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THE FALL OF NANKING

NANKING. A city long celebrated as one of China's greatest literary, artistic, and political centers, a city that served as the ancient capital of China from the third century to the sixth, and then intermittently after the fourteenth century. It was in Nanking that the canons of Chinese calligraphy and painting were set, that the four-tone system of the Chinese language was established, that some of the most famous Buddhist scriptures were edited and transcribed, and from which the classic "Six Dynasties" essay style (a blending of Chinese poetry and prose) emerged. It was in Nanking in 1842 that the treaty ending the Opium Wars was signed, opening China to foreign trade. And it was in Nanking in 1911 that the Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen became the first provisional president of his nascent Republic of China. Today it proudly holds his tomb.

Mention the name Nanking to any Chinese, and he or she will draw you a picture of

a city filled with ancient imperial palaces, lavish tombs, museums, and memorials. The picture would include the intricately carved stone statues of warriors and animals built during the Ming dynasty, the famous Drum Tower (Marco Polo saw the original one seven hundred years ago—the modern version was built three centuries later by a military leader who beat a huge drum from the tower to signal his soldiers), and the scenery on the outskirts of Nanking—temples perched on nearby mountains and hills, tea pavilions and lotus blossoms on its lakes, a massive bridge spanning the Yangtze River.

For centuries, water and mountain provided not only beauty for Nanking but military protection. The Yangtze River to the west and the Purple Mountain to the east shielded the city "like a coiling dragon and a crouching tiger," to borrow an ancient phrase describing Nanking's natural strength.

But sadly, three times Nanking has been an invaded city.

The first invasion occurred more than a millennium ago, at the end of the sixth century, when barbarian hordes demolished every important building in the city and even plowed up the land inside the walls. The second came more than one thousand years later, between 1853 and 1864, when the Taiping rebels captured the city. They were led by the fanatical leader Hong Xiuquan, who, after failing scholarly examinations that would have guaranteed him a place in the nation's elite, convinced himself and others that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ. The attempt he then spearheaded to overthrow the Qing dynasty eventually killed some twenty million Chinese over thirteen years. The rebels used Nanking as their capital for more than a decade until they were driven out, at which time they reduced the city to smoldering ruins and even smashed the Porcelain Pagoda, a multicolored tower of glazed tiles considered the most beautiful structure of its kind in China.

For the remainder of the nineteenth century, Nanking slumbered in peace and obscurity. When the Manchu emperors resumed their reign of China from the northern city of Peking, Nanking became nothing more than a cultural relic. It would not regain its importance until the Nationalists overthrew the

Qing and anointed Nanking as China's capital, which it officially became in 1928.

By 1937, the year of the Rape, the old Nanking, the Nanking of the Quing dynasty, was competing with the new Nanking of the Nationalists. Vestiges of the old China remained in the streets of the capital: the restaurant vendors balancing tiny rice bowls and teapots on baskets from poles, the hand weavers hunching over looms of silk in open-air factories, the noodle-shop workers stretching pasta by hand, the tinsmiths jangling their tin wares through the streets, the cobblers mending shoes before the doors of their customers, the candy made before the eyes of eager children clutching copper coins with square holes in the middle, the men with squeaking wheelbarrows piled so high with reeds that one could see neither the wheelbarrow nor the man. Yet the new was everywhere—in the asphalt roads that gradually replaced dirt and cobblestone paths, in the electric and neon lamps that replaced the last of the flickering gaslight, candle, and oil lamps, in the water that flowed from taps instead of being sold on the streets by the casketful. Honking buses and automobiles filled with military officials, bureaucrats, and foreign diplomats wove their way past ricksha pullers, mule carts laden with vegetables, and ambling crowds of pedestrians and animals—dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, even the occasional water buffalo or camel.

But part of the old seemed as if it would never change. Encircling the city was an ancient, immense stone wall built during the Ming dynasty, a wall that one missionary called one of the greatest wonders of the world. Surely, he proclaimed, if one were permitted to drive on top of it, that person would see one of the most spectacular views in China. From atop the wall at the southern tip of the city, one could see beyond crenellated gray battlements, the dust-gray brick of the working-class districts, the red and blue tile roofs of some of the more affluent homes, then, peering northward, some of the taller, modern buildings of the government district: the ministries and embassies built in Western-style architecture.

