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Confessed Police Killer Lionized by Thousands in China

Crime Seen as Blow Against Oppression

By Maureen Fan
Washington Post Foreign Service
Friday, November 14, 2008

BEIJING -- Yang Jia slipped into the Zhabei Police Station in north Shanghai through the service entrance. A knife in his right hand and a mask over his face, he fatally stabbed four police officers on the first floor and one each on the ninth and the 11th before finally being subdued.

Yang, 28, has confessed to the crime and is destined for execution. But in a bizarre twist that reveals the fissures that run beneath China's elaborately constructed social order, he is also an unlikely hero. Thousands of Chinese have lionized him for standing up to the security forces that are increasingly seen as a blunt instrument of the Communist Party's chief aim: to ensure its authority by maintaining stability and stifling dissent.

At one of Yang's hearings last month, hundreds of protesters descended on the Shanghai Higher People's Court, carrying signs that read "Long Live the Killer" and shouting "Down with the Communist Party" and "Down with fascists." Many of the protesters were educated and middle-aged.

More than 4,000 people have signed an open letter posted online urging that Yang's life be spared. The letter has been erased from many Web sites by government censors, and coverage of the case in the state-run media has been strictly controlled.

As heinous as the July 1 crime reportedly was, and despite Yang's confession, many Chinese still doubt the government's findings. Public support for Yang has been bolstered by reports that he had been mistreated by police on at least two occasions and may have been seeking revenge.

"There are many citizens who have suffered similar treatment but are too afraid to speak out," said Liu Xiaoyuan, the family's attorney. "They feel that if someone stands up to the police, he or she is fighting for justice on their behalf."

There are tens of thousands of protests each year in China, according to the government's own figures, and the number is rising. They range from rural protests over land grabs to the recent unrest in southern China over factory wages and dismissals. Many protests involve public outrage over heavy-handed tactics by the police or the wealthy, who are

VIDEO



Yang Jia's Father Talks About His Son

Yang Fusheng, the father of convicted murderer Yang Jia, spoke with The Washington Post shortly after his son's trial, on his feelings about his son's trial.

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perceived to take advantage of the country's millions of laobaixing, or ordinary citizens.

Yang's story has generated an uncommon level of public interest, with everything from his personal background to the minute details of the crime becoming fodder for feverish discussion among his backers.

Yang is an unemployed former supermarket clerk from Beijing with wide-set eyes, an open face and short-cropped hair. He loved hiking, photography and curling up all day with a good book, according to a MySpace blog he created before his rampage.

Part of the controversy surrounding the case involves his previous confrontations with police. Two years ago, Yang sustained a concussion and lost three teeth when police beat him for cutting in line at a train station in Shanxi province, according to lawyer Liu.

On Oct. 5 of last year, according to Yang's courtroom testimony, he was falsely accused of stealing a bicycle he had rented in Shanghai and was insulted and beaten by police. When he asked for a written explanation and \$30 in compensation, his family said, police offered to pay him \$210 but refused to provide any written account of their actions. Yang said he refused the money; he wanted police to admit they were wrong.

Police said Yang was stopped for riding a bicycle without registration plates. Though he repeatedly cursed them, police let Yang go after "educating" him, Shanghai public security officials said at a news conference this summer. Yang then filed multiple complaints demanding that the offending officer be fired and that he be compensated for mental stress, state-run media reported.

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"Yang did what we dare not do," said an online blogger using the nickname Xiao Bin, referring not to the killings but to confronting police. "Because of him, when we go to Shanghai and bike on the street, we don't have to fear policemen beating us."

Russell Leigh Moses, a Beijing-based American political analyst, said: "Support for Yang Jia shows intolerance for police brutality and authority exercised without restraint. This is not about an individual case. What you have is two very different views of what the government is: The government believes that rule is reinforced by retribution, but citizens increasingly detest power being exerted capriciously."

According to the official version of events, Yang arrived at the Zhabei Police Station in a northern neighborhood of Shanghai at 9:40 a.m. July 1, determined to retaliate for the bicycle incident.

Yang armed himself with tear gas, a knife, hammers, a hiking stick, plastic gloves and eight beer bottles that he had filled with gasoline from an auto repair shop, according to court testimony. After starting a fire at the front gate and slipping into the building, Yang began his killing rampage. He was finally found on the 21st floor, where seven police officers forced him into a corner with an office chair and disarmed him about 9:45 a.m.

Inconsistencies in the accounts, such as how Yang could have stabbed six officers to death and climbed 20 floors in five minutes, have not been explained. Yang was arrested, and according to the government, he confessed. Yang's first trial, on Aug. 26, was closed. His first attorney, Xie Youming, was a legal consultant to the Zhabei district government, a potential conflict of interest. On Sept. 1, the court found Yang guilty of intentional murder and sentenced him to death.

The case proceeded to the Shanghai Higher People's Court, where authorities mindful of public opinion allowed a more-open second trial on Oct. 13. Hundreds of protesters gathered outside. Yang's father and family attorney Liu attended, as did the Chinese news media. Ai Weiwei, an outspoken critic of the central government and the architect of the Bird's Nest stadium used for the Olympics, was also there.

VIDEO

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"The facts are clear, the evidence is certainly ample, the designated crime is accurate, the measure of punishment is appropriate, and the trial procedures are legal," the judge, Xu Wei, said in upholding the sentence late last month. Yang, dressed in black pants and a blue shirt, showed little emotion. The case has now gone to China's Supreme Court.

After the verdict, Ai posted on his blog an account of the trial, including what Yang said in court. Liu, the family attorney, also posted articles raising legal questions about the case. Both Ai's original account and many of Liu's articles were deleted by government censors but were then posted again. Soon Ai's account was widely circulated on various Chinese community Web sites, and conversations about the case sprang up on online bulletin boards and other blogs and Web sites throughout China.

"The more the government tries to conceal, the more the public will doubt," said Zhou Shuguang, 27, a Beijing-based resident who calls himself a citizen reporter and blogs on the results of his investigations. "Right now we are still not clear about many details in Yang Jia's case. It's hard for us to believe that the policemen are innocent. And the legal procedure is not fair. It's not right to sentence Yang to death."

The case took another strange turn this week when Yang's mother, Wang Jinmei, missing since the killings, turned up in a mental hospital on the outskirts of Beijing, reportedly claiming that police had locked her up and forced her to hire a government lawyer.

"Yang Jia's case is about whether we can live safely in China. To support Yang Jia is to support ourselves in the future," said Yang Peihua, a businesswoman who showed up at the second hearing. "Now that the Supreme Court is reviewing the case, we can only count on the central government to uphold justice. Otherwise there is no hope in China at all."

Researcher Liu Songjie contributed to this report.

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