

A Thoroughly American History

A Talk With Historian Iris Chang

By Terry Hong

While Iris Chang was writing her international best-seller, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, her hair started falling out. Small wonder, as she spent the majority of her waking hours researching and recording one of the most atrocious periods in human history: the Japanese Imperial Army's slaughter, rape, and torture of more than 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers in December 1937.

Published on the 60th anniversary of the massacre, the book—her second—put Chang on magazine covers, newspaper headlines, radio talk shows, and television spots. That success gave her the opportunity to meet Asian Americans across the country, to share their experiences and hear their stories. Together with her own family's immigrant memories, these testimonials gave the Princeton, New Jersey-born Chang her next book project.

Compared with *Nanking*, Chang says, writing *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* "was like a vacation." Published earlier this year, the book carefully traces the two-century evolution of an American people through the interwoven history of China and the United States. Chang relies on written memoirs, recorded oral histories, countless interviews, and pieces of her own family's narratives to create a thoroughly American history. She offers a thought-provoking overview of the integral role the Chinese have played in American history—proving that America as we know it could not possibly exist without the contributions of Americans of Chinese descent.

"There is nothing inherently alien about the Chinese American experience," Chang writes in her book. "In the end, the Chinese shared the same problems as all other immigrants—universal problems that recognized no borders." Her message is clear: People who look like her (and me), who have Asian ancestry, are indeed true Americans.

The Bloomsbury Review: *How did you become interested in writing about history?*

Iris Chang: After graduating from college, I worked for a short time as a reporter for the Associated Press and then the *Chicago Tribune*, but ultimately decided to pursue a literary career. I applied to the graduate writing program at Johns Hopkins University, where I took classes in fiction, narrative nonfiction, playwriting, and poetry. At Hopkins, I came across an intriguing topic that eventually evolved into my first book [*Thread of the Silkworm*, about Tsien Hsue-shen, a Chinese American scientist who engineered the U.S. space program and was falsely accused of communist leanings and deported to China].

My last three books are works of history, but I don't neces-

sarily see myself being locked into genre or subject for the rest of my life. In fact, I might want to write some fiction in the future.

TBR: *What prompted you to write The Rape of Nanking?*

IC: I had always wanted to learn more about the Nanking massacre. My parents had told me about it when I was a child, but I could never find any English-language information about the tragedy in our local library. Then in 1994, I saw some photos of the "Rape of Nanking" at an exhibit sponsored by a human rights organization [now the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia] in Cupertino, California. The images of the Nanking atrocities were worse than I could have ever imagined them to be,

and I was determined to get to the bottom of this story. I began researching the subject in earnest by early 1995, and *The Rape of Nanking* was published in 1997.

TBR: *How did you go about doing the research?*

IC: Though I didn't know it at the time, there was a tremendous amount of primary source information just waiting to be discovered. I went to the city of Nanking—now called Nanjing—and filmed survivor testimonials. I also located old film footage of the massacre taken by American missionaries. At the National Archives, Yale Divinity School library, and other repositories I found oral histories, letters, and diaries of Western eyewitnesses who recorded the horror of Nanking as it unfolded before them. One thing that distinguished Nanking from most other Chinese cities was the presence of foreigners in its population. Being the capital of China at the time, Nanking was a cosmopolitan and international city, attracting diplomats, scholars, and businessmen from countries all across the globe.

I also rummaged through naval intelligence files and State Department records, and documents from other U.S. government agencies. One rich resource of U.S. records was the Japanese Foreign Office intercepts—the messages sent

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between the Japanese government and their officials in Washington, which, unbeknownst to the Japanese, were systematically intercepted, decoded, and translated by American intelligence. I unearthed thousands of original records in four different languages—Japanese, Chinese, English, and German. Some of the descendants of the survivors had information to share from their own private collections. I wouldn't be surprised if there are still some primary source records lurking about. There may still be more papers hidden away in the homes of the descendants of sur-

The Chinese in America

A Narrative History

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vivors and eyewitnesses in both Asia and Europe.

I also found newspaper accounts of the massacre and the transcripts of the International Military Tribunal of the Far East, held after the war. These records are very extensive and can be found in many major libraries in the United States.

