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# MailOnline

## The Execution Factor: It was designed as propaganda to deter would-be criminals. Instead interviews on death row have become China's new TV hit

By [Hazel Knowles](#)

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With her silk scarves and immaculate make-up, Ding Yu looks every inch the modern television presenter. Indeed, for the past five years she has hosted a hugely successful prime-time show in China which has a devoted following of 40 million viewers every Saturday night.

But while in Britain the weekend evening entertainment will be The X Factor or Strictly Come Dancing, Ms Ding's show features harrowing – some would say voyeuristic – footage of prisoners confessing their crimes and begging forgiveness before being led away to their executions.

The scenes are recorded sometimes minutes before the prisoners are put to death, or in other cases when only days of their life remain.



Prime time: Chinese television's Interviews Before Execution has become a hit with

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viewers

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The glamorous Ms Ding conducts face-to-face interviews with the prisoners, who have often committed especially gruesome crimes. Her subjects sit in handcuffs and leg chains, guarded by warders. She warms up with anodyne questions about favourite films or music, but then hectors the prisoners about the violent details of their crimes and eventually wrings apologies out of them.

She promises to relay final messages to family members, who are usually not allowed to visit them on death row. The cameras keep rolling as the condemned say a farewell message and are led away to be killed by firing squad or lethal injection.

Having begun life five years ago on a TV channel in Henan province in central China, Interviews Before Execution quickly became a hit with viewers and was given a prime-time Saturday night slot.

Scenes from the series will be shown in Britain for the first time next week in a BBC 2 documentary. The BBC describes the Chinese series as an 'extraordinary chat show' which has made Ms Ding a national celebrity.

Ms Ding has covered more than 250 cases in Interviews Before Execution. She told a child killer: 'Everyone should hate you.' Her interviewees also included a jealous divorcé who stabbed his ex-wife in front of her parents.



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**TV star: The shocking and macabre interviews have made the programme's presenter, Ding Yu, a household name across China**

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In one scene, a prisoner in his 20s falls to his knees before his parents, who have been allowed to see him. He pleads: 'Father, I was wrong. I'm sorry.'

Moments later, his parents see him about to be led away to his death. His distraught mother apologises for beating him once as a child and implores her son: 'Go peacefully. It's following government's orders.'

Prison officers then push her aside and drag him away.

In another scene, a firing squad of about 20 men is briefed by a senior officer before executing condemned prisoners. 'Some criminals will be very tough and difficult. That means they'll be dangerous,' the officer tells them.

Officials in the ruling Communist Party regard the series as a propaganda tool to warn citizens of the consequences of crime.

Inmates are selected for Ms Ding by judiciary officials who pick out what they consider suitable cases to 'educate the public'. So far, the show's makers claim, only five condemned prisoners who were asked have refused to be interviewed.

Convicted criminals in China can be put to death for 55 capital crimes, ranging from theft to crimes against the state. However, the show focuses exclusively on murder cases, conspicuously avoiding any crimes that might have political elements.

The case that has drawn the largest number of viewers so far is that of Bao Rongting, an openly gay man who was condemned to death for murdering his mother and then violating her dead body.

Three extra episodes were devoted to his story as viewing figures soared. Homosexuality is still regarded as taboo in most of China, and the sensational trailers described his interviews as 'shining a light on a mysterious group of people in our country'.

When Bao was executed, no family members turned up to say farewell. His final conversation before being led to his death was on camera with a decidedly wary Ms Ding, who admitted to being unsettled by his sexuality. In a remarkable scene, he asks if she will do him a last favour by shaking his hand before he dies. She hesitates, before lightly touching his hand with her finger and then pulling it away.

She later confessed to being unsure if she should have shaken his hand, saying with obvious distaste: 'There was a lot of dirt under his nails. For a long time there was a feeling in this finger. I can't describe that feeling.'



**Death row: Gao Ping Phu, who murdered his ex-wife, shows remorse as he is interviewed by Ms Ding before he is led away for his execution**

The series has made a household name of Ms Ding, who is married and has a young son. She is often recognised in the street while doing her shopping with her family.

Denying her show is exploitative, she said: 'Some viewers might consider it cruel to ask a criminal to do an interview when they are about to be executed. On the contrary, they want to be heard.'

'When I am face-to-face with them I feel sorry and regretful for them. But I don't sympathise with them, for they should pay a heavy price for their wrongdoing. They deserve it.'

However, she admits to being haunted by those she has interviewed. She once woke on a train in the middle of the night and, looking out of her window, saw a vision of the executed prisoners she had interviewed standing in a line beside her carriage.

'Their faces were so real and all of them were standing there looking at me,' she said. 'I was horrified – I have heard so many cases. It is really not good for me at all. I have too much rubbish in my heart.'

Lu Peijin, the boss of TV Legal Channel in Henan province, said Ms Ding came up with the concept for the show and he agreed immediately, but that getting approval from officials was a long process.

'I thought it was a great idea right away,' said Mr Lu, who said that the stated aim of the show was not to entertain but to 'inform and educate according to government policy'.

'We want the audience to be warned,' he said. 'If they are warned, tragedies might be averted. That is good for society.'

