Research Notes on Japanese Poison Gas Warfare in China

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It is common knowledge that poison gas was used widely on the Western front in Europe during World War I and that the resulting horrors convinced most League of Nations members, including Japan, to sign an international treaty banning that weapon in 1925. However, it is less well-known that in 1929 the Imperial Army secretly began manufacturing various types of poison gas on Ōkunoshima 大久野島 in Hiroshima prefecture, and that Japanese forces used these chemical weapons extensively during the Fifteen-Year War against China which began in September 1931.

This issue of Japanese chemical warfare did surface briefly at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. But the persons responsible were never held legally culpable. The Emperor Shōwa himself, for example, issued orders to deploy, if not actually use, these weapons in China. But unlike West Germany, postwar Japan never apprehended and indicted suspects for its own independent war crimes trials. In other words, Japanese state policy has been to deny guilt in any wartime criminal acts except those for which Japan was expressly indicted by the Allied Powers. Accordingly, the Japanese government refuses to admit that Imperial Army units actually used chemical weapons during the war—even though some two million gas shells and canisters remain strewn about northeastern China today, where they continue to emit their lethal contents.

The Japanese government bases this denial of fact on the views of men like Fukuda Masaki 福田正記, who graduated from the Imperial Army's elite Narashino gakkō 那珂野學校, which developed chemical weapons during the war. As late as 1985, Fukuda was serving as second in command of Japan's Self-Defense Force School for Chemical Research. He claims that Japan's wartime use of gas was limited to types such as Type Red (diphenylcyanoarsine), which were not banned by international law. According to Fukuda, Type Red was not, strictly speaking, a toxic gas; and, moreover, the Imperial Army used it strictly to incapacitate adversaries temporarily—"just as Western countries use it for riot control purposes today."

As we shall see, it is a half-truth to argue that Japanese gas attacks were meant "simply to incapacitate" the foe; and Fukuda is totally wrong on two other accounts. The sneeze- and nausea-inducing gas known as Type Red was, in fact, prohibited by international laws and treaties that Imperial Japan pledged itself to uphold. Second,
and more importantly, Fukuda confuses the maiming toxic gases used by Japan during the war with simple tear gas used by riot police today. Tear gas, of course, does not leave victims permanently or semi-permanently impaired. Given Fukuda's educational background, it is far-fetched to deem this an innocent mistake.

As well, it should be noted that the Japanese government today still begrudges the declassification of certain source materials related to Japanese chemical or biological warfare. For that reason, Japanese researchers often must make costly, time-consuming trips to American or other foreign archives in order to read the same documents available but inaccessible to them in Japan. In sum, then, research in Japan on this and other war-related, politically-sensitive issues is hampered by numerous obstacles, which can include document-tampering by Defense Agency officials.

But a pleasant surprise for researchers came out of Peking in June 1991, when the Anti-Chemical Warfare Research Division of the People's Liberation Army published a massive 582-page book by Chi Hsueh-chen 纪学仁 entitled Hua-hsueh chan shih 化学戰史 [A History of Chemical Warfare]. In it, Chi documents even further Imperial Japan's wartime use of poison gas against China.

This work was published for internal use by the People's Liberation Army, not for external circulation. Nevertheless, copies of the book have since found their way to Japan, and its overall contents were introduced to the Japanese reading public this summer through reports by the Kyōdō共同 News Agency. I have obtained two-thirds of the book in photocopy form, but more of the following survey was compiled from information in the August 13, 1992 issues of Chūgoku shinbun 中国新聞 and Asahi shinbun 朝日新聞 (Hiroshima editions). Hence, the present article is not a review in the true scholarly sense. Instead, my aim is merely to introduce a recently-published Chinese secondary source, if largely in second-hand fashion, for the benefit of interested colleagues.

Chi's book has its own political slant, for he expressly condemns wartime "criminal actions perpetrated by Japanese imperialism in violation of international treaties," and he lambasts the postwar Japanese government for "evading culpability" by refusing to own up to those wartime actions. Hence, the Chinese government published this book—and perhaps even leaked it to Japan—not only to set the scholarly record straight. China also wants incontrovertible evidence to support its current demand that Japan assume full responsibility for safely removing the two million gas canisters and shells it abandoned on Chinese soil 47 years ago. In contrast, the draft treaty banning chemical warfare adopted by the United Nations' Arms
Reduction Conference at Geneva—which comes up for a vote in the General Assembly this fall—would make Japan and China jointly responsible for removing those discarded weapons.9 Officials in Japan's Defense Agency claim they "are in no position to comment" on either Chi's book or this Chinese government demand because their Agency and the former Imperial Army are "entirely separate entities."10

Chi's account is divided into: (1) five chapters plus an introduction and conclusion covering 377 pages; (2) a 77-page bibliography; (3) documentaries of actual examples of gas use running to 183 pages; and (4) thirteen pages of photographs. Chi outlines the history of chemical operations from World War I through the Persian Gulf War. But over half the work is devoted to Japan's use of gas against China from the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of July 1937 until the war's end in August 1945.

