*Death Sentence Review by the Supreme People's Court in China: Decision Patterns and Variations**

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Abstract

China has been making efforts to reduce the number of executions via a recentralized review process under judicial guidelines. This study analyzes 650 Death Sentence Review Transcripts collected from China Judgments Online, aiming to decipher patterns and variations of death review decisions via descriptive facts and circumstances. We find that marital or domestic violence, offender's guilty conscience or forgiveness by victim's family, and insufficient heinousness underline the disapproval patterns. In contrast, large number of victims or victim deaths, use of weapon, brutal crime nature, being a ringleader in violent crimes, and significant drug weight in drug crimes describe the approval patterns with a general lack of recognition for mitigating circumstances. However, significant variations existed among approved cases, involving defendants who caused a single death for domestic or marital dispute, had no criminal record, committed a crime of passion, or carried low-purity drugs or acted as drug mules. These variations raise the question of whether the Supreme People's Court maintains a consistent standard following its own guidelines.

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