THE KILLING OF TING FANG

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TING FANG

Detective Brevet Sergeant
Damian Britton
Some might disapprove of sex work, but Ting Fang – a pretty, outgoing young woman – meant no one any harm. Not even the monster who needlessly murdered her.

By Brett Williams
Major Crime detectives had just shown up at his front door. It was after 11 o’clock on a Thursday night and cold-blooded killer Chunguang Piao had every reason to be nervous. In a city hotel room fewer than 24 hours earlier, on New Year’s morning, he had murdered petite, defenceless Chinese sex worker Ting Fang.

He had beaten her with her own stiletto and slashed her throat with a razor blade. And yet now, confronted by the detectives, Piao did not sweat, shake, fidget or show any sign of nervousness.

“He was unbelievably calm,” Detective Brevet Sergeant Damian Britton recalls. “I was more nervous than him.

“He maintained that composition throughout the next two-and-a-half hours while we searched his house and spoke to him about his movements.

“He came up with a story straightaway, (saying) that: ‘I was there, I saw the girl, and then I left. The girl told me she had two more clients after me. I wasn’t the last client.’”

And, in his accented voice, a seemingly confident Piao assured the detectives that he was happy to help them with their enquiries.

In reality, of course, he sought not to help but rather thwart the Major Crime investigation while ever it implicated him.

After the detectives finished their search and conversation and had taken a buccal swab from Piao, they left with an iPhone, clothes and cash they had seized.

Back in the hotel room, Forensic Response investigators had found the murder scene intact.

Fang, clothed in black leggings, a long-sleeved pink jumper and an undershirt, and weighing just 48kg, lay dead on the floor. The slashing of her throat had left “a lot of blood” around her and a smaller quantity on a chair in a corner.

Blood was also obvious on a mattress sitting atop a king-size bed, which was slightly out of position, indicating a struggle.

In the bathroom basin was the murder weapon, the razor blade, in among some used baby wipes, a few of which had absorbed some blood.

In the bath – which had overflowed for so long that water had begun to seep into the room below – were sheets from the bed.

And among those wet sheets was the phone Fang had used to keep in contact with Xin (not his real name), her minder-cum-driver.

The scene was clearly gruesome; and the victim could have been any innocent sex worker. But timing worked against 25-year-old Sydney resident Fang, whose working name was Honey.

Her schedule of a few days’ work in Adelaide coincided with the day Piao, a business owner with no criminal record, chose to commit murder.

His first move in the lead-up to his vicious crime came around 3pm on New Year’s Eve, 2014. He logged on to Chinese messaging service WeChat to book an hour with a sex worker starting at 10pm that evening.

Fang had arrived in Adelaide two days earlier and checked in to the Hotel Grand Chancellor in Hindley St. She had booked her flight and the escort agency she was working for in Adelaide had arranged her pick-up from the airport and accommodation.

Her plan was to work in Adelaide for a few days and, then, return to Sydney with a percentage of her earnings after paying the agency its fee. She had done exactly that several times before – without any problems.

“The girls in this industry rarely work in their own cities for fear of running into a customer,” Britton explains. “So the girls fly around the country, and Fang came to Adelaide up to eight times in the 18 months or so that she’d worked for the Adelaide business.

“The Chinese clients were quite well-to-do people. (They had) the financial means to pay for that kind of service.

“Quite often they were married or had girlfriends, had their own businesses themselves, and this was just one of their vices.”

Piao arrived a few minutes early for his 10 o’clock appointment with Fang, whose room number he did not yet know. To get it, he would have to call Xin as was the established practice.

“And that’s the first and only time the client gets to know what room of the hotel she’s in,” Britton explains.

Fang, who had seen 16 clients since her December 29 arrival in Adelaide, was not quite ready at the designated time. And not until she was ready, a few minutes later, did Xin give Piao the room number.

So, just after 10pm, Fang welcomed her killer into the room and, soon after, at 10:40pm, she sent Xin a text message. Piao had requested another hour with Fang, whose room number he did not yet know. To get it, he would have to call Xin as was the established practice.

Xin gave the okay but, after a few more minutes, Fang sent another text message outlining a further request from Piao. He wanted to book Fang for the whole night and seemed willing to pay a premium for her services.

