2.3 Maoism and Disruptive Creativity

Shanzhai – an Alternative Perspective

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Abstract

Shanzhai has become an umbrella term denoting the creative mimicry, parody, and counterfeiting that is pervasive in China. Yet, little has been agreed in terms of what has informed and underpinned the disruptive creativity that distinguishes shanzhai from exact copying. In this chapter, the author seeks to establish a conceptual framework for understanding shanzhai by drawing on Maoism. It is the author’s contention that Maoism – especially its three founding pillars – art serves the people, the Mass Line, and self-reliance – has encouraged today’s Shanzhai makers to challenge existing patterns of dominance and monopoly. The chapter concludes by suggesting that shanzhai will continue to play an important role in ‘made/created in China’ as long as Maoism is enshrined as part of the CCP’s theoretical base.

Keywords: shanzhai, Maoism, Copyrights, The Mass Line, Great Leap Forward, self-reliance

Introduction

Chinese people have long been labelled ‘uncreative’. Various empirical studies in the past have concluded that creativity was something discouraged by Confucian or collectivist Chinese culture.1 However, the emergence of the shanzhai culture since 2008 has rendered such assertion debatable. Not

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exact reproducing but copying with ingenuity, *shanzhai* has become an umbrella term denoting creative fakery, mimicry, and modification pervasive in Chinese manufacturing, design, and art. For example, the GooApple handset – a *shanzhai* smartphone whose exterior looks almost identical to Apple’s iPhone but which boasts an Android (i.e. Google) mobile operating system that has been customised to resemble the user interface of iOS (Apple’s operating system for the iPhone). It suggests that the Chinese people are more than capable of merely imitating. Instead, their creations reveal that they are not shy in comfortably traversing conventionally defined divisions between systems of competition or opposition. Such traits expose Chinese creators’ ability and willingness to innovate and transcend rigidity, for which the dominant understanding of Confucian traditions would suggest otherwise.

Moreover, ‘creative industries’ based on these creative practices have not only become an integral part of the Chinese (in)formal economy, but the resulting products have also made their way into the international economic arena and cultural sphere and, consequently, have the potential to destabilise the international use value and copyright regimes. As we have entered an era of globalisation where culture flows are becoming more mutual and thus the boundary between originators and receivers of culture are blurred, we are more interested than ever in what *shanzhai* will mean for us. Is *shanzhai*, as Abbas suggests, a faking phenomenon that only proliferates at an early stage of globalisation? To what extent is *shanzhai* not a natural outcome of cultural globalisation but a concerted effort at soft power promotion by the Chinese state? How is submission, adaptation, and resistance to authoritarianism and neo-liberalism in contemporary China epitomised by *shanzhai*? None of these questions can be answered without comprehending the origin and characteristics of this vernacularly Chinese notion that has travelled globally.

**Understanding Shanzhai**

To make sense of *shanzhai* is challenging. On the one hand, our understanding is bound by a convenient fake/real dichotomy, depending on which authority or legitimacy is attributed to hierarchically – a rigidity that the

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conceptualisation of *shanzhai* in terms of intellectual property rights has contributed to in no small way. As de Kloet and Scheen point out, we should be cautious about simplistically dismissing the alleged copy and validating the assumed original when interpreting *shanzhai*. Instead, *shanzhai* should be read as a process of translation that enables more imaginations and iterations. On the other hand, *shanzhai* is an overarching term encompassing a variety of creative practices in the economic, social, and aesthetical realms, the speciality of each case making it even harder to make generalisations. Nevertheless, scholarly attempts have been made to tap into this cultural consciousness so rich in expressions. The most popular form of enquiry has been the use of case studies to illustrate what *shanzhai* stands for vis-à-vis state, society, and modernity. Chubb focuses on the production and consumption of a range of mundane, joyfully pirated products and regards the *shanzhai* phenomenon as a grass-roots reinterpretation of dominance that worships as much as it mocks authority. De Kloet and Scheen use the example of Pudong and argue that urban experiments there are most emblematic of a *shanzhai* imaginary global city. Pudong is neither generic, nor fake since it is characterised by a distinctive spatial arrangement (vis-à-vis the Bund); it inherits its own colonial and communist history, and is replete with authentic local experience. In this sense, *shanzhai* neutralises the homogenisation impulse of globalisation.

For *shanzhai* art, Wong presents her ethnographical research in Dafen Oil Painting Village, famous for its mass production of copy masterpieces, and argues that ‘replica’ can no longer capture the creativeness of artworks produced there as they exhibit considerable traits of ‘transfer, transformation, invention, innovation, appropriation and delegation’. On performance, Zhang and Fung investigate the *shanzhai* Spring Festival Gala – an internet-based parody, staged by the marginalised, of the state-run Gala. They trace the trajectory of this supposed manifestation of resistance, from a grass-roots amateur initiative, through commercialisation by the digital economy and co-optation by local state media, to suppression by the central government.

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7 De Kloet and Scheen, ‘Pudong’.
Their study reveals the limits that allow digital technology to garner, channel, and materialise popular imaginary for political democracy in China. The democratising aspiration bestowed on *shanzhai* is thus overstated as it represents little more than ‘a site of mediation’.10 *Shanzhai* reproduces, if not reinforces, existing patterns of predominance by state capitalism.

