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## 2. Mourning Iris Chang

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(William Y. JIANG)

*December 13, 2004 was the sixty-seventh anniversary of the Nanking Massacre and the seventh anniversary of the publication of Iris Chang's The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II. On this day, I thought about Iris Chang, her work, her inspiration to tens of thousands of people, and my transcendental experience in attending the memorial services after her abrupt departure. So I prepared this article in loving memory of Iris Chang. I memorialize the anniversary of the Nanking Massacre and mourn Iris Chang's passing away in hoping that such holocausts as the Nanking Massacre will never happen again.*

### The Breaking News

One peaceful early morning in November, I was busy checking and replying emails, when the corner of my eye caught a news flash popping up on my computer screen: "The Rape of Nanking author is found dead." What?!! My heart beat suddenly accelerated and I quickly searched the Internet. Short and brief breaking news appeared everywhere reporting Iris Chang's untimely death. Deeply shocked and saddened, I stood up and paced in my office for over half an hour, grieving the loss of Iris Chang. I desperately searched my memories for the minutest details of my own brief encounters with her and lost myself in the wilderness of "why." Why Iris Chang? Why leaving so abruptly, and so young? If you had to leave so soon and so young, why did you bother to be so beautiful and so unforgettable in the first place? I felt a dire need to seek answers, but I found none!

Details emerged from my memory. First I recalled seeing the headlines of the publication of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* in 1997, in association of memorial activities of the sixtieth anniversary of the Nanking Massacre. Iris Chang, I thought, glancing through the headlines, must be an old survivor from the terrible Nanking event sixty years ago. Then one day, I received a magazine with a picture of an attractive young woman dressed in bright red gracing the entire front cover: "Iris Chang, Author to Give Talks..." What!?? That is the author of *The Rape of Nanking*? So young and so beautiful! I went to the Iris Chang lecture in San Francisco according to the magazine's given schedule and was totally overwhelmed by Iris' style, eloquence and conviction. Since then, I had watched and followed Iris Chang's activities from a distance, until earlier this year in April, I noticed that Iris had arranged a book-signing ceremony for her newly published book *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* in San Jose Barnes and Nobles bookstore that I frequented. I went to her book-signing, had my copy of the book signed, and chatted with her briefly, telling her that I was also in The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign when she was pursuing her journalism degree there and that we were schoolmates. She then addressed me in mandarin with a smile, "Xue Zhang (学长 Study Brother)." That was the only smile she directed to me only. What a hauntingly charming smile!

### Who Was Iris Chang

Let us start by studying the meanings of Iris Chang's English name and Chinese name. First, Iris is a flower of a variety of beautiful colors. It is gentle, and vulnerable, yet it is also perennial. Iris is also a rainbow with multi-colors. By etymology, Iris is from Greek. In Greek mythology, Iris is the ancient Greek goddess of the rainbow and messenger of the gods. Iris Chang's Chinese name is Zhang Chun-Ru (张纯如). Chun-Ru (纯如) traces its origin from the Chinese classic no other than *The Analects* by the greatest oriental philosopher of all times, Confucius. In Book III, 23 of *The Analects* (论语: 八佾篇), the Chinese ancient philosopher Confucius used Chun-Ru (纯如) to describe the harmony and perfection of

music by a consummate musician. If we look at Iris Chang's short but glorious life and look at what she did for justice and humanity, we would agree that she represented all that is implied in her name.

Iris was born on March 28, 1968 in Princeton, New Jersey. The family moved to Illinois when her parents assumed professorships at The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. That was the university where Iris studied first computer science and then journalism. She also obtained a master's degree in writing from The Johns Hopkins University and became a full time writer.

While still at Johns Hopkins, Iris, twenty-five, finished writing her first book: *The Thread of the Silkworm*, which traces the life and career of Tsien Hsue-Shen (Qian Xuesen) and his impact on modern space age and nuclear missiles. The famous Chinese physicist was educated at MIT and CalTech. He helped pioneer the American space age during 1940s and early 1950s. Then due to the McCarthy-era paranoia, Tsien was branded a communist and imprisoned in the U.S. He was then deported to China, where he became the father of China's nuclear missile programs. Iris entitled her first book *The Thread of the Silkworm* for two reasons. One was that when Iris was little, her father brought back from China some silkworms and explained to her the five thousand-year old sericulture (silkworm cultivation) in China and how the silkworm would spit one single thread about one thousand yards long to make a single cocoon and how four-thousand cocoons would produce enough silk for a single dress. Since then, Iris admired the silkworm and its devotion. The other reason was that China's first nuclear missiles developed by Tsien Hsue-Shen were called "Silkworm missiles," and that Iris believed that Professor Tsien Hsue-Shen's life could be likened to a silkworm, who works for the benefit of others indefatigably and that his life path was like an endless thread of a silkworm, spanning half of the globe from China to the U.S. and back to China.

Coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary in 1997, Iris Chang published her second book: *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. The book's idea originated in her childhood stories told by her grandparents and parents about events that unfolded in a far away city in mainland China decades ago, when the Japanese invaders perpetrated the burn-all, kill-all and loot-all atrocities in China in general and in Nanking in particular in December 1937. The Japanese invaders killed over 300,000 Chinese in six weeks, reduced Nanking, the then capital city of China, into a hell on earth, and made the Yangtze River run with human blood. These stories really stirred up her curiosity and interest. She tried to look for materials on these events in the library, but none were to be found and she was not sure if these events had really happened. Then in early 1990s, she and her husband moved to the South Bay area where there is a concentrated population of Chinese and Chinese Americans. In December 1994, she happened upon an event marking the fifty-seventh anniversary of the Nanking Massacre in Cupertino, California. Black and white photos showing the stark reality of the atrocities in Nanking decades ago were in exhibit. These photos set Iris immediately on fire and on a long path of searching for the truth. For the next two years, Iris traveled to all places necessary, including the old grand city of Nanking, and engaged in meticulous field and library research, including interviewing dozens of survivors from the Nanking Massacre. The result was the first book in the English language documenting one of the most tragic chapters of World War II: the slaughter, rape and torture of hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers in Nanking. The book became an instant international best seller, remaining on *The New York Times* best-seller list for many months.

In 2003, Iris published her third book: *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History*. This book traces the history of Chinese immigrants from middle nineteenth century to the present, their trials and tribulations, and the tremendous challenge they had to face in order to create a new life in America. This book is "an epic story that spans 150 years and continues to the present day, Iris Chang tells of a people's search for a better life and the determination of the Chinese to forge an identity and a destiny in a strange land and, often against great obstacles, to find success." (Quote from the book's publisher) Jonathan Spence, Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and one of the most eminent scholars on Chinese

history commented on the book as “richly detailed... I know of no better introduction to this multi-layered and emotionally charged story.”

For all young American students of Chinese descent, Iris Chang had become a role model and an inspiration.

### **Visitation Service**

After learning the sad news of Iris’ passing, I was determined to see her one last time. On November 18<sup>th</sup>, I attended her “Visitation” service held in a funeral home (Spangler Mortuary) in Los Altos, California. It was a relatively simple service. Simple, because there were no major banners, no fanfare, no overcrowds of people, and no over-coverage of media; simple because the mortuary auditorium was relatively small, somewhat like a small church. From 5:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m., mourners could file up through the central aisle of the auditorium to “visit with” Iris and say a final good-bye, as she lay quietly in the casket dressed in a sky-blue suit. Numerous wreaths surrounded the casket and decorated the auditorium with a flower-draped color picture of hers standing on the left side of the casket. She looked serene, calm, and stately. She looked like the time when I saw her at her book-signing several months ago. She looked just as graceful and beautiful as she looked in any of her numerous publicly searchable pictures, except as if in a quiet sleep, and except that she was never to wake up again.

In the foyer, there was an exhibit of her books, posters, letters, speech engagement flyers, the issue of the *Reader’s Digest* magazine that had Iris Chang on its cover, and postcards bearing her picture for people to contact her. There were also her diplomas from The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, her diploma from The Johns Hopkins University, and two diplomas of honorary doctorates, one from the College of Wooster in Ohio, and the other from California State University at Hayward, plus numerous award plaques and certificates. Then, there were many, many of her smiling pictures, with the family, with her two-year old son Christopher, her wedding pictures, pictures with the Clinton couples, and pictures with some other celebrities, etc. Outside of the hall, there was a big table with rows upon rows of candles on it. Mourners were lining up to light a candle in solemn and loving memory of Iris.

After I said my final good-bye to her, I got a chance to shake hands and express my condolences to her husband, Brett Douglas, her brother Michael Chang, her parents Professors Shau-Jin Chang and Ying-Ying Chang. I talked with her father about the fact that I also studied at The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus when Iris was there and while her parents were professors there. He briefly talked about how Iris did not want to see the doctor for her depression, and how they wanted to help her, but in the end, were not able to. The brief contact with Iris’ parents there also gave me a strong impression that they are really nice and simple people. They appeared modest, humble, unassuming, and, warm given such circumstances. I also talked to Iris’ father about the fact that The Chinese Historians in the U.S. (CHUS), and The Association of Chinese Professors in Social Sciences in the U.S. (ACPSS) wanted to jointly establish a foundation in Iris Chang’s name, with the intention to carry forward the research on the Nanking Massacre and the cause of justice that Iris had devoted so much of her life to. He was happy to hear our initiatives and was willing to give his endorsement for the foundation. He also said that one of Iris’ wishes was to see a world-class movie to be made on the Nanking Massacre and that it was a pity that Iris herself was not able to realize this dream.

