



SHANZHAI: MOUNTAIN OF IDEAS

by Hazel Chung Chin Ching

In a sure sign that the phenomenon had “arrived”, the colloquial use of the term *shanzhai* was included in the new Oxford Chinese Dictionary earlier this year.

It literally means a self-administrated region in a mountain in ancient China. In the new dictionary, the term now also refers to the banditry seen in China’s vast array of name-brand knockoffs. But

while *shanzhai* used to suggest cheap or inferior products, it now connotes a certain Chinese creativity and ingenuity, a way of life even.

Take the recent “Apple Peel” gadget - Chinese manufacturers can now transform an iPod Touch into an iPhone by adding a microphone, an earphone and a SIM card. It is not just devices either; songs, movies and

even television shows have spawned alternative versions that can all be referred to as *shanzhai*.

Shanzhai going worldwide

The *shanzhai* trend even has an English language website devoted to it. Shanzai.com covers over 1,000



shanzhai products and provides an online platform for people around the world to exchange information.

The site started in 2009 and is led by editor-in-chief Timothy James Brown, known as “Tai-Pan”. The Canadian IT executive has been working in Asia for the past 13 years and is currently living in Taipei, though he often travels to Hong Kong and the mainland. Some of the website’s operating staff live in Shenzhen.

Brown sees beyond the issues of piracy shadowing the *shanzhai* trend, recognising it as an exciting investment opportunity instead. He and his team believe *shanzhai* products are serious contenders in the technology industry. They view the *shanzhai* world as a source of innovation that has received scant attention in the developed world.

“We see more and more westerners wanting to understand Chinese business tactics and industry. That is why we operate the website,” he says. Certainly, he seems to be onto something. In the past year, there were more than 1.2 million views of the videos on the site’s YouTube channel and more than 600 subscribers are actively following the development of *shanzhai* products through the site.

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Brown says the largest groups of users of the site are in the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom. Shanzai.com has also been extensively quoted by leading international business, technology and news publications.

Given all this, it is not surprising Brown is optimistic about the future development of *shanzhai* products.

“It will move into more and more industries and will start to have a larger influence outside China. Western businesses need to understand the *shanzhai* culture to compete and benefit from its creativity and momentum,” he says.

As the Tai-Pan of Shanzai.com, Brown gets to test drive a lot of interesting *shanzhai* products. Of all the creative devices he has come across, he was most stunned by a mobile phone which also doubles up as a shaver. “It looks a little crazy but, actually, it performed well. It could be quite useful to businessmen!” Little did he know the “shaver phone” made its debut in a 1994 Stephen Chow movie, *From Beijing With Love* (Kwok



(Above) Stephen Chow showed off his gadget in the movie *From Beijing With Love* (Kwok Tsan Ling Ling Tsat).

(Below) Varsity reporters found one *shanzhai* “shaver phone” in the Lo Wu Commercial Centre on sale for a mere \$500.



Tsan Ling Ling Tsat). Well, at least the shaver-phone concept did.

Piracy or parodying popular culture innovation

So, are *shanzhai* products just blatant “copycats” or do they represent another kind of innovation and creativity? Asked about the difference between *shanzhai* and counterfeit products, Brown says there is a fine line between them.

“When players copy trademarks, logos and designs, they are basically counterfeiting goods. When they copy and often modify ideas or products, they show how mainstream products can be improvised or represented in different manners,” he says.

Not everyone agrees. Some people still have a negative view of *shanzhai* goods as merely clones of the original products. But even among the sceptics, there are those who admit that the improved versions of the goods have, to some extent, brought more pros than cons to their lives.

Lifestyle

Wang Zhe, a first-year mainland student at The University of Hong Kong (HKU), does not hide the fact that the “brand names equal status” concept is deeply planted in her mind. She thinks the originals are more trustworthy and are a sign of good taste.

Wang may not want to use *shanzhai* products or wear *shanzhai* clothes, but even she has embraced a part of the *shanzhai* culture. Despite her distaste for *such* products, she agrees that *shanzhai* websites have already become an indispensable part of her life.

The blocking of Facebook and other websites in the mainland has spawned *shanzhai* versions of many popular sites. Wang showed *Varsity* the Chinese sites “inspired” by Facebook and YouTube, namely Renren and Youku. “Renren is a total copy of Facebook but almost every mainland student uses it.”

Wang says *shanzhai* websites are as important to mainlanders as Facebook and YouTube are in Hong Kong people’s daily lives. Even after they arrive in Hong Kong and are exposed to a world without internet censorship, the connections and emotional attachment to Renren cannot be replaced by Facebook.

Amy Ngai Man-ling, a Hong Kong student who studies in Shenzhen expresses similar sentiments.

“If these websites didn’t exist, a large part of my social network and communication channels wouldn’t exist either.”

Even Hong Kong students who are living and studying locally are using *shanzhai* websites. Man Ka-wing is a 19-year-old local student studying at The Chinese University of Hong Kong who chooses to use *shanzhai* websites.

“Weibo (Microblog) and Twitter are similar in properties, but Twitter is even less prevalent among my friends,” says Man.

Man says the Chinese microblogs are very clever at coming up with promotional strategies such as inviting celebrities to set up accounts and creating noise in the media. Man uses the microblogs just to follow celebrities and she believes most Hong Kong users do the same.

