

How has Iris Chang's book, *The Rape of Nanking: the Forgotten Holocaust of WW II*, affected my life and thinking?

An essay to raise awareness of the importance of remembrance of history
The first Iris Chang Memorial Essay Contest

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Iris Chang's effort to expose the 1937 story of Japanese atrocities in Nanking has impacted me personally through the realization that such historic events are both contemporary and relevant to today's fight for justice and truth. I have been so motivated by the personal advocating of Chang's beliefs that I am more sensitive to human rights; they are now a key factor in what I teach high school students. The media bombards us daily with injustice and tragedy because our freedom of expression allows the media to do so. Similarly, our freedom of expression allows us to act on these injustices unlike the limitations placed on oppressed victims. Because of Iris Chang's The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II, her accompanying speeches, radio and television appearances, I now embrace the notion that one person can make a difference. I feel strongly that students in today's classrooms need to know this. Not to teach this is dangerous because victims of atrocities, such as those at Nanking, do not live forever; therefore, their stories must. Otherwise, perpetrators go unaccountable and the tangible link between history and current events becomes diminished.

Throughout high school, college, university, and as a student teacher, I was taught very little about the Asia Pacific theater of war. Why had I not been exposed to this? It depicts the inhumanity, death, and torture faced by innocent civilians and brave soldiers, highlighting the inhumanity that is repeated throughout history. Iris Chang's book immediately opened for me a previously unknown chapter of history. It was history, as stated by Stephan Ambrose, that Chang understood needed to be communicated in an interesting way (The Australian). After reading her book I made a professional and personal commitment to expose this contemporary and historic chapter of history. As a high school social studies teacher, my curriculum responsibilities relate to twentieth century world history and historical / contemporary Canadian history. I have molded my studies, interests, and pursuits in this field in order to become a "specialist." I came about the Rape of Nanking by chance, almost incidentally. I have a passionate interest in Canadian Hong Kong Veterans who served in defense of the British crown colony of Hong Kong, only to spend close to four years as prisoners of the Japanese Imperial Army. The Canadian Hong Kong Veterans' experiences as prisoners lacked exposure in Canada, yet they are stories that fit within the events associated with the Japanese plans for a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

In British Columbia high school classrooms, the story of the Asia-Pacific, specifically the rape of Nanking, is not told in any significant detail. Why? Is it shame over the Canadian governments' actions regarding our Hong Kong Veterans? Is it accountability factors or fears of offending a valuable trading partner in Japan? Is the silence of veterans and civilian victims a result of their many years of neglect? In the case of the Asia Pacific War, there are limited available resources for British Columbia teachers. Traditionally, Canadian textbooks have focused on the European theater of WW II. It is Iris Chang's book that inspired me, between 1999 – 2001, to get involved with the British Columbia Ministry of Education and the B.C. Association for Learning & Preserving the History of WWII in Asia (Alpha) to create a resource guide for teachers to support aspects of the senior social studies curriculum: Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945: Social Responsibility And Global Citizenship. This resource, complete with an introduction, teacher backgrounder, five lessons on the Asia Pacific (lesson two being the "Nanking Massacre and other Atrocities"), resources and handouts, became available in 2003 to all senior social studies teachers in the province of British Columbia. Among other rationales for such a resource is the premise that, "If we break the cycle of violence, humankind must constantly remind itself of its own capacity for evil, more importantly, must educate itself on how to prevent crimes against humanity" (Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945, p. 4). It is my hope that this subject may follow "a trend ... also [be a] beginning that will require American schoolchildren to learn about the rape of Nanking as part of their history curriculum" (Contemporary Authors, p. 2). Imagine the way Chang presents the Nanking massacre, with primary source accounts and oral narratives from survivors and witnesses, as opposed to the "... dry compilation of statistics" (Contemporary Authors, p. 2) found in textbook. This is evident with History 12 students' responses to Chang's version of the 1937 events: "I was disgusted!" (Rhys Myhannis, 2006); "It's a pity we don't learn more about it" (Richard Combs, 2006); "...said to be like the Holocaust, but I found it more depressing with the rapes and torture methods inflicted upon civilians" (Kyla Pierson, 2006); "It reminds me of stories my mom told me ... my great-grandmother and grandma hid in a cave during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. I would have liked to know more because this part of history affected my family" (Sarika Kelm, 2006). Students like Sarika do know

