

Divided Chinese See a Live TV Program About Executions as Crass, or Cathartic



Cctv, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Naw Kham, the Burmese gang leader, on a Chinese TV broadcast.

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BEIJING — During a two-hour television broadcast that was part morality play, part propaganda tour de force, the Chinese government on Friday sent four foreign drug traffickers to their deaths after convicting them of killing 13 Chinese sailors two years ago as they sailed down the Mekong River through Myanmar.

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Although the live program ended shortly before the men were executed by lethal injection, it became an instantly polarizing sensation, with viewers divided on whether the broadcast was a crass exercise in blood lust or a long-awaited catharsis for a nation outraged by the killings

in October 2011. Some critics said the program recalled an era not long ago when condemned prisoners were paraded through the streets before being shot in the head.

“Rather than showcasing rule of law, the program displayed state control over human life in a manner designed to attract gawkers,” Han Youyi, a criminal law professor, wrote via microblog. “State-administered violence is no loftier than criminal violence.”

One prominent rights lawyer, Liu Xiaoyuan, insisted that the show, by the national broadcaster CCTV, violated Chinese criminal code by making a spectacle of the

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condemned. "I found it shocking," he said in an interview.

The program largely focused on Naw Kham, the Burmese ringleader of a criminal gang who investigators say ordered the brutal execution of the sailors after they refused to pay protection money. To confuse investigators, the men reportedly planted [methamphetamines](#) on the victims' boats.

In a nation where millions work overseas, sometimes in dangerous corners of the world, the killings were especially unsettling.

Last April, six men, including Mr. Naw Kham, were apprehended in Laos by investigators including officers from [China](#), Thailand, Laos and Myanmar.

Mr. Naw Kham and his accomplices were convicted last November in China's southwest Yunnan Province. The condemned men, including a Laotian, a Thai and a third of "unknown nationality," reportedly confessed to the crime.

The two other men who escaped execution received long prison terms.

Last month, a Chinese public security official told a newspaper that [Beijing had considered using a drone strike](#) to kill Mr. Naw Kham but later decided to capture him alive.

Given the considerable viewership on Friday, that decision proved to be a public relations coup. The program included interviews with police officers, images of the condemned men in shackles and the sort of blustery talking heads that would be familiar to Americans. The graphic elements that flashed behind the CCTV news anchor featured the tagline "Killing the Kingpin."

In one segment, Liu Yuejin, director general of the central government's Narcotics Control Bureau, cast the executions as a pivotal moment for a newly confident China and for ethnic Chinese across the globe. "In the past, overseas Chinese dared not say they were of Chinese origin," said Mr. Liu, who led the task force that spent six months hunting the culprits. "Now they can hold their heads high and be themselves."

Supporters of the program were many, and enthusiastic. One blogger suggested that death by lethal injection was too lenient.

Some critics said the broadcast, and the subsequent public gloating, displayed an ugly side of [China](#), which executes more people than all other countries combined. To Murong Xuecun, a well-known Chinese author, the program revealed a national psyche, fed by decades of Communist Party propaganda, that craves vengeance for the years of humiliation by foreigners. "It proves that hatred-education still has a market in China," he said in an interview.

In a commentary posted on Sina Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, CCTV defended the program. "There were no glimpses of the execution. We only saw the drug ringleaders' weaknesses and fear of death," it said. "In contrast to brutal murder by his gang, the methodical court trial and humane injections have shown the dignity and civilizing effects of rule of law."

Shortly before the men were led from their cells to the van that would take them to the death chamber, a reporter asked Mr. Naw Kham to talk about his family and then taunted him by showing him photos of the victims' relatives. "I want to raise my children and have them educated," Mr. Naw Kham said with a faint smile. "I don't want to die."

Shi Da and Patrick Zuo contributed research.

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