

FEATURE

Remember Iris

Historian Iris Chang won many battles/The war she lost raged within (Part 1)

— After seeing the Nanking pictures, Iris wrote: "I was suddenly in a panic that this... reversion in human social evolution would be reduced to a footnote of history... unless someone forced the world to remember it."

By Heidi Benson

On a cloudy Monday morning in early November, author Iris Chang, 36, drove her white 1999 Oldsmobile Alero down Alum Rock Avenue toward the green foothills of East San Jose. She passed the iron gates of Calvary Catholic Cemetery, where marble statues of winged angels, their heads bowed in prayer, mark the graves of early settlers. She passed the football field and the blocky, concrete auditorium of James Lick High School. Turning right, she pulled into the strip mall across the street from the school. She parked in front of Reed's Sport Shop, a redwood-shingled emporium that sells fishing, cycling and hunting gear.

Tall and slender, with glossy black hair falling well past her shoulders, Iris emerged from her car wearing blue jeans and sneakers. She walked through the whooshing automatic doors and turned right. On the far wall, a gallery of mounted deer heads marked her destination: the hunting department. This was not her first visit. She knew where to find the glass case of Civil War era pistol replicas, classified as "relics." She knew that in California, she could purchase a relic immediately and avoid the 10-day waiting period necessary with other guns. At 11:56 a.m. Iris presented her driver's license and counted out \$517 in cash — she was carrying nearly \$4,000 — and left the store with an ivory-handled Ruger "Old Army" .45 replica revolver. Back in her car, she slipped the gun and owner's manual into a cardboard box labeled "Real Estate Documents"

that lay on the passenger seat. That night, she had dinner with her husband of 13 years, Brett Douglas. They went to bed at midnight.

Before dawn, Iris awoke and got into her car. Driving west toward Santa Cruz on Highway 17, she took a turnoff 25 miles from her home and parked on a steep gravel utility road within sight of the highway. Nearby, Bear Creek Road curled up the lonesome hills, thick with black oak.

At 9:15 a.m. Tuesday, a county water district employee drove past the Oldsmobile. He stopped and honked but there was no response. Thinking the driver must be asleep, he got out of his car and banged on the hood. He noticed condensation on the windows, peered inside and saw Iris in the driver's seat with her hands crossed in her lap. The revolver lay on her left leg. Her head rested against the window. Blood covered her clothes. In the backseat, a teddy bear was tucked into the car seat of her 2-year-old son, Christopher. The water district employee called his supervisor, who called 911.

Homicide detectives would eventually determine that Iris had loaded all six chambers of the gun, placed the barrel between her lips, and fired. The half-inch lead ball perforated her hard palate, passed through her left dural sinus, her left cerebral and occipital lobes, broke partially through her skull and came to rest without exiting her scalp.

When her body was discovered. Iris Chang had been dead for two hours. At Reed's Sport Shop one month after her death, the spot on the top shelf of the glass-topped case where Iris' gun had lain was still vacant. "She was in on more than one occasion," said Reed's manager, Pat Kalcic, a tall outdoorsman. "She appeared to have done research." The clerk who sold her the gun told investigators Iris had said she collected antique firearm. "She got what she wanted and got out," he said. That such a beautiful woman would be remembered is not unusual. But Kalcic and his employees did not know how unusual Iris Chang was: a world-renowned author whose work had stirred international controversy. Neither did they know she had been bent on suicide.

On the day of Iris Chang's death, word spread quickly over news wires and the Internet. Her obituary was published in newspapers worldwide. She had gained an international reputation in 1997 when she was only 29 for writing "The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II." It was the first history of Japan's brutal 1937 occupation of China's Capital city and documented the weekslong rampage.

"Rape of Nanking" became an immediate best-seller and established her as an outspoken advocate for victims of Japanese war crimes. The debate it provoked — between those Japanese who deny the atrocities and the Chinese who seek an official apology and reparations - continues. "Iris scraped away the scar tissue of something that had been half forgotten and half healed over, and to this date, it's still a very raw wound, " said Orville Schell, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley. Schell reviewed her book favorably in the New York Times. "She ventured into a minefield of unexploded ordnance."

News of her suicide brought forth a chorus of disbelief. Questions hung in the air:

— How could someone with such success, surrounded by loving family and friends, take her own life?

— Was she "the last victim of the Rape of Nanking," plagued and destroyed by the dark histories she illuminated?

— Did her single-minded determination, her habit of working beyond exhaustion, contribute to her death?

