

Remembering Iris Chang at Iris Chang Park

(from Helen Chiang, Historian)

I first met Iris Chang in May 2003, when I joined a group of OCAW-SVC friends to attend her book signing for *The Chinese in America* at the Oakland library. By then, she was already world-renowned for her groundbreaking 1997 book, *The Rape of Nanking*. The venue was filled to capacity with readers and admirers. Tall and slender, she stood out in the crowd with composed, understated elegance. Her gaze was intense, revealing a depth of intelligence and seriousness that left a lasting impression on me.

It wasn't until last year that I learned of the Iris Chang Park in San Jose. After exploring its website, I knew I had to pay it a visit. Dedicated on November 9, 2019 – the 15th anniversary of Iris Chang's passing – the park pays tribute to her enduring legacy as a writer and humanitarian. Nestled beside a residential complex in the heart of Silicon Valley, the 2.6-acre park offers a tranquil retreat from the surrounding bustle. It was designed by American sculptor Richard Deutsch in collaboration with landscape architects, PlaceWorks. The space unfolds like a Zen garden, where a gently curving path guides visitors past thoughtfully placed sculptures that reflect Deutsch's deep understanding of Chang's vision as a historian and humanitarian. The Coyote Creek Trail, largely paved with fine crushed stones, winds along nearby, offering open, scenic views of the creek. When we began planning our 2026 OCAW-SVC activities, I proposed a visit and hike there, and the idea was met with strong support.

On an overcast spring morning on Sunday, April 26, 2026, thirteen OCAW-SVC members and friends gathered at the entrance to Iris Chang Park to pay tribute to Chang, whose life was tragically cut short by her struggle with depression, ending a future that held even greater promise. We were especially fortunate that, through Cynthia Chang's connection, Ying-Ying Chang, Iris's mother, was able to join us. She graciously accompanied us through the park, sharing the story behind its creation and answering our questions about Iris.



In front of the Entry Stone, engraved with a paragraph honoring Iris Chang's legacy, Cynthia Chang presented Ying-Ying with a bouquet of irises.

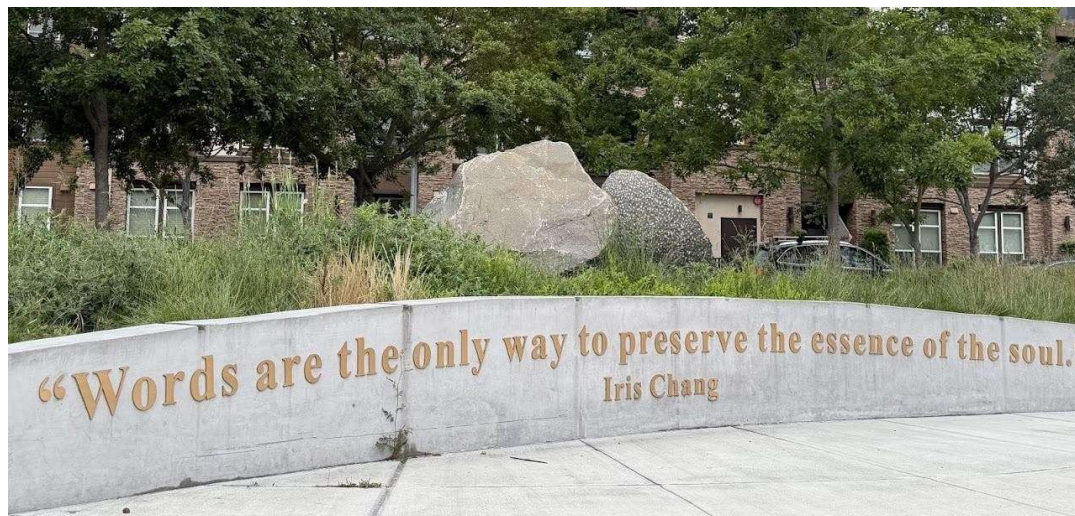


Ying-Ying told us that Iris and her husband had lived nearby. When the Essex Apartments on Epic Way were being built, the City of San Jose required new multifamily developments to include dedicated open space. The area might otherwise have been named Epic Way Park. Kansan Chu, a Taiwanese American politician and then a member of the San Jose City Council, was actively involved with the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia and the Rape of Nanking Redress Coalition. He approached Mr. and Mrs. Chang and suggested that they apply to name the park in honor of Iris, a San Jose resident. The San Jose City Council unanimously approved the proposal. With that approval, the project moved into the selection and design phases. It underscored the importance of having political support.

