

## Depression wracks mom held in baby's death

Lee T. Wang, CORRESPONDENT

OAKLAND – The last time Hui Zhu was in Alameda County Superior Court, her husband was the first to greet her as she entered the courtroom. He waved to her as she shuffled in, dressed in a red prison jumpsuit, almost standing out of his seat to get her attention. Zhu, accused of killing the couple's newborn son, returned his hello with a brief glance, barely changing her expression as she turned to look at her husband of more than a decade.

Zhu is expected back in court today, when the 42-year-old woman, who faces two felony charges of murder and assault on a child, is slated to enter a plea.

As her case returns to the spotlight, so does an issue rarely talked about in the Chinese American community – mental illness among mothers.

“We are culturally silent. We don’t talk about what’s bad. We only want our children to be doctors and lawyers,” said Betty Hong, executive director of Asian Community Mental Health Services in Oakland.

Zhu’s case is especially shocking for the Chinese community because she was a new mother, said Hong. Children are so highly prized, the idea of a mother being anything less than thrilled is unthinkable for many Chinese families.

“They’re not aware that it’s an issue,” Hong said. “They just say, ‘You’re a mom, you must be so happy.’”

Zhu immigrated to the United States with her husband from Guangzhou in the early 1990s. She had her first child this summer, when investigators say she plunged into a deep depression.

She first tried to kill herself by slitting her wrists 10 days after the birth of her son, relatives said.

After her first attempt, Zhu went into therapy. But counseling would not stop her from trying again. Family members told police they found her with a noose hanging inside the couple's house but were able to stop her before she could use it.

On Sept. 11, the new mother made her third attempt on her life, this time with her son by her side. Zhu sealed herself and her newborn into a room in her West Oakland home and then lit a pot of charcoal on fire, police said.

By the time police arrived, toxic levels of carbon monoxide had filled the room, killing the child and leaving Zhu unconscious.

An official diagnosis of Zhu’s mental condition has yet to be released, but relatives have told police she was suffering from a form of postpartum depression.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 10 to 15 percent of new mothers suffer from the condition, which is triggered by

hormonal changes. Postpartum depression can leave new mothers depressed for months.

Less than half a percent of mothers suffer from a much more serious form of the illness called postpartum psychosis, a condition that typically involves losing touch with reality.

Although postpartum depression afflicts women of all racial and ethnic groups, experts say a broad range of cultural factors can contribute to depression among Chinese mothers.

In Chinese communities, the “myths of motherhood” are so strong that women are often ashamed to admit they are depressed after giving birth. That sense of shame can keep women from seeking help and eventually lead to drastic measures, said Shoshana Bennett, a psychologist and president of Postpartum Support International.

“If Zhu was feeling anything but elated, that could cause so much shame that she felt she had to kill herself,” Bennett said.

Although research indicates Chinese women are no more likely to suffer from postpartum depression than other women, experts say Chinese women are more likely to turn to suicide as a solution.

According to the World Health Organization, Chinese women have one of the highest suicide rates in the world, more than three times the suicide rate of American women.

Limited research makes it hard to tell exactly how those numbers translate to the Chinese community in the United States. But research on Asian American women indicates suicide is a serious problem, especially among older generations.

In the over-65 age group, Asian American women have the highest suicide rate across all racial and ethnic categories.

According to Julia Shiang, a psychologist who researches suicide among Asian-American women, the high rate is largely a cultural phenomenon.

“There’s not this sin associated with suicide as there is in Christian society,” Shiang said.

Unlike Western societies where suicide is seen as immoral, in the Chinese tradition, Shiang said, killing oneself can be seen as a path to honor. Living a dishonorable life is considered more shameful than dying an honorable death, she said.

That cultural ethic can make suicide an attractive option for women who feel like they have run out of options, Shiang said.

In that context, killing one’s child can also have a very different meaning. Instead of seeing it as a crime, mothers may see it as an act of mercy, Shiang said.

“The stigma of being the child of a mother who committed suicide is extremely negative. If you don’t take the child, you’re leaving the child to lead a negative life,” she said.

Zhu continues to struggle with depression.

Behind bars at the Santa Rita county jail in Dublin, she is regularly receiving counseling, her attorney said.

As she copes with depression, her family continues to struggle with grief.

“The whole family is extremely sad,” said Nora Wong, Zhu’s attorney. “This is a tragedy.”

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