

Deciphering the History of Japanese War Atrocities

The Story of Doctor and
General Shiro Ishii

Kenneth L. Port



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*via wikimedia commons

**via ancestry.com

Preface

When I decided to write the definitive biography of Shiro Ishii in the winter of 2011, I naively believed that it would simply be an issue of learning yet another new Japanese vocabulary, researching old documents and piecing together a truthful narrative. I had no idea that doing this research would be like taking a slow stroll through a house of mirrors. At every turn of the page, someone would make an absolutely unsubstantiated claim. I would spend hours upon hours only to conclude that they were, in fact, wrong. Every writer, whether Japanese, American or Chinese, seems to have a subtext to their writing on the topic of biological weapon research and use by the Japanese during World War II. Some want us to believe that it is even worse than it is; some want us to forgive and forget. This story is bad enough in its raw detail that it deserves no exaggeration and most certainly does not deserve to be obfuscated, hidden or buried.

Many well-known and well respected scholars have come before me to this issue. Keiichi Tsuneishi, probably the most prolific, has spent his life researching and writing about the horrors of Unit 731, its doctors and their inexcusable moral transgressions. To be most certain, Shiro Ishii and the doctors of Unit 731 committed horrors on human subjects¹ that only the Dr. Mengeles of the world might contemplate. Ishii accomplished what Mengele could only dream about. Keiichi Tsuneishi taught the world much about biological weapon research and the conduct of the physicians under the command of Shiro Ishii.

Dr. Sheldon Harris closely followed Tsuneishi's work, writing the much-acclaimed book, *Factories of Death*. He, like Tsuneishi, spent his life's work attempting to prove beyond doubt that there was a United States government-led cover-up of the work done in Pingfan, China, under Ishii's direction. The United States obtained these secrets and in return gave Ishii and his doctors a form of immunity from war crimes prosecution. The Sheldon Harris Papers

1. Sheldon Harris, *Japanese Biological Warfare Experiments and Other Atrocities in Manchuria, 1932–1945, and the Subsequent United States Cover Up: A Preliminary Assessment*, 15 CRIME, L. & SOC. CHANGE 177–91 (1991).

held at the Hoover Institute Archives makes this abundantly clear. Harris' book makes this argument but his papers clearly show much more tantalizing evidence that leads to the depth of this conspiracy.

The story of Unit 731 has garnered the fascination of others and drawn them in. Ms. Fukiko Aoki, the former *Newsweek* chief correspondent of the Japan desk and accomplished author, has written an amazing book on Unit 731. By investing an inordinate amount of time and energy, she befriended members of Ishii's former village, Kamo, in Chiba, east of Tokyo. While doing so, she discovered a memorandum drafted by Ishii in the immediate post-war moments. Although short and mostly in some sort of code, this memorandum paints an interesting portrait of what fantasy Ishii had on his mind during the immediate post-war times.

Two people are in possession of this memorandum, Fukiko Aoki and Keiichi Tsuneishi. Ms. Aoki refused to respond to this author and Tsuneishi refused this author's attempts to see that copy without first obtaining Ms. Aoki's permission, citing something he referred to as a "freelancer's code." According to Tsuneishi, it would be a violation of this code to share the memorandum with a third person without obtaining permission from the freelancer (Aoki) who discovered it. As both Aoki and Tsuneishi have published pictures of this memorandum and have liberally cited it, actual possession of it would be superfluous. Rather, what this really illustrates is the depths to which people researching and writing on Unit 731 and Shiro Ishii will go to avoid discovery, contact and potential retribution from the Japanese nationalists.

Aoki tells about Unit 731 almost as if Ishii was in the room doing the telling. However, it is not entirely clear what she accomplished in this telling. She appears to live in isolation as she refused to even acknowledge this author's multiple attempts to make contact. I wrote to her directly multiple times. I had her publisher write to her (which he confirms he did). I even attempted to contact family members. It is safe to say that Aoki has insulated herself from the outside world. She appears to fear retribution from the Japanese ultra-nationalists who would prefer that the truth regarding Shiro Ishii was not told.

Seiichi Morimura, the famous award winning novelist, wrote the book *The Devil's Gluttony*, which mostly tells the story of Unit 731 after the war and its effects on Japanese medicine.

Two English journalists, Peter Williams and David Wallace, wrote *Unit 731*. Ed Regis wrote *The Biology of Doom*. Hal Gold wrote *Unit 731*. The list goes on. All focus on the Japanese attempts to master biological weapons. This work tells the true and accurate story of the principle player in Japanese biological

weapon research and use during World War II: Shiro Ishii. In context and in a correct historical perspective, Ishii's work and presence would be comparable to a team of Mengeles reporting to a chief microbiologist.