Gazing toward the northeast, one might detect the glistening white Sun Yat-sen mausoleum against the darker sweep of

Purple Mountain and dots of country villas owned by the wealthiest and most powerful citizens of Nanking. Then, looking to the northwest, one might catch glimpses of the industrial activity on the waterfront: the fingers of smoke from the factories, the inky smudge of the coal port, the steamships and gunboats near the dock, the tracks of the North China railway and the Shanghai-Nanking railway slashing across the city and horizon to intersect at the station in Hsiakwan, a northern suburb. Along the horizon one might see the giant, brawling, khaki-colored waters of the Yangtze River, curving west and north beyond the walls of Nanking.

In the summer of 1937 all these lustrous, cacophonous parts of Nanking lay under a blanket of somnolence. The air, soggy with humidity, had long earned the capital its title as one of "the three furnaces of China." The heat, mingled with the pungent odor of the night soil of nearby fields, drove many of the rich out of the city during the worst of the summer heat to seaside resorts. For those who remained, summer was a time of frequent naps, of lazy swishes of reed or bamboo fans, of houses draped with bamboo matting to shade them from the sun. In the evenings neighbors fled from the ovens of their homes by pulling lawn chairs into the streets to gossip the night away and then to sleep in the open air.

Few could predict that within months war would march by their very doorsteps—leaving their homes in flames and their streets drenched with blood.

On August 15, Chang Siao-sung, an instructor of psychology at Ginling College, had just lain back in bed for a nap when she heard the shriek of a siren. "Are they giving us an air-raid practice?" she thought. "Why didn't I see an announcement in the morning papers?"

When fighting had broken out between Chinese and Japanese forces in Shanghai earlier that month, forcing the Nanking government to ready itself for possible enemy attacks elsewhere as well, Chinese officials not only held practice air-raid drills in the city but ordered residents to camouflage their

houses and create bomb shelters. Across Nanking men painted black the red rooftops and white walls of their houses or dug holes in the ground to hide in. It was as if the city were preparing for a "funeral on a large scale," remembers Chang eerily.

So on August 15, when she heard a second signal, Chang took notice. But her friends in the house convinced her that it was just another practice, and so she again went back to bed, until she heard a dull rumbling sound, like that of a cannon. "Oh, it is thunder," one friend said and went back to reading her novel. Chang returned to bed, ashamed of being overly excited, until she heard the unmistakable sounds of machine-gun fire and airplanes overhead. Nanking was experiencing its first aerial bombardment in history.

For the next few months Nanking would endure dozens of Japanese air raids, forcing residents to hide in basements, trenches, and dugouts in the ground. Japanese pilots bombed the capital indiscriminately, hitting schools, hospitals, power plants, and government buildings and prompting thousands of people both rich and poor to flee the city.

Frank Xing, now a practitioner of Oriental medicine in San Francisco, recalls the hectic, nightmarish conditions under which he and his parents left Nanking during the autumn of 1937. Then a boy of eleven, he packed his precious collection of slingshots and marbles for the journey while his grandmother gave his father, a railway mechanic, bracelets of jade and silver to pawn in the event of future emergency. The train that bore his family to Hankow was so packed that hundreds of refugees unable to get seats sat on top of the compartments, while others also unable to get seats literally strapped themselves underneath the train, their bodies hanging only inches above the tracks. Throughout the journey Xing heard rumors that people had fallen off the train or rolled under the wheels. Xing himself barely survived the trip when Japanese bombers attacked the train, forcing his family to jump out and hide in a cemetery.

My own grandparents nearly separated forever during the evacuations from Nanking. In the autumn of 1937 my grandfather Chang Tien-Chun, a poet and journalist, was working for the Chinese government to instruct officials in Nationalist Party

philosophy. The Japanese bombardment of the capital forced him and his family to hide repeatedly in ditches covered by wooden planks and sandbags. By October he had decided it was unsafe for my grandmother (then a pregnant young woman in her early twenties) and my aunt (a one-year-old infant) to remain in Nanking. Both returned to my grandmother's home village in the countryside, a village near Ihsing, a city on the banks of Tai Hu Lake, between Nanking and Shanghai.

In November, on the anniversary of Sun Yat-sen's death, my grandfather left the city to see his wife and family. Returning to Nanking just a few days later, he found his entire work unit busy packing up in preparation for their evacuation from the city. Told that provisions had been made for the unit to leave by ship from the city of Wuhu, on the banks of the Yangtze River, my grandfather sent word to his family to meet him there immediately.

