

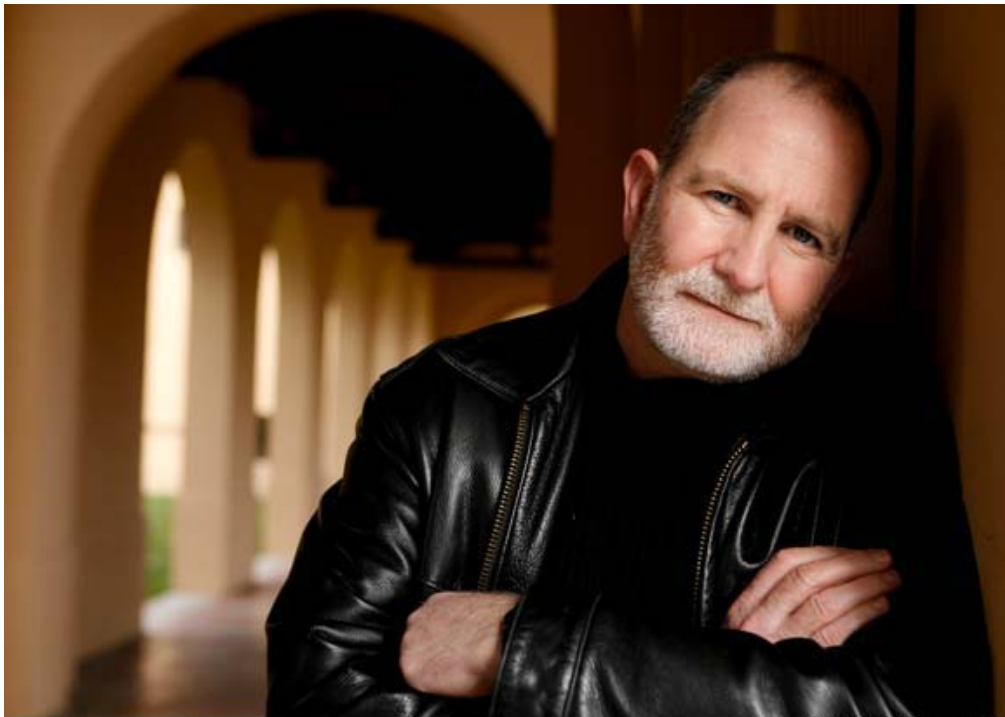
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## 'Nanking' documentary honors foreign heroes

[Heidi Benson, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Director Bill Guttentag dedicated the film "Nanking" to the late author Iris Chang. "Anyone who makes a film on this subject owes a debt to her," he said. Chronicle photo by Lacy Atkins



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Children in the International Safety Zone created by foreign nationals in Nanking during the siege of 1937. The zone saved tens of thousands of people. Photo courtesy of ThinkFilm



Eleven years ago, San Jose author Iris Chang brought a dark moment of history to light in her bestselling book, "The Rape of Nanking," a searing account of the six-week siege of that city during the Sino-Japanese war of 1937.

Now, a documentary film, inspired by that book and directed by Palo Alto filmmaker Bill Guttentag, honors the heroes of what Chang called "the forgotten holocaust."

As Japanese troops marched to Nanking, then China's capital, in the winter of 1937, a small group of foreign nationals - including an American doctor, an American educator and a German businessman who was a member of the Nazi party - created an International Safety Zone that succeeded in saving tens of thousands of lives over the period when hundreds of thousands died. The voices of these heroes narrate the film. Their eloquent and heart-breaking accounts, taken from letters and diaries, are re-imagined in stage readings by actors Mariel Hemingway, Woody Harrelson and others.

After premiering at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2007, "Nanking" has screened in China, Mexico and France; it opens in Bay Area theaters Friday.

The \$2 million film was funded and produced - out of personal passion - by an industry outsider, Ted Leonsis, vice-chair of AOL and owner of two national sports teams, the Washington Capitals of the NHL and the Washington Wizards of the NBA. He was inspired to bring the story to the screen after reading a New York Times obituary of Chang, who died in 2004. It was the first he had heard of the heroes of Nanking.

"I became, my wife says, obsessed," Leonsis remembered. "I wondered - what would I have done?"

