



## AAC Publications

---

### Fatal Fall From Anchor — Inexperience, Inadequate Supervision

Alabama, Sand Rock, Sun Wall

Andrea Bender climbing Misty (5.10b/c), the scene of the fatal fall of Yutung Zhang in October 2023.

Photo: Andrea Bender Collection

**On October 14, Yutung “Faye” Zhang (18) fell 90 feet from the anchors of Misty (5.10b/c) while preparing to clean this route at Sand Rock in northeastern Alabama. It was her second time climbing outdoors.** At around 12 p.m., Zhang, a new climber and part of a larger group, took a final top-rope lap on the route. She cleaned the quickdraws and reached the two-bolt anchor. The anchor was equipped with two mussy hooks plus a single locking carabiner that had been placed by one of the other climbers to prevent the rope from unclipping from the mussies.

No one was at the anchors with Zhang to see exactly what happened. June C, who was belaying Zhang at the time of the accident, wrote on Mountain Project, “We put the locker in on the incredibly unlikely premise that the mussys could come unclipped. Not that any of us really thought that would happen, but we wanted to keep our party safe. [While Zhang was on the ground], we communicated and demonstrated what she was to do when she got to the top and she was aware and confident of just needing to remove a locker and leave the mussys clipped.”

It is assumed that after removing the locking carabiner at the belay, Zhang somehow unclipped the rope from the mussy hooks. Jun C wrote, “Suddenly the rope became unweighted and she wasn’t clipped through the [hooks] anymore. I fell and smacked my back and head against another rock and she fell right beside me.... A few of us trained in emergency first response came to aid immediately as well as a physician that just happened to be in the area. EMS response was quite fast as well but there was really nothing to be done.”

June C added, “Between all of us we have decades of climbing experience. In our eyes, this [lowering from the mussy hooks] was routine and one of the safest things we could ask of a relatively new climber.” The belayer added, “At the same time I know all of us are kicking ourselves for asking her to do anything at all.... We’ve all been thinking about what we could or should have done differently or how this could have been a safer experience.”

### ANALYSIS

A few weeks after the accident, IFMGA guide Karsten Delap climbed the route and provided ANAC with some images and video. He observed that the best handholds at the end of Misty were located above the bolts. This may have positioned Zhang above the mussy hooks. Then, as Zhang weighted the rope, it might have loaded the hooks incorrectly and become unclipped.

Delap wrote, “It is plausible that the rope was threaded from right to left on the mussy hooks, with the locking carabiner positioned between the two hooks. As the climber approached the anchor from the right side, an attempt to remove the locking carabiner involved pulling up above the mussy hooks to introduce slight slack into the system. While this facilitated the removal of the carabiner, it also inadvertently positioned the rope over the gates of the mussy hooks. The belayer, responding to the climber’s movement, probably took up slack, felt the climber’s weight, and subsequently the gates of the mussy hooks back-clipped under the full force of the climber’s weight. This resulted in the rope becoming dislodged from the anchor.”

Delap also noted that the addition of a locking carabiner to this mussy hook belay was inappropriate for the system. In this case, the locker brought the rope above the plane of the hooks, a mistake when considering the “open” nature of a mussy hook. (See “Essentials” [here](#).)

Greg Barnes, executive director of the American Safe Climbing Association (ASCA), is a proponent of lower-offs such as mussy hooks, but he says these useful tools still require education. He wrote to ANAC, “In Owens River Gorge, lower-offs [have been] the standard since the early ’90s. Despite very heavy climber traffic for 30 years, there have been very few anchor changeover accidents compared to similar areas with closed anchors. In the Sand Rock case, we don’t know whether the rope became accidentally unclipped or if the climber unclipped them on purpose. It is wise to have direct supervision—namely an experienced climber at the same anchor—when a new climber cleans an anchor.” (Sources: [MountainProject.com](#), [Climbing.com](#), Karsten Delap, Greg Barnes, and the Editors.)

## Images



Andrea Bender climbing Misty (5.10b/c), the scene of the fatal fall of Yutung Zhang in October 2023.  
Photo: Andrea Bender Collection

Article Details

Author	Karsten Delap, Greg Barnes and The Editors
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	77
Page	
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Accident reports