Overall, *shanzhai* is a grab-bag notion with confounding implications, evident in the above studies. Despite uncovering the defining characteristics of *shanzhai* via different case studies, these studies do share an understanding of the etymology of *shanzhai*. Exemplified by the painstaking work of Hennessey on deconstructing this notion, *shanzhai* is generally thought to originate from Chinese historical romances featuring rebellious tribes fighting for justice from remote, mountainous (*shan* 山) strongholds (*zhai* 寨) beyond the control of imperial courts, epitomised by the novel *Shuihu Zhuan* (*水浒传*).11 In this novel, Robin Hood-like legends flee to the mountainous stronghold (*shanzhai*山寨) to evade capture or punishment by corrupt officials.12 They fight ruthlessly with government troops commanded by these officials while at the same time still holding a glimmer of hope of being recognised by the emperor – out of a paradoxical conviction that they are demonstrating their loyalty to the emperor by resisting those evil local tyrants. It is this moral dilemma of these ancient righteous warriors that still informs the ambiguity embedded in the *shanzhai* phenomenon today.

Moreover, for the vast majority of authors researching *shanzhai* as creative practices, it is a rather recent phenomenon. *Shanzhai* activities are said to be more visible and rampant in more globalised parts of China. In particular, the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen is regarded as the home of *shanzhai* and China’s copy capital.13 In most cases, it looks as if *shanzhai* creative activities only started to surface after China was integrated into the global political economy.

Interestingly, in most works, there seems to be a *chuanyue* (穿越) – a vernacular term in Chinese meaning that an ancient thing or person has resurfaced in the contemporary context – in the historical evolution of *shanzhai*. In other words, for most authors, *shanzhai* has been posited as a lost ethos not reactivated until China goes global. From the *Shuihu Zhuan* era of the twelfth century to the new millennium, the surprising ‘leap’ in

10 Ibid., 412.
the analysis of shanzhai’s historical lineage is where the existing literature falls short. To be sure, the analyses by Hennessey and Chubb have tried to address this problem. Hennessey extends the time span to cover the entire imperial China period and suggests that the counterculture of shanzhai continued into the neo-Confucian era, whereas the culture of imitation was endorsed and favoured by the establishment.\textsuperscript{14} Chubb, by contrast, narrows this gap further by drawing a close link between shanzhai and Grabism (nalai zhuyi, 拿来主义) proposed by Lu Xun in 1934.\textsuperscript{15} Grabism is a pragmatic approach emphasising that no matter the origins of useful things, be they foreign or indigenous, they should be borrowed, inherited, or mixed up as long as the new combination works for China’s modernisation.

Despite this, the decades from the 1930s until the late 1970s – a period of profound social experiment, transformation, and upheaval – are still missing from existing analyses. This period also overlaps with the entire political career of Mao Zedong. The task of this article is to fill this critical gap in understanding what has informed shanzhai. There has been a serious enquiry into contemporary shanzhai as a playful phenomenon due in large part to the spirits of populist anarchism, irreverence, anti-establishmentism, illegality, and nationalism. The courts of imperial China and the present Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime are equally vigilant to these spirits. However, there was a period when all these spirits were recognised not only as legitimate but as avant-garde. Indeed, in the Mao era these spirits and the chaotic social fluidity they fuelled were celebrated as progress.

In the English language literature, this Maoist dimension of shanzhai has remained undiscovered. However, this is not the case with the Chinese language literature. When performing a keywords search on the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) database,\textsuperscript{16} a sizeable number of articles draw close links between ‘the Mass Line’ (群众路线)\textsuperscript{17} (148 articles), ‘mass’ favourite (群众喜闻乐见) (144 articles), and ‘created by the masses’ (群众发明创造) (42 articles), on the one hand, and shanzhai on the other. However, despite frequent references to Maoist rhetoric, they fail to advance and conduct a systematic analysis of the intrinsic linkage between different tenets of Maoism and shanzhai’s expression in various forms.

\textsuperscript{14} Hennessey, ‘Deconstructing Shanzhai’.
\textsuperscript{16} The database search as restricted to the publication period 2008–2015, since 2008 is widely regarded as shanzhai’s ‘epic year’.
\textsuperscript{17} This communist revolutionary term refers to a leadership method that pays attention to consulting the masses, and transforming their opinions into actions.
Therefore, from a China Studies perspective, it is my contention that Maoism, too, has informed and underpinned the current *shanzhai* culture. Maoism, also known as Mao Zedong Thought treats the relationship between art and politics, the Mass Line, and self-reliance. These teachings have decisively pre-configured the contours within which present-day *shanzhai* activities operate. The following sections will proceed by tracing the roots of *shanzhai* in these three founding pillars of Mao Zedong Thought.

**Art and Politics: To Rebel is Justified**

Today, *shanzhai* is partly but not exclusively about anti-establishmentism. After all, *shanzhai* as a form of resistance against (neo)Confucianism existed throughout dynastic China, either in a violent *shanzhai*-style guerrilla warfare against corrupt imperial courts, or in other forms of disobedience such as the underground circulation of outlawed publications. What has enriched this rebellious mentality to become the spirit of contemporary *shanzhai*, however, is the liberal ideas of social equality and populism that enable commoners’ active participation in social, cultural, and political life on a more equal footing. Since the inception of his political career, Mao Zedong was at the forefront of negotiating and adapting these liberal values to the Chinese context.

