

**([Yanhuang chunqiu] Editor's Comment:** This essay is the posthumous work of Comrade Wu Zhili, former director of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army Health Division. With the exception of a few sentences and obvious typographical errors, this journal did not permit alterations in order to not influence the understanding of its contents.)

It has already been 44 years (in 1997) since the armistice of the Korean War, but as for the worldwide sensation of 1952: how indisputable is the bacteriological war of the American imperialists?

The case is one of false alarm.

That year the Party Central Committee confirmed (at least at the beginning) that it believed that the U.S. Army was conducting bacteriological warfare. We mobilized the whole military and the whole nation, spending large amounts of manpower and materiel to carry out an anti-bacteriological warfare movement. At the same time, American imperialism was also notoriously reaching a low point. When the former commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, [Matthew Bunker] Ridgeway, was transferred to Allied Headquarters Europe at the end of 1952, crowds jeered him at his arrival to the airport, calling him "the god of pestilence"<sup>[1]</sup> and causing him embarrassment. Not until he swore by the name of God that the U.S. military did not undertake bacteriological warfare was he allowed to go.

The affair originated with the appearance of large numbers of flies<sup>[2]</sup> and fleas on the snowy winter ground. It was later learned that these were snow fleas (in Korean called "oguli"), not human fleas,<sup>[3]</sup> and that they are a natural phenomenon on the snow in the winter. Snow fleas are of the order Springtail (*Collembola*), genus Dark springtail (*Isotomopalustris*)<sup>[4]</sup>. I also had reports of snow fleas in Northeast China. At that time we thought flies and fleas could not be found on the snow, and given that foreign newspapers were reporting that Japanese bacteriological war criminal Ishii [Shiro] had come to the front lines in Korea to investigate suspicious deaths on the U.S. military side, the Central Committee determined that the U.S. military was conducting bacteriological warfare.

The principal course of the affair was as follows: On January 29, 1952, the [Chinese People's] Volunteer Army Health Division and Volunteer Army Headquarters received a telegram from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Army claiming that U.S. planes flew over Pyonggang county (where that army was encamped) on January 28, 1952, and on the snow-covered ground in the trenches many types of insects were discovered. Among them were fleas, flies,<sup>[5]</sup> and spider-like insects. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Army sent specimens of 23 fleas (snow fleas), 33 flies,<sup>[6]</sup> and spider-like insects. Our chemical testing lab conducted cultures and did not discover pathogenic bacteria. The head of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Army Health Division was Gao Liang, a very attentive and qualified health cadre who had been the head of education at the medical school when I was in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. He must have been somewhat on alert about bacteriological warfare in order to send this telegram. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Army's telegram was also sent to PVA Command, where it drew the a high degree of attention from Commander Peng Dehuai, was forwarded to the Party Central Committee, and was sent to every unit to alert them and require timely reports of any similar situations. At that time almost all units sent telegrams of similar discoveries (within two months there were close to a thousand reports), reporting that the enemy dropped all kinds of things, including dead rats, flies and large mosquitos, vessels with insects (which were U.S. Army iron 4-compartment ammunition cases and paper parachute tubes used for spreading propaganda material), tree leaves and snakes, and one or two units reported that some North Korean citizens had suddenly died. [There were also] reports that large amounts of dead fish floated up in the river, and ten or more specimens of small dead fish (crucian carp<sup>[7]</sup>) were sent in, which a bacteriological culture found to have pure salmonella. *People's Daily* again reported that U.S. planes were dropping bacteria, dead rats and other things.

