

# THE STIR-FRY SNIPER

## 炒飯狙擊手

*Imagine Jason Bourne meets an older, grumpier John McClane, but both are inadvertent players in a top-secret international arms scandal worth billions of dollars. Sprinkle in some black humor, Chinese cuisine, and secret societies, and you get The Stir-Fry Sniper: a brand-new take on the international thriller, Taiwanese style.*

Twelve days before retirement, Taipei Police detective Wu takes on a curious case: a Navy officer has committed suicide in his hotel room. Wu immediately recognizes that he's been murdered, but the military wants to close the case with no questions asked. Yet the officer is merely the first of his colleagues to die under suspicious circumstances.

Meanwhile, far away in Europe, a sleeper cell is called to action. A young Taiwanese sniper, ex-Marine and ex-French Foreign Legion, who had been working as a stir-fry cook in Manarola, Italy, receives orders to assassinate a high-level Taiwanese government advisor in Rome. He is soon on the run, fleeing across Europe only steps ahead of his old brothers-in-arms.

Who is killing Navy officers in Taiwan? Who ordered the kill in Rome? As Wu races against time to solve this rapidly-escalating murder case before his retirement, Alex finds his way back to Taiwan and his own military beginning – a foster home where a benevolent “uncle” trained war orphans to serve their country.

Based on the biggest military corruption case in Taiwan history and the murder of Navy Captain Yin Ching-feng, *The Stir-Fry Sniper* is both a masterclass in thriller writing and a study of the human heart of darkness. It leads off a series of “cuisine meets crime” novels penned by leading Chinese-language crime writers and published by Marco Polo under the guidance of Sean Hsu, Taiwan’s leading crime editor and critic.



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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 a dozen books over his career, including *Italy In One Bite*, *Birdwatchers*, and *The Jobless Detective*.

# THE STIR-FRY SNIPER

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. Rome, Italy

5:12 a.m., La Spezia, Italy. He boarded the train and napped, rocked to sleep by the swaying car, his hood pulled low. 6:22 a.m., Pisa Centrale. He would not take the shuttle bus to the Piazza del Mircoli. He would not gaze at the Leaning Tower and imagine Galileo dropping spheres from it to discover his law of falling bodies. He would not demonstrate his creativity by taking a photo of himself holding the tower up.

Before disembarking he visited the train toilet, stuffing his bright yellow hooded t-shirt into the bin and replacing it with a red sports top. He switched platforms and boarded the 6:29 a.m. to Florence. He found a seat and slept again.

The earliest trains are rarely late. At 7:29 a.m. he arrived at Florence Santa Maria Novella. The train had filled up on the way and most passengers headed south-east as they exited the station, in search of the grand dome Brunelleschi had designed for the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, where they would puff and pant up four hundred and sixty-one narrow steps to gaze proudly down upon the wind-blown ancient city below.

The plan was to change platform and take the 8:08 a.m. train to Rome. He changed the plan, entering the station toilet to change again, into a short black coat. He was about to conceal the top in a space above the toilet, but then recalled the old man he'd seen slumped outside.

Or maybe not that old, just grey, curled up in a corner by the toilet entrance, face buried in his arms. He carefully draped the red top around the man's shoulders.

He left the station and walked to the bus terminus. There was an 8:02 a.m. to Perugia. It stopped at all the small towns, but there was plenty of time yet. One mistake though: he should have kept the hooded top. The coat was too formal for a tourist route.

Nothing to be done now. He retrieved a backpack from his suitcase and left the suitcase tucked behind a newspaper kiosk.

The bus left on time. At a stop in Arezzo he purchased a coffee and a chocolate croissant.

The Italians did love their sweet foods. They were like ants.

10:54 a.m., Perugia. He hurried to the station for the 11:05 a.m. to Rome, no time to reminisce about the local braised rabbit. No change of clothes this time, just the addition of a New York Yankees baseball cap. Three more hours to catch up on sleep.

The train was quiet: four backpackers with Scottish accents; three business travelers eager to get to their laptops; a single female traveler from Taiwan, maybe Hong Kong. He chose a seat at the back of the carriage and went to sleep.

It wasn't just that he hadn't slept the previous night. It was that he didn't know when he would have another chance to.

The train pulled into Rome Termini at 2:01 p.m., five minutes late. He descended from the carriage into a fractious crowd.

Leaving the station, he turned south, away from the crowds bound for Piazza della Repubblica, to a row of luggage lockers adjacent to a coffee stall. He used a key to open one of the lockers. Good, as expected: two plastic bags, taped shut. He took the bags and walked to an alleyway opposite, where he turned into an Algerian-run store. He emerged clad in a dark brown safari jacket with leather patches on the elbows and pulling a wheeled suitcase with a bear logo.