Up to now, historians working on this topic have had to rely on KMT figures dating from 1946 which show that Japan used poison gas in China 1312 times to produce 36,968 casualties. But these older figures are flawed in two ways. First, they are clearly too low. Second, they were calculated almost solely from battles against Chinese regular armed forces, which is to say, KMT troops for the most part. In other words, by excluding Japanese gas use in anti-guerrilla operations against irregular (largely Communist) forces, the old statistics are skewed to show KMT forces absorbing the brunt of Japan's chemical warfare.

Chi uses these older, inadequate KMT figures, but augments them with statistics culled from recently-uncovered sources, such as Chinese army telegrams and accounts left by Japanese prisoners of war (identified by name) who were captured in the China theater. In this way, he revises upward these hitherto accepted statistics to arrive at 2091 instances of Japanese use of gas producing about 80,000 casualties among Chinese soldiers and civilians during the eight-year period from 1937 to 1945. (See the Appendix for a rough breakdown by province.) Hence, this work is probably the most up-to-date and comprehensive narrative of Japanese chemical warfare against China available in any language.

Chi shows that 1668 out of the total of 2091 instances of Japanese gas use in China occurred against regular, i.e., non-guerrilla troops. That produced over 47,000 casualties mainly among KMT army personnel, of which roughly 6000 were fatalities. Hence, 33,000 casualties resulted from 423 instances of gas use against Communist guerrillas. These findings are significant for two reasons.

First, one would tend to assume that fatalities account for most of the casualties among victims of chemical warfare. Yet Chi's
casualty breakdown for regular military personnel presents a very low
dead-to-wounded ratio: about 6000 to 41,000. However, gas attacks
were not always meant to kill the foe outright; after all, the use of
very lethal gas might backfire with a sudden change in the direction
of the wind. Instead, as Awaya Kentarō asserts, Japanese gas attacks
were often launched simply to incapacitate the enemy for a time; then
they could be dispatched readily and cheaply by bayonet, sword, or
bullet, often without leaving any tell-tale signs behind. Chi
supports Awaya’s assertion by showing that, among the 671 cases in
which gas-types were identifiable, mustard or other lethal gases were
employed in only 125 cases—a mere 20 per cent of the time overall.

Second, Chi demonstrates that Imperial Army units used poison
gas extensively in their North China "Three-All Campaigns" (burn all,
kill all, loot all) designed to crush Communist guerrilla opposition.
Imperial forces employed poison gas 423 out of the total 2091 times
in these campaigns, to wound or kill over 33,000 soldiers and civil-
ians. This is opposed to 1668 gas attacks producing 47,000 casual-
ties against regular Chinese (largely KMT) troops.

Thus, on a per-attack basis, Japan’s chemical warfare was far
more deadly against the Communists. On average, regular (largely
KMT) forces suffered 28.17 casualties per gas attack; guerrilla
forces suffered 78.01 casualties per attack. This is perhaps the
most original and significant finding in Chi’s book. He is the first
to quantify Japanese poison gas operations against non-KMT, non-mili-
tary personnel—the Chinese Communist guerrillas, many of whom clear-
ly were civilians.

In addition, Chi documents Japanese use of poison gas against
Chinese prisoners, both military and civilian. Often this took the
form of experiments conducted on human subjects similar to those
performed by Ishii Shirō’s now infamous Unit 731 at P’ing-
fang 平房. Chi documents 39 cases of such experimentation in which
some 3000 prisoners died.

Also of interest are accounts that contemporary Chinese leaders
such as CCP Vice-Chairman Wang Chen and General Ho Lung
suffered long-term physical impairment due to Japanese gas attacks.
As Chi shows, these attacks were devastating not simply because the
Chinese could not retaliate in kind, but also because they lacked
even the most rudimentary protective devices. Thus, they were forced
to fashion crude gas masks by wrapping pulverized charcoal or pebbles
in cloth.

Awaya Kentarō, the leading Japanese authority on this subject,
states that Chi’s book "is significant as the first thoroughgoing
piece of research on the topic," and that "the account coincides with
Imperial Army source materials on many points." This work not only
cites Chinese Communist documents, but Japanese primary sources and research findings as well. That makes it, according to Awaya, "highly reliable." As mentioned above, the general narrative it provides about gas use in mopping up operations against Communist guerrillas is of great value, for it illuminates and quantifies a previously little known issue. This book should be translated into Japanese and English, for there is a large audience eagerly waiting to read it.

APPENDIX

Source: Chūgoku shinbun (August 13, 1992)
NOTES

1. I am grateful to the Faculty of Law, Hiroshima Shūdo大学, which funded my stay here and supplied me with research grants as a Visiting Professor during the academic year 1991-92. As well, I wish to express my appreciation to Professor Awaya Kentarō 粟屋憲太郎 of Rikkyō立教 University and to Tatsumi Tomoji辰巳知之 of the Kyōdō News Agency 共同通信, Hiroshima Office. Both supplied source materials used in preparing this article.


8. The Asahi shinbun (July 7, 1992) reported that officials at the Defense Agency Library used white-out fluid to cover up (literally) incriminating lines in a document concerning the Japanese government's wartime role in procuring and managing Korean "comfort women."

