

## **R V Zhenhao Zou Sentencing Remarks**

**Inner London Crown Court**

**Her Honour Judge Cottage KC**

**19th June 2025**

Please note that Reporting Restrictions apply in relation to identification of the victims.

1. On 5 March 2025 you were convicted by a jury after trial. I must sentence you for 28 offences of;
  - (i) **Rape**– eleven offences relating to 10 separate victims (counts 1, 2, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 22)
  - (ii) **False imprisonment**– one offence, in relation to X, (count 23)
  - (iii) **Committing an offence with intent to commit rape**– three offences, all of which relate to possession of quantities of 1,4-Butanediol (counts 29A, 30A, 31A)
  - (iv) **Possessing an extreme pornographic image**– ten offences which correspond with the allegations of rape (counts 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 25)
  - (v) **Voyeurism**– three offences, relating to two separate victims (counts 3, 4, 24).
2. You are 28 years old and have no previous convictions.
3. You are a Chinese national and you came to the UK to study in Belfast in 2017. Between 2019-2021 you attended UCL and gained a Masters Degree, followed by studies for a PhD from the same university from 2021. You are a very bright young man. You appeared to the world to be well to do, ambitious and charming.
4. In fact, that charming mask hid the fact that you are also a sexual predator. Over the period of the Indictment, some 4 years, you met women socially or on social media apps in this country and in China and organised to meet them in person. You would groom them with cheerful conversation over social media and perhaps 1 or 2 meetings that may not have involved sex and then plan to stupefy them with drugs and alcohol. Once they were unable physically to resist you would rape them. Not only would you rape them, but you would film yourself doing so. This, on your evidence, heightened your sexual pleasure and gave you a trophy to remember each woman completely under your control. Sometimes they would try and resist- you would tell them that resistance was futile. You calmly and inexorably ignored their pleas for you to stop, that you were hurting them. Sometimes you would be begged to stop. Occasionally that would irritate you and you would tell them that they had no choice but to comply. You sought power over them and wielded it without any thought of their wishes, their feelings. These women you treated callously as sex toys for your pleasure.

5. Two complainants who were able to be identified at trial, X and Z challenged you after their experiences. They had been confused and disoriented and questioned you about your behaviour and the sexual contact you had with them. You denied anything inappropriate, gaslighting them about their concerns. After X had contacted the police in 2023, you left the country and went to China. On your return in January 2024 you were arrested and your flat was searched. Cameras and telephones were seized which provided the videos of rape upon which many of the counts on this Indictment were founded. There was also intoxicant assisted rape pornography found and "how to" information from the internet in relation to drugs of stupefaction and how to use them. You had downloaded forum conversations lauding rape and stupefaction. Satisfaction was "guaranteed" with the victim rarely being able to remember anything that had happened to them.
6. Bottles of Butanediol were found in your bedroom along with whisky and pipettes for use to measure the correct amount of Butanediol into stronger tasting alcohol to render your victim incapable (Counts 29A to 31A). You sought to say that this was for your personal use. The jury clearly rejected your explanation. It was, without doubt, your favoured method as there was evidence of a bottle already having been used and there was another ½ litre bottle available in your wardrobe.

## **OFFENCES**

### **FEMALE A**

7. The evidence began with the video of your rape of Female A in your room in your halls of residence (Counts 1-6). In the first video that was played in court, HAS/09, which is 10 minutes long, Female A was lying on the bed naked save for her socks- not moving at all while you set up the camera. As you approached her she started shaking her head from side to side clearly showing her lack of consent. She repeatedly tried to push you away, crying out and telling you that it hurt. You used lubricant to help your penetration and calmly and deliberately pinned her arms down as she struggled. She cried out for her mother again and again
8. HAS/10, another 10 minute video, showed her clearly in pain, even more dazed. She cried out in pain as you withdrew and re-entered her. You continued to pin her down as she cried and moaned in distress. She told you, as it ended, that she hated you.
9. In relation to these videos and the others that you took of your unwilling or unconscious partners, you told the jury that they were all role play. You still maintain that fiction. The whole court watched these and the other videos which are extremely distressing. Some who watched, wept.

