

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Fashioning China: Precarious Creativity of Women Designers in Shanzhai Culture

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This study examines a copycat culture called Shanzhai, particularly looking into fashion imitations made and circulated by a group of women designers through digital media. It investigates the cultural transformation of labor taking place in China through the critical lens of precarious creativity. Women designers perform digital labor to de-fetishize the labor process of global fashion brands, which mythicizes class and commodity. These women's fashion work lacks official recognition as meaningful labor, while their ability to make a case for the legitimacy of their work is further diminished when the state co-opts Shanzhai for its nation-building narratives. These women's experiences of precarity and their very act of copying reveal the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of the Chinese Dream.

Keywords: Precarious Creativity, Women, Digital Labor, Shanzhai, Fashion Imitations, Creative Industries, Chinese Dream.

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In 2009, the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) featured a copy of the official Lunar New Year Show in which ordinary people recorded amateur performances with hand-held cameras to broadcast them online. It occurred on the same night as China Central Television's official Lunar New Year Gala (Canaves & Ye, 2009). Unlike the big state-sponsored event that regularly features stars, celebrities, professional performers, and major politicians, the copycat show embraced a do-it-yourself (DIY) creative spirit and eschewed celebrities, and hence generated a lot of publicity in China. The WSJ argued that this show marked a high point of *Shanzhai* (山寨), a copycat culture that displays a certain creativity, ingenuity, rebellion, and resistance to dominant cultural values among Chinese. The Shanzhai phenomenon sheds light upon the shifting cultural landscape of labor in China.

As a Chinese neologism, Shanzhai literally means "mountain strongholds," indicating adventurous foraging into the wilderness, risk-taking, and a Robin Hood-like

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ethos. In contemporary China, Shanzhai is also a well-known designation for counterfeiters and copycats. It was originally associated with counterfeit phones produced by local and regional networks of entrepreneurs (Lin, 2011). The customizable features of these handsets and their affordability made them popular among working-class migrants. As the practice of copying popular products has spread, Shanzhai has expanded to encompass a wide range of similar phenomena (Wang, 2012).

My project examines a group of women who actively participate in Shanzhai culture, appropriating brand-name products to create their own designs, and selling them at more affordable budget prices through digital platforms to local consumers. These women's activities constitute what I call Shanzhai fashion, and these women are considered Shanzhai designers who enact a very specific kind of copying. Unlike the conventional fashion world that is dominated by male designers, Shanzhai fashion is largely a women's undertaking. Most of them are fashionistas who have turned their hobby into a profitable business. They typically do not have professional training but learn from practice. This study focuses on how these women designers flexibly create Shanzhai fashion products, while perpetually facing risks and being subject to regulation. Women designers' labor in Shanzhai fashion exemplifies the precarious creativity embedded in the ongoing cultural transformation of production and consumption in China. Precarious creativity is a condition whereby people gain a certain autonomy over the cultural content and products they create, while nonetheless enduring uncertainty, insecurity, and unpredictability within their cultural environment (Canclini, 2013; Curtin & Sanson, 2016). Broadly speaking, I borrow conceptual perspectives on precarious labor and class struggle from Italian *Operaismo* theorists, exemplified by thinkers and writers such as Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and Michael Hardt. Reflecting on many labor movements in Europe since the 1970s, *Operaismo* scholars contend that informatization in dominant capitalist countries has fundamentally transformed the nature of jobs and employment, enlarging the precarity at work. Parting company with the Fordist model of regular employment, precarious work is usually characterized by low wages, temporary status, long working hours, mechanized patterns, and informal or self-employment. It requires high mobility, flexibility, and skills in communication. The insecurity of irregular, temporary jobs brings anxiety to workers who, as Standing (2011) argues, may become more and more vulnerable and dangerous, producing instability in society. However, the *Operaismo* theorists argue that the global transformation toward precarious labor is not completely negative, as the refusal to adapt to regular employment can be understood as the refusal of a life calibrated by capitalist production and exploitation. The condition of precarious labor is also more appealing to a younger generation that is heavily influenced by postmodern popular culture. They embrace creativity, digitalization, and entrepreneurship, which, by facilitating empowerment of ordinary people, allow for different forms of labor other than full-time employment and offer alternatives to the Western capitalist mode of development (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

