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80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BEGINNING OF THE TOKYO TRIAL

GLOBAL TIMES

Testimony Beyond Time

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By Shou Sheng, Zou Zhidong, Tang Ya and Wang Pu

A steady April drizzle lingered over Nanjing, deepening the solemnity inside the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders. It was here that a Global Times reporter met author Zou Dehai, who had traveled from afar to donate the archives of a US assistant prosecutor who took part in the Tokyo Trial, which he had acquired later.

Zou showed Global Times reporters pages from Sutton's diaries, which describe the opening session of the Tokyo Trial as "big light-gating witness" and "very impressive." Sutton also remarked that the "defendants look like insignificant bastards now."

David Nelson Sutton was invited after World War II to serve as an assistant prosecutor for the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and was one of the key figures responsible for investigating and gathering evidence on Japanese war crimes in China. Zou shared with the Global Times that while the evidence Sutton presented in court and his questioning of witnesses were rigorous, restrained and diplomatically objective, his private writings reveal a man driven by a deep personal commitment to justice.



LET HISTORY SPEAK, LET 让历史说话，用史实发言 FACTS TESTIFY

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New historical details from the Webb papers revealed by team led by a Nanjing University professor

An 81-year-old reader of private papers belonging to William E. Webb, president of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, uncovered by Chinese scholars, marks a major breakthrough in the Tokyo Trial research. During the admission of evidence on the Nanjing Massacre, Webb and his colleagues facing defense lawyers well-versed in Anglo-American procedure and seeking to exploit it, insisted on due process, an expert said.

The Webb papers, collected and cataloged in earlier years by the Australian War Memorial and long kept in storage with limited use, were recently reexamined by Nanjing University professor Zhang Sheng's team, yielding a number of significant new details.

"In general, I mainly work with the first section, which contains materials related to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. The remaining parts include draft judgments, case files from 1945, and correspondence," Zhang Sheng, a professor at the School of History at Nanjing University and leader of the research team, told the Global Times.

The draft judgments—marked up repeatedly in pen and pencil—show how the judges wrestled with fact-finding, the admissibility of evidence and even the phrasing of their decisions, rather than reaching hasty, one-off conclusions, the expert said.

The papers show Webb repeatedly raising in what Zhang described as disruptive tactics by Japanese defense counsel, Zhang told the Global Times, citing several cases.

In one instance, when Dr Robert Wilson, the only surgeon present in Nanjing during the massacre, testified that sexual violence by Japanese troops had led to epidemic infections among women, defense lawyers countered that secondary symptoms take at least three months to appear and, while feigning respect, attempted to steer the witness, Wilson, a physician trained at Princeton and Harvard, said.

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Picture of a page from the Webb papers. Photo: Courtesy of Zhang Sheng.

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In the end, 25 defendants were found guilty, and seven of them, including Hideki Tojo, were sentenced to hanging.

This was a just reckoning with the crimes of Japanese militarism, and a warning to anyone attempting to revive militarism.

As the last great international trial in human history, the Tokyo Trial carries profound historical significance. Together with the Nuremberg Tribunal, they established through international judicial practice for the first time that "a war of aggression constitutes a crime" and that individuals must bear criminal responsibility for it. They sent a clear message to the world that "aggression will be punished and those who will be held to account," laying an important cornerstone of the postwar international order.

Looking back on the century-defining trial, its historical weight has not diminished in the slightest with the passage of time.

Beijing, China May 10, 2026 (Issuewire.com) - Global Times: Testimony beyond time: scholars and collectors unearth archives, conduct studies of Tokyo Trial prosecutors, witnesses and judges to guard historical justice

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David Nelson Sutton was invited after World War II to serve as an assistant prosecutor at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and was one of the key figures responsible for investigating and gathering evidence on Japanese war crimes in China.

Zou shared with the Global Times what he found in Sutton's archives and diaries. While the evidence Sutton presented in court and his questioning of witnesses were rigorous, restrained and clinically objective, his private writings reveal a man driven by a deep personal commitment to justice. To ensure four key Chinese witnesses could travel to Tokyo to testify, Sutton personally advanced their travel and accommodation expenses - from Nanjing to Shanghai and onward to Tokyo - on behalf of the International Prosecution Section.

In Nanjing, Sutton went to the banks of the Yangtze River to verify on site the mass killing of 6,000 civilians by Japanese troops.

From March to April 1946, Sutton traveled to China with the International Prosecution Section and was tasked with investigating Japanese war crimes, focusing on evidence related to the Nanjing Massacre. During his stay, he conducted fieldwork in Shanghai, Beiping (Beijing today), Chongqing and Nanjing, among others, gathering eyewitness testimonies, statistical data and photographs of mass burial sites, and meeting with Chinese officials, missionaries, doctors and survivors, according to a statement the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders shared with the Global Times.