Unfortunately, there are at least three novels that fictionalize the story of Ishii and the Occupation. *Occupied City* by David Peace, *Slatewriter* by Lewis Perdue and *Neutral War* by Hal Gold all tell amazing tales of suspense and intrigue with no indication of what parts of the stories are true and what parts are fiction. To be sure, these novels are, in part, based on fact as they use actual names of actual characters and actual dates of some occurrences. However, in the end, these books are fiction and not helpful in telling the true story. Worse yet, pieces of the fictionalized story get retold by academic writers as fact. The "facts" as told by these semi-fictional authors get retold in the academic record as actual facts and the historical record becomes horribly distorted. Furthermore, the authors of these fictionalized accounts have either published actual true accounts of Unit 731 (Hal Gold) or they appear to have had the background to do it. In other words, it is as if they became frustrated or tired trying to write a true account and decided to switch to fiction. Nothing else seems to explain why these authors of these fictionalized accounts could have so much fact woven into their narratives.

There are others. Normally, this literature review would not be necessary in a work of historical fact; however, as a legal academic, I walked through this house of mirrors as many people tell a slightly (sometimes extremely) different story related to Shiro Ishii. Everyone has some fact the other one did not have. Each one uses scraps of factual evidence to extrapolate grander conclusions. As a legal academic, I asked a very important question about each fact: was it objectively verifiable and accurate beyond a reasonable doubt, meaning was it based on someone's opinion of some of the facts or was it, indeed, a fact? As I researched this book, I realized that many scholars who have gone before me, with all good intent, may have blurred this distinction. Some of the most accomplished people researching and writing about either or both Unit 731 and Shiro Ishii simply are arguing for a perspective rather than reporting accurate facts.

In this work, I do my best to rely on actual facts. When researching an extremely emotionally charged issue like the life of Shiro Ishii, one of the worst monsters the world has known, it is not enough to look to one source, even if you verify the source relied upon to make some assertion. Many times, even with the best researchers in this field, the author relied on an author who relied on an author who, in the end, was wrong. Much of the narrative that is told about Shiro Ishii is not correct or is simply misleading.

This book in no way defends Ishii or the work of his maniacal fellow physicians. There is no defense for them. However, history deserves that we get this story right. It is bad enough in its true form. There is no reason to distort or change or mislead, either intentionally or accidentally.

This book is an attempt at getting to the true story of the life of Shiro Ishii. Ishii committed war crimes during World War II that are unimaginable by today's medical standards. He literally sold his secrets to the Occupation and escaped justice before the Military Tribunal for the Far East (Japan's version of the trials at Nuremberg). He lived to the age of sixty-five and died of throat cancer and dysentery in 1959, some fourteen years after World War II. After the war and until his death, he lived a quiet life with his wife and daughter in the back streets of Wakamatsucho, a quiet, residential section of Tokyo near Shinjuku, where he characterized himself as someone who also did good and focused people's attention on that fantasy. Many of the above listed authors believed that narrative. As this work establishes for the first time, Ishii was a life-long pathological liar and sociopath. He charmed many people and many people, great and small, fell under his aura of charisma. He worked hard to create a narrative that satisfied his perception. Certainly, it was a fantasy and this book makes that clear.

This is a story of how one man attempted and largely failed to change the course of history by researching and using biological weapons. Biological weapons, of course, consist of weaponizing naturally occurring germs, bacteria and viruses in order to kill the enemy. This is distinct from chemical weapons, the use of chemical substances to kill and discourage the enemy. The entire concept of biological weapons should be viewed in the context of medical reality: although horrendous, virtually all biological weapons have a significant incubation period. As opposed to chemical weapons, biological weapons do not kill or incapacitate upon contact. Usually, it takes up to a week or more before the effects can be felt. However, and this is the key, because biological weapons use substances that occur naturally, there is far higher deniability with biological weapons than chemical weapons. As we shall see, this deniability played a major role in the life trajectory that Shiro Ishii chose.

Even though Shiro Ishii's activities in World War II cast a long shadow on Dr. Mengele's activities in Germany, Ishii is rather quickly being forgotten in the world and especially in Japan. He is no longer taught in high school history or (when he is taught) it is so superficial that few young Japanese people even know the name. In America, no one knows of Shiro Ishii or the carnage he unleashed during World War II.

