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### Pressure Builds on China Over Steroids

By Maureen Fan and Amy Shipley  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Wednesday, December 5, 2007

BEIJING -- In the fall, U.S. authorities announced a massive raid against underground suppliers of steroids, human growth hormone and other performance-enhancing drugs. Investigators had cast their net wide, arresting 124 people in 27 states.

But to determine the origin of the steroids, investigators had to look to only one place: [China](#).

Since at least 2005, when a U.S.-led crackdown crippled [Mexico's](#) steroid industry, Chinese firms have been supplying the vast majority of the steroids sold over the Internet, according to U.S. law enforcement officials. Those steroids are used by a wide range of athletes, from amateur bodybuilders to top-tier professionals.

Now, under U.S. pressure and with the Olympic Games in Beijing only eight months away, Chinese authorities say they are scrutinizing the companies accused of exporting steroids and vowing to better police the trade. But interviews with steroid manufacturers, suppliers and government authorities highlighted the barriers to effectively containing the problem: Confusion over regulations reigns, and companies can manipulate the system.

The Washington Post obtained a list of 37 Chinese companies that American investigators identified as being involved in the illicit steroids trade. Many of the companies could not be reached. Of the firms that were contacted, 10 said they no longer sold steroids or no longer exported them. But four said they could sell the compounds. One company appeared to have shut down its operations in one province only to reopen in another.



Workers make repairs at Green Leaf Pharmaceutical in Xianju after what was described as an April fire. The company used to sell stanozolol, a steroid, but not anymore, the workers said. (By Maureen Fan -- The Washington Post)

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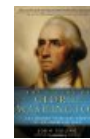
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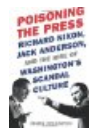
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Several companies expressed bafflement at the sudden scrutiny by the Chinese government, saying vague laws left unclear exactly what was illegal.

The steroids issue is particularly sensitive as China prepares to host its first Olympics. Chinese authorities are determined to use the Games as an opportunity to showcase their country as a modern state and are keen to prevent any potential embarrassments.

The Chinese Food and Drug Administration last month announced a five-agency investigation and a plan to "standardize" production and distribution of steroids. While the country's FDA has provided no further details and would not comment specifically on the Chinese companies that

had been targeted, it has said the investigation is the first of its size and scope.

International law enforcement officials with knowledge of the earlier U.S. investigation are hopeful that the Chinese can curb the trade, but they are also skeptical, noting that they have had little communication with Beijing.

"The biggest question is sustainability. Is this going to last past the Olympics?" said one official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We need to see some action. They need to prove themselves. We're seeing inklings of progress, but in other respects we're seeing nothing."

There are some signs that the Chinese investigation is having effects, at least for now. In interviews, representatives of several Chinese steroid companies said the firms had been questioned by authorities and ordered to halt exports. The Web sites of 17 of the 37 companies targeted in the U.S. probe could not be viewed on a recent day.

Meanwhile, at a pharmaceutical industry conference in Shenzhen, China, in November, several companies known to have sold steroids were noticeably absent, attendees said. Other companies complained that the investigation had hurt business and said that they had turned to selling other products.

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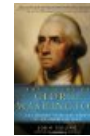


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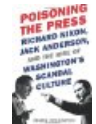
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A recent visit to the town of Xianju in coastal Zhejiang province, where many chemical factories are based, illustrated the confusion among factory workers and law enforcement officials about exactly what can be produced and exported.

"Before, the policy was very ambiguous," said a man in the receptionist's office of Zhejiang Xianju Junye Pharmaceutical Co., who insisted on being identified only by his surname, Li. "But since customs began forbidding the export of steroids, we know we are not allowed."

#### 'I Didn't Know'

For years, Wu Lifeng has been a small but successful middleman in Xianju. He supplied legitimate chemicals to Chinese and British suppliers by telephone, fax and e-mail. As the owner of Xianju Belter Co., he also sold human growth hormone to Chinese suppliers, without a hitch.

Wu's troubles began in August when a popular Web site invited him to place an online ad. He paid \$5,480 and listed in English the many chemicals produced by Xianju's factories. He also said he could export them. That landed him on the U.S. list of targeted companies.

Just after midnight Sept. 29, Wu received a phone call asking him to report to the Xianju Foreign Trade Bureau right away. He was asked for his sales records. Officials then followed him home and searched his tiny apartment about 2 a.m. Later that day, Wu was summoned to a meeting of the Xianju County government with trade officials, medicine supervision officials, local police and representatives from three other chemical and pharmaceutical companies.



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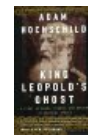
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"We were asked to deliver our sales records again, and we were asked: Did we do any business with steroids and hormone? Did we export them to the U.S.? The officials said there are many things you cannot do

anymore," Wu said.

Wu, who works out of his apartment, said he had not obtained any of the chemicals he advertised on the Web site, nor, he said, did he ship anything except legal chemicals. A customs official supported Wu's account.

Nevertheless, the Chinese inquiry made clear that the calculus of his business had changed. Wu downloaded from the Internet a government list of chemicals that can be used as illegal stimulants -- stimulants that can be sold only to licensed customers by

companies with drug-approval codes. His online ad no longer offers to export the chemicals. "I didn't know. It's very difficult to see a very clear boundary about what you can do," Wu said.

