

John Rabe, the Nazi Leader, Who Became “the Living Buddha of Nanking”

Xijing Luo

Clifford International School, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 511495 China

Abstract: *During the World War II, John H.D Rabe, a Nazis German business man, saved hundreds thousands of Chinese under the gun of Japanese army during the Rape of Nanking. The article aim to answer the question: Why, John Rabe, stood as the opposite of Japan—German’s ally, risked his life to save those Chinese? Through reading and analyzing Rabe’s diaries, we may conclude that there are several explanations which related to his political position, life experience in China, love of Chinese culture, and personal ties for the question. War is a game of inhumanity, cruelty and indifference. Even in these dark times, there is a humanist who maintains his reverence for life and his cultural zeal, and who stands firm at the point of a gun, even at the cost of risking his life.*

Keywords: *World War II, Nanjing Massacre, Nazi Germany, Chinese Culture*

1. Introduction

In the history of every war, there always have been heroes who emerge in the darkest of times, bringing a glimmer of hope to the prosecuted. In the face of an attack on the fundamental values of humanity, people push aside the differences between race, gender, nationality, and politics and unite under one banner. The Rape of Nanking, which happened in 1937, is considered “The Forgotten Holocaust”.^[1] From the ashes of this atrocity rose a surprising and unfortunately forgotten hero: John H.D. Rabe, a member of the German National Socialist party. How could a member of the Nazi party perform an act of such heroism, and one that was not even designed to save Aryan lives? In this paper, I will argue that Rabe, in addition to having many experiences with Chinese himself, was a product of a Nazi Party that was respectful of Chinese civilization.

2. The Nanjing Massacre

On December 13, 1937, after the fall of Nanking, the Imperial Japanese army carried out a brutal massacre. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese teenagers were rounded up and moved to the suburb of Nanking. Under the shade of China’s proud and ancient metropolis, their fates were sealed. The most fortunate ones were shot point blank by the war criminals, others were doused in petrol and burned alive, and the most unfortunate ones were bayoneted to death as live target practices for Japanese soldiers. For months, the stench of the dead bodies filled the city, the blood of the soldiers seeped into the waterways and dyed the Yangtze River red. Years later the International Military Tribunal of the Far East estimated that more than 260,000 civilians died in the course of just a few weeks.^[1] A number that surpassed even Hitler’s genocide in terms of deaths per day.

However, the statistical data does not even begin to paint the whole picture. The chilling stories brought this atrocity to a whole other level. On top of using civilians as the live targets for practice, there were “killing contest” held in the army, with the prize for staining your hand red with the blood of the innocent being a bottle of red wine. Moreover, the Japanese soldiers held wailing babies on the tip of the knife before throwing them alive in the boiling water.^[1] And thousands of women were raped then killed by the soldiers to fulfill their sense of accomplishment, hence the name, the Rape of Nanking.



Figure 1 News report about the killing contest during the WWII (reported in the Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun on December 13, 1937) [2]

3. John H.D Rabe's life experience and the International Safety Zone

Out of these atrocities emerged a safe haven, the International Safety Zone, established by John H.D. Rabe, a citizen of Nazi Germany — Japan's ally. Born in Hamburg, Germany, on November 23, 1882, Rabe worked in Africa for a few years before moving to China in 1908, where he found employment at the Peking office of the Siemens China Company. Here in his new home, Rabe found love, got married, and had children. In 1931, he was transferred to the Nanking office, selling electrical equipment to the Chinese government. After he moved to Nanking, he became a supporter of Nazism and the representative leader for Nazi Party in Nanking. Soon he became the pillar of the Nanking German community and administered his own German school. During his time in Nanking, he began to organize his diary about life in Peking, which became known as Peking, Wie Ich es Sah. The book introduced Peking's places of interest and the lifestyle of people in. After years of mingling with the Chinese people, he came and learned to respect Chinese people and the Chinese culture. Then in 1937, before the Japanese army entered the city of Nanking, the Americans and Europeans in Nanking decided to establish the International Safety Zone and elected John Rabe as its president. After being elected as the president of the International Safety Zone, Rabe accepted the position without hesitation; he wanted to help Chinese people even if it meant that his life was in danger. When a Japanese captain asked him why he stayed in China and protect Chinese people, Rabe answered: "I have lived in China for more than thirty years. My children and grandchildren were all born here. I have happy life and successful career here. The Chinese have always been good to me, even during the war." [3]

