

Yang Xinhai murdered 67 people during a four-year spree that covered four provinces.

highest we've had in the US is 48 victims. But you've got serial killers who know that they're in a country where there is no accountability and they can do what they want to do. And the more they get away with it, the more bold they become. That's a part of escalating behaviour because they feel mastery, they feel they're on top of it. At that point they're feeding their physiology and their body is finding it exciting."

Ramsland compares the situation in China to that in the now-defunct Soviet Union, where the government banned the reporting of rape and serial murder, even as one of the most prolific killers in history was at work. In 1992, Andrei Chikatilo, the Rostov Ripper, was arrested and confessed to 56 murders.

"It was only with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989 that they were able to use the resources they needed to solve these cases," Ramsland says.

Those resources include alerting the public but also criminal profiling, long touted in the west as a panacea for serial killings. Typically, the profiler visits the crime scene and pieces together a picture of the murderer based on clues. Even an absence of clues tells them something.

Experts say that while profiling is useful, it's not a fix-all. And profilers in China face an uphill battle, with no one body responsible for such work. Mostly it is done by individuals acting alone within the system.

"EVERYBODY IN THE POLICE; THEY CONSIDER [SERIAL KILLINGS] A NATIONAL SECRET"

Li is one of the few trying to profile killers. Her biggest problem is that they are usually shot shortly after conviction, meaning she cannot confirm whether her hunches were correct through interviews or explore the psyche and motives of the killers.

In contrast, experts at the FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit, part of the US National Centre for the Analysis of Violent Crime, and other psychologists and criminologists in the west may interview murderers for months or years after conviction, to build up information for future crime-solving. The FBI declined to provide details of its work.

Nor are the mainland police much involved in the conviction and execution process, which is handled by the courts and local or national-level procuratorates in mutually closed-off systems that relegate even Beijing officials such as Li to the status of "outsiders". Four years ago, Li applied to the Henan court sentencing Huang for permission to interview him. Her request was rejected.

The same happened with university killer Ma Jiajue, who, in 2004, murdered four classmates and stuffed their bodies into a cupboard. Li travelled to Kunming, Yunnan province – the scene of the crime – and was turned back. "It's frustrating. And yes, I wish I could do more," she says. The Supreme People's Procuratorate in Beijing wouldn't comment for this story. "We aren't open to the outside world," said a woman answering the telephone.

For years, Li has been calling on authorities to include a psychological profile as part of trial evidence. She also wants them to set up a nationwide profiling system similar to the one used by the FBI. Thirdly,



and crucially, she wants police to warn the public when they know a serial killer is in their midst. So far all requests have fallen on deaf ears. "For now, we have limited tools and still have to rely on research from the west," she says.

Yet there are signs mainland authorities are beginning to react to the problem. At an annual crime conference in mid-April at the Henry C. Lee Institute of Forensic Science at the University of New Haven in Connecticut, forensics expert Henry Lee hosted 700 criminologists, policemen, psychologists and forensics scientists from around the world. The topic of the two-day conference was serial killers.

"We had several participants from China," says Lee. "I thought they were wonderful. Of course, those who come out are always the cream of the crop. They attended workshops and they are passing on the knowledge back home. In the early days in China you didn't have that. In the past 10 years you have seen great changes in the system."

Change, however, is not apparent to the ordinary onlooker, agrees Lee. "Everybody in the police; they consider [serial killings] a national secret so it's very hard to get any information out of them."

The mainland is also building a nationwide computer database to help police solve crime – no mean task. "It takes a very concerted effort to keep a database like that for a large country," observes Ramsland. "And then it depends on the jurisdictions to keep it up."

If China does, one day, permit specialists to examine the problem and report publicly, the findings will be fascinating. Different cultures produce killers with different motivations. While money is the leading motive among serial killers in China, says Li, sex is also a component. That's similar to the situation in Japan, says Ramsland. In the US, male serial killers mostly are motivated by sex or anger, though females can be motivated by money.

Yet for now, on the mainland, many details of serial killers, including their motivation, remain patchy. Lu, the father of Ningbo, who Huang claimed as his first kill, says the murderer cut off his victims' penises and kept them in a jar, a detail that is unverifiable. The victims' families say Huang started killing after his girlfriend became pregnant and was forced to abort the unplanned, illegitimate child. Shortly afterwards she left him. Pingyu police refused to comment.

Despite widespread ignorance, occasionally a case is so big, some information slips out. Huang's was one such case and it revealed a high degree of police incompetence.

Disbelieving the police claim that Huang killed only 17 boys, victims' families travelled to his home on the Ching Ming Festival, 2004, long after the case had closed. They dug up his yard with their bare hands and found more human remains.

A resourceful man, Lu rang the *Beijing Youth Daily* and told reporter Zeng Pengyu, who contacted Deng, the forensics expert. "He said he'd go down there and bring the bones back in plastic bags for me to analyse to see whose they were," recalls Deng. "But that was no good. All the evidence would have been disturbed. So I went down with him."

Reverting to policewoman mode, Deng identified the remains of more bodies, bringing the total to 19 – unofficially. Families believe the real figure is higher still, the police having bungled the job of analysing the bones. "My relations with the police are very bad as a result," says Deng, laughing.

Lu says police harassed him and his wife on the six occasions they travelled to Beijing to petition the central government for justice, beginning in September 2003, shortly before Huang was caught. "They would be waiting for us in Beijing, stop us handing in letters and drive us back in minibuses," says Lu. "In all, I spent about 1,500 yuan getting up there." Once, he says, local officials offered him 30,000 yuan if he did not travel to Beijing, "but nothing if I did". In the end, local officials gave him nothing and the court compensated the family with 5,000 yuan. After Huang's execution, his victims' families tried to sue Pingyu officials but say every lawyer they contacted turned down the case.

As we leave Lu's house to visit the traditional Henanese conical earth grave in which Ningbo's torso lies – his head and limbs were never found – plainclothes officers follow us. Later, we are detained at an impromptu roadblock and our identities scrutinised by state security officials, who claim foreigners travelling to Pingyu must first register with the police.

Lu believes the heavy surveillance is because "they have ghosts in their hearts", local parlance for guilt. "They know he killed more than 17 children. But they don't want to admit it." ■