### **Z**

10. Z (Count 7) met you in London in about 2021 at a dinner party. She thought you were boyfriend material and when she received a message from you later that evening asking if she wanted to have a drink with you at your place, she agreed, drank a lot and spent the night with you. There had been some

messaging between you, just enough to keep her interested in you, over the following month and you joined her and friends to celebrate her birthday.

11. She became very intoxicated and became separated from her friends. Her memory was not clear about how or why she ended up walking back with you to your flat. You had clearly already spiked her drink. She vomited on the way. She then remembered being at your flat. She was partially conscious and saw that you were naked and she felt you penetrating her forcefully. She asked you to stop, but lost consciousness soon after. She had another memory of you wiping her and wetness between her legs.
12. She woke up the next morning naked save for her knickers and with your arms around her. She had no idea how her clothes had been taken off. You and she maintained some contact after this, after she had blocked you, and you asked why, but she became angry about what she believed had happened and challenged you. You said that you thought she was conscious and knew what she was doing. When she denied this- you blocked her. She saw X's post in 2023 warning women about your behaviour and she agreed to co-operate with the Metropolitan Police, as she had now returned to China.
13. A Victim Personal Statement from Z powerfully describes the appalling effect of your criminality. She was exposed and violated. The humiliation of being stripped of dignity, treated as nothing more than an object for your gratification haunts her. The thought of what happened makes her feel physically ill, and words cannot express her pain. She blamed herself. Even now, some years later, the memories trigger migraines and pain in the areas you violated with the urge to scrub herself clean. She feels guilt that she did not speak up sooner and will never forgive you.

#### **FEMALE B**

14. The rape of Female B (Counts 8-9) took place in China. It was proved on the short but graphic video you took of her. She was motionless and unconscious on a bed. We saw a close up that you took of her vagina and your penetration of her. You also took care to capture the image of your ejaculate in her vagina.

#### **FEMALE C**

15. The rape of Female C (Counts 10-11) was in China. You videoed yourself penetrating a completely motionless women who was unconscious. You treated her and the others in the same state as rag dolls. You would move their arms and legs to position them for your pleasure. You were slow and methodical about your movements- all the better to capture them for future viewing.

#### **FEMALE D**

16. The rape of Female D (Counts 12-13) was also in China. Your video of her was 15 minutes long. You were completely dressed at the beginning of the video and she was asleep under a duvet. You pulled the duvet over her top and lubricated her vagina. There was no motion from her at all. You then removed the duvet to show her completely naked and penetrated her. At first there was no response from her, then there was a sudden motion of her legs and she began to say no and tell you that it was painful.

You held her arms down while she repeatedly said no and mocked her for speaking in English as she begged you to stop and let her go. You finished and got off her leaving her lying motionless on the bed.

17. Following the publicity after your convictions, Female D contacted the police and her name is Y. A Victim Personal Statement has been taken which describes how when she came to after you had raped her, she was physically and mentally disoriented but knew something was terribly wrong. She messaged you and confronted you and then spent money she could ill afford taking prophylactic medication and having tests to rule out sexually transmitted disease.

18. She is haunted by your actions and has suffered from nightmares. She is too afraid to be alone in the dark and suffers with mental ill health. She blames herself for your actions and describes frenzied self-harm to try and manage the pain that you have caused. This alone would be enough to bear, but now she knows that you had images of her and lives in fear of them emerging. Describing what happened to her has made her re-live her violation, powerless to stop it.

#### **FEMALE E**

19. The rape of Female E (Counts 14-15) was also in China. Your short video showed her completely motionless while you penetrated her.

#### **FEMALE F**

20. The rape of Female F (Counts 16-17) was also in China. Your short video showed yet again, another motionless sleeping woman with her mouth gently open and her head on one side while you penetrated her.

#### **FEMALE G**

21. The rape of Female G (Counts 18-19) was also in China. Your short video showed you penetrating this woman who was asleep until jerked awake by your penetration of her. She looked distressed.