“According to the messages Fang sent (Xin), Piao suggested $2,100, which is in excess of what you’d normally pay for an overnight booking,” Britton explains.

“Overnight’s $1,500; two hours is $600.
So it was a bit unusual, especially in that kind of industry. You know your rates, you know what you’re paying, and you wouldn’t be offering up an extra $600.

“I suspect he’s done that knowing that he was never going to stay the night. It was just a ruse to cover any other clients coming in at 1 o’clock in the morning and finding her dead.”

During her exchange of text messages with Xin, Fang indicated that Piao was impotent. And no evidence of sex between the two would emerge in the later investigation.

So the way Fang saw it, according to her text messages, negotiating an overnight arrangement with Piao was a win.

It would earn her a lot of money for little work, given his apparent impotence. And she could return to Sydney the next day, as planned, without seeing any other clients.

Throughout the evening, Fang engaged in “a lot of communication”.

She sent texts to a couple of friends and Xin. He was at a New Year’s Eve party in a nearby suburb.

In one text exchange, he reminded Fang that he would pick her up from the hotel in the morning and take her to Adelaide Airport. He also wished her a happy New Year and, at 12:06am, she wished him the same. Eight minutes later, her messaging stopped completely.

**Discovering the crime**

Just after 7am on New Year’s Day, Xin turned up at the hotel and parked out front, within view of CCTV cameras. He rang Fang but got no answer and so went up to her twelfth-floor room, to which he had a key tag.

Once inside, he could hear running water and figured Fang was showering, either alone or with a client. So Xin retreated, went back outside the hotel, waited for a few minutes and rang again, but still got no answer.

Then, in yet another attempt to raise Fang, he tried calling her on the hotel’s internal phone network but, again, she did not answer.

Xin was now worried. He thought Fang might have left Adelaide without handing over the agency fee. It was his job to collect it.

So, he returned to the twelfth floor and, at 7.55am, entered Fang’s room which was in darkness. Only a small shaft of sunlight pierced through the window between curtains, and water was still running in the bathroom.

“He peers around the corner and just sees a body on the ground,” Britton says. “He goes over to her, and she’s got a towel on her face.”
“He lifts the towel up with his finger, sees her eyes and just freaks out, runs out and leaves the hotel. He's panicking now and so goes to the (agency) owner's house to try to raise him.”

Soon after that panicked exit, Xin returned to the hotel with the escort agency owner, Cheng (not his real name), but the flummoxed pair had not yet figured out what to do.

As Xin and Cheng deliberated, the hotel manager was heading for Fang's room. He had received a call from the guest in the room below, where water was seeping in from the now crime scene above.

After the manager got to the room, he opened the door; saw Fang's lifeless body on the floor, and called the police. That was at 8:35am and, by then, Xin had reported his discovery to the hotel reception.

Hindley St patrols responded and the scene quickly wound up in lockdown. Local CIB detectives responded too and went about drawing information from Xin and Cheng, whose responses were initially “cagey”.

Britton and Detective Brevet Sgt (now Inspector) Campbell Hill – recalled to duty on that New Year's Day – arrived on the scene around 1:30pm. Forensic Response officers responded too and would spend the rest of that day, and the next, examining the crime scene.

“There was quite a lot of work for them to do to try to piece together what had happened,” Britton says. “There were blood spatters here and there, and Fang had some injuries to her head that were consistent with the stiletto heel being used as a club.”

In those initial hours, while the case was white hot, Britton and his colleagues gathered evidence quickly.

Part of it was CCTV footage of people traffic in the hotel's ground floor; and other footage from cameras around the city. That vision clearly showed Piao arriving at the hotel before the murder and sprinting away from it afterward, at 12:33am.

Also clear in the hotel footage were all the other clients Fang had seen in the previous days.

“But the CCTV wasn't perfect,” Britton says. “It didn't identify who they were. We had to figure out who they were and go and speak to them. And all but one of them was Chinese.

“If we'd had CCTV in the lift, it would have been a no-brainer. We would've been able to establish who was coming in and out of that twelfth floor.

“But, thankfully, the vision we did have was still quite compelling; and we had time entries on the door to her room that we were able to cross-reference against the CCTV.

“We were able to say that no one entered the room using a key card after 9 o'clock on the 31st until (Xin) came in and opened the room up.”

