

# Death By A Thousand Cuts

by Darcia Helle  
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Capital punishment has been used for thousands of years and is or was practiced all over the world. A few of the past methods were quick and merciful. Most were not. *Death by a thousand cuts* is among the most horrific.

Also translated as *slow slicing*, *lingering death*, and *slow process*, the true name for this ancient Chinese style of execution is Lingchi. The term was derived from a classical description of ascending a mountain slowly.

Lingchi's use as a form of execution began in China around the year 900 and continued until its abolition in 1905. Reserved for crimes considered particularly severe, such as treason and killing one's parents, the process entailed slowly slicing off chunks of the condemned person's flesh. Execution normally took place in a public area, where the condemned would be tied to a wooden frame or cross beside a table holding a basket of razor-sharp knives covered by a cloth. Each knife bore the marking for a particular part of the body. The executioner would reach beneath the cloth and pull out a knife. He would then slice the area designated by the knife's inscription. The torture came to a merciful end only when the executioner pulled the knife with the marking for the heart.

This method appears to have been later changed to a more deliberate procedure, using a specific sequence of slicing and only one knife.

In later years large amounts of opium would first be given to the accused, although it is unclear as to whether this was an act of mercy or to prevent fainting and prolong torture. The condemned fortunate enough to come from wealthy families could offer the executioner a bribe to hasten death. For less serious crimes, the executioner would first slice the victim's throat. The slicing away of flesh then became symbolic rather than torturous.

To the condemned, Lingchi was physical and psychological torture, as well as publicly humiliating. The principle behind the slicing of flesh lay in the spiritual belief that the victim's body would not be intact in the afterlife. For the Chinese of that time, this may have been more horrifying than the actual torture.

In 1895, Sir Henry Norman witnessed a Lingchi execution. In *The People and Politics of the Far East*, Norman wrote that the executioner sliced off pieces by "grasping handfuls from the fleshy parts of the body, such as the thighs and the breasts". He went on to state that "then the limbs are cut off piecemeal at the wrists and the ankles, the elbows and knees, the shoulders and hip. Finally the victim is stabbed in the heart and his head cut off".

In 1904, in a public square in Beijing, China, accused murderer Wan Weiqin was put to *death by a thousand cuts* in front of a crowd of onlookers. He is among the last to have suffered this form of capital punishment.