Like his fellow intellectuals in the iconoclastic New Culture Movement, Mao regarded Confucianism as China’s social malaise. For him, the corrupt and rotten Confucian culture maintained a powerful system of exclusion that was responsible for a fatalistic and passive population. Based on the Confucian moral code of *sangang* 三纲 (three bonds: the minister was subject to the guidance of the monarch, child to father, and wife to husband), imperial China was characterised by a hierarchical and oppressive social order wherein every member of the society was confined to his/her particular position as dictated by *sangang*. Failure to fulfil one’s obligation as designated by his/her particular social role or attempts to break away from this system of exclusion were seen as treason and heresy. Consequently, imperial China achieved a state (illusion) of harmony by virtue of societal inertia. According to Han Feizi, on whose thoughts *sangang* was founded, ‘when the three bonds are adhered to, there is good order; when the three bonds are breached, there is great disorder’.19

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19 Cited in Zenghua Shao, 韓非子今註今譯 [Contemporary annotation and interpretation of *Han Fei Zi*] (Taipei: Commercial Press Taiwan, 1990), 1004.
There was an artistic dimension to Mao’s critique of Confucianism. For him, ‘feudal’ art and literature played an important part in sustaining this system of exclusion. The ruling class used this art and literature as a means to instill a sense of perpetual obedience to the superior among the inferior. The promotion of hierarchical values was pervasive in literature, music, and painting.20

Soon after Mao realised that China’s 1911 ‘bourgeois democratic’ revolution had failed to materialise aspiration for national independence and cultural renewal, he continued to wage an attack on Chinese traditions and extended the targets, this time to bourgeois and petty bourgeois cultures. He argued that these ‘new’ cultures did little to emancipate or enlighten the poorly educated masses due to their inaccessibility in terms of language and genre. What most bourgeois writers and artists had been preoccupied with, he complained, were hollow, artistic creations, full of affectation and narcissism, which lost touch with both the harsh reality of China’s ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial’ inferior status and people’s grievances.

For Mao, Confucian, bourgeois, and petty bourgeois cultures together formed an impregnable system of exclusion. By dictating and legitimising what can be said, heard, or seen in the art world and in everyday conduct, this system of exclusion barred the socially subordinate, economically disadvantaged, and the illiterate from speaking out and kept their aspirations hidden. Effectively, commoners and the proletariat played a negligible role in the cultural life of imperial and Republican China as a result of alienation, a reflection of their minimal political participation.

Ironically, the marginal status of the pre-PRC underclass resurfaced in the post-socialist PRC where state capitalism prevails and varieties of Confucianism are revived. This is also the social and cultural context in which present-day shanzhai has emerged. Isn’t shanzhai a salient expression of the participatory aspiration of those excluded? In what follows, the author will delineate how Mao’s lifelong struggle for more equality and social mobility (at least more dynamism in an inertia society) – through his fight with the Confucian, bourgeois, and Leninist systems of exclusion – informed today’s shanzhai spirit.

Mao systematically elucidated the need to challenge the dominant system of exclusion through aesthetic intervention in his 1942 Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. Mao called for smashing the hierarchies in the aesthetic order. The Talks, and especially its emphasis on promoting

art for and by the ‘uncultured’, was to become the source of legitimacy underpinning shanzhai art.

The Talks were meant to clarify two issues: who art was for and what role artists should play. As to the first question regarding audience and the class affiliation of art, Mao stated that the CCP believed that art was for the broadest sections of the people. Art should give a voice to those who had previously been excluded by the social order maintained by such exploiters and oppressors as the landlord class, the bourgeoisie, and the imperialists. Thus, artists are required to appeal to a much larger section of society and feature prominently in the lives and stories of the underclass.

With regard to the order of importance between art and politics, Mao was apathetic to the idea of ‘art for art’s sake’ and argued for the subordination of art to politics and to (proletarian) class interests. He thus saw a reconfiguration of the aesthetic arena as a mobilisation vehicle for oppositional politics and for social equality at large.

On the second issue of how to be a good artist, Mao’s answer has had profound implications on creativity and shanzhai. He argued that artists’ service to society comprised two tasks: to popularise art and to raise people’s ability to appreciate and create art. In order to fulfil these two roles, artists needed to wholeheartedly learn from the people what kind of language or genre made the most sense to them. ‘Only by being their pupil can he [an artist] be their teacher’. In particular, Mao valued nascent artistic creations by the masses, such as wall newspapers, murals, folk songs, and folk tales, and urged artists not to dismiss these as primitive but to help the masses improve the quality of their work.

This approach encouraged what Wong later found in her discussion of shanzhai art: the deskillling of art into mass culture. More precisely, first, the definition of art has been extended considerably; nascent artistic creations by art amateurs from all walks of life are no longer considered unqualified. Second, anyone, with some training, can become an artist.

23 Mao, ‘在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话 [Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art]’.
24 Ibid.
25 Wong, Van Gogh on Demand.
In both cases, the aesthetic arena has been pluralised. This also provides present-day shanzhai with legitimacy.

Mao's efforts to reconfigure the aesthetic arena continued into the PRC era. He had been constantly vigilant on any reactionary comeback by former cultural elites. However, by the early 1960s, he realised that the vanguard Party had gradually become the vested interest and formed a new, oppressive system of exclusion supported by reactionary culture and Leninist means of social control. He decided to revive the ideas and ideals he had developed earlier in the iconoclastic New Culture Movement and in his 1942 Talks in a more radical way, i.e. the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution (CR).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the trajectory of the CR, its aesthetic dimension warrants highlighting. That is, Mao mobilised the people to destroy the Party by granting them the Four Freedoms: ‘to speak out freely; to air views fully; to hold great debates; and to write Big Character Posters (大鸣, 大放, 大辩论, 大字报)’. The masses not only had unprecedented freedom to publish almost unconstrained as Party organisations, public security apparatus, and wider social hierarchies were stormed, but once again emerged at the forefront of the aesthetic arena. The Four Freedoms were also enshrined in the 1975 and 1978 versions of PRC constitution. It should be noted, though, that the briefly available freedom of expression as a result of anarchy can never explain away the unprecedented atrocities that occurred during the CR. The movement lost control soon after its inception and quickly became a project caught between emancipation and manipulation.