They almost didn't make it. With aerial bombing, the Japanese had destroyed the railway tracks between my grandmother's village and the city of Wuhu; the only route was by sampan through the intricate network of tiny waterways that laced the entire region.

For four long days my grandfather waited anxiously at the docks scanning boatload after boatload of war refugees. By the fourth day his family still had not arrived, leaving him with a choice that no man should ever be forced to make: board the next and final boat out of Wuhu, in the belief that his wife and daughter were not on their way to Nanking, or stay, in case they were, knowing full well that shortly thereafter the city would be overrun.

In despair, he screamed his beloved's name—"Yi-Pei!"—to the heavens. Then, like an echo from far away, he heard a reply. It came from one last sampan approaching the docks in the distance, a tiny sampan bearing his wife, his daughter, and several of my grandmother's relatives. My mother always told me that their reunion was a miracle.

Unlike my grandparents, many residents of Nanking remained in the city through much of November, some choosing to take a wait-and-see attitude, others staying because they were too old or too poor to do anything else. For them November brought consistently bad news—the battle had not gone well in Shanghai. Long files of Chinese soldiers, many of them mere boys, some no older than twelve, were returning from the battlefront, exhausted, wounded, and demoralized, marching in grim silence or riding in huge trucks draped with the banners of the Red Cross. Those who could took solace from the fact that new units of heavily armed troops could be seen marching through the streets to the waterfront, where they boarded junks towed by tugs on their way to the battlefront. Obviously, the fight was not over. Through rain and howling wind, small modern Chinese tanks rumbled from the capital toward Shanghai, next to lines of pack mules weighed down with cotton uniforms, blankets, rifles, and machine guns.

Later that month the dreaded news finally reached Nanking. Shanghai—"the New York City of China"—had fallen. More than two hundred thousand Japanese troops now stood between the ocean and the capital while some seven hundred thousand Chinese troops fell back in retreat. They brought the news no one wanted to hear. With Shanghai in ruins, the Japanese were now headed for Nanking.

The loss of Shanghai came as a blow to Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalists. Faced with the loss of China's largest metropolis, Chiang tried to resolve a difficult dilemma: whether to defend Nanking against the Japanese or move the entire capital to safer ground. In the end the Generalissimo decided to do both. But rather than stay and defend Nanking himself, he shifted the burden to someone else—a subordinate called Tang Sheng-chih.

The relationship between Chiang and Tang Sheng-chih was strange and highly complex. Neither really trusted the other—indeed, at different points in their lives the two men had been partners as well as the deadliest of rivals. During the Northern

Expedition, for example, as the Nationalists tried to unite the country, Tang helped Chiang wage battle against feudal warlords. But Tang had never shown Chiang any particular loyalty, and power struggles between the two men resulted twice in Tang's exile from China—once to Hong Kong and then again to Japan. In 1931, however, when the crisis erupted between the Chinese and Japanese over Manchuria, Chiang summoned Tang back into service in an effort to strengthen Chinese defenses. Tang rose swiftly through the Chinese military hierarchy, and by 1937 he had become Chiang's director of military training.

In November 1937, during several high-level military conferences on the issue of defending or abandoning Nanking, Tang, virtually alone among Chiang's advisers, spoke up in support of providing a strong defense. By defending Nanking, he argued, Chinese troops could simultaneously slow the advance of the Japanese army and give the rest of the Chinese military a chance to rest and reorganize.

But when Chiang asked who would stay and lead the defense, Tang and the other officials were quiet. Singling Tang out, Chiang presented him with an ultimatum: "Either I stay or you stay." In the presence of his peers, Tang undoubtedly felt he had no choice. "How can we let the Generalissimo stay?" Tang asked. He promised that he would remain in Nanking and fight to the death.

The decision to entrust Tang with the defense of Nanking made big news. On November 27, Tang gave a press conference to boost morale. Before reporters he delivered a rousing speech—vowing to live or die with Nanking. His speech was so passionate that when it ended, reporters gave him a big round of applause.

But some reporters noted that Tang also appeared to be extremely agitated. In fact, he had just recovered from a major illness, and in the words of one foreign correspondent, he seemed "dazed if not doped." He sweated so profusely that someone handed him a hot towel to dry his brow.

