

Featuring

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Over the last decades, shanzhai culture has caught the interest not only of the world's savviest shoppers, but of scholars and thinkers of consumerism. Originally denoting a mountain hamlet, and later, the secret lair of outlaws and bandits, this Mandarin word has come to connote the prolific counterfeit commodity culture of China, a culture that continues to thrive and morph through complex transnational networks of production and exchange. Fashion offers a unique framework to contemplate this pervasive but fickle philosophy of production as it relates to authorship, branding, and labor—and most ambivalently, its deep-seated connotations of freedom and rebellion.

ZAIRONG XIANG

I prepared a little framework for today's conversation, but we don't actually have to follow it. The first section is *locating shanzhai*. My first question is: *where is the mountain stronghold?* Shanzhai practices and phenomena are so widespread and diverse, cutting across a vast range of practices and industries. What is shanzhai for you, or is shanzhai precisely that which evades definition, if not identification? What can be said of the heterogeneity of definitions of shanzhai—as a commercial strategy, as a form of entrepreneurship, an alternative way of creativity, or even a semiotic hack? Shanzhai, I think, is at once very small, very local and *localized*, but at the same time, also very big in scope and complexity via its transnational connections.

SARA LIAO

I first got to know Shanzhai around 2011, when I was studying in Hong Kong and took a trip to Shenzhen with friends. We went to Huaqiangbei, which at the time was a bazaar of electronic devices and tech spaces. It was probably my first time seeing many "shanzhaiji"—so called knockoff phones approximating the look of brand name cell phones like Apple. I started to be interested in the phenomenon and found that many discussions online really treated it as a practice, perhaps first out of parody and ridicule, but also some sincere beliefs in creating business opportunities and working for fun. This is especially true when looking at the garment-making practice in China, which

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has long been accused of faking, counterfeiting, and basically ignoring the idea of copyrights and patents that upholds a global brand worship and logomania.

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FAN YANG

To me, the Shenzhen shanzhai phone sector is a very concrete artifact of new media that is so intertwined with other new media technologies like the internet and the globalization of intellectual property rights as a regime. I love your question about this connection between the local and the transnational, because I'm thinking about Shenzhen as a site that really straddles the global North and the global South (as binary ways of framing globalization). In many ways shanzhai provides that distinctive lens through which we can think about these kinds of entanglements of the North and the South in a more concrete and specific way.

You probably all know that the term *shanzhai* was actually first used in Hong Kong as an indicator of supply chain subcontracting sites for global manufacturing. But then it was taken up to label knockoff cell phones, particularly in places like Shenzhen, which is very close to Hong Kong. So *shanzhai* in Cantonese probably preceded the mandarin formation, so it's also important to think of language – especially in relation to the work of Shanzhai Lyric. What interested me as a scholar of globalization and culture was how this particular phenomenon speaks to the contradictions or contradictory impact of globalization on China, and perhaps places like Shenzhen stand out as sites where we can look at those contestations. Of course, the material grounding for something like shanzhai phones is precisely the rise of China as a world factory with the migrant workers moving from the countryside to the cities to work in companies like Foxconn, prompting a demand among migrant workers for communication tools to be able to survive in this type of globalized economy. So low-cost phones that cater to their needs were precisely the origins of shanzhai phones; simultaneously it occurred at a time when China was experiencing a booming Internet culture. So shanzhai phones transformed into the DIY shanzhai culture that we now know on the Internet. This is why I kind of

talk about shanzhai as a discourse about media but also it's mediated through new media.

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ZAIRONG XIANG

In my text about shanzhai, I made a kind of fake connection between Shenzhen and shanzhai. It's this kind of linguistic homophone that I think can nicely take us to Shanzhai Lyric.

SHANZHAI LYRIC

That's so funny, I think that maybe you started that rumor then, because a lot of people do think that shanzhai comes from Shenzhen. We've heard people state that as fact— that they read it somewhere— maybe they read it in your work! But this question of "where is the mountain hamlet" is really at the forefront of our work and figures as a constant pursuit. Currently, we're in one of many mountain hamlets that we have theoretically or physically inhabited in order to pursue our research. We're on Canal Street in New York City, which we've been studying for the past year. Canal Street is a kind of liminal space whose exceptional history and physical location can function to shield those that are at the margins. Canal Street has acted, for the past several centuries or so, as a kind of landing place for recent immigrants to the US.