— Did she suffer a fatal reaction to powerful drugs that she refused to take as prescribed?

Speculation that she may have been killed by Japanese ultranationalists continued to tum up on Web logs and Internet chat rooms. At the same time, her foes said her suicide proved that "Rape of Nanking" was nothing but lies.

Irrefutably, Iris Chang won many battles in her fight for justice. But as she began to manifest symptoms of bipolar illness, she perceived them as a failure of will. Such harsh logic, symptomatic of the disease, rendered her unable to extend her own magnificent compassion to herself. In the end, the war she could not win raged internally.

Together, Mr. and Mrs. Chang answered the door of their quiet, two-story townhouse in San Jose. It had been one week since their daughter's death. The foyer was filled with enormous bouquets sent by well-wishers. From the terrace, the view was peaceful — broad green fields and golden poplars. Married 41 years, the Changs are a handsome, gracious couple. Both were born in mainland China. Their families fled the 1949 Communist revolution and settled in Taiwan, where the two met in high school. They met again at Taiwan University — and yet again when each won a science scholarship to Harvard in 1962. Ying-Ying is a biochemist. Her husband, Shau-Jin, is a theoretical physicist. They married in 1964, and each earned a doctorate from Harvard in 1967.

As that November afternoon darkened into evening, the Changs sat at their Danish-

modern dining room table and told stories about Iris, speaking sometimes in past tense and sometimes in present tense. They told of the time in grade school when Iris decided "if Dear Abby can do it — I can do it," and she started her own advice column, writing questions and answers. Then, in high school. Iris became determined to revive the school's literary magazine, and quickly enlisted a staff and a sponsor. Her mother said, "She was always publishing something."

Rising from his chair, her father pulled a small red leather volume from the bookshelf. "Poetry by Iris Chang" was written in neat cursive on the title page. "She's very systematic — you see, every poem has a date on it. She just knows how to do things," he said, tenderly smoothing out a page. "This was lying in our basement. Now, it becomes our treasure." Iris was a serious child, her mother recalled. "Every day she seemed to have something new. She liked to talk, so it's very fun to watch her talking," she said. "She also liked to beat the system." Her father patted the tabletop. "Yes!" he said, grinning. "Every time we set a rule, she always tried to find some way to get around it. We always had to argue all the exceptions she could think of. It's never boring with her — it's interesting." Slowing down, he repeated, "It's interesting." His voice slipped to a whisper. "It's been too short."

Iris Shun-Ru Chang was born March 28, 1968, in Princeton Hospital, on the university campus in New Jersey where her parents were doing postdoctoral work. They lived on a leafy country road named Einstein Drive. After two years at Princeton, the family moved to a Midwestern college town, Champaign-Urbana, in Illinois. "He got the job, we went," Mrs. Chang explained. Soon they were both teaching and conducting research at the University of Illinois. Their second child, Michael, was born in 1970.

"Michael is very outgoing, very extroverted — Iris is different," said Mrs. Chang. "Ids can be a loner; it doesn't bother her." She touched her fingertips to her forehead, then waved her hand to the heavens: "It's because Iris

is a dreamer." Iris learned to read at age 4. At 10, she entered a young-author competition and won first place. Winning that prize led to dreams of becoming a writer, her father said. "Iris always came to us to discuss her problems," her mother said. "We are a very close family. We are lucky — she could tell me everything she felt. She was easily hurt, though sometimes she didn't show it. I would tell her, 'You can care too much about what people say about you.'" Iris was sometimes teased for her earnestness. She wanted to be independent, to think for herself.

Iris and her brother went to University High — known as Uni High — on the campus where their parents taught. The small, academically elite school has produced many Nobel laureates. At 14, Iris was studying advanced math and decided to join an all-boys computer club called Submit. She easily passed the 20 exams necessary to qualify, only to be told that she must take five more. "The boys came together to say, 'Crisis! There's a girl who wants to get into Submit,'" Mr. Chang recalled. "So they tried to make it harder and harder." Iris insisted she had already passed. "They had a big fight," he said. "Iris thought it was an injustice. She was mad. So you see, she was really a fighter. If they had let her get into Submit, she may not have become a journalist," he added. "We should be grateful."

Iris met the man she would marry in 1989, when she was a sophomore in journalism at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. Brett Douglas was a tall, low-key redhead, nearly two years her senior and an engineering graduate student when they were introduced at a Sigma Phi Delta fraternity party on campus.

