Using Trial Judgment to Heal:
On Crimes Committed by Japanese Forces in China

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1. Introduction

Seventy years after World War II (‘WWII’), crimes committed by Japanese forces during the War remain a relevant political and legal issue, despite the evidence relied upon by the Trial Judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (‘the Judgment’) and the discussions in the process to establish diplomatic relations between China and Japan. It is generally perceived that Japan has not been as repentant for war crimes as Germany. Controversial readings of Japanese attitudes towards the crimes are available, such as that “the younger generation has little knowledge of the recent past”, or “opinion polls suggest that most Japanese feel their country did things in Asia for which the country should apologize”. The Chinese public still cares about signs of Japanese repentance. While Japanese prime ministers have repeatedly apologized for their country’s misdeeds, issues like the absence of nationally sponsored museums in Japan that acknowledge Japanese aggression continue to irritate Chinese observers. The Japanese prime ministers’ offerings at the Yasukuni Shrine, which for the Chinese public symbolizes a lack of repentance, enhances an anti-Japan mood in China. The dispute over the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands in 2012 again provoked many Chinese citizens and confirmed their dissatisfaction with the lack of Japanese repentance, leading to demonstrations against Japan in several cities in China. The crimes committed by Japanese forces in China during WWII remain a trauma that influences the political and diplomatic relations between the two countries.

This brief asks whether the Far East Trial Judgment can be helpful today in healing trauma by documenting and thus making visible crimes committed by Japanese forces. The political significance of this trauma in both domestic governance and foreign relations falls outside the scope of this brief. Rather, the brief compares legal facts recognized in the Judgment – judicial findings – and the general perception of the Chinese public about the crimes. If the general perception in China and the legal facts contained in the Judgment largely overlap, the Judgment could make an important contribution to a process of healing. In answering the question, issues arise concerning individual responsibility for crimes and the significance of war crimes trials. After the comparison of legal facts and public perception in section 2 below, the brief will reflect on such issues in section 3, and conclude by stressing the potential positive role of the Far East Tribunal and its Judgment for trauma healing in China.

2. Comparing Legal Facts in the Judgment and Public Perception

2.1. Legal Facts

2.2.1. A Historical Line of Invasion

The historical line of invasion is represented in the Judgment in a meticulous and unambiguous way. This captures a broad spectrum of victimization of Chinese people in the affected areas. Details of the invasion were included in the Judgment, including the following facts: The attack at Mukden on 18 September 1931 (p. 91), the murder of marshal CHANG Tso-lin (pp. 527-529), the unilateral establishment of “Manchukuo” by the Japanese Army (p. 569), the invasion of Shanghai starting from 3


3 For discussions on the political factors contributing to post-WWII relations in Asia, see Thomas U. Berger, War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

4 Judgment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, p. 521. Another summary is provided on pp. 1139–1140. The entire Judgment and trial transcripts are freely available in the ICC Legal Tools Database.
Declaration of 16 January 1936 which set the stage "for
documents of the Japanese Army include the Konoye
of Japan’s policy toward China" (p. 628). Other official
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the Pacific War" (p. 706).

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2.1.2. Japan’s Military Strategy and Intentions
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Loyang (25 May 1944), Changsha (18 June 1944), Heng-
table operations in the interior of central China by the mid-
ince in May 1942, the capture of Changthe in Hunnan
north of a Shanghai Ta-Tao City Government in December
37 (p. 699), the capture of Taiyuan on 9 November
702), attack on and crimes committed in Nan-
king which came to be known as the “Rape of Nanking”
(pp. 707-708), the establishment of the provisional “Chi-
nese Government” on 14 December 1937 as the govern-
ment in North China (pp. 714-717), the process of es-
ablishing the Renovation Government in Central China
(pp. 717-721), military advances in many Chinese towns
and villages (p. 268), invasion of several cities (Hsuch-
chow (19 May 1938), Kaifeng (6 June 1938), Matang (27
June 1938), Kiukiang (25 July 1938), Sinyang (12 Octo-
ber 1938), Hankow (25 October 1938) (p. 722), Canton
(20 October 1938) (p. 731), Hainan Island (10 February
1939) (p. 732), Nanchang (26 March 1939) (p. 742), the
invasion of Lungchow (23 December 1939) and the cap-
ture of Nanning (p. 746), the capture of Ichang (12 June
1940) and Kaifeng (30 June 1940), sending troops to In-
do-China (p. 750), armed operations against Chungking
and bombing of Kunming and Chungking (pp. 754-755),
the capture of Lungling and Tengchung in Yunnan Pro-
vince in May 1942, the capture of Changthe in Hunnan
Province in December 1943, the intensification of mili-
itary operations in the interior of central China by the mid-
dle of 1944, the capture of Chengchow (20 April 1944),
Loyang (25 May 1944), Changsha (18 June 1944), Heng-
yang (8 August 1944), Kweilin (10 November 1944), and
Liuchow (11 November 1944) (pp. 759-760).

