

# A SKETCH OF A FEMALE SERIAL KILLER: TAIWAN'S ONLY FEMALE DEATH ROW PRISONER AND THE MURDERS THAT SHOCKED A NATION

## 一位女性殺人犯的素描：她如何謀弒母親、婆婆與丈夫

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*Convicted of killing three family members and sentenced to death, Taiwan's only female death-row inmate speaks through interviews, courtroom records, and her personal autobiography. Journalist and author Hu Mu-Ching frames these documents with her extensive research, dissecting the patriarchal assumptions about women and crime that informed the public image of "the daughter-in-law who made the earth tremble".*

Twenty years ago, Lin Yu-Ju, currently Taiwan's only female death-row prisoner, committed three murders that shook the entire nation. She began by murdering her own mother. The resulting NTD 5 million life insurance payout served to whet her appetite, and within the span of a few months she killed her mother-in-law and husband, both by administering toxic injections. Her story created a media frenzy in which she was portrayed as a cash-crazed murderess who would stop at nothing to acquire more wealth. Soon she was soon



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known as “the daughter-in-law who made the earth tremble” – but was the story true? Was she truly a cold-blooded killer who felt nothing for her own kin, and brought disaster to the doorstep of her unwitting and innocent family?

Veteran journalist Hu Mu-Ching spent two-and-a-half years in communication with Lin Yu-Ju – via written correspondence and numerous in-person interviews – to finally break through her defenses and gather the information needed to write this book. All the while, she questioned her own motivations, paying close attention to questions of journalistic ethics and potential conflicts of interest. Astoundingly, the author received permission to use Lin Yu-Ju’s autobiography, now available exclusively in this book. Therein, Lin Yu-Ju recounts a difficult childhood at home alone while her parents worked, and a rebellious adolescence. Most importantly, she describes her relationship with her husband, the heir apparent of a wealthy family, and a gambler who often beat her. However, there are numerous discrepancies between Lin Yu-Ju’s autobiography and the accounts given in previous media interviews. Her telling mixes fact and fiction, and it is difficult to discern one from the other.

In addition to Lin Yu-Ju’s letters, interviews, and autobiography, this work of meticulous reporting includes extensive original research sourced from interviews with Lin Yu-Ju’s family and friends, the insurance case manager who handled the payouts, the police who investigated the murders, and the psychiatrists and lawyers who worked with Lin Yu-Ju after her arrest. The author also documents the entire process of the interactions with prison administrators who allowed her access to Lin Yu-Ju.

Throughout this daunting endeavor, the author questioned her own motivations: what exactly was she hoping to uncover? She writes that she never hoped to overturn the case, but felt compelled to understand how the public image of the “daughter-in-law who made the earth tremble” was in some degree a product of patriarchal social structures and narratives that influenced the courtroom account of her crimes. More than just a rare book-length dissection of a true-crime case from Taiwan, *A Sketch of a Female Serial Killer* is an outstanding work of reportage whose meticulous research, fluid prose, and fine-grained analysis clarifies the role of gender-bias in

our understanding of criminal behavior, giving curious readers much food for thought.

## Hu Mu-Ching 胡慕情

Born in 1983, Hu Mu-Ching has worked as a reporter for a number of news agencies, focusing on the environment, human rights, and social issues. She has been awarded the Vivian Wu Journalism Award, the Foundation for Excellent Journalism Award, and the Society for News Design Creativity Award. Her work has received the Golden Tripod Non-fiction Publication Award. Currently director of interviews for Mirror Fiction's Cultural Division, she also occasionally writes book and film criticism.

# A SKETCH OF A FEMALE SERIAL KILLER: TAIWAN'S ONLY FEMALE DEATH ROW PRISONER AND THE MURDERS THAT SHOCKED A NATION

By Hu Mu-Ching

Translated by Laura Buice

## The Beginning: Her, An Earth-Shattering Daughter-in-Law

### Murdered

A silent murder still needs to be covered up. But she hadn't bought a shovel, nor prepared any burlap bags. Calmly, she looked around at the apartment. She tried to recall happy memories with her husband, Liu Yu-hang, but she could not. Instead, the phrase, "You get what you asked for" was bouncing around nonstop in her head. She opened the drawer, looking for the Seroxat her psychiatrist had prescribed. She ground a large number of pills into fine powder and brought it over to the kitchen, which was oppressively hot year-round. There she dug out the dehydrated sodium acetate that she used for preserving food and then went out back to grab the insecticides her mother-in-law Cheng Hui-sheng used when gardening, which contained Methomyl. Finally, she entered their only child's room and grabbed the methanol she used to remove stains and a bottle of cough syrup.

