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China makes ultimate punishment mobile

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By Calum MacLeod, USA TODAY

CHONGQING, China — Zhang Shiqiang, known as the Nine-Fingered Devil, first tasted justice at 13. His father caught him stealing and cut off one of Zhang's fingers.

Twenty-five years later, in 2004, Zhang met retribution once more, after his conviction for double murder and rape. He was one of the first people put to death in China's new fleet of mobile execution chambers.

The country that executed more than four times as many convicts as the rest of the world combined last year is slowly phasing out public executions by firing squad in favor of lethal injections. Unlike the United States and Singapore, the only two other countries where death is administered by injection, China metes out capital punishment from specially equipped "death vans" that shuttle from town to town.

Makers of the death vans say the vehicles and injections are a civilized alternative to the firing squad, ending the life of the condemned more quickly, clinically and safely. The switch from gunshots to injections is a sign that China "promotes human rights now," says Kang Zhongwen, who designed the Jinguan Automobile death van in which "Devil" Zhang took his final ride.

State secret

For years, foreign human rights groups have accused China of arbitrary executions and cruelty in its use of capital punishment. The exact number of convicts put to death is a state secret. Amnesty International estimates there were at least 1,770 executions in China in 2005 — vs. 60 in the United States, but the group says on its website that the toll could be as high as 8,000 prisoners.

The "majority are still by gunshot," says Liu Renwen, death penalty researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a think tank in Beijing. "But the use of injections has grown in recent years, and may have reached 40%."

China's critics contend that the transition from firing squads to injections in death vans facilitates an illegal trade in prisoners' organs.

Injections leave the whole body intact and require participation of doctors. Organs can "be extracted in a speedier and more effective way than if the prisoner is shot," says Mark Allison, East Asia researcher at Amnesty International in Hong Kong. "We have gathered strong evidence suggesting the involvement of (Chinese) police, courts and hospitals in the organ trade."

Executions in death vans are recorded on video and audio that is played live to local law enforcement authorities — a measure intended to ensure they are carried out legally.

China's refusal to give outsiders access to the bodies of executed prisoners has added to suspicions about what happens afterward: Corpses are typically driven to a crematorium and burned before relatives or independent witnesses can view them.

Chinese authorities are sensitive to allegations that they are



[Enlarge](#) AFP/Getty Images

Chinese tycoon Yuan Baojing was sentenced to death by lethal injection after he was convicted of having an attempted blackmailer killed. Yuan and two accomplices were put to death in March.



[Enlarge](#) Jinguan Group

This is a "Death Car" mobile execution unit. China is now executing criminals in these units.

VAN SPECS

Cost: \$37,500 to \$75,000, depending on vehicle's size
Length: 20 to 26 feet
Top speed: 65 to 80 mph

THREE SECTIONS

Execution chamber: in the back, with blacked-out windows; seats beside the stretcher for a court doctor and guards; sterilizer for injection equipment; wash basin
Observation area: in the middle, with a glass window separating it from execution area; can accommodate six people; official-in-charge oversees the execution through monitors connected to the prisoner and gives instruction via walkie-talkie.
Driver area

Production to date: at least 40 vehicles.

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Details

made by Jinguan and two other companies in Jiangsu and Shandong provinces

complicit in the organ trade. In March, the Ministry of Health issued regulations explicitly banning the sale of organs and tightening approval standards for transplants.

Even so, Amnesty International said in a report in April that huge profits from the sale of prisoners' organs might be part of why China refuses to consider doing away with the death penalty.

"Given the high commercial value of organs, it is doubtful the new regulations will have an effect," Allison says.

Local executions

Makers of death vans say they save money for poor localities that would otherwise have to pay to construct execution facilities in prisons or court buildings. The vans ensure that prisoners sentenced to death can be executed locally, closer to communities where they broke the law.

That "deters others from committing crime and has more impact" than executions carried out elsewhere, Kang says.

Jinguan — "Golden Champion" in Chinese — lies an hour's drive from Chongqing in southwestern China, below the green slopes of Cliff Mountain. Along with the death vans, the company also makes bulletproof limousines for the country's rich and armored trucks for banks. Jinguan's glossy death van brochure is printed in both Chinese and English.

From the outside, the vans resemble the police vehicles seen daily on China's roads. A look inside reveals their function.

"I'm most proud of the bed. It's very humane, like an ambulance," Kang says. He points to the power-driven metal stretcher that glides out at an incline. "It's too brutal to haul a person aboard," he says. "This makes it convenient for the criminal and the guards."

The lethal cocktail used in the injections is mixed only in Beijing, something that has prompted complaints from local courts.

"Some places can't afford the cost of sending a person to Beijing — perhaps \$250 — plus \$125 more for the drug," says Qiu Xingsheng, a former judge working as a lawyer in Chongqing. Death-by-gunshot requires "very little expense," he says.

Qiu has attended executions by firing squad where the kneeling prisoner is shot in the back of the head. The guards "ask the prisoner to open his mouth, so the bullet can pass out of the mouth and leave the face intact," he says.

No debate

In the United States, some death row inmates and death penalty opponents want the Supreme Court to declare lethal injections cruel and unusual. A recent lawsuit claimed inmates suffer excruciating pain during executions because they do not get enough anesthetic.

There is no such debate in China, which uses the same three-drug cocktail as the U.S. federal government and most U.S. states: sodium thiopental to make the condemned unconscious, pancuronium bromide to stop breathing, potassium chloride to stop the heart.

People's Daily and other state media describe the mix as a "non-virulent drug," bringing about "immediate clinical death while inflicting no physiological pain."

"It doesn't matter what method you use," Qiu says. "If someone is convicted of a capital crime, they should be executed."

Chinese prisoners condemned to death are not offered a choice of injection over gunshot, but Qiu and others suspect wealth and connections can buy the newer method.

"It is a real phenomenon that gangsters and corrupt officials are killed by injection more than gunshot, so their bodies are intact, and death is less painful," Liu says. "But I doubt it is government policy. These criminals are usually held in cities, where the injection is used. Common criminals are held in county-level facilities, where shooting is more common."

Tycoon Yuan Baojing was executed in March in a death van, in northeast China's Liaoyang city. He had been convicted of arranging the murder of a man trying to blackmail him for attempting to assassinate a business partner.

Sixty-eight different crimes — more than half non-violent offenses such as tax evasion and drug smuggling — are punishable by death in China. That means the death vans are likely to keep rolling.

"If we abolish the death penalty, then crime will grow," Kang says.

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