Accompanied by Chinese prosecutor Xiang Zhejun and his assistant Qiu Shaoheng, Sutton conducted extensive fieldwork, interviewing Chinese officials, foreign missionaries, medical personnel and survivors of the Nanjing Massacre. He collected a large body of firsthand testimonies, statistical data and archival materials, later transforming them into admissible evidence for the tribunal. In June 1946, Sutton led more than 10 Chinese and foreign witnesses to testify in Tokyo, providing crucial testimonial and material evidence to support the prosecution of Japanese wartime atrocities in China, Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders research fellow Zhang Guosong, also a researcher at the National Memory and International Peace Studies Institute, told the Global Times.

Featuring Sutton's handwritten diaries and investigative reports, the collection fills critical gaps in the historical record - bringing greater depth and credibility to the narrative of the trial and reinforcing the overwhelming evidence of atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre, Zhang said.

That evidentiary weight is also reflected in Sutton's own words. According to a Global Times review, Sutton ended one report submitted to the tribunal with a blunt assessment of wartime culpability: "It was a war begun in violation of solemn treaty obligations and repeated official assurances. It was a war waged in violation of every rule of organised warfare and in a manner which shocked the conscience of humanity. The acts of the defendants violated the inexorable rules of human conduct. Their acts were sins against humanity."

Dive into 'Chinese Anne Frank's Diary': A historian revisits a firsthand record of the Nanjing Massacre

Cheng Ruifang, who documented the Japanese atrocities in Nanjing in her diary between December 8, 1937 and March 1, 1938, later submitted a written testimony based on her experiences to the 1946 International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Her diary is also regarded as the diary of the "Chinese Anne Frank" for its firsthand account of suffering and survival during wartime.

"Now it is midnight. I am sitting here to write this diary and cannot go to sleep because tonight I have experienced the taste of being a slave of a toppled country ... After collecting more information, [we] heard that eleven girls, all told, were dragged away tonight. [We] did not know where they would be dragged to and be molested. I wanted to cry. What kind of future would these girls have?"

On the night of December 17, 1937, Cheng Ruifang, the housemaster of Ginling College and the head of the Health Unit of the Fourth District (Ginling College Refugee Shelter) of the Nanjing Safety Zone, wrote in her diary that she "could not help but feel heartbroken."

At the time Cheng Ruifang was already 62 years old. After the fall of Nanjing, she remained and, together with Minnie Vautrin, a US missionary and head of the Ginling College Refugee Shelter, and Chen Feiran, formed a "three-person emergency committee." Vautrin later described her as "an excellent general," according to the People's Daily Overseas Edition.

Due to health reasons, Cheng Ruifang was later unable to testify in person at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. However, she submitted a written testimony to the tribunal, which was admitted as prosecution exhibit No.308.

In her statement, she wrote: "I am 71 years old and serve as the housemother of Ginling Women's College. After the fall of Nanjing in December 1937, the campus was declared a safety zone ... Ginling Women's College sheltered more than 10,000 women and children." She then listed several instances of rape, looting and killings committed by Japanese soldiers on campus that she had witnessed, per the report.

Jiang Liangqin, a professor of the Department of Chinese History at Nanjing University, told the Global Times that, after rigorous academic comparison, Cheng Ruifang's testimony is fully consistent with her diary entries, which are even more detailed and comprehensive. Her diary has thus become key evidence in documenting Japanese wartime atrocities in China.

"Previous studies on the Nanjing Safety Zone have largely focused on Western participants. In reality, however, only some 20 Westerners remained in Nanjing and were responsible for protecting more than 200,000 refugees. As a result, much of the day-to-day administrative work in the refugee camps, including management and the provision of food and fuel, was carried out through the coordinated efforts of Chinese personnel," Jiang noted.

The expert added that through Cheng's words, it is clear she was a woman with stable emotions and great practical ability. There were times when even Minnie Vautrin could not resolve certain problems, but Cheng Ruifang was able to handle them successfully.

"From a historical perspective, the diary of Cheng Ruifang provides a direct and valuable account of the crucial work carried out by Chinese administrators, organizers, and frontline staff in the Nanjing Safety Zone. It helps correct earlier scholarship that focused heavily on Western participants while largely overlooking the contributions of the Chinese staff. As such, it stands as an important source for understanding how the Safety Zone actually functioned on the ground."

Jiang further observed that Cheng, as a Chinese eyewitness, offers a perspective that complements the diaries of Westerners. For example, her detailed descriptions of Vautrin's emaciated appearance and extreme exhaustion are not found in Vautrin's own diary, according to the expert.

