

# China executes former food and drug administration chief

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20 July 2007

In a cynical move aimed at shoring up the “Made in China” brand name, Chinese authorities executed Zheng Xiaoyu, the former head of the State Food and Drug Administration, on July 10 for accepting 6.5 million yuan (\$US850,000) in bribes from eight pharmaceutical companies. He was accused of approving fake drugs and other substandard items during his tenure from 1998 to 2005, including an antibiotic that killed at least 10 people last year.

Just before Zhang’s execution, one of his subordinates, Cao Wenzhuang, was also sentenced to death for accepting \$307,000 in bribes from two medical companies, but was given a two-year reprieve for cooperating with the investigation. Four other drug supervision officials were sentenced to prison terms of up to life.

Zheng’s crimes were undoubtedly grave, but the barbaric decision to execute him was not out concern for consumer safety or his victims. Rather Zheng provided a scapegoat to deflect attention from the unregulated operation of the capitalist market in China, rampant corruption at all levels of the Chinese bureaucracy and investors, local and foreign, who routinely flout even the limited rules governing everything from safety, hygiene and manufacturing standards, to workers’ pay and conditions and environmental safeguards.

Zheng’s execution followed damaging revelations involving Chinese products. Earlier this year, more than 100 brands of pet food were pulled from US shelves after scores of dogs and cats died from eating food tainted with the chemical melamine. Two months ago a scandal erupted in Panama over cough syrup tainted with diethylene glycol, an industrial solvent commonly used in anti-freeze. At least 94 people are alleged to have died after using it. In recent weeks, a number of countries in North America, Europe, South America and Asia have recalled Chinese-made toothpaste and other goods.

If it had not been for these scandals, Zheng might have been treated far more leniently. He was first accused of corruption and taking corporate bribes by one of his former

colleagues some six months after he retired in 2005. The official investigation dragged on and Zheng was not charged under the criminal code, but with “breaching party discipline”.

It was not until March this year—following the death of pets in the US—that the central leadership decided to expel him from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and hand him over to criminal prosecutors. As international pressure started to mount, the Chinese government accelerated the legal processes. An intermediate court in Beijing sentenced Zheng to death on May 29 and his appeal to a higher court was rejected two weeks later on June 12.

Due to the growing criticism of the large number of executions in China, a new regulation was introduced this year requiring the Supreme Peoples Court to approve all death sentences. But the top court quickly upheld the sentence, condemning Zheng for having “seriously damaged the interests of the state and people”. His appeal for mercy on the grounds of making a full confession and returning the bribes was rejected by the court because the “social impact [of his crimes] has been utterly malign”.

Even by Chinese standards, Zheng’s punishment was swift and brutal. Far bigger political criminals, such as ex-Shanghai party secretary and Politburo member Chen Liangyu who was dismissed last September for stealing hundreds of millions of dollars in pension funds, are yet to face criminal charges. The provincial leaders in Shanxi embroiled in a recent scandal over the widespread use of slave labour in local brick kilns have, to date, faced nothing more than criticism for “neglecting duties”.

The hurry to execute Zheng was a panicked response to international concerns over Chinese-made goods. Beijing was particularly fearful of moves by the Bush administration and sections of the US Congress to seize on the issue to justify new protectionist measures.

Even as the pet food scandal erupted in March, Chinese officials rushed to offer reassurances to members of the US Congress and to play down the extent of the problem. The Chinese government took the unusual step of consulting

several public relations firms to salvage consumer confidence at home and abroad in Chinese-made goods. Chinese authorities shut down more than 180 food-processing plants for health reasons and several dozen products were banned for export.

The production of unsafe goods is just one consequence of the unfettered operation of the market. As China has been transformed into the “workshop of the world”, corporations across the globe increasingly source products, components and ingredients from China with scant regard for anything but cost and potential profit. The lack of safeguards in China is compounded by the run down of regulatory bodies and standards in the US and other countries.

The pet food scandal involved an ingredient, wheat gluten, which was used by one of the largest US pet food companies, Menu Foods. The wheat gluten was sourced from a biological technology company, Xuzhou Anying, based in Jiangsu province, via a Las Vegas company, ChemNutra, which specialises in importing products from China. Xuzhou Anying apparently added melamine, an industrial plastic, to the ingredient to make it appear high in protein.

The product was not tested in the US until the death of a number of pets earlier this year. By the time American inspectors reached China, Xuzhou Anying was closed. Commenting in the *Washington Post*, William Hubbard, a former US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) official, warned: “There but for the grace of God go people. That same kind of contamination could have killed 4,000 or 5,000 people.”

The Bush administration has run down the main regulatory body—the USFDA, which currently has only 625 field inspectors and is planning to close seven of its 13 testing laboratories. According to statistics from the non-profit Center for Science in the Public Interest, the incidence of illnesses from contaminated produce more than doubled between 1998 and 2004.

In China, unsafe and toxic foods and drugs have led to rising public concern in recent years. Scandals ranged from the use of cancer-causing dye to coloured egg yolks and fake milk powder that killed several babies. Reports also surfaced of the use of banned chemicals and complete disregard for basic hygiene procedures in the food processing industry. Antibiotics have been widely used in fish and pawn farms to keep the products “healthy”, while rotten meat has been turned into ham.

The problem of food safety is so pervasive that the Chinese military has raised concerns that bad food could undermine combat capacity. Chinese authorities, which are commonly in collusion with companies, have done little to change the situation. Some 110,000 Chinese workers lose

their lives every year as a result of industrial accidents. Fires and building collapses result in more deaths due to inadequate enforcement of regulations. Industrial pollution takes place on a large scale. So it is no surprise that China’s minimal regulations on food and medical safety are routinely violated in the pursuit of profits.

Last Friday, Shao Mingli, the current head of State Food and Drug Administration, warned manufacturers not to “only go after economic gain”. He stated: “Food and drug safety is critical to the people’s health and lives, and is critical for social stability and harmony. This issue can easily morph into a much larger one and directly affect the image of local governments and the state, affect social stability and harmony as well as socioeconomic development.”

The Chinese government is trying to blame the problems on small-scale manufacturers. Some 80 percent of the country’s 450,000 food companies have less than 10 employees and half of those inspected had no proper licenses. There is no doubt, however, that bigger Chinese companies are also involved. The main difference is that they can afford to bribe government officials to grant the necessary official approvals and documentation, as in the case of Zhang Xiaoyu’s collusion with drug corporations.

Despite its own opposition to regulatory “red tape”, the Bush administration wasted no time in using the scandals to step up trade pressure on Beijing. US Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez warned Beijing last week to take the matter “extremely seriously”. Charles Schumer, the leading congressional advocate for punitive trade sanctions against China, called for the appointment of an “import tsar” to oversee “increasingly unsafe imports from China”.

Tensions between the US and China threaten to escalate. In retaliation, Beijing has banned imports of US chicken and pork products from Tyson Foods, the world’s largest meat processor, and other American firms. Chinese food safety regulators have allegedly found salmonella in frozen chicken from the US, demonstrating that it is not only in China that the operation of the free market is creating dangerous products for consumers.



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