

When I first The Rape of Nanking by Iris Chang, the first impressions that came to my mind were sorrow, hatred, and distrust. Having been well-versed in twentieth-century Asian history, I have known the Nanking Massacre that occurred during the Second World War to be the most atrocious events that befell on my grandparents, who witnessed the incident from just a few kilometers away. Yet, as I progressed through the book, my reactions changed from bitter to more reflective.

The Rape of Nanking is a powerful narrative of the story behind the civilian massacre of the Nanking civilians by the invading Japanese troops. Reading through the books, the descriptions of the horrors dumbfounded me, and the pictures of some of the events were eye-shocking. There were certain scenes of decapitation, mutilation, and forced experiments that to this day I still remember very clearly. I wanted to throw up at some of the grotesque photos. After I managed to brave myself to read until the end of the book, I had to put everything back into perspective. A question that I had a difficult time struggling with was the purpose of the book. Was the whole story meant to evoke certain emotions? If so, would it be fear? Sympathy? Anger? Possibly hatred?

Reflecting on back then, I was actually surprised that at that time I questioned the emotional impacts of the book rather than be swept away by one of them. If I had succumbed to feeling hatred against the Japanese, I would have never found this book to positively impact my life. The worst feeling one can get is a feeling of distrust for another group of people, not for what they have done, but what their predecessors have done. It is putting the currently living in a perspective of the crimes committed by their previous generations that truly rip this world apart.

After reading The Rape of Nanking, I began to realize how important it was for people of this generation to take a step back and review history from a more detached viewpoint. In the case of the Nanking Massacre, I can hardly blame many Chinese and Chinese Americans for harboring negative impressions of Japanese culture. However, this is the time of the third and fourth generations of the folks who witnessed the account. One option is to follow in the shadow of their footsteps, while another is to renew friendship with historical enemies. We can learn from mistakes, but to hate is to risk repeating such errors.

There is nothing more important in this world than cooperation. In the last few decades the world has seen the rise of the European Union as a sign of cooperation among nations that have battled each other for centuries. The same needs to happen for the Asian community. What begins as a passive recognition of each other as partners can develop into a meaningful friendship. It is this first step that our generation must take. If we want to see the worldwide Asian community prosper and grow in strength, we must rise together united, not divided.