### Slipping Past Customs

Part of the challenge in regulating steroids is identifying who is selling them and why. Steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs have legitimate uses in pharmaceuticals, so differentiating between suppliers who sell to licensed customers and companies that peddle to bodybuilders or athletes can be difficult.

In China, pharmaceutical companies are regulated by the state FDA, which requires them to obtain drug-approval codes and sell only to licensed customers. Chemical factories that produce raw materials, however, do not need to meet those requirements. The result has been a loophole that has effectively allowed steroids to be shipped internationally without regulation.

Representatives of chemical companies say customs declarations for their products can be altered to avoid detection.

"We registered our products as raw materials, even though they are in fact the same as pharmaceutical ingredients," Chen Qixiang of Hubei Fangtong Pharmaceutical Co. acknowledged in an interview.

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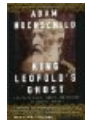
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Chen Xianshun, chief of the customs inspection station in Taizhou city, which oversees Xianju, said the issue of which shipments are considered medicine and which are illicit drugs is complicated.

But as a customs officer, he said, "we only care if you have completed all the procedures or obtained the licenses you need" when exporting a product. "I don't know if the companies are familiar with our policy, or what can sell or what cannot."

One firm targeted by U.S. investigators said Chinese companies continued to export illicit drugs to developing countries in Africa and several in South Asia. Other companies said there was no problem selling steroids domestically or to countries other than the United States.

"The attitude of the Chinese government is not clear yet, so we will wait until a clear policy comes out next February," said Zheng Jianfeng, sales manager of Shanghai Jiubang Chemical Co., which sold steroids to international trading companies that acted as brokers.

Zheng added, "For the domestic market, if there is any demand, we will produce and sell steroids since the government doesn't yet limit the domestic trade."

#### Full Cooperation With U.S.?

International sports officials say the easy availability of steroids from China has long created a problem for the Olympics. That fact was driven home when court documents revealed that Chinese raw materials had been used in the designer steroids provided by the Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative, or BALCO, and used by prominent Olympic athletes at the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney and the 2003 track and field World Championships in Paris.



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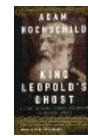
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The outgoing chairman of the World Anti-Doping Agency, Richard W. Pound, has demanded action on the issue from China

for more than a year, saying its reputation as a widespread source of steroids could affect the credibility of the Games this summer, particularly if China fields a team of extraordinary athletes who seem to come out of nowhere to win medals.

China set up its first Doping Control Center in 1990 and established its first anti-doping law in 1995. Three years ago, authorities strengthened regulations to conform to the codes of the World Anti-Doping Agency and published a list of steroid and hormone

products that require licensing.

But as steroids have continued to go abroad, they have also increasingly become a problem within China's own borders. Rising incomes have led more people to use performance-enhancing drugs. And as in other countries, coaches here have been known to encourage athletes to cheat.

"In the past, drugs like EPO" -- the endurance-boosting drug erythropoietin -- "or insulin were so expensive that athletes couldn't afford them, but now it's different. People start to use drugs when they are young," Zhao Jian, head of the China Anti-Doping Agency, said in the state-run China Youth Daily recently.

During a visit to Beijing a day after the U.S. investigation was announced in September, Pound said Chinese authorities had assured him they were cooperating with the United States.

But there was "some issue as to whether some of the sources were actually in China, as opposed to being merely web sites in China," Pound later wrote in an e-mail, adding that the Chinese "had not yet finished their investigation."

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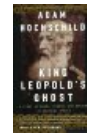


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Pound also said he was not clear whether the United States was receiving "full cooperation, as opposed to merely nominal or apparent cooperation" from the Chinese.

A spokeswoman for China's FDA, Yan Jiangying, said "strengthening the supervision and administration of steroids is a persistent policy of the Chinese government, which will not be changed by any influence from the outside." Yan also denied that current regulations or the government's position on steroids were unclear.



Workers make repairs at Green Leaf Pharmaceutical in Xianju after what was described as an April fire. The company used to sell stanozolol, a steroid, but not anymore, the workers said. (By Maureen Fan -- The Washington Post)

#### Mixed Message

Investigators may find they have to look beyond the list of targeted Chinese companies if they want to adequately address the problem.

In Xianju, workers at the Green Leaf Pharmaceutical Factory -- one of the companies that was formally accused of exporting to the United States -- were recently gutting buildings and laying pipes, following a fire in April, they said. The workers said the factory used to sell stanozolol, a man-made steroid similar to testosterone, but not anymore.

"Our clients were Chinese pharmaceuticals," Huang Guihai, a factory manager, said later in a telephone interview.

Meanwhile, in Hunan province, a new chemical factory opened recently. A woman who answered the phone at the company's sales office said the firm was owned by Xu Runxing, who also owns Green Leaf.

"We don't produce steroids or hormones," she said without being prompted.

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But when asked whether the company had any stanozolol or anastrozole for sale, she said yes, apparently unaware that both are in fact hormones that are banned in sports competition.

*Shipley reported from Key Biscayne, Fla.*

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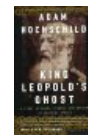
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