

IN THE CORONERS COURT
OF VICTORIA
AT MELBOURNE

Court Reference: COR 2010/3650

FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST

Form 37 Rule 60(1)

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Inquest into the Death of: SUE HUI WANG

Delivered On: 9 October 2012

Delivered At: Coroners Court of Victoria
Level 11, 222 Exhibition Street
Melbourne

Hearing Dates: 14 August 2012

Findings of: HEATHER SPOONER, CORONER

Police Coronial Support Unit Leading Senior Constable Tracey Ramsey

I, HEATHER SPOONER, Coroner having investigated the death of SUE WANG

AND having held an inquest in relation to this death on 14 August 2012

at Melbourne find that the identity of the deceased was SUE HUI WANG

born on 29 July 1995

and the death occurred between 16 September 2010 and 19 September 2010

at Unit 6, 2 Raynes Street, Balwyn, Victoria 3103

from:

1a. **COMPRESSION OF THE NECK**

in the following circumstances:

1. Sue Hui Wang (hereinafter referred to as “Sue”) was aged 15 when she died. She was a talented student and lived with her mother, Li Zhen Gao, at 6/2 Raynes Street in Balwyn. Her parents had recently separated after her father, David Wang, had left the family home on 22 July 2010. Her older brother, Andrew Wang, had moved out a couple of years before. Sue had no relevant medical history although some comments on her healthcare are separately referred to later in this finding.
2. This finding relates to that of Sue’s mother which is also released today (COR 2010 3649).

Brief Background

3. A police investigation was conducted into the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the body of Sue Wang in the hallway of her home on 19 September 2010. Her mother was also located deceased in their garage. As noted at Inquest¹, the background circumstances were largely provided by her father and brother.
4. Li Zhen Gao and David Wang were married in Shanghai, China, in 1986. David Wang migrated to Australia in 1990 to study, with Li Zhen Gao remaining in China. Shortly after her husband’s departure, the couple’s first child, Andrew, was born. In late 1991, Li Zhen followed her husband to Australia, leaving Andrew to be cared for by his grandparents. Li Zhen Gao and David Wang were subsequently granted permanent residency in Australia. In 1995, Sue was born. Shortly after her birth, Andrew joined the rest of his family in Australia.

¹ Transcript page 4

5. Throughout the 1990s and up until July 2010, Li Zhen Gao and David Wang operated a series of successful small businesses and accrued a number of financial assets.
6. David Wang reported that from approximately 1996, he began to argue regularly with Li Zhen Gao. He stated that these arguments were constant, and as a result, the couple often spoke of divorce.

Events Leading to the Deaths

7. David Wang's statement indicates that he had attempted to "*keep the family together*" but believed "*nothing was working.*"² As a result, he obtained legal advice and had his lawyers write to his wife with a property settlement proposal after he left for Hong Kong on 22 July 2010. It appears that he left without informing or warning Li Zhen Gao or Sue of his intentions.
8. Li Zhen Gao was highly distressed at the realisation of what had occurred and sought emotional support from family via telephone (expressing some thoughts of self harm) and assistance from a couple of friends who were aware that she was not coping. An offer of counselling from the school at which Sue Wang attended was apparently declined by Li Zhen Gao.
9. In the weeks preceding her demise, Li Zhen Gao had regular contact with two general practitioners.
10. On 15 September 2010, Li Zhen Gao had a will prepared in which she left her estate to her overseas aunt.
11. On 16 September 2010, Li Zhen Gao sent a package to her mother containing cash and photos of herself and her daughter.
12. Over the next few days Li Zhen Gao's son, aunt, and others attempted to contact her without success.
13. On 18 September 2010, Andrew Wang attended the Box Hill Police Station after he was unable to contact his mother and sister. He spoke with Leading Senior Constable Dean Leaumont, who conducted a LEAP check. A missing person report was not made at this time,

² Inquest brief page 74

however, Andrew was advised to return the following Monday if unable to establish contact. The following day, 19 September 2010, Boroondara police received a telephone call from Li Zhen Gao's friend in America expressing concerns. This prompted a welfare check by police and the discovery of Sue and her mother.