more, and in doing so, empower the memory of the victims. Ms. Chang stated in 1998, "... denial and amnesia are considered to be part of the final stage of genocide. First, the victims are killed, and then the memory of killing itself is killed" (Siegel). In my senior social studies classes, this is not going to happen!

Iris Chang was not afraid to take a risk with what others thought; she was driven by a conviction to expose a horrible truth. Her objectives were clear; "I wrote [the story] out of a sense of rage. I didn't really care if I made a cent from it. It was important to me that the world knew what happened in Nanking back in 1937" (The Australian, p. 2). As I learned of the tragedies and the horrors of war, and the true meaning of genocide as experienced by the Nanking victims, I started to develop the confidence needed to take risks like Chang did. After participating in the creation of Human Rights in the Asia Pacific 1931-1945: Social Responsibility And Global Citizenship I decided to propose a course for high school students on genocide that would use the Holocaust as a blueprint or starting point to engage students. I was careful however in my planning "not to attempt to show that one ethnic group's suffering was worse than another" (Contemporary Authors, p. 2). Genocide does not appear in any specific curriculum (beyond a definition which is void of what victims endure), although elements of what genocide is are touched on in various high school courses. My motivation in creating the course was two-fold. First I wanted to learn more about these topics myself. If I was just scratching the surface of grand scale historic and contemporary examples of tragedy and injustice, my students would have a similarly superficial understanding. My second motivation was that I wanted to teach my students of such events in a way that surpassed the simplified, scaled down version found in a textbook. In 2003 I took a risk; I proposed a course that would study genocide. I presented Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies to School District #23's (Central Okanagan) board of trustees, administrators, and superintendents. No course of this kind, to my knowledge or to the knowledge of the board, had ever been taught at the public school level in our province. It was risky in terms of the impact it could have on students, and the public's reaction, as well as the possibility of naysayers within and without the school to such a course. My biggest concern however was whether students would register for such a specific course and how I would develop curriculum for such a sensitive topic? Since its inception, the course has

grown from one semestered course to three for the 2006 / 2007 school year at Mount Boucherie Secondary. The Holocaust is studied as an example to further understand other genocides such as the rape of Nanking (Japanese Imperial Army), Cambodia (Pol Pot), Rwanda (Hutu Perpetrators), Yugoslavia (Slobodan Milosevic), and modern Darfur. Thus students are able to draw comparisons and contrast these events.

A key aspect of my course is hope and selfless action. It is examined in the lives of heroes who have acted in the face of danger and tyranny. Such heroes are presented as examples for students to follow in their daily lives. They have acted on their learned knowledge by writing provincially recognized award winning essays such as “Genocide: The Paroxysm Of Human Hatred” by Jen Rekis, and “The Relevance of Night Today”, by Tanya Armes. Students also write letters to survivors, as well as to various media publications in order to inform the public. This way their knowledge can make a difference in places like Sudan and Rwanda. My students have warned of hate, fundraised for women’s shelters and Sudanese refugees with, for example the sale of t-shirts, one titled, “Give Hate a Break” another “Stop Genocide in Sudan”. These “mini-activists” are making a difference. Like Iris Chang, I share a “... pride in breaking the silence ... comparing [the Holocaust and] the rape of Nanking to more recent brutality in Bosnia, Rwanda ...” (Siegel, p.2).

