

K. Masser

Independent Research in Nanjing, China

History 7840

“Minnie Vautrin’s Burden”

Summer 2011

Preface

I began working on this research paper as part of an independent reading course that I took as part of my study abroad trip to China in June, 2011. Over the course of one month, I travelled through many different places, including Beijing, Xian, Guilin, Hong Kong, Macau, and Shanghai, but our 'home base' was in Nanjing. Initially I was only interested in the history of the city of Nanjing, but after visiting the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall, I met Minnie Vautrin. That particular museum was one of the most graphic I've ever visited and my experience there was quite profound; it memorialized the victims of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, also known as the Rape of Nanking, in heart-wrenching detail. The details of this significant event in Nanjing have been disputed by the Chinese and Japanese governments and have been a source of contention for the last seventy-five years. However, during the last two decades, scholarship on the Rape of Nanking has flourished as previously under-used sources, sometimes translated, became more widely used by scholars, arguably because of the work of Iris Chang.

Iris Chang published *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of WWII* in 1997, on the 65th anniversary of the Massacre. Motivated by the experience of her grandparents and by the dearth of scholarly work on the Massacre, Chang's bestseller told the story from three perspectives: the Japanese soldiers, the Chinese civilians, and the foreigners in the safety zone. This book was controversial because of the alleged inaccuracies and a more sordid retelling of the atrocities committed by the Japanese than had been previously known to western scholars. Chang herself was a controversial figure, famously demanding that the Japanese Prime Minister formally apologize to the Chinese people during an American news program.¹

¹ *PBS NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, "I'm Sorry?", December 1, 1998.

After Chang committed suicide in 2004, it has been suggested that she was the final victim of the Massacre², and a section of the Memorial Hall in Nanjing was created in her memory. Iris Chang's section was not far away from Minnie Vautrin's.

As I read Minnie's memorial, as with Iris Chang, I was immediately drawn to her – here was an American woman who had lived in Nanjing and had devoted her entire life to her missionary and educational work and had almost single-handedly saved the lives of over ten thousand Chinese women and children. Her memorial reflected the way she was remembered by the Chinese she helped. She was respected and beloved and as I learned more about this horrific incident, I realized that Minnie was, in fact, a hero. I was deeply moved by her courage under fire and resolute faith and decided I wanted to know more about this brave woman.

Because of Iris Chang's groundbreaking work and the resultant literature that followed, I was able to find several books that discussed Minnie and her role during the Massacre. The first was a well-written, if not overly laudatory biography on Minnie written by Hua-ling Hu entitled *American Goddess at the Rape of Nanking: The Courage of Minnie Vautrin*. Hu also co-edited another book about Minnie and her assistant Mrs. Tsen entitled *The Undaunted Women of Nanking: The Wartime Diaries of Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang*. In both of these works, Hu does not mask her deep esteem for Minnie and while she extols the Minnie's virtues, there was no mention, in either book, of some of the perceived personality flaws Minnie clearly must have possessed in order to ultimately consider herself a failure and commit suicide, which she did in 1941. Though I agree with Hu's position that Minnie was the most essential person on the campus during those chaotic years and that the services she rendered went above and beyond

² Oliver, August, "One final victim of the Rape of Nanking?", *The Times of London*. March 17, 2005.

the call of duty, I wanted to know more about Minnie, as a person, not as a goddess.

Jin Feng's work, *The Making of a Family Saga: Ginling College*, while mainly a monograph about the history of Ginling, made frequent mention of Minnie and filled in the gaps of her life and personality. She was brusque and firm, frugal and conservative and often disliked for her autocratic and opinionated demeanor, but she held the respect of students and colleagues and her devotion to education and faith was never in doubt. She was capable and qualified to perform quite literally any task, and she knew it, but she was humble and solemnly performed the recognized duties before her.

Suping Lu, admittedly inspired by Hu's biography, edited and published Minnie's diary and correspondence from August 1937 to mid-1938, though Minnie kept a diary until April 1940. My paper looks at her diary entries from the beginning of the Massacre until her departure from China in 1940 to uncover what life was like for Minnie and her Ginling family. Minnie wrote in her diary religiously, indicating her determinism, and her entries reveal the responsibilities she held as a fluent foreigner during the Rape of Nanjing and its aftermath. In the end, these burdens proved insurmountable in the end and she ended her life believing herself to be a massive failure.

Though the similarities between Chang and Vautrin are blatantly obvious – they were both very educated women immersed in the events of the Rape that ended their own lives after suffering nervous breakdowns - this essay is not a comparison of their lives, but it is worth noting. Rather, this essay is a look at Minnie's own words and how they show the development of her emotions from the onset of the Japanese occupation until the breakdown that resulted in her departure from her home at Ginling, and in China.

Minnie Vautrin's Burden

Wilhelmina "Minnie" Vautrin was born on September 27, 1886 to Pauline Lehr and Edmund L. Vautrin in Secor, Illinois. Pauline named her daughter after her mother, Ann Eva Wilhelmina Lehr and nicknamed her "Mina"; her neighbors in Secor had known her as "Minnie".³ Edmund was a seventeen year old French immigrant from Lorraine who moved first to Peoria in 1883 for a blacksmithing apprenticeship with his uncle and then to Secor where he married Pauline and Minnie was the second of their three children; her elder brother died as an infant. Her mother also suddenly died when she was six years old and Minnie was sent to live with several foster families; the courts permitted her to return home to her father three years later and she assumed all of the household chores and excelled at school. "Minnie was a born student...She could excel in most anything she tried, and was a genuinely Christian girl."⁴

According to biographer Hua-ling Hu, young Minnie was devoted to her education and aspired to be a teacher, working part-time jobs in order to save the funds for her schooling. She also volunteered at local churches teaching Sunday school and after graduating high school at seventeen years old she officially joined the Christian Church in Secor. In 1903, Minnie was accepted to the Illinois State Normal University, the two-year teacher's college at Illinois State University, but because of her financial situation, she had to delay her studies several times in order to work to pay her expenses. When she did graduate in 1907, she was ranked first of ninety-three students and spoke on behalf of the students at the commencement ceremonies.⁵

Minnie taught high school mathematics in LeRoy, Illinois for a few years before

³ Lu, Suping. "Introduction". *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2008: xix.