### **What Amazes Me about Iris Chang**

I was totally shaken up after many hours and many days of the visitation, and after many weeks since her passing away. To me, especially when I was looking at her lying in that burgundy casket that day, she was just a little young girl. A typical American girl, pretty, slim, tall, and feminine. Yes, a typical American born Chinese (ABC) girl with typical academic-driven Chinese parents. (Her parents came

from Taiwan to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies, obtained their Ph.D.s, father in physics and mother in biology, from Harvard University, and went on to become full professors at The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.) This generation of ABCs, like our own children born in the USA, were born and raised in typical material comfort. They often become jaded and cynical even before reaching their teens. When hearing about hardship stories from China: the anti-Japanese war, the three-year famine, the cultural revolution, and the five thousand years of Chinese history of bitterness, hunger, warlords fighting each other, hundreds of emperors and dozens of dynasties, etc., they tend to shrug them off, complaining that their parents repeat similar stories too many times. “Here you go again!” is their normal response. Under these circumstances, how could such a girl as Iris grow up to be so determined, so adamant, and so committed to seeking the truth of an almost hidden or even forgotten holocaust of the East, just because her grandparents told her about their own escape from Nanking, and just because her parents repeated her grandparents’ story to her once more?! Despite the numerous letters of intimidations from Japanese right-wing militants, and despite the seemingly lost cause of even trying to convince people of believing that there was such a holocaust, Iris just forged on in her never-ending cause of seeking the historical truth. No wonder some claim that Iris was the most heroic fighter of the anti-Japanese war. What conviction, what commitment from a member of such a generation of typical materialism and cynicism!

Yes, even recently I was reading articles and websites doubting or denying the existence and magnitude of this horrendous holocaust: the Nanking Massacre. Many people were just inherently too innocent and benevolent to believe that such overall raping of the then capital of the biggest country on earth in such a short span of time and in such a brutal and atrocious fashion (including bayoneting babies, burying civilians alive, competing in beheading sprees, using live Chinese as living targets of sword practices, tying women to perpetual sexually attackable positions for repeated and random assaults, and mutilating female genitals after raping, etc.) were humanly possible. In addition, there is no lack of people who would like to see such historical truth suppressed. Even well-intentioned nay-sayers would argue from the basic human nature that such things were simply impossible or simply beyond imagination. And therefore, by inference, Iris must have been inaccurate, despite the fact that Iris Chang did her research in the most empirical and factual way. To them, or to any other normal persons, there is no way to imagine that Japanese soldiers’ cruelty and human abuse perpetrated during their invasion of China were so extreme and heinous as to be beyond exaggeration. In addition, Iris Chang, during her research on the book, unearthed many previously unknown sources (not the least of which was the absolutely incriminating diary of John Rabe, the Nazi hero of Nanking, an Oskar Schindler in Nanking), and documented all her primary and secondary sources clearly and retractably in her book.

The more I read and learn about her from the outpouring of articles in the press, especially since the news of her passing away, the more I think about her person and her work, the more amazed I am by her, and the more shaken off I am by her untimely and young death. She was truly a pride, nay, a miracle among Chinese Americans. Maybe Iris knew what some press is now saying that her death would allow people to learn more about the Nanking Massacre than if she had stayed alive!

I remember a fairy tale my mom told me when I was little: once upon a time, there was this beautiful angel who came down to earth from Heaven. She married a man on earth and gave him a son. She did many beautiful deeds for people on earth, and then she had to go back to Heaven. Nobody could stop her. She was just destined to go in a great hurry.

Yes, that was Iris Chang. An angel from Heaven who was destined to go back to Heaven in a hurry! After the “Visitation Service,” I knew that a memorial and burial service would be held for Iris the next morning and I knew that I would be there, mourning Iris Chang.

## **Memorial Service**

November 19, 2004 witnessed one of the most gorgeous mornings characteristic of the South Bay area. As I was driving along the winding hilly road of Los Altos, flanked by beautiful mountains, full of sunshine, covered with flower-dotted vegetation, I thought about the times when I came to this area for outdoor activities. I would usually negotiate a few curves along the paths, park my car on a hillside near Rancho San Antonio, and come out for hiking and jogging. But today, my destination was the nearby Gate of Heaven Cemetery, which consisted of a beautiful garden, a large fountain, a memorial church, and vast acreage of cemetery along hillsides.

