

## 'Nanking': A Stunning Contemplation Of Inhumanity

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No intellectual enterprise is more fraught than the study of atrocity, as

**The documentary explores Japanese mistreatment of citizens, in 1937 Nanking. (Thinkfilm)**

witnessed by the tragedy of Iris Chang, who is one of the dedicatees of the documentary film "[Nanking](#)." Brilliant, young and beautiful, in 1997 she published the bestseller "The Rape of Nanking," which restored to memory the hideous events in the then-capital city of [China](#) over six weeks of Japanese predation in 1937. She wrote another book and was researching still another, but perhaps the dark energies she had released in her contemplation of the hundreds of thousands of casualties of the event proved too much for her to bear; in 2004 she shot and killed herself, the rare woman choosing a gun as the vessel of obliteration.

In "Nanking" -- it's not based on Chang's book and uses a different narrative plan, but it wouldn't exist without Chang's spadework -- the same issues that surely disturbed Chang are in play: Is it too much? What is the point of remembering how evil men can be? Are we in any way improved by looking at piles of dead babies, or hearing the accounts of an army gone mad with rape fever? Can't we all just get along?

Yet with the study of such maelstroms of destruction -- indeed, much of it so horrifying it's painful -- comes things we should know. If evil is eternal, so is goodness and thankfully (for what good would goodness be without this?) courage. The story that emerges from the long dying at Nanking is also a story of heroes of the real kind, ordinary people (a Nazi, even) who at a certain point just said, "You know, it doesn't really matter if they kill me, I just can't let this go on without doing something about it." Most, like Chang, paid the price, through suicide, shattered spirits, nervous breakdowns, an exhaustion that lasted the rest of their days, and in the case of the Nazi, political problems with the [Gestapo](#), who wanted him to keep his mouth shut about what he had seen the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere unleash behind Nanking's thousand-year-old walls.

The facts, recounted from archival sources in the film, are melancholy. The Japanese million-man army had already taken [Shanghai](#) by November of 1937, and moved swiftly on Nanking, a hundred or so miles inland. Strategists still debate whether the city was worth defending, and Chiang Kai-shek cannot claim any triumph from what happened. First he left an army there to defend it; then, in the midst of the battle, he ordered his troops to abandon it. About half fought, half ran. The Japanese, meanwhile, bombed and shelled for a month, then finally entered the city Dec. 13 through gaps pounded in its walls.

The filmmakers keep deft track of the chronology of the campaign and don't deny that some controversy exists over what happened next. Numbers are still debated. Many Japanese say the civilian casualties were never more than 20,000 and refer to what happened as an "incident," not a massacre. The testimony of 22 Western witnesses -- Nanking had a sizable Western population, many of whom remained in the city -- suggest

that the Chinese contention that 300,000 were murdered and more than 80,000 women raped is closer to the truth.

Whatever the numbers, it is certain by testimony that hell had been delivered on Earth and the Japanese soldiers obeyed the orders of their leaders, which consisted of "the three alls": "Kill all, burn all, loot all."

As did Chang, the movie, directed by Bill Guttenberg and Dan Sturman and produced by local [AOL](#) guy and Caps owner [Ted Leonsis](#), finds these voices irresistible. They include the American diplomats John Fitch, Bob Wilson and Lewis Smith, the American missionaries John Magee and Minnie Vautrin and the German businessman and [Nazi Party](#) member John Rabe. In some sense, the drama becomes theirs, and not that of the Chinese, of whom we know little.

Little enough remains of these victims, not names, not families, not histories: They are blurry figures in some of the footage taken by Magee and some of the Japanese army cameramen, or they are grainy images from ancient newspapers, many of them depicting heads flying through the air (the Japanese loved their swords). They live in the memory of a few old Chinese witnesses, and that's about all. The Japanese not only took their lives but their identities, consigning them to burning, burial in mass graves or a drift down the Yangtze until decomposition claimed them.

Of course, Guttenberg and Sturman use archival film, artfully selected and edited, since the event itself, unlike so many in history, follows the narrative convention of beginning, middle and end. But to dramatize more potently, the directors have come up with a strategy at least as remarkable as the one Jessica Yu uses in the recent film "Protagonist," in which puppets stand in for a Greek chorus, talking of the patterns in lives. The directors have hired actors to -- hmm, there seems not to be a word. The actors do more than *read*, but they do less than *perform* (there are no "re-creations," favored in the [History Channel](#) approach to the past). Rather you might say they *occupy* their characters. In clothes reminiscent of the '30s (but not, strictly speaking, costumes) the performers read dramatically from the letters, journals and diaries of the Western missionaries and diplomats; they "perform" but in the limited sense, using only face and voice to communicate with the camera.

And you have to say: Wow.

It stunned me how good these people were, which leads to another revelation, how much talent there is that never gets a fair shot at finding a venue of expression. John Getz, minor TV actor with one remarkable film ("Blood Simple") to his credit, is simply brilliant as the head American diplomat, Fitch. [Woody Harrelson](#), hardly a heavyweight, comes across as the lower-ranking but tireless diplomat Wilson. It's no surprise, of course, that Jurgen Prochnow is a superb performer and his version of Rabe is superb, as might be expected. The surprise is Mariel Hemingway as the unbearably brave Minnie Vautrin; who knew she could give this woman's dignity, faith and indomitable will such a palpable presence.

"Nanking," so what does it prove? Man is evil, but men can be good. Or, men are evil, but man can be good. I don't know. Atrocity, 70 years ago, and the world didn't blink an

eyelash. Atrocity, the next century, we still don't seem to blink an eyelash. So the film asks the question: Have we learned a damn thing?

*Nanking* (89 minutes, at the Avalon) is rated R for disturbing images and descriptions of wartime atrocities, including rape.

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