

China's Mata Hari

Contributed by Mark O'Neill
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The bones of China's most valuable spy on Taiwan return home after 60 years

Last December, the most famous Communist spy in Taiwan returned home to China after 60 years.

Zhu

Chenzhi was so successful at espionage that she served as the conduit to transmit the island's defense strategy from Taaaiwan's Vice Minister of Defense to the People's Liberation Army as it prepared for a possible invasion. She got shot by a firing squad for her action.

Zhu's

remains returned in an urn carried by the chairman of a Taiwan burial company on a plane from Taipei to Beijing, where he presented it to Zhu's grand-daughter. Zhu was executed by firing squad in June 1950 -- but her story remained a secret for 60 years.

"Such a thing would have been impossible 10 years ago," said Chu Hong-yuan, a professor at Academia Sinica in Taiwan who played a major role in finding the urn.

"We

used to regard the other side as enemies but we do not now. The return of the urn was made possible by the hard work of many Taiwan people who did it from the goodness of their heart, not for money. The Communist Party sees Zhu as a revolutionary martyr. We do not object to this."

The

return of China's Mata Hari is a symbol of growing friendship between Taiwan and China. It took seven years of painstaking work by people in Taiwan to track down the urn and the return had the tacit approval of the government. It is a sign of tolerance and reconciliation, to regard someone who was trying to bring Communism to Taiwan as a person and not a criminal.

Zhu was executed by firing squad on June 10, 1950 in Taipei, together with Vice Defense Minister Wu Shi, the man who provided her with Taiwan's defense plans. Two weeks later, the Korean War broke out, persuading the US to switch policy and include Taiwan in its Asian defense perimeter. The invasion which Zhu had helped to prepare never happened.

Beijing regards Zhu as a revolutionary martyr and will intern her at the national cemetery at Babaoshan in Beijing in April. In

October 2005, events were held to mark her 100th anniversary in her native place in Ningbo, Zhejiang province. It was attended by senior members of the PLA, the police and China's intelligence community.

Zhu's

urn sat unnoticed in a Taipei cemetery for more than 50 years until her family in the mainland launched a search for it. A Taiwan author led the hunt, which took seven years.

Chu said that the Taipei city government and department of civil affairs had assisted with the search out of humanitarianism.

"We

hope the remains of the many KMT people who sacrificed themselves in the mainland can be returned. We hope that the Chinese government can support this effort."

One of the people instrumental in finding the urn was Lei Yuan-rong, who has worked in the Taipei Number Two Funeral Home for 20 years. "We have more than 300 unmarked urns, of Communist spies and those killed after the February 28, 1947 rebellion. Their families could not or did not dare to claim them. It was too sensitive. Many people now are too old to do this.

"But Madame

Zhu was a famous person, a high cadre in the party. The mainland government has paid much attention to this affair," he said. "It was my duty and that of the other parlor workers to help Zhu's family find the urn, despite the difficulties."

Zhu was born in 1905, the fourth daughter of a rich family in Zhenhai township in Ningbo, where her father was president of a fishing company. She attended the Ladies Normal School in Ningbo, whose principal was an underground member of the Communist Party and whose classmates were sympathetic to the cause. In 1925, she took part in anti-foreign protests in Shanghai.

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1927, she married the chief engineer of the main armaments factory of Zhang Zuolin, the warlord who controlled Northeast China, and had one daughter, Zhu Xiaofeng. After the Japanese takeover of the region in 1931, her husband moved to Nanjing to work for the arms industry of the Nationalist government; but he died suddenly of cholera in 1932.

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1937, after she married a member of the Communist Party, the couple moved to Wuhan. For the next three years, they worked for the party in the fields of culture and finance. She traveled to Hong Kong, Zhejiang and Guilin, collecting intelligence and managing money. In 1940, to raise money for the party, she sold a three-carat diamond ring given to her by her mother, for 3,000 yuan.

In 1941, the KMT arrested her husband and imprisoned him in a camp in Shangrao, Jiangxi province. Through her good connections in the KMT, Zhu visited him three times to provide him with money and medicine. She also gave gifts to the camp commandant. Her husband later escaped in a mass break-out by 58 of the 800 prisoners.

In 1944, she was arrested and interrogated by the Japanese military police in Shanghai. In 1945, she officially joined the party and worked undercover in the commercial and information sectors in Shanghai.

After working in Shanghai for three years, she was sent to Hong Kong in 1948 to work in a trading company run by the party's underground. She visited Taiwan on a business trip and found its people speaking Taiwanese and Japanese but no Mandarin and women on the streets wearing kimonos.

In 1949, she was given her most important assignment – to collect military information from Wu Shi, deputy defence minister. A long-time sympathizer of the Communist Party, Wu had since 1947 provided it with military intelligence which had helped it defeat the KMT in the mainland.

