

Finding IRIS CHANG

FRIENDSHIP, AMBITION, AND THE LOSS
OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MIND

PAULA KAMEN

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Iris Chang*

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Loss of an Extraordinary Mind

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FINDING IRIS CHANG

ALSO BY PAULA KAMEN

All in My Head

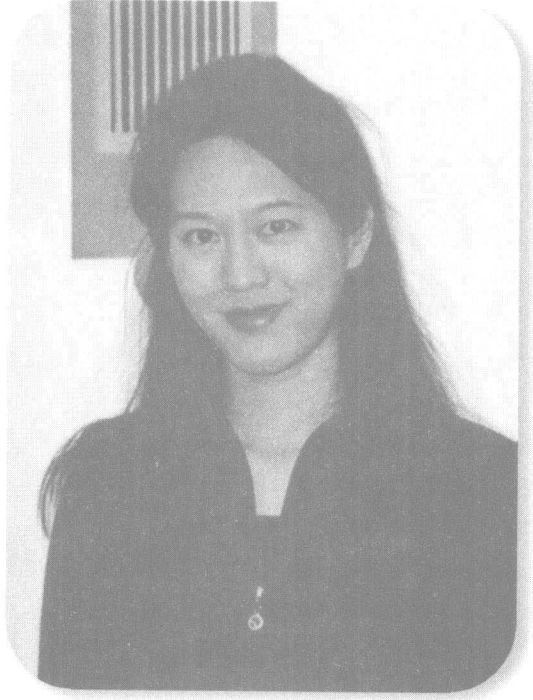
*An Epic Quest to Cure an
Unrelenting, Totally Unreasonable, and
Only Slightly Enlightening Headache*

Her Way

Young Women Remake the Sexual Revolution

Feminist Fatale

*Voices from the Twentysomething Generation
Explore the Future of the Women's Movement*



Iris Chang
1968–2004

INTRODUCTION

The Questions

From September 23, 1994, e-mail:

Dear Paula,

*I can relate to your comment about being a perfectionist when doing research. This tendency seems to be universal. Consider the following paragraph from Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Samuel Eliot Morison in his book *Sailor Historian*: "First and foremost, GET WRITING! Young scholars generally wish to secure the last fact before writing anything, like General McClellan refusing to advance (as people said) until the last mule was shod. It is a terrible strain, isn't it, to sit down at a desk, with your notes all neatly docketed, and begin to write? . . . Nothing is more pathetic than the 'gonna' historian, who from graduate school on is always 'gonna' write a magnum opus but never completes his research on the subject, and dies without anything to show for a lifetime's work. . . ."*

I think you've done enough research for your sex [and gender] book. You may have enough information in your tapes

and notes to sustain two or three more books. What you ought to do now is compile an outline of questions.

Ask yourself, what is the single most important question that this book will answer? That will be the thesis of your work. Then ask yourself, what are five to ten questions that must be asked in order to answer my main question? Each of those questions will be the topic of a new chapter. Then break down each chapter by asking five or ten or twenty more questions.

Use complete sentences to pose the questions, such as “What did Jane Doe believe was the most serious threat to sexually active women today?” If you [use] sentence fragments, such as “Jane Doe” or “interracial marriage” or “rape” when writing the outline, then you might get confused later on. When the entire outline is typed up and printed out, then you can go back at your leisure and answer all the questions. . . .

Anyway, feel free to ask questions or bounce ideas off me as your writing progresses. Send me a copy of your outline its [sic] finished!

Love, Iris

My first questions about Iris:

- What possessed her to kill herself?
- Were there earlier signs?
- Could depression come on that suddenly?
- Or was it something more than depression?
- Was it postpartum depression?
- Did the dark topics that she covered in her work drive her to insanity?
- Or, was she murdered?
- Were her fears based in reality?
- Was her suicide preventable?

- Could *I* have stopped it?
- Who was she, really?
- How am I any different from her?

While it was a mystery to me why Iris Chang had wanted to die, I knew why she should have wanted to live.

This thirty-six-year-old woman was the most envied, and enviable, person I knew. She achieved success, by all possible external measures, to an extreme and to an almost farcical extent: She had fame and fortune, a result of her 1997 international blockbuster book, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, which sold at least a half million copies and was translated into fifteen languages. She was doing meaningful social justice work and giving formerly anonymous victims of some of the worst war atrocities of the twentieth century a strong voice. She was a powerful and charismatic speaker, able to mobilize audiences with seeming effortlessness. She was beautiful. She was thin. She regularly socialized with filmmakers, the kinds of authors whose books you are assigned to read in college literature classes, and even elite policy makers. Her family was unusually close and supportive; her parents and brother would do almost anything for her. She adored her husband, and he adored her. And she openly expressed delight with her two-year-old son, who already was showing signs of his own genius.

