A Preliminary study of Rhetoric and Reality of Aerial Bombings of Canton, China, 1937-8

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Abstract
The aerial bombings of Canton by Japan between 1937 and 1938, we have been told, were “excessive and indiscriminate” and resulted in huge civilian casualty and extensive destruction of non-military property and utilities. This paper aims to revisit the whole issue and some of the nationalistic narratives about the wholesale application of “indiscriminate strategic aerial bombing” tactic on South China, and particularly its civilian population, and to assess the accuracy of representations in many Chinese texts, both official and unofficial, about the extensiveness and ruthlessness of Japanese air raids on this largest city in southern China.
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This paper presents some observations on one small, but important, chapter of the Japanese military operations in South China---Japanese air raids on the city of Canton and its vicinity, which was, and still is, commonly described in Chinese media and texts, official and unofficial, past and present, as merciless, indiscriminate, and hugely devastating. A close and meticulous study of available sources reveals that many conventional assumptions about the nature and impacts of Japanese aerial bombardment on this city are problematic because contemporary narratives, such as official and journalists’ reports, about these raids were, not infrequently, filled with exaggerations or inaccuracies in various degrees. The aim of this study is not to humanize or rationalize killing and destruction perpetuated by an invading army on the victims of this war, nor is it set out to demonize, blindly, the Japanese invading forces in Canton and its vicinity. Demonization and exaggerations about the nature and the essence of destruction and killing lead us nowhere but only deeper and deeper misunderstanding of what had actually happened in the past to the extent of firmly believing in the myths built upon historical fallacy. Emotion, patriotic feeling, and political persuasions blind us from understanding historical events accurately.

To serve the political purpose of arousing nationalist feelings among the people in not only China but also around the world, there appears in China in recent years a number of historical publications dedicated to the topic of aerial bombing of China by the Japanese invading forces. One of them, for instance, is a series of anti-Japanese-war (kang Ri zhan zheng 抗日戰爭) publications, entitled Riben qin Hua tu ji (Pictorials of Japanese Invasion of China), which were funded and highly commended by a supportive government, won its place as a “12th Fifth’ Publication Project with National Emphasis”(12.5 Guo jia zhong dian tu shu chu ban gai ge fa chan xiang mu) and also a “National News and Publications Development and Reform Project” (Guo jia xin wen chu ban gai ge fa chan xiang mu) in 2014. Volume 14 of this series is about “indiscriminate strategic aerial bombing”, which is also the title of this volume.1 It is a massive 400-page collection of photographs and descriptions of some the notorious events of indiscriminate serial bombing by the Japanese forces on big urban centres in different parts of China during the War. In its introductory chapter, its editors write that the adoption of airplanes by the military as highly effective “modern weapon of mass slaughter” began in World War I. Since then, warplanes became an important element in the strategic planning and military tactics for many countries. During the interwar years, military strategists all over the world had developed different theories on how to maximize most effectively the destructive power of this modern weapon. China, its editors continue, was

unfortunately the first country in the world on which these aerial-bombardment military theories had been tested by its enemy, and China was also the country which had been bombed most extensively and for the longest period of time (from 1931 to 1945) in the history of aerial bombing in modern history. Japanese militarists, they argue, adopted the tactic of “indiscriminate strategic aerial bombing”, instead of the relatively more humane “strategic bombing” which would have focused on strategically important military targets. Citing an influential work by historian Tetsuo Maeda about Japanese indiscriminate aerial bombing of Chungking (Chongqing), China’s wartime capital city, they state that “indiscriminate strategic aerial bombing” conducted by the Japanese throughout the War was about bombing not only military targets, but indiscriminately against everything within the range of bombing; it was about destroying all important facilities, military and non-military, in the enemy’s territories, and, more importantly, “targeting directly at the civilian population”, so much so that it would cause extreme anxiety among the people living in the bombed cities, and crushed their will of resistance. Between 1938 and late 1944, Japanese warplanes had conducted over 7,300 raids in different parts of China, all indiscriminately and inflicted enormous destruction of properties and facilities as well as massive casualty of civilians and military personnel. When describing the atrocious aerial bombing of Canton and other parts of Guangdong, we are told that from August 1937 to the last day of the war in August 1945, Japanese warplanes had never stopped bombing indiscriminately this part of China.2 Similar views on the ruthless and indiscriminate aerial bombing by a militarily superior Japan over a much weaker China and its defenseless civilian population are shared by many nationalistic historians whose works always emphasize the atrocities committed by the Japanese against unarmed and helpless Chinese.3

Newspapers in wartime Canton and other parts of the province are full of reports, about these allegedly “ruthless massacre” of innocent Chinese people in those incessant “excessive [aerial] bombings” (lan zha 濫炸) by Japanese warplanes on Canton and other cities in Guangdong. Foreign correspondents and officials in both China and the West, mainly London and Washington, also joined in condemning the “Canton bombings” as they called it.4 In nearly all these reports, which are always written in emotional language with strong patriotic overtone, Japanese aerial bombings were unfailingly described as “excessive”, “ruthless”, “aimless”, and the ensuing destruction and killing “atrocious”, “unnecessary”, “disproportionate”, “brutal”, and often compare to massacre.

This paper is not set out to deny Japan’s war guilt, or to disprove the existence of extensive aerial bombings of cities in China. The often-cited example of indiscriminate aerial bombing of Chongqing in Sichuan, an important historical subject which has been well documented by Japanese historian Tetsuo Maeda (whose pioneering study has since then inspired a number of similar studies by nationalistic historians in China), does demonstrate the ruthlessness and cruelty of the invading Japanese force.5 The aim of this paper, however,

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3 For example, Gu Linhui, “Jin er shi nian lai guan yu kang zhan shi qi Riben kong xi yu Zhongguo fan xi dou zhe yang yan ji zong shu”, Kang Ri zhan zheng yan jiu (2012), vol. 2, pp. 151-58. This article also contains a decent bibliography of the studies of aerial bombing of China by the Japanese, and air warfare between the two countries.
4 For examples, South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), Daily Express (London), North-China Daily News (Shanghai), New York Times, etc. published editorials condemning the bombings in early June, 1938. Abridgements of some of these editorials can be read in Hsu Shushsi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1939).
5 Tetsuo Maeda 前田哲男, Chongqing da hong zha (Chengdu: Chengdu ke ji da xue chu ban she, 1990).
is to revisit the whole issue and the nationalistic narratives about the wholesale application of that “indiscriminate strategic aerial bombing” tactic in the context of Canton, by examining the accuracy of representations in many Chinese texts, both contemporary and present-date, about the extensiveness and ruthlessness of Japanese air raids in this part of China. Canton, the largest city in southern China, and Shaoguan (韶關) and Qujiang (曲江), wartime provincial capital cities of the Nationalist government in Guangdong, and other major towns (such as Dongguan 东莞 and Shilong 石龍) in the Pearl River Delta region, are the geographical foci of this study. These cities are chosen because of their strategic important locations which attracted Japanese aerial bombardments regularly, and their proximity to the Kowloon-Canton Railway and the Canton-Hankow Railway lines, which were militarily extremely important to the survival of the defending Chinese forces in “free Guangdong”, also made them important targets for Japanese air strikes which as a result better documented. Only a detailed study of the experiences of these cities during the war could prove, or disprove, the allegation that “indiscriminate strategic bombing” was a general tactic adopted by the Japanese imperial command to terrorize the Chinese populace and to inflict maximum destruction to a city’s military targets as well as its civilian facilities and the common people.

**Strategic Raids or Wholesale Massacres?**

Reports of aerial bombing of Canton (and other parts of Guangdong) appeared in local newspapers since late August 1937, soon after the air strike against Canton began. Although some of these reports are sketchy, most reports, such as those published in Yue Hua Bao, a popular daily in Canton, and the official daily Zhongshan Ri Bao, contain fair amount of details about the extent of destruction, number of casualty, particulars of raid victims, and so on. These information, though not always perfect, provide us with important details of the characteristics of Japanese air raids on Canton. Close reading of historical materials such as news reports, Japanese military reports, foreign consuls’ reports, and reminiscences of war survivors, reveal something different from most contemporary and present-date Chinese narratives, but really important: that Japanese bombers did not conduct extensive aerial bombing on these urban settlements on a daily basis, and that when they did bomb these cities, they were, on most occasions, apparently exercised restraint and even often time tried to minimize, instead of maximizing, damage on civilians and densely populated areas. In many reported air strikes, only a handful of bombs were dropped on empty fields or brooks, resulted in fairly limited damage and, not infrequently, nil casualty. From careful reading of extant newspaper reports on nearly all the Japanese air raids on Canton (and some other parts of the province too) in this early phase of the war, it is quite clear that there were indeed different patterns of aerial bombing, and “indiscriminate bombing” was only one of them and was, according to this preliminary study, by no means the typical or the most often adopted one. The following examples, mainly based upon local newspapers’ reports of air strikes in this area, help illustrate these points. Incidents are too numerous to be cited in full here, and the following events of aerial bombing are selected from a pool of over a hundred.6