With all this information, I faced the challenge that every author faces: how to organize one's research into a coherent narrative. I created a computer database so I could easily search for and retrieve facts. I'm still adding Nanking-related records to that database, and am still using it. Given the amount of attention this book has received, and the intensity of the denial that still exists in Japan, I may one day write a sequel to *Nanking*.

TBR: *How did you survive the process of actually writing the book with all its horrific details?*

IC: I told myself that whatever pain I experienced writing the book was nothing compared to what the victims had endured. Who am I to shy away from this topic and to complain about pain, when hundreds of thousands of people died the most horrible deaths imaginable, people whose voices might be lost, forever, to oblivion?

But I do admit that the experience was disturbing—in fact, devastating. I might be taking a walk or taking a shower and one of the photographic images from the massacre might pop up before my eyes. Those images are seared in my brain forever. Once you see images of atrocities, you can't ever unsee them. Perhaps over time they might dull somewhat, but they will never disappear.

TBR: *And what about writing *The Chinese in America*?*

IC: Writing it was like a vacation. I was able to recover from the wounds of writing *Nanking*. I didn't want to follow *Nanking* with another story like it—or even worse stories of Japanese atrocities, like the comfort women [enforced prostitutes to the Japanese army]. Psychologically, I just couldn't do it—I needed a pocket of something that was not so emotionally devastating.

TBR: *So how did you find your so-called vacation spot?*

IC: [Laughs] I went on a huge book tour when *Nanking* came out. Both my publisher and I were knocked off-guard by the response from readers. We didn't expect the intensity of the audience reaction. I was flooded with invitations to give lectures at universities and civic groups, which gave me the chance to visit many, many Chinese American communities across North America. At the same time, I began discussions with publishers about my third book topic—and many of them were very interested in having me write a book on Chinese Americans. It had been some time since a comprehensive, one-volume history of the Chinese in the United States had been written. There had been a few pioneering titles during the 1980s, but nothing that incorporated the events of the last two decades.

Some people believe that the Chinese experience in America is a monolithic one. The reality is that Chinese Americans have a rich, diverse culture with great regional variations across the country. Here you have a community filled with Chinese immigrants who arrived at different times

and from different provinces in China, as well as American-born Chinese who span many different generations. Here you will see every extreme of racial acceptance and persecution. For instance, I was fortunate to grow up in a multicultural and ethnically diverse university town, which overall was an idealistic and racially tolerant community. But judging from my interviews with other Chinese Americans, many still face racial discrimination, negative stereotyping, and hate crimes. And as my research progressed, I became aware of how timely my topic was, especially after the Wen Ho Lee backlash [in 2000, another Chinese American scientist was falsely accused of espionage].

TBR: *Your book debuted about the same time as the Bill Moyers documentary "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience." What are some of the differences between the two works?*

IC: I think the main difference is that the Moyers documentary tracks the history of Chinese Americans as a linear process, from the poor and downtrodden to the model minority. My book presents a cyclical pattern—of wild swings between acceptance and abuse. I want people to realize that history repeats itself.

It is unfortunate that the documentary did *not* bring up dangerous decisions made by the U.S. government in the late 1990s, so when people watch the film they are left with the impression that there are no troubles left for the Chinese American community. I also remember a scene from the documentary that showed a family proudly displaying all the academic awards and trophies won by their American-born children, eager to show off these awards to their friends and relatives. Those kinds of images foster the popular stereotype of Chinese Americans as model minorities, the safe, cozy image of a people reduced to teachers' pets, striving for trinkets dangled in front of them.

Throughout history there are plenty of examples of Chinese Americans who were politically active, who spoke out, who refused to jump through hoops created by the system. And some Chinese Americans have succeeded in the political arena. Unfortunately, one major barrier to greater political success is the relatively small size of the Chinese American population, thanks to the legacy of the exclusion laws [begun in 1882, these laws eventually banned all Asian immigration; they were not revised until almost a century later in 1965, finally opening the door to significant immigration]. Had there been a large-scale immigration of Chinese to the United States throughout this 150-year history, had the exclusion laws never been passed, the racial makeup of the United States would be very different today. The entire country would be more like Hawai'i. And the so-called typical American might also be very different. ■

INTERVIEWER: **Terry Hong** is coauthor of *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture From Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism*.