The alleys surrounding the station were populated by refugees and immigrants. He referred to an address and soon came to a tall building dirty with a yellow-grey layer of smog. He pressed the button for the fifth floor. The glass door buzzed open.

The building was home to three hotels: the Hotel Hong Kong, the Hotel Shanghai, and on the fifth floor the Hotel Tokyo. The beer-bellied, middle-aged man at the Hotel Tokyo asked no questions, handing over a key in exchange for 30 euros.

The room was plain. A bed, a chair, and a television too small to watch without your nose pressed up to the screen.

The phone, so old it might have been vintage, rang at twenty to three exactly. He answered – a woman's voice, which unsettled him. Was it her?

"Hotel Relais Fontana Di Trevi," she said.

"Where's Ironhead?"

His interlocutor lowered her voice, betraying no emotion.

"The room's booked. Second passport."

The line went dead before he could ask again.

He opened his new suitcase, which contained a long holdall and more clothes. He removed the safari jacket and jeans, tossed them in the suitcase and pushed it under the bed before dressing in black trousers and coat and adding a black woolen hat and earphones. He left with the holdall slung over one shoulder.

Nobody at the front desk, the man from earlier now in a back office watching football. He pushed through the hotel door and picked his way down the cluttered stairway.

Back on the street, he slipped a multitool from his sleeve and freed the chain fixing one of several bikes to the railings. He pushed the bike forward a few steps before swinging onto the saddle.

Heading west through back alleys, he reached Barberini metro station, where he abandoned the bike and trotted to catch up with a group of flag-following Japanese tourists. At the Fontana de Trevi he veered away from the silver-haired travelers and weaved through the bustling crowd to a hotel on the south side of the square.

He handed over a passport to the beaming clerk, who checked his details and returned it with a key card.

"One night only?"

He smiled and nodded.

“From Korea? My girlfriend can speak a little Korean.”

He smiled and nodded again.

The man at Hotel Tokyo saw a nondescript Asian man. The clerk here saw a shy Korean man with poor English.

He walked calmly to the elevator and made it safely to Room 313.

150 Euros for a basic room which failed to block the noise of the crowds outside.

He tore open the first of the plastic bags retrieved from the luggage lockers. A large manila envelope fell out. The envelope contained only two photographs, one a semi-profile of a middle-aged Asian man, the other what looked to be a cafe, an outdoor table marked with an X.

In the second, a very non-smart mobile phone, a silver candybar Nokia 7610. He put it in his pocket.

From the Adidas holdall he retrieved a telescopic sight from its protective layer of underwear. From the window he surveyed the Fontana de Trevi and its square. Despite the seasonal cold there were still too many people, blurry figures crossing back and forth across his field of vision.

Did they have to choose the world’s most popular tourist spot for the job? Three thousand Euros worth of coins were tossed into the fountain in the center of the square every day; tens of thousands of photos of the sea god Oceanus and grinning tourists posted online.

He put his sunglasses back on, changed into a turtleneck sweater and hung a camera from his neck.

Just like Ironhead said: if you can’t change the environment, join it.

Immersing himself in the tourist flow, he browsed a few souvenir stores before taking a seat in a cafe. He ordered a macchiato, to which he added two small spoons of sugar, as the Italians did, and bit into, of course, a Sicilian cannoli.

He flicked through the Donato Carrisi novel he was carrying and glanced at the photo lodged within its pages. The round table just outside the window was the one marked with the X.

He would have a view of the table from the hotel room, a distance of about 125 meters. The buildings surrounding the plaza would block most of the wind, and there were no obstacles. Except people.

But there’s an answer to every question. On average it takes four seconds to react to a scare. Say three seconds to be safe. That meant he would have three seconds from taking care of any pedestrians in his line of sight. Three seconds from that pedestrian hitting the floor in which to take the second shot, at his target.

It would mean one more bullet, but that was no cause for concern. He snapped a shot of the fountain on his phone, keen to make sure the cafe staff remembered nothing more distinctive than a monochrome blend of all the Asian faces they saw.

The trouble with cannoli is the crumbs. Crumbs leaving oily marks on the pages of his novel. He’d just read of the death of the orphan Billy, the child who had once calmly cut down the corpses of his parents from their nooses, the happiest of the orphanage’s sixteen charges and a

boy with a smile always on his lips. According to the death certificate, Billy had died of meningitis. Yet when the police exhumed the corpse two decades later, they found every bone in Billy's body had been broken. He had been beaten to death.

Was Billy still smiling as he died?

He reluctantly put the novel away. There might be time to finish it on the return journey. He had to know who killed Billy. The question bothered him; it stuck phlegm-like in his throat.

And no more cannoli until it was finished.

