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**Nanking**, presented by [Cincinnati World Cinema](#), screens at 7 p.m. March 25 and 26 at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

## Film: Slaughter of the Innocents

**Nanking** looks at Japanese brutality toward the Chinese during WWII

BY [Steven Rosen](#) | Posted 03/19/2008 **Grade: A**

Ever since *Schindler's List* and the 1994 Rwandan genocide, there have been a spate of movies dramatic and documentary trying to shed light on the way modern warfare increasingly has become about murdering innocent civilians.

Some recent films have concerned Darfur, with the express aim of trying to stop the Sudanese government from supporting the ongoing slaughter there. There is a global network of organizations supported by people like Samantha Power, author of *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* at work trying to protect civilians there and goad governments into helping them.

Would only there had been such a network in the 1930s and 1940s, when the Germans and Japanese were committing their atrocities on humankind. We already know about the Holocaust, which in its scale and methodical nature has no equal in the annals of evil.

But the terrible Japanese brutality toward the Chinese is less known perhaps because after World War II Japan became our Cold War ally and China our enemy. The new documentary **Nanking**, directed by Bill Guttentag and Dan Sturman and produced by former AOL executive Ted Leonsis, aims to end our ignorance. It is inspired by Iris Chang's book *The Rape of Nanking*.

A few facts: In December 1937, following prolonged air raids against Nanking, then China's national capital, the Japanese attacked and occupied the city. According the post-war Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, in the first six weeks of occupation they murdered 200,000 civilians and prisoners of war and raped 20,000 women and girls.

The details of this bloodlust are gruesome - civilians shot in the back, prisoners set afire, people bayoneted and decapitated. In the film, one now-elderly Chinese "witness" recalls his attempt to try to find a living baby brother who had been skewered in the buttocks by a soldier and then tossed onto a pile of bodies: "I stepped on so much blood the bottoms of my shoes became sticky."



Thousands of Chinese citizens were murdered and raped during the first six weeks of Japan's occupation of Nanking during World War II. Thinkfilm

Because of surviving 16-millimeter film footage of the atrocities, we see in terrifying detail what the Chinese, sometimes fighting tears, tell the camera.

With this kind of material, directors Guttentag and Sturman had a practical problem – how to make a film not too horrifying to watch. The way they have tried to resolve it is open to aesthetic challenge, but I think it works. They have made the central focus a small cadre of Westerners living in Nanking at the time who tried to protect civilians. And they have used dramatic elements to impose a theatrical artfulness on the material.

Actors, including Woody Harrelson, Mariel Hemingway, Hugo Armstrong and Jurgen Prochnow, are filmed at a staged reading giving voice to the recollections. The actors are dressed in funereal black and filmed in close-up, after an initial introduction. Their voices are ever-so-slightly recitative to remind us they are actors, but they also try to inhabit their characters' pain and sorrow.

These re-enacted recollections are intertwined with real interviews of the Chinese "witnesses," some of whom were children saved from the Japanese by the actual Westerners. Additionally, actors in costume give voice to several other figures of the time, including a Japanese soldier. The filmmakers also have interviews with some elderly Japanese soldiers who attacked Nanking and participated in the rapes and murders.

The vintage footage includes newsreels, Japanese propaganda films and atrocity documentation that the Westerners smuggled out of China and took to the West to affect public opinion. All these disparate elements are connected via tight, smooth editing and by Philip Marshall's requiem-like score, performed by the Kronos Quartet.

It sounds complicated, but it flows easily while you watch it, sort of like what Warren Beatty did in *Reds*. And without making the story become about the Westerners' heroism rather than the Chinese suffering, Guttentag and Sturman do let the powerful, inspiring stories of resistance emerge. As they should - the film estimates the cadre of Westerners saved up to 250,000 Chinese.

Many of the Westerners were missionaries. There was also surgeon Bob Wilson (Harrelson), who not only had to care for his critically wounded patients, but had to repeatedly hide his Chinese nurses when Japanese soldiers would go on the prowl.

Also helping was German (Nazi) businessman John Rabe (Prochnow), whose attempts to create a civilian safety zone in Nanking earned him the moniker "living Buddha" from grateful Chinese. And most affectingly, there was Minnie Vautrin (Hemingway), dean of a woman's college who sheltered 10,000 girls and women. Yes, there is irony in a Nazi businessman trying to be a humanitarian especially considering Germany and Japan were allies. But it is a bitter one, as the film makes clear when it reveals Rabe's fate.

*Nanking* is not meant to provoke anger against Japan today – two atomic bombs did fall on the country to end the war, after all, an event we have yet to fully come to terms with. Rather it is to make us all realize the importance of being committed to the phrase "Never Again."

**Grade: A**

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