**Incident 1**: The first Japanese air raid on Canton was launched in the early morning of 31 August, 1937. Six warplanes were deployed in this raid, all 6 were twin-engine bombers, each, reportedly, could carry 2000 kg of bombs and could stay in the air for 15 hours. They were said to have flown from an air base in southern Taiwan. When flying above Canton,

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6 Since 31 August, 1937, Zhongshan Ribao (hereafter as ZSRB) and Yue hua bao (hereafter as YHB) published reports of these air raids whenever there was any.
they were confronted by heavy anti-aircraft artillery fire from different directions of the city. To avoid being hit, these bombers were reportedly flying high up at about 9,000 ft above ground. Since the anti-aircraft gunfire were so powerful and intensive that these warplanes “ran for their lives” after hovering above Canton for a few minutes. Before “exiting” Canton, and in order to reduce the weight of the aircrafts so that they could “runaway” more quickly, it was reported that a total of “9 heavy bombs” were hastily dropped on some empty fields in the eastern suburb of Canton, causing “no damage” (無損失 wu sun shi). On their exit, because these were heavy bombers and the pilots were “clumsy” in flying them, they were intercepted by the Chinese air force near the towns of Dongguan (東莞) and Tigris Bogue. In this air battle, two Japanese bombers were shot down, one badly damaged, and another one damaged.7

Some remarks on the above raid. First, these Japanese bombers were heavy aircrafts and no lighter crafts such as bi-plane, reconnaissance plane, or single-engine fighter plane which normally did not carry many bombs with them. Secondly, the weather and visibility on that day was apparently good, so much so that soldiers and journalists on the ground could spot clearly the type of the warplanes flying high up in the sky. Thirdly, not all six bombers had engaged in the attack; extant reports show that only 3 of the 6 aircrafts had penetrated into the air zone above the city, as if searching for targets. On exiting from the operation, nine bombs were hastily dropped on vacant fields without inflicting serious damage to the city besides a middle school was “affected” (波及 bo ji) with two students lightly hurt. In this air-strike operation, there was no evidence of intentional maximization of physical or civilian destruction. Fourthly, the anti-air defense in Canton was arguably effective, and the Chinese air force also played a useful role in the air defense system on that day.

Incident 2: Around 4 p.m. on 30 September, 1937, two Japanese warplanes were flying to Whampoa (Huang Pu黄埔) on a bombing mission. Not far from Whampoa, the pilots spotted a long-distance bus running on a carriageway. The warplanes then “decided to attack the passenger bus instead”. They tailed and machine-gunned the bus, so much so that the driver has to stop the bus in a field and with all the passengers ran away from it and hid in the field or lying low on both sides of the road. One of the planes then flew low and dropped one bomb on a field. The bomb did not explode, but the warplanes did not pursue any further and flew away, leaving no one harmed.8 Early afternoon on 2 October, 1937, four Japanese warplanes (2 bombers and 2 fighters) were spotted approaching Canton from the east. When flying above the port of Whampoa which is 19 km from Canton, the defending Cantonese heavy anti-aircraft artillery were put into action. To avoid being hit, the Japanese warplanes climbed steeply and hid behind clouds. When the anti-aircraft gunfire ceased, the Japanese planes dived low and dropped a total of 6 bombs, two of which fell into the Pearl River, three on barren fields, and one on a village resulting in the wounding of a few peasants. The warplanes flew away immediately after the bombing.9

In the first incident, the fighters seems to have exercised restraint on not destroying the bus or eliminating its passengers, which they could have easily accomplished given the circumstances as described: no armed resistance anywhere nearby, the bus and passengers had become still objects and subject to the pilots’ mercy. It was more a harassment than an intended act of “brutality [perpetuated by] Japanese warplanes” as it is described in the report.

7 ZSRB, 1/9/1937.
8 YHB, 3/10/1937.
9 YHB, 3/10/1937.
In the second incident, the raid was hastily completed after dropping 6 bombs on apparently insignificant targets. The village was not intentionally attacked and hence no serious casualty was noted. Whampoa, about 19 km east of Canton, was an important port where facilities such as dockyards and storage were plentiful, besides shops and villages. If the Japanese pilots had intended to inflict maximal destruction to this location, they would not have to look hard for targets. Moreover, six bombs from two bombers and two fighters on a bombardment mission is not a disturbingly large figure; this was apparently more a mission to harass than to destroy.

Incident 3: According to the press release issued by the Central News Agency, three Japanese warplanes attacked the Zhang Mu Tou (樟木頭) section of the Kowloon-Canton Railway, about 100 km southeast of Canton. They dropped 7 bombs on 4 different locations of the railway and “many” tracks were damaged as a result. In the afternoon on the same day, another 3 warplanes attacked the same section of the Kowloon-Canton Railway and 4 bombs were dropped destroying over 20 ft. of tracks. The correspondent of Yue Hua Bao provided more details about the two attacks. The 3 warplanes in the morning raid had hovered above the railways, apparently searching for targets. After a while, they dived to about 7,000 ft. above ground and dropped 7 bombs on the targets. Meanwhile, anti-aircraft artillery began firing at them but to no avail; the planes then climbed steeply and fled. One of the 7 bombs hit the rail tracks and destroyed about 36 ft. of them, another one hit two workshops but only hurt a few care-takers because all workers had vacated the buildings when the air raid siren on. The other 5 bombs fell on barren fields and ponds. In the afternoon attack, the three warplanes also hovered above this area searching for their target, which was an iron train bridge near the train station. After circling over their target a few times, they dived low and, “aimlessly” (胡亂地) according to one newspaper report, dropped 4 bombs, damaging “a few” rail tracks. After that, the warplanes flew to another train station and dropped 2 bombs on a barren field nearby, causing no damage.10

Small-scale air raids targeting railway lines like this were frequently reported and the pattern was also similar, involving a relatively small number of warplanes, with clear strategic targets of transportation lines, not so many bombs were dropped on the targets, limited damage was inflicted, and it was very often that bombs fell on barren fields, ponds, rivers, and locations some distance from human settlements. Railway stations were seemingly not always their prime targets.

Incident 4: The first aerial bombing of Canton that caused serious casualty took place on 10 April, 1938, nine months after the outbreak of the War. In that early afternoon, fourteen Japanese warplanes entered the air zone of Canton city. They hovered over the city centre, dropping propaganda leaflets printed in red and green colours, and dashed off when encountered heavy anti-aircraft gunfire. One of these 14 warplanes, however, suddenly flew over the West Gate (Xiguan 西關) district, which was the commercial hub of Canton, and dropped one bomb into the densely populated area around the Bao Hua Street (寶華街), which hit directly at a Da Li Garment Factory which was housed inside a former theatre with 417 workers working in it at that time. The roof of the factory collapsed and that triggered off a fire. Fortunately the factory was flanked by firebreaks and the fire did not spread. The death toll in this strike was 87, and 172 wounded and hospitalized. One of the reasons for the huge casualty was that the factory’s exits were locked, which was in compliance with the factory’s rule, to stop workers from sneaking off for unapproved break. In this air strike, part of a

10 YHB, 7/11/1938.
nearby middle school was also destroyed but no student was hurt because the raid was on a Sunday.11

Was it a preconceived “massacre of civilians”, as both the Cantonese government and the press eagerly criticized and publicized? Yes, given the fact that the target was a civilian garment factory and the majority of the casualty factory workers. But was it a strong case of well-planned “indiscriminate bombing” on civilian target? That’s arguable. First of all, if the aim of this aerial operation were to inflict maximum destruction of life and property in a densely populated city, then it is hard to explain why only 1 out of 14 warplanes had done the job and also why only one bomb (reportedly an incendiary bomb) was dropped. Secondly, Japanese army tried to rationalize the attack by saying that there were anti-aircraft guns installed nearby the factory and that their pilots had only intended to destroy those legitimate strategic targets. The Cantonese government, of course, denounced that allegation and reiterated that the entire city of Canton “was not armed” and “defenceless” (bu she fang不設防) and hence should not be bombed in the first place. It is hard to assure which side of the story is right. One thing is apparently clear though: the city of Canton was not as “unarmed” a city as its government claimed. Nearly all the reports about Japanese air raids against Canton do mention about heavy anti-aircraft gunfire and Chinese air force interceptive attack; the train stations along the various railway lines in the province and other major towns in the Pearl River Delta region, according to journalists’ reports or statements released by local military authorities, were all heavily guarded by anti-aircraft guns.12

