

A New Look at Japan's Unit 731 Wartime Atrocities and a U.S. Cover-Up

Didi Kirsten Tatlow



The New Museum of Evidence of War Crimes by Japanese Army Unit 731

Joy Chen is sitting on a bench outside a new museum in Harbin devoted to the medical atrocities committed by Japan's Unit 731 in Manchuria during World War II, trying to absorb what she learned inside: After the war, the United States covered up Japan's biological warfare research on humans, allowing the perpetrators to escape punishment and to prosper.

That is detailed prominently in exhibition notes and an audio guide in the black marble building that lies like a split box here in Pingfang, on the edge of Harbin in northeast China: "Out of considerations of its national security, the U.S. decided not to prosecute the leader of Unit 731 and the criminals under him. They all escaped trial for war crimes."

Led by Dr. [Ishii Shiro](#), Unit 731 bred plague microbes and deliberately infected thousands of men, women and children. It conducted

vivisection and frostbite and air pressure experiments, transfused prisoners with horse blood and studied the effect of weapons on the body, among many things.

Ms. Chen had had her fill of horrors and left her two companions inside.

"I'm shocked," said Ms. Chen, 24, who studies English at the [Harbin Institute of Foreign Languages](#). "I couldn't take more. As a Chinese person I just felt it was so incredibly cruel."

"And I found out for the first time about the Americans. Why didn't they prosecute them? I felt that was really hard to accept. Definitely, Chinese people will feel that way," she said.



Visitors look at exhibits at the Museum of Evidence of War Crimes by Japanese Army Unit 731, in Harbin, Heilongjiang province, on Aug 15, the day the museum opened to the public.

"It is shocking, isn't it," said [Mark Selden](#), a historian at Cornell University, in a telephone interview.

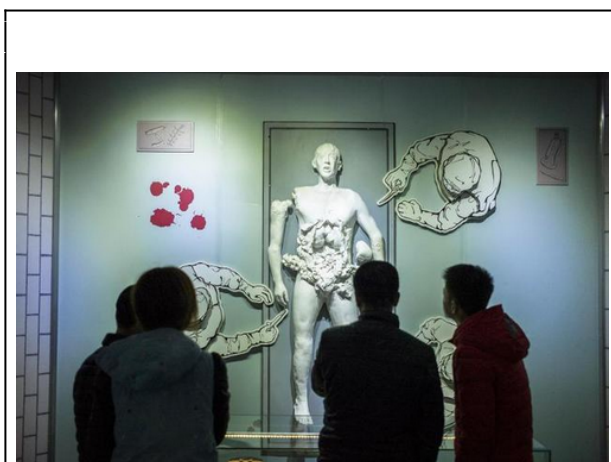
"It is precisely correct, as far as we know. No one was prosecuted. A deal was cut for the rehabilitation of everyone," Mr. Selden said.

Other nations among the Allied victors did try those Unit 731 members whom they captured, however.

In 1949 in Khabarovsk, the Soviet Union put on trial 12 Japanese caught during the Russian push east, and in 1956, China tried 36 in Shenyang. Those events are recorded in granular, black-and-white court photographs, and books from the time.

The [Museum of War Crime Evidence by Japanese Army Unit 731](#), which opened on Aug. 15, is bolder in intent than the older, adjacent museum that it incorporates and replaces and, according to museum officials, has attracted large crowds of visitors.

Judging by Ms. Chen's reaction, its blunt declaration of the cover-up is having some impact and could one day raise a difficult question: Should the United States apologize to China?



Visitors look at a scene depicting human experiments at the museum

Those calls, for now mostly on the Chinese nationalist fringe, could grow if the relationship

between the two nations worsens.

There are also serious historians and bioethicists who believe what happened is morally too significant and damaging to humanity to be excused. Jing-Bao Nie at the University of Otago in New Zealand is one.

"Morally, the cover-up trampled justice in the ruthless pursuit of national interest and national security," Mr. Nie wrote in an email.

