

## 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,<sup>2</sup> and that Japanese forces used these chemical weapons extensively during the Fifteen-Year War against China which began in September 1931.<sup>3</sup>

This issue of Japanese chemical warfare did surface briefly at the Tokyo War Crimes Trials. But the persons responsible were never held legally culpable.<sup>4</sup> The Emperor Shōwa himself, for example, issued orders to deploy, if not actually use, these weapons in China.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 習志野学校, 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."<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

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-jen 紀学仁 entitled Hua-hsueh chan shih 化学战史 [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.<sup>9</sup> 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."<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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 civilians. This is opposed to 1668 gas attacks producing 47,000 casualties 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-military personnel--the Chinese Communist guerrillas, many of whom clearly 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 石井四郎 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 王震 and General Ho Lung 贺龙 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



## NOTES

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2. For an insider's account, see Hattori Tadashi 服部忠, Hiroku Ōkunoshima no ki 秘録: 大久野島の記 [Memoir: Account of Ōkunoshima] (Takehara 竹原: Ōkunoshima dokugasu shōgaisha kōseikai 大久野島毒瓦斯障害者厚生会, 1963). For a general account, popular yet reliable, see Takeda Eiko 武田英子, Chizu kara kesareta shima 地図から消された島 [The Island Erased from the Map] (Tokyo: Domesu shuppan, 1987).

3. A good, brief account is Eguchi Keiichi 江口圭一, "Chūgoku sensen no Nihongun" 中国戦線の日本軍 [The Japanese Army at the Front in China], in Fujiwara Akira 藤原彰, et al., ed., Jūgonen sensō 2: Nit-Chū sensō 十五年戦争2: 日中戦争 [The Fifteen-Year War 2: The Sino-Japanese War] (Tokyo: Aoki shoten, 1988), pp. 47-86.

4. See Awaya Kentarō, Tōkyō saiban ron 東京裁判論 [On the Tokyo Trials] (Tokyo: Ōtsuki shoten, 1988).

5. Awaya Kentarō and Yoshimi Yoshiaki 吉見義明, "Dokugasu sakusen no shinjitsu" 毒ガス戦の真実 [The Truth About Poison Gas Warfare], Sekai 世界 (September 1985), p. 74.

6. In English, see Awaya Kentarō, "Japanese Mustard Gas in China: Then and Now," Sino-Japanese Studies 4.2 (April 1992), pp. 3-6.

7. Quoted in Awaya and Yoshimi, "Dokugasu sakusen no shinjitsu," pp. 72-73.

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."

9. Asahi shinbun (Hiroshima edition, August 28, 1992).
10. Quoted in Chūgoku shinbun (August 13, 1992).
11. Awaya, "Kyū-Nihongun no dokugasu sen" 旧日本軍の毒ガス戦  
 [Poison Gas Warfare of the Former Japanese Army], Jinbun kenkyū 人文  
 研究 108 (December 1990), pp. 152-53.
12. For sources, see Awaya Kentarō and Yoshimi Yoshiaki, ed.,  
Jūgonen sensō gokuhi shiryō 18: Dokugasu sen kankei shiryō 十五年戦  
 争極秘資料 18 毒ガス戦関係資料 [Collection of Top-Secret Docu-  
 ments on the Fifteen-Year War, 18: Documents Concerning Poison Gas  
 Warfare] (Tokyo: Fuji shuppan, 1989).