"The apartment block was like a bomb ready to go off"

Australia: Terry Li, boyfriend of Connie Zhang, speaks about Bankstown fire

Richard Phillips
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Terry Li, the boyfriend of "Connie" Zhang, 21, who tragically died attempting to escape an intense apartment fire in Bankstown on September 6, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site *last weekend. Zhang, 21, and her friend, Yinuo "Ginger" Jiang, 27, jumped 15 metres from a bedroom window to a concrete terrace five floors below. Jiang was seriously injured and remains in Sydney's Liverpool Hospital (see:* "Funeral ceremony held for Bankstown fire victim*").*

Li, 25, originally from China's Shandong province, completed international business studies at the University of Sydney last year. He had been Zhang's partner for three years. The discussion with Li was arranged by New Voice*, a Chinese-language blog run by former international students that provides advice and support to Chinese students in Australia.*

Terry Li: On Thursday [September 6], at about 2.50 p.m., I got a call from my girlfriend Connie. Normally I would call back because my phone plan is unlimited. I called her back at 2.51 pm. The first call lasted 27 seconds. She told me there was a fire in the balcony air conditioning unit and asked me to come back home. I told her I'd be back there as soon as possible. I was working in Milperra, nearby. I let my colleague know and drove back.

At 2.52, I called her a second time and asked her how was it going and what had happened. She said that she and Ginger [Yinuo Jiang] could not control the fire and that there was lots of smoke, and that they were already in my bedroom. The second phone call lasted about 40 seconds but the signal was not very good and so I called again. During the third call I tried my best to find out exactly what happened. She was very calm during the first call—it did not seem to be a large fire—but during the third call she was just concerned about all the smoke. All this happened in a few minutes and I think they had climbed out onto the window within five minutes.

Last Saturday I went back to the apartment and everything in my bedroom had been destroyed—it had become dust. The other three bedrooms were smoke-damaged but mine was completed burnt out.

If the fire was not very big at about 2.50 p.m. then everyone could have escaped but the electric cabling for the air conditioner was through the power switch box and that box was very near the gas pipe in the kitchen. If there'd been a problem with the air conditioning unit and the cable became very hot, it could have burnt into the gas pipe and caused an explosion.

The only escape was past the kitchen, which is where the gas line was. Even if the sofa had caught fire, it still would have been possible to get out, but if there had been an explosion then there was no way out. The most important thing is that they only had the first 20 or 30 seconds to escape. After that, there was too much smoke and that meant most of the residents in the building could not escape.

Richard Phillips: What happened to your room, which I understand had been added to the apartment?

TL: Everything was destroyed in it. There was a new room added, but I don't think this is the main issue. The main point was the gas. Only one thing can burn this quickly and for the temperature to reach 1,000 degrees and that's gas.

RP: How long had you known Connie?

TL: We met in January 2010, almost three years ago, when we had part-time jobs at a Chinese restaurant. We planned lots of things—to travel, to marry, to have babies—but now that's all gone.

This is very difficult for me, but the most important thing right now is the situation facing her parents. As you know, there is a one-child policy in China and that means Connie's parents have lost their only child. This is terrible for them. Although they are stable at the moment, they have difficulty sleeping because many, many things keep coming back.

RP: When did Connie and her parents come to Australia?

TL: I'm not sure exactly but her mother, who works full-time in a restaurant, came here in 2008. Her father is a car mechanic.

Connie was 17 years old when she came here [from Tianjin]. She finished high school and got into Sydney University. She was a very good student and achieved 97.5 for her HSC [Higher School Certificate], which is very high score. She was a very, very smart girl and much more intelligent than me.

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I moved into the apartment just over a year ago. I'd just finished my university study and moved here because it was near my workplace and my girlfriend.

RP: Did you have any safety concerns about the building?

TL: International students want their homes to be safe but I think the apartment was badly designed.

RP: Other residents have spoken about many false alarms. Did you know anything about these?

TL: I heard the smoke alarm going off once or twice in the building but it didn't seem to be anything serious. What happened in our apartment was not normal and that's why I keep thinking about the gas pipe.

RP: Fire authorities and the Bankstown City Council issued a number of fire safety compliance orders on the building. Were you aware of these?

TL: No. I wasn't told anything about those.

RP: If there'd been a sprinkler system in the apartment block the fire would have been extinguished straight away.

TL: Yes, but there was nothing like that, just a smoke alarm. Every building should have sprinklers. It should be the responsibility of the council or the building company to make sure that all buildings are safe. It's wrong that they don't have to install sprinklers, and cut costs at the expense of the safety of people living in apartments. The situation in the apartment block was like a bomb ready to go off.

RP: Could you comment on the accommodation difficulties and other conditions facing foreign students?

TL: International students, especially Chinese students, have a lot of financial difficulties. Their fees and living expenses are very high and so most of them share rooms. Lots of my classmates had to live together in small apartments. It's not unusual for six or eight students to be living in units designed for only two or three people.

There have been many protests by international students to demand better conditions … The Australian government could provide a much better environment for international students but it hasn't. The universities and the government are only interested in making money and so they don't care about the situation facing international students.

Most students have to get part-time jobs in order to live—Connie and I had to do this—but pay for restaurant workers is very low, sometimes only $7 or $8 an hour. If you don't want to accept this, then somebody else will take it.

Life for international students, especially for students from developing countries, is very hard because of all those pressures.

RP: The government—state and federal—and the Bankstown Council have washed their hands of any responsibility for the Euro Terraces disaster or to provide any real assistance to the residents. What's your response to this?

TL: The tragedy has happened and obviously we cannot go back. What we must do is fight for justice and real compensation for what we have lost. This is the only way we can face the future.

The government, the council, the builder, the real estate agents—all these organisations need to pay more attention to the issues that face international students and international workers who live in Euro Terraces, and provide them with a better and safer environment.

We have to fight for something better in the future, not just for ourselves, but for others. We have to fight because we have lost so much in this terrible event, all of us.

RP: All the residents have been locked out. Where are you living?

TL: I'm with my friends who are helping me a lot. The situation facing other people in the apartment block is bad. Some are owners, some are renters. They have suffered big losses and now have to pay for their own accommodation, food and to keep up their mortgages.

RP: Bankstown Council claims that it didn't know anything about the roof on the building's atrium, which trapped all the smoke, and didn't approve it. What's your response?

TL: So what were they doing? What happened to them, why didn't they see this? I haven't received any letters or announcements from the council—nothing, nothing, not even a phone call.

There are many problems with this building, including that there were no sprinklers. To make the apartment block just under the 25-metre height limit in order to avoid putting in sprinklers is wrong. Is this a crime?

If the apartments were correctly designed and built—and there are many others in the block just like mine—then this terrible disaster would not have happened. How can a fire erupt like this so quickly? This is a dangerous situation for everyone. It's a bomb waiting to explode everywhere.

There are people who are responsible for this and they must provide support. This is supposed to be an advanced, civilised country, but for three weeks there has been no real help from the council or the government. The other residents have lost their homes and don't know when they can return.

I lost my girlfriend and her parents lost their only child. I feel an important responsibility toward Connie's parents and want to help them as much as possible. This is very upsetting for me and everyone affected.

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