Sixteen years later, and five days after her death, Brett sat in the living room of the San Jose town home they shared, surrounded by family photos. The air was still, heavy with grief. A red tricycle and a jogging stroller flanked the front door. The sound of children singing wafted in from the swimming pool nearby. The pool, a

turquoise rectangle surrounded by pines, sat at the center of the village-like complex.

Brett's father, Ken Douglas, had flown out to keep his son company. A reassuring presence, he stood at the kitchen counter, fixing a sandwich for lunch. He had only recently retired from the family farm in central Illinois that had been in the family for five generations.

Speaking of the night they met, Brett said, "Iris was beautiful, vivacious—and sober. She just seemed to be more driven and to have more zest for life than anyone I'd ever met. I knew immediately I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her."

It didn't take him long to propose, but their 1989 engagement stretched out while Brett finished grad school in Urbana. Meanwhile, Iris was one of a dozen journalism undergraduates chosen for an accelerated Associated Press training program. She was assigned to the AP office in Chicago.

Brett soon grew concerned that Iris was overextended. "Iris could write two or three stories a day, and they loved her because she wrote so fast," he said. "But she worked herself way too hard when she was there. She wore herself out." Her mother concurred: "At AP, she worked so hard she couldn't sleep. I was worried. She never did sleep very well or eat very well." When her internship was up, Iris was offered a permanent job at AP. She went to the Chicago Tribune instead, but didn't enjoy "politicking for assignments," Brett said. Opting for a master's degree, she was accepted by the Graduate Writing Seminar at Johns Hopkins University and moved to Baltimore in 1990. Her long-distance engagement to Brett entered its second year. By now, Brett was living in Santa Barbara, working toward a doctorate in electrical engineering at the University of California. They kept in touch every day by e-mail.

At Johns Hopkins, Iris studied playwriting, fiction, poetry and science writing. As a teacher's assistant, she taught a class in

creative writing. She wrote her thesis on "The Poetry of Science." Soon she exceeded the dreams of every student in the program by getting a book contract from a major publisher while still in school. She was 22.

"Iris was a phenomenon," said one of her former teachers at Johns Hopkins, Ann Finkbeiner. In the fall of 1990, Iris took Finkbeiner's "Science Stories" course. "She talked almost obsessively. She got very, very wound up in things," Finkbeiner said. "You didn't always feel she was talking to you — it was as if she had to talk. To me, it was part of that whole intensity that made Iris able to do what she went on to do."

Barbara Culliton, now editor in chief of Genome News Network, was then director of the Johns Hopkins science writing program. Her friendship with Iris, Culliton said, "lasted from the day she walked in as a student - in effect, to the day she died." Culliton was sufficiently impressed by Iris' talent to recommend her to Susan Rabiner, editorial director of Basic Books, the "serious nonfiction" division of HarperCollins Publishers. It was unusual for Basic Books to consider such an untested writer. But Rabiner had been looking for someone conversant in the sciences and in Mandarin to write a biography of Hsue-Shen Tsien. Tsien was a top physicist at Cal-Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory who was deported during the Red scare of the 1950s. He returned to China and went on to develop its missile system.

Rabiner recalled telling Iris, " 'You're young, but take a flyer.' I didn't know if I'd hear from her again." Less than two months later, she did. Iris called to say she had found Tsien's son and had interviewed him in Mandarin. "Clearly, Iris was a strong, smart and directed young woman," Rabiner said. She helped Iris write a proposal and the project was quickly put under contract. "Iris was so excited when she got the contract for the book," Brett said, recalling how obsessively she ferreted out material. "She contacted people who'd been lost for years, dug

up records that nobody ever knew existed. She wrote her 100-page book proposal in a couple of weeks."

By now, Brett had taken a job with a Santa Barbara engineering firm. He and Iris were married in August 1991 in Champaign-Urbana. Their mothers helped to plan the wedding. The newlyweds settled in Santa Barbara, and Iris began writing the book about Tsien. In 1992, at 24, she received a \$15,000 award from the MacArthur Foundation, which helped fund the project. The book, "Thread of the Silkworm," was published in 1995. It was well-reviewed, though it never sold in great numbers. But soon Iris would write one of the most controversial books of the decade. That book would sell half a million copies.

