

Tsen Shui-fang: Rescuer of Nanking 1937-38



Tsen Shui-fang [Cheng Rui-fang] was born in 1875 and graduated from the Wuchang Nursing School. After graduation, Tsen Shui-fang was a nurse and then administrator at the local Methodist Women's Hospital. From 1910 to 1924, Tsen was director of dormitories and then principal at St. Hilda's High School. In 1924, moved to Nanking where she was employed as the director of dormitories at Ginling College in charge of students' room and board. In addition, she was the college's nurse.

In November as the Japanese soldiers approached Nanking, most of Ginling's staff fled. However, at age sixty-two, Tsen stayed to assist Minnie Vautrin to protect the campus. Indeed, Vautrin named Tsen to her Emergency Committee. Tsen helped pack Ginling's books and valuables to send to safer locations. She helped Vautrin burn papers that the Japanese might misinterpret. Tsen also bought rice and other staples to feed the remaining staff in case of a siege. Moreover, Tsen found time to attend to the wounded Chinese soldiers housed outside the city wall.

In December 1937, when Ginling was designated as a refugee site, Tsen helped Vautrin to clear eight buildings on Ginling's campus for the refugees. When the Japanese soldiers were raping and looting, Tsen helped Vautrin guard the gate to the college. After 10,000 women and children flooded the refugee camp, Tsen helped Vautrin managed the camp. As the only nurse in Ginling, she provided first aid to the refugees, delivering babies and attending the dying. In addition, she helped Vautrin teach classes for refugee children and widows without job skills.

Cheng Guoguang, her grandson, stayed with Tsen Shui-fang in the Ginling College during the Nanking Massacre. He recollected:

After the Japanese invaded Nanking, my mother, sister and I lived with our grandmother. I was a little boy of ten-years-old. Grandmother said if everyone fled, there would be no body to watch the school. She said she was old and did not want to leave. Ms. Wilhelmina [Minnie Vautrin] did not leave either; together they took care of refugees in Ginling College. Grandmother was always busy. She managed the dorms, prepared food, and helped Ms. Wilhelmina with a lot of things. Grandmother told all the women to cover their heads with cloth, wipe their faces with ashes, and hide under the blankets.

One thing Cheng Guoguang remembered particularly was that his grandmother used to write something by the dim light of her room at night. He thought she was doing bookkeeping at the time, because she had so many different tasks. In fact, like Vautrin, Tsen kept a daily diary, starting on December 8, 1937, and ending on March 1, 1938.

From Tsen Shui-fang's diary:

December 13

Last night, our troops retreated, and no more anti-artillery round could be heard this morning. This afternoon at 2:00 P.M., the Japanese soldiers entered the city from Shuishi Gate.....Tonight, many refugees came to the college as the Japanese soldiers drove them out of their homes, because the soldiers wanted to sleep there. Most of these refugees came empty-handed; the soldiers had taken their beddings. They were scared to death. I feel so sad. Nanking has not had peace since four months ago and fell only after three days' fighting. It is really pathetic. I have no idea what is going to happen tomorrow.....

December 18

All the girls, except one, who were taken away last night were released and came back. [I have] no idea where the missing girl is or if she feels too ashamed to come back.They [Japanese soldiers] were extremely ruthless; they committed all kinds of crimes, killing and raping whomever they like, no matter young or old. One family has mother and nd daughter. The mother, over 60 years old, was raped by three soldiers consecutively, and daughter, 40-some years old, by two soldiers. Both of them are widows. It is extremely inhumane!Now, Ginling has over 9,000 refugees. Outside and inside, walkways and hallways, people slept everywhere as if sardines packed in boxes.....

Tsen Shui-fang's diary is the only known account by a Chinese national written during the massacre and not written after the fact. Her diary is written from a unique perspective: a woman witnessing the atrocities being committed in Nanking and relatively powerless to help anyone outside the gates of Ginling College refugee camp.

Sources:

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