Book Review:

The Woman Who Could Not Forget: Iris Chang Before And Beyond The Rape of Nanking

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In this book Ying-Ying Chang, mother to Iris Chang, shares an intimate look into her daughter’s ongoing passion to expose a chapter of history that was forgotten by the international community – The Rape of Nanking. As Iris exposed the atrocities of the Nanking genocide to the world, Ying-Ying now shares the personal and professional life of Iris Chang with the world. There is no one else who could have more sensitively and intimately wrote a detailed biographical memoir of Iris’s short life, which was tragically taken by suicide, than her own mother. Ignatius Ding, [an activist who worked with Chang], writes in the ‘Foreword’ of the book:

One must understand how hard it was for Ying-Ying to go through her recollection, relive her nightmare once again, and spend several years to compile and document relevant information. It was very honourable on her part to do so. This is a great gift to the public. It is done to honor the memory of her beloved daughter, Iris Chang.

Sorrow, justice and liberation are felt at multiple levels in this book. As the back cover of the book states, “The Woman Who Could Not Forget cements Iris’ legacy as one of the most extraordinary minds of her generation and reveals the depth and beauty of the bond between a mother and a daughter.”

Some readers may not know the history of Iris Chang. Iris Chang, an accomplished journalist, scholar activist and noted public intellectual, wrote the Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II. Her research and activism brought the Nanking genocide into the public consciousness of Westerners and into the recorded histories of World War II. She wanted the world to know what had happened at Nanking, and she was determined to support her claims through evidence. The History Page, on the worldwide web, is evidence of the success of her work as it refers to this chapter of history as ‘The Rape of Nanking’ and includes descriptions such as these:

(a) In December of 1937, the Japanese Imperial Army marched into China’s capital city of Nanking and proceeded to murder 300,000 out of 600,000 civilians and soldiers in the city. The six weeks of carnage would become known as the Rape of Nanking and represented the single worst atrocity during the World War II era in either the European or Pacific theatres of war

(b) The notorious Comfort Women system was introduced which forced young Chinese women to become slave-prostitutes, existing solely for the sexual pleasure of Japanese soldiers.
(c) An extraordinary group of about 20 Americans and Europeans remaining in the city, composed of missionaries, doctors and businessmen, took it upon themselves to establish an International Safety Zone. Using Red Cross flags, they brazenly declared a 2.5 square-mile area in the middle of the city off limits to the Japanese... About 300,000 Chinese civilians took refuge inside their Safety Zone. [Academic Yang Ximing states the number is more around 200,000]

Iris Chang was determined to never give up in her endless inquiry. Iris once stated to her mother, Ying Ying, “I cannot teach Christopher [Iris's young son] to be an intellectual and a socially responsible person unless I demonstrate to him, through my actions, that I myself am such a person.” These are powerful words and they powerfully reveal Iris’s motivations and her deep conviction – to be a mentor to her son, Christopher.

Ying-Ying includes some compelling insights into Iris’s research that expand beyond the perimeters of her book The Rape of Nanking (e.g., articles, interviews, emails). Ying-Ying states that “Iris was one of the first few people to press the issue of monetary reparation from Japan (e.g., for such things as the heinous labour camps, institutionalized rape by the military, and biological warfare testing on live citizens at Unit 731). She shares an interview Iris had with Japanese reporter Kinue Tokudome who asked, “Are you planning to go to Japan when your book comes out there?” Iris responded:

I don’t know. All I do know is that I recognize that there are many sincere, wonderful and courageous people in Japan who want nothing more than to promote the truth, and these kinds of people – though in small numbers – can be found worldwide. This is a human quality that transcends ethnicity and nationality. Such people recognize that what happened in Nanking an in other regions of China is a human rights issue, and that patriotism or nationality or ethnicity has no bearing on human rights issues. They see the larger picture. I am one hundred percent behind those people in Japan, and I certainly hope to meet them one day.

Japanese soldiers, film makers, and academics are now coming forth on these issues. At a recent conference in Toronto entitled Forgotten Voices Living History: International Conference for Educators on the History of WW11 in Asia a previous Japanese soldier spoke of his experiences and film maker Izumitani, Akiko shared her film Silent Shame, where she confronts the “hidden truth about her country’s involvement in war crimes in WW II.” Ying-Ying also shares part of James Bradley’s eulogy to Iris’s two years old son. Bradley is “the best-selling author of Flags of Our Father” [the life stories of six American men who raised the flag at the Battle of Iwo Jima], which is a motion picture directed by Clint Eastwood. Bradley states:

Christopher, your mother was Iris Chang ... Five years before you were born, I was struggling in my effort to write a book about the six flag-raisers in the photo. For two years I had tried to find a publisher. Twenty–seven publishers wrote me rejection letters ... Flags of Our Father became a New York Times #1 best seller. Twenty seven publishers had said ‘No.’ Your mother had said ‘Do
it...’ (She) touched millions and will be remembered on all continents in countless ways. Here is just one of them...