#### **FEMALE H**

22. The rape of Female H (Counts 20-21) was also in China. This was yet another video of a sleeping woman being penetrated by you, oblivious to your depravity.

#### **X**

23. X was 18 years old when she met you in May 2021 on social media. You met in person when she came round to your flat to study maths. There was some messaging between you and then a couple of days later she came round to your flat again when you had invited her to come to a party in the same block of flats where you lived in Elephant and Castle. She drank vodka and then you invited her to come to your flat for more drink. Her memory was patchy about what happened in your flat. However, she knew that wanted to leave but you were preventing her from doing so. A female friend of yours arrived at your home and X asked for her help in leaving. You said she was too drunk to go and she stayed. By this

time you had obviously been lacing her drinks with Butanediol kept in your bedroom for the purpose and you started to make her drink more to get her to the right point for you to rape her.

24. You videoed her in your bedroom for about half an hour. You kept telling her to drink and chastised her for wasting your drink. She wanted to go home, and instead you manhandled her onto the bed. You lied to her and said that you would not touch her. She was desperate to go, occasionally screaming and crying. The video then finished.
25. After she had been rendered incapable, you stripped her naked and had sex with her. She was barely conscious but still knew that you had penetrated her, and that she could do nothing about it. You photographed her naked body. You also took a selfie of yourself with your head lying next to hers, as though she was sleeping naturally in your embrace. This photograph, although not indecent is also disturbing example of your distorted thinking. In evidence when it dawned on her that you may have taken photographs of her naked she was shocked. You had hidden her underwear when she tried to get dressed the following day, no doubt to save as a trophy, but in the end you gave it back to her. There was some further messaging between you where she challenged you about your behaviour which you denied. She also told you that she had called the police but changed her mind while they were there.
26. After she had contacted the police she was so emotionally disturbed by what had happened that she was unable to cooperate with an investigation at that stage. She posted on a Chinese social media app about your behaviour to warn others. Z contacted her and, in due course X contacted the police again.
27. The victim personal statement details how her fragile mental health was profoundly affected by your behaviour. She could not sleep, was overwhelmed by anxiety and suffered from hallucinations and flashbacks. Her experience stopped her from socialising and trusting people and took medication to manage her emotions. Outrageously, she was trolled on social media for having bravely warned others about you. She has been so damaged by your behaviour that it has rocked her to her very core. She sadly feels guilt for your behaviour- yet, you feel no shame.

## **SENTENCING COUNCIL GUIDELINES**

28. There are three different types of sentence available to the court in your case- a determinate sentence, an extended sentence and a life sentence. I must assess your dangerousness and then decide which of the types of sentence is appropriate in your case. In order to reach the appropriate length of the sentence, the court must follow the sentencing guidelines. There is mostly agreement between the prosecution and defence as to where the offences sit within the various guidelines that apply.

## **RAPE**

29. As submitted by your counsel, it is appropriate to treat the rape offences as the lead offences and the offences associated with them as aggravating features of each of them. Within the rape guidelines for

a single offence of the seriousness in this case in Category 1A, there is a starting point of 15 years with a range of 13-19 years. There is no doubt that you planned and executed a campaign of rape. You met women online and groomed them to feel safe with you while you encouraged them to drink alcohol which you spiked so that they became so intoxicated that they were unable to consent, some were conscious but unable to move- knowing what you were doing and utterly unable to stop you.

30. There are a number of factors which mean that these offences of rape are in the highest category;

- i) Significant planning- applies to each count and includes the researching, purchasing of stupefying drugs- in particular the Butanediol
- ii) Administering a stupefying drug
- iii) Each victim was particularly vulnerable- their alcohol intoxication alone would make them vulnerable to your planned actions, but, of course, they were even more vulnerable the more stupefied they became.
- iv) Prolonged incident- in the case of X and Female A and Female D
- v) Recording of the incidents and keeping the images for your sexual gratification and repeat viewing- X and Females A, B, C, D, E, F, G and H
- vi) Severe psychological harm- only known in relation to X, Z and Female D- your behaviour has had devastating and long-term effects.