What does the CR have to do with shanzhai? Yu Hua characterises the CR as a period of shanzhai when ‘the revolutionary inner nature of disadvantaged groups in society was activated’ to overthrow the establishment under the Maoist rubric of ‘to rebel is justified’. He specifically points to anarchism during the CR, when myriad autonomous mass organisations were formed, just like rebellious strongholds in ancient times. Moreover, the participatory struggle in the aesthetic arena by the masses during the CR serves as a beacon that often lends legitimacy to present-day shanzhai cultural practices. To be sure, the current underclass enjoys few of the Four Freedoms. They are, nevertheless, constantly contesting the dominant statism-neo-liberalism

27 Pang, *The Art of Cloning*.
29 Ibid.
nexus in the form of *shanzhai* art and performances that carry their aspirations to participate in contemporary social and political life.

**The Mass Line: from the Masses, to the Masses**

Before uncovering the historical linkage between *shanzhai* and the Mass Line, it is important to recognise the often neglected distinctions between Maoism, Marxism, and Leninism. For Mao, the latter two were often referred to as ‘dogmas’ – orthodoxy taken for granted without appreciating peculiar Chinese conditions. Defying dogmas with grass-roots creativity derived from practice – another defining characteristic inherent in contemporary *Shanzhai* – first acquired its theoretical underpinning in Mao’s criticism of Leninism for its lack of popular participation in policymaking. In contrast to Leninism, where the people were perceived as ignorant (thus denied access to policy debates), Mao’s faith lay in the masses, whom he believed were the source of true wisdom.

This preference was reflected in his long-term suspicion of intellectuals and the knowledge they possessed. Intellectuals were deeply distasteful to Mao for two reasons. One was that he regarded intellectuals as bookworms, who simply claimed expertise from their dogmatic studies of theories but knew little about how things work on the ground, as they were reluctant to ‘dirty their hands by going out among the people to learn about real conditions’. In particular, according to orthodox theories, intellectuals well-versed in Western theories (including returnees from the Soviet Union) often hastily asserted the technological infeasibility of achieving something great given China’s inferior productivity. They did so before actually learning from workers and peasants who creatively developed quick fixes or shortcuts that, as Mao believed, overcame or at least ‘got around’ the same obstacles. In other words, unorthodox or *shanzhai* methods invented by the masses were valuable approaches that should be cherished because they could potentially help achieve the conventionally unthinkable, even though the finished products were barely usable. This later becomes a supporting argument often proudly cited by today’s *shanzhai* makers, who claim better knowledge of realities on the shop floor and accordingly

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31 Ibid.
renovate (i.e. simplify) the production process, something that established manufacturers are unwilling to risk due to their conservative inclinations.\textsuperscript{33}

The other reason was Mao’s concern that the Confucian social order – in which the literati were afforded a higher status than the common people – would revive if the newly founded People’s Republic were to rely too heavily on armchair experts, intellectuals, and managers for state building and economic construction.\textsuperscript{34} For Mao, the political loyalty of this echelon was questionable. He believed that, despite the revolution, they still had ‘attitudinal hangovers’ about their superiority over the proletarian masses.\textsuperscript{35} Instating intellectuals to leading roles would undo his efforts to achieve a more equal relationship between intellectual and manual labour. He went so far as to contend that:

Scientific knowledge and technological inventions are usually created by classes under suppression. In other words, they are created by those with a low social status, little education, in poor [financial and living] conditions; by those whom at the beginning always being laughed at, or even attacked, tortured and executed.\textsuperscript{36}

This interpretation of the true source of creativity, I contend, provided considerable justification and created an ambiguous safety zone for the development of contemporary \textit{shanzhai}.

The masses, emblematic of manual labour, were thus not only worthy, but also trustworthy to listen to. When it came to the creative potential of the masses, Mao praised them for having ‘[…] boundless creative power. They can organise themselves […] and concentrate on production in breadth and depth and create more and more undertakings for their own well-being’.\textsuperscript{37} His voluntarist confidence in the masses – the belief in people’s unconquerable volition to the extent that once they were fully mobilised in concentrated efforts they could overcome any challenges, regardless of the prevailing productivity level – set him further apart from orthodox Marxism in which

\textsuperscript{33} Bai Ye, ‘山 寨文化纵横谈 [Open discussion on \textit{shanzhai} culture]’, \textit{社会科学 论坛 (学术评论卷) [Tribune of Social Sciences]} 2 (2009): 56-90.
\textsuperscript{34} Breslin, \textit{Mao}.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{36} Mao, 1985, cited in Guisheng Chen, \textit{教育研究空间的探求 [Explore the space for education and research]} (Fujian Education Press, 2006), 308.
materialism is the incontestable cornerstone.\textsuperscript{38} It was also heterodox in comparison with classic doctrines of socialist economic construction emphasising socialist rationality in the forms of central planning and top-down techno-bureaucratism – an orthodox approach to economic advancement preferred by Mao’s Leninist-leaning colleagues but which Mao considered uncreative or even suppressive of mass motivation.

