

August 8, 2006

China Turns Out Mummified Bodies for Displays

By [DAVID BARBOZA](#)

DALIAN, [China](#) — Tucked away in the back of this coastal city's export-oriented manufacturing zone is a place that can only be described as a modern mummification factory.

Inside a series of unmarked buildings, hundreds of Chinese workers, some seated in assembly line formations, are cleaning, cutting, dissecting, preserving and re-engineering human corpses, preparing them for the international museum exhibition market.

“Pull the cover off; pull it off,” one Chinese manager says as a team of workers begin to lift a blanket from the head of a cadaver stored in a stainless steel container filled with formalin, a chemical preservative. “Let's see the face; show the face.”

The mastermind behind this operation is Gunther von Hagens, a 61-year-old German scientist whose show, “Body Worlds,” has attracted 20 million people worldwide over the past decade and has taken in over \$200 million by displaying preserved, skinless human corpses with their well-defined muscles and sinewy tissues.

But now with millions of people flocking to see “Body Worlds” and similar exhibitions, a ghastly new underground mini-industry has emerged in China.

With little government oversight, an abundance of cheap medical school labor and easy access to cadavers and organs — which appear to come mostly from China and Europe — at least 10 other Chinese body factories have opened in the last few years. These companies are regularly filling exhibition orders, shipping preserved cadavers to Japan, South Korea and the United States.

Fierce competition among body show producers has led to accusations of copyright theft, unfair competition and trafficking in human bodies in a country with a reputation for allowing a flourishing underground trade in organs and other body parts.

Here in China, determining who is in the body business and where the bodies come from is not easy. Museums that hold body exhibitions in China say they have suddenly “forgotten” who supplied their bodies, police officials have regularly changed their stories about what they have done with bodies, and even universities have confirmed and then denied the existence of body preservation operations on their campuses.

Human rights activists have attacked the exhibitions, calling them freak shows that may be using the bodies of mentally ill people and executed prisoners. In June, the police in the city of Dandong, about 190 miles northeast of here, discovered about 10 corpses in a farmer’s yard. The bodies were being used by a firm financed by foreigners, the government said, that was illegally involved in the body preservation business.

Worried about a growing trade in illegal bodies, the Chinese government issued new regulations in July that outlawed the purchase or sale of human bodies and restricted the import and export of human specimens, unless used for research. But it is unclear how the regulations will affect the factories.

[Premier Exhibitions](#), one of the world’s largest exhibition companies and the creator of “Bodies: The Exhibition” — now showing at the South Street Seaport in Lower Manhattan — declined to comment, saying it had not yet reviewed the regulations.

But Dr. von Hagens said he welcomed the new regulations, noting that they would not prevent him from doing business because he operated a research institute and his exhibitions rely mostly on European donors rather than Chinese bodies.

The new regulations, however, could prevent Chinese bodies from being exported from China to exhibitions in the United States, putting at stake possibly tens of millions of dollars.

Premier Exhibitions, a publicly listed company based in Atlanta that created the “Titanic” artifacts exhibitions that began in the 1990’s, recently agreed to pay \$25 million to secure a steady supply of preserved bodies from China. Despite the new risks associated with procuring bodies and the prospect of saturating the market, Premier is still betting that the body shows will expand around the world.

“Our body exhibitions will probably surpass ‘Titanic,’ ” which was seen by 17 million people worldwide,” said Arnie Geller, the chief executive of Premier. “And it will probably do that in half the time.”

Experts say exhibitions featuring preserved bodies are now among the most popular attractions at American science and natural history museums. While the shows have not appeared at two of the most respected museums — the Smithsonian and the [American Museum of Natural](#)

[History](#) in New York — they have appeared at major museums in Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles.

“These are blockbuster shows,” said Robert West, who tracks the museum exhibition business for Informal Learning Experiences, a Washington consulting firm. “We haven’t seen anything like this since the robotic dinosaurs came in the 1980’s.” The industry is dogged by questions about the origins of the corpses. Premier says its exhibition uses unclaimed Chinese bodies that the police have given to medical schools. None of the bodies, it says, are those of executed prisoners or people who died of unnatural causes.

“We don’t deal with it directly, but we want to do what is morally and legally correct,” Mr. Geller said. “We traced the whole process. None of these would be executed prisoners.”