## 2. Taipei, Taiwan

Wu put down his chopsticks and paid his bill. Uninclined to return to the bureau just yet, he hailed a taxi and took the expressway across Shenkeng to the station in Shiding, where Chen had said he would wait.

Chen must have been seventy, and was short several teeth. His ten-minute explanation left Wu spattered with spittle.

As far as Wu could make out, village resident Wang Lu-sheng was missing. Every time Chen went to visit, Wang's two sons said he was in hospital. Which hospital? Family matter, they said, no need for you to know. So old Mr. Chen had checked the lists at Veterans General, then asked at Tri-Services General. No sign of a Wang Lu-sheng. Worried, he filed a missing person report.

Perhaps he'd lost his memory and couldn't find his way home? Or been hit by a car and left lying in some nameless alley?

Well, neither of his sons were going to report him missing. It was up to Mr. Chen.

Let's take a look then.

He requested a car from the station. It came staffed by two greenhorn training school grads to accompany him, each bearing the single-line, three-star insignia betraying them as brand-new. And off to Wutuku.

They turned off the provincial road onto a county road, then onto a village road, and finally onto an access road which itself petered out after a few kilometers.

On a hillside stood a sheet-metal shack of dubious legality, appended to an older brick-built structure that lay in a heap of its own bricks and tiles like some underfunded historical ruin. Saplings sprouting from cracked corners grew slowly toward the roof they would pierce eventually. No chance of keeping wind and water out, except perhaps with a tent pitched inside. It looked like the owners had decided the cost of repairs was too high and instead opted to erect a metal shack up against one wall, and in the process acquire a bit of the surrounding state forestry land.

The car pulled up at the end of the muddy track and three black dogs rushed up, barking. His two escorts seemed unsure of themselves, so Wu got out and, letting the dogs bark away,

threw the remainder of a takeaway meal someone had left on the back seat towards a dog bowl by the wall. He tied the animals up while they fought for the food.

“So are his sons here?”

“They were here two days ago,” Mr. Chen replied, anxious.

“What are the names?”

“They call the older one Waster, the younger one Rake.”

Wu nodded and walked up to the metal door, sniffing. Strong smell of glue. He unclipped the safety strap on his holster, brushed the drizzle off his grey flattop, rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and kicked the door in.

“Waster! Rake! Get out here, you fuckers!”

A clatter from inside, but no reply. Wu stepped inside and soon returned, carrying a skinny man of about fifty in each hand. He slammed them down onto the bonnet of the car.

“Cuff ‘em, there’s drugs inside. Have a look round for dad.”

The site backed onto a cliff and was otherwise surrounded by forest. The nearest neighbor was at the bottom of the hill.

There was no sign of the old man. Traces of heroin on the plastic bags and needles in the shack, though. Class A, up to three years, but previous convictions and two rehab failures would mean more. There was also a large container of glue on a table, two-thirds empty, and piles of yellowing plastic bags.

No money for heroin, so they turned to glue. A junkie’s fate.

But never mind the drugs. Where was the man?

Big brother Waster looked confused, the crust around his eyes well matured. He squatted by the car, drooling. The younger, Rake, could at least stand, one foot bare and muddy, the other – equally muddy – in a cheap plastic sandal.

“You’re not going to dodge this one by going into rehab, Rake. This is jail time, and you’ll be sixty before you’re out. So, where’s your dad?”

Rake looked down at the mud on his feet.

“Your father,” Wu continued, checking the notes on his phone. “Wang Lu-sheng, 87, retired army sergeant. Ring any bells?”

Still no response.

“One more time.” Wu glowered, voice now booming. “Where did you two bastards bury your father?”

He took the man by the neck. “How long has he been dead? How many years have you been stealing his pensions?”

This, going by Mr. Chen’s report, was what Wu thought most likely.

And it wasn’t that unusual. The two men had been doing drugs and stealing since their late teens – no big crimes, but all the small ones. Neither had ever had a proper job and the whole family relied on Wang Lu-sheng’s state and army pensions.

But it was years since anyone had seen him. Wu’s guess was that he was dead, and his sons had buried him quietly to keep the money coming.

Backup arrived from the Criminal Investigation Bureau and the Xindian sub-bureau. Wu continued to let fly at the two junkies, then pushed the sobbing and sniffling Rake into the forest.

“He looked after you two failures your whole lives, then when he’s dead it’s a shallow grave in a forest? Aren’t you ashamed? Animals do more for their dead. So where is he?”

Rake collapsed in the mud. It was his brother, supported on each side, who led them deeper into the trees and pointed out a pile of five stones in a clearing.

“We...we...we always come and tidy the grave on Tomb-sweeping Day.” The wail of a mourning son.

“Oh, fuck you.” The snarl of an angry cop.

Wu couldn’t help but take a swing that sent the man to join his younger brother in the mud.