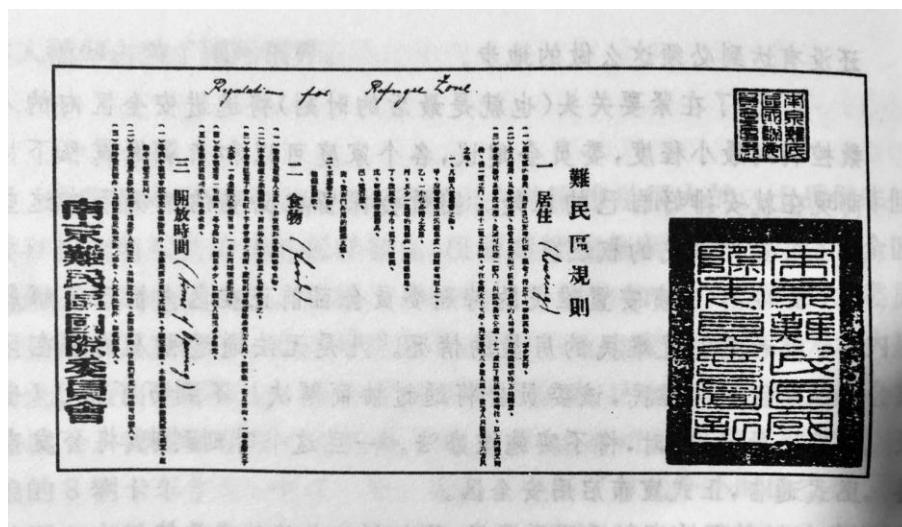


Figure 2 Notification of International Safety Zone [3]

4. Nazi Germany's attitude towards Chinese

While it seemed paradoxical that a Nazi would save so many non-Aryans, but the Nazis were surprisingly tolerant of the Chinese. Although they believed that the German "Aryan" race was threatened by the inherently inferior races: Jews, Roma, Africans, and Slavs, he respected the Chinese and Japanese culture. During World War II, Nazi Germany established military and economic ties with China and Japan. Hitler showcases this side of him in *The Political Testament of Adolf Hitler*, he wrote: "Pride in one's race – and that does not imply contempt for other races – is also a normal and healthy sentiment. I have never regarded the Chinese or the Japanese as being inferior to ourselves. They belong to ancient civilizations, and I admit freely that their history is superior to our own. They have the right to be proud of their past, just as we have the right to be proud of the civilization to which we belong. Indeed, I believe the more steadfast the Chinese and the Japanese remain in their pride of race, the easier I shall find it to get on with them." [3] Chinese and Japanese were seen as "honorary Aryans", Hitler saw China and Japan as equals to Germany. To John Rabe, who lived in China for many years and affectionately called China the host country, the choice to save a race he respected became clear.

5. Rabe's obsession with Chinese culture

Before John Rabe moved to Nanking, he lived in Peking for twenty-three years; during he lived in Peking, Rabe was interest in Chinese lifestyle and became obsessed with Chinese culture. In his diary *Wie Ich es Sah*, he gave a detailed account of Peking's folk customs, architectural attractions, and civic life. Those chapters introduce the living customs of people in Peking in the 20th century. Even before he moved to China, he admired it from afar, burying himself in books detailing Chinese culture. Once while speaking with his friend, he mentioned that: "Affluent Chinese eat bird's nests for breakfast, they eat meals with bamboo chopsticks." When he friend shocked with his knowledge about China and asked if he went to China before, he answered: "No, but I will go." [4] Though Rabe was born in the West, his heart lied with the East. His friend Erwin Victor once said that even though Rabe spoke a different language to those Chinese, he thought the same way they do. [5]

5.1 Rabe's Collection of Chinese Curio and paintings

Rabe not only admired Ancient Chinese culture, he also took a part of it into his home. Rabe has a passion for mobile Chinese curio, he has collected many Chinese curios and brought them back to Germany. When he was in Peking, he often goes to the antique stalls in temple square of Longfu Temple. Foreigners were always surrounded by Chinese and use their own unique way of bargaining with vendors. Rabe said he felt proud when he bought his favorite curio for half the original price. [4] In addition to the Chinese curio, Rabe also loved collecting Chinese watercolor. He bought a collection of watercolor portraits on a antique shop on Wangfujing Street and donated them to the Hamburg Anthropological Museum.