Other valuable evidence came from Fang’s phone. It still worked – despite ending up among wet sheets in the bath - and contained thousands of sent and received text messages.

“Without the messages it would have been near impossible to find out what exactly happened that night,” Britton says.

In pursuit of more evidence, Britton undertook an on-camera interview with Cheng at the Grenfell St police station around 6pm on New Year's Day. Out of that conversation came the understanding that Cheng ran his escort agency with his wife.

From two mobile phones in his possession, he produced the WeChat usernames and numbers of clients who had booked Fang over the previous few days. That included the username, Huashe, and number of the last client to see Fang.

Hill sent that name and number through to the Major Crime intel section, which would soon come up with a hit.

But the information the detectives had already gathered from Cheng told them a lot anyway. “The phones we got from (Cheng) showed all the WeChat communications from the clients,” Britton says.

“That's how we could piece together how many people had been there (to see Fang), how much they paid, how much money should have been in the room...”

Fang should have had around $8,000 in her room but the Forensic Response officers found only half that amount in a drawer. And Xin insisted that he had not collected any money.

Around 10:40pm, after a 9:30pm meeting with a witness in a McDonald's car park, Britton and Hill got the result of their intel check. The phone number associated with Huashe belonged to Piao.

His particulars had wound up on record because, around six months earlier, he had lost some business documents, which someone had handed in to police.

Confronting the killer

So Britton and Hill headed for a western-suburbs address, where Piao lived with his wife and eight-month-old son. With the two officers were Detective Senior Sergeant Phil Linton, Detective Brevet Sergeant Amanda Bridge and Brevet Sergeant Gavin Bakkelo.

When the detectives arrived, Piao – who Britton now considered a suspect – was in bed with his wife and son.

As a late-night search and videotaped questioning took place over the following two-and-a-half hours, spouse and child “stayed out of the way”.

“I'm not sure if that was his instruction but she didn't come into the room when we were speaking,” Britton says.

Piao, who was then 27 and ran a cleaning business, played the calm, co-operative citizen right to the end of the detectives' visit.

And that visit wound up at 1:50am on January 2, when the detectives left with the iPhone, clothes and cash they had seized.

But nowhere had they found the distinctive jeans and shoes they had seen Piao wearing in the CCTV footage. They suspected he had disposed of them.
April 2017

“In Australian currency, they had found $1,250 in a wallet and jeans belonging to Piao. On his iPhone, most significant messages were missing.

Just 15-and-a-half hours after this first encounter with Piao, Britton and three of his Major Crime colleagues went to search his (Piao’s) home again.

They now knew, from the findings of an autopsy, that on Fang’s scalp were two crescent-shaped injuries.

“We searched for anything that could’ve caused the injuries,” Britton recalls. “We didn’t find anything. We weren’t sure if it was the tip of an iron, like the iron from the hotel room, and we seized that.

“But the search was to also locate clothing better matching CCTV vision of Piao leaving the Grand Chancellor Hotel.”

When the detectives finished this second search, they again left with seized items: a shirt, a cardigan, two jumpers and a tomahawk.

On January 9, Britton got word of the discovery of a fingerprint on one of Fang’s shoes.

But the print, found on the base of the left stiletto, did not feature on the national fingerprint database.

So Britton rang Piao and invited him to Adelaide police station to provide the help he had pledged, albeit insincerely.

Piao agreed to call in at 9:30am the next day, January 10. He arrived at 9:40am and joined Britton, Hill and a Mandarin-speaking interpreter in the station interview room.

Around 10 minutes later, Piao underwent fingerprinting on a LiveScan fingerprint machine in the station.

Then, back in the interview room at 10:15am, Britton got a videotaped conversation under way with Piao.

His questions focussed on Piao’s movements on New Year’s Eve but, at 11:42am, he suspended the interview after a knock at the door. And the interruption was for good reason: Piao’s right thumbprint had proved an identical match with the print on the stiletto.
Even more incriminating was that the position of the thumbprint suggested that Piao had gripped the shoe so as to use it in a striking motion. And, in that scenario, he likely inflicted the injuries to Fang’s head with the stiletto heel.

Piao claimed his thumbprint was on the stiletto because, while in the room with Fang, he had removed her shoes from her feet.

