

# THE THIRD BULLET

## 第三顆子彈

*The pulse-pounding second novel in Chang Kuo-Li's The Sniper thriller series, The Third Bullet is based on the infamous "two bullets" incident – the attempted assassination of President Chen Shui-Bian in 2004. Many believe the attack was staged by Chen himself in order to win reelection. The question is – how did he do it?*

Seven days before the election, Taiwan's President Hsu is shot during a parade on a crowded – and closely guarded – street in Taipei. Former senior detective Wu, now working as an insurance investigator, is pulled out of retirement to help investigate the case. He enlists the help of the best sniper he knows, our protagonist Alex, still in hiding after the events of *The Sniper*.

Alex's investigation confirms his suspicion: the shooting was staged. His instinct is to back away, but it's too late – because who makes a better fall guy than a seasoned sniper like himself? Soon, Alex is being hounded by Taiwan special forces. He flees to Japan, hoping to track down an old French Foreign Legion comrade who is now a monk with a drinking problem...

Who is the mysterious sniper that made the non-fatal shot? And who is the puppet master running the show? As secrets are revealed, guns are drawn, and blood is spilled, Alex and Wu face the most dangerous mission of their lives in a battle that will decide the fate of a nation.

Based on the 319 Incident, a 2004 attempt on President Chen Shui-Bian's life, this exciting sequel to *The Sniper* can also be read as a stand-alone thriller. With characteristic humor, brisk pacing, and cinematic action, renowned author Chang Kuo-Li carries readers on a convoluted quest for the truth that is packed with police investigations, political intrigue, and a tense showdown between master snipers.



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## Chang Kuo-Li 張國立

Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of China Times Weekly, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published over 60 books over his career, mostly mystery novels, including the recent *Pawnshop of the Otherworld* and *The Spirit Medium Detective* series. Among all his works, *The Sniper* series has been translated into Dutch, German, French, English, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Japanese.

# THE THIRD BULLET

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## Part 1: Taking Fire

"In the fourth century B.C., during the Spring and Autumn period, there was a renowned assassin. Now remember, kids, that plenty of assassins became famous. But not so many actually managed to kill their targets. Killing someone's not as easy as you might think.

"Anyway, this assassin's name was Zhuan Zhu, and he was known, the history books tell us, for his loyalty and sense of justice. So, the King of Wu had just died. All his kids and grandkids were squabbling over who would succeed him. Prince Guang was the rightful heir, but his cousin, Prince Liao, seized the throne. Guang, furious, ordered Zhuan Zhu to do away with the usurper. Zhuan Zhu made some enquiries and learned Prince Liao liked to eat fish. So he went off to Lake Tai to learn how to cook tender, flavorsome fish. Think of the fish you might get at a Sichuan restaurant. Simmered in soy sauce and chili bean paste... Or the fish in yellow soybean sauce the canteen did the other day. Can't you just smell it?

"Zhuan Zhu had a mission. And every mission needs a weapon. Enter Ou Yezi, the legendary swordsmith of the Spring and Autumn period, forger of five famed swords. The first four used up most of his metals, so the final fifth sword was shorter, more of a dagger. But he hammered and hammered at the blade until it took on the scaled shimmer of a fish's belly. And it was no longer than a fish, so that's what it was named. Fish Belly.

"Liao, now King of Wu, was informed his cousin Guang had a cook who made the tastiest fish and came visiting to see if this was true. Naturally, he was closely guarded during the meal. Trusted retainers sampled every dish for poison before it passed the king's lips. Servants were searched for weapons before approaching the table. After many courses, the showpiece arrived: the fish. Zhuan Zhu carried it to the table himself and described the cooking process to the diners. Then, in mid-sentence, he tore open the fish, removed Fish Belly, which had been concealed in its flesh, and with a single stab pierced the usurper king's layers of armor. The king died. When the king's guards realized what had happened, so did Zhuan Zhu."