During the pandemic we witnessed what we saw as radical redistributive acts. One of the main tenets of what shanzhai culture can be is this active culling of resources from those that have, and redistribution to those that have not. In the case of Canal Street, which is the epicenter of bootleg markets in New York City, we're thinking about what kinds of life-ways the redistribution of luxury goods affords.

And what you're saying, Fan, about destabilizing binaries of global North and South, or East and West, feels really crucial to the study of and celebration of the mountain hamlet, as a place that can be situated in many places. In some sense our recent work is an extended pun on the word *hamlet* when it moves into English and acquires this association with Shakespeare's tragic hero, the melancholic Prince of Denmark, Hamlet.

We consider the text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as itself a shanzhai text because much of it is copied from an earlier play by Thomas Kyd, in a collage or mash-up with other texts. And *Hamlet* itself has been bootlegged countless times—so there's really no official version of this very iconic English-language play—it's literally a bootleg text, a bootleg of a performance, a bootleg recording. For us, this has been an exciting zone of wordplay to reside inside because it undermines the idea that shanzhai practice is inherently from the East, and that the West has a different relationship to authorship. If we look more closely at the most classic English language author of all time—Shakespeare—his authorship as an individual actually begins to unravel, revealing itself as the myth of the individual. In actuality, the creation of his works is a totally shanzhai process. It's been very exciting to us that the mountain hamlet is an approach that can happen wherever.

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ZAIRONG XIANG

This is amazing! This actually brings me to the second question—this is slightly vague—but it's something that keeps bugging me. Can we attempt to locate the proper definition of shanzhai, or, more specifically what's the difference between shanzhai and fake or shanzhai and counterfeit. Is there any difference if so, what it is?

SHANZHAI LYRIC

We have been very interested in shanzhai as *commentary, critique, innovation, building upon, adding to, mutating, transforming, morphing, or feedback* to the original. The term shanzhai has such a specific meaning that does seem really linked to its etymology and its origins, connecting it to a spatial geographic purview as well as philosophical possibility that allows for responsiveness, adaptability, improvisation. So shanzhai is not purely imitative; it's actually *building upon* and *transmuting*, as opposed to counterfeit, which has an etymological antagonism as being *counter* to a "made" or "complete" thing.

FAN YANG

It's interesting because I actually play with the word *counterfeit* a little bit too in my analysis. If you trace the Latin roots, it's literally "counter

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made," so there is a sense of *countering* for me with shanzhai, in the sense of countering dominant discourse, in relation to, for example, intellectual property rights. At the same time, there's also a sense of countering the national, the official and the new global, so that's where a double layer of countering come into tensions with each other; it also shows what kind of power struggle may arise when the global regime encounters the national one. There's much value in connecting shanzhai to counterfeit in English, but I think part of what intrigued me about Zairong's question of language here is that I wonder if it's also useful to return shanzhai to the Chinese linguistic context. You can say 假 (*jia*) or 伪 (*wei*), which can be somewhat glossed as "counterfeit" or "fake," but *shanzhai* is one of those terms that you just cannot find the exact equivalent in English that has all those valances. This attention to the specificity of the cultural environment that gave rise to something like shanzhai allows us to perhaps explore the decolonization of knowledge production.

ZAIRONG XIANG

That's actually something that I've been thinking about as well—the closeness of shanzhai and [*jia*] and the difference between shanzhai and fake. Because [*jie*] basically means to borrow, right? It also forms a rhetorical strategy like [*jia-jie*] and so on, so it doesn't have the same kind of connotation at all as fake, so if we develop a kind of genealogy from that perspective, we might be able to circumvent this question altogether actually. So shanzhai is not fake—not in the sense that it is not fake, but in the sense that it's not fake in the sense of English.

Shanzhai is this kind of very ambiguous phenomenon, but let's look at two things. Many people agree that it starts in the mobile industry, but as Sara's book shows, it is probably much more visible in the fashion industry than in the mobile industry today.