⁴ Hu, Hua-ling. *American Goddess at the Rape of Nanking: The Courage of Minnie Vautrin*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000: 3.

⁵ Lu, xix.

registering at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana to complete her bachelor's degree in education. While at Champaign-Urbana, Minnie participated in the YWCA, was a member of Kappa Delta Pi, and was president of the Bethany Circle, a women's church group associated with the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions that was spreading across the United States. She attended multiple seminars and lectures sponsored by the Movement and displayed her dedication to her education and faith while she was a student. A few weeks before her graduation, Minnie was recommended by the university pastor to the recruiters from the Foreign Christian Missionary Society (Disciples of Christ). The recruiters requested that she replace a teacher that was going on furlough at a school in China.⁶

Protestant missions to China had begun to flourish as a result of the treaties ending the First Opium War (1840-42) and Second Opium War (1863-65) that opened Chinese seaports to Western businesses as well as Christianity. Though the missionaries themselves were not always easily accepted by Chinese families and society, by the late 1880s, they had converted over thirty-seven thousand Chinese Protestants. Missionaries opened schools for both boys and girls and by 1860 there were twelve missionary schools in the first five original treaty ports and six all-men's Christian colleges had been established by the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ But,

For thousands of years, Chinese history has been basically men's history. The main reason women were ignored related to their political, economic, and social position in the society. Being dominated by Confucian ideology that promoted the ideas of female inferiority and separation of sexes, women were generally excluded from formal education and participation in policy making, the military and other activities in public spheres. Their place was mostly inside the household.⁸

During the 1890s a self-strengthening movement spread across China that advocated,

⁶ Ibid., xx.

⁷ Feng, Jin. *The Making of a Family Saga: Ginling College*. Albany: SUNY University Press, 2009, 28.

⁸ Wang, Shuo, "The "New Social History" in China: The Development of Women's History." *The History Teacher* Vol. 39, No. 3, (May 2006): 316.

among many ideas, the advancement of women's education. As the Chinese were becoming more familiar with Western traditions and were increasingly influenced by Western thinkers, and growing unhappier with the Qing dynasty, reform leaders demanded fundamental changes in all facets of Chinese life, including family, education, and the status of women. The Reform Movement of 1898, or the Hundred Days of Reform, took place between June and September 1898 under the young and more liberal emperor Guangxu, who issued several proclamations supporting many of the issues supported by the self-strengtheners.⁹

As a result, several girls' schools across China were created. The first school for elite young Chinese women (Chinese Girls' School) was opened in May 1898, and enrolled seventy female students over the first two years. The Reform Movement of 1898 was "the first attempt in some two thousand years to transform China from a highly refined imperial system into a modern, constitutional nation-state,"¹⁰ and this girls' school was quite successful. It remained open even after Empress Dowager Cixi staged a coup d'état, ending the Reform Movement. "Nevertheless, advocates of women's education and women's rights continued to make their voices heard,"¹¹ and the Hundred Days of Reform is noted for bringing the discussion of women's issues to a wider public.

By 1906 the Qing government had become more receptive to other ideas, notably Western education and mandated the schooling of all females.¹² Feng noted that the female missionaries of the early twentieth century who enjoyed this more favorable reception were able to congregate with elite Chinese society, as opposed to the female missionaries of the mid-

⁹ Spence, Jonathan. *The Search for Modern China*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 227.

¹⁰ Qian, Nanxiu. "Revitalizing the Xianyuan (Worthy Ladies) Tradition: Women in the 1898 Reforms". *Modern China*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Oct 2003): 401.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 422.

¹² Feng, 12.

nineteenth century who generally only associated with the poor and illiterate. As a result, many twentieth century missionary schools saw a shift from charitable institution to profit institution and a marked increase in educational quality and prestige that placed mission education out of the reach for lower-class Chinese people.¹³ In 1941, of China's 115 colleges and universities, thirteen were Protestant and one of out of every five Chinese university students were enrolled in Protestant colleges and US investment grew to \$20 million dollars.¹⁴

The year 1906 was the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. The four goals of the Movement were:

(1) to lead students to a thorough consideration of the claims of foreign missions upon them as a life-work; (2) to foster the purpose of all students who decide to become foreign missionaries, by helping to guide and stimulate them in mission study and in work for missions until they pass under the immediate direction of the mission boards; (3) to unite all volunteers in an organized, aggressive movement; (4) to create and maintain an intelligent, sympathetic, active interest in foreign missions among the students who are to remain on the home field in order that they may back up this great enterprise by their prayers, their gifts, and their efforts.¹⁵

As Hu noted, "by the time Minnie Vautrin was entering the University of Illinois in 1910, 25,208 students were enrolled in 2,084 of the Movement's indoctrination classes, compared to 136 such classes in 1893...(and) by 1914, about six thousand young Americans went to foreign countries as missionaries, over one-third of them to China."¹⁶

As she had always been considered a good Christian girl by those who knew her, Minnie's interest in foreign missions is not surprising. Once she graduated, second in a class of over 500 graduates, she joined the Foreign Christian Missionary Society (FCMS) and accepted

¹³ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴ Caldwell, Oliver J. "Christian Colleges in New China." *Far Eastern Survey* Vol. 11, No. 23, (Nov. 16, 1942), 236-237.

¹⁵ Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Executive Council. *The first two decades of the Student Volunteer Movement*. New York: Student Volunteer Movement, 1906. 4.