Coincidentally, at that time suspicious deaths were discovered on the U.S. military front lines, and the U.S. military sent Japanese bacteriological war criminal and former head of Unit 731 Ishii to North Korea to investigate this matter and publish this information. Based on the above information, the Party Central Committee determined that the U.S. military was conducting bacteriological warfare. After just a few days, on February 22, 1952, the front page of the *People's Daily* ran an eye-grabbing top headline, which, in the name of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and the North Korean government, denounced the U.S. imperialists for carrying out large-scale bacteriological war in Korea and Northeast China. Photographs of the dropped objects and bacterial smears were attached. This drew jarring and successive condemnation from the whole world. Prior to this, we did not know *People's Daily* would publish so quickly. After publication, I said to Health Division Deputy Director Zhu Zhiguang (since passed): "From here on, we should be passive." Zhu said, "After today, we can only write an article."<sup>[8]</sup>

The Central Health Division<sup>[9]</sup> was under the charge of Deputy Director He Cheng. He had worked in Northeast China, and knew that Japan's Unit 731 had engaged in<sup>[10]</sup> bacteriological warfare. He knew Ishii's person and deeds, and that they were *his* mistaken decision- and the Party Central Committee agreed. He sent entomologist Professor He Qi and bacteriologist Professor Wei Xi (both of them since passed) to Korea to investigate. Before they came, we had already dispatched men (including myself) to the reporting units many times to ascertain the situation, an investigation which concluded that there were insects and other objects dropped on the snow, but which did not discover people who had died suddenly or suspiciously fallen ill. Units that had previously reported deaths said that the reports had been hearsay. As for flies, almost every house has them in front of and behind the stove—they could fly out the door onto the snow at any time.

My personal analysis was: (1) Imperialism is capable of carrying out all manner of evils, and bacteriological war is not an exception. (2) Severe winter, however, is not a good season for conducting bacteriological war. When the weather is cold the mobility of insects is weakened, and is not conducive to bacteria reproduction. (3) Dropping [objects] on the front line trenches, where there are few people and sickness does not spread easily, and where the U.S. military's trenches are not more than ten meters away, allows for the possibility of ricocheting. (4) Korea already had an epidemic of lice-borne contagious diseases. All the houses in the cities and towns had been burned down, and the common people all lived in air-raid shelters. Their lives are already difficult, but the Korean people are extremely tenacious and bacteriological warfare cannot be the greater disaster that forces them to surrender. (5) Our preliminary investigation still could not prove that the U.S. military carried out bacteriological warfare.

I reported my viewpoint to Deputy Commander Hong, and he agreed that I should send a report of my opinion to Commander Peng and the Central Committee. I suggested that it would be wise to not publicize this as a major matter, in order to avoid being passive and wasting manpower and resources (this was before Professors He and Wei had arrived). Just then, a telegram arrived from the Central Committee, criticizing my lack of vigilance and saying that the enemy had not carried out bacteriological warfare, but that we could still take advantage of this to reinforce health work. Afterward Professors He and Wei carried on with their investigations and observed insect specimens and bacterial smears. He discovered that the so-called fleas were snow fleas, while Wei discovered that although the stained snow flea smears seemed to have bubonic plague<sup>[11]</sup> bacteria, they showed to be gram-positive (bubonic plague is gram-negative). They could not culture plague. I asked their opinion. He Qi said (verbatim), "I think it's a *false alarm*."<sup>[12]</sup>

After Commander Peng saw my telegram, he requested that I give an in-person report. Deputy Commander Hong asked me to give Commander Peng a realistic account of my viewpoint. Coincidentally, Chief Kim of the Korean People's Army Disease Prevention Bureau was ordered to come get to the bottom of things and discuss with me how to manage the situation, because they also could not come up with evidence. I took him with me to see Commander Peng, hoping that Kim could be a witness to the fact that evidence of bacteriological warfare could not be found. That evening, we arrived at the PVA Headquarters in Hoengsang County (We were posted at Seongcheon County, about a two-hour drive from the Command). Commander Peng, Deputy Commanders Deng Hua and Song Shilun, and ten or more others were sitting. We reported the results of our investigation and our opinions as stated above. Commander Peng said sternly (this is the general idea): "Our Health Director is an America imperialist operative and speaks on behalf of the enemy. Can the health of the Volunteer Army be guaranteed?" Then he said, "There are others who report that you<sup>[13]</sup> are neglecting the sick and wounded. If a thousand or ten thousand die on the battlefield that's fine, but if one dies afterwards I will come to you for a reckoning." I said, "I will no longer act as Health Director. I have no other request, except please let me stay in Korea and fight." Commander Peng declared the meeting temporarily in recess for the standing committee to deliberate. When the meeting resumed, Commander Peng said, "The standing committee still wants you as the Health Director. Do a proper job. Set up a general disease prevention office and be the deputy director. Deng Hua will be the director."

