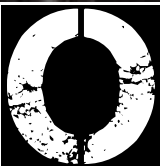




UNDER FIRE

How Easy Is It to Obtain a Gun?

BY SKY THOMAS GIDGE



On the morning of August 14, 2012, a plainclothes police officer's bullet entered Zhou Kehua's temple and ended the life of one of China's most notorious serial killers. Nicknamed 'brother headshot,' Zhou's modus operandi was simple: he waited at banks for people making large withdrawals then fired point-blank into his victim's skull before taking the money.

Thought to have committed at least nine murders, he avoided police for eight years while killing in cities from Nanjing to Changsha, before being shot dead in an alleyway in Chongqing. The last bullets to

spiral from the barrel of Zhou's Black Star, a domestically manufactured pistol based on a Soviet design, were at pursuing police officers.

Zhou was apparently an aberration. In a country with strict gun laws, Zhou turned heads every time he pulled the trigger.

But how rare are illegal guns really? That proved a very difficult question to answer. Figures provided by the National Bureau of Statistics draw no distinction between cases involving illegal guns, knives or any other sort of weapon. In addition, a carefully curated media means incidents may go unreported to maintain China's image as a gun-free nation.

The one source who supplied a number to us that was likely accurate added the caveat that we could not print it.

The most detailed information turns out to be from a 2015 report by the Washington DC-based Jamestown Foundation. The organization describes itself as a politically neutral source of information that should be available through official channels, "but sometimes isn't."

'Mapping China's Small Arms Trade: China's Illicit Domestic Gun Trade' paints a picture of an active and growing gun market in China and estimates that thousands of groups sell firearms through underground channels.

"Private possession of firearms and illegal high-powered air rifles is on the rise in China," says the report's author, Zi Yang, via email. "Arrests of gun suppliers – ranging from large trans-provincial networks to local mom-and-pop businesses – is a common occurrence, indicating a rise in demand."

Gun suppliers? In China? It begged an obvious question: could we find one?

Entering the pinyin for 'buy a gun' into Baidu led us to a website with a banner proclaiming it sold anti-bird guns, with a graphic below listing 'real guns' among the products. The guns listed for sale, often pictured with bullets beside them, ranged in price from RMB2,000 for a domestically made pistol to RMB8,000 for a Remington rifle.

After about 10 phone calls to the national Internet complaint center in Beijing, we were told they were not aware of the website and that 'relevant departments' would be notified.

The gun website's customer service representative was much more helpful.

"If you decide you want one, we'll send a person with the product to you," the agent typed over QQ. Identified as 'hunter' in Chinese, the agent said we could check the gun before paying for it and the firearm could be delivered to Guangzhou the next day.

But this seemed a little bit too easy. The site was the number-one result on

Baidu. 'Hunter' was openly talking about guns. Was it a trap? We got the feeling that *That's PRD* may have been a QQ message away from a police sting.

We deferred to the expert. Yang looked at the conversation and said it appeared legitimate, explaining it wasn't an issue of whether or not you could get guns in China, but a question of whether you want to take the risk.

"You always have access to guns – whether through personal connections or the Internet – but the risk is high given the tough laws involved," he says. "They include a possible life sentence or execution for the purchaser."

We asked 'hunter' to provide a picture of one of the guns, including bullets, to prove the company was pedaling real weapons. After that, 'hunter' went silent.

According to the Jamestown Foundation report, face-to-face gun delivery is not the norm; instead, groups have a buyer purchase a legal item on Taobao before shipping the weapons in separate pieces to a customer.

Chinese police busted one ring in November 2015 after discovering several pieces of guns in packages in Inner Mongolia. After a seven-month investigation, police seized 1,180 guns and six million bullets from a gang operating out of a house in Hunan, according to Xinhua, which quoted a police officer as saying that the gang had made four million yuan in profit.

With so much money at stake, it seems some are willing to take the risk that comes with selling weapons. A 2014 report posted on the China National Radio website looked at a group that claimed to be able to deliver guns – including AK-47s – to locations across the country. How could one organization have such reach? Franchising.

The group's requirements to become a franchisee included connections with police, at least 30 guns in personal stock and access to potential customers.

Gunrunners are embracing e-commerce just like the rest of us, albeit with a bit more caution. Instead of openly talking about buying and selling guns, they buy and sell 'dogs.'

The Chinese word for dog, *gou*, is a rough English homophone for gun. Online, would-be gun buyers refer to a handgun as a hand dog, an assault rifle as an assault dog

LAYING DOWN THE LAW

"No individual or unit may possess, manufacture (including alter or assemble), trade, transport, rent or lend firearms in violation of the law."

That's the central tenet of the Firearms-Control Act, and the penalties are harsh for those that transgress. Lesser offences related to illegally dealing with guns, ammunition or explosives entail a fixed-term of imprisonment not less than three years but not more than 10. If the circumstances are serious – for instance, manufacturing more than 20 guns or selling more than 10 – the minimum an offender can expect is a decade in jail, though the judge has the option to sentence a person to life in prison or even death.

Who Has Authority to Use Guns?

Legal firearms in China are divided into three categories: military firearms, firearms for official use and firearms for civilian use. Anyone possessing a firearm must have a permit.

'Official use' mainly refers to police attached to public security, prisons and courts, as well as customs personnel, guards of important state defense enterprises, financial institutions, storehouses and scientific research institutions.

Firearms for civilian use are confined to:

1. **Sports units**, including for-profit shooting ranges
2. **Hunting grounds**, delineated areas where hunters and herdsman may possess rifles; it is forbidden to leave these areas with a firearm
3. **Wildlife protection**, breeding and research institutions, if firearms are necessary in their operations

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and ammunition as dog food.

The majority of 'dog' purchasers are people that work in industries that straddle the line between legal and illegal – think massage parlor owners, shady night club bosses – and buy guns for personal protection from criminals they deal with, according to a 2012 report published in the *Journal of Henan Police College*.

But it's not just back-alley hustlers making use of firearms. One recently executed Sichuan CEO had the unfair business advantage of an armed militia. Liu Han became a billionaire after building the Hanlong Group into a huge private enterprise.

Liu armed his lackeys with military-grade weaponry, which were mostly used to threaten people who got in the way of his illegal businesses, but also as an element of intimidation in the company's aboveboard operations. Needless to say, the Hanlong Group tended to win bids.

Liu, who was lauded in 2010 in the Sydney Opera House after promising billions in investment in Australia, was executed in 2015. Of the charges he faced, one was weapons trafficking. The majority of Liu's fortune likely didn't come from selling

Guns on the Chinese market are pilfered from weapons factories or military arsenals

weapons – the Hanlong Group has big stakes in the energy industry – but we can make a good guess about the source of the weapons he peddled: China.

"Most [guns sold] are made in China, since the production cost is low and the production rate can be high," says Yang.

"Imports are more expensive given the risk involved in smuggling."

Despite Huanggang Port being China's largest port of entry, Hong Kong customs reports not having intercepted any guns in the last decade.

Instead, the guns on the Chinese market are manufactured domestically or pilfered from weapons factories or military arsenals, according to a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* report.

Since that article was published, China passed Germany to become the third largest arms exporter in the world as of 2014, seeing a 143 percent leap in arms exports between 2009 and 2014, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. With more guns leaving China, chances increase that some will be left behind.

Turning our attention back to unearthing a legitimate gun vendor, we had a quick browse on Google, which proved even less fruitful than Baidu.

One page promised "gun sales customer service" and was blocked on the mainland Internet, giving it a bit more credit as a potential dealer. The page contained a verbose pledge to provide quality customer