14. On their arrival at 6/2 Raynes Street, police found the body of Sue lying on her back in the hall outside her bedroom with black electrical cable around her neck. An open ceiling access point and ladder was next to her body. Sue had blood around her lips and blood staining on her top.
15. Li Zhen Gao was found hanging in the garage, suspended using electrical cord. She had superficial cuts to her wrists and a kitchen knife was located on the ground next to her.
16. Located at the scene were four envelopes, each containing an amount of money (specifically \$12,000, \$7,000, and two envelopes containing \$10). Also located was a brown paper bag containing four passports: two were in the name of Sue (of which one was current and one was expired); and two were in the name of Li Zhen Gao (of which one was Australian and the other Chinese). A Chinese identification document for Li Zhen Gao was also with the passports. Li Zhen's purse was in this bag, containing just over \$300. The kitchen and dining area of the house were reportedly untidy, however there were no signs of a struggle or forced entry prior to police arrival.
17. A suicide note was not located.

Post Mortem Examination

18. An Autopsy was performed by Dr Matthew Lynch, Forensic Pathologist at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. Dr Lynch formulated the cause of death and set out the following autopsy findings and comments:

Report dated 17 December 2010

Autopsy Findings

1. *Linear abrasion about the neck with ligature resting on body at scene of death.*
2. *Focal haemorrhage right and left sternomastoid muscles, left platysma and adjacent to the left submandibular gland.*

3. *Conspicuous petechiae on subconjunctivae and on skin of face in region of bridge of nose extending to forehead.*
4. *Epicardial petechial haemorrhages.*
5. *Bloodstained frothy fluid in airways.*
6. *Fine film right subdural haemorrhage.*
7. *Occipital (scalp) bruise.*

Comment

1. *The cause of death in Sue Wang is in my view most appropriately formulated as follows:- "compression of the neck".*
2. *Sue Wang is a 15 year old girl who was located in the hallway of a premises at 6/2 Raynes Street, Baldwyn. There was a ligature resting on the body in the region of the neck. A ligature mark was noted on the skin of the neck. The body was located adjacent to a ladder which was positioned under the man-hole to the roof space, the cover of which was disturbed. In the garage of the same premises the mother of Sue Wang, Li Zhen Gao (case no. 3649/10) was found hanging. According to the police report the mother of Sue Wang had recently separated from her husband.*
3. *A number of injuries were identified at autopsy including some abrasions on the front of the neck consistent with the application of a ligature. Whilst the larynx was intact focal areas of haemorrhage were noted within both left and right sternomastoid muscles and adjacent to the left submandibular gland.*
4. *The mechanism of death in cases of neck compression involve one or a combination of airway obstruction, vascular (arterial or venous) obstruction or cardiac arrhythmia induction in the setting of carotid sinus stimulation.*
5. *There was no evidence of any significant natural disease identified at autopsy that might have contributed to death.*
6. *Toxicological analysis was negative for drugs and alcohol.*
7. *This case has been subject to the Institute's technical review process.*
8. *Related case is 3649/10 Li Zhen Gao.*

Evidence at Inquest

19. A focus of the Inquest was to seek some clarity, if possible, about the circumstances and events leading up to the death of Sue Wang and her mother Li Zhen Gao.
20. A police summary was read to the Court.³
21. At Inquest, Dr Lynch stated that his findings in regard to both Sue and her mother were similar in that the ultimate cause of death in both women was compression of the neck. In the case of Li Zhen Gao there was evidence that compression came as a result of suspension in the form of hanging.⁴ Dr Lynch went on to state:

“there is a point of contrast with Sue Wang in that, (1) she was not observed to be hanging from any particular point, and I’m unaware if there’s any evidence that there may have been a hanging point, other than what I observed at the scene, that there was an open manhole and a ladder. She had a ligature mark on the neck, which is something that falls within the spectrum of injuries that I see in the setting of hanging, but without – from my perspective, without unequivocal evidence that she was suspended from anywhere at any particular point of time, I’ve retreated from using hanging as the cause of the neck compression, allowing that to be left open. And that’s because there are other ways of applying a ligature to a neck and producing the injuries that I observed. And one of those would be application of a ligature to cause death by strangulation, at the hands of another person. But there will be significant overlap – and there’s nothing in the injuries that I observed in Sue Wang that allows me to say this is ligature strangulation. Hanging is a form of ligature strangulation, but ligature strangulation used in the more traditional sense of ligature applied by another party. There’s nothing on her neck that allows me to favour either of those two mechanisms, and in fact if there was any evidence of a point of suspension, I would be of the view that it’s entirely consistent with suspension. But similarly, it’s also consistent with application of a ligature in a different setting.”⁵

22. Dr Lynch was asked about the level and length of application of force that might have been involved in ligature strangulation of Sue. He stated in part “...sufficient force to, I guess,

³ Transcript page 1

⁴ Transcript page 9

⁵ Transcript page 9 - 10

produce an injury to the neck, render the person unconscious and ultimately result in their death."⁶ He was unable to shed any light on who might have died first.