Iris Chang found the inspiration for her new book in 1994 when she came face-to-face with poster-size photographs of Nanking war crimes at a conference in Cupertino. She was 26. "I walked around in shock," she later wrote. "Though I had heard so much about the Nanking massacre as a child, nothing prepared me for these pictures — stark black-and-white images of decapitated heads, bellies ripped open and nude women forced by their rapists into various pornographic poses, their faces contorted into unforgettable expressions of agony and shame. In a single blinding moment I recognized the fragility of not just life but the human experience itself."

The conference had been sponsored by the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia. Iris discovered this group of Chinese American activists after she and Brett moved to Northern California when he got a job with Cisco Systems. After seeing the Nanking pictures, Iris wrote: "I was suddenly in a panic that this ... reversion in human social evolution would be reduced to a footnote of history ... unless someone forced the world to remember it."

Iris called Rabiner. "There's a book I must do," she said. She offered to pay Basic Books to publish it. "No, no! We don't work that

way," Rabiner insisted. "Tell me why you want to tell the story." Iris had been haunted since childhood by the graphic stories she was told about Nanking. Her maternal grandparents had escaped just weeks before the Japanese arrived. As a youngster, Iris had sought books on the subject in her school library. But there was none. As she later told an interviewer, "**I wrote 'Rape of Nanking' 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." Rabiner sensed the book would be important and signed Iris to write it.

Later, Iris told interviewers that, as a child, "it was hard for me to even visualize how bad it was, because the stories seemed almost mythical— people being chopped into pieces, the Yangtze River running red with blood. It was very painful for me to think about, even then." While writing the book, Iris found it "almost impossible to separate myself from the tragedy," she said. "The stress of writing this book and living with this horror on a daily basis caused my weight to plummet," **she said. "I had to write it, if it was the last thing I ever did in my life."**

On her trip to China, she met with survivors from Nanking. "Every single survivor I met was desperately anxious to tell his or her story," she later said. "I spent several hours with each one, getting the details of their experiences on videotape. Some became overwrought with emotion during the interviews and broke down into tears. But all of them wanted the opportunity to talk about the massacre before their deaths." Seeing how the survivors lived was as harrowing as hearing their stories.

Iris was "shocked and depressed" to see their living conditions in Nanking. "Most lived in dark, squalid apartments cluttered with the debris of poverty and heavy with mildew and humidity," she wrote. "During the massacre some had received physical injuries so severe they had been prevented from making a decent living for decades. Most lived in poverty so crushing that even a minimal amount of financial

compensation from Japan could have greatly improved the conditions of their lives."

During two years of research, Iris made significant historical discoveries. She found the diaries of a pair of Westerners who were among the heroes of Nanking. The first was John Rabe, a German member of the Nazi party who was living in the Chinese capital in 1937. He established an International Safety Zone in Nanking before the Japanese soldiers arrived from Shanghai. Iris dubbed him the "Oskar Schindler of Nanking."

The other diarist — the "Anne Frank of Nanking" — was an Illinois woman named Minnie Vautrin. (In the book, Iris noted that Vautrin had graduated with honors from her own alma mater, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.) In 1937, Vautrin was a missionary and teacher at the Nanking Women's College when its campus became part of the Safety Zone. She harbored hundreds of Chinese women and children there during the occupation. But there were untold numbers of women she could not save from capture, torture or death at the hands of Japanese soldiers. Haunted by the belief that she had failed, Vautrin suffered a breakdown in 1940. While on the ship home, she tried repeatedly to leap overboard. Back in Illinois one year later, she committed suicide.

"Civilization is tissue thin," Iris wrote. She called this the most important lesson to be learned from the tragedy of Nanking. And she believed her research produced irrevocable proof of Japanese atrocities. She wrote:

"After reading several file cabinets' worth of documents on Japanese war crimes as well as accounts of ancient atrocities from the pantheon of world history, I would have to conclude that Japan's behavior during World War n was less a product of dangerous people than of a dangerous government, in a vulnerable culture, in dangerous times, able to sell dangerous rationalizations to those whose human instincts told them otherwise."

The book hit the stores at Christmas, a tough selling season for serious nonfiction. It became a surprise bestseller. A groundswell of interest in the Chinese American community had quickly spread to booksellers and the broader reading public. Newsweek ran an excerpt, and soon Iris was a familiar face on TV news shows. Reader's Digest devoted a cover story to her. "We weren't really prepared for the success of the book," Brett said. "Iris wasn't prepared and her publisher wasn't prepared. I don't know how many printings it went through. They just kept saying, 'We'll print another 10,000, we'll print another 10,000.'"