Everyone donned masks. After only a few shovelfuls of earth were shifted, a foul stench filled the forest. It was a rainy place and the body had been lain directly into the mud, no coffin or even a mat. Wang’s reward for continuing to look after unfilial sons.

He’d died of an illness four or five years ago – not that his two sons could remember which it was. They weren’t even sure exactly what had killed him. One day Rake came home to find his father on the bed, not breathing.

How long had he been lying there on that scavenged mattress?

Again, they didn’t know. Waster said he’d been working construction in Yilan, Rake had been on the fishing boats. They hadn’t been back for months, while their father died alone in a remote hillside shack. Rake didn’t call the police or an ambulance. He slept in the room with the corpse for two weeks, waiting for Waster to come home. They decided to conceal the body and, using their father’s seal and passbook, continue to withdraw his pension.

If Mr. Chen hadn’t taken an interest, Wang Lu-sheng could have lived on paper to be a hundred years old. Immortal, in fact.

The prosecutor fled the forest with nostrils clamped shut and drove off after signing arrest warrants for both men. The CIB team refused to transport them, for fear of stinking up their car. Someone from Xindian was clever enough to turn up a hose, though, so they both got a dousing.

Spraying two criminals with icy water in this kind of weather.... Was it torture? A breach of human rights, maybe?

Not Wu’s business. He wandered around the shack a few times. A gas cylinder outside was rusting away. The power was cut off. The fridge, used as a cupboard, lay empty. Wu saw no sign of anything to eat, apart from empty instant noodle containers crawling with cockroaches. How had they not starved?

He found a pile of electricity bills. They’d stopped paying fifteen months ago, been cut off half a year back.

There was an old barrel they’d used to cook, with a pot hung over ashes. The remains of whatever they had last made sat at the bottom of the pot, under a layer of green mold.

The pair of them were ruined, shrunken by their glue habit. Not much chance of them taking care over their meals.

He explored the forest, taking a narrow path so overgrown he had to crouch till his face was in the grass. He found another smaller shack, formed of three iron sheets and a rickety wooden door – a toilet, by the look of it. There was no need to open it up. Below the door a pair of feet, female, still in sandals, protruded. There was no mobile signal so he went back towards the cars and yelled to one of the Xindian lads:

“Back here! There’s a woman’s body!”

They checked records on one of the in-car computers. Rake had divorced twice, both times from the same woman, a cleaner at a hot springs resort. And it looked like they had gotten back together one last time.

The Xindian and CIB cars were summoned back to the scene before they’d even left the hill.

She’d been beaten to death, the bruises still visible amongst the rot. An aluminum baseball bat turned up in nearby grass, bashed and bloody. Hand and fingerprints were clear in the blood. Wu could almost smell Rake’s stench on it.

A few phone calls revealed that Rake and his sometime wife had a son, currently serving ten years in a Guangdong prison for telecom fraud. At least his room and board came at the expense of the mainland taxpayers.

Wang Lu-sheng had joined the Nationalist army in Shandong before he was even fully grown. He’d served all over, first fighting the Japanese, then fighting the Communists. He’d been at Kinmen during the artillery barrages and won medals for his bravery. He finally got to return to Taiwan proper to settle down, only to have three generations of his family come to ignominious ends.

Naked, Rake hopped from foot to foot in the mud, cupping his hands over his genitals. Wu grabbed the hose and turned it on him. “He’d have been better off raising dogs!”

Wu’s boss, Egghead, saved Rake from pneumonia by choosing that moment to call. Egghead seemed in good temper, though his words were cryptic. “Wu, how would you like to go to Keelung for one of those delicious sandwiches they have at the night market?”

“How would you like me to tell you how long it is till I retire?”

“Twelve days, it’s written on my board. I take a day off for you every morning.”

“And rather than let me have some peace, you’re sending me to Keelung?”

“It’s always busy at the end of the year, and then there’s the new chief, you know what he’s like. Anyway, a straightforward suicide. Take a poke about, give the body and weapon a look, write up a report, and leave the rest to the medical examiner.”

“Ah, so you do have a conscience. You’ve carefully selected the dullest job you can find to make sure these last few days really drag.”

Egghead’s strangled-chicken laugh. “And bring me a couple of those sandwiches – with ketchup, not mayo. Doesn’t look like I’m getting home for dinner again.”

Wu waved down one of the Xindian cars as it tried to drive off: “We’re going to Keelung.”

The uniform at the wheel dared a question: “Keelung, sir?”

“Yes,” said Wu as he climbed into the back seat. “And be happy about it, you’re getting a sandwich at the organized crime squad’s expense.”

To no applause, the car drove off into the rain. The temperature was down to eight degrees, the coldest yet this winter, and the rain never-ending.