¹⁶ Hu, 4.

the position to develop a school for girls in China, albeit against her family's wishes.¹⁷ For Hu, Minnie was "courageous, determined, and devoted to serving the neediest...Minnie also felt her academic training could be best used as a missionary to China."¹⁸

At twenty-six years old, Minnie was sent to Hofei (Luzhoufu), in the Anhwei (Anhui) Province in the fall of 1912 to establish the San Ching (San Yu) Girls' Middle School. Most of the local women and girls were illiterate and Chinese education for females was, what Hu called, "pathetic", but Minnie's hard work resulted in the school's critical academic success. Hu also noted that during this time in Hofei, Minnie met her future fiancé, a fellow American missionary whose name is unknown, and acquired her Chinese name, Hua Chuan, "a transliteration from the syllables of her surname, Vautrin."¹⁹

After six years of service in China, as per the regulations of the FCMS, Minnie returned to the United States for furlough in the summer of 1918. She visited Secor first upon her return and "the local young girls all regarded Minnie as their role model,"²⁰ for the work she did in abroad. In the fall of 1918, she enrolled in Columbia University in New York City to pursue a master's degree in education, which she received after two semesters in 1919. She took courses that would benefit her next scheduled assignment, the establishment of another girls' school in Nantungchow, but while she was finishing her coursework, Minnie was approached by Elizabeth E. Goucher, a teacher at Ginling College, an all-female institution in Nanjing, and was asked to serve as the interim president for one year while the school's current president, Mrs. Matilda M. Thurston, furloughed in the United States.

¹⁷ Lu, xx.

¹⁸ Hu, 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

Ginling College was the third institution created by a group of female American missionaries who sought to “establish four woman’s colleges in China – one each in north, central, west, and south.”²¹ The Ginling College Committee (GCC) was formed in New York City in 1913 and Mrs. Thurston was elected to serve as the first president once the Ginling College opened. After two years of planning, the door opened on September 17, 1915 with six teachers, three staff members, and eleven students. Because Mrs. Thurston had to leave, Minnie was told that there was no one at Ginling with the fluency in Chinese and administrative experience to run the school, and that her help was desperately needed or things would fall apart.

The manner of approach is similar to her initial recruitment in 1912; both times she had been approached by a member of the Movement to serve a position in China that only she could fill. While Minnie seems passionate and sincere about her dedication to education in China, there also appears to be an element of guilt that may have persuaded Minnie to accept each of these positions. She had a deep sense of moral obligation and she knew she was one of the most qualified to establish schools for girls in China. She was educated with all of the proper qualifications, had the desire to aid others, and was very intrigued by Ginling. Previously, she had only taught young rural girls and this was an opportunity to teach at an institute of higher learning.

At the time, Minnie had also been thinking about her upcoming wedding plans with her fiancé, who was also on furlough, but she did wish to return to China as soon as she could. The FCMS was initially firm on the decision to send Minnie to Nantungchow (Nantong). Hu found that Minnie preferred Ginling to Nantungchow and wrote a secret letter to Elizabeth Bender,

²¹ Feng, 29.

member of the Ginling executive committee, to persuade the FCMS to allow Minnie to have a vote in her next destination. Ultimately, the FCMS decided to send Minnie to Ginling College and Minnie agreed to postpone her wedding for one year and she became the acting president in September, 1919. Minnie eventually broke off her engagement and never married.²² Feng noted that Minnie “was a supporter of women’s celibacy, and regarded marriage as a necessary evil to be postponed as long as possible,”²³ and that may be why she cancelled her wedding plans so abruptly and there is little known about her fiancé.

Minnie was delighted to be back in China and immediately made plans to improve the academics as well as student life at Ginling. She created courses on education administration and management, an innovative student-teaching program, and handled the planning and funding of the new campus by the West Gate of Nanjing. Minnie chose to stay at Ginling past her one-year agreement and continued administration work at the College. Under Minnie’s temporary leadership, Ginling College moved to the new campus in July 1922.²⁴

During the fall semester of 1922, Minnie began a “good neighbor” policy and urged her students to enumerate neighborhood children. One hundred fifty local and mostly illiterate children were discovered in the homes close to Ginling’s new campus and Minnie hired a teacher for them to have temporary classes at the gatehouse while she organized a fundraiser to build them an elementary school. For Hu, “The main reason for Minnie to promote the “good neighbor” policy at Ginling was to lead the students to fulfill the spirit of Ginling’s motto, “abundant life,” by making them walk out of the “ivory tower” to see and understand the

²² Hu, 19-21.

²³ Feng, 94.

²⁴ Hu, 22-23.

suffering of the poor and by encouraging them to devote their lives for the betterment of the society.”²⁵ She also setup a free local clinic staffed by Ginling students to serve the local people.

By the time Minnie returned to the United States for her second furlough in the fall of 1925, she had become affectionately known as “Miss Hua” by her students as well as the locals in Nanjing and had already made many improvements to the quality of life and education in and around Ginling College. She had served as president for her first year and a half at Ginling, and then again from 1924-25 when Mrs. Thurston went on furlough, and had made great efforts to improve the living conditions and education of her students and local people.²⁶

However, as Feng noted, though she worked tirelessly, some staff members and many students did not support Minnie’s method and often found her personality to be overbearing. There were basically two camps at Ginling – the Thurston camp and the Vautrin camp.

Compared to Vautrin’s more watchful and interfering administrative style on similar occasions, it is little wonder that Thurston easily won over the students with her understanding and gentler handling of their needs and qualms. However, Vautrin also gathered her own group of followers and admirers who found in her both a mother and a father.... Vautrin’s large boned figure and her dignified appearance apparently struck her students as rather masculine, but her constant smiles, gentle words, and especially her kindness towards the poverty-stricken women and children living close to Ginling earned her the reputation of being a caring mother.²⁷

Feng noted that the staff found Minnie to be self-righteous and overly conservative and her lack of popularity among the students is evidenced by a story told to incoming freshman to warn them about Minnie; one night Minnie encountered an unchaperoned Ginling student and her boyfriend, and to the student’s humiliation, Minnie escorted them home.²⁸ Minnie was a devout conservative Christian and her particular method of instilling morals did not win her many friends among the students in her charge.

²⁵ Ibid., 24.

²⁶ Lu, xxii.

²⁷ Feng, 59.

²⁸ Ibid., 53.