Incident 5a: After bombing Da Li Garment Factory on 10 April, 1938, and up until 17 April, Japanese aerial bombing did not cease, but resumed to a more “usual” pattern, so to speak, which were small in scale, mild in severity, targeting transportation networks and railway facilities, ensuing low casualty and limited damage to property. For instance, on 14 April, twelve Japanese warplanes hovered above Bogue Tigris in the downstream of Pearl River, as if looking for targets to bomb. These aircrafts, however, did not launch any attack besides hovering above this area. After a while, they broke into two files, with 10 planes in one and 2 in another, and heading northeast. The ten warplanes then flew over the Shilong Section of the Kowloon-Canton Railway. In face of heavy anti-aircraft gunfire, these planes did not fly low; they returned fire with their machine guns. Eventually, they dropped over 20 bombs “aimlessly” (hu luan di胡亂地) from high above and then flew away quickly. On-site inspection revealed that only the sideways of the two iron train bridges were damaged by 2 bombs, with three pairs of rail tracks destroyed, two electricity poles also fallen; all the other bombs fell into the East River. The operation, from the moment the air raid siren was switched on, to the exit of all the planes from the areas, lasted about 24 minutes. No casualty was reported. One journalist concluded that there was “no loss on our side” (wo wu xuan shi我無損失).13

11 Hua zi ri bao (Hong Kong; hereafter as HZRB), 11-13/4/1938.
12 Even in fairly remote Jiang Cun (江村), a small settlement adjacent to a station of the Canton-Hankow Railway line, 20. Jiang Cun is 23 km north of Canton and largely a quiet settlement where a small group of dedicated New Zealander missionaries had been active in providing the community with free education and medicine since late-Qing. E. G. Jansen and Owen Lamont Eaton, Jade Engraved: New Zealand missionaries and their Chinese colleagues in Japan’s “China incident” (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1947). According to Japanese naval source, however, this place was installed with “a number of military establishments” which they claimed had destroyed in aerial missions in early June, 1938. Hsu Shushsi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1939), p.65.
13 HZRB, 15/4/1938.
Incident 5b: On 17 April, 1938, Canton was “madly bombed by enemy planes”, as the headline of one Hong Kong Chinese daily reads. In early afternoon on that day, over 10 Japanese warplanes “madly bombed” the northern part of the city which was, according to newspaper reports, “a cultural district” in northern Canton. Reportedly, no less than 30 to 40 bombs were dropped in that afternoon, killing “over 100 innocent civilians” and wounded “at the minimum over 300 people”, with tens of houses destroyed. From the detailed report about the exact locations of where the bombs fell, it is known that most of the bombed areas were hit by one single bomb; four bombs fell on 4 main thoroughfares; in the vicinity of a local Daoist temple where a number of straw-built huts stood, over 10 incendiary bombs fell. About 70 houses were either destroyed by the bombs or collapsed because of strong concussion caused by the explosions, and over 30 straw-made huts burned down by the incendiary bombs.  

Some remarks on example 5b. First, it is arguable that bombing the northern district of Canton was intended “to destroy the culture” of Canton, if that “culture of Canton” was only referring to two local high schools, namely Guang Zhong Middle School and Far East Middle School, both were located in the same district and were hit and partly destroyed in this bombing. Although one newspaper report claims that the Japanese warplanes aimed to destroy 5 middles schools there and dropped over 10 bombs on these targets, no further detail was given on the damage done to the other 3 schools in this air raid (most likely because these schools were not hit), although readers were told that these warplanes kept returning to these bombed sites and fired repeatedly with machine-guns at civilians on the ground. It is important to note that the two schools which were partially damaged in this raid hardly represented the cultural centre of Canton. Given the fact that there were over 340 various kinds of schools in Canton by mid 1930s, the damage of these 2 middle schools in the Big and Little North districts, though unfortunate, was far from destroying “the culture of Canton” in massive or significant scale.

Secondly, the bombed neighbourhoods, Big North and Little North (Da Bei, Xiao Bei), were hardly a cultural hub of Canton. These areas were well-known for its rustic environment and its many cottage tea houses, and also the hilly Yue Xiu Park which offered a commanding view of the city underneath. Nor was it a most densely populated area, with slightly over 40,000 people lived there, which was just about the mean by Canton standard in terms of population density. In the description of a contemporary guide to Canton, Big and Little North was an infamous area where people “from complicated backgrounds” lived and also full of illegal gambling dens. On this area no less than 30 bombs were dropped in that afternoon, with tens of houses either destroyed or shattered, killing 155 and wounded 240 people. This is not a small number, especially comparing to so many other air raids on this city in the past months. But that was arguably not a large number too because if all the bombs had had fallen on the more populous parts of this area. It seems that the bombardment was not aimed at causing maximal destruction to civilian lives because if it was so, then the raid would have been aimed at the western district of the city which was truly the commercial heart and the most populated area of Canton. In that afternoon, most of the spots bombed

14 HZRB, 18/4/1938.
15 HZRB, 18/4/1938.
18 Ni Xiying, Guangzhou (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), pp.47-8; Liao Shulun, Guangzhou da guan (Guangzhou: Tian nan chubanshe, 1948), p. 11.
were hit by one single bomb, not a cluster of bombs as it would have been in case of “carpet bombing”. Many houses collapsed (dao ta 倒塌) because of the shocks generated by the explosions; houses which were directly hit and destroyed were comparatively fewer in number. Six bombs were dropped on a stretch of vegetable fields and vacant ground nearby a Daoist temple, the shock caused by the explosions led to the collapse of over 20 mat-shed houses of the indigents in the area.

Thirdly, the Canton authorities strongly criticized this attack as atrocious because the area bombed was said to be a “de-militarized zone” (fei wu zhuang qu 非武装区域) and that explains the high casualty of civilians in this raid. It is not known if this area was truly a non-militarized zone, but there is ground for doubt. It is hard to understand why Yue Xiu Hill (越秀山), being the highest point in Canton city, was not used as anti-aircraft gunnery position, and the fact that a few bombs were dropped on this hill was most likely a Japanese attempt to eliminate some military installations there. Even a British journalist, who was sympathetic with the Canton authorities, admitted that “there are some useful anti-aircraft batteries on the hills outside…” Moreover, heavy anti-aircraft gunfire was reported during the aerial attack on this professedly “de-militarized zone”, and it was so heavy that the sky was reportedly darkened by artillery smoke. It should be also noted that the Kowloon-Canton Railway line did pass by the northern end of the Big and Small North districts and hence made this area strategically valuable targets in the eyes of Japanese pilots. Moreover, this area is adjacent to Yue Xiu (越秀) district where many important government offices and buildings were located, such as the Provincial Government Building, the Municipal Finance Department, the Court of Justice, Sun Yatsen Mausoleum, etc. These bombs, perhaps, were originally intended for these government buildings, not civilians, but missed because of heavy gunfire from the ground or poor marksmanship of the Japanese pilots.

Incident 6: Throughout early and mid May, 1938, Japanese warplanes continued to bomb Canton and particularly the railway lines in different parts of the province. On 13 May, for instance, thirty-one warplanes at four different hours attacked Canton and other strategic locations in four separate groups. The first group of 17 warplanes was soon joined by the second group of 8 and then the third group of 4; altogether they first hovered high above the city of Canton, “searching and inspecting”. They were greeted by heavy anti-aircraft gunfire and as a result flew away from the city towards the direction of Whampoa port (黄埔港) which is 19 km east of Canton. On the Whampoa subsidiary rail line 黄埔支線 they dropped “a few bombs” before flying north. Another group of 4 warplanes flew over the area of Pa Jiang (琶江), which is nearby Whampoa, and then dropped “over 20 bombs” on the subsidiary rail line of Whampoa. Before returning to their bases, “a few enemy planes” dropped “a few bombs” on the town of Heng Shi (横石) and on a quarry mine in the county of Cong Hua (从化), north of Canton. There is not much detail of the destruction caused by these bombardments, but according to the Central News Agency, most of the bombs “fell on the fields and the wild”. In the evening on the same day, at around 8:35 p.m., a team of “enemy planes” were spotted approaching Canton. Due to darkness and low clouds, it was not sure how many planes took part in this operation. Around 9:25 p.m., these warplanes were flying over the Kowloon-Canton Railway, hovering above the line for some time, and then fired a flare, apparently looking for target, and eventually dropped 2 “small-size bombs”

20 HZRB, 18-19/4/1938.
Incident 7: In late May, 1938, the Japanese aerial attack on Canton and the transportation networks in the province began adopting a somewhat new tactic: for the first time since the beginning of the War, more warplanes were put into action. For example, on 27 May, the Kowloon-Canton Railway was attacked by 29 warplanes which came in 3 batches. The first batch of 6 arrived at the eastern outskirt of Canton at 8:40 a.m. Over Canton’s sky, they hovered for “fairly long time”, without dropping any bomb, and flew off to the north when heavy anti-aircraft gunfire started shooting at them. These 6 warplanes then attacked two sections of the Kowloon-Canton line north of Canton, namely Le Tong (樂同) and Xin Jie (新街). After dropping more than 5 bombs on their targets, they flew off and arrived over Jiang Cun (江村), which was one of the stations on the Canton-Hankow Railway, at 9:20 a.m.. They did not attack Jiang Cun, but only hovered above the settlement for at least 20 minutes, and left for the base when anti-aircraft gunneries started firing at them. At 10:10 a.m., the second batch of 16 warplanes arrived over the sky of Dongguan. They were divided into two groups, each attacking different spots on the Kowloon-Canton Railway. One group of 8 dropped “a few bombs” (25 bombs according to another source) in Zhang Mu Tou and Tang Tou Xia (塘頭下), and eventually left at 11:05 a.m. when “they run out of bombs”. The other group of 8 dropped over 10 bombs in Shi Long (石龍), three on Bai Sha (白沙), and then left for the sea at 11:35 a.m.. In early afternoon, the third batch of 7 Japanese warplanes arrived over the sky of Shi Long, an important station of the Kowloon-Canton Railway, approximately 69 km east of Canton. They machine gunned targets on the ground at 1:15 p.m., and 5 minutes later, dropped 6 bombs on an iron bridge for locomotive, and then immediately heading back toward the base. On all these occasions, heavy anti-aircraft gunfire from the grounds was reported. According to a press release by the Central News Agency, only little damage was done to these lines.