Knowing Guttentag's work - his 2003 film, "Twin Towers," won the Oscar for best short documentary - Leonsis sent him copies of Chang's book and two others: the diaries of businessman John Rabe, who was imprisoned on his return to Hitler's Germany; and a biography of Minnie Vautrin, who sheltered tens of thousands of women and girls in her school in Nanking but despaired that she couldn't have done more and ended her life in 1941.

Like Leonsis, Guttentag was stunned by what he read and riveted by the stories of personal sacrifice. He signed on to the project and brought in Dan Sturman to co-direct.

"It was 18 months from the day I read Chang's book to the day we showed up at Sundance with a wet print," Guttentag said.

He said he feels a particular responsibility to make films that address political or ethical issues.

"The entertainment industry makes up 6.5 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product," Guttentag noted. "For better or worse, we're exporting our values. It's an incredibly important industry. And it changes so quickly."

The history the film depicts in archival footage and personal accounts is still the subject of a bitter debate. Some Japanese deny the savagery of the occupation, despite the findings of the 1946 Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, which concluded that at least 300,000 people were slaughtered and that mass executions, rape and other "inhuman brutality" were common.

"It's a 70-year-old issue that still makes front-page news in Asia," the director said. In fact, some people working on the film in Japan quit the project under pressure from family or friends and feared their involvement could taint their careers, said Guttentag, who hired researchers on three continents.

Because the subject remains so controversial today - from the moment "The Rape of Nanking" was published, its research and conclusions have been challenged - the filmmakers knew they would need to conduct their own in-depth research. The film is not based on Chang's book, but the directors worked closely and with the blessings of Chang's parents, whose families barely escaped the siege.

The filmmakers were also able to maintain control over the project in other ways. To film in China requires government permission and partnership with a Chinese company. "Nanking" was made in cooperation with CCTV, a Chinese television network that will air the film later this year.

"There was no censorship," said Leonsis. "We were in charge of verbatim translations of what we did. It was wise of them and very pragmatic. We made the movie we wanted to make, they didn't add value or edit it. So, there was no controversy."

Thus far, the film has riled critics who challenge both its findings and its independence, particularly when it was re-released in China last month to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the siege.

The filmmakers expected debate, but when they learned that "Nanking" is on the short list for an Academy Award for best full-length documentary, they took it in stride. (The top five nominees will be named next week.)

"Awards are nice, but it's the subject that counts," said Guttentag, a former Knight Fellow at Stanford University who - when he's not making films - also teaches a course called Leadership in the Entertainment Industry at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

The film's producer is equally philosophical. "It's magnificent news, but my goal is to have a lot of people see the film," Leonsis said. That the audience will grow when "Nanking" airs on HBO in mid-2008 seems assured.

The film is dedicated to Iris Chang. "Anyone who makes a film on this subject owes a debt to her,"

Guttentag said. "We had an enormous team, and she was just one woman out there."

Since "Nanking" premiered, there are a half-dozen films on the subject in the works, including a Chinese feature film, directed by Lu Chuan, with a \$12 million budget, and others with names like Oliver Stone, Steve Buscemi and Roger Spottiswoode attached.

Despite the horrors of war that it recounts, the film, like Chang's book, takes pains to present a nuanced message. In several passages, taken from letters, the heroes of "Nanking" say they would do the same for the Japanese, were the circumstances reversed.

As Chang wrote: "Japan's behavior during World War II 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."

Indeed, after the film screened at Sundance, a man in the audience told Guttentag that his father had been with the Imperial Japanese Army in Nanking.

"I didn't know what would come next," Guttentag said. "Then I noticed he had tears streaming down his face and he said, 'I'm really glad you made this film.' "

### **The film**

"Nanking" opens Jan. 11, for one week only, at Lumiere 3 Theater, 1572 California Street at Polk, S.F., (415) 267-4893, and at Shattuck Cinemas, 2230 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, (510) 464-5980. In the South Bay, the film opens Jan. 18 at Camera 12 Downtown, 201 South Second St., San Jose, (408) 998-3300.

The film's official Web site: [www.nankingthefilm.com](http://www.nankingthefilm.com).

### **References**

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