

Chapter 15

The Triumph of *Shanzhai*: No Name Brand Mobile Phones and Youth Identity in China

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to explore the connection between the popularity of shanzhai (no-name brand) mobile phones among urban youth and their social characteristics in contemporary China. Through qualitative analyses of in-depth interviews both shanzhai and non-shanzhai users and selected online group discussions of shanzhai workers, this connection is examined in five realms: political attitudes, practical rationale, social values, interest-seeking and self identification. The findings indicate that the youth's attitudes towards shanzhai phones are prominently based on practical rationale, followed by their craving for entertainment and fashion. The political orientation of anti-mainstream, anti-authority and anti-brand is not prominent. To use a brand imitation is not so much a vanity issue for social status elevation, as a need of self experience within an affordable means. Finally, young people who are engaged in the shanzhai industry do form their own cycle and build their identity strongly associated with the "shanzhai" both as a business career and political mission.

INTRODUCTION

One of the latest buzz words in China's popular culture of 2008 is "*shanzhai*" (literal translation: mountain village), which originally meant a fortress in a mountain occupied by outlaws. However, in its post-modern connotation, it refers to a wide range of imitations of brand names. It

is associated closely with a phenomenon of producing and consuming low-cost products, which imitate brand names, mostly mobile phones and digital products.

The "*shanzhai*" mobile phone, as the name indicates, carries a connotation of rebellion, resistance, periphery, and outlawing. Foremost, it is an antonym of the "brand-name" phone. The "brand-name" phone signifies the celebrated name, good quality, high price, recognized prestige and an

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enviable possession of social status. Whereas the “*shanzhai*” phone is associated with the no-name, shoddy quality, low price, dubious reputation and a distasteful piece of low class production. The popularity of *shanzhai* phones poses a series of intriguing questions: what does it signify for the contemporary urban youth in China? Does it indicate a resistance against the authority of the “brand-name”? What other meanings does the *shanzhai* phone also embody? To what extent do these meanings connect to the characteristics of urban youth in China today? In other words, if the mobile phone is a central artifact of the youth’s self-image (Fortunati 2001) and personal style (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), how does the *shanzhai* version symbolize the construction of self-identity for the young generation in contemporary China?

This paper attempts to identify the connections between the popularity of *shanzhai* mobile phones among young people and the characteristics of youth described in the public discourse in contemporary China. It explores how young people’s choice and use of mobile phones, especially their attitudes towards *shanzhai* mobile phones, express their styles and characteristics, particularly their pursuit of a distinct personality. The inquiry centers on deciphering the *shanzhai* phenomenon in relation to the youth culture discourse which emphasizes the defiant and rebellious attitude of youth towards the mainstream culture and their construction of a sort of anti-mainstream or anti-brand identity. The central research question is: How does the *shanzhai* mobile phone connect to the characteristics of urban youth in China today? This central issue is explored by two sub-issues:

- a) What are the meanings of the *shanzhai* mobile phone constructed by phone users in relation to the characteristics of youth?
- b) What are the meanings of the *shanzhai* mobile phone constructed by *shanzhai* workers in relation to the characteristics of youth?

SHANZHAI MOBILE PHONES

“*Shanzhai*” is not a brand name of mobile phones, but a generic term for all the small brands, non-brands and even pirated handsets. Initially, it referred to a low technological production which copied brand-name mobile phones and other digital products. Gradually, it was used to describe a type of industrial phenomenon in which small and unknown manufacturers attempted to imitate a variety of brand-name products. The word “*shanzhai*” can be used both as an adjective (“*shanzhai* phones”) and a verb (e.g. to “*shanzhai*” a phone). The “*shanzhai* production” is mainly characterized as imitation, primitive technology, small operation, low cost, swift market adaptation, customer-tailored design and so on. “*Shanzhai* products” therefore are associated with brand-name imitation, low prices, shoddy quality, practical functionality, novel designs, alternative styles, etc.¹

According to media reports, *shanzhai* mobile phones have occupied nearly 30% share of the domestic market in China. Globally, Chinese *shanzhai* phones sold about 150 million sets in 2007 when the “*shanzhai* phones” suddenly rose to prominence. This figure accounts for 1/10 of the total global sales (Yin 2009). Traditionally, *shanzhai* phones were mostly bought by migrant workers and low-income consumers. However, as *shanzhai* phones outperformed brand-name phones in price, functions, durability and designs, they became a trendy artifact for teenagers and urban youth in such metropolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The most famous centre of *shanzhai* mobile phone manufacturing and trade is in the Huangqiangbei district in Shenzhen. This area of 1.45 square kilometers is the centre of 27 electronic markets and nearly 30 companies which generate RMB37 billion a year.

The MTK chip was central in bringing the *shanzhai* mobile phone to market. It revolutionized the manufacturing process, created a consistent

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