Incident 8: Between late May and early June, 1938, however, there were indeed devastating bombing of Canton by the Japanese. On 28 May, Japanese warplanes bombed Canton and the Kowloon-Canton Railway line at 3 different hours on that day, with a total of 71 aircrafts deployed. The attack was started at 8:45 a.m., when 9 warplanes dropped 28 bombs on various railway stations and the tracks in Zhang Mu Tou, Lin Cun (林村), and Xin Zhou (新洲) areas, about 120 km southeast of Canton. This operation adjourned at 9:30 a.m.. After this group of planes had left, another group of 8 warplanes arrived over the sky of Whampoa area about 15 minutes later. After hovering for a while, they dropped 4 bombs on

21 YHB, 14/5/1938.
22 YHB, 28/5/1938.
Tang Mei (塘美) and Shi Long, both places were adjacent to the Kowloon-Canton line. Most of the bombs fell near the Shi Long market killing “a number of civilians”. These planes flew away at 10:30 a.m.. The third big group of 22 warplanes, divided into four smaller columns, arrived over the city of Canton at about the same time. Hiding behind thick clouds over the city, these planes hovered for quite some time, and started bombing by dropping 2 bombs on Hui Ai Road Central (惠愛中路), one fell on an empty field, the other on a busy street in the city centre, destroying 12 houses, killing over 20 people. Over 10 bombs were dropped in areas nearby Tian He (天河) and Bai Yun (白云), in the northeastern outskirt of Canton, where aerodromes were located. Before returning to their base, they “dropped bombs aimlessly” on the western district of the city, which was the commercial hub and one of the most populous areas of Canton. In this neighbourhood was Huang Sha (黃沙), where the terminal of the Canton-Hankow Railway and a matches factory were located, and on this area about 8 bombs fell. By 12:30 p.m., these planes had all gone. Fifteen minutes later, however, another group of 13 warplanes were sighted over the sky of Canton. Despite heavy anti-aircraft artillery fire, eight bombs were dropped on Huang Sha Station and its vicinity. A group of fire fighters were hit by this second bombing, killing 6 of them and wounding over 10. Before heading back to the base, these planes flew south and dropped a few bombs on a carriageways intersection in Zhongshan County (中山縣). Less than an hour after this attack, nineteen warplanes flocked to Canton. They dropped “a few bombs” on a rail track in Whampoa, three bombs on a pier in Er Sha Island (二沙島), another “few bombs” on Huang Sha after a period of hovering above it, and finally heading south to Nan Kang (南崗) where they dropped over 10 bombs on the Kowloon-Canton Railway line. On that day, Huang Sha was bombed thrice. Ninety-four houses on 13 streets and lanes were damaged during the bombings, many of them collapsed (or partially collapsed) at the strong concussion of exploding bombs. The death toll for that day of massive bombing was over 600, seriously wounded about 200, and over 600 slightly wounded.23

Incident 9: On the next day, 29 May, twenty-two Japanese warplanes flew over Bogue Tigris at 9:50 a.m.. They hovered over the fortresses for some time, and then dispersed into two groups when anti-aircraft gunfire became heavier. They flew over a number of towns and cities in the Pearl River Delta and along the East River. Over these towns and cities they hovered back and forth as if searching for their targets. At 10:10 a.m., thirteen warplanes were flying over the eastern suburb of Canton and, in the words of a reporter, “determined to launch another massacre of our defenseless citizens” in the heart of the city. Instead of attacking, however, these warplanes continued hovering over the city centre for “quite some time”, despite heavy anti-aircraft gunfire from the ground. Eventually, six of them dropped 3 bombs on two spots near Huang Sha, destroying over 10 houses, killed and wounded about 20. Another group of 7 aircrafts flew to the eastern suburb and dropped 8 bombs on Tian He and Dong Shan (東山) areas, where aerodromes and exclusive residences of senior government officials and military commanders were located. After that, they flew back to the northern suburb of Canton where they dropped 6 bombs on 4 locations. Four warplanes then flew to Honam Island (He Nan 河南) where they dropped 7 bombs, but all fell on either vacant land or vegetable fields according to reports on the ground. Before returning to their base, they flew to the northwestern suburb where the terminal of Canton-Sanshui Railway (廣三鐵路) was located. Seven bombs were dropped on that area but all fell on barren fields. They continued their raid on the Ying De (英德) section of the Canton-Hankow Railway line, with 6 bombs were dropped on it. On that day, over 39 bombs were dropped on about 10

23 YHB, 28-29/5/1938.
different parts of Canton, nearly 200 houses were either destroyed or shaken to the ground due to concussion, and the casualty “should be about 3 to 4 hundreds”, according to one reporter.24

Incident 10: On 30 May, Japanese warplanes continued bombing Canton on the third consecutive day. In the words of local journalists, Canton was again “bombed madly…indiscriminately, aimlessly and excessively”. At around 10 a.m. that morning, three groups of Japanese warplanes were flying into the air zone of Canton from different directions. Undertaking this operation were 20 “warplanes” (types unknown) and 9 “heavy bombers”. The warplanes scattered into small groups and attacked different parts of the city, despite heavy anti-aircraft gunfire. The following places were bombed by these presumably “lighter” warplanes: one bomb on Han Min Public Park (漢民公園), two bombs on Guang Wei Road (廣衛路), one bomb on De Xuan Road (德宣路), one “heavy bomb” on a street near Jing Hui Public Park (靜慧公園), nine bombs on the river near Er Sha Tou’s piers and the terminal building of Canton-Hankow Railway, resulting in many sampans capsized because of the strong waves caused by the explosions. Meanwhile, the 9 heavy bombers dropped 11 bombs on railway tracks in different parts of the city, five bombs on San Yuan Li (三元里), three on Xi Cun (西村), and over 10 bombs in areas near Bai Yun and Tian He (strategic significance of these places will be discussed below). At 11:05 a.m., these warplanes left Canton and heading towards Hua County (Hua Xian 花縣), northwest of Canton. Over half of these planes headed back to the base, and the remainders continued bombing Xin Jie, Le Tong, Jiang Cun, Jun Tian (軍田) and Xin Zhou, all were main stations of the Canton-Hankow Railway line but considerably far north of Canton; these spots are at some considerable distance from Canton city. Before returning to their base, these remainder bombers first flew easterly to Dong Guan County where they dropped over 14 bombs in Zhang Mu Tou and Shi Long, both were main stations on the Kowloon-Canton line.25

The “indiscriminate bombing” on 30 May, together with the two air strikes two days before, and the two raids on June 3 and 4 (which will be detailed below), were described as acts against humanity, a “massacre” of innocent denizens. Material and human losses were substantial and that is something indisputable. Local journalists estimated that over a hundred houses were destroyed or collapsed, at least 400 people were either killed or wounded in the strike on 30 May. These figures were rough estimations noted by reporters on the spot who were obviously reporting under great emotional stress and anger, judging, understandably, by the tone and the emotional language in their reporters. The exact figures are not known, and probably will never be; but that does not mean that the reporters’ estimations have to be accurate. Even a strong critic of Japanese bombings from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs found it hard to deny Japan’s accusation that Chinese casualty reports “are always over-estimated in the first excitement…[and] the exaggerations were not official, but by news correspondents and entirely unintentional”.26 According to fairly detailed newspaper reports about the casualty that ensued in this bombardment, which included where and how many were wounded and how many bodies were found, the numbers are not as high as it was estimated: one hundred and twenty-one found and buried, eighty-four wounded and hospitalized. Moreover, as in similar air raids on Canton and other towns in Guangdong, newspaper reports told us that many houses were destroyed not by direct hit, but by strong concussion of exploding bombs, meaning they were literally shaken to the ground. In fact,

24 YHB, 30/5/1938.
25 YHB, 31/5/1938.
26 Hsu Shushsi, *Three Weeks of Canton Bombings*, p.69.
quite a number of places were hit by one single bomb, but the damage brought about by concussion was apparently worse than the hit itself. For example, one bomb fell on Hou Lou Fang Street (後樓房街), right in front of the Provincial Government headquarters building. It did not hit any building but only somewhere on this street. The concussion caused by the explosions, however, had caused the total and partial collapse of 6 buildings/houses near the crater.