Mao also had a unique take on how the Party-state could best utilise available forces of production to lift China out of backwardness. He characterised this underdeveloped condition as ‘poor and blank’ (一穷二白), that is, poor as a result of a low level of industrialisation and blank in the sense that China had little accumulated knowledge on (Western- and Soviet-dominated) science and technology.\textsuperscript{39} However, Mao regarded ‘poor and blank’ as an advantage,\textsuperscript{40} because being a latecomer also meant that China could develop itself relatively unconstrained by the dogmatised experience of developed countries and create its own path for modernisation. In Mao’s words:

\begin{quote}
The poor want a revolution, whereas it is difficult for the rich to want a revolution. Countries with a high scientific and technological level are overblown with arrogance. We are like a blank sheet of paper, which is good for writing on.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

This interpretation of the advantage of backwardness foreshadowed Mao’s subsequent appeal for launching a technological revolution by utilising mass creativity and mass political energy rather than relying on dogmatised knowledge. The pinnacle of this ‘technological revolution’ was what later became known as the Great Leap Forward (GLF) – which I consider a mass shanzhai campaign that most of China’s working population at the time participated in – shed important light on contemporary shanzhai.

While Mao also acknowledged the importance of learning from abroad, albeit with an ‘analytical and critical’ eye for foreign knowledge and experience,\textsuperscript{42} he believed this was insufficient to arouse the political enthusiasm of the proletarian masses. Mao wanted to instill a sense of

\textsuperscript{38} Lieberthal, Governing China; Maurice Meisner, Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).


\textsuperscript{40} Meisner, Mao Zedong.

\textsuperscript{41} Mao, ‘论十大关系 [On the Ten Major Relationships].

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
ownership, to the point that the people saw the Party’s undertakings as their own. He sought to cultivate an active and voluntarist subjectivity.

The hallmark of the governing mode that Mao endorsed thus comprised an accessible Party in listening mode and a dynamic populace, motivated to adopt initiatives not so much by coercion but by virtue of their spontaneous embrace of socialist citizenship. This engaging relationship formed the basis of the organising principle of socialist government – the Mass Line. Its mass orientation was reflected in the governing principle ‘from the masses, to the masses’. That is to say, cadres should elicit disparate ideas from the masses that could potentially improve policy outcomes. As a result, when these policies based on mass input were ‘returned’ to the masses, they would be welcomed by the masses themselves because of their prior involvement in the policy formation process. The Mass Line was deemed a virtuous loop in which the people were convinced of their political efficacy and, at the same time, of the economic progress, embodying Maoist governing strategy that combined economic development with socialist awareness.

Furthermore, the applicability of ‘from the masses, to the masses’ was extended to all policy areas and was upheld as the universal technologies of government from the mid-Mao era onwards. As an editorial in the People’s Daily pointed out on the eve of the GLF: ‘the technological revolution [...] that the Party is calling for, just like the socialist revolution in economic, political and ideological affairs, must also be a mass movement’ based on the premises of ‘trusting mass power and reflecting mass desire’. Henceforth, indigenous and creative (albeit primitive) techniques invented by the masses, or shanzhai methods, had shaken off all heterodox connotations. Shanzhai became the established doctrine of problem solving, whereas more scientific methods with a focus on technological sophistication, but which were disdainful of mass creativity, were marginalised.

As rationality gave way to passion and techno-bureaucratism to voluntarism, it was not surprising that the GLF unfolded in a shanzhai manner. This was clearly evident in the General Line – the guiding principle of socialist construction: Go all out; aim high; build socialism rapidly and economically with better and greater results (鼓足干劲，力争上游，多快好省地建设社会主义). Given the promotion of mass creativity at the

43 Breslin, Mao.
45 Breslin, Mao.
expense of scientific knowledge, unconstrained mass initiatives unleashed great destructive power that led to catastrophes. For instance, the Great Famine following the GLF was largely due to a voluntarist belief that ‘The crop from the field is as large as guts can yield’ (人有多大胆, 地有多大产).

The most ironic episode of the GLF that directly mirrors contemporary *shanzhai* practices was utilising mass creativity and ingenuity for steel making. In 1958, Mao proposed an ultra-ambitious goal of doubling steel output in the same year, with a view to eventually overtaking the UK and the US in steel production in a matter of a decade. This target was clearly unattainable according to orthodox theories of industrial development and prior experience of industrialised countries. Yet, for Mao, revolutionary fever among the masses would effectively compensate for the shortage of material resources. Immense mass initiative and creativity was a formidable drive of production in its own right. As such, he resorted to the Mass Line and favoured the *shanzhai* approach.

The masses in all factories, even in schools and hospitals, were accordingly mobilised to make steel. Having no knowledge of metallurgy and no experience in steel making, they relied upon a variety of indigenous but wildly primitive methods that they created ‘out of the box’. To name a few of these *shanzhai* innovations: using gasoline cans as backyard steel furnaces; melting pots, pans, and other metal household articles as raw materials; using firewood as fuels. Despite being given credit for their ingenuity, the nationwide implementation of these *shanzhai* methods produced vast quantities of useless pig iron.

In the economy as a whole, the race towards rapid industrialisation was also carried out in a *shanzhai* manner. The masses in all industrial sectors proclaimed and boasted that their *shanzhai* methods embodied ‘greater, quicker, better and cheaper’ (多快好省):

> In the current great development of technological revolution, [we] have been creating using primitive methods superior and state of the art products that have never existed before. These are all uniquely stylish products with simpler structures and greater efficiency.  

Examples of the above were numerous, mostly multifarious prototypes, such as automobiles, locomotives, and machinery – novel but barely usable and

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47 People’s Daily, ‘土法炼钢 妙计无穷 [An Unlimited Number of Ingenious Techniques That Were Indigenously Developed to Make Steel]’, October 5, 1958b.
short-lived, too unreliable to adopt for scale production. Unsurprisingly, the wider GLF shared a similar fate as *shanzhai* steel making.