FAN YANG

When I was researching the mobile phone industry, one of the things that fascinated me was mobile phones themselves as fashion

symbols amongst migrant workers, much like *Sha Ma Te* (杀马特, or “smart”) hairstyle.

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SARA LIAO

Fan, your book gave me so much inspiration when I was researching shanzhai fashion. I’m trying to think about when I started to see that “shanzhai” was used to refer to fashion copying. I guess it was around 2012 or 2013, when I was really deep into the phenomenon, seeing some of my favorite stores on Taobao start to say they would “shan” something, which meant they were copying a design or an outlook. But really, if you look at specifically fashion copying, we might even call it a time-honored practice. Law scholars Christopher Sprigman and Kal Raustiala mentioned that fashion imitations can be innovative drives.

SHANZHAI LYRIC

This also guides our interest, specifically, in shanzhai writing or the text on shanzhai garments. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han traces shanzhai to the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, in which emptiness in a landscape invites collective inscription and the value of work increases as it gains co-authors, rather than as the work of a single author. The original, then, becomes non-existent; the work is not finished at its inception, it is continuously co-created as it acquires more traces. This feels very resonant as a parallel to the accumulation of traces on a shanzhai garment, where many authors add a sort of inscription—this could be in the form of a brand name or it could be in the form of lyric, a song, a design choice. In the shanzhai garment, you can see traces of many poet-authors creating the shape together. The text bends and curves across the emptiness of the garment as it is worn by bodies moving through a landscape.

ZAIRONG XIANG

In fact, Byung-Chul Han’s work might lead us to the second part, which I call *(the) expanding shanzhai*, expanding in the sense of looking backwards. Is there a history, or we can think of a *long durée* of shanzhai that we could trace, for example, to the Chinese porcelain in Germany,

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or Japanese painting in late 19th century France? To what extent we could use shanzhai as a synonym for cross-cultural influence, or is this too much of a stretch? Is there a way to think of shanzhai’s past life, say, before global capitalism?

SHANZHAI LYRIC

Thinking in the realm of language, an analogous phenomenon is perhaps the Pidgin tongues of the Pearl River Delta. *Pidgin* itself is allegedly a transliteration or transformation of the word “business” in English. We think a lot about the profit-driven motive of language, that is, how words end up being born in order for two people with disparate languages to communicate to do business and to exchange. But what’s interesting in the case of shanzhai writing is the way it can potentially be divorced from the profit-driven motive, in the sense that language becomes a pattern or image.

ZAIRONG XIANG

Very connected to that is also thinking about *other shanzhais*. You mentioned the use of words as pattern, and this reminds me of African print textiles, which also has a very interesting history of being allegedly designed in the Netherlands, and then sold to Africa, and where it became a sort of symbol of the local fashion. And now, China enters this picture again because the African prints made in China are the most cost-friendly. In your research and observation, do you find other examples that talk to different places, rather than shanzhai per se?

SHANZHAI LYRIC

It’s interesting that you mention African textile, because there’s a direct link between the counterfeit luxury bag culture we witness here on Canal Street, and the popularity of African textile in New York City. A wave of West African traders came to New York in the 90s and a lot of what they were tapping into was a growing interest in Africana, coinciding with the invention of the holiday of kwanzaa and so on. Lots of outdoor markets catered to this interest of African Americans to wear West African shirts or head scarves. And while they were initially importing textiles from West Africa, some of the vendors realized that

they could actually get much much cheaper versions from the Korean and Chinese manufacturers in lower Manhattan and New Jersey. That played a key role, it seems, in the rise of West African vendors on Canal Street, because when these informal markets where a lot of these goods were being sold in Harlem was shut down by the mayor, the vendors were already familiar with this downtown area due to the business they had been doing with textile manufacturers. So they migrated down to Canal Street. Africana goods manufactured by Chinese garment workers present another mode of shanzhai, one that points to the absurdity of claims of authenticity.

ZAIRONG XIANG

This is a great example, and I think this is exactly the kind of spirit that makes me very interested in shanzhai as a connector that enables things to emerge. It's very difficult to be moralizing about the examples—it's not like that the company has some kind of post-colonial mission, or even solidarity with the Global South, but at the same time, their shanzhai indeed often bypasses the domination of eurocentrism in the industry.

