

# Reflections on the Nanking Massacre After 70 Years of Denial In Memory of Our Daughter Iris Chang

YING-YING CHANG

My husband and I were born in China during the Japanese invasion and occupation. Our parents endured those eight difficult years of the Sino-Japanese war from 1937 to 1945, experiencing the horror and tragic events of that war. Their stories were passed down to us as we were growing up, much as we would later pass our stories down to our children, including our daughter Iris Chang.

I was born in 1940 in Chungking, the wartime capital of China, during the intense battles of the Sino-Japanese war. The hardest year for China was 1937: Nanking, China's capital, fell to the invading Japanese army, and in subsequent years, Japanese forces occupied many parts of China, including numerous major cities. The Chinese government retreated to Chungking, which was bombed day and night. In fact, I would not exist if my mother had not been fortunate enough to survive the bombs dropped on the hospital where she was waiting to give birth to me.

Three years earlier, my parents and my older sister had barely escaped from Nanking one month before the fall of the city to the advancing Japanese troops. My parents traveled hundreds of miles after fleeing from Nanking, enduring the horrible Japanese air raids until they finally arrived in Chungking. They could never forget the gruesome scenes of human destruction by Japanese air bombardment. Those shocking and frightening stories of the carnage and devastation, which my parents told their children repeatedly at the dinner table, became deeply embedded in my memory.

After the Sino-Japanese war, China was immediately plunged into civil war. Again, my parents took five of their children as they traveled thousands of miles attempting to escape the war. First, they went to Guiyang, my father's hometown in the southwestern region of China, and then to Guangzhou in the southeast. Finally, we settled in Taiwan in 1949. I attended eight elementary schools during my six years of primary school education. The lives of my parents and my husband's parents – their entire generation seemed to have been shaped by war and the terrible memories of war.

Witnessing the cruelty of those two wars and the dark side of politics, both my husband and my parents understandably encouraged all their children to study the sciences in making their career choices. Fortunately,

in 1962, my husband and I were awarded scholarships from Harvard University and had the opportunity to be educated in this country. In 1967, we received our Ph.D.s in physics and biochemistry, respectively, from Harvard.

After graduation, we did our postdoctoral work at Princeton, New Jersey, where our daughter Iris Chang was born in 1968. We subsequently moved to Urbana, Illinois to take faculty positions at the University of Illinois, settling down in that peaceful Midwestern town in the American heartland. In our intimate dinner table conversations, we described to our children our parents' war experiences and our family history. Those stories of our families confronting the tragedies of war invariably influenced both of our children. Iris, however, was the one who showed intense curiosity about and interest in our family background and her roots. We never anticipated then that those stories at the dinner table would be the



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impetus for her to write the book, *The Rape of Nanking: the Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, which would become an international bestseller and a reawakening of conscience. While she was writing the book, we helped her in every possible way we could because the “forgotten Holocaust in Asia” was, to our parents’ generation, a story of life and death and of the struggle of a country for survival. From the conception of the book to the time it was published, the research, writing and revising became the central issue of Iris’ life and of our own lives as well.

While writing her book, Iris often discussed with us the historical evidence and personal documents she discovered in her exhaustive research.

Those materials gave us a chance to learn more about that part of Chinese history. Although we had heard extensively about the atrocities that the Japanese Imperial Army had committed in Nanking in 1937-1938 and elsewhere in China during that period, we were unaware of some of the important and compelling details. For example, we had never heard of the Nanking Safety Zone, which was established in Nanking during the genocidal massacre by several Westerners who remained there in spite of the difficulties and dangers of life in a war zone. Until Iris’ research, we had no idea of the heroic deeds of those brave Europeans and Americans who risked their own lives to protect thousands of Chinese refugees who were trying to escape the mass killings, rape, torture and systematic brutality of the massacre.

When Iris went to the Divinity School Library of Yale University to do research on the book, she was amazed to find a great number of primary sources on the massacre. There were numerous letters, diaries, reports and other documents written

by American missionaries, scholars, and others who were present in Nanking at the time the massacre was taking place. Yet for more than half a century, she could not find a single book in English that dealt specifically with that historical event: one of the most brutal and massive crimes against humanity of the twentieth century. One day, Iris was so moved that she broke down and cried after reading the diary of American missionary and educator Minnie Vautrin, who was born in Secor, Illinois, and who, like Iris, had graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana. Iris told us that the diary of Minnie Vautrin vividly and sadly recorded the rapes and the killings and the other acts of brutality she witnessed when she was

the acting head of Ginling Women’s College in Nanking. Because of her admirable courage, humanity and tenacity, she saved thousands of Chinese women and children from rape and other crimes by Japanese soldiers in the Safety Zone. However, after Minnie Vautrin returned to U. S. she took her own life out of physical exhaustion and mental suffering.

In the summer of 1995, Iris went to Nanking and interviewed several victims and survivors of the Nanking Massacre, getting first-hand accounts of their individual stories. Many historical events of the massacre were recorded in the diaries, letters and reports Iris found in the archives, and the accuracy of those events was confirmed by the survivors’ statements.