As I was approaching, I saw hundreds of cars had already jam-packed all the different parking lots. I had to find roadside parking quite a distance away from the memorial church. As I walked towards the church where the memorial service would be performed, the bright morning glory graduated into a solemn mourning ambience.

In front of the church, there was a wide lawn. Hundreds of people were already thronging in there. At the entrance leading to the lawn and the church, there was a big oval-shaped billboard with a smiling picture of Iris and a Chinese poem, which I translate as follows:

Iris Chang (March 28, 1968-November 9, 2004)

Like rainbow, you bring people  
Beauty and hope  
Like rainbow, you manifest  
A bridge between heaven and earth  
Like rainbow, your existence is ephemeral  
What you leave behind are endless memories  
Like angel, you represent  
Kindness and courage  
Like angel, you are an emissary  
For justice  
For silent victims and  
For historical testimony  
To humanity  
You devoted your life.

(Note that “Like” in Chinese 如 is part of her given name in Chinese and rainbow is her given name in English, as discussed in a previous section.)

If yesterday’s “Visitation” service was simple, the memorial ceremony today was the opposite. This time, there were definitely overflows of people and over-coverage of media. It seemed that all Bay Area celebrities, especially Chinese American celebrities were here: TV anchorpersons, talk-show hosts, human rights leaders, and journalists from *San Jose Mercury News*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *World Journal*, *Overseas Chinese Daily*, *Sing Tao Daily*, etc. About six hundred mourners, roughly half Asian and half Caucasian, were trying to find seating in a church with only three hundred-person capacity. Since I was a latecomer, I had to find myself a place outside. Luckily enough, as I was facing the church directly, I was able to see the podium inside from a distance. There was a sobering atmosphere of mourning and solemnity in the air.

The first speaker was her husband Bret Douglas. He recalled his first meeting with Iris, “She was so attractive and so eye-catching in a crowd of students. I was immediately attracted by her congeniality and managed to introduce myself to her.” “She was always the center of attention.” His other family members also took turns to speak memorializing Iris. Her father, Professor Shau-Jin Chang, talked about

Iris' perpetual honors from elementary to middle school to college days, her decision to change her major from computer science to journalism because of her pure love for writing, and her uncontrollable urge to excel. Her brother Michael Chang presented memories of Iris as his sister growing up together with him under the same roof. Her mom Professor Ying-Ying Chang read a letter from a close friend from Iris' adolescence, Amy Kohler, "I remember once in Champaign-Urbana standing by a pond with her [Iris] throwing stones. We were trying to get some of them skip. We talked about the ripples spreading outward that each stone made as it landed in water. When I think of Iris' life that is what I see, the ripples of good spreading out from the courageous way in which she lived."

Long-time friend Barbara Masin said, "She [Iris] felt other people's suffering so intensely, to the point that it made her suffer." Paula Kamen, a college classmate and fellow journalist and author, attested to Iris Chang's gift for writing. Paula and Iris were college "rivals" in journalism. Paula once served as editor of the university newspaper. She said, "When Iris submitted a piece, I was supposed to edit it; but everything Iris wrote was impeccable. No correction was necessary, from spelling to choice of words to punctuation." Paula said that then she realized "Iris does not get by just by her good looks." Paula also said that she was really tired of "eating dust" behind Iris Chang in college. Paula and Iris were also close friends after college years, "A minimum conversation with Iris would last two to three hours. She wanted to know every detail about my life and my work, barraged me with a torrent of concrete advice to love."

Susan Rabiner, Iris' publisher and agent, first talked about how she was recently overwhelmed by "emails and letters of condolences from everywhere, London, Sidney, Toronto, Vancouver, Beijing, Nanking, and practically all over the world." Then Susan talked about how she commissioned Iris to write her first book about Tsien Hsue-Shen (Qian Xuesen) and how Iris pursued the research and interviews. "I took a risk in asking a twenty-five year old to write the book," she said. "Five days later, I was surprised to receive a call from Iris. The excited Iris says, 'Hi Susan, I am calling you from Beijing. I have Professor Tsien Hsue-Shen's son with me in the car right now...'"

"Before she was twenty-five," Susan continued. "She had written a book that had already changed the course of history." Susan then recalled that sometime in late 1994, Iris came to her and said, "There's a book I must do!" That book was *The Rape of Nanking*. Susan added, "Now, some child will go to the library and -- though there wasn't such a book for Iris when she was growing up -- there will be a book in a language they will understand. And they will see the photographs and see a beautiful young woman, completely devoted to her cause." Susan said that she had a long phone conversation with Iris the day before Iris died. The last words Iris said to her were, "I love you." It did not occur to Susan at the time that these should be understood as her last words.