Also, her suicide didn't add up for other reasons. Her family had explained that she had become seriously depressed only in the last several months of her life. I had never known her to be clinically depressed. If anything, she had been one of the most steadfastly positive and exuberant people I had ever known; no one I knew wanted to do more with their life and was more driven. And whenever we had talked about weakness through the years, it was nearly always about me.

The last time I saw Iris Chang was in the spring of 2003, in Chicago, when I went to see her lecture promoting her third book, *The Chinese in*

America. She seemed to be in good spirits, and we had a good time afterward going out for pizza in a small group and hearing about her latest adventures. She was already working on her next project, on the Bataan Death March. I knew the stories she was gathering were intense, like those she had covered from that same World War II period for *The Rape of Nanking*.

The months passed, and I got involved in my own, much lower-key deadlines. In the first week of November 2004, a mutual friend e-mailed me that Iris was trying to reach me, and that she had been sick for the past few months. I had assumed it was some kind of protracted cold, the kind I had over the winter. Coincidentally, I had just been thinking that I hadn't talked to Iris in a very long time, since the summer, when she seemed okay, although the conversations then were uncharacteristically abrupt.

On November 3, she called my cell phone while I was getting a haircut, but I didn't pick up. The wary look in the eye of the hairstylist, who was running late, cautioned me not to get it. Besides, I was relieved to let it ring into voice mail, knowing that if I picked up the phone, the conversation might take hours, and I no doubt would be late for a birthday party that evening.

In her short voice-mail message, which I ended up saving for more than a year, she said:

Hey Paula, it's Iris calling. Iris Chang. Hope you're doing well. It's been a long time since we talked, and I want to touch base with you. When you get this call give me a call back at 408 _____. You take care now, bye-bye.

Her tone was upbeat, as usual. I left her an e-mail message late that night, telling her to call me the next day. Then, three days later, she tried to reach me on my cell phone while I was away visiting friends—a couple and their baby—in Kentucky. When I picked up the phone and simultaneously realized it was Iris via the caller ID, I thought of my friends waiting

for me to start dinner in the next room and Iris' typically epic conversations. I immediately cautioned, "Iris, I'm visiting someone out of town and can't talk long. Can I call you when I get back home?"

She cut off my words with: "Paula, I have something to tell you. I have been very, very sick for the past six months."

When I heard the tone of Iris' voice, I wandered outside into my friends' yard for privacy, not bothering to get a coat despite the chill in the air. The bounce in her voice, the one that I had even heard in the voice-mail message from days before, was totally gone. Instead, it was sad and totally drained, as if she were making a huge effort just to talk to me—as if she were a different person. I remembered the comment from a friend that she recently had been sick.

"And I just wanted to let you know that in case something should happen to me, you should always know that you've been a good friend."

Over the next hour, in one of the strangest conversations of my life, I stumbled to ask her about what had happened. She talked about her overwhelming fears and anxieties, including being unable to face the magnitude—and the controversial nature—of the stories that she had uncovered while researching her book on the Bataan Death March. "People in high places are not going to like it. Frankly, Paula, I fear for my life," she said, still maintaining her flat tone.

That was the first time I thought that Iris might be human, after all. Perhaps she wasn't an exception to the rules of nature. Perhaps even she was not able to work nonstop without paying any price. Perhaps I wasn't such a freak, after all.

Despite having told me that she was sick, she described her current vague problem, which I understood as some kind of depression, as the result of "external" forces. It wasn't a result of the "internal." I asked her what others in her life thought about the cause of this apparent depression. She paused and said, "They think it's internal."

"It's got to be external. It just can't be the result of . . . of a book tour," she said, fading out a bit to ponder that question. She was referring

to her exhaustion from the more-than-twenty-city tour she'd made in the spring of 2004 for the paperback release of her book *The Chinese in America*. She went on to talk about other fears. "Paula, I've made serious mistakes with my son. I gave him autism with vaccines." The tone of her voice was firm, like she was proclaiming an unassailable guilty verdict on herself from the voice of the highest possible authority.