Says Britton: “It would be highly unusual to remove the left shoe from Fang in a manner that would leave the right thumbprint orientated as it was. To hold the shoe, to take it off, or to move it around (as Piao claimed), you wouldn’t hold it that way.”

Britton was satisfied that he now had enough evidence to act against Piao. At 12:04pm, he arrested him for the murder of Ting Fang and informed him of his rights. After that, Piao refused to answer any more questions.

And suddenly gone was the charade of calmness and co-operation, replaced by argumentative claims of innocence. It was the most emotion Britton had seen Piao display.

“He was quite vocal and in denial of killing her,” Britton says. “He said he wasn’t the last client (Fang saw) and that we’d got it wrong.

“He’d interrupt constantly when I was reading him his arrest rights. He wanted to continue to argue the point that he shouldn’t be arrested. So it took a while to get through (to him).”

In separate phone calls, Piao got to speak to a Legal Aid representative and Chinese Consul Franklin Wang. Later, just before 6pm, Britton and Hill took Piao to the City Watch House where they formally charged him with murder.

But there was still more evidence to gather. Indeed, the next day, acting on information from a witness, Britton and Bridge located a car registered in the name of the cleaning business Piao owned.

In debt through gambling, he had pawned the white Volkswagen Caddy for $8,000 in a transaction with a “loan shark” the day before he booked Fang.

The van was now in a driveway at a western-suburbs address, where Britton went about searching it. In the driver’s-door recess he found 18 razor blades in a press-seal bag – and they were the same type as the one at the murder scene.

Alongside the blades was a receipt marked December 5 from a local cleaning supplies business.

The loan-shark transaction, caught on CCTV, had played out in the city and was itself valuable information.

Says Britton: “He (Piao) burnt the $8,000 at the casino in the next 24 hours. So he had absolutely no money and then went and saw a sex worker (Fang) where he said he would pay $2,100 to stay with her that night.

“So the money just didn’t add up. He went from burning that $8,000 to (supposedly) having $2,100 to pay for her services.”

“To hold the shoe, to take it off, or to move it around (as Piao claimed), you wouldn’t hold it that way.”
“So I had the interpreter say to the mum: ‘We’ll treat this as if it’s my own granddaughter who died.’ And she just burst out crying, put her hands together, and bowed her head, saying: ‘Thank you, thank you.’ ”

The family’s anguish

As the investigation continued into the next day, January 12, it sparked extreme emotion – from the shattered Fang family. The parents had arrived from China with their son, who had to undertake the crushing process of identifying his sister’s body in the city morgue.

And he and his parents had never known that their beloved Ting had been working in the sex industry.

“Everyone broke down, the mum especially,” Britton recalls. “The brother and the father just tried to be stoic I think to help mum, but she was inconsolable the whole time.”

Making the experience even tougher for the parents and son was that none of them spoke a word of English.

When they faced up to a meeting arranged for them with Major Crime investigators, Detective Superintendent Des “Doc” Bray spoke to them through an interpreter.

He could see that they were grief-stricken and perhaps even wondering how seriously police would take a foreigner’s death in Australia.

“You could tell that they didn’t have any understanding of our culture, our way of life, how we do an investigation,” Bray recalls. “And, as a team, we wanted them to understand that it was really important to us to make the person who had done this accountable.

“So I had the interpreter say to the mum: ‘We’ll treat this as if it’s my own granddaughter who died.’ And she just burst out crying, put her hands together, and bowed her head, saying: ‘Thank you, thank you.’

“I think that gave the family an immense degree of comfort knowing that police in South Australia would commit to that investigation like it was our own family.”

Friends in disbelief

By late January, detectives still had only a minimum of background information about the life Fang had led in Australia. To find out all they could, Britton and Senior Constable First Class Elise Twiggs travelled to Sydney to speak with her friends and acquaintances.

“They just spoke of her as a normal, friendly, outgoing girl, who worked as a beautician and studied,” Britton says. “Not one of them had any clue that she was involved in the sex industry. Her friends couldn’t believe it.”

Study was the reason Fang had come to Australia in 2007, and she had worked in not only the beauty industry but in other regular jobs as well. The detectives found no evidence that anyone had coerced her into sex work.

Piao, who had come to Australia from China in 2010 and married an Australian resident, had engaged sex workers before.