In 1996, Iris was able to locate the granddaughter of John Rabe, a German businessman and the leader of the Safety Zone in Nanking in 1937. Rabe was also a member of the Nazi Party. Iris was astounded to discover that Rabe’s granddaughter possessed a diary and several documents and reports of her grandfather. The diary of John Rabe, which has since been translated into English and Chinese and a number of other languages, contained records of the atrocities the Japanese Imperial Army committed during the fall of Nanking in 1937-1938. Historians throughout the world have recognized the value of the diary, which was acclaimed as the first detailed account and the most credible personal testimony of the Nanking Massacre.

In her book *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris told the story from three different perspectives: the Japanese soldiers who committed the crimes; the Chinese civilians who were victimized; and the Europeans and Americans who created a safety zone and saved thousands of Chinese, many of them non-combatants, including women and children. But the book does more than just describe an orgy of violence; it reveals another shocking fact of the atrocities: the “cover-up.” We did not realize it until Iris revealed in her book “how the Japanese, emboldened by the silence of Americans and Chinese, tried to erase the entire massacre from public consciousness, thereby depriving its victims of their proper place in history.”

The primary force that kept out of public consciousness the Rape of Nanking and other atrocities the Japanese committed in Asia is political expediency. Right after World War II ended, the U. S., faced with the threat of Communism in the Soviet Union and China, rebuilt post-

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war Japan, the former enemy, to counteract the increasing power of the Soviet and Chinese Communists. After the Communist revolution in China, both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China in Taiwan competed for Japanese trade and political recognition. Both governments chose not to press Japan to acknowledge its war crimes and to pay reparations to the victims; consequently, for over half a century the world forgot the Nanking Massacre and other Japanese atrocities committed during the war. In Japan, the ultra-conservative right wing groups tried to whitewash and deny the history of Japanese war crimes. The rightists deliberately obstructed important historical information about World War II by censoring text books and controlling the media. Those ultra-nationalist groups used intimidation to silence former soldiers from publicly confessing their crimes or expressing their remorse, and the rightists assaulted verbally—and sometimes physically—scholars, journalists and historians who wrote about Japan's crimes against humanity.

This is in stark contrast to what post-war Germany has done to atone for the heinous crimes the Third Reich perpetrated during World War II, including the Holocaust. Germany not only paid billions of dollars in compensation and reparation to the Holocaust victims, but also passed legislation mandating teaching the history of the Jewish Holocaust in the school system. The German people and the German government acknowledged the Nazis' genocidal acts and other war crimes, then made a sincere apology to the Holocaust victims and compensated them.

Seventy years have passed and the Japanese government still has neither made a sincere official apology, nor offered compensation to the victims of the Asian Holocaust. For seven decades, the memories of Nanking have haunted Japan as well as China. The recent denials by the Japanese government of its wartime atrocities stirred up angry protests in China and other Asian countries and brought condemnation by the international media. Former Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi also ignored the repeated protests from China and various other Asian countries victimized by Japan and continued to visit Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 class A war criminals of World War II are enshrined. There is no doubt that the visits to the Shrine hurt and insulted the people of the victimized countries, particularly China and Korea, and that those visits also contributed to the strained relations between China and Japan in the past several years.

In 2005, when the Japanese government certified a revisionist history textbook which sanitized Japan's role in the Sino-Japanese war and the Rape of Nanking, the news sparked a series of riots across China. That same

year, the textbook controversy also helped to mobilize millions of people throughout China and other Asian countries to organize a signature campaign, urging the United Nations not to make Japan a member of the Security Council. The resulting loss of a coveted seat on the U.N. Security Council is a significant part of the price Japan must pay for the stubborn denial of those crimes against humanity that Iris helped to bring back from obscurity.

In the spring of 2007, the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo stated several times that the wartime sex slaves, euphemistically described as "comfort women," were not forcibly recruited or coerced by the Japanese government. Overwhelming evidence from World War II archives and the individual testimonies of sex slave survivors from Korea, China and a number of victimized Asian countries directly contradict Abe's self-serving public relations statement, which angered people in Asia and throughout the world and generated much criticism from the public media. Many observers also believe his statements facilitated the passage of House Resolution 121 in the U. S. Congress — a resolution which calls on Japan to apologize for forcing thousands of women into sexual servitude to the Japanese soldiers before and during World War II. The passage of H. R.121 also contributed, many observers believe, to the political demise of Prime Minister Abe.

The Nanking Massacre is just one of many atrocities the Japanese military forces committed during the Sino-Japanese war, which lasted 14 years – from the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 to the end of the war in 1945. In addition to the Rape of Nanking and the sexual enslavement of thousands of Asian women, the Japanese military used chemical and biological weapons that killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese people during the war. The actual death count is still rising as more evidence is unearthed, and may never be known. The horror, brutality and magnitude of the war crimes by Japanese forces cannot be easily erased from the memories of the Chinese people and the other victims throughout Asia.

In Iris's book, she quotes George Santayana's warning: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Indeed, if Japan as a nation cannot come to terms with its past, the continuing denial will undermine Japan's trust and credibility not only among Asian countries but also the entire world. Ultimately, the ones that Japan's denials and distortions of history will hurt the most are the Japanese people.

