

# ***Cultural roots of Shanzhai: a Chinese phenomenon\****

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This research paper explores the cultural origins of the *Shanzhai* phenomenon, which first emerged in the Chinese mobile phone industry in the early 2000's, and now forms a major part of the informal economy in China. *Shanzhai* refers to businesses based on fake or pirated products, or anything that is improvised or homemade.

**Design/methodology/approach** - To date little research has been conducted to focus on the cultural aspects of the *Shanzhai* phenomenon. Based on literature review of related cultural studies and taking an emic Yin Yang perspective, the paper elaborates on four key constructs of Chinese culture – national & regional historical, attitudes toward change and learning, value consciousness and conformity, innovation vs. imitation – to gain a better understanding of *Shanzhai*'s cultural context and impact.

**Findings** – *Shanzhai* economy is shaped by Chinese culture. On the one hand it created huge opportunities for both manufacturers as well as consumers, on the other hand it is unpredictable, fast moving and highly competitive. It is not about low-cost fake products anymore; it is about how to drive innovation without following conventional wisdom and develop competitive advantages that are unique to Chinese culture.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research is an early stage observation. From the methodology perspective, it provides preliminary elaboration of the *Shanzhai* phenomenon and its cultural roots. It provides a base only for a comprehensive understanding of the *Shanzhai* phenomenon in terms of its overall constructs and patterns, development in the future and implications for business and policy decision-making.

**Originality/value** – This paper is the first to examine the *Shanzhai* economy through cultural lenses, which presents a unique perspective to understand culture's impact upon China's informal economy.

## ***Oranges and Apples: Defining Shanzhai***

***Shanzhai*** (pronounced as “shan-jai”), originally means -“mountain village” in Chinese, was given a new life in China in 2008 implying any type or form of “imitation”. It refers to businesses based on fake or pirated products, though it can also refer to anything improvised or homemade (Booz & Co, 2010). There is a whole “*Shanzhai*” world out there in China, from knockoff tennis shoes to online games, to *Shanzhai* celebrities. Some even say that China is a “*Shanzhai* economy”, a dual market of SQNY (SONY), ADIDOS (ADIDAS) and Samsang (Samsung) that co-exist with the market for the originals.

The word *Shanzhai* was firstly used to describe no brand mobile phones and their manufacturers when they came into existence in 2003. Within a very short period of time some of the counterfeit mobile phone manufacturers managed to successfully transform themselves into emerging indigenous adaptors and innovators, covering many aspects of the ecosystem, from industrial design, demand capture, core technological breakthroughs, whole phone system’s total solution and supply chain’s regional integrations (Zhu & Shi, 2011).

Timing was also important for the emergence of the *Shanzhai* mobile phone industry. At that time most of the major Chinese mobile phone manufacturers failed to supply quality, innovative and better products together with satisfactory after sale services at the right prices, *Shanzhai* phones like Nokla (Nokia), Orange(Apple’s iPhone) and Samsang (Samsung) became very popular. These phones are about a fraction of the price of their competition, multifunctional, and look just as trendy as their “twin brothers/sisters”.

Also not all of the *Shanzhai* manufacturers simply copy global brands. One mobile phone maker Tianyu, for example, was the first to market a mobile phone that is specially designed for elderly Chinese people. These phones have a large screen and large keys, with emergency call functions, a louder speaker and an inbuilt magnifying glass. They also paid special attention to control the quality of their battery. While most of the early *Shanzhai* phones used cheap, low quality and sometimes-unsafe batteries, their batteries are not only safe, but also boasts between 7-15 days standby time. Today Tianyu has managed to move up the value chain and become a major player in China's mobile phone market.

Some other manufacturers have cleverly identified specific market demands, and come up with innovative models, examples include those that combine the mobile phone with a digital camera, popular iPhone look with friendly Android features, etc.

## **Shanzhaism – characteristics of the *Shanzhai* economy**

There are many other examples of *Shanzhai* mobile phones that have come and gone. The phenomenon has also expanded into other industries like wine and medicine, even to New Year galas. So much so that some Chinese use the word “Shanzhaism” – *Shanzhai* spirit – to capture the capability to imitate, improve and innovate; challenging the authority/monopoly; speedy delivery to market (*Shanzhai* manufacturers can go from concept to delivery in a matter of weeks, if not days); affordability to many, plus a sense of fun even satire where appropriate.

