

Francis Chen: Rescuer of Nanking 1937-38



Francis Chen (Chen Fei-rung) served as assistant treasurer and business manager of Ginling [Jinling] College in Nanking from 1934 to 1939. In early December of 1937, before leaving Ginling College, Dr. Wu Yi-fang, the president of the college, named Francis Chen to the three-member emergency committee that included Minnie Vautrin, acting vice president, and Mrs. Tsen Shui-fang [Cheng Rui-fang], Director of the student dorms and the college's nurse.

Chen was in charge of training the janitors to be security guards and organizing the teenagers on campus into a service-corps as guides and scouts. He was invaluable assisting Vautrin as she tried to make Ginling look neutral to the Japanese. They hung eight U.S. flags in strategic locations around the college. They had the old signs for the college repainted to read: "Great American Ginling College."

They also supervised the preparations for admitting the refugees. Eight buildings were emptied of furniture, which was put in storage. These buildings were to house around 2750 refugees. In fact, at the height of the rape of Nanking, Ginling College housed over 10,000 refugees, mostly women and children.

After the Japanese occupied Nanking, Chen being a young man was in danger. The Japanese were rounding up young men whom they suspected had been soldiers. The Japanese slapped Chen on one occasion. On two occasions Chen was taken out of the college by the Japanese. Vautrin and the others feared that he would be murdered. Both times he was released after the Japanese soldiers had looted his money and possessions. Vautrin called these, miracles.

Minnie Vautrin said, "Mr. Francis Chen has had trying experiences because of his youth—in a situation where this was a handicap—but he has always been willing to do all that he could do to help". She said that at first Francis had been afraid but later he said that he was glad he had stayed at Ginling College and that he had lost all fear.

Francis Chen continued to be helpful and brave, patrolling the campus with the Westerners and standing guard at the gate house. These activities were dangerous because, despite the college's neutrality, Japanese soldiers persisted in breaking in either to take women out to serve as military sex slaves or to rape the young women. The soldiers also entered Ginling to search for young men whom they suspected of being in the Chinese army. The Chinese men who were taken out of Ginling were murdered.

The Japanese soldiers had little fear of any Chinese but were afraid of the Westerners, especially the men, because of the trouble the Westerners could cause them with their officers. Both Minnie Vautrin and Francis Chen were slapped trying to help refugees.

While Francis was still at Ginling, his son was born. In Vautrin's diary, on February 12, 1938, she noted that the college staff had celebrated the birth of Chen's son in Swatow, Kwangtung (Guangdong) Province in southern China.

Francis Chen continued with his work on the emergency committee, assisting Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang, for example, with the registration of the refugees, decreed by the Japanese.

Chen continued working at Ginling College until 1939.

Sources:

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