On November 25, 1949, Zhu took a boat from Victoria harbor to the north Taiwan port of Keelung, hiding gold necklaces and ornaments in her clothes. She took an assumed name and stayed in the house of her stepdaughter, who worked, ironically, for the KMT's secret service.

From early December, Zhu went to Wu's house each Saturday, under the guise of someone from a pharmaceutical shop, to collect the information; the next day she delivered it to Cai Jiao-gan, head of the Communist Party in Taiwan and the only Taiwanese to have taken part in the Long March.

The information Wu provided was first-grade military intelligence – Taiwan's defense strategy, the quantity and location of its air force, the kinds of planes, the details of arms, artillery, tank and infantry units and names of senior officers. It was just the information the PLA needed to plan the invasion.

Wu was driven not by money or material benefit but idealism; like many Chinese, including those in the Kuomintang, he was inspired by the dream of a strong, independent and uncorrupt China.

Zhu

made seven collections, the last on January 14, 1950, and safely passed the information to her superiors. Her mission complete, they ordered her to return to Hong Kong; she sent a message to her family in Shanghai telling them of her imminent arrival. A friend bought her a ticket on a boat to Hong Kong.

Then in January, police arrested Cai, who supplied the entire list of Communist agents in Taiwan. Aware of his imminent arrest, Wu organized a military plane to fly Zhu to the Zhoushan islands off Zhejiang, still in KMT hands, and not far from her home town. She was arrested there on February 18 and flown back to Taipei.

During her interrogation, she was asked to co-operate but refused and stuck to her principles. She was, like many associates of the Chiang family, a member of a wealthy Ningbo family. The official report on her case said she tried to commit suicide by swallowing gold concealed in her clothes and that, entrusted with an important mission, she had shown bravery and resolution and willingness to sacrifice her life.

On the afternoon of June 10, after conviction by a military tribunal, she and three high-ranking KMT military officers, including Wu Shi, were taken to the Machangting execution ground in Taipei. Six soldiers raised their rifles. "Long live the Communist Party," she shouted and the six opened fire; she was just 45. Among the three others executed was her informant Wu Shi.

Her family did not learn of the death for a month, according to her daughter Zhu Xiaofeng, 80, a doctor who spent her professional life at a military hospital in Nanjing and lives in retirement there. In July 1951, she received a document from the Shanghai government saying that her mother was a 'glorious revolutionary martyr' but was told that there could be no public mourning of her until Taiwan was 'liberated', a decision she completely accepted.

During the Cultural Revolution, Zhu Xiaofeng was falsely charged – people said that her mother had been seen in Taiwan and had changed sides. Finally, in 1983, she went to Beijing to receive a document from the party Central Committee saying that her mother was an outstanding revolutionary.

Zhu spoke rarely about her mother, even among the family. They did not know if anything remained of her. Zhu Chenzhi's second husband died in 2000.

Then, in 2000, at the Taipei museum of the February 1947 uprising, a Taiwan author, Hsu

Chung-mao, organized an exhibition of people who had been executed at Mayangting in 1950; for the first time, the public saw photographs of Zhu Chenzhi and Wu Shi.

In 2002, Hsu provided the pictures to two mainland magazines, which informed people in China about Zhu for the first time. The next year Zhu Xiaofeng asked Hsu to try to track down her mother's remains.

Hsu discovered that, due to the pressure from associations representing the families of those executed under martial law, the Taipei government had set aside 612 spaces in one of the city's funeral homes.

Hsu searched for two years for the urn but got nowhere. The case was pending for five years until the start of 2010, when a Shanghai scholar provided an important clue. Then, with the help of Professor Chu Hong-yuan and staff at the funeral home, they were able to locate the urn and inform Zhu's family in China.

Last December 9, Liu Tiancai, chairman of the Sino-Life Group Ltd, carried the urn himself on a plane from Taipei to Beijing and presented it to Zhu's grand-daughter and her husband. The two took it to the Babaoshan cemetery.

In October 2005, Zhu's home district of Zhenhai held memorial activities to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth and built a museum in her honour. The events were attended by family members, senior local officials, a representative from the Ministry of Public Security, the former deputy ministry of the communications division of the Chief of the General Staff and the son of the party's top spymaster during Zhu's life. Speakers praised her for an outstanding contribution toward 'the liberation of Taiwan and the unification of the country.'

Hsu said that he and the others who had helped in the search for the urn had been motivated by a spirit of reconciliation and tolerance and a wish to change the political culture from removing heads to counting them.

"It will probably take many years before history can make the final judgment," he said. "Or there could be no final judgment at all. As with the American civil war, a heated debate as to who were the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' has continued to haunt the descendants of the soldiers and officers who gave their lives."