FAN YANG

When I was researching shanzhai, I saw so many discussions around the empowering dimensions of new media, a lot of super celebratory treatments. I was kind of fed up with it, and wanted to challenge that by thinking about what kind of power relations might still get inflicted on these "countering" tactics. On the surface there's this sense of empowerment of the masses, but beneath that there's still the subjugation to the global regime of branding that is about economizing culture. But I feel like things have shifted quite a bit since I made that argument. I think it's really an open question, if you think about DIY "culture" writ large.

SHANZHAI LYRIC

In shanzhai, there is an explicit renegotiation of authorship that is in dialogue with an official branded version, whereas DIY doesn't necessarily have that particular relationship to an original. In shanzhai

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fashion, the imitation of luxury functions as commentary, as longing, as critique, as mockery, as dismissal. There's an accompanying attitude whereas DIY responds to a particular need, often an urgent need. There isn't the same sort of churning of cultural references. Think of Dapper Dan, the US New York designer of the 80s and 90s, who's famous for extravagant bootlegs of luxury brand textiles and designs. He brought together streetwear and luxury for the first time, and dressed all the celebrities of the day such that his designs became more coveted than the luxury items themselves. Many years later, after first being sued and shut down, he is now employed by these same luxury brands. He's such a canonical shanzhai artist, rather than a DIY-er. The shanzhai artist demonstrates such an extravagant embrace of the idioms of branding and consumerist desire that this exaggerated demonstration can become a form of critique.

JEPPE UGELVIG

But indeed, there's a sort of celebratory irreverence associated to shanzhai as a phenomenon, and I think it is a kind of irreverence that is not only decolonial in spirit but that also has an embedded class politics to it. But, as you say, with the case of Dapper Dan and Gucci, we're seeing how that irreverence is itself becoming a desirable brand or object to be consumed and to be replicated by the hegemonic industry that shanzhai initially counters. What happens when shanzhai develops from being a critical strategy to becoming a fetishized readymade that can be replicated by "those who have," to continue your logic from earlier? Five years ago you saw this in Western fashion a lot with the rise of brand-hacking that suddenly appeared with brands like Vetements and Balenciaga. Suddenly the hottest commodity was actually shanzhai, but with the critical supply chain that I guess that we're appreciating here, cut off. It becomes a pure marketing or a simple semiotic game within the linguistic space of consumerism. What are the risks of glorifying or appreciating shanzhai?

ZAIRONG XIANG

I think my observation from the phenomenon is not really irreverence but *indifference*. There is an inbuilt indifference in all shanzhai-related

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practice, and this indifference also means that it can be indifferent to politics. And that's very difficult to grasp, this question of indifference. I once wrote a text called *radical indifference*, adding the "radical" to indicate when the intentionality to be indifferent is not inbuilt, meaning that indifference, rather, is a result or a consequence, not a starting point. I think this concept actually derives from my studies on shanzhai.

SHANZHAI LYRIC

Radical indifference is a really exciting concept! The most common question we receive from people is regarding intention *but these shanzhai lyrics are mistakes, right? What you're attributing to them is your own interpretation? These people making these have no idea what they're doing, right? How do you know the exact process and intention behind these items and phrases?* People really have a desire to understand intentionality as it relates to authorship, and it's a very curious impulse to us because it's precisely this radical indifference that's so exciting. Of course we can't know the exact process and intention of every item; maybe you could take a long time to trace a single object and the forces that produced it, but we encounter so many objects and we can't make generalizations or guesses. But we can observe that there is a radical disregard for certain things—in the case of our object of study, the norms of standard English—and this radical flouting of the norms of standard English is precisely what opens up the possibility for a different mode of relating to the so-called standard, to this *imperial tongue*. It brings into question what we even mean by intention, because the daily practice of completely disregarding the rules of English is to treat English not as the language of empire but rather as sculptural material to be played with and then discard. And that proposes a certain political possibility that reorients assumed power relations.

