

Poison case haunts suburban mum

EXCLUSIVE

LIAM MENDES
NATASHA ROBINSON

In a sprawling double-storey bungalow overlooking the tranquil waters of Salamander Bay on the mid-north coast of NSW, Shiyang “Jasmine” Sun is living a charmed life. To the Australian friends who have adopted her, she’s just a normal mum. She volunteers, hosts lavish dinner parties and is preparing to send her only daughter to a local school.

But Sun previously known in China as Sun Wei – is accused of harbouring a dark secret. In the mid-1990s, as a young chemistry student at China’s most prestigious university, she came under suspicion of the most serious kind. Her dorm roommate, beautiful and popular young fellow student Zhu Ling, had fallen mysteriously ill. The symptoms, acute abdominal pain and loss of appetite, initially baffled doctors. Then Zhu’s hair began to fall out. A few months later, illness struck again – intense leg pain, then severe dizziness. In early 1995, the symptoms intensified over weeks until Zhu’s facial muscles were severely distorted and her speech became barely intelligible. On March 20 that year, she fell into a coma.

“Zhu Ling was a truly enviable young woman, showcasing exceptional prowess across various domains,” says a former classmate of Zhu, who played the guqin, an ancient plucked seven-string Chinese instrument, in the same orchestra Ms Sun also played in.

“Zhu Ling’s musical talent, academic excellence and outstanding sports abilities undoubtedly set her apart.”

As Zhu lay intubated in Peking Union Medical College Hospital in March 1995, doctors ran a battery of tests. They all turned up nothing. With no answers and growing suspicions, friends back at Beijing’s Tsinghua University – from a single portal at one of the very few internet access points in China – issued an international SOS, so launching one of the biggest citizen scientific sleuthing campaigns in Chinese history.

“It was remarkable, the English was a little sloppy, it was desperate,” says John Aldis, who in the mid-1990s worked as a doctor for the US State Department. Aldis was instantly captivated by the mystery. “I was immediately drawn to the case, very excited by it,” he says. He consulted a colleague, who immediately suspected only one thing – “it’s thallium”.

In Canberra, pathologist Ted MacArthur was convinced of the same thing. The doctors’ assessment forced eventual testing at a specialist facility in China, which found massive levels of thallium in Zhu’s blood, cerebrospinal fluid, nails and hair samples.

Thallium is a toxic heavy metal, colourless and odourless,



Clockwise from above: Jasmine Sun and Feiyu Xie in Port Stephens; properties the couple own at Soldiers Point, Salamander Bay and Nelson Bay

and often used as rat poison.

This month, weeks after Zhu finally succumbed to a brain tumour and died aged 50, that global hunt for justice has finally forced a reckoning upon Sun, who for two decades has been the main suspect in Zhu’s thallium poisoning.

Sun was exposed by The Weekend Australian living incognito in the Port Stephens area, where she has been buying and selling real estate, after arriving in Australia a decade ago.

The couple decided around two years ago to move to Salamander Bay, in slightly faster-paced Port Stephens, from their 53ha farm in “cliquey” Booral.

They were looking for a more social life, and with their daughter starting kindergarten this year wanted a few more options.

Their holiday rental listing says they enjoy swimming and kayaking, and riding bikes to the fish market to buy fresh oysters and watch the pelicans on the dock.

The revelation of the poisoning case has shocked locals, with some describing Sun as “really lovely and kind”, “generous and warm”.

Friends and acquaintances have struggled to reconcile the social, affable neighbour with the case of Zhu Ling, who after the poisoning was confined to a wheelchair, almost blind, her parents forced to cut her food into tiny pieces and handfeed her, their

daughter so disabled she was described as having the mental age of a six-year-old.

“It’s almost like a movie plot, especially in the Bay, you don’t really hear about high-level drama like this,” said one woman who came to know Sun well. “It’s raised more questions than answers, that’s for sure.”

Sun denied the allegation when the thallium poisoning was first confirmed and has always denied it since. She did not respond this week to questions.

Locals in Port Stephens have taken to the internet to research the crime that has now been bizarrely connected with their region. Citizen police have emerged on Facebook pages, with one local advising if anyone sees Sun they should “call 000 immediately”. The post was hastily removed.

“The more you go down the rabbit hole the worse it sounds, but at the same time, are you ever going to find out the truth?” said one local.

Sun and husband Feiyu “Ringo” Xie have sent messages from the ski fields in Japan where they are holidaying, attempting to reassure friends not to believe the accusations. But when they return, there’s little chance of a quiet life. Millions of people in China are now monitoring Sun, their networks extending even to the quiet streets of Port Stephens.



Zhu Ling’s mother, Zhu Mingxin, 83 and father Wu Chengzhi, 84, farewell her at her funeral on December 24

Zhu’s tragic decline

For two decades, China’s netizens have steadily uncovered the secrets of Zhu’s poisoner. Aldis has followed the case intently. “The use of the internet to do this was remarkable,” he says. “At the time, it was Earth-shaking.

