

# ‘Ningbo is a Heroic City’: Descendant of Doctor Ianto Kaneti Returns to Pay Tributes

Striving towards a modern  
coastal metropolis  
建设现代化滨海大都市

*Editor's Note: This year marks the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. In commemoration, this series of reports by Ningbo Evening News revisits some lesser-known wartime stories and friendships.*

“Ningbo is a heroic city,” murmured Anton Agov. The words came quietly, almost like a confession, as he stood before a wall etched with the names of more than 130 local martyrs. He was walking through an exhibition titled “*Patriotic Souls of Siming: Ningbo in the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression*.”

The exhibition, opened on September 4, recounts Ningbo's sacrifices during World War II — known in China as the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. Display cases holding faded uniforms and medical kits stand alongside photographs of families bidding farewell to soldiers. In one corner, a statue titled “*Farewell*” captures a mother and daughter seeing off their loved

one as he departs for the front.

For Mr. Agov, the president of the Bulgarian and Chinese Association for Traditional Chinese Medicine, the visit was more than a journey into history; it was a deeply personal experience.

“I have always admired heroes,” he said, “and my great-grandparents were mine.”

Anton is the descendant of Dr. Ianto Kaneti (Chinese name: Gan Yangdao) and nurse Zhang Sunfen, who served in the International Medical Aid Team during the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression. For him, Ningbo's wartime history is not an abstract narrative, but a personal inheritance — one that has been carried across oceans and generations.



Dr. Ianto Kaneti  
(Gan Yangdao) and  
nurse Zhang Sunfen.  
Photo courtesy of  
Anton Agov

## Healers in the Fire of War

The story dates back to 1939, when Europe was on the brink of conflict while China had already been at war for two years. In London, the International Committee for Medical Aid to China was recruiting doctors and nurses willing to cross continents to resist fascism. Among the volunteers was Kaneti, a Bulgarian communist. Upon arriving in China, he was appointed to lead the Third Medical Team, launching six years of frontline rescue work.

Conditions were brutal: Supplies were scarce, sanitation poor. Undeterred, Kaneti improvised ingenious yet practical solutions. Specifically, he built a solar-heated bamboo shower to provide soldiers with warm water for washing, and sterilized their clothes by boiling them in ad-hoc wooden barrels. Such measures, simple as they seemed, significantly improved the survival and morale of the wounded.

Amid the chaos, he met Zhang Sunfen, a newly minted

graduate from the nursing program at Yenching University (a private research university in Beijing, China, from 1919 to 1952, once known as the Harvard of the East). Zhang had joined rescue corps of the Red Cross Society of China in 1940, driven by the belief that, as she put it, “every citizen is responsible for the rise and fall of the nation.”

Two years later, they married on the front lines — a union that came to embody both a wartime partnership and an unlikely love story, that of a Bulgarian doctor and a Chinese nurse, brought together by shared ideals. And by naming their sons Baozhong and Baohua, which means “Protect China, Protect the Friendship,” the couple inscribed into their family the very values they had fought for.

Kaneti was modest about his contributions. “It was not an act of heroism,” he once said of his decision to serve in China. “It was simply the right thing to do. If history repeated itself, I would make the same choice.”

## Memory Carried Across Borders

For decades, those stories were shared in the family living room. Agov recalls his grandfather Baozhong describing the battlefield hospitals and the sacrifices his parents had made. “Each time I heard them,” he reflected, “I felt their love for China and their unwavering faith in the revolution.”

That devotion lasted long after the war. After Japan's surrender in 1945, Zhang accompanied her husband back to Bulgaria, settling in Sofia but never cutting ties with China. She taught Chinese at Sofia University, compiled the country's first Chinese-language textbook, and laid the foundation for Chinese studies in Bulgaria. In recognition of these contributions, she was awarded Bulgaria's highest honor in education, the Blue Ribbon Medal, in 2004.

Kaneti and Zhang served not only as healers but also as cultural ambassadors. In the early years of China-Bulgaria relations, they promoted understanding and exchange, bridging two societies with little shared history.

Today, Agov sees himself as the inheritor of that mission. Fluent in Chinese and trained in traditional medicine after five years of study in Beijing, he now champions Chinese medical culture in Bulgaria. In March, he organized the country's first Traditional Chinese Medicine Festival at Medical University of Plovdiv, drawing crowds to lectures, exhibits, and live demonstrations of acupuncture and pulse diagnosis.

“When I practice Chinese medicine, I feel I am walking in their footsteps,” he remarked. “It is a continuation of their belief that healing and cultural exchange are inseparable.”

## A Bridge Between Past and Present

This visit was Agov's second time to Ningbo, yet it carried a far deeper significance. Where he once admired the city's coastal landscapes, he now sought out its memorials and monuments. He photographed the sculpture *Farewell*, and lingered at the relief wall carved with the names of fallen soldiers.

“This history has never been forgotten,” he said. “Even across generations and oceans, the memory of resistance and the longing for peace bind us together.”

For Ningbo, the exhibition does more than recall the past — it reminds future generations of the value of international solidarity. Just as international medical professionals like Kaneti and Zhang who brought aid to China's war-torn regions, their descendants now returned to strengthen cultural and scientific ties.

During his stay, Agov visited the Fenghua campus of Zhejiang Pharmaceutical University, where he toured laboratories and met with faculty to explore cooperation in research, training, and student exchanges. “We hope to build lasting connections,” he noted, “to bring traditional medicine into the next century of cooperation.”

Spanning 1945 to 2025, from battlefield clinics to university lecture halls, the Kaneti-Zhang family story traces a through line of belief and resilience. For Agov, it is proof that history lives not merely in museum archives but also in the life of a family — embodied in choices and passed down through language and profession.

“May the friendship forged in love and courage endure,” he remarked, “living on from generation to generation.”

Adapted from an article by Yu Jiajia (Yongpai).  
Translators: Pan Wenjie, Pan Chengyang (intern)  
Proofreaders: Yan Yujie, Huang Dawang,  
Jason Mowbray