



Shanzhai

Copycat design as an open platform for innovation

Countries, from the US to Japan, regularly accuse China of copying designs. Indeed, multinational companies in these countries spend an inordinate amount of time and money trying to prevent their products from being copied. But Shanzhai — “copycat” design — represents a vast business opportunity.

Shanzhai is an open platform for grassroots innovation: Apple, Nokia, and Samsung smartphones get copied, but the knockoffs adapt the original designs in ways that appeal to Chinese customers. Shanzhai designers might

add a flashlight, key in areas with unstable electricity.

The effect is to make products accessible to common folks in terms of price, aesthetics, values, and needs. Shanzhai designs are an opportunity for international companies to introduce Chinese consumers to their brands, and then observe how local Chinese culture adapts their offerings.

How might companies harness learning by observing Shanzhai designs?

TAKE ACTION – *designing for Shanzhai*

1.

Leverage the wisdom of common folks

Organize a Chinese version of Dragons Den, or innovation competition, to help grassroots innovation blossom.

2.

Use tools for expression

Provide customizing tools that enable people to mark a bit of themselves on their products. Consider the gamut, from stickers of Swarovski crystal on mobile phones to prestige logos.

3.

Go for liangdian, or ‘shiny points’

Be bold and explicit about the value proposition of a product. It has to make a clear statement of what consumers have paid money for.

4.

Exploit grassroots sentiments

Harness grassroots humor to get closer to Chinese consumers in diverse regions. Such playful sentiments help build relationships with mass consumers.



‘Shiny points’ stand out

One of the key design principles of Shanzhai is to make the assets of the product stand out. Shanzhai is not about being subtle. It’s about bringing up the distinctive character of a product and accentuating it.

Of the population, “80-90% are unsophisticated consumers,” explains Wang, a Shanzhai mobile phone manufacturer. “When they buy a mobile phone, they want to see values that they can understand. They’ll not understand subtle design or complicated technology.”

Whether it’s a big camera lens or speakers attached to the phone, these consumers want focal points, because they are the “face” of products. Chinese consumers call this quality *liangdian*, or “shiny points,” in the design. These exaggerated features attract the attention of others and explicitly state that those are what consumers have paid money for. Products become valuable partly through the confirmation of one’s peers.

How might companies design for liangdian, or shiny points?

The optimism of humor

Li is saving money to buy a QQ, the Shanzhai version of the economical GM Sparkle. He plans to customize it with a “Mercedes emblem.”

“It’s the Mercedes of ordinary folks,” says Li with a laugh. “With this car I will be a true ‘successful businessman’ like my mom always brags to her fellow villagers!”

A young migrant worker with only a high school diploma, Li is doing well to have found a job as a clerk in Shenzhen, but he is nowhere near the popular image of the “successful businessman” who gets driven around in a Mercedes. QQ adds color to everyday life by making fun of ordinary people’s reality. It’s the grassroots humor of Shanzhai culture that attracts consumers like Lee — people who work hard, whose lives are improving, and who are optimistic about the future.

How might brands get closer to ordinary people by using their sense of humor?



Legitimacy through participation

Lecture Hall is a well-known program on CCTV, the biggest national television network in China. It features scholars discussing various topics, from history to literature to art. Han is a businessman with a strong interest in history. Through CCTV’s application procedure, Han expressed his interest in offering a series of talks about the Song Dynasty but was told he was not qualified because he is not a professor. So he decided to make a Shanzhai version of *Lecture Hall* in a simple studio he set up.

Han posted his video on the Internet, and within weeks, the show had been watched more than half a million times. This quintessentially Chinese story reveals the strong need for popular participation and local legitimacy.

How might we create a platform where ordinary people feel comfortable adding a bit of themselves to the product?

The word *shanzhai*...

Made up of the characters *shan* (山, “mountain”) + *zhai* (寨, “fortress”), Shanzhai implies banditry and lack of state control. The phrase suggests the value that runs through Chinese classics like *Water Margin*, the story of bandits who helped the poor by stealing from the rich. In this Chinese version of Robin Hood, “right” and “wrong” are presented in an ambiguous light. In this respect, perhaps, Shanzhai questions legitimacy and authenticity of design and blurs the line between cultural appropriation and outright theft.

Leveraging grassroots innovation

Nokia recognized how Shanzhai can help us learn about other cultures when it created a design competition in three communities far beyond China: Dharavi (Mumbai, India), Favela Jacarezinho (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), and Buduburam (Accra, Ghana). Nokia’s “temporary design studio” is about learning how people improvise, use, and conceptualize a device in the context of their own communities. The open studio provided an alternative way for people to articulate their wants and needs.

Prototyping rather than planning

Shanzhai mobile phones have at least 2 SIM card slots. This may not be an award-winning design concept, but it effectively addresses the needs of Chinese users who often use an additional local number when they travel. Shanzhai is about implementing user needs in a short period of time. It runs on the spirit of “put it out there and see how it goes.” Production cycles are very short and quality may be compromised, but over time the product is improved and becomes more stable.

Fake star or entrepreneur?

There are many Shanzhai stars in the Chinese media, but in contrast with Elvis impersonators in the West, they are quasi-legitimate. Some, like Andy Lau and Jay Chou, are considered quite successful in their own right and have been invited to perform at local events. Embracing Shanzhai has created a business opportunity for performers to utilize their lookalike asset and build authentic fame. These impersonators have value for being Shanzhai, rather than because they can impersonate famous stars.

PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

Be a pattern spotter: Now that you’ve been exposed to a few different examples, don’t be surprised if you start seeing *Shanzhai* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it’s the next new pattern.

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