“What I know is a person put thallium into Zhu’s Ling’s cups, probably her tea or her coffee, and probably someone very close to her. So who would this be? Who has access to her tea when she is drinking her tea?”

In 2018, as Sun quietly prospered in Australia, half a world away in the US state of Maryland, a revolutionary form of hair analysis was being performed by US geol-

ogist Richard Ash based on samples collected by Zhu’s parents.

Ash used a mass spectrometry laser ablation technique usually used to analyse sedimentary rocks to establish that Zhu had been poisoned with thallium over the course of several weeks. There was also some evidence of potential lead poisoning. “We stuck the hair down with double-sided sticky tape, fired the laser along the hair, and we knew that how fast the laser moved along the hair was related to time,” he said.

His resulting scientific paper reported: “Hair incorporates heavy metals from the bloodstream into keratin proteins at a relatively constant rate. The distribution profile of a heavy metal



LIAM MENDES

along the hair shaft generally correlates well with the dose and time of exposure to this element, hence representing a long-term record, which remains unaffected by later homeostasis or excretion.”

Ash speculated the victim may have been initially dosed with thallium via her contact lenses, followed by oral ingestion in increasing frequency “every few days” over several months from late 1994, when Zhu went completely bald, lost eyesight and experienced symptoms abdominal pain. She visited home, recovered, and returned to school, then in March 1995 she was admitted to hospital suffering delirium, seizures and convulsions, and eventually fell into a coma.

At that time in China, thanks to an extraordinary international collaboration of scientists that became known as the Thallium Poisoning Telemedicine Network, Zhu was eventually given the remedy Prussian blue. Aldis called on a friend in the CIA based in Beijing to deliver a letter to the hospital treating Zhu requesting urgent administration of the antidote. It was done, and Zhu began to recover. But the damage could not be reversed – she had lost her memory, was severely neurologically disabled and would never walk again.

Back in Australia, Sun changed her name from Sun Wei to Jasmine Sun, and even allegedly

changed her birthday to shed her previous life. But she could not escape the reach of Chinese internet sleuths. Zhu’s death in December only intensified the international push for justice, as the case in China activists claim was stymied – perhaps because of Sun’s apparent high family connections within the Communist Party – became a murder investigation. In Australia, the allegations against Sun have been referred to the Home Affairs Department. At this stage any extradition proceedings appear unlikely, as does the chance of Sun ever facing court in China.

But Aldis says Sun cannot escape questions – or her past. “Right now, after Zhu Ling’s death, everything’s gone hysterical. We can’t rely on the Chinese government to do anything. I can’t think of any other way.”

And so Sun will return to Port Stephens from her holiday to resume a life that has been shattered. She will attempt to repair neighbourhood relationships, but knows the netizens of China will make a quiet life impossible.

In Beijing, Zhu’s parents still have no answers. As they bent to kiss their daughter in her casket in December, wearing customary white flowers on their lapels, Zhu Mingxin, 83, and Wu Chengzhi, 84, looked exhausted and defeated. Justice for Zhu remains elusive, and may never come.

Elle’s body of work is laudable

JENNA CLARKE

She has carved a successful career out of being “The Body” and as she approaches her 60th birthday, Elle Macpherson has never looked or, more importantly, felt better.

Nor has she been more successful. Her body of work away from the camera is how the supermodel has remained at the top of her game for 40 years.

As she prepares to celebrate her own diamond anniversary, Macpherson returned to Australia to also mark the 10th anniversary of her wellness and supplement brand Welle Co.

In between events to promote her new products, including “elixirs” to promote good sleep, Macpherson was the special guest speaker at the Australian Open’s Inspirational Series lunch alongside tennis legend Evonne Goolagong Cawley.

Macpherson headlined the eighth edition of the series, which pays homage to female achievement. This year it also celebrated Goolagong Cawley’s first Australian Open win back in 1974 and her Grand Slam successors in 2024 finalists Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff.

Tennis, coincidentally, inspired Macpherson’s career evolution. “I remember seeing John Newcombe’s fashion line, with the moustache and wink, and he was the biggest thing in tennis at the time and I thought that is something I want to do,” she told the crowd.

Licensing her brand, at first with a lingerie line, helped strengthen her mark and it is something she credits as one of the biggest learning experiences of her career.

“New Zealand brand Bendon approached me to be the face of their brand as they wanted to break into the Australian market and I said ‘You can’t afford me’ as I was working for Victoria Secret at the time. Instead, I suggested we work together as I was obsessed with French lingerie but it didn’t really work for this 6-foot Aussie with a size 36 bust so we created something new. I was just so passionate about creating something,” Macpherson said.

She ended the agreement in 2014 when she established Welle Co in a pursuit of “helping people, as deep down that was what I have always wanted my career to be about”.

Macpherson admitted she had struggled with ageing but was now in the “most Zen space” she’s ever been. And she nominates motherhood as her greatest achievement.

SPORT P41

‘Birdman’ Hawk to soar high in a one-day-only world first

EXCLUSIVE

ANDREW McMILLEN
NATIONAL MUSIC WRITER

For one day only in the Queensland capital, skateboarding hero Tony Hawk will fly high above a crowd of fans at a world-first event to be held in one of Brisbane’s major music venues.

