
BOOK REVIEW

DEATH BY A THOUSAND CUTS

Timothy Brook, Jerome Bourgon, and Gregory Blue
Harvard University Press, 2008. 320p. \$29.95 ISBN#
978-0-674-02773-2

©LANCE BURKE*

In the autumn of 1904, a gruesome sight was seen in a public square of Beijing, China. Wang Weiqin, convicted of multiple murders, was put to death by *lingchi chusi*, which has been translated by Western observers as “death by a thousand cuts,” “death by slicing,” and “the lingering death.” While bound to a tripod, Wang had pieces of his flesh cut from his breasts, arms, and upper thighs, followed by the amputation of his limbs. Lastly, his head was severed from his body. In total, the executioner made approximately three dozen cuts to transform Wang into an unrecognizable puzzle of body parts.

From its first codified appearance in the Liao Code of 1036 till its abolition in April of 1905, *lingchi* played an important role in both Chinese society and in the formation of (often erroneous) views of China held by members of other cultures. In dynastic China, there were three forms of capital punishment: strangulation, decapitation, and *lingchi*. Although *lingchi* was considered the most severe of these punishments, it was often not as painful a death as that of strangulation, nor as painful as some of the many torture devices used on Chinese subjects accused of lesser offenses. For example, inquisitorial magistrates were allowed to use ankle and finger press boards to prod sus-

* Lance Burke is a librarian and Legal Research instructor at Elon University School of Law.

pects and solicit confessions. These boards were simple devices that could be attached to a portion of the body and tightened with a rope until bones and limbs were crushed. The authors of *Death by a Thousand Cuts* not only examine the history of *lingchi* and other forms of Chinese punishment, but also defend the Chinese system from the barbaric impression formed by foreigners after viewing the pictures of mutilated *lingchi* victims that portable photography made so popular in Europe.

Based on pictorial evidence from the nineteenth century, evildoers in China could expect any number of tortures in *diyu* (“the underground prison”) upon death. The majority of these images come from the *Jade Register*, a popular religious text of the time. Religious beliefs and texts such as the *Register* are what led *lingchi* to be labeled as the harshest penalty in the Chinese legal code. The scale of severity in the Chinese judicial system was not based on the pain suffered by the condemned at death, but rather the consequences to the body itself. More than any other penalty, *lingchi* violated “somatic integrity,” which is the concept of a body remaining whole both in life and in death. The loss of somatic integrity was the single most feared outcome and most potent threat of a judicial proceeding.

The foreign military occupation of Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, combined with the previously mentioned rise of portable photography, caused a surge of newspaper reports and images around the world linking China with torture and other assorted atrocities. Amateur photographers were now able to capture on film the executions that, up to that point, had only been verbally described by European visitors to China. These pictures were often exploited for political purposes, with the explicit message being the Chinese were so barbaric and violent, only Western colonialism could put a stop to the violence.

Despite the horrific nature of *lingchi* and other forms of Chinese punishment, the various dynastic codes from Chinese history were typically very well organized, and magistrates and other public officials did not have the ability to use such draconian measures without a proper legal reason. The Ming Code contained nine offenses which could result in *lingchi*, and though other dynasties sometimes changed the list of offenses punishable by *lingchi*, all were codified. The Chinese regarded the use of the death penalty as disrupting the natural order of life and death, and also as a political disruption. Therefore, they were not quick to invoke it, and emperors were often open to the idea of

leniency, operating on the theory that such mercy demonstrated the success of their rule.

“Death by a Thousand Cuts” presents a vivid portrait of dynastic Chinese legal systems, and provides many pictures and illustrations of Chinese texts and *lingchi* victims. With over 560 footnotes and a twenty page bibliography, the authors have provided a comprehensive look at a practice modern Western cultures would deem abhorrent, but which they argue was not outrageous for Chinese society at the time.