Perhaps Chiang knew that his adviser was in no shape to do battle with the seasoned Japanese military and had appointed him merely to make it appear as if the Chinese were really going to put up a strong defense. Or perhaps caution told Chiang to be ready with a second plan just in case. What we do know is that during the latter half of November the second plan went into effect. First Chiang ordered most government officials to move to three cities west of Nanking—Changsha, Hankow, and Chungking—stoking rumors among the few officials left behind that they had been abandoned to whatever fate the Japanese planned for them. Within days official-looking cars packed with luggage clogged the streets; then, just as quickly, such cars disappeared altogether. Buses and rickshas also left with the departing government officials, leaving the city with no public municipal transportation. Indeed, soon almost every truck was gone, even those trucks that were used primarily to transport rice from the countryside to Nanking. And then, in mid-November, fifty thousand Chinese troops arrived to take the place of departed government officials. Arriving from up-river ports, they first unloaded boxes and boxes of weapons on the waterfront and then started to occupy empty government buildings of their choosing. By December an estimated ninety thousand Chinese troops populated the Nanking area.

The troops transformed the face of Nanking. Chinese soldiers dug trenches in the streets, laid down underground telephone wire, and strung barbed wire over city intersections—intersections that began to resemble battlefields. The troops also fortified the city wall, installing machine-gun redoubts along the ancient battlements. They shut all gates except three, keeping narrow passageways open only for military transport. Gates were barricaded with sandbags twenty feet deep and reinforced with wood and angle iron. At least one of them was walled up entirely with concrete.

In early December the military also resolved to clear by fire a mile-wide battle zone around the entire circumference of the city walls, regardless of the cost and suffering involved. The cost was incalculable. Along the outskirts of the city, the inferno consumed petrol and ammunition, barracks, agricultural

research experimental laboratories, a police training school, and mansions in Mausoleum Park. In the countryside soldiers torched straw huts, farmhouses with thatched roofs, trees, bamboo groves, and underbrush. Not even major Nanking suburbs were spared. Troops herded residents from Hsiakwan and districts around the South Gate into the city walls before incinerating their neighborhoods. People whose houses had been targeted for destruction were told to move out within hours or risk being arrested as spies. The military justified the burning as a strategic move to eliminate any structure of potential use to the invader. But one foreign correspondent pointed out that charred walls could serve the Japanese almost as well as actual buildings for shelter against ammunition. He speculated that the fire was really "an outlet for rage and frustration" for the Chinese—a desire to leave the Japanese with little more than scorched earth.

And so a city prepared for invasion. Anyone and anything with the strength, the judgment, the money, or the opportunity to leave began to get out. Whole museums were packed and carted away. On December 2, hundreds of boxes of Palace Museum treasures—practically the whole of China's cultural heritage—were loaded onto a boat for safe storage outside the city. Six days later, on December 8, Chiang Kai-shek, his wife, and his adviser fled the city by plane. There was no longer any doubt. The Japanese siege of Nanking was about to begin.

For decades one of the mysteries of the Rape of Nanking was how, with so many soldiers in place, the city of Nanking fell in just four days, on the evening of December 12, 1937. The troops, after all, possessed enough ammunition to last through at least five months of siege. As a result, many survivors, journalists, and historians attributed the collapse to a loss of nerve among the Chinese soldiers. They also branded Tang a villain who abandoned his troops when they most needed him.

Later history based on newer documents suggests a somewhat different picture. During the battle of Shanghai, the Japanese air force of almost three thousand planes dwarfed

the tiny Chinese air force of three hundred. In other ways the Chinese were no match aerially for the Japanese. During the battle of Shanghai, Italian-trained Chinese pilots wreaked havoc on the city, dropping bombs near Western ships and even on crowded streets and buildings within the international settlement.

But even a bad air force is better than no air force. And that was the situation presented to Tang. On December 8, the day Chiang and his advisers left the city, so too did the entire Chinese air corps. Tang fought the next four days without the benefit of any strategic aerial data on Japanese movements, rendering even the expensive Chinese fort guns on the hills and mountains around Nanking much less effective.

Second, the government officials who moved to Chungking took with them most of the sophisticated communications equipment; thus, one part of the army could not talk to another.

Third, the troops did not come from the same regions and literally had trouble speaking to each other. One paramedic in Nanking recalled that the Chinese military doctors spoke Cantonese while the Chinese soldiers spoke Mandarin, a situation that created endless confusion in the hospitals.