This book is informative and reaches international borders and transcends them too.

Few things, if any, could be as painful as the news that one’s child has committed suicide, but this is the opening chapter of this book, and the journey that one mother and her patient husband, have taken since the death of their daughter, Iris. This is where a new chapter begins for them and for the followers of Iris Chang. We learn of Iris’ life as a child, daughter, college student, wife, and mother in this book. As Richard Rhodes, author of twenty three books and the Pulitzer Prize winning book The Making of the Atom Bomb says in the prelude of the book,

In the course of our lives from birth to death we fill multiple roles. None is complete without the other; each complements the other. Whatever your religious beliefs, at minimum those we have lost survive in our memory of them. In this memoir Iris’s mother, Ying-Ying Chang, shares her memories of that other part of Iris’s life, the part that was private. Writing it, Ying-Ying tells us, helped her work through the grief at her daughter’s death. For those who knew Iris only or primarily through her books, learning more about her life enlarges our sense of who she was and how she came to her celebrated work...

Memoir can’t bring Iris Chang back, but it can at least help us to experience her presence again. It is a presence, full of the courage of her convictions, full of life.

Ying-Ying shares the immense joy, love and pride, she and her husband felt for their daughter; the selflessness of Iris as she encouraged her husband Brett to enter and complete an MBA at Harvard Business School, the agonizing rollercoaster ride with fertility issues that Iris and Brett endured, the great concern she had for Iris’s downward-spiralling mental health, and the challenges Iris faced as she lovingly nurtured her autistic son, Christopher. The book includes a plethora of loving ‘Dear Mom’ letters where Iris shares intricate details of her work and intimate details of her personal joys, sorrows, and struggles. Ying-Ying should be applauded for sharing Iris, her daughter, with the world.

This review would be incomplete without a few snapshots of Iris’s letters:

(a) Dear Mom:

Thank you for your inspirational email. I’ve been working on my book all week and feel more confident about my material ... The sections [of the book] are so short that I organized each chapter as I would a speech ... Thinking of the chapters as speeches for inspiration. They are breathtaking in their power – and so much more pungent than prose. In the evenings, when I read the speeches of Napolean or Clarence Darrow or Winston Churchill, I feel engaged in actual conversation with them. Words are the only way to preserve the
essence of a soul. What excites me about speeches is that even after the
speakers are dead and buried, their spirit lives on. This, to me, is true religion –
the best form of life after death

Love, Iris

(b) Dear Mom,

I want to teach Christopher that it is far better to belong to the critical minority
than the unquestioning majority. I want to teach him the ability to think
independently, to evaluate ideas and information on his own - without the
official sanction of the authorities - and, if possible, to create ...These qualities
are not universally popular in our society.

(c) Dear Mom,

It was wonderful talking to you and Dad a few nights ago. Few people achieve
the level of intimacy and love that we enjoy, as parent and daughter, on an
almost nightly basis. As a family, we are blessed, truly blessed, and we must
remind ourselves of this every day.

This book is not only for human rights activists, historians, fans of Iris Chang’s work, and those
who want to preserve the history of World War II in Asia.

Ying-Ying’s book is a compelling story of a mother’s love for her daughter and a
daughter’s love for her mother, father, husband and child. It is an inspiration to those who wish
to “stand alone, apart from the crowd” and stand tall for social justice. In the closing of the book
Ying-Ying writes:

And the end of the writing of this book, I came to the ultimate question, one
whose answer I have always been – and continue – searching for: what is the
meaning of life? The answer will surely vary with different people. When I
thought about Iris’s life, her speech and all those letters she wrote to me and
her dad, she clearly expressed that she was a person listening to her heart, her
own inner passion, while striving to create something of enduring value.

The magic of writing is in its power to capture our souls, moments and lived experiences, and to
bring us to place where we understand ourselves, others, and the world more deeply. Ying-Ying
Chang invites us into the personal journey she shared with her daughter, and in doing so, she has
“preserved the essence of a soul”.
