

# Pistols and porn make model market

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## BEIJING BRIEFING

By **GEOFFREY CROTHALL**

WHEN Deng Xiaoping called on the people of China to "liberate their thoughts" and give full play to market forces, the folks at Baigou took the patriarch at his word.

Baigou is probably the most "liberated" market in northern China. Here you can find everything from handbags to handguns, plastic toys to pornographic video tapes, often at a third the price of those in Beijing's department stores.

There appears to be no control over the market; even there is a demand, even for the most dangerous, harmful or illegal products, there is a supply - even, for some items, from the police.

AK-47s are on offer for about 4,000 yuan (about

HK\$5,360), allegedly cheaper than in the bazaars on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. At the lower end of the market there is a vast array of crudely fashioned pistols and flick knives probably more harmful to the user than the intended victim.

The authorities launch periodic crackdowns but within a few months, business always booms again.

Part of the problem is that Baigou, a three-hour drive south from Beijing, is at the intersection of three counties - Xincheng, Ba and Xiong - none of which seem to have the ability or desire to govern the place.

What government there

is seems more intent on making money out of the market than on regulating it or controlling its excesses.

The police are getting in on the act, selling off standard issue pistols, electric batons, handcuffs and identity cards.

Despite the all-too-apparent lawlessness - gunfire can regularly be heard around Baigou's main street - the official Chinese media continue to praise it as a model of entrepreneurial endeavour.

The *People's Daily* has described the town as the "commercial hub of the north China plain". Being a similar distance from Bei-

jing and China's third-largest city, Tianjin, Baigou was perfectly located to act as the market-place for rural industry on the plain, it said.

Baigou's prices were so low, the newspaper said, because the market was based on high volume, rapid turnover and low profit margins.

The official reports tend to ignore the seedy side of Baigou market, concentrating on the more wholesome rural industries such as bag-making that first put the market on the map.

But even in this, everything is not as it is portrayed in the press. Product quality is extremely poor. Some of the electrical goods and toys could cause serious injury.

Furthermore, trademark and copyright infringements are common. Hongkong

travel firm Morning Star, for example, might be interested to learn that its name and logo are being used to sell a range of suitcases. They can be found next to a pile of pirated Hongkong martial arts movies.

That said, Baigou is trying to clean up its act with Hongkong money.

The "Little Hongkong Market", under construction, will be a purpose-built indoor market, designed to provide a permanent home for the sellers whose ramshackle stalls line the main streets and alleyways.

But putting a glossy face on Baigou is not going to change the fundamental nature of its business; that will require concerted action from the authorities.