

WILHEMINA “MINNIE” VAUTRIN

Minnie Vautrin, missionary educator in China, protected thousands of Chinese civilians during the Japanese invasion of the city of Nanking during World War II. Born on September 27, 1886, in Secor, Illinois, Wilhelmina was quickly nicknamed “Minnie.” Minnie trained as a teacher, graduating from Illinois State Normal University in 1907 and the University of Illinois Urbana-Campaign in 1912. Minnie graduated from Columbia University’s Teachers College with a master’s degree during a furlough in 1918.

Missionary Work

Minnie was encouraged by a pastor to use her passion for teaching to serve with the Foreign Christian Missionary Society. Despite strong resistance from her family, Minnie went to Hefei, Anhwei Province, China in the fall of 1912. Minnie worked vigorously to establish San Ching Girls’ Middle School, promoting education as a means to elevate the status of Chinese women.

In 1919, she became the acting president of Ginling College, the first college for women in China in Nanking (also known as Nanjing). She served as an administrator and teacher for the remainder of her service in China.

In the 1920s and 1930s China endured endless foreign and domestic conflicts that made life difficult and dangerous. The Japanese Imperial Army invaded Nanking on December 13, 1937. Most Westerners fled the country, leaving only 27 foreign nationals in the city, including Minnie. The following two-month period, later named the Nanking Massacre, ravaged the city as tens of thousands (some estimates reach as high as 300,000) of Chinese civilians were killed, homes were looted and burned, and women were brutally raped.

Minnie helped to establish the Nanking Christian War Relief Committee in response to the atrocities. Ginling College became a refugee shelter. Designed to accommodate 300 students, at the peak of the invasion more than 10,000 women and children lived within the walls of the college.

During the Japanese invasion and resulting occupation, Minnie personally fought to protect the city’s residents, running the Ginling refugee camp until May 1938. Because of her tireless efforts, the Nanking residents gave her a second nickname, “Goddess of Mercy.”

Minnie was awarded the Emblem of the Blue Jade by the Chinese government because of her humanitarian work.

Recognizing the enormous emotional and physical toil on her body and spirit, Minnie was sent back to the United States in April 1940 by her mission board to receive medical and psychiatric treatment.

Significant Contribution to Christianity in the United States

Minnie's love for the Chinese people encouraged others to pursue missionary work in the region. Her sacrificial love for the Chinese and eyewitness account of the events surrounding the Nanking Massacre earned her commendation from Christians and non-Christians alike. Her involvement also provided necessary proof of the Nanking Massacre. The extent of killings and brutality are still denied by the Japanese government.

Witnessing the devastation of Nanking took a terrible toll on Minnie, who was convinced she should have done more. On May 14, 1941, she committed suicide. Minnie's World War II diary was published posthumously as *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38*.

References and Resources

- Hu, Hua-ling. 2000. *American Goddess at the Rape of Nanking: The Courage of Minnie Vautrin*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Vautrin, Minnie. 2008. *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38*, Suping Lu, ed. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

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