Kenzaburo Oe, Japanese novelist and Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature said, "Japan must apologize for its aggression and offer compensation. This is the basic

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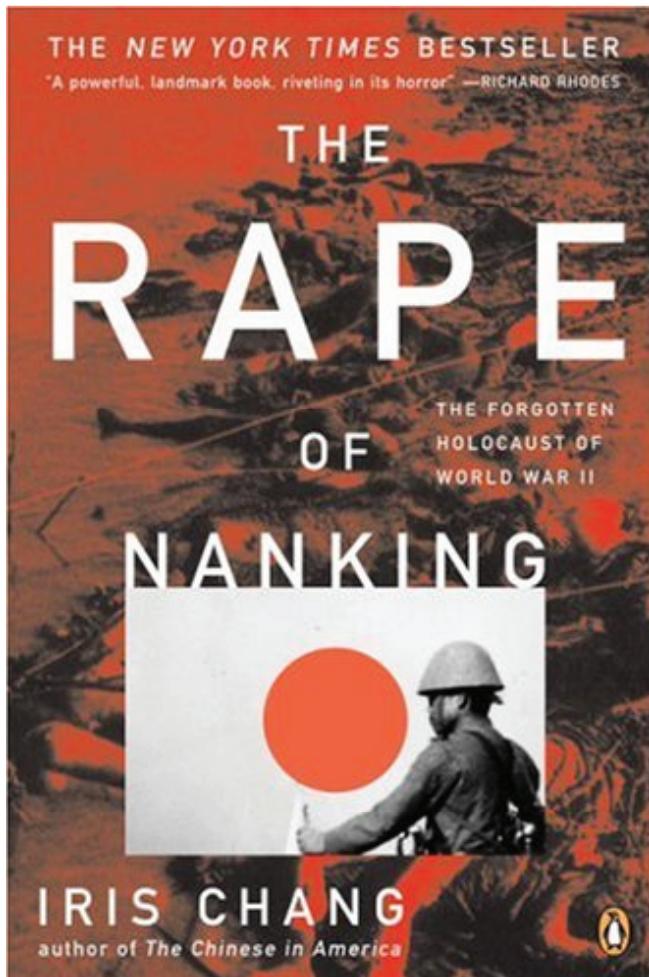
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condition, and most Japanese with a good conscience have been for it. But a coalition of conservative parties, bureaucrats and business leaders opposes." I sincerely hope the silent majority of Japanese people will have the courage to come forward and do what they know is right. I also hope their collective conscience will awaken the Japanese political leaders, so that Japan and the rest of Asia will embark on a path of true reconciliation, which is the only way that leads to a just and lasting peace in the Asian Pacific region.

It's unfortunate that Iris is no longer with us today. My husband and I have decided to devote our remaining years to continuing the unfinished work she left behind. We established the Iris Chang Memorial Fund to continue carrying the torch of her commitment to justice, peace and human rights. In her interview with Robert Birnbaum in 2003, she said: "It is important for me to write about issues that have universal significance. One of them that has resonated with me all my life has been

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the theme of injustice...for some reason, I seem to be bothered whenever I see acts of injustice and assaults on other people's civil liberties." Iris was passionately dedicated to struggling against social injustice and human rights violations all over the globe.

To pay tribute to her, we have made the mission of the Iris Chang Memorial Fund to educate the public about the importance of remembering history, to raise the awareness of the dark, painful history of World War II in Asia, and to support the education and research of the younger generations in the U. S. with regard to the history of war in Asia. For Iris believed that only from truth in history can we secure justice, safeguard humanity from repeating mistakes of the past, and bring about genuine reconciliation and lasting peace among all people.

It is hard to imagine anything sadder than a mother losing a gifted, beautiful and humane daughter. I can never think of Iris without a sadness that threatens to overwhelm me, but I take pride in her life and work. Whenever I think of her, she is simply our beloved daughter. She is hard working and gets things done. She is vivid and talkative. She not only can write but can speak eloquently. She is a person you will never feel bored around. To the contrary to some common notion that she was always serious, in reality, she was quite happy. She is always very curious and has a touch of innocence, a trait she never lost with the years. In short, she was complex, yet a very simple person.

In June 1998, in the acceptance speech she delivered on the occasion of receiving Max Beberman Award from her high school in Urbana, Illinois, she said to the high school graduates, "Please believe in THE POWER OF ONE. One person can make an enormous difference in the world. One person — actually, one idea— can start

a war, or end one, or subvert an entire power structure. One discovery can cure a disease or spawn new technology to benefit or annihilate the human race. You as ONE individual can change millions of lives. Think big. Do not limit your vision and do not ever compromise your

dreams or ideals..."

She was my daughter but also my friend and my mentor. Her struggle for justice and peace is now mine.

I wrote this article with Maya Angelou's words in mind, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

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Ying-Ying Chang is the mother of Iris Chang, who is known for her bestselling 1997 non-fiction book, *The Rape of Nanjing*.