"Legally, the cover-up constitutes complicity after the fact," he said. "And pragmatically, a formal apology will serve the long-term interest of the United States because it can contribute positively to the relationship between the U.S. and China."

The deal reached by the U.S. enabled it to gather information that was of great use for its own biological warfare program, early in the Cold War, said Mr. Selden.

In contrast, many [Nazi doctors in Europe](#) who did similar things were prosecuted by the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal.

The American action in Japan "was in some ways similar to how Wernher von Braun and other scientists were taken to the U.S.," said Mr. Selden, referring to the German rocket scientist. "The U.S. made very good use of them."

"In Japan, they did want the biological warfare research and they did take it. You and I may wonder if it was a wise thing to do, but the reality is that there was no significant pushback," he said.

As the visitor leaves the exhibition, a final exhibit spells out the consequences of the American decision.

On a meters-long, white stone stele that lies horizontally amid others, as if it has been tossed in the air and has landed haphazardly,

are engraved the names of 60 doctors and other members of Unit 731, with a short description of what they did after the war. It reads a little like a Who's Who of the post-war Japanese medical establishment.

The exhibit, titled "Postwar Service Condition of Former Unit 731 Members (Part of Known Staff)" includes: Masaji Kitano, director of the Green Cross Corporation (Tokyo); Masao Kusami, Showa Pharmaceutical University; Miho Masuda, National Defense Academy of Japan; Tachiomaru Ishikawa, Kanazawa University Medical Department; Nobuo Nakano, Kamo Hospital; Kenjiro Ozuka, No. 1 Tokyo National Hospital. What the exhibit fails to point out is that the pioneering research about Unit 731's activities was done by Japanese social scientists and historians, part of a group of Japanese who came to deeply regret what happened and wished to memorialize it as a warning for humanity.

Outside, a shop offers cups and t-shirts with patriotic Chinese emblems and messages of victory over Japan, amid other museum merchandise. But the room is deserted and the offerings have the air of something a person might buy as penance.

A new book about the museum in English, Chinese and Japanese, with a Russian translation coming, had arrived that very day, a saleswoman says, adding that its publication was timed to coincide with the nationalistic 70th anniversary celebrations of the victory over Japan on Sept. 3, in Beijing.

For the U.S., an apology, to improve relations with China, may be needed one day, Mr. Selden said. "We are at a period in which there are a lot of tensions in the relationship." Yet for now, anger in China is directed almost entirely toward Japan, he said.

"I've often been struck by the unrestrained anger toward the Japanese, far beyond anything toward the U.S. Even if we are in a

period of many frictions," said Mr. Selden.

Nor is Unit 731 the whole of the challenge, he said.

"A bigger story than the U.S. responsibility toward Unit 731 is what did the U.S. do about Hirohito. It didn't abolish the Emperor system. It kept him on the throne. It didn't prosecute him or ask him to testify at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. The consequence is that it's very difficult for the Japanese people to come to terms with their war responsibility and war crimes in Asia, because the top guy is let off scot-free," he said.

Q. and A.: Gao Yubao on Documenting Unit 731's Brutal Human Experiment

The opening of the new Museum of War Crime Evidence by Japanese Army Unit 731 on Aug. 15 in Harbin in northeast China was timed to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, part of commemorations across China that included a major [Victory Day military parade](#) in Beijing on Sept. 3.

The [museum](#) in the district of Pingfang enlarges an earlier one on the site where Japanese doctors of Unit 731 carried out medical atrocities on prisoners that rivaled in brutality, or perhaps even surpassed, those committed by Dr. Josef Mengele in Nazi Germany. During a visit last month, workers were still finishing a giant metal canopy that covered the excavated remains of cells where thousands of prisoners lived and died in horrific ways, including by vivisection and by deliberate infection with plague bacteria.

According to Gao Yubao, the museum's head of research, the curators were motivated by a desire to present an accurate picture of history. The museum's message is clear: Biological warfare was Japanese national policy, and the United States covered it up in exchange for information, without bringing a single

perpetrator to justice.