31. In addition there is this aggravating factor;

- i) You did not wear a condom on any of the videos that the court has seen and your ejaculate was clearly seen in some of the images of Female B, E, F and G. You used wipes to clean the vagina of the woman concerned to help you pretend that nothing at all had happened to them.

## **FALSE IMPRISONMENT**

32. The prolonged incident in the case of X is elevated beyond that contemplated at Step 1 of the Rape guideline to that of False Imprisonment. It was clear on the video that you took of her while you almost force fed her laced alcohol that she wanted to leave and you would not let her go. You had given her so much intoxicant that she lost a whole day, and had no idea.

33. The offence of False Imprisonment (Count 23) is extremely serious in itself and is clearly in Culpability A and harm category 1. The psychological harm caused to X by this particular aspect and your rape of her is very serious. The starting point is 11 years with a range of 8-16 years.

## **COMMITTING AN OFFENCE WITH INTENT TO COMMIT RAPE**

34. There are three counts of your possession of a class B drug- Butanediol with intent to commit rape. (Counts 29A, 30A, 31A). For simple possession of the amounts involved in this case there would be a

short sentence of imprisonment aggravated by approximately 2 years to reflect the seriousness of your intended offence- here rape.

## **POSSESSING AN EXTREME PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGE**

(Counts 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 25)

35. There are no guidelines, but the maximum sentence is one of 3 years imprisonment. All of the extreme images reflect your rape of a woman or rape by another kept for your gratification.

## **VOYEURISM**

(Counts 3, 4, 24)

36. The maximum sentence for voyeurism is two years' imprisonment. The guidelines indicate a short sentence of imprisonment of up to 26 weeks would be appropriate. However, the aggravating feature of this offence being associated with rape raises the sentence into Category 1 where the starting point is 26 wks' custody with a range of 12wks' to 18 months' custody.

## **DANGEROUSNESS**

37. However, I must consider the legal issue of dangerousness in this case which applies in relation to the rape and false imprisonment counts where the court may consider a discretionary life sentence and in respect of the committing an offence with intent to commit a sexual offence an extended sentence.
38. I have no doubt that there is a significant risk to members of the public of serious harm occasioned by the commission by you of further specified offences. You have an abiding sexual interest in asserting your power and control over women. You admitted having an interest in rape pornography in evidence. In 2020 you were researching how to stupefy women for sex. Your defence was that this was rape role-play. Having watched you give evidence, it is clear that you are a highly manipulative and intelligent young man who gave no thought at all of the wishes and feelings of the women that you penetrated and filmed. They were simply pieces in an elaborate game for 1- you. It is clear from the PSR that you have no understanding of the meaning of consent and take no responsibility for the harm you have caused.
39. I also have no doubt that the seriousness of the offences of rape and the offences associated with them justify a life sentence. Although you have no previous convictions, there is a high level of danger because of your distorted thinking and sexual preoccupation with rape which was evident in your evidence to the court. Your desire to assert power and control over women as shown by the offences of which you have been convicted is something that means that you are a risk for an indefinite period.

40. Your counsel has submitted that your relative youth and intellect means that your risk is not indefinite. I disagree. Your intellect is what enabled you to plan. You were able to dissemble and scope suitable women using your qualifications and outward appearance of friendliness. You could give them a trial run with apparent consensual sex and make them trust you. You could then set up the next occasion where you would rape and film them. Everything was carefully planned and controlled by you. It is also said on your behalf that you have begun the process of reflection and made some limited admissions when speaking to the probation officer. In my view your admissions were equivocal and always with the caveat that you were not really to blame. Such acceptance as there was I find was part of the attempt to mitigate the level of your sentence rather than the beginnings of any genuine remorse.
41. Neither a determinate sentence nor an extended sentence would provide sufficient protection to the public for what I have determined is the indeterminate period of high risk that you pose. Therefore, I must pass a life sentence which I shall do in relation to the counts of rape. The other offences will be concurrent determinate sentences. In relation to the minimum term that you will serve I must consider totality- the overall length of the sentence to ensure that it is just and proportionate.
42. The court has considered the case of Sinaga in the Attorney General's Reference (No 688 of 2019) [2020] EWCA Crim 1676 which has similarities to the behaviour involved here. However, the Court of Appeal was considering the principle of whole life orders in cases other than murder. By the time Sinaga's case reached the Court of Appeal, he had faced 4 trials involving the rape of 44 men over a two and a half year period.
43. Your personal mitigation is limited. You, of course, have lost the chance of a bright future which you had worked hard to achieve and you will be serving your sentence far from your home and family. You also have a heart condition.