On the road later with Director Kim, he said that he was scared and trembling because he thought I'd be beheaded. He also said, "Your Commander Peng is

great, he loves the troops! He both educates you and regards you highly. You have a good Party, and a good Commander. After returning to post, I reported everything to Deputy Commander Hong, including what Commander Peng said to me personally. Hong did not utter a word, except to say "Do a proper job!" After only a few days, the Director of the Northeast Military Region Health Division, Dai Zhenghua (since passed), was tasked by the Central Military Commission to investigate anti-bacteriological warfare work. I gave him a report of Commander Peng's instructions. Dai said, "Don't be afraid, just go do what Commander Peng said." That night at midnight, I received a phone call from the Soviet Chief of Staff at Headquarters who, through a translator, said, "Stalin has asked whether bacteriological warfare is really occurring." I answered, "Go ask Commander Peng," and hung up the phone. I thought to myself, this is really hard to figure out! If I don't do this right I'll be beheaded. I should prepare myself to be beheaded.

After only a few days, He Cheng and Gong Rengquan organized a disease prevention inspection unit with a 30-person strong line-up that included He Qi and Wei Xi and had it come to Korea to aid in countering bacteriological warfare. Among them were:

Entomologist He Qi

Flea expert Liao Zhiying

Parasite experts Wu Guang and Bao Dingcheng

Bacteriologists Wei Xi, Chen Wengui (a plague expert who proved that Japan used the plague during the War of Resistance), Fang Liang (Korean), Xie Zhimu, Guo Shiqin, and Cheng Zhiyi

Virologist Guo Chengzhou

Epidemiology experts He Guanqing and Yu Huanwen

Expert in Rickettsia corpuscles Liu Weitong (who is also an epidemiology expert)

Approximately 10 young scientists (Ren Minfeng, Wu Zilin, Hu Jietang, Li Yimin, Li Zhenqiong, Gao Yundiao, Liu Yujing, etc.)

10 or more photographers and technicians

I divided them into 4 teams, the largest of which I placed near the Health Division. I placed the other 3 teams in the health departments of the Eastern, Central, and Western fronts respectively. These 3 teams were to take charge of the preliminary examination of specimens sent up from the field, and were responsible for directing disease prevention work on the ground. Specimens that had problems in the preliminary examination would be sent to the group headquarters at Seongcheon for a secondary examination. The number of specimens received was large (several hundred), and some had bacteria cultured from them. All of these were Salmonella-type, and neither plague<sup>[14]</sup> nor cholera<sup>[15]</sup> appeared. A few times anthrax<sup>[16]</sup> was found on tree leaf specimens. There were all kinds of so-called "dropped objects," but it was difficult to link them to bacteriological warfare.

I quickly formulated anti-bacteriological warfare measures (strengthening individual health measures, giving more types of vaccinations, requiring everyone to pin their trouser leg and sleeve openings tight and wear scarves around the neck, setting sentries to watch the sky, developing methods for collecting and submitting specimens for examination, on-the-spot swatting of insects dropped from the air, sprinkling sanitizer, discovering suspiciously ill personnel first isolate them and then report, etc.) and promulgated them throughout the whole army. I also got Commander Peng's approval (which the PAV Headquarters and allied governments circulated to the whole army) to perform autopsies on the dead, giving a green light to researching the cause of their injury and death.

For the entire year, no sick patient or deceased person was found to have anything to do with bacteriological warfare. Because of our particular focus on health, the number of sick personnel was greatly reduced. Later, in 1987, a few army leader cadres ran into me and said, "The American imperialists engaged in such massive germ warfare but our side didn't even have one death!" By then, I thought this was unimaginable.