From a manufacturing perspective besides the massive output volume and fast new production introduction rate, it is estimated that in the whole country the work force indirectly serving the *Shanzhai* industry may exceed one million. It is believed that the

annual total capital flow in this industry can be up to 100 billion RMB Yuan, while tax contribution to all relevant governments can reach 1.5-2 billion Yuan (Zhu & Shi, 2011). But how has *Shanzhai* come about? Is it influenced by Chinese culture?

## **Overview of related cultural studies**

In the field of cultural studies there has been a long research tradition in studying both cultures in general and culture-specific characteristics. Cultural studies were very much in the mainstream of the social sciences during the 1940s and 1950s. The interest subsided during the 1960s and 1970s, and was then revived during the 1980s, as scholars struggle to explain poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and knowledge, racism and discrimination with non-cultural factors. The major renewal of interest in culture among scholars, journalists, politicians and practitioners started in the 1990s, and has continued ever since.

As globalization progresses, scholars are adapting cultural perspectives to explain changes in economic and political conditions of nations and regions, modernization, the behavior of organisations and communities, and the various relationships among countries, regions, cities, people of different ethnic background and gender.

With the ever-increasing importance of China on the global stage, China has also emerged as a significant field for both the academia and industries. Extensive studies have been conducted focusing on Chinese culture.

For example following Hofstede's value orientation framework (1984), many researchers concluded that Chinese people are united in their high power distance, low individualism,

low uncertainty avoidance and medium masculinity ratings (Bond, 1996; Chong et al., 1983; Shenkar and Ronen, 1987; Cragin, 1986: in Rong & Liu, 2010). Hofstede's IBM survey and Bond's Chinese value survey showed that compared to the Americans, Chinese are more likely to choose long-term orientation decisions (Hofstede, 1991).

### **Yin Yang: exploring *Shanzhai* from an emic perspective**

One important assumption of these studies building upon Hofstede's framework is that the propositions were developed by adopting a bipolar approach – for example to classify Chinese culture as collectivistic, long-term oriented where culture of the USA is individualistic and short-term oriented. In other words these studies measure Chinese cultural values along a continuum of two opposite preferences, assuming that the Chinese use the same logic of linear rationality - “either-or”.

Such approach would not be able to help explain the “paradoxes of China” that have been observed. In some studies it has been found that Chinese culture is stable and immune to fundamental crisis and disruption in history; and contemporary Chinese people seem to be proud of their national culture even with the ever-increasing exposure to Western culture (Pan, 1990: in Lin & Wang, 2010). On the other hand, some scholars suggest that China is changing in many ways and is more likely to accept Western practices in the future; some even found that traditional Confucian values are increasingly fading out among younger generations (Wang et al., 2005).

Increasingly scholars are seeing the limitation of the bipolar approach, realizing that “Chinese people see the world differently from westerners” (Chen, 1999, p.56 in Faure & Fang, 2007). The Chinese worldview is very much “both-and” instead of “either-or” (Chen, 2001; Fang,

2003, 2006a,b: in Faure & Fang, 2007), embodied in the Chinese philosophy of Yin yang.

Chinese seem to have the ability to manage paradoxes with a different dual structure approach, adopting a Yin Yang perspective (Faure & Fang, 2007; Fang & Faure, 2010; Lin & Wang, 2010; Kommonen, 2011). Lin & Wang suggested Yin Yang explains the inconsistencies in the Chinese culture and why different or even contradictory values coexist (2010). Such hypothesis also explains how contradictory values restrain and interpenetrate each other to form a balance (Pan, 1990).

The concept of 'Yin' and 'Yang' originated thousands of years ago. First seen in I-Ching (Book of Changes), the Chinese believe it explains all phenomena relating to nature, the human society, historical or political changes, scientific findings as well as natural calamities. The only constant is change. These concepts are learned from childhood by studying the famous Chinese fable of Sai Weng (Baker & Zhang, 2008).

The story goes that many years ago in ancient China, Sai Weng, a very well respected wise man in the village lost his horse. His neighbours came to comfort him. He said about losing his horse, 'This may not be a bad thing'. After a few days his horse returned. His neighbours all said to him, 'You were right in the first place!' His reply was, 'This may not be a good thing'.

The next day his son rode the horse and fell. He broke his leg. The neighbours all said, 'Surely this has to be an awful thing to happen.' He replied yet again, 'Not necessarily.' Shortly following the accident, the country was calling all the young men to go and fight a war with the neighbouring state. His son was not summoned because of his broken leg.

