

Australia: Funeral ceremony held for Bankstown fire victim

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More than fifty friends and relatives attended the funeral of Sydney university student Pingkang “Connie” Zhang, 21, who tragically died attempting to escape an intense fire that erupted at the Euro Terraces Building B apartment block in Bankstown on September 6.

The private ceremony was held on Friday at Camelia Chapel, Macquarie Park Cemetery in Sydney’s north. University of Sydney students, Menai High School teachers and former fellow secondary students were among the mourners. Many of the students were distraught over the young woman’s death.

Zhang died and her friend Yinu Jiang sustained serious injuries when they jumped 15 metres onto a concrete terrace five floors below. Zhang had been visiting the apartment. Dozens of horrified onlookers, many of them begging the girls not to jump, witnessed the tragedy. Jiang remains in intensive care at Sydney’s Liverpool Hospital but her condition is stable.

The fire was a result of inadequate fire safety facilities in the recently-constructed 10-floor building. The apartments were not fitted with sprinklers—which are not required in buildings less than 25-metres high in Australia. With four similar adjoining blocks, the complex is home to hundreds of working class families, particularly immigrants from China, Vietnam and the Middle East, as well as students.

Euro Terraces had been previously served with fire safety compliance orders from Fire and Emergency NSW and the Bankstown City Council, but the residents have been given no details of those orders. The city council had approved the entire construction, which was signed off by a private building certifier. The council claims that an atrium roof, which trapped the fire’s smoke in the

building, was not included in the original plans.

Among those addressing Friday’s funeral was Terry Li, Zhang’s boyfriend, who lived in the West Terraces apartment, and Menai High School deputy principal Rob Lindsay.

An accomplished pianist, Connie Zhang was on the Higher School Certificate Distinguishing Achievers List in her graduation year with a 97.5 mark. She came first in her year for Extension 2 Maths and Physics, and won a scholarship to the University of Sydney, where she was in her second year of a combined nursing and science degree.

Connie Zhang lived with her uncle and cousins in suburban Punchbowl, which adjoins Bankstown, and had a part-time job at a coffee shop. Her father is a mechanic and her mother worked at a Punchbowl restaurant.

Menai High School’s Rob Lindsay told the ceremony that she was a “remarkably bright student” and had recorded the highest ever marks in Mathematics in the school’s history.

Karen, Michael, Lily and Shaun, a group of former tertiary students who maintain a blog providing advice and assistance to Chinese students, spoke with the WSWWS after the funeral. They did not know Connie Zhang personally, but came to pay their last respects and provide moral support for her family.

Asked about fire safety and other issues that contributed to Connie Zhang’s death, Karen said: “The Bankstown council had said that the building was ok but when asked about it after the fire, they threw the ball back onto the private certifier and said they didn’t know anything about

the atrium roof. They said they didn't approve it, and didn't take any more responsibility for the building.

"I don't know who is going to investigate this, but the authorities are just blaming each other. There's no information or responsibility being taken. They say it's not their duty to check these things but this is wrong.

"If the media and the public don't chase this thing up then the people in charge will do nothing. It will be the end of the case and there'll be more tragedies."

Lily said: "We used to be international students and we know about the conditions that students are being forced to live under. We've always been worried that this sort of thing could happen and came today because we wanted to support her family and show that our hearts go out to them.

"Somebody needs to take responsibility for this. We can't let this be forgotten and just vanish into the air. It is not fair. It should be illegal for people who build apartments to hire someone to approve the same building. This should not be allowed."

Michael added: "We're very concerned about the situation facing students—the overcrowding and everything else—and don't want another tragedy like this to happen again. She was a remarkable and very talented girl. This is such a waste. We are very concerned because there's a lot of overcrowding of Chinese students in the city, but also in Hurstville, Ashfield, Burwood [Sydney suburbs] and other places. People cannot afford the rents and have to share and there are many problems."

Eighteen days after the disaster, there is no official report on what caused the fire and whether occupants in Euro Terraces Building A and other apartment blocks in the complex are safe.

Fire and Emergency NSW and the Bankstown City Council refuse to make public the fire safety compliance orders they issued to Euro Terraces strata management and other vital building documentation, claiming that this information cannot be released, pending a possible future coronial inquiry. (See: "Australia: Official wall of silence over Bankstown fire")

An unnamed senior emergency service official,

however, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday that the blaze probably began in an air conditioning unit on the balcony and rapidly spread through the system, igniting a futon and other material.

The heat was so intense that it reached an explosive state, which the official described as a "flashover," within 15 minutes. A day after the blaze, fire officials told the media that temperatures reached 1,000 degrees centigrade.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that an additional bedroom had been created in the three-bedroom apartment by subdividing the dining room. Locked bedrooms and a wedged-open front fire-safety door reportedly contributed to the fire's intensity. The open door, the emergency service official said, created a "wind tunnel" effect.

The lack of decent, affordable accommodation, high tertiary fees and other expenses have forced thousands of students, particularly international foreign students, into dangerously over-crowded rental properties with poor or non-existent fire safety standards.

Residents of Building B, where the fire occurred, remain locked out of their apartments, with Bankstown council refusing to provide alternative accommodation or to answer basic questions about the fire and the council's approval of the building's construction. The Socialist Equality Party has issued a statement urging residents of the complex to attend the council's monthly meeting tomorrow evening to demand accommodation and answers. (See: "Demand Bankstown council provides accommodation and answers for Euro Terraces residents")



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