That year [1952] we were busy with receiving investigatory delegations: Li Dequan [Otto Braun, Comintern advisor to the Chinese Communist Party] and Liao Chengzhi led the Chinese team, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, and the International Scientific Commission. The head of the latter delegation was Royal Society fellow Joseph Needham, who wrote *Science and Civilisation in China*.<sup>[17]</sup> The deputy head of the delegation was U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences fellow Zhukov-Verezhnikov, who was experienced in this area and was a medical expert at the trial of Japanese bacteriological war criminals in Khabarovsk. He brought a young English translator named Mr. Kowalski.<sup>[18]</sup> Members of the delegation included Brazilian biologist and bat expert Dr. [Samuel B.] Pessoa, French veterinary expert Professor [Jean] Malterre, Swedish clinical laboratory scientist Dr. Andrea Andreen (female), and Italian biologist Dr. [Oliviero] Olivo. Our own Dr. Qian Sanqiang was the point-of-contact, Doctor Chen Shu was the Russian translator, tropical disease expert Dr. Zhong Huilan and (gynecology) professor Yan Renying (female) were English translators. Of the former two investigation teams, one was entirely Chinese and of course fully cooperated.

The International Association of Democratic Lawyers, not being natural scientists, diligently noted down everything we said, all the while cursing American imperialism. It was not the same with the International Scientific Commission: although they believed that the American imperialists conducted bacteriological warfare, we could not produce proof of the issue. Soviet Academician Zhukov was entrusted [with the task] by Stalin. He was an all-right fellow. When they came to Korea, which was right after the U.S. military conducted a huge bombing raid on Pyongyang, Pyongyang was a field of rubble. The investigation teams first inspected the bacterial evidence dropped by American planes in the Northeast [of China] (July 12 to July 25). Before entering Korea, Zhukov had said to them, "Korea is a battlefield and very dangerous, we might as well make a conclusion about the results of the Northeast investigation and sign it in order to avoid working hard and accomplishing nothing [if we get killed]." The other delegates thought this made sense, and wrote the initial conclusion that the U.S. military had conducted bacteriological warfare in Northeast China. In Korea (July 28 to August 1), they were set up in a hotel deep underground, but were still harassed by American planes at night.

On the day the hearing began, the Korean side reported two cases. One was of cholera deaths: American planes dropped straw baskets on Daedong in Pyongyang, which contained mussels carrying cholera. Patients ate the mussels, got cholera, and died. Korea had not had cholera in many years. The other case was of plague deaths: one day a family discovered fleas on the surface of their water jar, which was very strange. After a few days, members of the family fell ill and died. The autopsy revealed plague. Korea had never before had plague. (This case was prepared under the guidance of Professor Chen Wengui at the request of the Korean side, it was similar to what he observed in water jars in the 1940s when Japan dropped disease-carrying fleas at Changde).

The Volunteer Army brought forward the case of two first lieutenants at the 20<sup>th</sup> Group encampment who discovered a dense group of fleas while chopping wood. They collected quite a few and sent them in. Plague was cultured from the fleas. Because we required everyone to tighten their trouser leg and sleeve openings and immediately sanitize areas upon which objects had been dropped from the sky while we were countering anti-bacteriological warfare, the army did not have any sick or dead. The scientists easily accepted this, and they adopted the testimony. The truth of this matter is that the fleas were discovered in small thatched cottages in the forest. These cottages have firewood and other assorted items in them that are suitable for flea colonies. It is difficult to say that the American imperialists dropped these in. When they were giving the above report, they did not mention the thatched cottages. This time when they were asked to go out and testify at the scene, one of them said that Chairman Mao taught him not to lie. He was unable to move. What to do? Only to persuade him to submit to the current needs of the struggle against the enemy and say that the place where fleas were discovered was out in the open. All the flea specimens were human fleas (*Pulex irritans*)<sup>[19]</sup>. As for the plague, that was easy, we [could] cause it to appear.