The sculptor Richard Deutsch, Ying-Ying said, had been overwhelmingly voted for as the park's designer from a group of candidates. He carefully read Iris's book, and the "Power of One" was his idea chosen as the central theme. A quote of Iris was engraved on the bottom half of the Entry Stone. "Please believe in THE POWER OF ONE. One person can make an enormous difference in the world... One discovery can cure a disease or spark new technology to benefit or annihilate the human race. You, as ONE individual, can change millions of lives. Think big. Do not limit your vision and do not ever compromise your dreams or ideals." Deutsch also traveled to Nanjing, where he was presented with a 300-year-old Chinese grinding mill. He stacked the two round millstones upright and named the sculpture *History Stone*, as it had borne witness to history over the years. Ying-Ying strongly believes that the mill embodies an unceasing life force, having sustained generations of people in Nanjing.



As we walked toward the hardscaped theater area in the center of the park, *Touch Stone* came into view atop the higher ground behind the semi-circular retaining wall. It consists of two conical-shaped basalt stones that barely touch, symbolizing humanity’s interconnectedness and our reliance on one another, as interpreted by Deutsch. Another quote by Iris Chang, “Words are the only way to preserve the essence of the soul,” is displayed on the retaining wall. Chang reckoned that words are more than merely a tool of communication; they keep the human spirit eternal.



Toward the far end of the park stands a large, commanding stone marker – *Stele*. Its polished surface is engraved with Iris Chang’s words, “Power Of One.” Our group gathered in front of it for a photo commemorating the visit. Ying-Ying reminisced that she and Mr. Chang, who passed away last year, often came to the park and sat on the bench beside the *Stele*, quietly taking in the surroundings. Around the corner,

they planted bearded irises. On the second Sunday morning of each month, volunteers come to help with weeding and maintain the park's vegetation.



Ying-Ying continued, with passion, to answer our questions about what young Iris was like and how she first became interested in exploring the subject of the Nanjing Massacre. Ying-Ying remembered Iris as a child full of curiosity, and she had a keen sense of justice. Family mealtimes were often filled with lively discussions on a wide range of subjects, and Iris got to know her Chinese heritage and developed an early awareness of her parents' journey – from China to Taiwan, and then to the United States.

When Iris visited a Nanjing Massacre Photo exhibition in Cupertino, CA, presented by the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of WWII in Asia, the images of the atrocities committed by the Japanese Army against Chinese civilians and disarmed soldiers during those dark weeks in December 1937 seared into her mind. She posed a question to Ying-Ying that she could not understand why such a significant history remained largely unknown in the Western world. Compelled to act and write about the subject, she embarked on a journey to China with the intent to interview the remaining survivors of the Nanjing Massacre and document their firsthand stories. Yet the path was not easy. In the beginning, she had no idea how to locate them before others stepped in to help. Burdened as well with the financial realities of a young writer, she nevertheless pressed forward. The result was *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, a book that would resonate with readers worldwide when it was published in 1997 and became a best seller.

Ted Leonsis, former Vice Chairman of AOL, as Ying-Ying told us, was vacationing in the Caribbean on his yacht when he read Iris Chang's obituary in *The New York Times* on November 12, 2004. Having previously known nothing about this history, he later read *The Rape of Nanking* and was profoundly moved. He wanted to bring the story to the screen, with a social purpose rather than a profit motive. He requested filmmaker Bill Guttentag to direct. The documentary, *Nanking*, was released in 2007. Ying-Ying later recounted the extraordinary journey behind the film in an article published in *Sing Tao Daily* on November 5, 2023. Looking back, the thread that connects these efforts feels almost mystical – as if history itself sought a voice and found one.

After Iris's death, Ying-Ying Chang channeled her grief into writing a memoir, *The Woman Who Could Not Forget*, about her daughter's life and death. Mother and daughter shared a deep and enduring bond. From our interaction, I see in Ying-Ying, a mother who cannot forget. She has kept Iris close to her heart. Over the years, she traveled widely and gave numerous talks, continuing to honor Iris's legacy and advocate for the causes she championed.

As we left the park and approached the Coyote Creek Trail, it became clear that the drizzle had no intention of letting up. We decided to cut our hike short and head out for an early lunch. We were glad that Ying-Ying joined us, giving us more time to get to know her. She mentioned that Iris was honored as 1998 Woman of the Year by the **Organization of Chinese American Women** in Washington, D.C. In the end, Ying-Ying, along with three other participants, signed up to join OCAW-SVC.



May we carry forward Iris's spirit by continuing to seek understanding, preserve and learn from history, and honor human dignity.

(Photos taken by Sophia Yang)