She twisted the cap off the cough syrup, turned it upside down over the kitchen sink, and watched it slowly empty down the drain, and into sewers already filled with stomach-churning scents of rot and decay. The sweet, fragrant pink syrup was used to cover the bitter taste of medicine, but that wasn't necessary now. She filled the sticky transparent plastic bottle with the pain medicine, sodium acetate, insecticide, and all her hopes. She left the house and went to the pharmacy where she bought a syringe before driving to see Liu Yu-hang at Puli Christian Hospital.

Expressionless, she walked into Liu Yu-hang's room, room 1505. Liu Yu-hang asked for his medicine in a hoarse voice. She obediently pulled the sleeping pills from her backpack and handed them to him. He swallowed three pills. Within three minutes he was asleep and snoring. Keeping an eye on her husband reclining on the hospital bed, she pulled the syringe out of her

bag. She filled it with the concoction she had mixed at home and pushed it into Liu Yu-hang's IV line. Robotically, she repeated these actions again and again.

When she came back to herself, the bottle was completely empty. She did not know what time it was. She left the room in tears, discarded the syringe, drove home, and cleaned up. She sat in the living room and stared at the clock. She knew the hospital would call to notify her. She knew she would inevitably pay for killing her husband with her life. But first, before her trial, she, Lin Yu-ju, made up her mind to hold a grand funeral for her husband.

## **Suspected and Arrested**

To this day, if you mention Liu Yu-hang's death to the people of Puli, they remember it vividly. For Puli, it was an unusual death; there has not been a comparable murder in the fourteen years since. At first locals thought Liu Yu-hang's death was a tragedy: in three short months, the Liu family had lost both Liu Yu-hang and his mother, one right after the other. It was not until the funeral that rumors started flying.

Puli is located in Nantou County in the central part of Taiwan. Landlocked, it sits in the Central Mountain Range, hemmed in by the Paiku branch of Hehuan Mountain and the Tahengping branch of the Xueshan Range. The city is not well-served by transportation, which has greatly slowed its development. Shielded by the mountains, Puli sits in a star-shaped basin with valleys radiating out from the city. Winter is not too cold, summer is not too hot, clouds and rain are abundant, and strong winds are scarce. The charming climate has given Puli a reputation for having "green hills and clear waters".

During the first half of the twentieth century, Puli, like all of Taiwan, was under Japanese rule. Industry developed in accord with the needs of the Japanese motherland, prioritizing the extraction of forestry and agricultural resources. Camphor was harvested from the mountain forests; sugar cane and rice were planted on the hills and plains. Towns developed small factories to complement the farming industry. In the fourteenth year of the Showa Era, towards the end of Japanese occupation, Puli's streets were packed with fifty-three factories. Almost half were rice mills, which were very common in Taiwan at the time. There were also paper mills, tile-making factories, lumber mills, flour factories, sugar factories, tea factories, tofu factories, etc., no more than three each. After the occupation ended and the Chunghsiung highway was constructed, tourism industries started to develop in Hehuan Mountain and nearby regions. Furthermore, as industrialization slowly progressed, Puli became the transport hub for the central mountains, and the streets gradually filled with various food stalls.

Liu Ching-hsun, Liu Yu-hang's grandfather, learned to make tofu during the Japanese occupation. At first, he only made tofu and dried tofu. Later, after observing the vegetarians in Puli's numerous Buddhist temples, he researched and developed an herbal brine for producing stinky tofu, and began selling his tofu products wholesale. Luckily, he was the first, and since Puli's remote location made it difficult for competitors to bring their products to market, Ching-hsun

immediately had a monopoly. Anyone buying tofu in the area had to buy from him, and there is evidence that his tofu was selling as far away as Caotun, a town forty kilometers away.