Of significance, the *Operaismo's* view on precarity offers a vision of and possibility for new socialities of the ordinary. However, it has been critiqued for ignoring the

gendered dimensions of precarity in the social factory. Many feminist scholars such as Federici (2006) point out that the tremendous leap in technology and informatization of work do not overcome exploitation, especially for women who bear the unpaid household work of capital accumulation to reproduce life and labor-power. Other feminists such as McRobbie (2010) argue that the growth of the female consumer market has enhanced women's self-awareness and individuality, while simultaneously overwhelming participants with intensive feelings of precariousness in the process of the privatization of work and life. Working in creative cultural occupations, women, when compared to men, are to a greater extent called on to regulate their conduct to fit into the work regime and popular cultural images, resulting in a new precarious subjectivity associated with more flexible, agile, and mobile laboring process. Women's disempowerment becomes invisible within an individualist and postfeminist climate that valorizes creative work using glamorized and iconic terminologies of entrepreneurship, freedom, and agency (Gill, 2014). Understanding this condition allows a rethinking of every aspect of daily life where women's work, as in my study of Chinese Shanzhai women designers' labor, carries a tremendous amount of precarity without proper recognition. These women's precarious creativity also showcases a space that is structured, on the one hand, by social discourses of hierarchy and patriarchy as well as capital accumulation and reproduction, but, on the other hand, this very same space also offers opportunities to fulfill individual desires and cultivate relationships that nurture aspiration.

Here, women's labor in Shanzhai fashion refers to a specific kind of digital labor, in which people contribute both material and immaterial cultural products. On the one hand, women designers produce physical products such as clothes, accessories, and other fashion items. On the other, they regularly update their online shops with trendy products, post photos of themselves wearing clothes that they made, and share fashion experiences with their consumers. The latter is the informational and cultural aspect of digital labor, which is the immateriality of products, as Maurizio Lazzarato (1999) contends. In Shanzhai fashion, for one thing, women's digital labor is not compensated by great financial rewards and is often valorized by pleasure as well as autonomy of doing creative work, such as fashion design. For another, women's fashion work first and foremost needs to conform to the cultural and technical conventions of media platform providers, such as Alibaba, the owner of the largest online shopping platform Taobao Marketplace, and Sina, the owner of the microblogging website Weibo. For example, in order to advertise a dress on the social media Weibo, a women designer needs to pay Sina a considerable amount of money to ensure that the advertisement reaches all her followers. The media corporations accumulate wealth from women designers' and Shanzhai fashion consumers' participation as well as their interaction with these platforms. This is what Terranova (2000) calls a double form of exploitation within digital labor: People embrace the so-called autonomy at the expense of financial stability, and they are further impoverished by corporate hegemony. In other words, the increase of productivity for capital accumulation is based on exhausting these women's digital labor. Shanzhai women designers actively produce

cultural products to grapple with the autonomy of creativity, and are simultaneously unacknowledged, marginalized by both the conventional Shanzhai discourse and the state. Their precarious creativity in Shanzhai fashion business occupies a liminal space that is a material site of struggle for carving out an everyday existence and good working conditions. Women's Shanzhai fashion practice sits right on the border between creativity conforming to a legitimate global intellectual property rights (IPRs) system and imitation inherent to fashion design, resulting in a tension that is emblematic of and exacerbated in the discourse of the "Chinese Dream."

Officially raised by president Xi Jinping in late 2012, the Chinese Dream is an ideological continuation of national rejuvenation, in which an important goal of the state is to produce China as a "great cultural power" through creativity and innovation (Keane, 2016a, p. 40). This aspect of the Dream discourse coincides with the heated discussion within business and IT sectors of learning from the grassroots creativity in Shanzhai culture to facilitate the innovative process (Tse, Ma, & Huang, 2009). While the Chinese Dream is a top-down project to implement structural and systematic channels for innovation, it also tries to co-opt Shanzhai culture, especially in the IT sector, to utilize the bottom-up practice of creativity to foster innovation nationwide. The rise of some domestic IT companies such as Xiaomi articulates how the state has fabricated Shanzhai as a counterfeit subaltern culture that recalibrates nationalism under the name of innovative capacity (Keane & Zhao, 2012). In other words, the Chinese Dream is an ideological construct that allows the state to rework Shanzhai to fit into its paradigm of increasing global cultural power through creativity and innovation. Nonetheless, while Shanzhai women designers are dreaming a "Chinese Dream" through their fashion work, the state fails them by exclusion and nonrecognition. These women's experience epitomizes other cultural workers' situation in China, and is symptomatic of a much larger terrain of precarious labor.