"What?" I said, totally perplexed at this comment. I understood that autism was the result of the "internal," basic neurology, not external actions. And I had no reason to believe he was autistic.

"I've made some very serious mistakes with my son," she kept repeating.

I fired questions at her, repeating the same ones over and over again—about her son, her research, her state of mind—although I kept hearing all the same answers. I was reeling from the apparent suddenness of this crisis. I thought I had figured her out years ago.

"This is all temporary! It's a storm that will pass. You have to wait it out." I then confessed to her about a period of months in 2001 when I had been immobilized by a depression, which later lifted. I called it a "breakdown," although it probably wasn't technically one. I told her that with some time off, I eventually found a way to manage a root cause of that depression, a chronic and yet untreatable migraine. It wasn't easy, but I was doing the best I could, even in some pretty challenging circumstances. I said that she would read more about those strategies in greater detail in the spring, when my book on chronic pain would be published. She didn't respond.

She talked more about her guilt over her son. At one point, she was silent and then seemed to drift miles away, as if she had been possessed by demons. A faint voice, which did not sound like hers but that of a tiny child, whispered longingly: "Paula, do you ever just want the lights to go out?"

"Yes, of course," I said, stumbling over my words. "These thoughts are normal. But they pass. I would be, I would be devastated if something were to happen to you. I wouldn't, I couldn't. . . ."

There was more silence.

"This is temporary," I said. "This is not how I see you," I assured her.

"That's not how you see me? Then, how do you see me?" she said, with sudden intense interest, her voice returning to earth.

"Energetic," I said. "You're someone truly engaged with life. A hero! You've been a total inspiration to me! You've helped so many people."

"Yes, engaged with life," she said, brightening a bit. "Remember that. If anything ever happens to me, people are going to talk, and you have to remind people of that."

I repeatedly asked to speak to her husband, Brett, to get more information, but she said he was busy. Then, we talked more and I felt a bit relieved to hear that her husband and her parents were near. She seemed to come back to me and sound more lucid, and I talked about my pain-coping skills for a while. To start off, I gave the example of Buddhist-like advice an alternative healer had given me. "I know this sounds cheesy, but . . . try to see your fears and anxieties like a fire. You need to acknowledge them, tend them and not ignore them, or else they'll rage out of control. But you have to keep a distance, stand away from them, not stand IN the fire, and then get consumed by it," I said. "There's a lot more to it, but that's just something to start out with."

That sound bite of therapy seemed to resonate with Iris. I promised to e-mail her the titles of some books that had helped me. I also mentioned how so many investigative journalists seem to actually thrive with stress and controversial topics. "What about Seymour Hersh?" I asked, now adding some forced humor to the conversation. "He seems OK, and he criticized a lot of powerful people. He's alive and kicking. I'm sure they didn't like him uncovering all those atrocities in Vietnam, and now he's writing on Iraq."

In return, she perked up a bit and suggested herself that she would look into how famous investigative journalists deal with their stresses.

Yes, and then when I got back to Chicago, I said, we'd talk. She didn't respond. We talked more, and I said I had to go. She plummeted into a deep sadness, sounding worse than she had when she first called. I hesitated to end the call and we continued the conversation.

Before we finally hung up, she said one last time: If anything happened to her, I had to let people know what she was like before this happened.

And I said I would.

This book—seeking truth about Iris’ glorious life and mysterious death—came out of a eulogy I wrote for her for the Web magazine Salon.com shortly after her death. In response, I received hundreds of e-mails, many from strangers who confessed that this death had somehow “shattered” them to their core, to such an extreme that they were puzzled why. A few people told me that when they heard the news about her death on their car radios, they had to pull over to the side of the road to contain themselves. And this is for someone they had barely met, maybe for a minute at a reading, or never at all.

The first e-mail I received, within minutes of the article’s posting, had come from a World War II history scholar at a Chicago-area university who said he felt guilty that he had been jealous of Iris for years—that she had attained the acclaim that had always eluded him, as he worked for years in obscurity on similar topics.

“Don’t feel bad,” I replied, simply. “*Everyone* was jealous of her.”

Combing through the deluge of e-mails to come, I was startled by how symbolic Iris was to others. She wasn’t just a historian of atrocities of 1930s Nanking; she was all things to all people. She represented: a working mother, a warrior for social justice, an Asian American, a voice for forgotten war victims, a suicide, a sufferer of depression, and a high-spirited person who was “too much” for others at times.