Minnie came from a rural family and spent her first few years in China working with young rural girls and at Ginling, and Feng explained that, “Vautrin found herself scoffed at by Ginling’s more metropolitan student population...They ridiculed (her) little economics, such as teaching servants to oil paper for insulation of windows and doors instead of buying (it).... They also saw her habit of eating Chinese food with the students at their dining halls in order to save money as “snooping”.”²⁹ However, her faith, frugality, and devotion to teaching in China were important to Minnie, evidenced in her diary entries, as well as the programs she began at Ginling, and Feng also suggested the opinions of the students were overly harsh.

After visiting her family, who had moved to Shepherd, Michigan, bearing many gifts from her stay in China, Minnie went to Chicago with her father and once again used her sabbatical to care for her father and to further her own academic credentials by enrolling in the graduate education program at the University of Chicago.³⁰ In addition to her studies, she spent much of her year back in the United States working on behalf of Ginling by recruiting new teachers, planning curriculums, buying supplies, and most importantly, fundraising. Minnie secured several thousand dollars through fundraising and was also successful in persuading the executive committee to increase Ginling’s budget for the upcoming school year.³¹ Minnie returned to Ginling during the fall of 1926.

The China she returned to was in political chaos. The Qing Dynasty fell to the Nationalist government in 1912, warlords became the de-facto rulers after the death of Yuan Shi-kai in 1916, and the birth of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, and the May Fourth and New

²⁹ Feng, 52.

³⁰ Hu, 25.

³¹ Ibid., 26-28.

Culture Movements all contributed to the complicated political situation in China. “By September 1926, when Minnie Vautrin returned to Nanking the Nationalist government had already empowered General Chiang Kai-Shek to command the Northern Expedition troops to eliminate the warlords...One year later, they successfully took Nanking from the warlords, but regrettably staged the Nanking Incident.”³²

Fortunately for those living on campus, Ginling College was not burned or looted during the incident, though Chiang’s troops did destroy many foreign buildings and killed several foreigners. Minnie and the other foreign-born residents of Ginling were hidden in the attic of the faculty dormitory during the night Chiang’s troops were on campus and were transported by gunboat the following morning to take refuge in Shanghai.³³ “The Nanking incident set back the missionary cause, even though there had been similar incidents in other cities. Because of the fear generated by the Nanking Incident’s graphic coverage in the American press, most missionaries in the interior left their posts to avoid a similar fate.”³⁴

Minnie intended to remain in China and immediately upon her arrival in Shanghai, she held many meetings with her colleagues, determined to support those remaining on the campus and to open the College on schedule in the fall. Though there was a backup plan to hold classes in Shanghai, Minnie and seven other teachers returned to Nanjing and classes began on schedule on September 22, 1927. Minnie once again became interim president of Ginling when Mrs. Thurston decided to remain in Shanghai for safety reasons.³⁵

One of the biggest concerns for Ginling was pressure from the Nationalists to formally

³² Ibid., 34.

³³ Feng, 114.

³⁴ Hu, 36.

³⁵ Ibid., 38-39.

register with the government, which would result in mandated changes in the curriculum and administrative structure. Colleges in China were required to have native-born presidents, so the executive committee of Ginling selected Wu Yi-fang, a former Ginling student and one of the first five graduates, to assume the presidency once she completed her doctorate degree in biology in the United States. Minnie remained as acting president of Ginling until Dr. Wu Yi-fang assumed the office in September 1928.³⁶

After Dr. Wu arrived, Minnie continued to work as a teacher and administrator at Ginling, but when her aging father requested she return to the United States earlier than her expected 1931 furlough, Minnie decided to resign to care for him, “even though she already regarded Ginling at her home.”³⁷ Edmund reconsidered his request after he was informed by Ginling’s staff that Minnie’s services were vital while Dr. Wu became familiar with her new role as president. Edmund consented, and Minnie remained in China until her scheduled furlough, though, she was in no hurry to return when summer 1931 arrived.

It took Minnie three months to finally reach the United States after leaving Nanjing because she travelled with three friends by train through Siberia to Moscow, then to Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, France, and England, before arriving in New York in October 1931. They visited major tourist sites in each of the cities but Minnie paid particular attention to the educational systems. She was impressed by the rural adult education programs in Denmark and Sweden and wished to organize similar programs in Nanjing.³⁸

According to Hu, Minnie was disappointed in her homeland upon arriving in New York in

³⁶ Feng, 130.

³⁷ Hu, 46.

³⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

October 1931 and also felt quite distant from her family. “Although she was glad to be home, her mind was occupied by Ginling,”³⁹ and returning ‘home’ to Nanjing. As she did during each of her last furloughs, she registered for college courses at the University of Chicago and the Chicago Theological Seminary, and continued fundraising and working for Ginling.

When she returned to Ginling in 1932, two additional buildings on the Ginling campus had been finished, completing the campus quadrangle. The “good neighbor” program continued, as it did in the past, and this time students arranged fundraisers to build a Neighborhood House and Neighborhood Health Center, fully supported by Ginling students.⁴⁰ Over the next few years, Ginling managed to stay successful and Nanjing was relatively peaceful, though everyone knew there was trouble brewing in China. When Minnie turned fifty years old on September 27, 1936, the College “seemed to have lost much of the relative tranquility of its early years.”⁴¹ For Hu,

Minnie devoted herself completely to Ginling. If she thought anything or any program beneficial to the college, she would carry it through, no matter how difficult it was or how much her colleagues opposed the idea. She offended quite a few colleagues, who thought her too dictatorial, too unreasonable. However, Ginling’s students and neighboring poor residents all loved and respected her.⁴²

On June 21, 1937, Minnie received word from her brother that her father had suddenly died at eighty-three years old. Minnie was filled with great guilt over not caring for her father more but decided not to return for his funeral as she felt she needed to remain in China because of the looming Japanese threat. In July, while vacationing in Tsingtao, Minnie heard about the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and immediately cancelled her trip to Tokyo in August 1937 as well as her furlough scheduled for 1938 and boarded a train back to Nanjing on July

³⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁴¹ Feng, 158.

⁴² Hu, 54.

