Mangled WTC steel bought by China

Company denies souvenir plans

January 27, 2002 | By Ching-Ching Ni, Special to the Tribune. Ching-Ching Ni is a staff reporter for the Los Angeles Times, a Tribune newspaper.

SHANGHAI — As New Yorkers emotionally debate what kind of memorial should honor those killed in the Sept. 11 World Trade Center attack, 50,000 tons of mangled metal from the twin towers have been sold and shipped to China as scrap.

China's largest steel company denied reports that it plans to make souvenirs out of metal from the collapsed buildings. But officials at Shanghai Baosteel here said the company did buy scrap from the wreckage of the terrorist attack.

For those involved in the deal, the purchase was an ordinary business transaction.

"Scrap from the World Trade Center is cheap, and the quality is good," said Cao Xianggen, an engineer at Baosteel. "America can't use it all, but China has a huge demand for it."

For some victims' families, however, the selling of the steel that entombed their loved ones could prove an example of cold-hearted global trade.

The families had made emotional appeals to the city of New York to stop the recycling until further clues could be found about the towers' collapse. New York officials said the investigation could continue without the physical wreckage.

In New York, city officials confirmed that at least two companies had bid successfully on scrap material from the World Trade Center, but they said that they didn't know what had happened to the material after it was purchased.

Baosteel is believed to have bought the steel from one of the two companies. A staff member at Baosteel's shipping department said late Friday that a ship carrying the wreckage had left the United States in the
middle of December but that it probably wouldn’t reach China on schedule. Part of the 50,000-ton purchase had been due to arrive Friday.

China is one of the world’s leading producers of steel. During the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, China wanted to prove its self-sufficiency, so it made the whole country turn in pots and pans, antique decor, any metal objects people could find to forge steel.

Today, it relies on other countries for its raw material. In 2000, the country imported 5.1 million tons of scrap, according to the Shanghai Daily. The average selling price is about $150 a ton, the newspaper said.

Baosteel bought some of the remains of the World Trade Center for $120 a ton, according to the Beijing Youth Daily.

The management office at Metal Management in New Jersey, one of the two original buyers, didn’t return calls.

But Alan Ratner, president of Metal Management, told the New York Daily News last month: “This is recycling at its purest form. Our job is to take material and find a beneficial reuse for it.”

Some of the wreckage, Ratner said, will be donated to a memorial.

Considering that almost 3,000 people died in the suicide attack on the World Trade Center and weighing the sensitivity of U.S.-China relations, Baosteel vehemently has denied reports made by the Beijing Youth Daily that the company might profit from sales of mini-WTC replicas.

"Baosteel absolutely did not buy scrap with the intention of making arts and craft," according to a posting that appeared on the company's Web site Friday.

Indian companies also bought scrap from New York's disaster zone.

The World Trade Center wreckage is expected to produce an estimated 300,000 tons of structural steel. The girders, columns and beams will be melted down and reforged into basic building materials in Asia.

Typically, such scrap is used to construct skyscrapers, roads, bridges, cars and some household appliances.

The U.S. scrap-recycling industry is worth at least $20 billion a year.

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