For Jack Qiu Lin-chuan, an associate professor of the School of Journalism and Communication of the CUHK, the *shanzhai* phenomenon is about more than following stars or getting more bang for your buck. Professor Qiu, who has been studying the *shanzhai* phenomenon for six years, looks at *shanzhai* culture on a social level.



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He thinks the *shanzhai* culture gives people choices and the possibility of resisting dominant cultural values.

“*Shanzhai* is a grassroots’ innovation; it can solve issues of social class. *Shanzhai* products cater to the needs of low-end users, they enable everyone in society to be equally exposed to technological advances.”

“They are from the grassroots and for the grassroots.”

He promptly pulls out three *shanzhai* phones that he has used at various times to show *Varsity* how such products are also tailor-made for users with specific needs. One has a dual SIM card system, developed for users who frequently travel between Hong Kong and the mainland. Another one, which has larger and longer-lasting batteries, is designed for people like security guards who listen to music overnight to kill time.

Price vs durability and safety - misconceptions of shanzhai

Some users think the low prices of *shanzhai* products may compromise their durability. Chung Tsz-hong, a local university student has used several *shanzhai* devices. Two years ago, he purchased a *shanzhai* iPhone at a computer exhibition in Sham Shui Po. Chung says this *shanzhai* iPhone looked very much like the original and the interface, functions and icons were very similar. You could only tell them apart by comparing their weights. The *shanzhai* version was lighter.

At \$900, it was 80 percent cheaper than the genuine article, but the *shanzhai* model only lasted two months. The short lifespan of Chung’s first *shanzhai* product did not make him stop using others, however. Attracted by their low prices and extra functions, Chung continues to go *shanzhai*. He recently purchased a 4GB MP4 video player for \$400 that comes with a one-year warranty.

While some may worry that *shanzhai* products may explode, due to shortcuts in safety to ensure low prices, Jack Qiu

takes a more relaxed view. “*Shanzhai* producers face strong competition, therefore they have to enforce quality control on their goods in order to stay competitive in the market,” he says.

He says the idea that *shanzhai* products are unsafe, is a common misconception. He had visited factories that manufacture *shanzhai* phones and was not surprised to see the same factories manufacturing accessories for the branded phone companies such as Nokia. “We are basically using products of similar quality without big names.”

Qiu says *shanzhai* manufacturers can keep their prices low mainly because they do not need to pay for intellectual property rights or patents, unlike large companies.

In this Chinese version of Robin Hood, “right” and “wrong” are presented in an ambiguous light. While some may still pour scorn on *shanzhai* culture, it is hard to deny its influence. For enthusiasts like Tim Brown and Jack Qiu, *shanzhai* challenges how we understand creativity.

So in future, do not be too surprised to see photos of fluffy dogs groomed to look like the national mascot walking in the streets (*shanzhai* pandas), jerry-built vans running on railroad tracks (*shanzhai* trains) or a pictorial story “Skygazer tree - Alianya” (*shanzhai* Avatar) on mainland internet sites or blogs. As Qiu says, “Creativity is no longer confined to elite innovation and creativity is not expensive. The greatest creation happens in the presence of limited resources.”



A photostory that “borrows inspiration” from blockbuster Avatar to tell a similar story of “man versus nature”. It appears to be an advertisement for tourists to visit *Xishuangbanna*.



This photo shows President Barack Obama greeting the *shanzhai* guests: Michael and Tareq Salahi, at a State Dinner hosted by Obama for Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the White House in Washington.



A Chow Chow dog turned *shanzhai* “panda” often draws attention when out for a walk—both from the public and the police. The owner has been stopped 28 times!



A van-train found by a netizen and posted on a forum on showing a *shanzhai* train at a work site in Chinese suburbs which seems to be transporting coal.

Top 10 Shanzhai Phenomena in 2009

1. **Let’s Go Watch Meteor Shower** – Hunan TV’s *shanzhai* version of “Meteor Garden”
2. **Gong Mi** - a contestant of Happy Girls 2009 and the internet is filled with buzzes about her look as *shanzhai* Cecilia Cheung.
3. **San Qiang (A Simple Noodle Story)** – Chinese version of Cohen brothers’ Blood Simple by Zhang Yimou.
4. **Gate Crasher** – Uninvited guests gatecrashed the White House party that President Obama held in honor of visiting Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on November 24.
5. **Han Jiangxue** – Grassroot scholar providing lectures that imitate CCTV 10’s *Lecture Room*.
6. **Lao Meng** – initiator of *shanzhai* Spring Festival Evening Gala, a more amusing *shanzhai* version of elite CCTV Spring Festival evening gala.
7. **Kaixin (kaixin001.com)** – A faithful copy of “Facebook”
8. **Shanzhai mobile phones** – iPhone’s numerous “brothers” in China. HiPhone even had the slogan “not iPhone, better than iPhone.”
9. **Muntazer al-Zaidi** – Bush shoe-thrower on the receiving end of a similar footwear attack.
10. **“Top 10 Everything” lists**
The “Top 10 Everything” of chinadaily.com is a *shanzhai* version of Time magazine!

source: <http://www2.chinadaily.com.cn>