18.⁴³ The choices Minnie made during the early summer months of 1937 epitomize her belief that China was her home. She did not return home to her blood family after a death, but raced back to her 'adopted' family at the first threat.

As Minnie returned to Nanjing, thousands of people were trying to leave as the city prepared for war with the Japanese. She absorbed all of the administrative duties of Ginling College when Dr. Wu, as the leader of the Chinese Women's National Defense League, provided medical care for Nationalist soldiers and was therefore too busy. Minnie made arrangements to prepare the campus by sending records to Shanghai; purchasing supplies, instructing students and faculty on emergency precautions; cleaning out and converting rooms in campus buildings for storage and refuge; and ordering the building of trenches. She was thorough in her thinking and tried to anticipate every scenario and plan accordingly in advance.⁴⁴

Minnie began keeping a diary on April 12, 1937, the day before Japanese troops attacked Shanghai. The first air raid on Nanjing took place two days later and as a result the American embassy arranged for the evacuation of women and children from the city. Minnie was one of three American women who were not forced to leave Nanjing and was also one of three foreign faculty members to choose to remain at Ginling. She wrote, "I personally feel that I cannot leave... Men are not asked to leave their ships when they are in danger and women are not asked to leave their children."⁴⁵

Because of the constant Japanese air raids, Ginling decided not to hold classes at the college in the fall and arrangements were made to transfer students to institutions in other

⁴³ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴⁴ Vautrin, Minnie. August 27, 1937.

⁴⁵ Vautrin, August 28, 1937.

cities; by September, only three students remained on campus.⁴⁶ Approximately fifteen people, staff and teachers, remained at Ginling, and due to financial strains, each saw their salaries halved, but Minnie did, however, decide to open the Homecraft School for teenage girls as well as the elementary school on September 20, 1937. Perhaps opening the schools was Minnie's attempt at maintaining normalcy at an institution of learning.

Though she maintained courage outwardly, Minnie was terrified of the air raids, and on October 13, 1937, she wrote, "We dare not wish for sunshine and a clear blue sky (but)...the dreariness, if it lasts too long, is worse than the raids," and admitted that if not for her influence over others, she would not get out of bed at night to hide in the mosquito-ridden trenches. However, she tried to remain optimistic in the same entry by deciding to "transplant trees to show my faith in a future both for Nanking as the national capital and in Ginling."⁴⁷

By November 1937, residents of Nanjing feared a large-scale Japanese attack on the city would soon occur after the Japanese took Shanghai on November 15. On that day, Minnie wrote, "It is only a matter of time until Nanking is taken over," and wondered what the city would look like in six months. By this time the wealthier residents of Nanjing had fled the city, leaving only the poor and retreating Nationalist soldiers in the city as the Japanese marched towards Nanjing from three directions. On November 21, Minnie had her first encounter with severely injured soldiers and remarked that the smell of rotting flesh had stayed with her until the next day. Though she tried to remain optimistic, Minnie was also a realist, and during a period of peace that lasted several days in, Minnie lamented, "I think it must all be a hideous

⁴⁶ Hu, 65.

⁴⁷ Vautrin. October 13, 1937.

nightmare – it cannot be true.”⁴⁸

Minnie was correct; it was not to be true. According to Hu, the Nationalist government had decided that Nanjing was not defensible, but since it was the capital, “they advocated putting on a symbolic fight and then retreating,”⁴⁹ leaving the city and the people to fend for themselves. As a result, the foreigners that chose to remain in Nanjing formed the sixteen-member International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone (ICNSZ) on November 15, 1937, requesting that China and Japan both grant neutrality to the refugee zone. China agreed immediately and donated supplies to the Committee. The Japanese responded that provided there were no Chinese military personnel hiding in the safety zone, it would not be attacked.⁵⁰

The International Red Cross, of which Minnie was a member, also set up a chapter in Nanjing and worked with the ICNSZ to handle the administration of the safety zone. Twenty-five refugee camps were setup and Ginling was chosen to house the women and children that were sure to arrive. As the top two administrators of the College, Minnie did not think it was wise for both her and Dr. Wu to remain in Nanjing, so she urged the president to take refuge at one of Ginling’s branch schools. Minnie, steadfast as always to remain, wrote that she would not even pack up her belongings for safe keeping as other staff members at Ginling had done, and declared, “If I lose, I lose all.” This total commitment is testament to Minnie’s character.

The first refugees arrived at Ginling on December 8; the Chinese military had burnt their homes near the main gate because they posed strategic difficulties for the defense of the city. Over the next three days, 850 refugees came to Ginling and the chaos was beginning to take its

⁴⁸ Vautrin, November 1, 1937.

⁴⁹ Hu., 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71

toll. The Japanese were not inside the city yet, and Minnie was already feeling exhausted. That night she wrote, “Tonight I look 60 and feel 80.”⁵¹

The Japanese successfully broke through the city’s defense on December 13 and the Chinese people found themselves subject to burglaries, kidnapping, rape, and murder at the hands of the Japanese soldiers. Nanking was without power and Minnie, like many, felt a great sense of isolation. “We are indeed separated from all of you by an impenetrable zone... We are all fearfully tired...a tiredness that permeates through and through.”⁵² By December 16, four thousand refugees had arrived at Ginling for sanctuary.⁵³

That evening, before retiring to sleep, Minnie wrote a prayer in her diary. She often spoke of God and Christianity and quoted religious passages, but this entry is unique for its length and foreshadowing and is worth reprinting in its entirety.

Oh, God, control the cruel beastliness of the soldiers in Nanking tonight, comfort the heartbroken mothers and fathers whose innocent sons have been shot today, and guard the young women and girls though the long agonizing hours of this night. Speed the day when wars shall be no more. When thy Kingdom will come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.⁵⁴

Minnie, ever the administrator and planner, powerless to stop the sufferings of the Chinese, was reaching out to her God as if she believed no human could prevent what she knew would occur. On December 4, she wrote, “*Why* can’t reasonable folk put a stop to war?” and by writing this prayer about ten days later, perhaps she believed that those involved were not reasonable, after all. “Who suffers by the destruction but the poor of China?”⁵⁵

Japanese soldiers visited the Ginling campus daily looking for Chinese soldiers and

⁵¹ Vautrin, December 8, 1937.