Officials at the Customs Bureau here in Dalian and the Dalian Medical University, however, said they had no records showing the supplier of Premier having acquired bodies and then transporting them to exhibitions abroad.

“I don’t know where the bodies came from,” said Meng Xianzhi, a spokesman for the university.

Dr. von Hagens, who opened the first large-scale body preservation factory here in Dalian in 1999, said he abided by the regulations.

The fierce rivalry between Premier and Dr. von Hagens’s company, the Institute of Plastination, has moved to the courts, over everything from copyright claims to rights to the name “Body World.” They have each publicly hinted that their rival is engaging in unethical behavior in acquiring bodies in China.

“All the copycat exhibitions are from China,” Dr. von Hagens said. “And they’re all using unclaimed bodies.”

Mr. Geller, the chairman of Premier, counters Dr. von Hagens: “He says his full body specimens are all donors, but his organs may not be from donors. Listen closely to what he says.”

Part of the reason for the tension is that Premier’s sole supplier of bodies is Dr. Sui Hongjin, a former general manager of Dr. von Hagens’ s operation in Dalian. Dr. von Hagens contends that while serving as his general manager, Dr. Sui secretly ran his own body operation in Dalian. Dr. von Hagens said he then fired Dr. Sui.

Dr. Sui, who operates his own body factory in Dalian, declined to be interviewed.

Dr. von Hagens says he is now tracking his competitors in China because his institute, like other foreign companies that open factories in China, has fallen victim to unsavory Chinese entrepreneurs, who created “copy cat” shows and entered the market with bodies that had not been as well preserved.

To make his case, Dr. von Hagens invited two journalists to Dalian for a tour of his facility, which he said was the first center in China to preserve bodies.

He also told the story of how he came into the business. After growing up in East Germany, Dr. von Hagens says, he was imprisoned for trying to defect while in his 20’s. He later reached West Germany and earned a medical degree there.

In the 1970’s, he says, he created a process that allowed him to preserve corpses by removing the fluids and then replacing them and preserving the body with chemical polymers, or plastic, in a process he calls plastination. He began touring the world with his “plastinated bodies,” holding his first exhibition in Japan in 1995. It drew three million people.

Initially, Dr. von Hagens says he had difficulty showing his human specimens in Europe, where he was called Dr. Death and Dr. Frankenstein. The European press even compared him to Josef Mengele, the Nazi death camp doctor.

Dr. von Hagens then came to China, where he said he found cheap labor, eager students, few government restrictions and easy access to Chinese bodies, which he said he primarily uses for experiments and medical research purposes, not for his exhibitions.

“When I came here, he said we’ll have no problem with Chinese bodies,” Dr. von Hagens said of Dr. Sui, his former general manager. “He said we can use unclaimed bodies. Now it’s difficult, but then it was no problem at all.”

Dr. von Hagens insists that much of the world has come to accept the educational and scientific value of producing preserved bodies. He calls this his effort to “democratize anatomy” and allow common people to see the wonders of the human body.

And so in his large Dalian facility, Dr. von Hagens, who is a visiting professor at [New York University](#) College of Dentistry, is also producing animated videos, books, DVD’s and stuffed toy animals with flaps that reveal easily detachable internal organs. His company is branching out into plastinated animals, which have been featured in a number of shows.

On his tour, he pointed to a large container in the campus yard that he said contained an elephant corpse that had just arrived from a German zoo. Then he entered a warehouse and had

workers pull a large bear out of a tank of alcohol, followed by several human bodies he said were ready for dissection and plastination.

“Every specimen is an anatomical treasure,” he said.

He walked amiably through the halls and workshop floors, instructing his employees to open baskets, refrigerators, boxes and stainless steel tanks to show off the human and animal corpses housed inside.

About 260 workers in Dalian process about 30 bodies a year. The workers, who generally earn \$200 to \$400 a month, first dissect the bodies and remove skin and fat, then put the bodies into machines that replace human fluids with soft chemical polymers.

In a large workshop called the positioning room, about 50 medical school graduates work with the dead: picking fat off the cadavers, placing them in seated or standing positions and forcing the corpses to do lifelike things, such as hold a guitar or assume a ballet position. Dr. von Hagens admits these positions are controversial.

“Even my former manager said, ‘Can you really pose a dead man on a dead horse?’ ” Dr. von Hagens said. “But I decided this was real quality.”