Mr Lu said Ms Ding's feminine image endears her to both audiences and the prisoners she interviews. 'We say she is the beauty with the beasts,' he said.

## CONFESSIONAL TV: ROGUES' GALLERY WATCHED BY 40M VIEWERS



**NAME:** Wu Yan Yan

**CRIME:** Murdered abusive husband.

**INTERVIEWER'S QUESTION:**  
'I still don't see sufficient reason to burn your husband alive.'

**CONDEMNED WOMAN'S RESPONSE:** 'He beat me and abused me. I was very angry.'



**NAME:** Bao Rongting

**CRIME:** Murdered his mother in row over his gay lovers.

**INTERVIEWER'S QUESTION:**

'Did you kill your mother because your resentment boiled over?'

**CONDEMNED MAN'S**

**RESPONSE:** 'It was about money and sex.'



**NAME:** Zhang Peng  
**CRIME:** Robbed and murdered girlfriend's grandparents.  
**INTERVIEWER'S QUESTION:**  
'You killed your girlfriend's

grandparents – have you a message for her?'  
**CONDEMNED'S MAN RESPONSE:**  
'Be strong and don't fall in love with someone like me in future.'

China is believed to kill more prisoners every year than the rest of the world combined, and the communist state has been widely criticised over its use of the death penalty.

There is no presumption of innocence under Chinese law. The condemned are often put to death as little as seven days after their convictions are confirmed by the Supreme Court.

The exact number of executions is a state secret, but it has been estimated that about 2,000 prisoners a year are executed in China, although rates are believed to have fallen in recent years.



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**Haunted: Miss Ding, who also conceived of the programme, has had visions of the executed people she has interviewed**

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China is concerned that the BBC documentary will damage the country's image overseas and lead to fresh accusations of human rights abuses. Ms Ding and her colleagues have been banned from giving any further interviews.

Officials are particularly upset because next week's BBC broadcast comes at a politically sensitive time – only days after China's pseudo-parliament, the National People's Congress, begins its annual session in the capital Beijing.

A Chinese TV executive who works on Interviews Before Execution said: 'When the party officials realised the extent of the footage the BBC would use, they were very concerned about it.'

'Although the documentary was approved, Ms Ding and her colleagues have been told off for giving the BBC team too much access. They have now been instructed not to give any further interviews to foreign media.'

'It's fair to say the BBC programme has created a problem for us. Officials here do not want the foreign media saying there are no human rights in China, particularly at this sensitive time politically.'

Reached by phone at her TV station in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan province, Ms Ding told The Mail



on Sunday: 'I'm afraid I can't speak to you about this. Our show involves a very sensitive subject involving human rights.'

'We have been instructed not to accept any further interviews about the programme, particularly with foreign media.'

A BBC spokeswoman said the programme was made by a Chinese production company and then acquired and revised in accordance with BBC guidelines.

The spokeswoman said: 'The programme provides a revealing insight into Chinese attitudes to the death penalty. By showing rare footage of China's death row alongside interviews with convicts, judges and journalists, it opens up an aspect of China that is normally hidden from the world.'

ε **This World: Interviews Before Execution, BBC 2, Monday, March 12, 11.20pm.**

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Wondering if they aren't drumming up interest in another tour of plasticized bodies, strictly educational of course!

- Donald, Springfield, MO, 06/3/2012 06:38

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The story isn't troubling out of sympathy for those who've committed unforgiveable crimes. It's disturbing that Chinese society is interested in watching this spectacle, and this is a top-rated show.

- Jeremy, Houston, TX, 06/3/2012 01:47

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Bizarre, but this doesn't prove that Chinese are any more barbaric than the rest of us. After all, public executions used to be a popular spectator sport in Britain, the US and in my country. Unfortunately, I think a show like this would rate through the roof in the Anglosphere.

- Steve777, Sydney, Australia, 06/3/2012 00:09

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Looks as though they are as sick and disgusting as us.

- Otisx, Sunbury, Ohio, 05/3/2012 23:25

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It won't be long before networks shows like 60 Minutes come out for reinstatement of the death penalty. Just think of the ratings, the advertising revenue.

- fmc, Cohasset MA, USA, 05/3/2012 22:21

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Why are they on death row, did they not offer birth control to their employees as part of their health benefits?

- Cebes, San Diego, CA, usa, 05/3/2012 21:50

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"Mother in Row" ? Is that some sort of joke, because I laughed. Its under Bao Rongting's bio.

- Sean patriot, TEXAS, 05/3/2012 21:18

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We could balance the US budget on a pay-per-view weekly format!

- G.Mike Davis, San Francisco, USA, 05/3/2012 19:00

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The world is morally declining one small increment at a time. This is a hop-skip-jump away from 'The Running Man'

- Jeremy, Houston, TX, 05/3/2012 16:37

Click to rate \_\_ Rating 60

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Barbarians and population control... I'm confused are you guys trying to eliminate the hate or induce it? Yes humans are barbaric. Yes China exploits people on TV for PROFIT but then so does my country.

- kentrx, Hermosa Beach, CA, 05/3/2012 15:52

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