⁵² Vautrin, December 13, 1937.

⁵³ Hu, 89.

⁵⁴ Vautrin, December 16, 1937.

⁵⁵ Vautrin, December 12, 1937.

Minnie's presence as a foreigner was often a deterrent for Japanese aggression, but on many occasions, Japanese soldiers tore the American flags she had placed around the campus and ignored the letters from various embassies and harassed, kidnapped, or raped many women and girls at Ginling. During the first month after the Japanese took Nanjing, Minnie requested and received over thirty proclamations from the Japanese embassy because they were often torn and destroyed by the soldiers.⁵⁶

Sadly, Minnie's prayer was not heard; it was reported that between one thousand women were raped in Nanjing the night of December 16 and within a few days the population at Ginling swelled to over ten thousand refugees.⁵⁷ Ginling soon faced dilemmas with sanitation and space on campus and by the end of January the campus was unrecognizable; refugees had laundry strewn on every available spot, especially on tree branches and fences, and while supplies were limited, Minnie made every effort to organize the situation on the campus. As the year ended, Minnie lamented,

Those of you who have lived in Nanking can never imagine how the streets look – the saddest sight I ever hope to see...The handful of us who are managing are worn out – how long we can stand the strain we do not know...And the sad thing is, we see no future. The once energetic, hopeful capital is now almost an empty shell – pitiful, heartrending.⁵⁸

The sadness and desperation apparent in Minnie's entries was shared by all of the fearful staff members and refugees at Ginling. Minnie's main assistant, Mrs. Tsen Shui-Fang, also kept a diary during the days of the Nanking Massacre, and echoed many of Minnie's lamentations about the grave situation for the people, especially the women. Like Minnie, Mrs. Tsen feared that her diary would be stolen by the Japanese and they would suffer severe

⁵⁶ Hu, 96.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁵⁸ Vautrin, December 21, 1937.

consequences, but in spite of these fears, both women wrote religiously.⁵⁹

“At the time, many people regarded Ginling as the safest among all of the refugee camps in the safety zone,”⁶⁰ and Minnie heard countless devastating stories from the women seeking shelter there, many searching for their husbands or relatives taken by the Japanese. On January 28, 1938, the Japanese ordered that the refugees would have to return to their homes and the camps were to close by February 4, 1938. Over five thousand refugees remained at Ginling by the end of January, and many refugees who left Ginling upon the Japanese orders, returned with additional horror stories of looting, rape, and murder. “It is not strange that even the old women prefer to starve on our campus than to venture back to their homes.”⁶¹

The International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone changed its name to the Nanking International Relief Committee (NIRC) after the safety zone ceased to exist as a result of a February 18, 1938 proclamation. Ginling was one of six camps to remain open and local women were grateful for the assistance Minnie and Ginling provided. Minnie forged motherly and protective relationships with the refugees at Ginling and was, on several occasions, inspired by their courageousness. When she suffered from an inflamed eye on February 3, she wrote, “I now have more sympathy for the four blind girl refugee girls. How can they be so cheerful?” and several weeks later she wrote, “How like a miracle it is, that in these days of sorrow and distraction, such messages of life can be brought to such a large group.”⁶² In reference to hearing many stories about missing male family members, Minnie wrote, “Such a heartbroken

⁵⁹ Hu, Hua-ling, and Zhang Lian-hong. *The Undaunted Women of Nanking: The Wartime Diaries of Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010: 3.

⁶⁰ Hu, 105.

⁶¹ Vautrin, February 5, 1937.

⁶² Vautrin, April 15, 1938.

yet hopeful group!⁶³ ... How my heart aches for them.”⁶⁴ She often noted that she wished the Japanese women could hear of the atrocities their men have committed in Nanjing and to the innocent victims of war. She truly empathized with the plight of the Chinese women.

The NIRC decided to shut down the last six refugee camps on May 31, 1938, but as women were still being attacked and many others had no place to return to, Minnie was determined to keep Ginling open for the remaining 850 refugees. After she learned some of the atrocities committed upon women she sent home before it was totally safe, she was adamant about keeping the doors of Ginling open for their safety and wrote, “I learned my lesson and I will not easily forget it.”⁶⁵ Ginling would remain a refugee camp.

During the summer she had a nursery built for the children and raised funds for her homecraft programs that she intended to offer school-aged girls and women and mothers beginning in September. These programs included classes on gardening, wood-cutting, mathematics, parenting, nutrition and hygiene, reading and writing, sewing, and knitting – the “little economics” her colleagues and students previously disapproved of. For the victims of the Massacre, acquiring these skills provided them with a way to provide for their families. When war devastates a city and there are no ready-made materials to buy, these skills are vital. As Hu put it, “Minnie trained all students to be mentally prepared to face the outside world and to make a living with their newly acquired skills... and such traits as responsibility, cooperation, thoughtfulness, and kindness were emphasized.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Vautrin, March 18, 1937.

⁶⁴ Vautrin, February 1, 1937.

⁶⁵ Vautrin, April 4, 1938.

⁶⁶ Hu, 118, 120.

Her programs were setup to run for six months and at the end of March 1939, Minnie held graduation services for homecraft students. She had also set up small-business loan programs to subsidize the graduates' return back to their homes and arranged for job-placement for over fifty women. According to Hu, Minnie had dreams of creating more educational opportunities for the Chinese people, including a rural program similar to the system she observed in Denmark. On July 30, 1938, Minnie was awarded the Order of the Jade by the Chinese Nationalist government, which was the highest honor awarded to foreigners.⁶⁷

Because her work was so admired by the Chinese government, the Chinese people, and her colleagues and the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS, formerly the FCMS) and because many people thought she was long overdue for a furlough, Minnie was repeatedly offered several promotions in the United States during the summer of 1939, but she blatantly refused on the grounds that she wished to remain in China.⁶⁸ Yet, she was exhausted from the endless responsibility and conditions were often miserable, especially during the cold winters, and entries recording her fatigue became more frequent throughout 1939-40.