There is a Sai Weng in every Chinese entrepreneur. Not only can Chinese hold seemingly opposite views at the same time, but also there are Yin and Yang in each and everything they do. When things are doing well, they are prepared for the tough times (the Chinese saying is ‘prepare for a rainy day’); when they encounter difficulties, they tell themselves to be patient because good things are about to come.

We believe Yin Yang also helps the Chinese to navigate through the dramatic change brought by globalization. While many in the West find it puzzling to understand the many paradoxes in China, the Chinese people are adopting such perspectives to integrate foreign cultures into their frame of mind. When examining *Shanzhai* phenomenon, Yin Yang offers us a critical tool to frame and understand the paradoxical nature of Chinese cultural values and their manifestation.

### **Shanzhai’s cultural roots**

In the *Shanzhai* phenomenon there is much to be explored culturally. Here we focus on four key cultural elements underpinning its emergence.

#### *One – Long embedded Shanzhai culture in Chinese history*

This spirit can be traced back to one of the “four great classical novels of Chinese literature”<sup>1</sup>, which is well known to almost all Chinese. The Story of Shui Hu (also known as Water Margin, Outlaws of the Marsh), was written nearly 1,000 years ago by Shi Nai’an. The novel

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<sup>1</sup> The other three novels are: Journey to the West, Dreams of the Red Mansion and Romance of the three kingdoms.

tells stories about 108 outlaws, regarded by many Chinese as “the heroes of Liangshan” – who could be loosely described as the equivalent of China’s “Robin Hood”. They challenged the corrupt authorities at the time seeking justice for the weak and common people<sup>2</sup>. Their base where these heroes lived and operated is called “Liang Shan Bo”, a literal *Shanzhai* itself. Chinese students learn parts of the book during their school education. The book has also been made into popular TV series, movies, and games many times over in China.

The Liangshan marshlands may have long been drained, but *Shanzhai* spirit continues to live in those who challenge the monopoly of mobile phones and other areas in life that are only available to those “selected few”. For example the *Shanzhai* CCTV New Year gala imitating the most watched annual television New Year show, also there is a *Shanzhai* Nobel prize given out in China. It is important to note that they both imitate high-end, popular yet authoritative events - “grass-roots parties for the grass roots” as one of the gala organizers puts it.

From an entrepreneurial perspective most successful Chinese *Shanzhai* manufacturers carry the genes of those Liangshan heroes. They are smart risk takers who survive and thrive during the many twist and turns of the fast changing environment. They are willing to take their chances, take little or no notice of authority or monopolies. Deng Xiaoping’s famous saying “crossing the river by feeling the stones” is a motto followed by many. In Shenzhen, where the *Shanzhai* phenomenon originated, there is a saying that “when the light turns yellow, go faster; when the light turns red, try to find an alternative route”. Such risk taking

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Story of Shui hu: <http://history.cultural-china.com/en/59H6308H12124.html>  
accessed in December 2011.



mentality fueled with a sense of urgency, the capability to experiment and fail fast, as well as the aptitude to learn and replicate success, nurtured the fast growth of the *Shanzhai* economy.

### *Two – Survival through constant change and learning*

*Shanzhai* manufacturers have managed to survive because of the tremendous adaptive skills and flexibility to accommodate change. So long as the commercial benefit of putting out a *Shanzhai* product outweighs the potential risks, such decision will be made accordingly and swiftly. If someone has come up with an idea that works, soon there will be imitators and others that will not only copy, but also improve the idea. Like Sai Weng, true Chinese entrepreneurs appreciate that today's "good thing" may become bad tomorrow. They are not complacent and always looking for the next opportunity. While most of the copycats are generally short-lived, some of the best *Shanzhai* manufacturers have quickly evolved to become disruptors or even market leaders.

As an example in the case of mobile phones, for some popular brands a few months before the real phone is being released, one could buy its *Shanzhai* versions already. In the category of knockoff sports shoes, due to the ever-increasing security and protection from the original manufacturers, the "launch" of the copies is usually 2-4 weeks after the originals launch. The manufacturers have also climbed up the knowledge ladder through learning from the best. Often the *Shanzhai* products are of such quality that even the most trained eyes could not tell them apart. As a Chinese knockoff sports shoes sales person put it, "everything (of these shoes) is original, only the brand is fake"<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Schmidle, *Inside the Knockoff-Tennis-Shoe Factory*, New York Times, 19 August 2010.

### *Three – Balancing Xingjiabi (cost Performance ratio) & Mianzi (face)*

From the demand perspective an important cultural dichotomy that plays a significant role for *Shanzhai* products is the pursuit of value consciousness as well as to be seen as “face enhancing” of the majority of Chinese people.