Liu Ching-hsun was able to get married and settle down because of his tofu business. He had one son and two daughters. He had a conservative personality and, in the tradition of “the son inherits, not the daughter”, he passed his secret recipe for stinky tofu down to his son, Liu Yen-liang. The younger Liu continued to operate the business until, in keeping with Liu Ching-hsun’s wishes, he passed it down to his only son, Liu Yu-hang. The Liu family stinky tofu business survived through three generations, but collapsed in an instant the day Liu Yu-hang died.

Hsu Chia-jung was surprised when he received the news that Liu Yu-hang was dead. After Cheng Hui-sheng’s death one or two months prior, Hsu Chia-jung’s company, Baoyuan Life LLC, had handled her funerary arrangements. On May 28, 2009, Hsu Chia-jung received a call from Lin Yu-ju, asking for his help because Cheng Hui-sheng had succumbed to illness at Puli Christian Hospital. They wanted her body to be brought home for the wake but nothing had been prepared in advance. The Liu family lived approximately three kilometers away from his business, so Hsu Chia-jung agreed. He quickly arranged for employees to decorate the Liu Family’s mourning hall. While they were working, members of the Liu family kept coming and going. After about thirty minutes, the simple hall decorations were completed. Hsu Chia-jung washed his hands and maintained a calm state of mind so he could receive Cheng Hui-sheng outside the door. As he arranged her remains, he called out, “We are here.” When he finished, he prepared to wash Cheng Hui-sheng and change her clothes, but he heard people yelling.

Cheng Hui-sheng’s older brother and father Cheng Tu had rushed to the hall after receiving the news about Cheng Hui-sheng. They couldn’t understand how she had been fine a few days ago when they last saw her, but now, she was suddenly dead.

Lin Yu-ju explained that after midnight on May 27th, Cheng Hui-sheng said her head hurt and she felt like throwing up. At the time, Lin Yu-ju and her husband took her to the ER at Puli Christian Hospital. Around two a.m., they were given three days’ worth of medicine and returned home. But later that day, Cheng Hui-sheng started to lose consciousness and could no longer move on her own. They returned to the ER with the live-in caretaker soon afterward. The doctor wanted Cheng Hui-sheng to remain overnight for observation to determine if her psychiatric medication or weight loss pills had triggered acute gastroenteritis.

Cheng Hui-sheng stayed at the hospital that day. When the nurse went to start a new IV bag the next day at five a.m., Cheng Hui-sheng looked normal. “In the end, around six a.m., I discovered Mom was very pale.” Lin hit the call button and called for a nurse. The nurse realized Cheng Hui-sheng did not have a pulse; she quickly called a code, but they were not able to revive Cheng Hui-sheng. “Two hours after they worked the code, the doctor called her time of death. She had passed away.”

According to the death certificate, Cheng Hui-sheng died of myocardial infarction secondary to hyperlipidemia. After Cheng Tu heard this, he had an even harder time understanding, “What on earth does a heart attack have to do with gastroenteritis? They owe me

an explanation!" At the time, he wanted his son to take him to the hospital and request an autopsy. Liu Yu-hang stopped him, "The hospital already asked us if we had any concerns about her death. and I said no. That way, they wouldn't order a forensic autopsy. Mom has already passed away; an autopsy would be a violation of her body."

Liu Yu-hang used the traditional argument that the bodies of the deceased should remain intact to persuade Cheng Tu to accept the fact of Cheng Hui-sheng's death. After they argued back and forth, Hsu Chia-jung was finally authorized to continue handling Cheng Hui-sheng's funerary arrangements. But he did not expect that two months later there would be another argument in the family of the deceased on what should have been a solemn and sad occasion. On the day Liu Yu-hang's body was supposed to be returned home for the wake, his aunt, Liu It-sen, and his grandfather, Liu Ching-hsun, rushed to the house and began yelling at Lin Yu-ju. They questioned how twenty-seven-year-old badminton athlete Liu Yu-hang could have died suddenly from a minor illness. "You must have killed him!"

Lin Yu-ju did not refute the accusation. Liu Ching-hsun had never liked her, not before the wedding, and not after. She had once worked in a "hostess bar", and by marrying his son, she had caused Liu Ching-hsun to lose face in the community. She let Liu Ching-hsun yell at her and did not flinch when he raised his cane to hit her. But a friend of Liu Yu-hang stepped in: "Grandfather, what you're saying doesn't make sense. Even if she is your grandson's wife you can't just hit her. If you suspect her for something, you should go to the police." Liu Ching-hsun lost his temper when he heard this and immediately went to file a police report. Afterwards, Lin Yu-ju was asked to give a statement at Nantou County Police Bureau.