Minnie's diary in completion totals 526 typed pages, and the last entry, dated April 14, 1940, shows a slight change in her writing style and the evident melancholy she was feeling. Minnie is clearly at her breaking point, "I'm about at the end of my energy. Can no longer forge ahead and make plans for the work, for on every hand there seems to be obstacles of some kind."⁶⁹ Her previous optimism was nowhere to be found and though she had been the glue that held Ginling together during the Massacre, during the spring of 1949, she finally admitted

⁶⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁹ Vautrin, April 14, 1940.

she was too tired for another year in Nanjing and finally agreed to a furlough. She knew she could use the rest, but she continued to worry about the fate of Ginling. One of the qualified teachers hired to replace Minnie in the fall cancelled in April and Minnie was saddened to realize none of her colleagues wished to continue her homecraft program while she was gone, even though she could clearly see the advantages for local Chinese women and did not understand why they did not wish to keep it going.⁷⁰

Minnie found herself unable to sleep because of her constant worry, and sadly, her mental health suffered. Though she was already scheduled to return to the United States in the summer of 1940, Minnie suffered two episodes on May 2 and May 10 that contributed to a full nervous breakdown several days later. The UCMS arranged for Minnie to return to the United States early on May 14 and Minnie was despondent the entire trip home; because she had to leave China without fulfilling all of her plans, she felt as if her entire life was a failure and that she wished to die.⁷¹ The atrocities she witnessed and burden of her responsibilities had finally taken its toll on her strength and mental stability and though she was responsible for protecting ten thousand women, Minnie could not see the good she had done – she was distraught.

The UCMS arranged for Minnie to receive psychiatric care in Iowa City and Minnie remained hospitalized for a few months before she was released. On September 20, Minnie moved to Texas to stay with a Ginling colleague also on furlough, Katherine Schutze, who had accompanied Minnie back to the United States. Overall, to her doctor and friends, Minnie appeared to be getting better, but she still often felt very depressed. In early February 1941, Minnie purchased some sleeping pills and swallowed some in the presence of one of her

⁷⁰ Ibid., 133.

⁷¹ Ibid., 135.

colleagues, and was subsequently sent to a doctor in Indianapolis. She was given outpatient psychotherapy and hormone injections and was permitted to stay at the homes of some of her friends in the UCMS, including Mrs. Robert Doan and Miss Genevieve Brown.⁷²

Again, Minnie appeared to be responding well to the treatment to those close to her, but her writings indicate she was still unhappy. On April 25, 1941, Minnie received a package of her belongings that were left in China and found it difficult to process her emotions upon seeing them again. Minnie asked the colleague who mailed the package to her to refrain from sending another for the time being as she felt overwhelmed. She managed to pull herself together during the first week of May while speaking at the International Convention on behalf of Ginling College, her home, the place where her heart was.

She thought about Ginling constantly; though she was able to accomplish so many things, but she never felt that it was enough. Because she did not carry out all of her ideas and plans, she believed herself to be a failure. She had spent twenty-eight of her fifty-five years in China and longed to return, but realized she was never going to fully recover from her breakdown, “and that she would rather die than become insane.”⁷³ On the one year anniversary of her departure from Nanjing, Minnie ended her life in Miss Brown’s apartment by opening the gas jet on the stove in the kitchen. “As a final tribute to the Ginling family and her beloved China, she wrote these words just before her death: “Had I ten perfect lives, I would give them all to China.”⁷⁴

She is buried in Shepherd, Michigan and her gravestone has four Chinese characters

⁷² Ibid., 142-143.

⁷³ Ibid., 144.

⁷⁴ Feng, 181.

meaning, “Ginling Forever”, along with her name, “Goddess of Mercy,” “Missionary to China – 28 years,” and “1886-1941.”⁷⁵ Minnie loved Nanjing and was overcome when she knew she’d never return about not being able to return after her breakdown. She called it ‘beautiful’, even though her last few years there the city saw great destruction. For a good Christian mid-western girl, the ancient Chinese city of Nanjing, and specifically Ginling was home. When Ginling heard about Minnie’s suicide, memorial services were held and a scholarship fund was set up in her name to provide support to female students in China.⁷⁶ It is exactly what Minnie would have wanted.

Minnie’s breakdown, though out of character for this strong and capable Christian woman, is not all that surprising. Her diary entries provide warning signals to her deteriorating mental health and frame of mind. In regards to the Massacre, Minnie’s diary entries are remarkably bloodshed-free considering the atrocities that were committed. Instead of describing, in graphic detail, the horrors she saw on the streets of Nanking, she focused on the sufferings of the Chinese woman at Ginling, and empathized with their impossible situation. For Feng,

That Vautrin chose to focus on the emotional pains of the Chinese women can be seen as her attempt at paradoxically both giving and deriving emotional support by identifying with the victims. ...Taking on a maternal, protective role towards the Chinese refugees while facing alone the very visceral reality of the massacre, she understandably felt unequal to the task of transforming tales of suffering into those of moral exuberance... It can be seen that Vautrin’s narrative gesture of submissive endurance masked her very real psychological anguish...she found a certain solace in the fact that she was stoically suffering along with the Chinese women to whom she could only offer inadequate protection despite her best efforts, as if sharing their sufferings and victimization could redeem what she saw as her own disgrace”.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Hu. *The Undaunted Women of Nanking*, 5.

⁷⁶ Feng, 205.

⁷⁷ Feng, 176-177.

On several occasions in her diary, Minnie wrote that she wished the stories she heard would be transcribed for the public to know. She empathized completely with the displaced women and children of Nanjing and felt an unwavering devotion to them. Minnie was keenly aware of her particular role in these women's lives, as a teacher, supporter, and foreign presence. During the Massacre, there was a lot of pressure on Minnie to keep Ginling's refugee camp running smoothly and as safely as possible, and while her colleagues appreciated her efforts, they also contributed to the enormous pressure facing Minnie.