James Bradley, a fellow author, read a passionate letter addressed to Iris' son Christopher, recalling how his first book was rejected by twenty-eight publishers. It was Iris that had helped him and encouraged him to be persistent. As a result, James also became a well-known author in World War II history. With Iris's direct help, James has now written two best-sellers: *Flags of Our Fathers: Heroes of Iwo Jima*, and *Flyboys: A True Story of Courage*.

A representative from Congressman Mike Honda's office read a tribute from Mike Honda. This is particularly significant for two reasons: 1) that this tribute becomes part of the US Congressional Record in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress in the United States, a permanent US government document; and 2) that Mike Honda, Congressman from District 15 in San Jose, California, is a Japanese-American, who has always believed in Iris Chang's work. Mike Honda says in his tribute, "As a historian and an activist, Iris fought passionately for historical justice and reconciliation. Her book, *The Rape of Nanking*, chronicled the horrific capture of Nanking during Japan's invasion of China in 1937, and was instrumental in educating the international community about Japanese military atrocities during World War II human rights violations that had gone unwritten and unacknowledged for decades. Her efforts to seek redress for the

crimes at Nanking brought her in conflict with the Japanese government and communities worldwide, but Iris was unwavering in her commitment to justice and truth.”

“Her fierce pride of her Chinese-American heritage empowered others with the certainty that they were truly Americans despite their ancestry. Our community had lost a role model and close friend; the world has lost one of its finest and most passionate advocates of social and historical justice.”

After all speakers finished their memorial speeches, mourners began to sing the song *Amazing Grace*:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.

... ..

### **Burial and Final Good-Bye**

As the singing flows, some mourners could not help shedding tears. The sobering atmosphere of mourning became more emotionally charged. Then the casket containing Iris was being carried by poll-bearers out of the church, across the lawn, and up the hill where Iris would find her permanent resting place. Six hundred mourners, with flowers in hand and tears in eyes, following the casket, filed into a long and silent serpentine march up the hill.

As the casket was placed on a rack on top the dug grave, several layers of mourners circled around. The cemetery director seemed to be waiving for all mourners to leave, but the mourners were obstinate. Not knowing exactly what was the ending point, I waited, and waited with all other mourners. Suddenly, I felt somehow an uneasy and suffocating silence. There seemed to be a glitch in the procedure. No speaker was arranged, and no other agenda planned at the burial site. The casket rested on the rack above the dug grave. The mourners wouldn't leave. Not sure when the casket was to be lowered, mourners just waited in silence, determined to send Iris all the way to her final resting place. Then, from the lower section of the encircling crowd, somebody, as if to relieve the repressed feelings, suddenly began to sing in her single voice: “Oh! Beautiful for spacious skies; for amber waves of grain.”

A few more in the crowd joined: “For purple mountain majesties; above the fruited plain.” Then, the wave of singing caught on contagiously like wild fire across the entire hill of mourners:

“America! America!  
God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood,  
From sea to shining sea.”

What harmony and what unison! I had never heard *America The Beautiful* sung in such an impregnated way and with such grief and glory: grief for an inspirational life cut abruptly short, and glory for a celebrated life fully lived. I said to myself, “Yes, America, you are beautiful! Yes, Iris, you are beautiful!”

Another briefer silence followed before an elderly gentleman suggested, “Let’s sing Happy Birthday to Iris for the last time!” The crowd burst into another song:

Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday to you,  
Happy birthday, dear Iris,  
Happy birthday to you!

The casket was gradually lowered and lowered to six feet under. Mourners automatically filed again, carrying their flowers and tears, to pay their last respect to Iris. Each paused at the side of the grave and dropped a flower onto the lowered casket. Following other mourners, I lightly tossed my bouquet of purple irises onto the top of the sealed burgundy coffin in which our dear Iris would rest in peace permanently, oblivious of any further human anguish and poignant experiences that she devoted her entire life to writing about. Yes, Iris, you have had enough of your own share!

### **Epilogue**

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to uproot, . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” (*Ecclesiastes 3*)

This is the time to weep and mourn, to weep over and to mourn the early yet gracious departure of our brave heroine, freedom fighter, and truth fighter. This is also the time to laugh and to dance, to laugh and to dance in celebration of Iris’ young but fully lived life, a life of courage, a life of devotion, and a life of triumph.

Good-bye, Iris, may you rest in peace, and may we all find solace, courage, and inspiration in your steps and in your spirit!

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