Beyond hope and selfless action in the face of hate I have my students focus on the four basic groups of individuals associated with the Holocaust and other genocides: bystanders, victims, perpetrators, and heroes / saviors. Students study these four types throughout Holocaust 12 and are able to identify each. Students understand and are aware of the concept of hate and its impact at a personal and societal level. At the conclusion of this course, students are able to identify these concepts and relate them to events both historic and contemporary, while gaining awareness and assessing critical problems in our society. This empowers students to make a difference. In the words of one of my students at the conclusion of taking Holocaust 12: A Blueprint for Modern Societal Tragedies, “I have learned about the darkest times in human civilization. I have come to see the darkness of the human heart, but not just because of the atrocities we have committed but because of the lack of action taken ... because of this class we will never be bystanders, we will be saviors”. At the conclusion of this course, a greater number of

students each year are armed and educated about human disaster. Some critics have questioned my motives, stating these are “only students,” seventeen or eighteen years old. Their age however is a benefit because they are future leaders and they will carry this knowledge with them. I know they make a difference; I have seen it, especially when compared to “... a world in which so many international figures – the United Nations’ Kofi Annan immediately comes to mind – seem content to deal with the challenge of human disaster in the fashion of athletes out to achieve a winning record (you may lose in Rwanda, but you win East Timor)” (Mills, p. 40). My students, like Chang have a moral integrity that set them apart.

The denial and dismissal of blatant, malicious, and purposeful genocide, if listened to by an apathetic audience is dangerous. If not challenged such denial aids the perpetrator in denying victims their suffering even further. People are impressionable, especially hearing something for the first time. Some of the most impressionable are students who are easily swayed and often won’t challenge what they are told regarding required curriculum. For the rape of Nanking to be called an “unfortunate incident” does not serve justice. Consider:

Over a six-week period, up to 80,000 women were raped. But it wasn’t so much the sheer numbers as the details that shock – fathers forced at gunpoint to rape daughters, stakes driven through vaginas, women nailed to trees, tied-up prisoners used for bayonet practice, breast sliced off the living, speed decapitation contest (August, p. 1).

Is this a mere “unfortunate incident?” Iris Chang sets the bar high when challenging deniers. She went as far as challenging the Japanese ambassador to America to apologize for the Nanking Massacre, calling into question the integrity of the Japanese government. Bringing the story to the public realm, the fight for justice and truth is brought to a forum where it can’t be hidden. Exposure of events is a method of combating denial. Teaching a high school course that identifies perpetrators and incorporates the truth of genocide in all social studies courses will make a difference in combating both silent and not so silent critics. Iris Chang has faces great deniers. Nobukatsu Fujioka, a right wing commentator, openly campaigned to prevent publication of her book in Japan by citing errors. He also published a book denouncing Chang as a propagandist funded by Japan-haters (August, p. 3). What is most disheartening for me, as an individual who wants to make a

difference, is to hear that Japanese right-wingers interpreted her suicide as belated support for their contention that the massacre never happened (August, p. 4). Never happened? My students will know it happened, as will my colleagues, my family and friends, and their family and friends. The rape of Nanking is a distinct, yet unfortunately common, injustice that Iris Chang brought to the “public’s consciousness” (Ramzy, p.14).

Many people have inspired, influenced, and challenged me as an educator: Canadian Hong Kong Veterans who spent close to four years in prisoner of war camps and can now tell their stories without hate; Dr. Leon Bass, a black American educator, racism and holocaust consultant who inspires with his message that intolerance is not acceptable; Madiom a five-year-old southern Sudanese boy with a brilliant smile – despite his 7.4kg skeletal body, emaciated by hunger; and my students who, despite their complicated, confusing, and issues-filled lives, show up every day with a desire to learn. But of all these people, it was Iris Chang who first taught me to be aware, aware with the intention to make a difference. I am one of “... the millions of people whom she touched through her writings and her activism ... promoting peace between peoples of different races and backgrounds” (Benson). I will continue to keep her memory and mission alive in my life and in my classroom so that she does not become yet another victim of the Rape of Nanking.

(also see: <http://irischangmemorialfund.org/>)

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