As for me, it’s hard to know where to even begin to describe what she meant. In conversation, I had always referred to her as a role model, for example, with a friend a few years earlier. About a year before Iris’ death, this friend, who had just had a baby, was sadly observing how all her friends and mine with high-powered careers had given them up when they became mothers. I denied that was the case, and she dared me to list someone as an example. I thought for a second, and the one person we knew who didn’t fit that description was “Iris Chang.” Iris repre-

sented to me what it meant to be successful, without giving up the rest of one's life. She had accomplished the feat of being an extraordinary woman who also managed to hang on to the "ordinary" parts of life, a husband and child.

Iris also resonated to me as an *openly* ambitious woman, someone who didn't act coy, the way you're supposed to, about reaching her goals. She didn't even flinch over self-promotion, which she knew was vital to success in publishing, no matter how talented one is and how just the cause being advanced. When she had met her future husband, Brett, in college, he asked her the odds of her writing a best-seller, and she answered "90 percent." No one had ever bothered to tell her that you just don't voice those things out loud; you keep them to yourself, no matter how basic they are to your being.

With her engrained high-achievement ethic, Iris also didn't seem to realize the pervasive hostility in society about openly ambitious women. I don't think she would have caught that common put-down, for instance, in referring to the most highly symbolic "modern woman" of our time, Hillary Clinton. When someone wants to insult her, all they have to say is "she is a very ambitious woman." Case closed. Even on garden-variety reality TV shows, producers know that the key to making an instant villain is to feature an ambitious woman. In such circumstances, it's a sure bet that the woman would defend herself by saying something like, "I'm not here to make friends. I'm here to win"—a statement that also tells you who you're not supposed to like. But I'm not sure that Iris would have realized that either. No one seemed to have informed Iris that when you're a woman, you're supposed to be different by being extra discreet about your appetites of all kinds, whether they're for fame, money, or food. She didn't seem to acknowledge that the risk of being indiscreet could be ridicule, shame, or rejection.

Actually, beyond addressing her ever-unfolding symbolism, much of my inspiration in preparing for this book has boiled down to a single concrete image, in a coloring book. All in black and white.

As possibly the ultimate measure of success, toward the end of her life, Iris was one of a limited number of alumni honored with their own page in a promotional publication in the form of a coloring book from her prestigious university-run laboratory high school in Urbana, Illinois. After all, you know that you've done something pretty big when you're in a coloring book.

I remember her telling me about it, how excited she was to be pictured among the likes of such luminaries as Max Beberman (“the founder of the New Math”), columnist George F. Will, and numerous Nobel Prize winners.

On Iris' page, she is portrayed as a beautiful “young historian,” her long black hair cascading behind her as she looks forward and serenely smiles at us, sitting beside a book case. The caption simply reads: “Iris Chang credits her love of history and chasing down a story to the freedom she had to do so while at Uni High.” Alongside that is a page-long bio listing one stellar writing achievement after another, including all three of her books.

This picture of the successful author, the one that she best projected to the public and even to me, was no understatement; her ambition and talents were central to her very being. She was a genuine scholar and an industrious worker—not a bullshitter at all. But, as her suicide revealed, much more was going on in her life than I ever had suspected, and well before the year of her death. With that two-dimensional coloring book page in mind, I saw this book project as a privileged opportunity for me to investigate beyond the public contours of this public figure, to find color, depth, and maybe even shadow.

In discussing what Iris symbolized to them, some of the respondents to my Salon article would later become partners in researching this book, mainly her friends and acquaintances. I also was guided throughout my quest for answers by circuitous trails of clues that Iris herself seemed to leave me—buried within her writing, correspondence, and hundreds of boxes of personal and professional papers that she had left to three major university archives.

Above all, in this researching and writing effort, I have tried to use her own work as an example, to basically ask the right questions—and then keep reformulating them with changing insights and circumstances. Just as historians like Iris have worked to investigate and clarify incidents obscured by the so-called fog of war, I've tried to figure out what really happened through the also-greatly-distorting fog of mental illness and family secrets. That has involved studying not only external events, but the mysteries of one person's powerful inner life, an inner life strong enough to create an explosive work of history, and also to unleash the most unforgiving type of fury and violence upon one's self.

In the meantime, in studying Iris' triumphs and struggles, I have also gained new insights into the experience of what it is like, for better and for worse, to be truly extraordinary.