It is not a secret that Chinese always want to save up for a rainy day, and always enjoy a bargain. Verses like “every grain of rice we eat was watered by the hard sweat of a farmer”<sup>4</sup> are hard wired in the brains of most Chinese. If presented with options, most mid to low-income Chinese consumers will always go for the cheaper choices. This mass market is the target for most *Shanzhai* manufacturers.

The other side of the value consciousness is that Chinese consumers consider *Mianzi* (face) as a critical part of the purchasing decision making process. *Mianzi* can be vaguely described as someone’s reputation and social status, as well as the image that one establishes in the eyes of others – in some ways it is similar to a person’s ‘brand’, yet it is a lot more than that. It forms the integral part of the ‘Chinese way’. It is intangible and very hard to quantify, yet almost every aspect of life in China – from socialising to banquets, even how the government makes certain decisions – are reflections of this concept (Baker & Zhang, 2008).

*Mianzi* stems from a society that is highly connected and formed by many networks or webs. A Chinese person has no identity without reference to others to whom they are inextricably

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<sup>4</sup> *Commiseration for the farmers*, a poem by Shen Li (742-846) during Tang Dynasty, which is still taught in Chinese schools today.

linked: a man is father of his children, a student of his teacher or a member of the golf club. Such cultural orientation has been identified by Hofstede's value dimension related to individualism, where he finds that China is a highly collective society (Hofstede, 1980). In their influential seven cultural dilemmas model, Fons Trompenaars & Charles Hampden-Turner also differentiates between cultures by identifying those that focus on the needs and rights of individuals, versus those that care about the welfare of others and the community. Again China is found to be highly communitarian (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

The connectedness culture has its roots in China's long agricultural history, when Chinese resided in villages near their fields. For thousands of years, survival was dependent on others supporting and working with you, and also dependent on the generosity of nature. Such conditioning nurtures a strong sense of belonging and patriotism, and a tendency for considerate behaviour and sharing.

As a consequence Chinese live their lives 'relative' to others. Such interdependency determines that *Mianzi* is a must for everyone. From government officials and successful entrepreneurs to farmers, every Chinese treasures their *Mianzi* throughout their entire life. Its importance is often associated to one's social status, position in the family, work, as well as one's personal capability. It is the first consideration Chinese have when they decide what cars to drive, where to dine, what schools to send their children and what friends to choose. The same applies when the Chinese consumers make decisions like whether or not to buy a *Shanzhai* product.

As a result most of the successful *Shanzhai* products are not only significantly cheaper, but also present very sleek, if not perfect imitations of the real thing. Such products address the

need of certain segment of the consumer market – those who cannot afford an iPhone, but want to have a *Shanzhai* substitute so to keep *Mianzi*.

One should not ignore the dynamic nature of *Shanzhai* economy, either. As the consumers become more educated and sophisticated, *Shanzhai* manufacturers are acutely aware that one of the most important criterion of their consumers is *xingjiabi* – cost performance ratio in Chinese. Low price alone is no longer enough to compete with other similar products. Only those innovative *Shanzhai* products that offer a wide array of functions and satisfy consumer needs beyond their expectations make reasonable returns - before others *Shanzhai* them.

Finding the balance among continued innovation, profit margin, sales volume as well as supply and demand remains an art as much as a science for *Shanzhai* manufacturers. No wonder a CEO of a *Shanzhai* mobile application company once famously said, “I don’t play the stock market, as my industry is way more exciting and demanding”.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Four – Innovate or Imitate*

The *Shanzhai* phenomenon has long been debated within China. While many Chinese have expressed their concerns about *Shanzhai* being a shameless act of imitation or purely profit-oriented operations, supporters however believe that *Shanzhai* manufacturers thrive by ignoring traditional rules or practices, therefore producing innovative and unusual products or business models. We propose a sensible way to interpret such contradicted viewpoints by

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<sup>5</sup> Source:

[http://www.esnchina.com/ART\\_8800093285\\_1100\\_2201\\_0\\_0\\_95d56fa2.HIMjumpto=view\\_welcomead\\_1341309401872](http://www.esnchina.com/ART_8800093285_1100_2201_0_0_95d56fa2.HIMjumpto=view_welcomead_1341309401872) accessed in July, 2012.

adopting the Yin Yang perspective - innovation and imitation are the two sides of the same coin, which again can be explained from the Chinese cultural perspectives.