Fourth, many of the "soldiers" in this army became soldiers overnight, having been kidnapped or drafted against their will into the army from the countryside. A substantial number had never held a gun in their hands before Nanking. Because bullets were scarce, few were wasted teaching these recruits how to shoot. Of those soldiers who had previous experience, many had just come back from Shanghai. Tired, hungry, and sick, most were much too exhausted to finish the necessary preparation work of building barricades and digging trenches in the city.

Worst of all, Chinese soldiers felt little sense of cohesiveness or purpose. In a battle report about conditions in Nanking, a Chinese military officer noted that whenever troops occupied an area, they tended to idle about rather than take the initiative to help other troops engaged in nearby battles with the Japanese. The commanding officers, apparently, were no better.

They did not trust each other, the report observed, and for this reason the Japanese were able to move from one area to another, defeating Chinese armies one by one.

On December 9, Japanese airplanes began dropping leaflets near Nanking written by Matsui Iwane, one of the three Japanese generals. The best way to "protect innocent civilians and cultural relics in the city," the message read, was to capitulate. The message promised that the Japanese would be "harsh and relentless to those who resist" but "kind and generous to noncombatants and to Chinese troops who entertain no enmity to Japan." It demanded that the city surrender within twenty-four hours, by noon the next day, "otherwise all the horrors of war will be let loose."

Publicly Tang expressed outrage at the terms of the ultimatum. Throwing the leaflet to the ground, he dictated two orders that were distributed among the troops. The first order forbade the army to retreat. "Our army must fight to defend every inch of the front line," the order read. "If anyone does not follow this order and retreats, he will be punished severely." The second order prohibited any military group from using boats privately to cross the river. If any military units possessed boats, they were required to turn them over to the transportation department. Tang designated the 78th Army as the unit responsible for directing and handling transportation matters and warned that any military personnel found using boats for private purposes would be punished.

Privately, however, Tang negotiated for a truce. Despite his original promise to fight to the last man, he seemed eager to do anything to avoid a showdown in the city. Supporting him in this stance were the few Americans and Europeans still in the city. These selfless individuals, about whom we will learn more later, had decided to remain in Nanking to do what they could to help and had created the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone. One of their first steps was to cordon off an area of the city and declare it the Nanking Safety Zone, or the International Safety Zone, with the understanding that

anyone within the zone of two and a half square miles, Chinese or non-Chinese, was off-limits to the Japanese. Now, in a final effort to save lives, they offered to try to arrange a truce with the Japanese. Their plan was to suggest a three-day cease-fire, during which the Japanese could keep their present positions and march into Nanking peacefully while the Chinese troops withdrew from the city. Tang agreed to the proposed truce and asked the committee to send a message from him to Chiang Kai-shek through the U.S. embassy. The plan was transmitted by radio on the USS *Panay* gunboat to the Generalissimo. Chiang promptly rejected it.

On December 10, the Japanese waited for the city to surrender. At midday two Japanese staff officers stood outside the Mountain Gate in the eastern wall to see whether the Chinese government would send out a delegation with the flag of truce. When none arrived, the Japanese high command ordered a furious bombardment of the city.

The next few days saw intense fighting between the Chinese and Japanese troops around Nanking. The Japanese dropped bombs on the city and pounded the walls with heavy artillery fire. Tang would later reveal the gravity of the situation near certain landmarks and gates of the city in a long, rambling, and desperate telegram to Chiang Kai-shek:

> From the 9th to the 11th of December the Japanese forced their way through Guanghuamen three times, first the military training corps tried to resist them, then the 156th division bitterly fought back, killing many of the enemy and holding the gate. Starting noon on the 11th, bad news came frequently from the Yuhuatai area, Andemen, Fongtaimen fell to the enemy, ordered immediately the 88th division to shrink the front-line, coordinate with the 74th army, 71st army, rapidly transferred 154th division to help.

But worse news awaited Tang, and this time the bad news would come not from the enemy's successes but from Chiang himself. At noon on December 11, General Gu Zhutong placed a telephone call to Tang's office. Orders had come directly from Chiang, Gu informed Tang, for a massive retreat of Tang's

forces. Tang himself was to hurry to Pukow, the site of a ferry and railway terminal that lay across the river from Nanking, where another general would wait to pick him up and bring him to safety.