Mrs. Tsen's diary is the only known Chinese diary of the Rape of Nanking and tells an eyewitness account from a Chinese perspective. Mrs. Tsen was Minnie's closest administrative colleague and the two of them worked tirelessly together to keep Ginling afloat. Mrs. Tsen's diary often praised Minnie's work, but it is clear that there were tensions between them. On December 16, 1937, the most violent night at Ginling, Mrs. Tsen was particularly annoyed with Minnie's negotiations with the Japanese, and wrote "I was really mad at her... for thinking that if we treat the soldiers nicely, they would behave."⁷⁸

Mrs. Tsen understood "Vautrin was exhausted" but she thought Minnie possessed a bit of naiveté in regards to the capabilities of the Japanese. She expressed this opinion again a few days later on December 21 when she disagreed with Minnie's optimism about the twenty-five Japanese gendarmes sent to protect Ginling. Mrs. Tsen did not believe the intentions of the gendarmes were good, while Minnie tried to think positively. Ultimately, Mrs. Tsen's assumptions were correct; that night those gendarmes committed many crimes on the Ginling

⁷⁸ Tsen, December 16, 1937.

campus, including several rapes.⁷⁹ Later, during the registration of refugees, Mrs. Tsen commented that, “It’s not easy to talk some sense into her,” because unlike Minnie, she thought the registration was a “trick” played by the Japanese, and that “(Minnie) cannot understand the real motives of the Japanese.”⁸⁰

On the 17th of December, Mrs. Tsen wrote that, “One soldier slapped (Minnie) in the face... (and the normally courageous Minnie) was so frightened... not many Americans are here, and they are helpless.”⁸¹ Two days later, Mrs. Tsen again mentioned Minnie’s exhaustion, “Vautrin was deadly busy/tired because every day {Japanese soldiers} come several times,” but then took a shot at her supervisor. While Minnie was gathering eggs from the chicken coop, a girl was raped on campus. Mrs. Tsen wrote, “If not for the sake of eggs, Miss Vautrin would have gotten there sooner so the girl would not have to be molested.”⁸²

Mrs. Tsen’s comment illustrates the pressure, almost unfair, that Minnie dealt with on a daily basis. While she was appreciative of the help Minnie was providing, she was critical of Minnie’s lack of experience with the Japanese and was upset that Minnie could not prevent each and every incident at the campus. Refugees at Ginling had called Minnie a “Goddess of Mercy” or a “Living Goddess” and perhaps those terms were not as symbolic as one might first presume. As a human, Minnie was only able to do so much, she could only be at one place at one time, but it appears that even Mrs. Tsen expected Minnie to be able to do the impossible, to be a literal goddess and save the lives of everyone that was in danger. A deep psychological analysis is unnecessary to see that this deification can cause extreme amount of pressure –

⁷⁹ Tsen, December 21, 1937.

⁸⁰ Tsen, January 4, 1937.

⁸¹ Tsen, December 17, 1937.

⁸² Ibid.

pressure that may cause the individual to eventually breakdown.

On February 16, 1938, Mrs. Tsen appeared to be jealous that her supervisor was thought of as a goddess, even though she herself had unrealistic expectations of Minnie. Mrs. Tsen, almost sarcastically, remarked that Minnie is mostly a delegator, that she does not actually complete a lot of the manual work at Ginling but again, like in previous entries, Mrs. Tsen backtracked at the end of the entry and showed her appreciation and understanding of reality when she wrote, "If Miss Vautrin was not here, it would not work either."⁸³ In fact, Minnie did perform many manual tasks at Ginling, as well as managing the entire campus and teaching whatever she could, all the while racing from gate to gate to deter Japanese soldiers. It is not reasonable to suggest that one woman alone could have prevented each incident.

Because she felt like a failure and was clinically depressed and took her own life, Minnie shared Mrs. Tsen's disappointment and emphasis on these perceived 'failures' and could not get past them. Perhaps there was an element of "survivor's guilt" that consumed Minnie; she survived the ordeal and remained relatively unharmed throughout, but witnessed countless atrocities committed on the innocent people of China that she was unable to prevent. Her effort is commendable but she was one woman, passionate about God and China.

And Ginling. Before the Massacre, colleagues at Ginling remarked that, "[Vautrin] was dominant on campus...of course God led her to see what was right and, having seen it, she worked tooth and nail to make his will the law in her location." Vautrin's perceived self-righteous attitude prompted one irreverent young member of the faculty to say: "I could have

⁸³ Tsen, February 16, 1937.

stood up to Minnie but Minnie and God were too much for me.”⁸⁴ The Rape of Nanking was too much for Minnie. Perhaps her self-righteousness is akin to her passion; she truly loved where she was and what she was called to do and believed she was making the right choices.

Minnie also usually tried to remain hopeful and find humor, even in the most dismal of days. On Sunday, December 12, 1937, she wrote, “Funny things do happen in all this distress and terror,” and recounted that Lin, the campus janitor, was hoarse from trying to convince the refugees to prohibit their children from relieving themselves on the floors and was angry that his requests were ignored. In April, though there were many other pressing needs, Minnie must have been feeling optimistic by showing her lighter side in an entry requesting fashion advice as her “Vogue Quarterly” no longer arrived and she was in dire need of a new style.⁸⁵ When the roses bloomed in May, she waxed poetic, “while there was so much to make us sad, yet the roses could not but make us glad.”⁸⁶

In the end, however, Minnie’s optimism was insufficient to prevent her breakdown. As seen in the entry from May 31, 1938, Minnie often dwelled upon the negative occurrences. “For the sake of the youth we must keep life normal, but it is difficult for me to laugh and make merry when I continually think of the battlefields and the cit(y).”⁸⁷ Minnie was hyper-aware of the anniversaries of events in her life, and often noted that she spent much time thinking about the past. On January 17, 1938 she noted that it had been a month since the worst night in Ginling’s history, and not coincidentally, took her life a year to the day she left China.

⁸⁴ Feng, 52.

⁸⁵ Vautrin, April 13, 1938.

⁸⁶ Vautrin, May 11, 1938.

⁸⁷ Vautrin, May 31, 1938.

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