The instructor jabbed his half-smoked cigar towards the seated students. "Understand the moral of the story?"

"Yes, sir! Stick to sushi and sashimi and stay away from whole fish."

The class burst out laughing.

"It's only half four, Tuan, are you hungry already? Would you like a gate pass so you can go out and get yourself some fucking sushi? Two watches for you tonight, 11 till 1 and 5 till 7, we'll see how that helps your digestion."

The instructor tapped the cigar, sending ash drifting to the floor.

“The story tells us the assassin needs to first identify the target’s habits and preferences, then second, understand the environment. And third, and this is crucial for snipers, choose the right weapon. Zhuan Zhu chose Fish Belly because there was no sharper blade, and because it was small enough to conceal in the fish and so evade the searches. If you know your targets are going to be within 400 meters, you don’t want the M200. It’s 140 centimeters long itself. Add on 50 rounds – each 10 centimeters long – and you weaklings will give yourselves hernias before you’re even in position.”

More laughter from below.

“Think of Fish Belly. Advanced tech, light, convenient. You’re snipers, remember. We are not going to the supermarket and buying the biggest bag of dumplings because that works out cheapest. Although that is no doubt what you gluttons do.”

—Colonel Huang Hua-sheng. Army special forces sniper, sniper trainer

## 1

At 9:17 a.m. the President’s right hand went to his abdomen. He bent forwards, shrimp-like, then toppled to the right. His hand came away from his belly to grasp at the handrail in front of him, where it left a scarlet smear. Blood dripped to the floor of the jeep, pooling into the shape of a chili pepper.

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At 9:11 a.m., President Hsu Huo-sheng, codenamed Phoenix by his protection officers for the literal meaning of his given name, “Fire-born”, was in a motorcade pulling into Huayin Street and the final push of the presidential election. Hsu was known to be a workaholic, rising at 6 a.m. even back when he was a mere lawyer. He maintained the habit when he became president, putting in a half an hour on the treadmill before reading his briefing papers over breakfast. And that time was inviolate. Nobody, not even the First Lady herself, dared interrupt.

The President’s breakfast menu had featured in the memoirs of a butler recently retired from the official residence. Beef soup, in the Tainan style, to show he remembered where he came from. Two fried eggs, sunny side up, as the Americans like them, with eight mainland-style pork and chive dumplings, to show his openness to all.

The President believed, or so his former butler reported, that breakfast provided fuel for the entire day to come. It was therefore essential to eat until his belly was full. Lunch he could overlook, unless it was a lunch meeting, and was usually a meat-filled glutinous rice dumpling and Four-Treasure Soup. For dinner, he favored steak. Ideally sliced, with a touch of soy sauce, wasabi and crispy fried garlic. Plain rice on the side.

President Hsu's pre-breakfast temper was notorious. A story had once leaked about an occasion when he found the tie laid out for him objectionable: "What am I meant to do?" he had roared. "Employ a tie man?" The anecdote was, naturally, repeatedly denied by a Presidential Office spokesperson. But it remained true that nobody spoke to the President before he had eaten. And he would never smile while still in the residence, even after breakfast. His smile was a politician's smile – rarely seen by aides or even the premier. Voters, though, were assured of a genuine beam.

Politicians, you see, love votes even more than voters love money.

The schedule published by the campaign headquarters was broken down into half-hour segments. Every day started with a meeting at headquarters at 7:30 a.m., which Hsu attended. General business was concluded by 8 a.m., although Hsu would stay on to discuss matters further with his more trusted advisors. At 8:45 a.m. he would climb into the jeep and hit the campaign trail.

It was a 9:00 a.m. start to avoid the worst of the rush hour. The motorcade drove in the slow lane, Hsu in the back waving to voters looking on from their office windows.

President Hsu loved campaigning. During his first term of office a newspaper editorial had quipped that "Hsu Huo-sheng is possibly the only person in Taiwan who would prefer annual elections."