Figure 3 Rabe's Watercolor Collection [6]

5.2 Appreciation for dynamic art — Chinese opera

In addition to the static art such as paintings and curios, Rabe also enjoyed dynamic art. He mentioned Chinese opera in the chapter of Peking folk custom. Usually, foreigners who listening to opera would be disappointed because they cannot understand what is being sung. To Rabe, he did not need to understand

the meaning of the words, but knew the meaning of every movement of the actor. Through understanding the actor's move gestures – a universal Language – opera contains profound connotation that Rabe called it “the art that foreigners cannot enjoy.”[4]

5.3 Rabe's Admiration for Chinese literature

His love for the Chinese arts was only matched with his admiration for the Chinese language and their literature. He recorded twelve different ways of writing “shou” , and felt surprised that there are more than one hundred ways to write this character while they all have the same meaning: longevity. Yet each of them still held a unique purpose that enhanced the Chinese language above and beyond. Moreover, Rabe gave himself a Chinese name called “Ailapei” and carved it on a wooden stamp. When he lived in Peking, his Chinese friends always called his Chinese name rather than “Rabe”, even in letter, Rabe's Chinese colleague wrote: Dear Ailapei.[6] As his understanding of the language grew, so did his appreciation of Chinese philosophy, Rabe admired Confucius, a famous Chinese philosopher, from the bottom of his heart. He wrote in his diary: “The Chinese held Confucius and his teachings in such reverence that they worship him as a god. Although Confucius lived 2,900 years ago, the admiration and respect of the Chinese people has miraculously remained, so whatever form it takes, we should not laugh at it.”[4] Through the book *Peking, Wie Ich es Sah* which was diary of John H.D. Rabe, we can see that Rabe is a very open man, even though his image looks like a stereotype of a German businessman, he became a part of Chinese culture, a link between the East and the West.



Figure 4 Rabe's wooden stamp bears his Chinese name[6]

6. Rabe's personal ties in China

On top of his respect for Chinese culture, it is also important to recognize that Rabe's personal ties. At Nanking, Rabe had developed ties with the Chinese employees at his company, and thus felt duty bound to save them, too. In September of 1937, Rabe was on his vacation in Beidaihe. After he heard that the Japanese would attack, Rabe immediately went back to Nanking despite the long and harsh journey. He mentioned in his diary: “ I certainly did not come back from Beidaihe where is safer than Nanking out of an interest in adventure.....There is a moral problem, I am a decent German businessman. Our Chinese servants and staffs, together with their families of about 30 people, were looking at the “master”. So far I have been unable to betray the trust of others. Of course they want to go back to North China, their hometowns, but there are also wars in North China. So they would like to follow me.”[2]

7. Conclusion

To most of Chinese, the name of John H.D. Rabe is assuredly the symbol of heroism, “the living Buddha of Nanking”, the great president of the International Safety Zone, the savior of millions. Not only was he a symbol of heroism, he is also a symbol of East-Westcoexistence. Rabe was a researcher and lover of Chinese culture. While it may be hard to image a Nazi Germany risking his life against an ally to protect others, the Chinese became his people. It follows that feelings for a place can transcend gender, race, and nationality. John Rabe, who always called China “host that being kind to him for more than 30 years”, now rests in the hearts of a billion grateful Chinese.

References

- [1] Chang.I.(2015) *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. China CITIC Press, Beijing. pp. XI-205
- [2] Shinju S.(1937) ‘Incredible Record’ - Mukai 106 - 105 Noda — Both 2nd Lieutenants Go Into Extra Innings. *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun*. December 13, 1937. pp.1
- [3] Rabe.J.(2009) *Rabe’s Diary*. Jiangsu People’s publishing House, Nanjing. pp.0-588
- [4] Bormann.M.(2009) *The Political Testament Of Adolf Hitler*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Scotts Valley. pp. 0-76
- [5] Liang.Y.(2005) *Rabe’s Diary in Beijing*. *Historical Archives.*, 03:133-136.
- [6] Rabe.J.(2009) *Peking, Wie Ich es Sah*. Dongfang Press, Beijing. pp.0-213