Despite little achievement in economic terms and a disastrous ending, the *shanzhai*-style GLF left a profound mark on a mentality of rationality that survived into the post-Mao era. It should be noted that the term *shanzhai* never appeared in official discourse, but it was precisely because of its newly acquired orthodox status that a more ‘politically correct’ alternative was used and, in this case, mass creativity instead of *shanzhai*. It would be rather simplistic to suggest that in the specific context of 1950s PRC these two terms were interchangeable. Nonetheless, *shanzhai* indeed closely resembled the Mass Line ethos for three reasons, such that when the former resurfaced decades later, the way it sprawled also retrospectively mirrored the latter. I will explain such parallels using the example of *shanzhai* mobile phones – *the totem of everything* *shanzhai*.

First, the Mass Line ethos of ‘greater, quicker, better and cheaper’ was substantiated by tactics aimed at overcoming resource constraints. These could be epitomised by ‘make the best use of local materials and conditions’ (*就地取材, 因陋就简*). By extension, it meant substituting whatever materials were available locally for key materials or components that could not be made from local efforts; or to simplify complex processes and designs so that people with little education or experience would still be able to learn and make products in large quantities. These mass created tactics were the combination of a defiance of established rules and economic imperative. At best, these interim measures can be seen as tactics that economise production. At worst, they were tricks to cut corners. Present-day *shanzhai* practices are embedded with features of both.

*Shanzhai* products are famous for their value for money but seldom for durability. Take *shanzhai* mobile phones: As a result of being *shanzhai*, most of these phones are made outside of the formal economy, hence rarely follow national quality assurance standards or conventional manufacturing procedures adopted by established brands. It is common for *shanzhai* makers to operate without licences and *shanzhai* phones do not undergo a thorough quality check before shipment. This makes them very competitive in terms of cost and turnaround unmatched by established brands.

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49 Yang, *Faked in China*.
processes have also transformed mobile phone making from high-tech to low-tech, thus enabling amateur makers with little formal knowledge of telecommunications and design basics to enter the market. In this respect, \textit{shanzhai} phone making has become more of a creative than a manufacturing process – little R&D is involved, all \textit{shanzhai} makers need to do is to make their phones functional and aesthetically appealing. As to functions, \textit{shanzhai} phones are marked by their versatility – ‘all-in-one’ designs combining several functional modules, e.g. a handset with a built-in TV tuner – are made available for the ‘information have-less’ at a fraction of the cost of a mainstream phone.\textsuperscript{52} Another extreme example is the Daxian \textit{shanzhai} phone, which achieves its boasted ‘wireless’ charging functionality by simply mounting a built-in power plug and voltage transformer on the handset.\textsuperscript{53}

Admittedly, free market fundamentalism matters,\textsuperscript{54} in that for the producers of these phones, \textit{shanzhai} is a vital surviving strategy. Even without the influence of Maoism and the Mass Line, cutting corners and other economising tactics would still seem the optimal choice for \textit{shanzhai} makers who compete in the market by undercutting mainstream producers. In other words, \textit{shanzhai} making in China is not very different from underground manufacturing elsewhere. This raises the question of differentiating the economic versus the cultural dimensions of \textit{shanzhai}, hence the possibility of \textit{shanzhai} without democratic connotations but purely as an imperative for economic survival.\textsuperscript{55} However, this is certainly not the whole story about Chinese \textit{shanzhai} manufacturing in general, and mobile phone making in particular. Although the economic survival perspective is insightful with regard to why \textit{shanzhai} makers produce cheap phones, it lacks explanatory strength when it comes to analysing creativity embedded in these phones. That is to say, creative elements and how they come about require analysis beyond neo-liberal market competition.

This is especially true if we take a closer look at those ‘rebellious’ traits, such as novel product design in contravention of established knowledge and the belief of \textit{shanzhai} makers that manual labour can make products as great as intellectual labour (thus bringing down the hierarchy of labour in the creative domain). It is therefore this unique blending of economic survival strategy underpinned by neo-liberalism and democratising connotation

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Wallis and Qiu, ‘Shanzhai’.
\textsuperscript{55} I’m grateful to Stefan Landsberger for this point.
informed by Maoism that makes shanzhai in China stand out from other forms of pirating around the world. For the latter, it is about today’s proletariat inheriting the mass creativity doctrine favoured by Mao and carried out by their predecessors. To say the least, they have made these shanzhai phones by adopting practices common in the GLF, such as informal work organisation and indigenous innovation that embodied ‘greater, quicker, better and cheaper’.

That said, the downside of inheriting GLF-style mass creativity by contemporary shanzhai is also notable, as it has led to numerous failures, similar to that of mass innovation in the wake of the GLF. Previous research on shanzhai often focused on its playfulness. However, failure is also part of the shanzhai story. Many shanzhai phones did not last long as a result of disregarding conventional quality control measures. Some of them even exploded due to cutting corners on materials.

Second, the Maoist governing principle of ‘from the masses, to the masses’ is also palpable in contemporary shanzhai. Shanzhai phones with a fancy appearance exemplify this – one that looks like a model Ferrari sports car, or one made to resemble a pack of luxury cigarettes. Although such designs may be at odds with elite taste, these objects do reflect mass desire. They are popular among the budget-conscious stratum, such as migrant workers who are eager to join the ranks of China’s conspicuous consumer society. The novel exteriors of these shanzhai phones also look appealing to the middle class and the youth – for whom the possession of one of these phones conveys the desire to be cool and distances them from the dull and generic symbols of consumer society produced by powerful market dominators.