In the previous election he had started off lagging by 17 percentage points, a handicap he had whittled down to 3 percentage points. Ultimately, he snatched a shock victory by a mere 38,808 votes.

According to the butler's memoirs, Hsu had explored the entire official residence on the day he moved in. The butler had assumed the new president was simply interested to see his new home, until the real reason became clear. Hsu had stopped in the hall used to host foreign guests and pointed at the wall: "Move those paintings to the library. I want a photo of the Central Election Commission results up there." Not just his own votes, the butler clarified. The votes of all the candidates.

Because there's no victory without a defeated foe, and Hsu wanted the guests honored with a visit to the official residence to know they were meeting with a man with a passion for victory. Look, that photo would declare: here are my defeated foes.

Hsu liked to tell reporters that he had suffered from asthma as a child, and when he had an attack his mother would take him to the town's clinic, where they would put him on a steroid drip and tell him to rest. And as he rested, he felt as if he was floating, weightless. Young Hsu wondered at first if this meant he was dead. Later he decided he was simply flying.

And that's what winning an election feels like, he told them. Like flying. Like you've been on the steroid drip a little too long.

But this campaign was harder fought again. Hsu had been brimming with confidence, until the two opposition parties formed an unexpected and unprecedented alliance, their leaders standing on a joint ticket. An opinion poll the previous weekend had shown Hsu trailing by 11 percentage points.

That deficit would have had any other candidate packing their bags. Not Hsu. He just campaigned harder. Every single one of Taiwan's 23 million residents knew Hsu was not one to admit defeat. Some loved him for it, some cursed him a bullshitter. In a pep talk for his campaign staff that had leaked online, Hsu was seen yelling, his face twisted: "Do not be scared of being behind. Being behind makes us work harder." And so Hsu's schedule for the final week of the election was crammed so full a mosquito would have failed to find a gap to fly through. Hsu made his plan clear: "We're going to boost turn-out in our strongholds, and we're going to take votes in theirs."

And that reminded everyone of what he had said while running for mayor of Taipei: "Switch one voter from their side to ours, and that's as good as two votes. So tell me where their voters are, and that's where I'll go."

Hsu, standing in the rear of the open-backed jeep, heard the shouting of the crowd, amplified through loudspeakers, even before the motorcade turned into Huayin Street. His supporters were there, he knew. Passers-by on the sidewalks watched as he drove by, proud and upright, apparently destined to serve another four-year term.

From the campaign headquarters on Zhongshan North Street the motorcade took Nanjing West Street to Chengde Street, then turned onto Huayin Street in the direction of Taiyuan Road. This was one of the few remaining traditional communities in central Taipei and had once been a stronghold for Hsu. This time, not so much. His opponents were spending big and portraying him as a political operator sacrificing principles for profit.

But he knew how to respond: "I was born in a place like this. I grew up in a place like this. And I will never forget the mothers and fathers who scrape their children's school fees together cent by cent. They can try to smear my name, but they will not succeed. I swear to you here, hand on heart, that my government will help you pay for your children's education."

The spiel booming from the jeep's loudspeakers was heard well in advance of the motorcade's arrival. Hsu stood behind the cab, one hand clutching the handrail welded there, the other constantly waving, like the paw of one of those Japanese cat figurines. He kept waving, but he could not deny the campaign was physically punishing: he had patches to ease muscle pain on the inside of both his elbows, and round bruises from the cupping therapy on his back. This was an important day for the campaign. There were only seven days before the election, and today marked the start of the final push.

A legislator with Hsu's party sighed and whispered into a reporter's ear: "If you get a chance, film him next time he visits a temple. He lights the incense then closes his eyes and mutters away to himself. It's like he's talking to the gods or something. And when he's done, he's all full of beans. Cheaper than a six-pack of Red Bull, I guess."