**Time: July 20, 2009, 5:10 p.m.**

**Place: Puli Precinct, Nantou County Police Department**

"Why are you here today to file a report?"

"Because my husband Liu Yu-hang died."

"What's his date of birth?"

"He was born May 18, 1983."

"How long were the two of you married?"

"Seven years."

"Are his parents still alive?"

"They've both passed away."

"What work did he do?"

"He was a stinky tofu wholesaler."

"Who did he live with?"

"With me, our son, and his younger sister."

"How did he die? Please describe what happened."

"Early morning July 17, 2009, he suddenly had a stomachache. He broke out into a cold sweat, felt dizzy, and couldn't walk in a straight line. I asked if he wanted to go to the doctor. He

said no, he would be fine after some rest. Afterward, he sat on the toilet resting. I waited around twenty minutes and then asked if he felt any better. He said he felt dizzier and dizzier, so I took him to the ER at Puli Christian Hospital. After seeing the doctors there, at twelve-thirty a.m. on the 20th, they notified me my husband was terminally ill and needed to be transferred to the ICU. They sent me to his room and I waited for the doctors to treat him. When they were done, they told me he had passed away.”

“When you entered the ER with your husband did you go straight to the ICU?

“No, first he was placed in a regular room. They moved him after the hospital notified me.”

“When you and your husband entered the ER, did they advise you of his condition?”

“At the time, they didn’t say a lot. They just said they had to run a few tests because the doctor said my husband had fatty liver disease.”

“When they transferred him to the ICU, did they advise you as to why?”

“They told me the nurses were not able to get his blood pressure and they discovered his pupils were enlarged, so they needed to stabilize him.”

“What room was your husband in at the time?”

“Room 1505”

“At what time did you finally leave your husband's room?”

“I left at eleven p.m. on July 19th, 2009.”

“Did your husband express any discomfort before you left?”

“He did not.”

“Did your husband ever state he was in pain during his stay at the hospital?”

“At six p.m. the day before, he told me his stomach was bloated and uncomfortable.”

“How was your husband’s mood in the hospital?”

“He slept a lot.”

“Did your husband go to the hospital often prior to this occasion? How many times? And what dates?”

“He went twice before. Both were within these two months; I can’t remember the exact dates.”

“Was it the same situation both times?”

“It was almost exactly the same.”

“Did your husband drink excessively?”

“He was always a habitual drinker, but after his mother passed away two months ago, he began drinking almost every day.”

“Aside from his drinking, did your husband have any other illnesses?”

“He did not.”

“How was your husband’s health normally?”

“It was good.”

“When did your husband pass away?”

“The hospital notified me that he had passed away at two a.m. on July 20th.”

“Where is your husband’s body currently resting?”



"Puli Christian Hospital's Taiping Room."

"Do you have any thoughts on your husband's case?"

"I don't."

"Is everything you stated true? Do you have anything else to add?"

"It's the truth. I don't have anything else to add."

The interview took an hour. Before it ended, they asked if she would agree to an autopsy upon Liu Ching-hsun's request. Lin Yu-ju agreed. This changed Liu Ching-hsun's mind. After all, the corpse would talk, and how could a murderer calmly agree for evidence to be made public? But four months later, Liu Ching-hsun learned that his first instinct was correct. Lin Yu-ju had killed his precious grandson, Liu Yu-hang. When the investigation's results were released, Liu Ching-hsun was even more horrified – Lin Yu-ju's treachery was also behind the death of his daughter-in-law Cheng Hui-sheng.

Today, Chen Ming-cheng has already forgotten the exact day he decided Lin Yu-ju was a serial killer. But he will never forget how everyone involved in the investigation was promoted after the case was solved. Chen Ming-cheng, the captain of the Puli Investigative Division, was promoted to a staff member of the Nantou County Government Police Department Secretary's office in August 2013. Lin Chia-yu, the public prosecutor of the case, became the head prosecutor of the Nantou District Prosecutor's Office in September 2010. Shih Mu-chin, the judge from the trial, was later promoted to Taiwan's High Court, and also became chairman of the Civil Disciplinary Board.