“At least four times that we can show,” Britton says. “In fact, he’d gone to see a girl just one week before (the murder) at the same hotel.

“And we were able to speak to two girls he’d seen in December who were able to give statements about his demeanour and behaviour.”

Enquiries the detectives made into Piao’s business – which employed a secretary and Chinese students as cleaners – revealed that it was “reasonably successful”. But Piao was a chronic gambler with “financial issues” and the subject of a casino barring order.

And the detectives found that, only 40 minutes before his appointment with Fang, Piao had received a “threatening (text) message”. Someone – who later refused to give a statement – was demanding $3,000 of him by the next day.

The true intention

This led Britton to suspect that Piao had booked Fang not for sex but rather to rob her of her three days’ earnings.

Evidence of that scenario lay in the $1,250 detectives had found in his possession and another $1,000 he deposited into an ATM after the murder.

“He was generally a person who had no cash on him,” Britton says. “He was always borrowing money from people and struggling to make ends meet.”

Text messages indicated that Piao intended to go to an ATM after midnight to draw out money, which he did not have, to pay for the whole night with Fang.

“It might have been the case that she was getting ready to go out with him,” Britton says. “So she might have been putting her shoes on and, while she was bent down, he’s belted her with her stiletto to the head, twice.

“She’s gotten up and staggered across to the bed where she’s collapsed. Then Piao’s pulled out the razor blade and slit her throat while she was hunched over the bed, perhaps. This is the hypothesis of Forensic Response and it seems to fit.”

Another scenario Britton considers possible is that Piao took an opportunity, while Fang was in the bathroom or otherwise occupied, to steal her cash. She might subsequently have caught him in the act, sparking an argument which led to the attack.

“I don't know which (scenario) is correct, but it was brutal and cowardly,” Britton says. “I don't think there was any chance she would’ve been able to put up a fight against him.”

The detectives did not find evidence to suggest that the killing was premeditated. But there seemed little
or no other purpose in Piao taking a razor blade to an appointment with a sex worker.

And it appeared that, by leaving the blade in the bathroom basin among the baby wipes, Piao had tried to obliterate his involvement in the murder.

“The wipes in the basin had DNA from other clients on them,” Britton explains. “I suspect he’s gone to the bin, taken some of them out, and put them in with the blade in the sink.

“That’s so that, when we tested the blade, there would be DNA from someone else associated with it. But, because we were able to identify all those clients, and they were able to give statements, we were able to rule that out.”

Below: the blood-stained baby wipes and razor blade found in the bathroom basin.

**Changing stories**

Before Piao went to trial in the Supreme Court, he rang Britton several times while on remand in prison. In one pointless rant, he complained about the prison food and accused Britton of ruining his life and causing him to miss his son’s first birthday.

Britton made clear in the phone conversation that he was perfectly willing to speak to Piao, but on video and only about the allegations against him.

When more calls came, Britton suggested to Piao that he seek advice and undertake an on-camera interview, which he (Britton) would facilitate.

Piao agreed, and Britton took him out of the Adelaide Remand Centre to conduct the interview. It went for two hours, and Piao – who had not sought and did not want any advice – provided some “very unusual answers”.

He claimed that he had never himself made the 10 o’clock booking with the escort agency for Fang’s services. His new story was that he went to a park where he met Cheng, who took his (Piao’s) phone from him, made the booking on it, and handed it back.

“Then,” Britton says, “he talked about two people being in the hotel room, while he was there, trying to search for something, and how they’re the ones who killed Ting.

“So, first, it was that he just went there and left and nothing was wrong. Now it was someone else who had made the booking and two people were in the room as he was cowering in the corner.

“It was at complete odds with his first interview. We ended up winding that interview up and taking him back to the remand centre, but both interviews got played in the later trial.”

And in court, where Piao pleaded not guilty and declined to testify, the trial ran for five weeks last year.

Fang’s brother sat through the proceedings while his parents remained in Sydney. They chose not to endure witness testimony about the brutality inflicted on their daughter.

A few times during the trial, the brother walked out of the courtroom after he became overwhelmed with emotion. But his distress turned to joy after the jury had deliberated for four-and-a-half hours and found Piao guilty of murder.

Justice David Lovell, who called the crime brutal, opportunistic and senseless, jailed Piao for life with a non-parole period of 25 years.