About the middle of May, Chen Wengui phoned me from our inspection team's bacteria lab to tell me that Fang Liang had lost the plague cultures dropped by the enemy (the bacteria lab was originally Fang Liang's responsibility, in reality the lab had never had plague cultures). Chen Wengui had studied plague with an Indian professor,<sup>[20]</sup> and discovered it at once. I realized that this was a big problem and immediately notified Director He Cheng in Beijing and Director Wang Bin in Northeast China to promptly send Comrade Men Xin to get the plague cultures or else this would all be [too] difficult to manage. Men Xin (who later served as the director of Military Hospital 203 in Liaoyang, since retired) went to Shenyang, and came back in 5 days with two tubes of plague cultures (packed in sealed iron pipes). I gave one tube to Chen Wengui, and gave the other to the North Korean deputy prime minister of health protection Ro Jin-han<sup>[21]</sup> in the presence of the deputy captain of our disease prevention unit Li Zhefan. He had asked for the bacteria cultures before, and at this moment he knew exactly why I gave him the cultures. After this, I told Li Zhefan, "In case it will be difficult when the time comes to prove bacteriological warfare, inject me with plague and let me die. This way, the director of the Health Division will have caught the plague dropped by the U.S. military even if it is not iron-clad evidence." He said, "That won't do. We can always think of another way." It was apparent how large the pressure was at this time. Li was of Korean ethnicity.<sup>[22]</sup> Before Liberation he had done plague prevention work with Soviet experts in Northeast China and was already a remarkable expert. A few years ago I asked him if he remembered this affair, and he said he did not remember it too clearly.

Within this one year I went to Beijing three times to report on issues related to anti-bacteriological warfare. I saw Premier Zhou [Enlai] every time. Even though Premier Zhou had many matters to attend to, he asked a lot of very detailed questions about this issue. One time, the Korean Deputy Prime Minister for Health Protection went with me to Beijing and gave the Premier a report of the preparatory work of the International Scientific Investigation Team. The Premier asked the Korean side what difficulties there were, and I interjected, after which the Premier immediately asked Deputy Prime Minister Ro what he thought of my opinion. It moved me that the Premier had the noble character to respect the opinions of others, and at the same time made me feel like I should not so wantonly interrupt. One evening, at a little past 8 o'clock, the Premier was eating while discussing issues with me. He only had a small bowl of rice, two small plates of vegetables and a small bowl of soup. Quite a thrifty life.

Before the investigation teams returned to Northeast China, they went to Pyoktong prisoner of war camp on the northern border of Korea and met with several U.S. airmen. They had earlier published in *People's Daily* that they had dropped bacteriological bombs. With the investigation teams, they freely discussed the classes they took on bacteriological weapons and their experience with "bombs that don't explode." After the ceasefire, they were exchanged back to their country. I heard that they were all disciplined for this. I really admire the persuasion work of our personnel in the prisoner-of-war camps.

When the investigation teams returned to Beijing, they signed and published a 500-page-thick black book, *Report of the International Scientific Commission for the Investigation of the Facts Concerning Bacterial Warfare in Korea and China*. They were received by Chairman Mao.

After the international scientists gave their report to Chairman Mao, he said, "I see that the American imperialists are experimentally engaged in bacteriological warfare." They unanimously approved what he said.<sup>[23]</sup>

After Academician Zhukov returned to the Soviet Union and reported to Stalin, a telegram came from the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party saying that bacteriological warfare was a false alarm. Premier Zhou immediately sought out Chief of Staff Huang Kecheng and Deputy Commander Hong Xuezhong and asked, "Have you been up to tricks?" Hong answered, "Yes, otherwise we wouldn't have had anything to report." At that time, China had sent people to Europe to do anti-bacteriological warfare propaganda. Premier Zhou promptly ordered a retraction. Afterwards China did not raise the matter again, but following [generations] did not know. A few people who write books are always inserting that the American imperialists engaged in bacteriological warfare. I always recommend conveying that we were "threatened" by bacteriological warfare, thus taking a more defensible position. When he was sick, Huang Kecheng asked me to pass his opinion to the comrades at the Academy of Military Sciences who were editing an encyclopedia: "The American imperialists did not engage in bacteriological warfare in Korea. Right now the two countries' relationship is not bad, and it would be inappropriate to keep talking about this issue." When they heard this, they sent someone to ask if there had been bacteriological warfare after all. I only said that we do not have enough evidence.