This study draws on discourse analysis to examine women's imitation of fashion culture in China. I investigate how the texts, images, narratives, and conversations about Shanzhai fashion are dispersing through different media platforms, particularly these three: online shops featuring Shanzhai products, the microblogging website Weibo, and the instant messenger WeChat. Weibo and WeChat are Chinese equivalents to Twitter and WhatsApp. These three digital platforms are the main media channels through which Shanzhai businesses are circulating their products. I also examine digital archives of news, government papers, and industrial reports related to Shanzhai from domestic and international media outlets. Even though I draw on information on Shanzhai fashion from online spaces, I observe how these spaces are closely tied to the actual offline production and consumption of Shanzhai products. As I will illustrate below, women designers are not able to make a fashion imitation without consumers' discussing, voting, and critiquing products on designers' online shops, Weibo, and WeChat. Purchasing a copycat means that the consumer has not only a well-made dress, but a chance to show-off to other consumers through posting selfies online and commenting. In other words, these online texts, images, and conversations initiate Shanzhai fashion and complete the production–consumption cycle.

Below, I will first explain women designers' fashion work as digital labor, which de-fetishizes the labor process of global fashion brands that mythicize class and commodity. Their dedication to knowledge production and value-making practice pushes the boundary between legal and illegal, creative and copy, and puts them into a precarious position where they constantly face policing from the state. I then articulate how women designers has been deprived of recognition twice when the state expropriates Shanzhai for its own purpose of nation branding. Next, by debunking the meaning of copy and creativity in contemporary China, I show how these women designers' unspeakable experience is exacerbated by the Chinese Dream discourse and how their very act of copying reveals both the possibility and impossibility of the Dream.

Shanzhai fashion as digital labor

Imitating popular fashion products is a worldwide practice that has existed throughout history (Chang, 2004; Raustiala & Sprigman, 2012). Before the term Shanzhai became a popular designation for copycats, scholars such as Chew (2010) studied imitated fashion in terms of pass-off menswear. According to Chew, pass-off menswear is a specific kind of counterfeit trade referring to the approximate emulation of a product's appearance to confuse the consumer, and such a practice of fashion copying produces commodities that have a different use and appeal for consumers. In China, fashion designs, particularly readymade garments that emphasize the practical functions over aesthetics, are not covered by copyright law; what is covered are brands and trademarks (Ruan, 2016). Shanzhai fashion garments copy the original brand-name products as much as they can: the design, fabric, prints, and accessories such as buttons and zippers. Most of them do not sew the original brand logos on the copycats, marking a boundary that they consciously do not cross. However, the aura of the brands is essential for the copycats to attract customers. Some Shanzhai designers are therefore pushing the boundary by offering logos on the products or using copyrighted advertising images from the original brands. Such activities are easily targeted by the government, which is trying to crack down on knockoffs.

It is necessary to illustrate the Shanzhai fashion process, which focuses highly on interaction with consumers. As an example, I will use the women designer RooCool's post of a routine for making a fashion imitation on her online shop Puff.DJ, which has several steps.¹ First, the designer asks potential consumers to select their favorite style. Usually, she sets up a webpage that features a highly priced product (such as \$9,999) and invites consumers only to "save to my list" to signify their approval. Increasingly, the selection stage takes place on social media sites such as Weibo and WeChat through the mechanisms of creating polls and sharing. After that, the designer purchases the original product chosen by their potential consumers and researches its material and aesthetic design. Meanwhile, she requires a downpayment from the interested consumers to estimate the market demand. This downpayment also entitles the consumers to a small discount in purchasing the finished product. She then makes several sample versions and modifies them until they are finally put



Figure 1 A snapshot of the comparison of the original product and the Shanzhai copy made by a women designer, Wanzi.