Naturally, the Chinese do not forget. As the principle, but not exclusive, victims of Shiro Ishii, they have a keen interest in not letting the world forget what Ishii did. In Pingfan near Harbin, China, there are several archives and libraries where researchers like Assistant Curator Yan-jun Yang of the Harbin Academy of Social Sciences, Japanese Army Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum, work diligently at not letting the world forget. Mr. Yang collects data, leads tours and assists people of any nationality in understanding what transpired at Unit 731 in the hands of Shiro Ishii. Tours that bring international educators to visit the former grounds of Unit 731 are extremely helpful; educators learn the real story of Unit 731, a story that the U.S. and Japanese governments equally wish to be forgotten. With the help of people like Mr. Yang and the other employees at the Harbin Academy of Social Sciences and all of those academics that have come to this topic before me, we shall strive to not let that happen.

Acknowledgments

In researching and writing this book for over two years, there are many people who deserve mention, both for the roles they played in this project and for the roles they refused to play in this project. That there are many Japanese people who refuse to be associated with this project out of fear of their personal safety speaks volumes regarding the conflict between the old, ultra-nationalist perspective of World War II and everyone else in the Japanese society. The old, ultra-nationalist view of World War II is that the war was prosecuted to free Asia from its white colonists. According to this view, all war atrocities are merely examples of “victor’s justice.” If Japan had won, they argue, they would have tried Truman as a war criminal for authorizing the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

More specifically, this project gained much insight from Fukiko Aoki and Keiichi Tsuneishi’s work. Even after more than ten attempts through e-mail, letters, phone calls, and contacts with her publisher, Ms. Aoki refused any contact. Even though he spent his life working on Unit 731, Professor Tsuneishi claimed that he was not interested in my project and refused to help. Tsuneishi was so suspicious of me that he even refused to supply me with documents on which he relied to write his many books, citing some fabricated notion of “freelancer’s ethics.”

Two Japanese friends played important roles hunting down sources, locating relics and providing indispensable advice steering me through the intricacies of Japanese culture. Neither would allow me to use their names in this work.

Existing Japanese scholars and commentators refuse to lend their names and private Japanese citizens refuse to lend their names (but are more than happy to actually provide significant help) to this project. There is a very interesting subtext in Japanese society today: the ultra-nationalist right is bullying the rest of society. Japanese society in general lives in fear of the ultra-nationalist right. It is impossible to tell how far the tentacles of the ultra-nationalist right reach. For sure, they kept two very fine, supportive people

from allowing me to thank them properly, and they prevented the freedom of expression of Japanese academics and commentators to play a role in this book.

The people who did let me use their names on or in connection with the story of Shiro Ishii were all Chinese or Americans (with one exception). William Mitchell College of Law students and my research assistants include Sarah Berger '12, Lucas Hjelle '12, Kyle O'Dwyer '13, Stephanie Hilstrom '13, and Miwa Kaneko '14, now with Santa Clara University and the sole Japanese person that would allow me to use her name. My daughters, Emily and Ellie, conducted research for me as their busy college lives allowed. In the end, all credit for this project is due my wife, Paula Port, as she inspired this project from the beginning over a cup of morning coffee in the winter of 2010 up until the end joining me in Tokyo and Harbin to conclude the research for this project. To her, I remain eternally and entirely grateful.

I am also indebted to the memory of Professor Sheldon Harris. The Hoover Institution at Stanford University allowed me access to his papers. By reading and relying on much of what Professor Harris accomplished and attempted to prove, I gained a keen appreciation for a person that spent his entire life pursuing justice and the truth, wherever it may lead. May he rest in peace.

I am also indebted to Professor Yue-him Tam of Macalester College for his encouragement and interest in this project. Professor Tam has spent many years researching and writing about Japanese atrocities from World War II. He introduced me to the fabulously helpful people at the Unit 731 Museum in Pingfan, Harbin, China.

I am most indebted to Curator Cheng-min Jin, Assistant Curator Yan-jun Yang of the Harbin Academy of Social Sciences, Japanese Army Unit 731 Crime Evidence Museum and Haichun Bao and Mao-xiao Zheng of the Harbin Academy of Social Science for their support and diligent work in bringing to light Unit 731 and Shiro Ishii's atrocities. Ms. Ru-jia Liu provided expert translation services.

I am indebted to Niels Schaumann for his commitment to this project while he was Vice Dean for Faculty at William Mitchell College of Law. Regrettably only for me, he has since become the President and Dean at California Western College of Law in San Diego, California.

There are, of course many, many more people who inspired or tolerated a conversation about Shiro Ishii. To them all, I am grateful and gratified.