Tang expressed shock. Aside from the fact that he was being asked to abandon his troops, an unattractive alternative for any leader, he had another very real problem—his troops were at that moment engaged in furious fighting. He informed Gu that the Japanese had already penetrated the troops' front lines; an orderly retreat was not even a possibility. It would readily turn into a rout.

"I can't worry about that," Gu Zhutong said. "Anyhow, you have to retreat by tonight."

When Tang again detailed the likely consequences of a sudden and hasty retreat, Gu reminded him that he, Tang, had been personally ordered by Chiang to "cross the river tonight." Leave a subordinate behind to handle the situation if you have to, Gu told Tang, but "you must cross the river tonight," he repeated.

Impossible, Tang said. The earliest he could cross the Yangtze was the next night. Gu warned him to leave town as soon as possible, for the situation with the enemy had grown urgent.

That afternoon Tang received a telegram from Chiang confirming the order: "Commander-in-Chief Tang, if you cannot maintain the situation you should take the opportunity to retreat in order to preserve and reorganize [the army] for future counterattack. —Kai. 11th." Later that day the distressed Tang received a second telegram from Chiang, again urging retreat.

Unable to hold the line and under pressure, Tang complied. It was a decision that resulted in one of the worst disasters of Chinese military history.

At 3:00 A.M. on December 12, Tang held a predawn meeting at his home. As his vice commanders and top staff gathered before him, Tang told them sadly that the front had fallen, that there was no way for them to defend the gates of the city, and

that Chiang Kai-shek had ordered the troops to retreat. He told his subordinates to prepare for the retreat by printing copies of the order and other related documents. That afternoon, at 1:00 P.M., the orders were distributed among the Chinese military.

But then electrifying reports reached Tang. Tang hoped to remove his troops via the Yangtze River. Now he learned that the Japanese navy was minesweeping the river to the east of the island of Baguazhou and steaming its way to Nanking. Its arrival would block that escape route, the last from the city. With the situation dire, Tang again approached the International Committee for the Nanking Safety Zone on 5 Ninghai Road, asking Eduard Sperling, a German businessman, for help in negotiating a truce with the Japanese. Sperling agreed to take a flag and message to the Japanese but later reported to Tang that General Matsui had refused his offer.

That afternoon, just minutes before his commanders gathered for a second meeting, Tang watched from the window of his house as an entire city took flight, the streets jammed with cars, horses, and refugees—the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor. Anyone with half a brain was determined to get out while he still could. At 5:00 P.M. the meeting began. It lasted only ten minutes. Many of the top military officials did not attend because communication between the field commanders and central command had all but collapsed. Others never received notification of the meeting because they had assessed the situation for themselves and run away.

The Japanese, Tang told those gathered in his home, had already broken through the gates of the city and penetrated the wall in three places. "Do you still have any confidence to hold the defense line?" he asked the group. Although he waited several minutes for a response, the room remained silent.

After this pause, Tang calmly discussed strategies for retreat. The evacuation would start within minutes—at 6:00 P.M.—and last until 6:00 A.M. the next day. One portion of the army—the 36th Division and the military police—would cross the river from Hsiakwan and gather at a designated village on the other side. The rest of the army, he announced, would have to force its way out of the Japanese encirclement, with the survivors

congregating at the southern region of the Anhwei province. Weapons, ammunition, and communications equipment left behind were to be destroyed, and all roads and bridges in the path of the retreating army burned.

Later in the same meeting, Tang modified his order. He informed his men that if the 87th Division, 88th Division, 74th Army, and military training corps could not break through the Japanese encirclement, then they too should try to cross the river. Tang now gave five divisions the authority to cross the Yangtze River—doubling the original number of men involved in the operation. That evening Tang would himself journey to the docks. It would be a journey he remembered for the rest of his life.

Not surprisingly, the order to retreat threw the Chinese military into an uproar. Some officers ran about the city haphazardly informing anyone they came into contact with to pull out. These soldiers took off. Other officers told no one, not even their own troops. Instead, they saved their own hides. Their soldiers continued to fight the Japanese; thinking they were witnessing a mass desertion when they saw other troops fleeing, they machine-gunned hundreds of their fleeing comrades in an effort to stop them. In the haste and confusion to leave the city, at least one Chinese tank rolled over countless Chinese soldiers in its path, stopping only when blown up by a hand grenade.