It is indisputable that in this air strike innocent civilians were killed and non-military installations such as residential buildings or municipal facilities destroyed. It is, however, not so certain if this raid, as the other raids on 28-29 May and 3-5 June, was “indiscriminate” and aimed at unleashing a massacre of civilians and military personnel alike. First of all, if the Japanese had really intended to massacre the Cantonese in these air raids, they, who were enjoying substantial superiority in terms of air power, would have “carpet bombed” the city and other places in the vicinity. All those meticulous details about the bombing cited in the above, however, do not support this theory of indiscriminate bombing and massacre of civilians, although, it must be added, there were indeed civilians killed and non-military objects shattered. As noted earlier, most of the bombed places were hit by one single or a handful of bombs, instead of clusters of bombs. Although incendiary bombs and “heavy bombs” were used in this strike, available sources indicate that these were isolated and by no means the typical kinds of bombs used in these raids. Secondly, the exact locations of many of those places bombed show that they were unfortunately close to, if not precisely on, railway lines and stations, government buildings, police stations, transportation hubs (river and land), airport, and most likely also anti-aircraft gunnery positions. In the city of Canton, areas nearby Han Min Public Park, Guang Wei Road, De Xuan Road, Jing Hui Public Park, had been attacked. These were areas where many government headquarters and municipal buildings were located, such as the city’s Finance Department and the judicial court. The section of Pearl River near Er Sha Tou was hit because the place was adjacent to Da Sha Tou where stood the terminal of Canton-Hankow Railway, and also the eastern Bund with its many piers. In Canton’s northwestern suburb, San Yuan Li and Xi Cun were bombed because of their proximity to an important junction of three railway lines (namely the Kowloon-Canton Railway, the Canton-Hankow Railway, and the Canton-Sansui Railway); Bai Yun and Tian He in the northeastern suburb were targeted because of the air field there. Xin Jie, Le Tong, Jiang Cun, Jun Tian, Xin Zhou, Nan Kang, Zhang Mu Tou and Shi Long were locations where either the Kowloon-Canton or Canton-Hankow lines passed through and had a station. According to a Japanese naval spokesman in Shanghai, the raids had hit many legitimate military targets, including the buildings of the Canton Municipality, the Provincial Government, the Garrison Headquarters, the Bureau of Finance, an arsenal, batteries of anti-aircraft guns, aerodromes, aeroplane assembling plants, and munition factories. These places were strategic targets in the eyes of the enemy, though unfortunately these places were not far from civilian settlements and hence innocent lives were killed. The bombardments were not entirely aimless or indiscriminate as publicized heavily in public media.

Xi Cun deserves more elaboration because it was better documented. Xi Cun was the site of Canton’s most important “industrial zone”. In there were located one cement factory

27 In an attempt on the power plant in Xi Cun on 9 August, 1938, a 500-pound bomb was reportedly used, but seemingly wide of the mark because it had left a big cradle in an open square in front of the plant. Zhang Zhonghua ed., Ri jun qin lue Guangdong dang an shi liao xuan bian (Beijing: Zhongguo dang an chu ban she, 2005), p. 63. On the same day, two 300-pound bombs were dropped on areas near the government-office buildings which shattered 36 houses and shops. ZSRB, 9/8/1938.
28 Hsu Shushsi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1939), pp. 59-62.
which was a state enterprise and one of the few important industrial plants in the province, two power plants (one new and one old, and the new one boosted the latest and costly technology imported from Germany), a sulphuric acid plant, and “some of the newly established government industrial plants”.\textsuperscript{29} Between May and August, 1938, this cement factory was attacked by Japanese warplanes for no less than 9 times, with a total of 64 bombs fell on or near the plant, causing damages of various degrees to the factory complex, but only two soldiers killed and three staff lightly wounded.\textsuperscript{30} The power plants and the sulphuric acid plant had also received more than 40 hits in the raid.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Incident 11:} For citizens in Canton, the first 2 days of June, 1938, had passed peacefully because there was no Japanese air strike. On 3 June, just before 3 p.m., Japanese warplanes were again spotted over the city’s sky. Fourteen fighters and heavy bombers, divided into 3 groups, circled above towns in Canton’s vicinity and railway stations in different parts of Dong Guan County, east of Canton. Five minutes later, they flocked to the eastern outskirt of Canton; five of them tried to approach the city centre and the northern part of the city, but pushed back by “unusually heavy anti-aircraft gunfire”. They then flew towards the eastern Bund where they aimlessly dropped over 10 bombs, six of which fell on a wide and empty field in Honam Island, opposite the Canton proper in the south, and the rest of the bombs into Pearl River, near the Tian Zi Pier (天字碼頭) where some official buildings were located. No large vessel was hit, but the big waves caused by the explosions had capsized over 40 sampans, wounding over 10 boat people, killed three children and one old man. Almost at the same hour, three warplanes dropped 4 bombs on Tian Tang Wei (天堂圍) and “a few bombs” on Bao Tai carriageway (寶太公路). Another 5 warplanes dropped 3 bombs on Lin Cun (林村) and 6 on Nan Kang, both are east of Canton--- these were stops on the Kowloon-Canton Railway line. One Japanese heavy bomber was hit by anti-aircraft gunfire and reportedly crashed somewhere in the county of Dong Guan. The death toll of this air strike was 16 (including 4 children), with another 41 wounded.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Incident 12:} On the next day, 4 June, Japanese warplanes struck Canton again, twice. The air strike started at 9:50 a.m., when 25 Japanese warplanes (fighters and heavy bombers) in two groups reached the outskirts of Canton. These warplanes hovered and hid among the white clouds over Canton, and started to attack some time after 10 a.m.. They encountered heavy anti-aircraft gunfire, and the battle continued for over 2 hours before these planes departed at 12:30 p.m.. A total of 21 bombs were dropped in this two-and-a-half-hour long “indiscriminate bombing” and “aerial massacre on unprecedented scale”, as Canton journalists described in their reports.\textsuperscript{33} Most of the bombed locations were hit by one bomb; on three locations 2 bombs fell, and on one location 4 bombs. The areas hit included: a) Jiao Yu Road (教育路), Hui Ai Road West (惠愛西路), Ji Xiang Road (吉祥路) and Yue Hua Road (越華路) (where 4 bombs fell), were all in the proximity of the headquarters buildings of Guangdong Provincial Government, the Bureau of Police, the city’s Finance Department, and the modern new office-building of Canton Municipal Government; b) Tai Hong Road (泰康路), Han Min Road South (漢民南路), Hui Long Road (匯龍路), Dong Heng Street (東橫街), Xin Sha Zhi Street (新沙直街), etc., were all located near either the eastern Bund where

\textsuperscript{29} Ng Yong-sang, \textit{Canton, City of the Rams} (Canton: M.S. Cheung, 1936), pp. 103-104.
\textsuperscript{30} For factual details of each of the 9 raids, with description of the damages inflicted on the factory complex, see Zhang Zhonghua ed., \textit{Ri jun qin lue Guangdong dang an shi liao xuan bian}, pp. 61-63, 90-91.
\textsuperscript{31} Hsu Shushsi, \textit{Three Weeks of Canton Bombings} (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1939), p. 61.
\textsuperscript{32} YHB, 4/6/1938.
\textsuperscript{33} YHB, 5/6/1938; ZSRB, 5/6/1938.
piers were abound, or the iron-made Pearl River Bridge, the city’s only bridge which links Canton proper with the southern island of Honam. All these bombed areas, unfortunately, were in proximity to densely populated residential settlements and that explains the heavy casualty and the wide extent of destruction of houses and shops. The reports published on Zhong Shan Ri Bao and Yue Hua Bao are full of graphic details of the destruction inflicted on civilian houses, shops, public buildings (such as schools and one temple), as well as brief biographical details of the wounded and some of the killed victims; the focus of the reports were entirely on the devastating impacts of the bombing, understandably so. Undoubtedly, this air strike created a devastating impact on many parts of the city. But one should not overlook the fact that only 21 bombs were dropped in the span of 2.5 hours, under the favourable circumstance that the Japanese enjoyed near absolute air superiority; much worse devastation could have been easily inflicted if they had had determined to do so. Details in these reports indicate that a great number of houses and shops damaged or destroyed in this attack were not hit directly by bombs, but collapsed at the strong concussion of the explosions in the neighbourhoods. For examples, one of the badly hit areas was Hui Ai Road West, where 2 bombs were dropped. One of the 2 bombs fell near a road junction, but 17 shops were shattered and burnt down, with 27 other shops and houses collapsed or partially collapsed because of powerful concussion caused by the blast. In Han Min Road South, one bomb was dropped and hit a shop which was completely shattered; nine other shops nearby were either collapsed or partly damaged because of the shock caused by the blast. On the number of fatality, the official daily Zhong Shan Ri Bao printed in big bold characters that “two thousand women and children were killed”. This figure, however, is far much higher than the actual number of bodies collected or buried by the various rescue teams in the city (around 80, and another 40 to 50 were suspected of being buried underneath the rubbles in a collapsed concrete building); one hundred and seventeen people were wounded.34