ZAIRONG XIANG

To add to that, radical indifference can only come from the less powerful in a power relationship, so the powerful cannot be radically indifferent.

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SHANZHAI LYRIC

They're already indifferent!

ZAIRONG XIANG

The last question actually is the *gender of shanzhai*, or *shanzhai and gender*. I never thought about the gender aspect concretely until I encountered Sara's work that talked about this concretely, namely the gendered labor in the fashion industry, as opposed to the male-centered discourse of shanzhai technology. How can we think about fashion, specifically clothes and garment, as this thing that both enables and challenges gender norms by way of shanzhai?

SARA LIAO

At the time I was researching shanzhai fashion phenomenon, it was like a fad; a bunch of apparel shop owners, primarily women, turned themselves into some early forms of online fashionistas in China, inviting their customers through Weibo to be involved in a process of copying, primarily Western luxury brands and customizing clothes. Many of them were literally practicing shanzhai, if we understand it as to copy, in fashion for quite a long time, but also frankly admitted that they used "to shan" or "shanzhai"—when these terms became popular—to take part in their popularity, to seek business opportunity, and to have fun by simply talking about shanzhai with their customers. I wrote my PhD dissertation on this shanzhai fashion phenomenon by talking to these women, looking at their engagement with garment-making and e-commerce, and trying to figure out the economic and cultural logics behind their business. Shanzhai in fashion is not new to China, yet what's new here is how the discourse of shanzhai has been appropriated by some women to revamp a practice and create a niche in digital culture and creative industry. It presents a concrete case to look at the engagement of participatory culture, gender and labor with some competing ideas around globalization, creativity, and authenticity.

SHANZHAI LYRIC

The tech and fashion industries connect around questions of gender insofar as the people who are often doing the daily labor of creating

things, whether it's a fashion garment or it's inputting information for software to function, are women, and usually women of color. So the place where the so-called error enters, *the glitch*—whether it's a glitch in language or a glitch in programming—is very exciting, because it makes visible, audible, and palpable the presence of an actual person making things function through their daily, embodied labor that is so often invisibilized and exploited. This is how we understand the delight that you can find in the glitch is that it can be a moment of recognition. It does feel very gendered in terms of *who is often doing this work* in contrast to *who is credited and compensated*. Shawn Wen writes of scans of digitized texts in Google Books where, occasionally, you would catch the shadow of a scanning hand, the actual hand that's doing the work of scanning each page. Even when the book is made to appear disembodied, the shadow makes visible that there is a body doing this labor.

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FAN YANG

Of course, it's simultaneously reflective of the regime of exploitation but disruptive in some ways. There's something very powerful about the title of Sara's book, *Fashioning China*, when the subject matter is about the women designers and workers in shanzhai fashion industry simultaneously engaging with and navigating the precarity of the neoliberal entrepreneurial life, but also empowering themselves to be different. I thought that was really fascinating, that kind of jumping of scale from the intimate body of fashion to a kind of national imaginary of making and branding.

SARA LIAO

Thanks Fan. It is quite fascinating to see many contradictions in Shanzhai fashion, like how women generally were marginalized by a more tech-oriented shanzhai rhetoric/maker culture, and subjected to stricter scrutinization as a representative of China's knock off industry that was contrasted to a global fashion world centered on Western haute couture and logomania, while at the same time, they carefully worked around the legal structure to continue to "shanzhai" those name brands and enjoy it, even when their labor in it were not well

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compensated materially. For me, there are several gendered layers to "fashioning" China. One is perhaps more historical and connects to what Fan mentioned as a national imaginary of, or perhaps transnational imaginary of making, an imaginary of women sweatshop labor in garment factories making "Made-in-China" goods. Shanzhai fashion-making somehow inverts such an image, or it makes it invisible, which is still problematic, but less a concern that would attract huge attention. Another one is the binary of interpreting shanzhai in the realms of technological innovation and fashion copying. Usually the former brings up the image of men's bodies while the latter associates women's; and this division extends into the fashion business where these women usually consider their work to be presenting themselves as glamorous muses while their male partners are in charge of the logistics, photo shooting, among others. So it is gendered labor to shanzhai-ing China and to fashioning China.

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