This has been my silent regret for decades. There has been no other. I only feel sorry for the international scientists who signed their names. Perhaps I am too naïve, because it is possible they knew the truth but obeyed the requirements of the political struggle. If it was like this then fine, but if not then they were deceived by me. I had unceasingly expressed my apology for them to Huang Kecheng. Huang said, "You don't need to feel this way, this was political struggle! Furthermore you had expressed your views on bacteriological warfare from the beginning. It was not an easy situation, and you were given responsibility too late."

I think that there will be a day in history to speak clearly about this incident. Now that I am an 83-year-old man who knows the facts and is no longer on duty, it is fitting to speak out: the bacteriological war of 1952 was a false alarm.

September 1997

(Retrospective from February 2, 2005: Last year, in 2004, Professor Li Yimin at the Military Hospital Academy of Science forwarded an essay written by a professor at a Belgian medical college, discussing this affair in particular, which said: "Russia has published documents from the former Soviet Union. In the fall of 1952, the Soviet Central Party Committee sent telegrams to Chairman Mao Zedong and Chairman Kim Il Sung respectively, claiming that the U.S. military had certainly not conducted bacteriological warfare and that it was a false alarm. The Academy membership of Soviet expert Zhukov has been revoked because he took the lead on producing the black book.")

(The author [Wu Zhili] is the former Director of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army Health Division)

([Yanhuang chunqiu] Editor: Huang Zhong)

<sup>[1]</sup> The Chinese word used, *wenshen* [wěnyǎn], is a deity traditionally believed in Korea and China to cause disease and pestilence. The fact that European crowds were using the name of a Chinese deity in this case may be embellishment by the author.

<sup>[2]</sup> More specifically, "houseflies."

<sup>[3]</sup> The Chinese term is generally used to refer to the *Pulex irritans*. The original article uses the common names for organisms, except in a few cases where the scientific name is given parenthetically after the common name in the text. In all other cases, the translator has provided the scientific nomenclature in the footnotes.

<sup>[4]</sup> Possibly intended to refer to *Isotomurus palustris*.

<sup>[5]</sup> Although the author used the term for "housefly" above, this instance uses only the more general categorical sense of "fly."

<sup>[6]</sup> Here the author uses the term "housefly" again.

<sup>[7]</sup> *Carassius carassius*.

<sup>[8]</sup> Zhu uses the word for an academic article [wenzhang, wen-zhang] rather than the word for an official report [baogao, baogao].

<sup>[9]</sup> It is unclear whether this refers to the PLA Central Health Division or a national government central health division, but in either case it is superior to the PVA Health Division.

[10] The word in Chinese translated here as ‘engaged in’ often has a negative connotation, and can imply that the speaker/writer feels that the action carried out was nefarious.

[11] *Yersinia pestis*.

[12] In the original manuscript, the author has He Qi saying the term “false alarm” in English.

[13] The Chinese word used here is second person plural.

[14] *Yersinia pestis*.

[15] *Vibrio cholera*.

[16] *Bacillus anthracis*.

[17] The Chinese title for this book is *The History of Chinese Science and Technology*.

[18] This rendering in English is an approximation of the original Russian name filtered through Chinese pronunciation.

[19] That is, *Pulex irritans*.

[20] The name of the Indian professor is given in Chinese as *suoke* [ç’çǎ..ɿ], but the English spelling could not be determined.

[21] In simplified Chinese pronounced *Lu Zhenhan* [ɛ̃²æŋ æ±%], which in Korean hanja is rendered ㄹ ㅌ ㅈ ㅊ ㅅ ㅅ ㅅ or in Hangul ㄹ ㅌ ㅈ ㅊ ㅅ ㅅ ㅅ.

[22] That is, ethnic Korean Chinese.

[23] Or, “They unanimously approved this way of putting it.”