Incident 13: In the morning of 5 June, “enemy aeroplanes continued massacring civilians in Canton”. A squadron of 46 Japanese warplanes flew above the city centre, then dispersed into smaller columns and started the “big massacre” of innocent citizens, by dropping bombs “aimlessly all over the city”. On that day and in different parts of Canton, a total 23 bombs were dropped. Bei Heng Street (北橫街) and Yue Hua Road which were nearby the administrative centre of the city, were reportedly the worst hit area in this strike. The one bomb which was dropped on Bei Heng Street had hit 10 shops which were shattered instantly. The explosion shook the ground so strongly that at least 15 other houses nearby, which were built of poor materials and humbly constructed, collapsed due to powerful concussion. A few bodies were recovered, about 30 to 40 were suspected of being buried underneath the rubbles. Three bombs fell on De Xuan Road East and Zheng Nan Road (正南路), one hit a fruits shop directly, the others fell on the 2 streets and causing partial damage to 11 houses; the roof of some of these houses were shattered. Bai Ling Road (百靈路), which was adjacent to the Provincial Government headquarters building, was hit by one single bomb which destroyed or damaged 17 shops, killing two, wounded three, and over 10 were believed to be buried underneath the rubbles. Two bombs were dropped on empty fields outside the Central Park, which was right next door to the provincial government headquarters. After about half an hour of bombing this northern part and also the administrative heart of the city, five warplanes flew southward to bomb the area of Huang Sha, where the terminus of Kowloon-Canton Railway located, but one fell into a big fish pond nearby and the other 2 into the river; no casualty was reported.

This was the last serious aerial attack by the Japanese on Canton for June, 1938, and these bombings conducted in late May and early June were commonly described as the most devastating aerial bombardments on South China by Japan. A group of Chinese historians excitedly describe this series of bombings on Canton as follows: “…For over ten consecutive days, Japanese aeroplanes bombed Canton madly, [and] everyday tens of [Japanese] aeroplanes carpet-bombed the urban areas [of Canton], with universities, public parks, hotels, hospitals and markets as targets of bombardments…resulting in the massacre of countless number of civilians….” However, judging by the number of bombs dropped, the locations the warplanes targeted, the damage done to properties and the cost of human life, however tragic these incidents of bombardment, it was arguably a “classical case” of “indiscriminate (or carpet) bombing” and “wholesale massacre” of civilians.

**Incident 14:** At 3:10 p.m. on 8 August, 1938, six Japanese warplanes were spotted entering into Canton’s air zone. At heavy anti-aircraft gunfire, this column split into two; one group “dropped 6 heavy bombs aimlessly” on the intersection between Zhong Hua Road North and Hui Ai Road West, near the administrative centre of the city. Not long after, another squadron of 15 warplanes joined the attack and “aimlessly dropped over 30 bombs” (“36 heavy bombs” according to the official Central News Agency) on the city centre, resulting in over 200 civilian houses destroyed, and over 500 civilian casualties. This squadron then flew over Niu Lan Gang (牛欄崗) in the northwestern suburb of Canton, hovered over there and then “indulged in wanton massacre” (肆虐) for nearly 30 minutes, before departed for the open sea; they dropped a few bombs on Bogue Tigris on its way of exit. The whole operation lasted for 2 hours 23 minutes. The areas which were hit the hardest were all close to the city centre where government buildings were located. One of the “worst disaster areas” (重災區), according to one newspaper report, was the House of Marble (石室), or the Roman Catholic Cathedral, a French-run cathedral which dominated the skyline of Canton with its impressive lofty spires and marble walls, and was not far from the western Bund and the strategically important Pearl River Bridge. Two bombs fell near the cathedral: one was said to be a heavy 200-pounder, which destroyed 19 houses, with over 100 casualties, mostly rickshawmen from Chaozhou; another was an incendiary bomb which landed in front of the cathedral, destroyed a police post, killing one policeman and wounded another, seven buildings were ablaze. The death toll in this attack on Yi De Road (一德路) was fifty one. Another hard-hit area was the intersection of Zhong hua Road Central (中華中路) and Hui Ai Road West, which was a commercial hub but unfortunately close to the government offices district. Four bombs fell there, two of them were 300-pounder, resulting in the collapse of nearly 40 buildings, mostly shops, killed 6, though one reporter wrote that “total casualties should be over 50”. Four bombs also fell on Xi Hu Road (西湖路) and Nan Chao Street (南朝街), both were few hundred yards from many important government buildings, destroyed some 20 buildings, killed one policeman and another wounded, and also over 10 people hurt (another source stated that over 20 people killed, and more than 30 wounded). Also “hit hard” was the area around Guang Da Road (廣大路) and Guang Wei Road (廣衛路), both were within the administrative heart of Canton. Four bombs landed there, shattered 6 shops and 6 residential abodes, killing 4 residents. A

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35 Ding Shengzun et al eds., Guangdong min guo shi (Guangzhou: Guangdong ren min chu ban she, 2003), Vol. 2, pp. 861-862.

36 It must be noted that there was no detailed information on this over-30-minute “wanton massacre” in the city’s northwest suburb; this is quite unusual because both the official Central News Agency and local press gave detailed and vivid descriptions on the destruction caused by this raid on the same day. ZSRB and also YHB, 9/8/1938.
missionary-run kindergarten was also hit, and half of the establishment destroyed. Fortunately nobody was hurt because everyone had been evacuated before the raid began. The last area which was struck hard in this raid was Nan Guan (南關), along the Xin Sha Upper and Lower Streets (新沙上、下街), nearby the obvious target of Pearl River Bridge. Seven bombs, including one incendiary bomb, were dropped on this area, destroyed over 40 shops and buildings, killing over 20, wounded another 30.\(^{37}\) Newspapers in Canton gave full-page coverage of this air strike. Zhongshan Ri Bao described it as “massacre of Canton citizens in massive scale” by “dropping over 30 big bombs onto the residential, commercial and cultural districts [of Canton]”.

**Incident 15:** On the next day, 48 Japanese warplanes came bombing Canton again. The first group arrived over Canton at 7:40 a.m.. Instead of attacking Canton, they flew north and dropped “a few bombs” on Jiang Cun, where, as mentioned above, the Canton-Hankow line had a stop, and “military establishments” were installed. These bombs, however, fell on barren fields. The second group of 21 aeroplanes flocked to Canton at 8:20 a.m., dropped 8 bombs on Han Min Road Central (漢民中路), Tai Ping Sha (太平沙), the former was in the city’s administrative centre, and the latter by the river front. Meanwhile, another group of 11 warplanes “bombed aimlessly” the densely populated West Gate district. About 11 bombs in total, including one 500-pound device, were dropped on this area which brought about the collapse of over 200 buildings, including one municipal primary school, and over 100 casualties. Soon after, a third group of 12 warplanes were found entering into Canton air zone. Instead of dropping bomb, they dropped leaflets over the city. At heavy anti-aircraft gunfire, they dispersed and dashed towards Xi Cun industrial zone where they dropped over 20 bombs, others bombed the railway tracks near San Yuan Li (suburb northwest of Canton) and Zhang Mu Tou in the east. The whole operation was ended at around 11:15 a.m. (there was one more round of attack in the afternoon, involving 7 warplanes, mainly attacking two sections of the Canton-Hankow Railway north of Canton).\(^{38}\)

In this “massacre” of the West Gate district, bombs were dropped on Ji Xiang Fang (吉祥坊), Yuan He Street (元和街), Duo Bao Road (多寶路), Duo Bao Street (多寶街), Zhi Bao Bridge (至寶橋) and Tai Ping Sha (太平沙), which was not exactly “aimlessly”. All these places, except tai Ping Sha, were not far away from the terminus of the Canton-Hankow Railway, which was an important supply line of military hardware from Canton (first imported from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia) to the battlefield in Central China. Although some of these places were not right next to the terminus or the railway track, they were also not far away from it either; they might well be victims of misses.\(^{39}\) Most of these places were hit by a small number of bombs, ranging between 1 and 4. The attack on Tai Ping Sha was also hardly “aimless” given its close proximity to the Pearl River Bridge. Four bombs were dropped there, causing damage to at least 40 houses, but with no casualty because most residents had already sought shelter elsewhere. Human loss and materialistic devastation were serious in these raids on two consecutive days. But in this nearly three-and-half-hour operation which involved 48 warplanes, the extent of destruction, if the tactic of “wholesale bombardment” had had been truly enforced, could have been much more severe than it was.


\(^{38}\) ZSRB, 10/8/1938.