2.1.2. Japan’s Military Strategy and Intentions

The commanding organization in Japan during WWII
was the Imperial General Headquarters. Set up on 20
November 1937 by the Cabinet, it included “the Emper-
or, who was its head”. The Judgment recognizes that the
Imperial General Headquarters “had a great deal of influ-
ce on the Japanese Government prior to the outbreak of
the Pacific War” (p. 706).

The Judgment includes several documents revealing
the policies of Japan. The “Amam Statement” issued on
17 April 1934 by the Japanese Foreign Office was recog-
nized as the “official declaration by the Foreign Ministry
of Japan’s policy toward China” (p. 628). Other official
documents of the Japanese Army include the Konoye
Declaration of 16 January 1936 which set the stage “for
further invasion and the development of local regimes ul-
timately for the creation of a ‘new government’ in China”
(p. 713); the Japanese “Five Ministers’ Conference” in
1938 which planned “the establishment of a Japanesedomi-
nated or ‘puppet’ government for the whole of China
as distinct from the local governments already establi-
shed” (pp. 724-728). “Konoye’s Three Principles” aimed
at creating in China “a complacent Government […] by
Japan, giving the latter complete control of China” (p. 741).
These policies were clearly connected with acts of
aggression against China based on military strategy. The Judgment recognizes that several key statements like those above were issued by the Japanese Foreign Office.

Furthermore, the Judgment establishes beyond doubt
that conflicts were provoked on purpose by the Japanese
Army. For example, the so-called Lukouchiao Incident
was described by the Tribunal as “the culmination of the
Army’s scheme for bringing north China under Japanese
rule” (p. 183).

2.1.3. Crimes Indicted

It is clearly stated in the Judgment that “the case made
against the accused is of waging aggressive war, with the object, inter alia, of obtaining economic domination of
Manchuria and other parts of China” (p. 761). For the
intention of waging war, the Tribunal found that “the cons-
piracy to wage wars of aggression was already criminal
in the highest degree” (p. 1142).

Annex 6 provides the Indictment, charging the mili-
tary officials with the crime against peace, conventional
war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Appendix A of
Annex 6 provides the summarized particulars showing
the principal matters and events; Appendix B provides the list of articles of treaties violated by Japan; Appendix C provides the list of official assurances violated by Ja-
pan; and Appendix D provides the conventions and assu-
rances that, together with the practice of civilized nations,
established laws and customs of war.

Annex 6 and the appendices provide summarized lists
of crimes, as well as specific bases on which international
law was violated. Some detailed descriptions were provi-
ded in the Judgment.5

5 P. 1001 of the Judgment provides a general description of the “cru-
elities of the most inhuman and barbarous character practiced by
the Japanese Army and Navy”; p. 1002 says that the killing of pris-
oners, death marches, forced labor, torture and cannibalism were
practiced; pp. 1008–1009 state that the practice of machine-gunn-
ing of civilians “continued throughout the China War; the worst
example of its being the massacre of the inhabitants of Nanking in
December 1937”; p. 1010 describes torture of captured Chinese;
pp. 1011–1015: details of the rape of Nanking; pp. 1019–1022: the
expansion of war and crimes committed by the Japanese Army;
pp. 1030–1031: some atrocities committed by the Japanese Army;
pp. 1037, 1038 and 1044–1057: crimes, including death marches and
massacres of prisoners of war, committed in the Pacific War; pp.
1057–1064: a brief summary of torture and other inhumane treat-
2.1.4. Specific Terms Illustrated in the Judgment

The Judgment deals in particular with several terms used by the Japanese Army. It shows that these terms were deliberately used wrongly or without the meaning the terms are normally acknowledged to contain.

The first term is “national defense” which was recognized by the Tribunal as Japan’s argument to justify her own aggressive policies (p. 669). The second is “incident” described as follows by the Judgment: “Japanese Governments refused to acknowledge that the hostilities in China constituted a war. They persistently called it an ‘Incident’” (p. 1003).

2.2. Public Perceptions

To compare the legal facts of the Judgment as briefly described above with public perceptions in China on crimes committed by Japanese forces during WWII, let us briefly examine the crimes contained in the following Chinese media: curriculum textbooks, slogans in anti-Japan demonstrations, information available on web sites to memorize WWII, and claims made in law suits for compensation.

First, in the Chinese National History Curriculum for Senior High School published by the People’s Education Press in 2007, a number of events were listed with emphasis on the brutal behaviour of the Japanese Army, including the Machine-Gun Killings in Nanking and Pan-jiayu, the use of a biological unit in north-east China, the activities of Unit 731, the deployment of a chemical weapons unit in north-east China, and Unit 516 which was involved in raping and killing civilians.

Second, slogans used in anti-Japan demonstrations express public perceptions about the crimes. The demonstrations in 2012 included the slogans “Defend the Diaoyu Islands”, “Smash Japanese Imperialism”, and “Resist Japanese Products”. Another anti-Japanese demonstration happened in 2005. The slogan largely used was “Patriotism is Not a Sin”. The slogan “Face History” was also used in the demonstration.