By installing a custom-built 3.65m “vert ramp” inside the Fortitude Music Hall, and adding skate demonstrations, live music and video gaming, event organisers have assembled a unique tribute to Hawk in which the man himself will be a star performer.

The US athlete’s name and virtual avatar helped repopularise the sport more than two decades ago, when the first edition of the mega-selling Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater (THPS) game series was released in 1999, complete with a soundtrack heavy on punk rock and alternative music.

When this multi-layered proposal to mark the 25th anniversary of the game was first put to the bloke otherwise known as “Birdman”, how did he respond?

“I thought it was ambitious but a great way to celebrate 25 years of our THPS legacy,” Hawk, 55, told The Weekend Australian.

“Authentic skating and iconic music are key factors of why the series has endured all this time. Bringing both elements together for a live audience will be a sensory overload, and I’m here for it.”

Secret Sounds Venues head of bookings Mark Gibbons, who is a producer on the event, has been



GLENN HUNT

Legendary skateboarder Tony Hawk

patiently nursing it to fruition across several years of planning.

On Saturday, across two sold-out shows – all-ages in the afternoon, adults only at night, respectively – he and his team at the Fortitude will be among the 4000 or so attendees watching this dream come to life.

“I liked the thought of being able to put a ticket on sale, and people get to imagine a completely different world,” Gibbons said.

“They’ll be walking into something that you wouldn’t see anywhere else in the world: this is an exclusive, one-off event that probably won’t exist ever again, so it’s a really special one for us to work on.”

Hawk will be among 12 athletes from his Birdhouse team to

skate on the newly installed vert ramp – as well as a crew of local Queensland skaters – as rock bands play on stage and live footage from THPS fans playing the iconic game are broadcast on a big screen behind the band.

As for starring in an unusual show held on the other side of the world from his birthplace in San Diego, Hawk remains humbled by the journey that brought him there.

“It’s a huge honour,” he said. “I never imagined travelling the world, performing in front of crowds or working on video games in my early days of skating – and I certainly didn’t think I could still be a pro skater into my adult years. I’m thankful for all of these opportunities, and I take none of it for granted.”

Dementia crisis guide for first responders

EXCLUSIVE

STEPHEN LUNN
SOCIAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

All first responders in Australia will have access to a new specialist training program to deal with people with dementia in emergency situations.

Police, firefighters, ambulance and other frontline health services intervening in a crisis situation involving a person with dementia need specific skills, Aged Care Minister Anika Wells said in introducing the new initiative.

“With more than 400,000 people living with dementia in Australia, a number expected to double by 2058, the demand for dementia awareness among emergency personnel has never been greater,” Ms Wells said. “People living with dementia deserve to be treated with empathy and respect.

“This training, fully funded by the Albanese government, will empower our police, fire, emergency workers, paramedics and ambulance officers to safely engage with people who have dementia in an empathetic way. It’s a game-changer for first responders who have a new opportunity to increase their understanding of dementia.”

The training module’s introduction follows the case of 95-year-old Clare Nowland, who died in May after allegedly being tasered by police.

The incident has led to NSW police Senior Constable Kristian

White being charged with manslaughter and other offences.

Dementia sufferer Nowland, who was living in a nursing home in Cooma, NSW, had been wielding two knives as she moved around with the aid of her walkers, police allege.

Called to attend the scene, Senior Constable White asked Nowland to drop the knife, before saying “bugger it” and discharging his taser, police allege. She sustained a brain injury when she fell backwards and died in hospital days later.

The case will return to court next month.

The free online training will be delivered by Dementia Training Australia. It has already been adopted by seven first responder organisations across four states and the Northern Territory, with police, ambulance and health services having signed up.

It provides information and advice on dementia, its symptoms and its impact on the brain and behaviour.

“Currently, we are asking our first responders to handle challenging situations for which they may have limited preparation,” Dementia Training Australia executive director Isabelle Meyer said.

“(Through this) course they will gain a deeper understanding of how dementia affects the brain and behaviour of those living with it, providing them with the practical tools needed to identify someone who may be impacted by dementia, communicate effectively and prevent distress and escalation.”



Australian Government
Cancer Australia

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH CANCER GRANT INITIATIVE 2024 GRANT OPPORTUNITY NOW OPEN

Cancer Australia is calling for applications for funding under the **Supporting people with cancer** Grant initiative.

The Supporting people with cancer Grant initiative offers grants to community organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations supporting people affected by cancer.

Applicants can apply for grants of up to \$120,000 (GST exclusive) for three years. The minimum grant amount is \$40,000 (GST exclusive) for a one-year project.

How to apply

You can apply through the Commonwealth Government’s grant website – GrantConnect at: www.grants.gov.au and search GO6713.

Further information

For grant guidelines, application form and further information visit:

- GrantConnect at: www.grants.gov.au
- For enquiries email: Grants@canceraustralia.gov.au

Applications are now open.

Closing date: 2.00pm (AEDT) on 29 February 2024

canceraustralia.gov.au