The autopsy report would first show whether or not Liu Yu-hang was murdered. If so, it would still remain to be determined whether Lin Yu-ju was involved. A couple of days after her interview, Liu Yu-hang's body was brought over to the Nantou Medical Examiner's Office for Tsai Chung-hung to perform an autopsy.

From June 25th until the day he checked into the ER, medical records showed that Liu Yu-hang only visited the hospital once. At the time, he suffered from colitis and gastroenteritis infections. He felt dizzy and had low blood pressure. When he went to the ER on July 17th, they first treated his low blood pressure and acute gastroenteritis. He also had extrapyramidal syndrome, possibly caused by his medications. The cause of death was listed as acute cardiopulmonary failure. After confirming his medical history and without noticing any obvious injuries, Tsai Chung-hung carefully examined each of Liu Yu-hang's organs.

No hemorrhage or injury to the brain was found and no fluid was found in the hollows of the facial bones. The heart, esophagus, and chest x-ray were all normal, however, both lungs showed hemorrhagic edema. Aside from hemorrhaging in the fatty liver, kidney, and duodenum, nothing abnormal was discovered in the organs in the abdominal cavity. However, the tox screen found the ethanol content in his blood was 75 mg/dl; the methanol content was 95 mg/dl; and Trazodone, the drug used to treat alcohol reliance, was 7.539 mg/dl. There were also traces of ketamine, used to treat depression.

At these dosages the medications were not lethal. According to Lin Yu-ju's statement, Liu Yu-hang had symptoms of alcoholism and the treatment dosages of his medications was consistent with what was found in his blood. Methanol, however, is regarded as poisonous at concentrations exceeding 25 mg/dl, and could lead to serious poisoning at more than 50 mg/dl.

In a study conducted on deceased patients, it was found that the methanol blood content can rise as high as 40 mg/dl within seventy-two to ninety-six hours after death. Liu Yu-hang's blood content level had reached 95 mg/dl. This was more than enough to cause respiratory failure. In the autopsy report, Tsai Chung-hung determined that Liu Yu-hang's gastroenteritis, extrapyramidal syndrome, and cardiopulmonary failure were due to methanol poisoning. "But whether the high methanol level was due to a mistake made by Liu Yu-hang, or someone else's actions remained to be investigated."

According to standard procedures, Chen Ming-cheng did not immediately receive the results of the autopsy, but he had already begun to suspect Liu Yu-hang's death was not straightforward. "We started investigating it like a murder case, mainly because a member of the local government brought it up to me over tea one day."

Lin Yu-ju was able to take Liu Yu-hang's body back after the autopsy and prepare for the funeral. She wanted to give Liu Yu-hang a grand funeral like she promised on the day she had killed him. Because the Liu family was famous in Puli, local politicians wanted to be present. On the day of the funeral, as he was lighting incense for the deceased, a public representative for the city council overheard the neighbors gossiping: "She and her son died one right after another, and the cause of death was similar. The family suspects Lin Yu-ju murdered them." Furthermore, Nanshou Life Insurance also thought something was suspicious about the deaths of Cheng Hui-sheng and Liu Yu-hang, and had already filed a report with the police. Lin Yu-ju had bought life insurance policies for both of the victims. If Liu Yu-hang's death was being investigated, was this a serial murder with the intent to commit life insurance fraud?

The public representative related his experiences to Chen Ming-cheng, reminding the detective of the Chen Jui-chin murder case that had occurred in Zhu Mountain, elsewhere in Nantou County.

In 2000, several insurance companies brought a case to the attention of then-legislative council member, Chen Chao-jung. Over the course of a few years, they became suspicious that a 51-year-old male, named Chen Jui-chin, had killed his wife and son to collect the insurance money. On October 14th, 2000, the accused accepted a TV interview and denied the unthinkable charges, "Who doesn't want kids? Look at me, I don't have a son (to be responsible for my arrangements when I die); My wife will never sleep with me again even for one night. She was my closest family member; how could I possibly kill my wife?" There was little progress on the case after the interview, and it wasn't until 2004 that he was finally arrested.