The firecrackers started exploding when the sound of the loudspeakers heralded Hsu's arrival on Huayin Street. Hsu was shouting, red from the neck upwards: "Give me four more years, and I promise you Taiwan will be the fastest-growing of the Four Asian Tigers. The stock market will hit 20,000; average income will hit 30,000 US dollars. We can do it if we work together!"

Hsu had never lost an election. Yet.

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At 9 a.m. sharp, the man – tall and thin, wearing grey Adidas sneakers with white trim – unlocked the metal gate to the staircase and hurried up to the fifth floor, accompanied by the sound of firecrackers drifting in from the street. On the fifth floor he unlocked the door to Room 502. By the time he was at the window overlooking Huayin Street the President's motorcade was just coming into sight.

Most of his field of view, he realized, was obscured by the shop signs jutting out into the street, but he knew the other rooms would be no better and possibly worse. He pressed a telescopic sight to his eye and adjusted the focus. There was no mistake: there, standing in the back of the jeep, was Hsu Huo-sheng.

The man had been watching Hsu for eleven days now, and had noticed a cluster of laugh lines which appeared at the left corner of the President's mouth when he smiled. At this distance, a 5.56mm round aimed at those wrinkles would blow his head to pieces. Much like a watermelon used for target practice.

He lost sight of the target as the jeep drove behind a large shop sign. It soon reappeared, but a cloud of firecracker smoke now obscured Hsu's face. Someone was setting off the firecrackers directly below the hotel room, sending clouds of sulfurous smoke drifting along the street. The man lit a cigarette and then, with unhurried and practiced movements, assembled a sniper rifle.

He liked the SVD. A classic. Made in 1964, well-maintained even now, and entirely reliable. Not to mention weighing a mere 4.3 kilograms. And thanks to decades of handling and sweaty cheeks the stock was now as soft and smooth as skin.

The man rarely used a bipod, and instead steadied himself against the wall, eased the barrel of the SVD from the window, and centered those laugh lines in his sights. He counted out five rounds by feel, loaded them into a magazine and slid it into place.

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The jeep, open-backed and festooned with banners, slowed in tandem with its escort of police cars as it turned from Chengde Street into Huayin Street. Alongside the jeep trotted a dozen uniformed police officers; another dozen in plain clothes were scattered in the crowd. The uniformed officers were protected by bulletproof vests and equipped with batons, stun guns, loaded handguns, body cameras, handcuffs, radios, and their cell phones. The plainclothes officers had much the same loadout, minus the batons and stun guns, but with the addition of handheld terminals loaded with the IDs and photos of potential risks to national security. But uniformed or not, they were all squinting through sweat-stung eyes, trying to spot a bad guy among the good, a threat among the throng.

Rapid as the wind, firm as the forest, and as implacable as the fire, the police officers stared down those whose enthusiasm saw them edge too close to the jeep. They didn't care who won the election. They just wanted whoever won to win peacefully.

The schedule issued by the campaign headquarters had given the Taipei police only an hour to liaise with the National Security Bureau's Special Service Command Center and check the route. That task had fallen to Datong Precinct. And prior to the motorcade's departure, the officer in charge of the escort had given his orders: check your weapons are loaded, and if anyone causes trouble, don't be shy. Stun them, gas them, shoot them.

The firecrackers lit by Hsu's supporters were not the motorcade's only welcome: his opponent, Gu Yan-po, had ensured jeering protesters were also on the scene. Gu had visited Huayin Street three times previously; this was Hsu's first appearance. From his vantage point in the rear of the jeep Hsu could look left and see old men with Gu Yan-po baseball caps, or gaze to his right to see old women with Gu's name printed on florescent yellow vests. Gu's banners hung from apartment windows. The lead police officer tensed, scouring the crowd with ever greater intensity. No matter how raucous a welcome Hsu's supporters put on, this remained enemy territory.

But Hsu Huo-sheng could take it, and he was not a man easily deterred. The whole street could be lined with Gu's banners and he would still come. A vote is a vote. The loudspeakers broadcast his achievements while in office, some of which even Hsu himself was unfamiliar with.

