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'Rape of Nanking' Ended in Suicide; Chang's Friend Explores Why

By Katherine Tam



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Nov. 22 (Bloomberg) -- When historian Iris Chang killed herself at age 36 in November 2004, her friend and professional rival Paula Kamen was shocked into investigating the reasons.

The result is ``Finding Iris Chang," Kamen's homage to the author of ``The Rape of Nanking" and an earnest yet unwieldy examination into the ultimately lethal pressures Chang faced as a role model, activist and bestselling writer.

Kamen attended the University of Illinois with Chang and was initially jealous of her success. Only after examining old letters from Chang and mutual acquaintances did she conclude that

Chang's rapid rise on the bestseller charts in 1997 masked an insecurity that had festered since her childhood in central Illinois.

Chang's friends remembered her running the high-school literary magazine, but also being ridiculed by bullies. At college, she had an uneasy relationship with her sorority sisters, yet got elected homecoming princess. She went on to win two prestigious reporting internships, sparking the envy of Kamen and their colleagues on the campus newspaper.

Chang told her future husband that she wanted to win a Pulitzer Prize; she broke into a sprint when, at 23, she signed her first book contract while attending a writing program at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

At 29, she became a bestselling author with the release of her second book, ``The Rape of Nanking," her account of the massacre of Chinese civilians after Japanese troops captured the city of Nanking (now Nanjing) in December 1937. Her Japanese publisher canceled publication of the book after receiving death threats from Japanese conservatives.

Stress, Drugs

The resulting stress caused Chang to unravel. While working on her third book -- about U.S. prisoners who perished in the Bataan Death March during World War II -- Chang took fertility drugs that may have caused a hormonal imbalance that affected her mental health. After suffering a breakdown and being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she bought a book on euthanasia and acquired an antique gun.

At times, ``Finding Iris Chang" reads like a thriller. Kamen visits Chang's husband and the four university archives where Chang hastily stored her papers before her death. After Chang's mother declines to talk, Kamen consults a psychologist about the stigma of mental illness among Asian Americans. Kamen is also surprised to receive a load of State Department documents detailing the way U.S. diplomats monitored the impact of Chang's work in China and Japan.

Painfully Thorough

Kamen is thorough -- painfully so, as when she recalls her final phone call from Chang. She also fumbles in places: She goes on about her friendship and rivalry with Chang at such length that you begin to wonder if these are still issues. She talks to Chinese-American activists who, like her, remain in awe of

Chang.

She should have taken a deeper look into how China, Chinese- American activists and Japanese conservatives are using Chang's death to further their own agendas. She could also have explored how Chang's work has affected relations between China, Japan and the West.

It's a tragedy that, as China's economic and political power grows, Chang isn't alive to explore how the country's turbulent history will shape the world for years to come.

``Finding Iris Chang: Friendship, Ambition and the Loss of an Extraordinary Mind'' is published by Da Capo (280 pages, \$26, 13.99 pounds).

(Katherine Tam writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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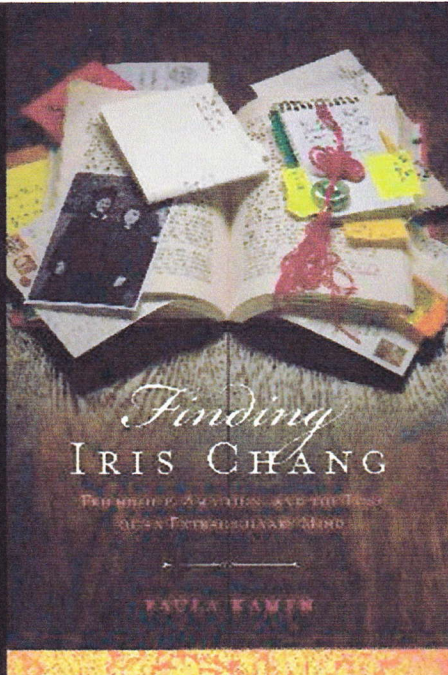
Paula Kamen, author of "Finding Iris Chang: Friendship, Ambition, and the Loss of an Extraordinary Mind," poses in this undated photo. Source: Perseus Books via Bloomberg News

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Iris Chang poses with her book "The Chinese in America" at the Harold Washington Library in Chicago in this photo taken April 2003, the last time she was seen by author Paula Kamen. Source: Perseus Books via Bloomberg News

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The book jacket for "Finding Iris Chang: Friendship, Ambition, and the Loss of an Extraordinary Mind" by Paula Kamen is pictured in this undated handout image released to the media on Friday, Nov. 2, 2007. Source: Perseus Books via Bloomberg News

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