The Diary of Cheng Ruifang is not only the first known account of the Nanjing Massacre recorded by a Chinese eyewitness based on her own experiences, but also the only surviving testimony from a Chinese woman's perspective.

Jiang said the diary offers a rare window into the resolve of Chinese workers in the Nanjing Safety Zone, their efforts to aid fellow civilians, and the emotional toll of living under occupation. It provides invaluable firsthand material for understanding the survival conditions, moral courage and mutual support of ordinary Chinese people during the massacre.

"That's precisely why the diary of Cheng Ruifang is so invaluable," the expert added.

New historical details from the Webb papers revealed by team led by Nanjing University professor Zhang Sheng

An 8.2-gigabyte cache of private papers belonging to William F. Webb, president of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, uncovered by Chinese scholars, marks a major breakthrough in the Tokyo Trial research. During the admission of evidence on the Nanjing Massacre, Webb and his colleagues, facing defense lawyers well versed in Anglo-American procedure and seeking to exploit it, insisted on due process, an expert said.

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The draft judgments - marked up repeatedly in pen and pencil - show how the judges wrestled with fact-finding, the admissibility of evidence and even the phrasing of their decisions, rather than reaching hasty, one-off conclusions, the expert said, pointing to the level of detail in the archive.

The papers show Webb repeatedly reining in what Zhang described as disruptive tactics by Japanese defense counsel, Zhang told the Global Times, citing several cases. In one instance, when Dr Robert Wilson, the only surgeon present in Nanjing during the massacre, testified that sexual violence by Japanese troops had led to syphilis infections among women, defense lawyers countered that secondary symptoms take at least three months to appear and, while feigning respect, attempted to steer the witness. Wilson, a physician trained at Princeton and Harvard, said onset can occur anywhere between six weeks and three months.

Another dispute centered on the so-called "defeated stragglers." The defense claimed Chinese soldiers who had not formally surrendered were not protected as prisoners of war, seeking to justify civilian killings by labeling the victims as combatants. Webb countered that determining status required legal procedure, and that killing people based on calluses, load marks or hat lines was plainly unlawful.

In the interview, Zhang cited these examples without hesitation, laying them out in quick succession within just a few minutes.

Zhang added that Webb's private papers also make a point that's often overlooked: Japan's deliberate use of the term "incident" to describe its campaigns - such as the Mukden, Lugou Bridge and Shanghai "incidents" - was intended to deny the existence of a formal war and evade international law, a position acknowledged in court by Class-A defendant, former Imperial Japanese Army Lieutenant General Akira Muto. That intent, however, did not make it into the final judgment - an omission that, Zhang said, carries lessons today for how historical narratives are framed and terms defined.

From today's historical perception, Matsui Iwane, the commander of the Japanese Central China Area Force bore multiple responsibilities for planning and escalating the war and for allowing atrocities in Nanjing to unfold. His insistence during the Battle of Shanghai helped push Japan toward full-scale war, though not all relevant evidence was available to the tribunal at the time. Webb's papers show he weighed both the evidentiary strength of the prosecution's case and the political realities among the Allied powers, according to Zhang.

This, in turn, allows us to see the historical process through the individuals behind the official verdict, revealing the complexity of the Tokyo Trial, which cannot be reduced to the notion of a "victors' justice" as claimed by some Japanese right-wing narratives, the expert said.

Courts decide based on the evidence available at the time, while historical research continues to expand and revise the record as new materials emerge, Zhang said. This is why Chinese scholars and private collectors have, in recent years, been working through archives at home and abroad to recover primary sources, fill gaps in the Tokyo Trial record, and further substantiate the evidentiary basis for atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre, while contributing to a more detailed and sustained scholarly understanding of historical justice, he added.

The Tokyo Trial left the reckoning with Japanese militarism incomplete, with the emperor's exemption, the failure to prosecute Unit 731 and an insufficient adjudication of crimes against humanity. These unresolved issues continue to echo into the present, as right-wing forces deny the Nanjing Massacre and use such denial as a basis to undermine the legitimacy of the trial, deflect state responsibility, and advance the so-called "normal nation" narrative.

Right-wing circles in Japan also invoke the principle of non-retroactivity of law to challenge the trial's legal basis. "The law governing crimes against humanity often lags behind the atrocities it seeks to address," the experts said, adding that strict adherence to non-retroactivity would make it impossible to hold aggressors accountable, and would undermine humanity's broader effort to restrain war and safeguard peace.

"Whoever tied the knot is responsible for untying it," Zhang stressed, warning that unless Japan draws the lessons of history, any return to militarism would risk repeating the tragedies of the past.

Anna Li

*****@globaltimes.com.cn

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