

A CONVERSATION IN NANKING

In our first visit to Nanjing China in 1986 we happened by chance to spend an evening with Madam Fang Fei. She was the minister of education for the Nanjing district, and on that occasion she was the only woman we saw that was dressed in a skirt rather than the padded garb that all women wore.

The conversation began with my question. “I apologize for not remembering, but was the sacking of Nanjing in 1936 or 1937?” Madam Fang immediately became very enervated, confirming that it was in 1937, and then started telling me the whole story.

She was in an American mission school, and was 13 years old when the Japanese arrived. I was the same age when that event occurred.

It happened that on the day of the Japanese arrival her school was out, and the girls were in a neighboring village—a common practice. I had read the book “The Rape of Nanking” so I was aware of that awful moment in history, but Madam Fang began to tell me her first-hand experience. She said that 70,000 people were slaughtered that first day, and the rapes, tortures and beheadings were really beyond description. On that day she became a guerilla fighter, and never spent two consecutive nights in the same village until 1945. She carried guns, and killed Japanese whenever she had the opportunity.

Her husband was the governor of the Wuxi at the same time she was the minister of education for Nanjing, and how did that come about? He had been on the long march with Chairman Mao, and together they had credentials that were difficult to match.

Madam Fang told me with great glee about her official state visit to Australia. The Minister of Education of Australia was her host. Shortly after they met, he asked her how many students she had in her district. She replied “Twenty five million”. The Australian, living on a continent where the entire population was only twenty million, then told her that perhaps she was confused by the English, and the number was surely different that 25 million. It happened that she was taught American English in her mission school, and she used that as an excuse.

For then she said, “What I mean is twenty five followed by six zeros!” The Australian minister was now somewhat better educated!

We continued our conversation for about four hours, and discussed all manner of things. She wanted to hear all kinds of things about America, and of course was intensely interested in Los Alamos.

One of her stories was about the books that her students had in the schools. Traditionally all the school books used in China were required to have so many Chinese characters per page that the students had difficulty in reading them without magnifying glasses. She therefore had made a trip to Beijing and met with the proper authorities—I would have loved to have been there—and the result was that the Nanjing district was the only district that had readable school books. I’ll bet she wore the dress, too.

At the end of the evening, she told me that if there were ever anything whatsoever that she could do for me, all I had to do was to ask. I was very appreciative of the offer.

An American who was with us and who had heard most of the evening’s discussion was tremendously impressed by her words, and asked me what request I might have. I responded to him by saying “I really don’t have anybody that I need to have rubbed out!” This remark was meant to convey my appreciation for her eight years as a guerilla fighter, a feature of her life that I will never forget.

The time spent with Madam Fang was worth our cost of the entire trip to China.