Third, information on Chinese web sites shows perceptions of crimes committed by Japanese forces during WWII. For example, on the web site china1931.cn details of events in WWII are provided under the categories of biological warfare, “comfort women”, and forced labour respectively. Oral statements or memoirs of those involved in war at the time and pictures taken as well as diaries of Japanese war criminals are the main sources for the events presented. Under the category of biological warfare, for example, there are 107 articles or news items providing information relating to what happened during WWII as regards biological warfare. The articles include general claims on the use of biological weapons, on which Japanese forces were involved (Units 526, 731 and 1644), and on specific events that occurred in the war that involved the use of biological weapons, together with evidence (including copies of newspaper articles at the time in both China and Japan, memoirs from victims who survived the war, records in archives, books published in China, the United States, and Japan). According to the evidence on the web site, places where biological weapons were used include Beitong, Chongshan, Luxi, Yiwu, Changde, Ningbo, Guangfeng, Shangrao, Nanking, and areas in the provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Yunnan and Canton.

Fourth, the compensation claims in Japanese lawsuits brought by Chinese victims for crimes committed by Japanese forces reflect some of the perceptions on the crimes. Such lawsuits started from 1995 onwards. Suits against private companies have been mainly about the issue of forced labour. Several cases ended with financial compensation for Chinese victims. As far as lawsuits about the issues of “comfort women” and biological warfare are concerned, state responsibility and corresponding compensation are still being debated.

2.3. Comparing Public Perceptions and the Judgment

When comparing public perceptions on crimes committed by Japanese forces during WWII with the legal facts of the crimes established by the Judgment, we notice that some events that are greatly emphasized in China today did not draw much attention in the Judgment, and that differences appear in details of crimes. For example, much public attention has been paid in China to the activities of the Japanese Units 731 and 1644 which were the units committing biological warfare in China, while in the Judgment biological warfare is given only limited attention without much detail being provided. Likewise, the practice of vivisection included in the Judgment does not contain information about Unit 731 which has drawn much attention in China. Another example of the difference committed by the Japanese Army in China and throughout the Pacific War; and pp. 1067, 1083, 1089 and 1091: certain practices of the Japanese Army including vivisection, forced labour, excessive punishment, mass punishment, and death penalty.


ence between publicly perceived crimes and crimes recognized by the judgment are the crimes committed in the Pacific War by Japanese forces outside China. Furthermore, while not much attention was paid by the Chinese public to economic domination, the Judgment recognized the economic domination by Japanese forces during the war in China.

Although these differences exist, a detailed comparison leads to the conclusion that the Judgment provides not only evidence for various public claims made, but also a wider range of crimes than what we see in the public discourse in China. The documentation drawn upon by the Judgment is a foundation for open debate on the construction of the Far East Tribunal, on the evidence collected for the proceedings before the Tribunal, on the facts recognized in the Judgment, and, most importantly, on relevant legal and political issues based on the facts recognized. For these reasons, the Judgment could very well serve as an instrument of healing by documenting the crimes committed by Japanese forces in China in WWII.

3. Conclusion: Between ‘Truth’ and Interpretation

The extent of horror in the crimes referred to above leads to the equation of international law and civilization, pursuant to a progressive historiography in which horror is conquered for the “survival of humanity”. The civilization premise perceives law as developing. Thus, although the international law on aggression and criminal responsibility was not yet developed at the outset of WWII, it shall be applied, so the argument goes. The reasoning starts with the premise that the facts were clear, that “all the judges agreed upon these facts”, while the “law […] was doubtful”. While acknowledging the horror of the crimes, this argument should not neglect the context in which the crimes happened. Interpretation of what happened through the legal arrangement or classification of ‘crimes against humanity’ constructs what had happened, and erases horror during the period of war.

While trials seek to deal with the “truth”, the “truth” is about interpretation. In international criminal justice, the way the trial is constructed is the beginning of interpretation: the legal arrangements or classifications in the trial will have an impact on the “truth”. The events are interpreted through the lens of the legal arrangements and structuring of the trial. History and memory, meanwhile, are closely linked with future-oriented political interests. Add the fragmentated evidence caused by the particularities of war, and we can picture the limits of the trial, as Koskenniemi writes: “The engagement of a court with ‘truth’ and ‘memory’ is thus always an engagement with political antagonism, and nowhere more so than in dealing with events of wide-ranging international and moral significance […] Much is at stake for the protagonists – that is the nature of the trial – and no truth can remain sacred within it.”

In the course of an international criminal trial, open argumentation takes place, involving conflicts of interpretation. This brief submits that a key value of the trial lies exactly in this conflict. The post-WWII trauma in China has lasted to this day, despite the work of the Far East Tribunal. Controversial arguments have been made about the legitimacy of the Tribunal, in particular that it represented victors’ justice. More conflicts between interpretations at the Tribunal could have prevented this.

As mentioned above, the Far East Judgment could well serve as an instrument to heal the trauma in China. It addresses a broad spectrum of victimization of Chinese by Japanese forces in connection with WWII. Further research on possible conflicts of interpretation in the work of the Tribunal could contribute towards the good purpose of healing.

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9 ZHU Wenqi, supra note 1, p. xviii.
10 Ibid., p. xvii.

12 Ibid., p. 25.