The contemporary proliferation of shanzhai is also partly the result of intensive community knowledge sharing, a culture promoted throughout the Mao era. For shanzhai phones, protection for intellectual property is weak since design and production revolve around informal work organisation rather than discrete copyright holders. To compete against established manufacturers on turnaround, shanzhai makers rely on a model marked by flexibility and informality, thus reducing the importance of formal contracts.56 Sometimes, in response to rapidly changing market trends, they have even hastily produced phones without a brand name, let alone intellectual property. Despite operating at the border of legality, these informal arrangements have created considerable potential for fostering community learning and knowledge spillover, which will, in turn, upskill the shanzhai workforce.

Lastly, the voluntarist mentality of the GLF is still present in contemporary *shanzhai* and it has been renewed with a nationalist tinge. By voluntarist mentality, I mean here the persistent belief among *shanzhai* makers that it is possible to counter a dominant player in marketing and technological sophistication by fully mobilising the creativity, initiative, and entrepreneurial ethos of the Chinese people. Consequently, it is not uncommon for *shanzhai* makers to make such bold assertions as ‘world-leading’ when marketing their products, despite apparent technological inferiority.\(^{57}\) Their dauntless attitude towards more powerful rivals is not without grounds, as a few mass created models have turned out to be successful, so much so that even established manufacturers have adopted these mass innovations from their copyists. The dual sim mobile phone, for example, initially a cost-saving design typical of *shanzhai*, has now become an industrial standard implemented by all major phone manufacturers. It exemplifies Abbas’s argument that ‘the problem of the contemporary fake is not how close the fake is to the original but how close the original is to the fake’.\(^{58}\) These remarkable cases that have testified *shanzhai*’s enduring creative potential are accompanied by nationalist claims, for instance, ‘Together let’s create the glory of domestic-brand mobile phone industry’.\(^{59}\) Some even make a connection between present-day *shanzhai* and People’s War.\(^{60}\) People’s War, a popular slogan in the Mao era, means to prevail over powerful enemies not by hardware predominance but by overwhelming them in number and with creative tactics. ‘*Shanzhai* phone makers are able to wage a People’s War against powerful competitors such as Nokia, and this is their advantage’.\(^{61}\) The next section will explore this nationalist dimension of *shanzhai* further.

**Self-Reliance: Competing by Copying**

In contrast to the previous section, which had a domestic focus and an emphasis on grass-roots creativity, this section takes a different,
state-centric perspective and looks at how the state has been actively sponsoring *shanzhai* practices as a means to strengthen China's economic standing internationally. In fact, these two themes are complementary rather than contradictory, as *shanzhai* practices in the Mao era relied upon both bottom-up and top-down initiatives, depending on the circumstances. For example, during such political high tides as the GLF and the CR, mass initiatives were given more prominence; whereas in the politically less turbulent interludes between these pinnacles of mass campaigns, the role of the state was more crucial in leading *shanzhai* efforts in all industries.

To be sure, Mao was only one among many advocates of self-reliance in the history of modern China. Yet, due to international isolation during his time, Mao certainly stood out for having *mobilised* this idea on an unprecedented scale. This was evident in the import substitution industrialisation that he led China to pursue before opening up. This policy of self-sufficiency had not achieved the ‘four modernisations’ that he and his colleagues hoped for; nonetheless, it made China one of the few countries with a comprehensive industrial structure, without which subsequent reforms would have been impossible. More importantly, his self-reliance doctrine is fertile soil from which to draw inspirational lessons, even in the age of globalisation – such that when China’s policymakers realised again the importance of national economic security, the strategies they have implemented are not so different from those of the Mao era. In addition, I argue that *shanzhai* practices in Mao’s years have influenced, in a path-dependent manner, China’s attempts to upgrade from ‘Made in China’ to ‘Created in China’.

Mao was convinced of the pivotal importance of self-reliance and often attributed the victory of China’s communist revolution to the CCP’s relative independence from the Comintern and, later, from the Soviet Union. Speaking of the more concrete task of economic construction, the Mao’s embryonic thoughts on self-reliance had already emerged during the War of Resistance against Japan, when he established a dozen of Revolutionary Base Areas (again, akin to *shanzhai*) in China’s uninhabitable hinterland and turned them into largely self-sufficient economies. The lesson Mao drew from this experience of developing largely without external aid or interference was that:
We stand for self-reliance. We hope for foreign aid but cannot be dependent on it; we depend on our own efforts, on the creative power of the whole army and the entire people.  

This pre-PRC proclamation reveals the essence of Mao’s later articulation of self-reliance. For Mao, one’s self-independence did not equate with closing oneself off. Rather, it stood for always keeping the initiative in one’s own hand, no matter whether foreign assistance was available or not. That is to say, it attached importance to building up the capacity for self-sustainability in the event of adverse situations.  

This required learning from head to toe the foreign artefact being introduced into China rather than hastily ‘transplanting’ it without appreciating the pros and cons associated with its local adaptation. Hence, he placed enormous emphasis on the importance of ‘sinifying’ foreign things. In this respect, he regarded the importation and indigenisation of foreign things as a means to break away from dependence on foreign countries, or to prevent ill-intentioned countries from taking advantage of their technological superiority to extort China’s concession. Thus, he was not content with simply putting foreign artefacts into instrumental use or absorbing foreign knowledge alone, but stressed developing and re-innovating further what had been imported. In other words, one could not be said to have fully mastered the skills of making a sophisticated artefact unless (s)he was, on top of reproducing that item, able to modify the original design in order to suit Chinese conditions, and achieve higher efficiency. Mao upheld this view even during the Sino-Soviet honeymoon before the 1960s when production lines along with blueprints were given away to China by the Soviets.