## **ANCILLARY ORDERS**

44. The prosecution originally applied for a Sexual Harm Prevention Order. However, the nature of the sentence that I shall pass means that it would be inappropriate to do so.

## **SENTENCE**

45. I am satisfied that there is a significant risk of you committing further specified offences and, coupled with that, a significant risk of your causing serious harm thereby. I am also sure that this is a risk that is likely to carry on long into the future. I am satisfied that your offence is so serious that a sentence of life imprisonment is required; and that is the sentence which I impose. As to the minimum term which you must serve: if I had been sentencing you to a determinate sentence, taking account of all the aggravating and mitigating factors in this case, I would have sentenced you to 36 years' imprisonment. Because you would have served up to two-thirds of that sentence in custody, I fix the minimum term



which you will serve at two-thirds of 36 years: that is 24 years. Finally, I reduce that minimum term of 24 years by the number of days which you have spent on remand in custody: 504 days. This means that the minimum term which you will serve before the Parole Board may consider your possible release is one of 22 years and 227 days.

The sentence on each count is as follows;

COUNTS	OFFENCES	SENTENCE
1 (London)	RAPE FEMALE A 9/19-09/20	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
2	RAPE A/A	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
3	VOYEURISM	12 months imprisonment concurrent
4	VOYEURISM	12 months imprisonment concurrent
5	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
6	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
7 (London)	RAPE Z 12/9/21-15/9/21	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
8 (China)	RAPE FEMALE B 9/9/22	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
9	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
10 (China)	RAPE FEMALE C 27/9/22	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
11	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
12 (China)	RAPE FEMALE D 24/10/22	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
13	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
14 (China)	RAPE FEMALE E 11/12/22	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
15	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
16 (China)	RAPE FEMALE F 16/12/22	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
17	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent

18 (China)	RAPE FEMALE G 5/2/23	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
19	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
20 (China)	RAPE FEMALE H 20/2/23	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
21	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
22	RAPE X 17/5/23-19/5/23	Life Imprisonment with a minimum term of 22 years and 227 days
23	FALSE IMPRISONMENT	11 yrs imprisonment concurrent
24	VOYEURISM	12 months imprisonment concurrent
25	POSS EXTREME PORN IMAGE	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
29A- Butanediol LAA/07	Committing an Offence with Intent to commit a sexual offence- possession with intent to commit rape	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
30A- Butanediol LAA/12	A/A	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent
31A-Butanediol LAA/13	A/A	2 yrs imprisonment concurrent

46. As I have already said the minimum term which you will serve before the Parole Board may consider your possible release is one of 22 years and 227 days. It is most important that you and everyone concerned with this case should understand what this means. The minimum term is not a fixed term after which you will automatically be released but is the term that must be served before the Parole Board can undertake their first review of the case. They will review the risk that you then present and will consider whether you can properly be released from custody subject to licence at that stage and if so on what terms. If and when you are released, you will be subject to licence; and this will remain the case for the rest of your life. If for any reason your licence is revoked, you will be recalled to prison to continue to serve your life sentence in custody. It follows that unless and until the Parole Board consider that your release is appropriate then you will remain in custody. As I said earlier, a copy of these sentencing remarks and the other documentation uploaded at section T should be sent to the prison authorities.

## **NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS**

47. You will be subject to the notification provisions for the rest of your life.

## **DEPRIVATION/FORFEITURE**

48. A deprivation order is made in respect of the digital items and a forfeiture and destruction order is made in relation to the drugs in the list provided by the prosecution.