Rabiner said Iris "found her voice" in promoting "Rape of Nanking." "She had so many bookings, she could easily be on the road for 2 1/2 weeks before coming back home. She came alive before crowds — she loved to share, and she was interested in other people's lives. That's why she was such a powerful role model for so many Chinese Americans. She was committed to her cause, and she radiated life."

At the same time, torrents of hate mail came in, Brett said. "Iris is sensitive, but she got charged up," he recalled. "When anybody questioned the validity of what she wrote, she would respond with overwhelming evidence to back it up. She's very much a perfectionist. It was hard for her not to react every single time." Most of the attacks came from Japanese ultranationalists. "We saw cartoons where she was portrayed as this woman with a great big mouth," Brett said. "She got used to the fact that there is a Web site called 'Iris Chang and Her Lies.' She would just laugh."

But friends say Iris began to voice concerns for her safety. She believed her phone was tapped. She described finding threatening notes on her car. She said she was confronted by a man who said, "You will NOT continue writing this." She used a post office box, never her home address, for mail. "There are a fair number of people who don't take kindly to what she wrote in 'The Rape of Nanking,'" Brett said, "so she's

always been very, very private about our family life."

The book's popularity meant a lengthy book tour. "Over a year and a half, she visited 65 cities," Brett said. "Most authors are worn out after five or six cities." He could see the travel was taking a toll on her. In 1998, Brett recalled, "for her 30th birthday, we went out to a little resort near Santa Cruz and she literally didn't want to leave the room." Somehow, she always bounced back, energized by her role as spokesperson for a movement. Among her many television appearances was a memorable evening on "Nightline," where she was the only Asian and the only woman among a panel of China experts.

To see her on TV, defending 'Rape of Nanking' so fiercely and so fearlessly — I just sat down, stopped, in awe," said Helen Zia, author of "Asian-American Dreams: Emergence of an American People" and co-author, with Wen-Ho Lee, of "My Country Versus Me: The First-Hand Account by the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused." "Iris truly had no fear. You could see it in the steadiness of her voice and in her persistence," Zia recalled. "She would just say, matter-of-factly, 'Japan is lying and here's why.'" Later, Iris challenged the Japanese ambassador to a debate on the "MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour" on PBS. After the ambassador spoke of events in Nanking, Iris turned to the moderator and said: "I didn't hear an apology."

"Chinese Americans grew up hearing about this forgotten holocaust," said Zia, whose grandmother was killed in Nanking. "It was family lore." When Zia

and Iris met for the first time, they planned a quick lunch. But lunch lasted through dinner. "We sat down and started talking, and we had a lot to say. For Asian Americans to write nonfiction about Asia or Asian America was relatively new. Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan really blew the doors open for fiction writers. But for us to be able to write nonfiction, the stories of our lives — on a lot of levels, it was revolutionary."

Despite support from esteemed historians and journalists, including Stephen Ambrose and George Will, some judged Iris' version of history too subjective. "This was something of a roots venture for her - to reconnect with the country that her family had drifted off from," said UC Berkeley's Schell. "And she brought an incredible reserve of emotion to it. Iris was first and foremost an advocate. She was an able journalist, but she allowed herself to become deeply involved emotionally in her subjects, which gave her accessibility. But some scholars felt that she was a little too involved with her subject matter."

Rabiner, who later became an agent and represented Iris, said, "The book was beyond well reviewed — it was a mega-best-seller that continues to sell. It showed that at times history has to be written by a member of the community, out of a passion the author shares with the community. It caused an international scandal because the Japanese to this day have not conceded the extent of the wartime atrocities perpetrated against the Chinese and others. It also showed publishing houses that there is a market for books about the Chinese experience."

Message from the Managing Editor:

'Remember Iris' is a long good-bye to a courageous and magnificent young woman.

"International Symposium on Japanese Responsibility of WWII Atrocities" was held on December 6-8, 1996 at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA. At this great event, I made many friends of the 'Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWE in Asia.' (GA).

It was my first time meeting with Iris Chang.

In December 1997, Iris called to tell me that she would be in Seattle in February during the book tour of her new book, "The Rape of Nanking" and asked me to inform the Chinese community about the book. After her book readings at the Borders book stores, the GA friends held a reception for her at the Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park, Seattle and also arranged a banquet with some friends of her parents, she first met during her high school years in Champaign-Urbana, that evening.

She gave me a copy of her new book. Besides the thank-you note to me, she wrote

'May the world never forget' above the title of the book, "**The Rape of Nanking**".