The subsequent Sino-Soviet split and the Soviet withdrawal of assistance certainly reaffirmed the importance of self-reliance. With a heightened degree of isolation as well as victim mentality, China leaned more towards import substitution industrialisation. As a result, the abstract guiding principle of sinification was translated into an emphasis on reverse engineering – an ability that the state invested so much effort into nurturing that it is still a hallmark of Chinese manufacturing today. Reverse engineering as a process of retrospective analysis of structure and design makes quick prototyping possible. It is also a time-wise and cost-saving method compared with


63 Lieberthal, Governing China.

64 Jun Wang, 毛泽东与中国工业化 [Mao Zedong and China’s industrialisation] (Fujian Education Press, 2001).
traditional mass-production-based design and manufacturing processes.\textsuperscript{65} It was therefore not only a rational choice, but a necessity for the isolated PRC to have chosen this shortcut given the flexibility and speediness brought by reverse engineering.

In addition to reversely engineering previously imported artefacts, an accompanying strategy of ‘integration innovation’ was also deployed. It has also been known as the ‘whole-nation system’ (举国体制), namely pooling resources of the entire state to tackle problems in a concerted effort. At a time when imports or foreign technical assistance became difficult to obtain, this strategy served as an alternative – a single factory or research institute might not have the technical capability to produce an import substitute on its own, but the obstacle may be partially overcome by assigning each work unit the part of the task at which it excelled and then putting components together to form a complete object. Notably, objects including rockets, satellites, and an atomic bomb, which raised China’s international profile, were all made by mobilising resources domestically in the 1960s, during a period when China was most isolated. The Chinese people spoke of these objects using the prefix: zhengqi (争气) – credit winning. For example, zhengqi dan (争气弹), literally meaning nuclear bomb solely made without external assistance, and which brought credit to China’s standing. Hence reverse engineering, integration innovation, and other essentially shanzhai practices were justified and glorified as independent innovation, because these measures were widely implemented amid international isolation.

Having suffered hardship after breaking away from the Soviets and having learnt from the experience of developing import substitution industrialisation, when external assistance became available again in the early 1970s, the Chinese leadership was even more convinced that importation should only serve as a means to achieve a higher level of self-reliance. Zhou Enlai, for instance, further elaborated Mao’s thought on the relationship between foreign import and domestic innovation as a progressive sequence: learn, utilise, modify, and innovate (一学，二用，三改，四创).\textsuperscript{66} This laid the foundation for contemporary Chinese thinking on innovation.

For a time after Mao, the emphasis of self-reliance was overshadowed by economic reform as import substitution industrialisation gave way to export-oriented development. The argument was based on the notion of ‘comparative advantage’ – that China should focus on labour-intensive


\textsuperscript{66} Wang, 毛泽东与中国工业化 [Mao Zedong and China’s industrialisation], 364.
production by taking advantage of low labour costs. In this respect, having a self-sufficient industrial system and being able to produce everything was no longer important, nor desirable. However, major disruption to China’s opening up, such as Tiananmen and the subsequent Western embargo, also remind the Chinese leadership that, although international isolation has become a thing of the past, external prejudice against China persists.\(^{67}\)

A major resurgence of self-reliance thinking occurred in 2008, after the global financial crisis. China realised its exposure to external market turmoil and revaluated export-led development strategy. The outcome has been a paradigm shift from export-oriented growth to innovation-driven development, or ‘transformation and upgrade’ (转型升级). The ‘new’ discourse of innovation pronounced by the Chinese government – a. original innovation (原始创新); b. integration innovation (集成创新); c. import, assimilate, absorb, and re-innovation (引进、消化、吸收、再创新) – echoes strongly (especially b and c) with state-led shanzhai practices in the Mao era.

**In Lieu of a Conclusion: Towards Varieties of Shanzhai?**

Having discussed shanzhai and its various forms in art, manufacturing, and industrialisation, respectively as a mobilisation vehicle for social equality, techniques of mass creativity, and strategy for industrialisation, it must be admitted that instead of making shanzhai generalisable, this article has, in fact, further muddied the water and made its definition more opaque. Hence the question, is shanzhai really definable? As we have seen, shanzhai is like a kaleidoscope – each of its manifestations has provided input to the discourse of Shanzhai ‘in ways that are specific to its characteristics as a communicative form’.\(^{68}\) As such, it is perhaps better to speak of ‘varieties of shanzhai’ instead of giving it a rigid definition. This more open-ended approach actually allows more imagination for this evolving phenomenon.

This is not to say, however, that each expression of the shanzhai phenomenon is discrete from the other. To the contrary, they do have something in common if viewed through the lens of Maoism. Namely, shanzhai as a kind of social innovation creates a participatory space that allows the involvement of previously precluded, non-traditional participants in establishment activities. Shanzhai lowers the entry barriers for such establishment activities.

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68 Yang, *Faked in China*, 89.
or even overthrows them altogether. It democratizes the right of access for those who ‘have not’ in art, consumption, and science and technology. Indeed, if one is to characterise shanzhai activities in terms of Maoism and its key tenets, they form a coherent set.

Especially on this last point, few other explanatory tools better annotate shanzhai’s democratising and innovative potential than Mao’s Mass Line dictum ‘to popularize and improve’ (普及和提高) in literature, art, and technology. This is the shared purpose of shanzhai regardless of its expressive forms – be they parody, fakery, or copy.

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