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COURTS

Art Basel knife wielder pleads guilty, must return to China

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A mentally disturbed college student who believed terrorists were threatening to blow up the Miami Beach Art Basel event — leading her to stab a patron in the neck — pleaded guilty Thursday to attempted murder.

Siyuan Zhao, however, won't be doing any prison time.

Instead, the 24-year-old

was to board a plane on Thursday night, leaving Miami eventually bound for her native China, never to return. In a plea deal approved by the victim, Zhao — after months of intense mental-health treatment — is to deport herself and must continue her rehabilitation living at home with her parents.

"It's very difficult for a judge to give someone the maximum penalty," Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Alberto Milian said. "But it is equal-

ly as difficult to be open-minded to understand that not every crime deserves maximum punishment."

Thursday's hearing concluded a strange episode that began during an event that draws celebrities, international art lovers and party-goers to Miami every December. Some patrons initially believed the stunning public attack was some sort of performance art.

The stabbing happened at the Miami Beach Con-

vention Center near an art installation called *The Swamp of Sagittarius*. Zhao stabbed Shin Seo Young, 33, in the shoulder and neck with an X-Acto knife. She survived.

Afterward, it was revealed that Zhao had for years struggled with mental illness and had tried to commit suicide. At the time of the attack, she had been hearing voices and thought she needed to protect the event from the Middle Eastern terrorist group ISIS.

"She was very psychotic," Dr. Ilan Melnick testified. He also said: "She felt ISIS was going to be at Art Basel to destroy the art."

After her arrest, Zhao posted bail and checked into

Miami's Passageway Mental Health Center. There, she continued her outbursts, trying to kill a "therapy" bird and even vandalizing the doctor's car.

But in recent months, Zhao had improved greatly, taking her medication, undergoing intense therapy and learning to understand the gravity of the attack, defense lawyers Howard Srebnick and Mark Shapiro told the judge.

The legal case was thorny. Zhao could very well have been found not guilty by reason of insanity, which would have meant commitment to Florida hospitals under court supervision — at the expense of taxpayers.

"Her family has paid for her treatment and will continue to pay for her

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Siyuan Zhao, 24, pleaded guilty Thursday to the stabbing at the Art Basel showcase in December.

treatment," Srebnick said, adding: "She will not pose a danger to anyone in the United States because she will be living in China with no hope of returning."