

DEATH ROW STUDY SESSION

BY ZENG LINLIN

Zhang Zhixin, a cadre in the Liaoning provincial government, was arrested in September 1969 after voicing her disenchantment with the Cultural Revolution's violent factional struggles. She gained immortality in Liu Binyan's *A Higher Kind of Loyalty*, which reported that when Zhang was executed in April 1975, her throat was cut to prevent her from shouting slogans with her last breath. In the following essay, Zhang's daughter, who was not yet 18 when her mother died, recalls her family's ordeal.

In the early spring of 1975 there was a fierce blizzard. That day, two Shenyang court officials came to my house to notify my father, myself and my younger brother to attend a meeting in town. Father and I carried my brother, and braving the blizzard we arrived at the town guest house. Upon pushing open the door, we were met with a blast of hot air, as the room had indoor heating. In spite of the heat, my heart trembled and I felt colder than outside in the storm.

The Shenyang court officials told us to sit down, that we would be having a "study session." One of the officials produced a copy of Chairman Mao's *Quotations*, opened the book and began to recite from it. I don't remember the content completely, but the gist was a passage about class struggle and another about the need to resolutely crush all counterrevolutionaries. Then they mentioned my mother, and proceeded to ask my father some questions. Father said that he had divorced my mother several years earlier, and had been given custody of us children.



Zhang Zhixin

The court official asked me: "Do you know about your mother's behavior in prison?" I nodded my head, even though I had no idea about my mother's situation. I had heard people say that she was a counterrevolutionary. After Mother went to prison, Father visited with clothing and other items, but he was not allowed to see her. Even her brother, who came all the way from Beijing to the prison, was not allowed to see her. From the time Mother was arrested, all contact with us was cut off, and we had no news of her at all.

The Shenyang court official said loudly: "Your mother is very reactionary and will not reform herself. She is stubborn, opposes the Great Helmsman Chairman Mao, opposes Mao Zedong Thought, opposes the revolutionary proletarian line and piles offense upon offense. The government is considering adding to her punishment. If she is given the death penalty, how would you feel?"

I stared blankly, not knowing how to respond. My heart was shattered. But I remained outwardly calm and suppressed my tears. Father had told me never to cry in front of others, or it would mean that I had not drawn a clear line between myself and my mother. Father answered for me: "If this is the case, whatever the government does is fine."

The court official then asked: "If she is executed, will you bury the body? Do you want her belongings back?"

I stared at the ground and remained silent. Father again answered for me: "We do not want anything."

They did not ask anything further. The court officials conferred for a short time; one wrote something down, and the other instructed me, telling me that I was a well-educated girl, that the Party emphasized an individual's attitude and behavior and that I should draw a clear line between myself and my mother. He wanted me to say what I thought about my mother's crimes. I repeated the rote political phrases that my teacher had taught us. But my heart was confused, and I cannot now remember exactly what I said.

One official showed the other what he had written, after which they again whispered to each other and wrote some more. Then they required me to sign and affix my fingerprint to the document. The "study session" was over. During the encounter, my brother was so scared that he stayed silently clinging to my father.

Afterward Father led us from the guesthouse, staggering

through the whistling blizzard and wind. He did not make dinner when we got home, but split a steamed corn bun into two pieces, which he gave to me and my brother, saying, "After eating you must go to bed."

Even though she gave birth to me and is my mother, she is a counterrevolutionary and is my enemy.

I lay quietly in bed. Father sat alone, staring at the light as if in a trance. He then looked over at the bed, and thinking that my brother and I were asleep, he slowly stood up and began rummaging through a box of belongings, looking at pictures of Mother. Father could not control himself and began to cry. I climbed down from the bed, jumped into his arms, and began sobbing. Father comforted me, and said: "Don't cry, we can't let the neighbors hear us." Hearing our cries, my brother woke up as well and climbed into Father's arms. I don't know how many tears we cried that night.

This is a very painful memory, almost too painful to recall. The document that Linlin was required by the court officials to sign and fingerprint is excerpted below:

Linlin: After hearing that Zhang Zhixin was convicted of a counterrevolutionary crime, I thought that it would hinder my progress. But after studying and raising my political awareness, I realized that even a mother-daughter relationship has a class nature. Even though she gave birth to me and is my mother, she is a counterrevolutionary and is my enemy. She opposes the Party and Chairman Mao, and we must continue to struggle against her. As a result of education by my teachers and family, I recognize that she is a counterrevolutionary, and I have drawn a clear line between myself and her so that my progress is not hindered.

Questioner: Zhang Zhixin clings to her erroneous views, and her crimes are very heinous. What is your opinion?

Linlin, Tongtong: We resolutely oppose her, and agree she should be put to death to rid the people of this poison. We don't even want her body. We support whatever the government does. We don't want her belongings. We don't want anything. The government can do as it sees fit.

That year Tongtong was not yet 10 years old, and Linlin was not yet 18. Even if this "record" is not just the creation of a court official, under the circumstances of that time Linlin and Tongtong had no other choice but to say what was required of them.

Translator's name withheld

The original Chinese article has been posted on numerous Web sites, but originated as part of a longer article published in the Guangzhou-based *SouthernWeekend*. The full article can be accessed at: <http://www.southcn.com/news/community/shzt/party/first/200206271778.htm>.