23. Detective Senior Sergeant Ian David Snare of the Victoria Police Homicide Squad attended the scene on the evening of 19 September 2010. In his statement that he read to the court he noted:

"Dr Lynch entered the scene and examined the premises and the deceased persons Wang and Gao. Dr Lynch indicated that it was unlikely that Gao could have been placed in the position in which she had been observed, and it was likely to have been a suicide. Dr Lynch was not able to establish the circumstances of the death of Wang at that stage.

*In view of the information I had received during the investigation, and the known circumstances surrounding the location of the bodies of Wang and Gao, I formed the opinion that it appeared that Gao had committed suicide, in relation to Wang it was not established if she had committed suicide or had been murdered by Gao."*⁷

24. Although Detective Senior Sergeant Snare indicated that he initially considered it possible that the deaths of mother and daughter were the result of a double suicide, it was apparent that by the time of the Inquest he had formed the view that: *"Sue Wang was murdered by Li Zhen Gao and that Li Zhen Gao has gone to the garage area and hung herself from the rail."* He went through a large number of factors which had since influenced his change of mind including the depression through separation suffered by Li Zhen Gao; family issues; her retrieval of keys from neighbours; her superficial wrist wounds; the knife located below her; the ladder located nearby Sue Wang and the position of it in relation to the manhole; the partially removed manhole cover and the height of the roof rafters which would have been difficult for either Sue or Li Zhen Gao to reach. He noted there was an absence of any cord of sufficient length to reach the rafters and that the ends of the cord were located towards the rear of the neck of Sue, leading Detective Senior Sergeant Snare to conclude *"...it would be difficult to strangle yourself in that [manner]."*⁸

⁶ Transcript page 15

⁷ Transcript page 18-19

⁸ Transcript page 23

25. Detective Sergeant Eric Young of Boroondara Crime Investigation Unit read his statement to the Court. He was the lead investigating police officer in this matter. Detective Sergeant Young concluded from his investigation that:

“An examination of the scene and background information determined that Li Zhen Gao had murdered her daughter Sue Wang with a length of electrical cable, by strangling her with same. That Li Zhen Gao took her own life by hanging herself from a garage rafter, with an electrical extension lead.”⁹

26. During questioning at the Inquest, Detective Sergeant Young was taken through several possible scenarios as to how Li Zhen Gao and Sue Wang may have met their demise. One scenario involved Sue Wang having died by suicide before being found by Li Zhen Gao, who in turn took her own life. Detective Sergeant Young believed this to be an unlikely possibility, stating in connection to Sue Wang:

“She was a gifted student, 15 years of age and the – although I didn’t attend the scene on the night, the length of cord that’s been described by Detective Senior Sergeant Snare would make it almost impossible for a single individual to have strangled themselves, given the description of the position of the cord around her neck. I don’t believe there was a hanging point for her to do so nearby, where her body was, and although the ladder was positioned above or nearby her, where her body was, and the manhole removed, if she had suicided from there – which again is highly unlikely because of the height difference between the manhole and where the rafters are – if someone had have cut her from there, it would be my suggestion that the ladder wouldn’t have been perfectly positioned under the manhole as it was, that there would have been some movement of that ladder from that position. I believe that the mother has explored the opportunity to suicide above her daughter, removed the manhole cover and saw how the gap between the manhole and the rafter, realised that it would have been next to impossible and then sought an alternative location, which was the garage, where she hung herself.”

27. Detective Sergeant Young went on to comment that the distance between the ceiling access point and rafters was approximately six feet, and that had been no rope or other cords or anything similar attached around the ceiling cavity.

⁹ Transcript page 30

28. Detective Sergeant Young was also questioned as to the possibility of Sue Wang having murdered her mother and then taking her own life. He was of the opinion that this was highly unlikely, in connection to the size difference between the parties and the position in which Li Zhen Goa was found. Importantly, he stated there were no signs of a struggle that may have taken place.
29. Detective Sergeant Young was asked to comment on any measures that he believed may have prevented the tragic deaths of Sue Wang and Li Zhen Goa. He stated that he did not consider there to be any from a police perspective, but possibly in connection to contact with medical professionals who had involvement with the family. Specifically, he commented:

*“There was no domestic violence reported, there’s been no police involvement, apart from property crime matters, with any of the individuals in this. Perhaps, maybe from the medical point of view when the doctors have seen them, but not from a police perspective.”*¹⁰