\(^{39}\) Hsu Shushi pointed out that in Canton, the majority of aerial bombing misses “average from 400 yards to half a mile from possible targets”. *Three Weeks of Canton Bombings*, p. 91.
Aerial bombing on Canton and its vicinity continued intermittently throughout the rest of the summer months of 1938 until the city fell into the hands of Japanese infantry in late October of the same year. The fall of Canton, however, was not preceded by large-scale devastating bombing similar to those of Incidents 12 to 14 described in the above. Smaller-scale bombings, however, were continued to demoralize and to harass the defending forces and local population, rather than determined to wipe out the city and its vicinity altogether. Shigeru Yoshida, Japanese Ambassador in London, was cited by the *Reuter* saying that: “The Japanese did not want to bomb Canton, but the bombings were undertaken in order to demoralize the Chinese people, and prevent reinforcements being sent from China”. 40

Concluding Remarks

Although the above incidents are only a handful of examples of Japanese aerial bombardments on Canton and its vicinity between August 1937 and August 1938, their characteristics were fairly “typical” of most other air strikes by the Japanese in this region and at that time: “typical” does not mean one single pattern/type of aerial bombing, but a range of possibilities in terms of number of aircrafts deployed and bombs dropped, extent of devastation, targeted facilities or locations, duration of an raid, and so on. As the somewhat tedious details in the various examples cited in the above have shown, there was apparently no one single pattern of aerial bombing by the Japanese on Canton. In terms of scale of operation and extent of damage wrought on Canton, the air strikes on 3 to 5 June, though highly devastating, were not typical that of numerous other aerial bombings were like. Indiscriminate or carpet bombing, excessive slaughter or massacre of civilians, though arguably detected in some of these raids, were hardly the dominant pattern of Japanese aerial bombardment of not only Canton but many other cities and towns in Guangdong.

Understandably, all the reports about these incidents of air raid prepared and published by both the Canton authorities and local journalists shared one common characteristic: they are all written in heavily emotional languages when describing the bombing, the physical devastation and the loss of civilian lives. Emotional languages in these reports reflected the strong feelings of frustration and hatred among local people against the invaders, and could be a powerful tool for arousing jingoism amongst the populace in the bombed areas. Hatred and patriotism, however, often clouded the judgements of these reporters and publicists to such an extent that the accuracy of their reports and writings were affected and hence became questionable. An example, among many others, is the report about the “heavy loss” of the invading Japanese aircrafts in the first air raid of Canton on 31 August, 1937. In official Chinese record, two Japanese warplanes were shot down, one badly damaged, and one damaged. According to official Japanese record, however, only “one of our planes was set afire and lost”. 41 Chinese newspapers’ reports of this raid also did not mention anything about the attack on Tian He and Bai Yun which resulted in the destruction of many hangars and 2 Chinese aeroplanes in the two airfields; 42 their reports were focused entirely on the “atrocious” bombing of a “defenseless city” and its “helpless citizens”. 43 It should be noted


42 Ibid.

43 ZSRB and YHB, 1/9/1937.
in passing that Chinese officials in Canton and Nanking, in the hope of winning the sympathy and support of Western governments, had eagerly publicized to foreign diplomats and consuls in the city and the world that Canton was a “de-militarized” and “defenceless” city and therefore the Japanese air forces were indeed attacking an unarmed city and its helpless citizens. This is, again, arguable as it was clearly recorded by local journalists and official press releases that anti-aircraft gunneries were installed in many parts of the city and their effectiveness did considerably restrict the movements of Japanese bombers over Canton’s sky, and Japanese warplanes were occasionally shot down by this apparently heavy and effective anti-aircraft artillery. In the reminiscence of an anti-aircraft artillery officer in Canton, the city had begun building its air defence system since 1933, towards the goal, set by Canton military authorities, of acquiring 60 heavy and medium anti-aircraft cannons, and “a large number of anti-aircraft machine guns”. Since then, these machine guns were produced in great number the province’s arsenals, whereas heavy artillery were purchased from Britain and Czechoslovakia. Those British-made cannons could fire at a range of 10,000 metre and could reach the height of 9,600 metre, whereas those Czech anti-aircraft heavy machine guns could fire up to 800 metre high. This anti-aircraft “fire net”, he recalls, was so effective that Japanese warplanes rarely dared to fly low over Canton.\(^\text{44}\) A spokesman of the Foreign Office in Tokyo claimed that Japanese planes had detected in Canton locations of “31 anti-batteries…in addition to numberless machine-gun emplacements and other gun emplacements”; another Japanese source gave the number of anti-aircraft batteries at 50.\(^\text{45}\) Canton, in both sources, was not a defenceless city but “strongly fortified and defended” because its “city limits are only six miles round”.\(^\text{46}\) Moreover, Chinese fighter planes were also around and deployed, though only occasionally, to engage Japanese warplanes.\(^\text{47}\) The defending Cantonese military did not just sit still and let the enemy bombed the city. Rhetoric and reality was often not the same.

From the many incidents of aerial bombing of Canton and its vicinity, it seems that the marksmanship of not a small number of Japanese pilots was fairly inaccurate. Newspaper reports about aerial bombing on Canton and different parts of the province are full of accounts of “misses”, such as bombs which fell into rivers, on empty or barren fields, vegetable or paddy fields, and so on. On numerous occasions when Chinese junks, barges or boats were said to be “attacked atrociously” by Japanese warplanes on inland rivers or open

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\(^{44}\) It is not known at this stage of writing that whether the original plan of acquiring all 60 anti-aircraft gunneries from abroad was completely materialized by July 1937. But it is clear that Canton was not a city without any anti-aircraft defence capability. Chen Tianliang, “Kang zhan chu chi de Guangzhou di mian fang kong bu dui”, in He Bangtai ed., *Guangzhou kang zhan ji shi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong ren min chu ban she, 1995), pp. 92-96.


\(^{47}\) For example, in an air battle over Canton’ sky in April, seven Japanese aeroplanes were reportedly shot down by the Chinese Air Force. *HZRB*, 14/4/1938. Chinese historians Ding Shengzuan and his team that between mid-October, 1937 and January 1938, the frequency of Japanese air strike was significantly lower due to the effective resistance by the defending Canton air forces. Ding Shengzuan et al eds., *Guangdong min guo shi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong ren min chu ban she, 2003), Vol. 2, p. 862. However, this view is seemingly not unproblematic. First, the “low frequency” was only relative to the other periods, and aerial bombardments on Canton remained almost a daily event in November and December, 1937 (HZRB and *YHB*, Nov. and Dec., 1937, *passim*). Secondly, it is doubtable that the air force in Canton could have effectively withstood the challenge of Japan in the air, although it is true that Chinese airplanes did score some commendable successes in Canton against the Japanese air forces, but these successes came only occasionally and rarely in any decisive scale. (Huang Shaolian, “Wo can jia de du Ri kong zhan”, in *He Bangtai ed., Guangzhou kang zhan ji shi*, pp. 83-88). Thirdly, by the outbreak of the War in July 1938, there were only 24 warplanes in Canton, charged with the duty of defending the entire province. Chen Yingming and Liao Xinhua, *Yu xue chang kong: Zhongguo kong jun kang Ri chan shi* (Beijing: Hang kong gong ye chu ban she, 2006), p 29.
sea, most of the time these vessels, usually sailing alone and hence easy targets, were eventually let go, though sometimes slightly damaged by machine-gunfire, instead of being sunk. On at least three occasions when schools in Canton were hit by aerial bombs, the casualty was surprisingly low (no injury in at least two incidents) because the raids were “so happen” on a Sunday. Could this be the work of “good Japanese” who chose to do their jobs perfunctorily in order to minimize the extent of destruction that otherwise would have been inflicted on their targets, particularly those many easy civilian targets? Were all this nothing but evidence of poor marksmanship of Japanese war pilots? The training of Japanese war pilots was apparently very strict, as a well-known veteran reminisced in his autobiography.  

Official Japanese records of aerial operations in China reveal that Japanese war pilots were able to perform well in bombing their targets. Poor marksmanship, though undoubtedly existed, could not be a common characteristic of Japanese war pilots. In the reminiscence of Sadamu Takahashi, a senior flight commander who took part in the bombing of Nanking in December 1937:

We certainly do not attack Chinese private houses because we had a sense of the same family with the Chinese. There was just no sense in doing that. Confronting the enemy’s anti-aircraft fire, our carrier dive-bomber squadron did our best to hit the Chinese Government’s war machine. We did not do such attacks on civilians as we would have been criticized by international law.  

The Japanese government had also defended against the accusations from China, Britain and the United States that their airmen bombed Canton indiscriminately. Spokesmen of Tokyo’s Foreign Office and also Ministry of Navy reiterated that “Japanese air squadrons never attacked the civilian population…Japanese planes not only take all precautionary measures but return to their base without dropping bombs in case civilian life is likely to be endangered”. They stressed that the accuracy of the Japanese bombings had inflicted irreparable damage on many Chinese military buildings and other “legitimate targets”. But then how could one explain the horrendous destruction of private houses and the loss of civilian lives, including many women children in these aerial raids?

According to the Chinese government, these were indisputable acts of massacre, full stop. Particularly given the accurate marksmanship of Japanese pilots, as Japan’s Ministry of Navy often boasted, the bombings of non-military facilities and civilians in Canton, therefore, have to be, in the angry Chinese critics’ eyes, intentional and indiscriminate. The Japanese side of the story was expectedly different, though not totally unconvincing. First, the strong anti-aircraft gunfire had forced Japanese warplanes to drop their bombs from high altitude of, sometimes, 10,000 ft., and from that kind of height, misses were unavoidable. A Chinese observer noticed that when the Japanese bombed the Kowloon-Canton Railway, “the misses of direct hits [are usually]….within 20 yards of the railway”, whereas their misses in Canton city “average from 400 yards to half a mile from possible targets”. That, most probably, was due to Canton’s intensive anti-aircraft gunfire, although that observer thought differently.  