Complicating that picture is the fact that the experiments, led by Dr. Shiro Ishii, on Chinese, Korean, Russian and American prisoners is also a focus of China's highly ideological "patriotic education." A visitor book at the museum, for instance, records mostly stock patriotic phrases like, "[Never forget the national humiliation!](#)"

Here's what two other historians, one American and one Japanese, said of the new museum:

"The Chinese state uses history to its own purposes, as do other countries, and it has a level of control that is way up in the stratosphere," said Mark Selden, a senior research associate in the East Asia Program at Cornell University and co-editor of "[Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities](#)." Yet, he added, "We have to respect the historical data in particular situations."

[Tsuneishi Keiichi](#), a contributor to "Japan's Wartime Medical Atrocities" and author of "Unit 731: The Truth about Biological Weapons and Crimes" said: "I have not met a Chinese researcher who has studied the history of 731 Unit seriously. So I do not expect anything of the new museum. I think there is no really reliable and authentic research material on Shiro Ishii's biological warfare activities in China. Those are in Japanese libraries and [Japanese National Archives](#), and in the U.S. National Archives and the Library of Congress."

In an interview, Mr. Gao explained the thinking behind the museum:

Why build a new museum about Unit 731?

Unit 731 committed large-scale, systematic crimes against humanity and ethnicity. Those crimes must be revealed and recorded, so that humanity can remember the price of peace and cherish it.
Some countries in Europe are still suffering

from war, which is proof that humanity needs constant reminders of how important peace is.

What is the architecture of the new museum saying?

The vision for the museum comes from the metaphor of a black box of a plane crash. The point is to say that the site of Unit 731 is the black box that recorded one of the darkest periods of human history.

In showing the contents of the black box, we find out what happened and remember the lessons learned from the disaster. The area round the museum was made to look as if the ground split open to reveal the black box.

Who is the architect?

A team led by Dr. [He Jingtang](#) of South China University of Technology. We talked to many teams in China and Dr. He's had the best concept.

They did the [China pavilion of the Shanghai Expo](#), which shows that they can handle a large project, and the [Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall](#), which shows they can handle the theme of World War II.

When did construction begin?

The original building had a small area for displaying artifacts, but the space was too small. Also for the protection of the building, we can't let in an unlimited number of visitors. We started drawing up blueprints in February 2014. Construction started in November 2014 and finished in August this year.

What are the visitor numbers?

From the opening up to Sept. 18, on average 7,000 to 10,000 people visited the museum daily.

Before, about 400,000 people came each year to visit the site. Now we have had 270,000 visitors in a little over a month.

The end of the exhibition states clearly that the United States did not try the perpetrators of Unit 731 out of its own national interest. Are you concerned this could affect relations between China and the United States?

Our motto is: Record history and ignore politics. We are historians, not politicians. Our job is to research and present history to the best of our knowledge and as objectively as we can. As long as historical truth is restored, our job is done. We don't twist history out of political considerations.

What can be done to help set right the burden of the Unit 731 history in relations between China and Japan?

We have found other individuals and organizations, including Japanese historians and scholars, who are also interested in

revealing and researching this time in history. We'd like to bring together all who are committed to this. We have extensive cooperation with Japanese historians and artists and dozens of Japanese groups. We just had a 300-member group from Japan visit the museum.

Didi Kirsten Tatlow is a correspondent, Beijing Bureau, New York Times.

THIS IS AN EXPANDED VERSION OF A **LETTER FROM CHINA** NEWS COLUMN THAT RAN IN THE INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES AND THE NEW YORK TIMES ON OCT. 21, 2015. PLEASE CREDIT THE INYT AND NYT.

Recommended citation: *Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "A New Look at Japan's Unit 731 Wartime Atrocities and a U.S. Cover-Up", The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 13, Issue 46, No. 3, November 16, 2015.*