Supplementary Medical Report

30. Following the Inquest, further questions were addressed to Dr Lynch concerning the cause of death for Sue and the circumstances in which this occurred. A supplementary report was provided to the Court.¹¹ In connection to whether Li Zhen Gao had strangled her daughter, Dr Lynch reported the following:

*“The marks observed on the neck are consistent with the cord coming in contact with the neck of Sue Wang. This contact could have occurred as a result of the ligature being applied to her neck either in the setting of hanging (i.e. where the force provided to the ligature comes from the weight of the body of Sue Wang) or by the ligature being applied by another party (an example of what is sometimes termed ligature strangulation). Either of these scenarios is possible. I certainly have no view as the position of the mother relative to the daughter if in fact she has been responsible for applying the ligature.”*¹²

¹⁰ Transcript page 40-42

¹¹ Supplementary report for Sue Wang prepared by Dr Matthew Lynch dated 3 September 2012

¹² Ibid

31. This report articulates the difficulties in determining the circumstances in which Sue Wang died relative to the actions of her mother.

Medical History

32. Sue's medical history commenced when she was a child and consists of a number of admissions to Box hill Hospital with respiratory illness. She experienced many rashes and upper respiratory tract infections, viral and bacterial, all of which were treated appropriately. Sue was seen by the same general practitioners as her mother, including Dr Goh and Dr Yang. The medical files indicate Li Zhen Gao and David Wang were at times anxious parents who sought reassurance regarding colds, Sue short stature (for which they requested growth hormone), and other areas of her development. Li Zhen Gao was especially concerned Sue would develop a goitre and cancer like her great grandmother, a concern Li Zhen Gao also held for herself.
33. The only record of distress concerning Sue is in November 2007. During consultation with Dr Goh, there is reference stating *'unhappy family, parents have relationship problems...she denied having pressure from parents – counselling both parents.'* Sue had not previously attended her school counsellor, and there is no mention of her having displayed concerning behaviour in this setting.

Sue Wang's Reaction to her Parent's Separation

34. Witness statements contain various references to indicate that Sue was distressed by the event of her parent's separation. Her brother Andrew noted that she was not coping well, didn't want to go to school and was crying a lot. He also described her as being angry at the situation. Further, a statement from a parent of Sue's school friend stated that Sue had received an email from her father and this had upset her greatly. A joint statement provide by Sue's grandmother and great aunt in China indicated that Li Zhen Gao had told them Sue could no longer study and *"was saying very few words"* to her mother. Sue had also reportedly told Li Zhen that without her father they were not a family anymore, and had stated *"that it's better not to wake up in the morning."*¹³

¹³ Inquest brief page 108

35. The Inquest Brief did not contain any statement from Sue's school friends, and thus it is not clear as to what Sue may have disclosed to them. As part of this investigation, inquiries were made in order to access Sue's Facebook account, in an effort to shed further light in this area. Unfortunately, this information could not be obtained.
36. Sue and her mother were seen at their home on 15 September 2010 by a parent of Sue's school friend. She described them as appearing 'normal' on this occasion.

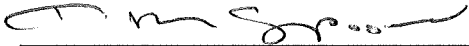
Finding

37. This Inquest sought to clarify the likely sequence of events that led to the death of Sue Wang and her mother. There can be little doubt that the fallout from the family breakdown and apparent decline in the mental health of Li Zhen Gao would have created considerable stress for Sue. In support of this, evidence was provided as to Sue's emotional responses in the weeks preceding her death.
38. Despite the investigations that have occurred into this tragic event, a degree of ambiguity remains as to the circumstances in which these deaths occurred. When Detective Senior Sergeant Snare attended the scene and observed Sue and her mother in situ, he was unable to establish if Sue's death was the result of suicide or attributable to the actions of another person, namely Li Zhen Gao. He gave evidence to the Inquest that he had since formed the view that he preferred the latter scenario and supported the conclusions of Detective Sergeant Eric Young. However, having given consideration to the facts of this case as they currently stand, and the range of evidence produced for the purpose of this investigation, I am unable to be convinced to the requisite degree of certainty that Li Zhen Gao was responsible for taking her daughter's life.
39. As a result, I find that Sue died from compression of the neck. However, the exact circumstances are unknown and I therefore can not find if this was the result of intentional self harm or as the result of injuries inflicted by her mother, Li Zhen Gao.

I direct that a copy of this finding be provided to the following:

The family of Li Zhen Gao;
Investigating Member, Victoria Police.

Signature:



HEATHER SPOONER
CORONER
Date: 9 October 2012