The paving stones on the pedestrianized section of Huayin Street, his campaign office had discovered, had been renewed five years ago, while he was mayor of Taipei. And when he was thirty-one and a freshman city councilor, he had attended a ceremony at the local temple to celebrate the birthday of its resident god, the Divine Lord Jinchi. It also transpired that his paternal grandmother had relied on medicines purchased at a long-forgotten Huayin Street apothecary while pregnant with Hsu's father. Without Huayin Street, there would have been no Hsu Huo-sheng, one might say.

It was one of the advantages of an election campaign. All those forgotten moments, those snippets of family history, fell from the skies like hailstones, making themselves heard.

About 23 million people lived in Taiwan. Subtracting those too young to vote, those who never voted, and those who would be put off by a light shower, you needed about 7 million votes to win. So Hsu clasped right fist in left hand and shouted to the crowd:

"Your vote! Your vote is the only vote I need!"

Presidential candidates are not known for their reserve. They battle street by street, lane by lane, close on their opponent's heels, sharing a fug of sweat and shouts.

Finally, Hsu's shy supporters made themselves known, emerging from their apartments onto the street. They returned the President's waves, called for his victory. The swollen crowd pressed forward towards the jeep.

Despite the reconstruction over a decade ago, Huayin Street remained narrow and lined mostly with four-story apartment blocks capped with metal roofs. Metal security grills over the windows, weathered by wind and rain, spoke to a general fear of crime.

The last time those grills had been a political issue was in 1981, when Lin Yang-kang, then Minister of the Interior, said in response to questions in parliament that he was determined to “cause a recession for the security grill industry” by reducing crime. The security grills had long outlived Lin Yang-kang and remained in place, just rustier than before.

Waving hands protruded from those rusty bars; supporters on the street surged closer to the jeep. Orders came from the command car at the rear of the motorcade and the officers closed up around the jeep, forming a barrier. This did not suit the presidential candidate himself, who wanted his public up close, in the hope the television cameras would capture some good shots for broadcast.

Hsu threw his arms in the air and called to the crowd: “I, Hsu Huo-sheng, am your servant. You all know what I have done for you in office, and that record cannot be denied! What do you say?”

Applause and whistles drowned out whatever the crowd had to say. The street was now blanketed in firecracker smoke.

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Twenty minutes previously, Alex had sat down in a Japanese café on a corner of Huayin Street to have breakfast: seafood rice. The prawns weren’t fully defrosted and his teeth kept crunching down on ice crystals, while the tuna had been frozen and defrosted so many times the flavor was, if he was to be picky, questionable. Not that it bothered him. He drizzled his breakfast with soy sauce and the condiment took the lead, obscuring any dubious tastes.

He had already waited fifteen minutes longer than planned and was not a man keen on being stood up. But nor was Wu a man to break a promise.

It had been a good while since he had seen Wu. He spoke to the man’s son more often, if only via occasional online messages. But this, a meeting arranged by Wu himself sending a text message, was unusual.

**Alex, breakfast? There’s something we need to talk about.**

And it was only right that, when meeting a member of the older generation, Alex arrived five minutes early. He had chosen a chair backed up against a pillar and kept a close watch on the street outside. Just to be safe. He had not expected to see the street become so busy. Tourists in search of Instagrammable spots; local residents heading to their usual breakfast places; shopkeepers rolling up their shutters and setting out their wares. Alex wasn’t a fan of busy places. And Wu knew that. *So, why here?*

Exploding firecrackers and a rush of supporters announced the arrival of the presidential motorcade. This was no longer an environment he could control. Time to go. He settled up and, seeing the other end of the street blocked by the motorcade, merged with the oncoming crowd, baseball cap pulled low over his face.

He couldn’t rush off. There would be armed police everywhere, trained to spot anyone who didn’t fit in. So Alex waited for his chance to slip away.