Piao had chosen not to make any pre-sentencing submissions and continued to deny that he had killed Fang.

**The challenges**

It had taken 18 months to get to the point of conviction and sentence, and Britton was both “relieved” and “overjoyed” with the outcome.

“I don’t know how I would have felt if the jury had found him not guilty,” he says. “I was sitting alongside the brother when the verdict was read out and knew how much it meant to him and his parents.

“They deserved to have some recognized form of closure to 18 months of turmoil.

“The guilty verdict also gave me a great deal of satisfaction. All the work we’d done to put together what was a purely circumstantial case had paid off, and the jury’s decision validated that.”

Today, Britton reflects on what he considers the toughest aspects of the investigation. “Having three key phones without a word of English in them,” he says. “It was a daunting start.

“We were tied up with interpreters and needed the help of some local SAPOL members and public servants to translate thousands of messages on Ting’s phone.”

“Then,” Britton says, “he talked about two people being in the hotel room, while he was there, trying to search for something, and how they’re the ones who killed Ting.

“So, first, it was that he just went there and left and nothing was wrong. Now it was someone else who had made the booking and two people were in the room as he was cowering in the corner.

“That’s so that, when we tested the blade, there would be DNA from someone else associated with it.”
“And not being able to speak to the family, the brother particularly. That was especially frustrating because he was very invested in (pursuing justice). “I couldn’t send him a text or ring him and just chat to him. I’d always have to go through one of our Chinese-speaking interpreters to pass on a message. Or, if he had a question, it always had to come through them. It was difficult.”

Balancing out the difficulties were those who, at risk of embarrassment, contributed willingly to the investigation. Among them were Fang’s clients.

Says Britton: “They were all hardworking, decent people who wanted to help as much as they could because she (Fang) died. But they didn’t want to be caught out by their partners for seeing a sex worker.”

Support also came from the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China. Its first secretary and consul, who travelled to Adelaide from Canberra, helped Major Crime liaise with China to get the Fang family out to Australia.

Members of the local Chinese community gave support to the family too, by staging a fundraiser. The money raised paid for Fang’s cremation and for the parents’ travel from Adelaide back to Sydney.

Piao received far less backing, at least in court, where many likely thought he had the appropriate number of supporters: zero. Not even his wife. PJ

“Ting Fang (pictured) was just 17 when she left her home in Fujian Province, China to come to Australia, on her own, to study in 2007. It was a move she made on the suggestion of her English teacher, who considered Fang had a good grasp of the language.

She left behind her younger brother and parents. Her father was a taxi driver and her mother had for many years worked in a factory. Apart from their jobs, the parents owned a small plot of land which they rented out to farmers.

Fang, who set herself up in Western Sydney, took to her studies in 2008 and stuck with them throughout the following years.

Her parents regularly deposited money into an account as a contribution to her schooling costs. And Fang supplemented those funds with money she earned from working odd jobs – in a supermarket, a restaurant and as a beautician.

Major Crime detectives investigating her murder found no evidence that anyone had coerced her into the sex industry. It seemed, according to a witness, that she had enquired with a Sydney escort agency about sex work, in which she subsequently became involved.

“We don’t know exactly how she got the lead,” Major Crime detective brevet sergeant Damian Britton says. “Perhaps it was just an advertisement that she saw in a newspaper or online about looking for girls.

“Some overseas students hear about it as a way to make some reasonable money and live a lifestyle they probably wouldn’t otherwise be able to afford.”

Fang started out working as an escort in Sydney before she likely discovered the option of operating interstate. The advantage of that practice was that sex workers were never likely to run into clients in their home towns.

“She moved away from that Sydney-based work to do the interstate trips which would have netted her a fair bit of money,” Britton says.

“And she also worked her normal day job as a beautician, waitress, supermarket packer, or whatever she was doing at the time.”

Fang had herself approached the escort agency she ended up working for in Adelaide. Britton suspects that she was able to do that through connections she had in Sydney.

Not long before Chunguang Piao killed her, Fang indicated to another client that she was missing her Sydney home and just wanted to get back there.

Her body was cremated in a Buddhist funeral in suburban Adelaide. PJ

A tragically short life

Not long before Chunguang Piao killed her, Fang indicated ... that she was missing her Sydney home and just wanted to get back there.