

## 'Hello Kitty' Murder Case Horrifies Hong Kong

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HONG KONG, Dec. 8 — A macabre murder case in which three men were accused of torturing and killing a nightclub hostess transfixed residents of Hong Kong, who were titillated by grisly testimony and shocked that something so horrific could happen in their crowded but relatively safe city.

"Never in Hong Kong in recent years has a court heard of such cruelty, depravity, callousness, brutality, violence and viciousness," said Hong Kong Justice Peter Nguyen, who sentenced the defendants to life imprisonment Wednesday after they were convicted of manslaughter. "The public is entitled to protection from people such as you."

The case was dubbed the "Hello Kitty murder" in the press because the victim's head was stuffed into a doll called Hello Kitty that is wildly popular in Asia. It fascinated the 6 million residents of this former British colony not only because of its lurid details but also because of the juxtaposition of brutal crime and the cuddly icon.

"It's horrible, but it's so interesting," said Sandy Chan, a sales clerk at an upscale boutique in Hong Kong's Central district, acknowledging that she and many of her friends followed the case closely from the start.

"That kind of thing, you think, 'Okay, it happens every day in New York--or maybe on the mainland,' " said stylist Irene Chang. "But not in Hong Kong. So people can't help it--they want to know."

Hong Kong's homicide rate--1.23 per 100,000 people--is among the lowest of any major city in the world, according to the University of Hong Kong's Center for Criminology. New York's murder rate, despite recent declines, is nearly 15 times higher.

When a 13 year-old girl came to Hong Kong police in May 1999 complaining of nightmares, investigators nearly dismissed as teenage delusions her descriptions of a young mother, bound with electrical wire and tortured. But a search of a third-floor flat in Hong Kong's gritty Kowloon district turned up chilling evidence, including the Hello Kitty doll with the severed head of missing nightclub hostess Fan Man-ye.

Over the course of a six-week trial, concluded last month, the girl--testifying in exchange for immunity and identified in court documents as Ah Fong--told jurors how her boyfriend and two other men abducted 23-year old Fan in March 1999 because she had failed repay a \$2,500 debt.

The three men--Chan Man-lok, 34; Leung Shing-cho, 27; and Leung Wai-lun, 21--held Fan captive for more than a month, torturing her until she died, according to the teenage witness, who acknowledged that she occasionally joined in the beatings.

Prosecutors charged that, after they killed Fan, the three men dismembered her and disposed of her body parts with the household trash. It is not clear why Fan's assailants sought to conceal her skull by sewing it into the head of the Hello Kitty doll.

The three men were convicted of manslaughter rather than a harsher charge because the jury ruled that Fan's remains offered insufficient evidence to determine whether she was murdered or died from some other cause such as a drug overdose.

In contrast to mainland China, where those found guilty of murder--as well as lesser charges such as corruption--are speedily executed, Hong Kong does not have a death penalty. The three men could be eligible for parole in 20 years.

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