Let's look at imitation first. It can be explained through the collective nature of Chinese culture. Due to the agrarian roots of Chinese history, conformity is regarded as one's highest form of contribution to society, while achieving personal objectives comes second. Contrary to Western culture, a person who only cares about one's own achievements is often regarded as 'aggressive' and 'selfish' rather than 'ambitious'. The tendency to conform is reflected in the many "me-too" *Shanzhai* manufacturers, as soon as one product or design is doing well, many others will copy and follow suit. As far as these manufacturers are concerned, being in the mainstream will minimize the risk of taking untested products to market first. Also many of them often have no regards or respect for intellectual property or licensing regulations. So long as there are others doing the same, they are simply - conforming.

How about innovation? Kash (2010) points out Chinese innovation tends to be more incremental and process driven, also the hierarchical structure of the society often encumbers revolutionary innovation. The source of the ingenuity of Chinese innovation also can be traced to the spirit of Yin Yang. For example *Shanzhai* mobile phone manufacturers are aware that there are many people who have more than one SIM card. They have developed dual (some triple and quadruple) SIMs, dual standby models for this market. Some phones also offer specific functions that are tailored for the Chinese market, like a fake currency detector. Another mobile comes with a removable keyboard, where the qwerty keyboard could be replaced with the numeric one, which also changes the screen accordingly<sup>6</sup>. The

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.clonedinchina.com/2010/07/Shanzhai-brings-bar-phones-that-have-removable-keyboard.html>, accessed in December 2011.

capability to think in holistic and non-linear ways enabled the designs of these *Shanzhai* mobile phones to allow for what seems to be mutually exclusive ideas (like one mobile phone with dual SIMs) to manifest in one single product.

Perhaps what *Shanzhai* manufacturers have also achieved is what Christensen (1997) defined as low-end “disruptive innovation”, where by making what were previously expensive products simpler, more affordable and assessable to new or less-demanding customers. Some of the *Shanzhai* products even go further to offer more functions and benefits. Take the example of GooApple. Haled as an affordable smart phone, it looks exactly like an iPhone, but offers Google’s Android applications for approximately 1/3 of the price of an iPhone equivalent<sup>7</sup>. We agree with some scholars that such creative design can no longer be called imitation (Schnaars, 1994; Shankar et al., 1998: in Zhou, 2006). It transforms the original idea or technology to a different offering, making it accessible to more customers without causing a major threat to iPhone. As discussed in the last section, for *Mianzi* concerns there are Chinese customers who will not trade the original branded product for a *Shanzhai* substitute, regardless of how much cheaper and more functions it can offer. While in the meantime there will be others who purchase the *Shanzhai* version for exactly the same reason – to show and gain *Mianzi*.

However to sustain the innovative spirit *Shanzhai* manufacturers need to transform the existing technology based upon a thorough understanding of their consumers. They need to further tap into customer needs that even the customers may not be aware of themselves. As the *Shanzhai* economy operates without rules and licenses, the *Shanzhai* manufacturers

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <http://www.gooapple.com/> , accessed in July 2012.

themselves are subject to imitation. Furthermore as the supply chain of these industries is often very mature and readily accessible, the entry barrier is nearly non-existent. Among increasing fierce competition, decreasing margins, exponential rate of technology improvement as well as ever increasing demand from consumers, what has nourished the industry could become their own Achilles heel.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese culture shapes the development of the *Shanzhai* economy. One could argue that the Chinese DNA contains elements that nurture the *Shanzhai* phenomenon. Savvy *Shanzhai* entrepreneurs are hailed as modern day “heroes of Liangshan”, as they understand and make available products to customers that one else would. Besides the affordability, Chinese customers also need to satisfy their *Mianzi* when making a buying decision. Those who were happy with a cheap, basic and functional product now prefer more value for money and satisfaction.

The nimble and fast learning culture in China that once tolerated simple adaptations now demands more from the *Shanzhai* entrepreneurs. To progress into a more profitable and reputable future, *Shanzhai* manufacturers need to not only focus on short-term profit, but also sustain their competitive edge to move up the value chain and operate legitimately.

Adopting the Yin Yang perspective, while on one hand *Shanzhai* economy is blessed by the Chinese attitude to handle change with ease, on the other hand conformity and lack of individuality hinder the upgrade of this unique, self-organised informal economy.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.”

*Shanzhai* manufacturers need to apply Yin Yang to re-invent themselves and take the intelligent “first-rate” shift to drive change and sustainability. Those who cannot stay in front of the technology innovation curve and develop their own core competencies will soon disappear.



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