Even in the larger, tragic scheme of things, the retreat had its comic moments. As soldiers grew desperate to blend into the populace and thereby elude capture, they broke into shops to steal civilian clothes and undressed in the open. The streets soon filled not only with half-naked soldiers but with half-naked police officers, who had discarded their uniforms to avoid being mistaken as soldiers. One man roamed about wearing nothing but his underwear and a top hat, probably stolen from the home of a wealthy government official. In the early stages of the retreat, when a semblance of order remained, entire sections of the Chinese army were shedding

their uniforms, changing into civilian clothes, and marching in formation, simultaneously. But when the retreat turned into a rout, the scramble for clothes grew urgent. Soldiers were actually seen throwing themselves on pedestrians and ripping clothes off their backs.

There was only one way to get out of the city safely without encountering the Japanese, and that was through the northern harbor to the Yangtze River, where a fleet of junks were waiting for those who could get there first. In order to reach the harbor, soldiers had to first move up the main artery of Chungshan Road, and then pass through the northwest gate of the city, called the Ichang, or Water Gate, before they could enter the northern port suburb of Hsiakwan.

But before the gate lay a scene of almost unbelievable congestion. One problem was that thousands of soldiers, many in trucks, cars, and horse-drawn wagons, were trying to squeeze themselves through the narrow seventy-foot tunnel. The trickle of men had turned into a river by 5:00 P.M., and a flood by late evening, as everyone tried to funnel through the tiny opening of the gate. Another problem was that the retreating soldiers had discarded countless armaments and supplies to lighten their load for the journey across the river, and the resulting heaps of hand grenades, buses, machine guns, coats, shoes, and helmets near the gate of the city blocked traffic. A barricade that had been built near the gate also blocked half the road. The area was ripe for disaster.

Tang witnessed much of this chaos from the window of his chauffeured black car on his way to the docks. As the car maneuvered through tangles of people, he heard pedestrians curse him. How can you ride in a car at a time like this? they yelled, unaware that the passenger in the car was Tang Sheng-chih. Tang pretended not to hear and shut his eyes as the car inched turtlelike to its final destination. He was supposed to arrive at the docks by 6:00 P.M., but it was 8:00 P.M. before he finally got there.

Absolute bedlam greeted Tang at the riverfront. Military officers were arguing with each other over which pieces of equipment to destroy and which to ferry across the Yangtze River,

while soldiers tried to balance tanks on rows of boats bound together. Much of it capsized and sank anyway.

As the night progressed, the soldiers focused on getting themselves across and abandoned the tanks and equipment. The scene grew violent as boats grew scarce, and in the end some ten thousand men would fight over two or three vessels, struggling to cram themselves aboard or to scare off others by firing shots in the air. Terrified crews tried to ward off the surging mob by swinging axes down on the fingers of soldiers who clung to the sides of their junks and sampans.

Innumerable men died trying to cross the river that night. Many never even made it past the gate. That evening a fire broke out on Chungshan Road, and the flames swept through heaps of ammunition, engulfing houses and vehicles. Horses ensnarled in traffic panicked and reared, heightening the confusion of the mob. The terror-mad soldiers surged forward, their momentum pushing hundreds of men into the flames and hundreds more into the tunnel, where they were trampled underfoot. With the gate blocked and an inferno raging nearby, the soldiers who could break free from the mob made a wild rush to climb over the walls. Hundreds tore their clothing into strips and knotted them with belts and puttees to make rope ladders. One after another, they scaled the battlements and tossed down rifles and machine guns from the parapets. Many fell and plummeted to their deaths.

When the last boats disappeared, soldiers dove into the waters on makeshift flotation devices, hugging or sitting on wooden railroad tracks, logs, boards, buckets, bathtubs, or doors stolen from nearby houses. When the last pieces of wood disappeared, many attempted to swim across, meeting almost certain death.

Tang and two vice commanders boarded a tiny coal-driven launch and waited until 9:00 P.M. for two more military staff members who never arrived. From the launch Tang would have heard the noise and screams of people fighting with each other, mingled with the louder punctuated sounds of Japanese cannon fire. Then there was the sight, the sight of Nanking on fire. The conflagration lit the dark sky bright.

One can only imagine the thoughts of the humiliated Tang as his launch moved across the river. His last glimpse of Nanking was of a city in flames, its people frantically trying to save themselves, his own troops hanging onto driftwood to stay afloat in the dark cold waters of the Yangtze. He would later tell friends that while he had fought in hundreds of battles over twenty years, he had never experienced a day as dark as that one.