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52 Hsu Shushi, *Three Weeks of Canton Bombings*, p. 91.
Secondly, the Chinese authorities was criticized for their attempts “to frustrate Japanese air attacks by moving military establishments to new sites close to properties of third Power nationals”, i.e. the Shameen International Settlement and also buildings in the Chinese part of Canton ran by Western missionary such hospitals, churches, and schools. These “new sites”, moreover, like most other military targets in these raids, were all located close to private houses. Warnings, according to these spokesmen, had been repeatedly sent to the civilians in Canton “to leave the vicinity of ‘military objectives’”. A number of Chinese news reports did mention that Japanese aeroplanes sometimes had dropped “ridiculous publicity leaflets” (荒謬傳單) to Canton (and other Chinese cities too), but never disclosed the contents of these leaflets. These leaflets, according to an article contributed to a local daily by a resident in Canton, were Japan’s written forewarning of imminent bombardment and imploring Chinese civilians to leave the area or the city.53 At a press conference, the Rear-Admiral of the Special Service Section of the Japanese China Sea Fleet stated: “It is because we are thus fully aware that not all of the bombs will find their mark, notwithstanding all the care that is being exercised…we have frequently warned the populace by leaflets dropped from the air…”.54 Japan also “expressed the hope that the British Consul-General in Canton would advise the Chinese authorities to withdraw their military establishments, anti-aircraft batteries and machine-guns from Canton to points outside the city limits, ‘because that would be the best guarantee for the safety of non-combatans in the Canton city limits’. The Chinese authorities, however, was criticized by the Japanese Rear-Admiral for “deliberately refused to take necessary measures for the evacuation of their civilian population”.55

According to Chinese Central News Agency, from July 1937 to July 1938, Japanese warplanes had carried out over 800 air raids on Canton and its vicinity, dropped thousands of bombs indiscriminately on different parts of the city, resulted in over 1,500 fatalities, another 3,000 wounded.56 The “slaughter” of innocent civilians in these raids is indisputable, and even the Japanese authorities had expressed “regrets” to the suffering of civilians.57 However, it is also doubtable that that was the result of tactical “indiscriminate bombing” or “wholesale destruction” adopted by the Japanese naval force (most of the warplanes used were from the Japanese navy) in this year-long campaign. From the evidence given in the above, most incidents of the aerial bombings on Canton and its vicinity, though indisputably resulted in physical destruction and civilian casualties, were not as “indiscriminate” as alleged. Damage of non-military properties and loss of civilian lives, though sad and condemnable, could have been far more extensive and severe if Japanese warplanes, as alleged in some historical work, had had “carpet-bombed” the city of Canton continuously for months. It is important to mention in passing that throughout these months of aerial bombardments of Canton, the frequency of night-time air raids was surprisingly low. Majority of the air strikes were carried out in daytime, mostly at dawn, early mornings when visibility was clear, or in early afternoon.58 Night-time attacks were usually much smaller in scale, and apparently also not indiscriminate—mainly railway tracks, industrial zones, anti-aircraft batteries were targeted, and flares were used to help search for targets. Local news reports recorded that railway tracks and aerodromes, were bombed in these night raids, and the fact that many bombs had

53 YHB, supplement, 5/11/1937.
54 South China Morning Post, 6/6/1938; Hsu Shushi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings, pp. 69, 78, 79.
55 Hsu Shushi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings, pp. 67, 79.
57 Hsu Shushi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings, p. 61.
missed the targets and fell on barren fields and rivers indicated that these attacks were not aimed at congested city centre or populated areas, but suburbs where railway lines passed through. Even sometimes, these night-time operations, which were as a rule titled in local newspaper reports as “indiscriminate raids” or “massacre of civilians”, turned out that no bomb dropping had been reported, nor casualty. Civilian casualties and property damage were unavoidable, but not as extensive as those of Incidents 9-12 as described in the above. But if these night raids had had been more frequent, and their bombing tactic truly indiscriminate, then the scale of destruction on the city and its inhabitants would have been far worse. Moreover, nearly all the raids reported were preceded by a long period of “hovering above the city’s sky”, sometimes could be as long as one hour, apparently in search of targets, instead of dropping bombs hastily or indiscriminately. It is true that some parts of the city were seriously destroyed, innocent civilians killed, but it is also clear that urban activity, as a whole for Canton, did not come to a complete standstill as a result of these devastations. A Chinese official and observer in Canton noted that:

Normal life goes on in many districts with the attendant hustle and bustle familiar with the city….Motor cars, rickshaws and other kinds of vehicles jostle the thoroughfares with large number of pedestrians….shops and restaurants throw open their doors fully for business. Hawkers yelling at the top of their voices sell fruits or other goods. Busy traffic also goes on on the Pearl River….Although hundreds of bombs have been dropped here (Huang Sha railway station)….traffic is maintained, and amidst extensive ruins passengers still come in and out of the much battered and devastated area….Not far from the scene of wreckage and desolation is the Bund which is as busy as in ordinary times. The western part of the city, Honam (south of Pearl River) and Shameen are other places where effects of the air raids are the least felt. 

Perhaps one may argue that the relatively limited extent of devastation inflicted on Canton in these months-long aerial bombardments might be due to the types of warplanes used by the Japanese Navy in these operations, which were mainly Model-95 and Model-96 Fighters, Model-96 Twins Engine Land Based Bomber, Model-96 Carrier Dive Bomber, and Model-97 Carrier Attack Plane, all of them were not designed for carrying huge loads of bombs. For instance, Model-96 Fighter could carry only 60 kg (2 x 30 kg) of bombs, whereas the Model-96 Twins-engine Bomber 800 kg of bombs. But this still could not explain everything. First, the number of bombs dropped was still proportionally low to the number of warplanes deployed. For instances, in Incident 13 twenty-three bombs were dropped by 46 warplanes (including bombers and fighters), and in Incident 12 twenty-five planes dropped 21 bombs. Secondly, if the Japanese warplanes were determined to drop more bombs, they had the capability of doing so. For example, in Incident 14, six Japanese warplanes dropped 36 bombs during their mission, and in Incident 9, twenty-two planes dropped 39 bombs on the city. These Japanese navy warplanes, though not every one of them a bomb-carrier,

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59 For examples, see the detailed reports on night-time air raids on Canton in YHB, 8 to 12/6/1938. On these misses, see YHB 12/6/1938.
60 For examples, see YHB, 12 to 15/5/1938.
61 Hsu Shushi, Three Weeks of Canton Bombings, pp. 25-29.
62 Headquarters of Army Forces Far East, Military History Section ed., Air Operations in the China Area (July 1937-August 1945) (N.p.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers to the Japanese Government, circa 1945), pp.10-12, esp. Chart 2. I am indebted to Prof Kwong Chi-man of Hong Kong Baptist University for alerting me to look into this military aspect.
apparently could have dropped a lot more bombs on Canton if they had been determined to do so.

Nonetheless, Canton was in marked contrast to what many other bombed cities had experienced during World War II, experiences which are truly classical examples of indiscriminate or wholesale bombardment. The Allied aerial bombings of German and Japanese cities in the mid 1940s, for instances, were in a very different league. First, heavy bombs were used, some of them as much as two to four thousand pounds each.\footnote{Bernard Brodie, \textit{Strategy in the Missile Age} (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 125.} Secondly, low-level attacks at night were frequent and very intensive. For instance, in a low-level nighttime attack on the southwestern portion of Tokyo on 23 May, 1945, “500 bombers dropped 3,646 tons of incendiary bombs on an area of about eleven square miles [and] for two hours during that attack the bombs were dropping at an average rate of 1,000 pounds per second”.\footnote{Bernard Brodie, \textit{Strategy in the Missile Age}, pp.127-8.} Thirdly, “the tonnages expended on city bombings were enormous”, and over 27 per cent of the million-and-a-half tons of bombs dropped on Germany in the last two years of the war fell on its cities. The U.S. dropped 160,800 tons of bombs on home islands of Japan; sixty-six Japanese cities received 104,000 tons of bombs, mostly incendiary, in the last year of the War.\footnote{Bernard Brodie, \textit{Strategy in the Missile Age}, pp.121, 129.}

Demonization of Japanese war atrocity in terms of its aerial bombardments of Chinese cities and towns is understandable from the perspective of Chinese nationalism. This, however, would only hinder us from understanding accurately these tragic events of the War. Even Hsu Shushi, once adviser to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a strong critic of Japanese “indiscriminate bombing” on Canton, admitted that: “It is not proven that the [Japanese] airmen have deliberately bombed civilians [in Canton]”.\footnote{Hsu Shushi, \textit{Three Weeks of Canton Bombings}, p. 68.} History is about facts, not emotion.