into production, usually numbering in the several hundreds for a single batch. At this point, the full payment is required from the consumers. Finally, the finished products are shipped to the customers. The whole process often takes up to a month, but in some cases, the actual production takes longer (e.g., for winter outfits), or in some extreme cases, the order has to be canceled due to difficulties in obtaining the proper materials. Remarkably, the relationship of Shanzhai designers with consumers continues when many consumers share their selfies and other photos to comment on the products on women's online shops, Weibo and WeChat. Armed with these comments and feedback, designers can further adjust the design of the product in response to the market, which in turn leads to another cycle of production, consumption, and circulation. Shanzhai fashion is therefore highly consumer-centric. To a certain extent and contrary to usual conceptions of counterfeiting, its practice approximates in many ways that of *haute couture* fashion, a point to which I will return soon.

It is helpful to understand Shanzhai fashion by looking at the example shown in Figure 1.² This image illustrates part of the process when the designers create sample versions of their products for advertising. The coat on the left is from the 2015 winter collection of the brand Dizzit; while the right one is the copy. The capital letter "Z" on top of the image indicates the original, as it is the initial of the Chinese pinyin for *zhengpin* (正品, "the original"), and the "S" refers to Shanzhai. Usually the designers keep interested consumers involved by explaining the details of the copying process, where a very important part is comparing the original and the Shanzhai versions, in order to show the similarities and improvements of the copycat. In Shanzhai-ing the Dizzit coat, the designer Wanzi explained that the fabric used in the copied version came from a special order, keeping the exact prints and touch of the original. She also introduced a better lining, compared to that of the original, for the imitations. In addition, consumers play an important role in the process, and their feedback is taken into consideration by women designers to further modify the design before final production. In some cases, consumers can provide their measurements for the

designers to customize the clothing and accessories for them. For example, the women designer SaraVivi, who both designs and models her clothes, offers the option for customization with a higher price in her online shop; consumers can chat with the customer service staff for detailed information.

Returning to my earlier point concerning haute couture, it is a fashion culture that originated in France, and the word itself refers specifically to a form of high fashion with hand-executed, personalized, and custom-fitted clothing (Haute|Hot Couture News, n.d.). It supports a whole philosophy and culture of fashion where only a narrow circle of several hundred people around the world can participate (Klaffke, 2003). The industry relies heavily on the loyalty of its consumers and the bond between elite designers and the powerful and rich, which creates a dream “of chic cachet, of beauty, desirability and exclusiveness” that is turned into a selling point by haute couture fashion houses to brand their ready to wear products (Thomas, n.d.). It is exactly the imaginary of exclusiveness created by high-fashion powerhouses and facilitated by multiple forms of media that convinces the consumers they are “the chosen ones.”

It is almost the same in Shanzhai production culture, but not quite: Shanzhai fashion resembles the exclusive culture of haute couture, yet simultaneously inverts such a culture through de-fetishizing the labor process and de-mythicizing class in the making of garments. It delinks the privilege and prestige of custom-made clothing from the elite class and relinks it to a new consumer formation. Women designers frequently emphasize the customizability of their products as demonstrated in their special fabrics, printing technologies, sewing techniques, hand-crafting skills, and the products’ resemblance (yet also superiority) to the original. For instance, in copying a European designer dress, the designer Daxi tweeted a video showing how female garment factory workers sewed buttons to the dress by hand (Daxi, 2015). The interview-style video revealed that workers spend 10 minutes sewing each individual button and there were 14 buttons for each piece. At the end of the video, Daxi affirmed her sincerity in producing a proper imitation, which requires a sufficient amount of time, labor, and skill. The practice of Shanzhai-ing encapsulates a cultural process whereby the high-class exclusivity of fashion has been translated into an individual entrepreneurial practice that de-mythicizes the elite-ness of fashion, as Shanzhai products are reachable and affordable by ordinary people. Further, unlike fast fashion, most of these Shanzhai products are limited in number, usually not exceeding a few hundred. The relative scarcity further reinforces the exclusivity and evokes the desire of obtaining a product as a privilege.

The reworking of exclusivity compatible with affordability in Shanzhai fashion nonetheless foregrounds the labor process of garment-making. Because the consumer base is potentially large, women designers compete with each other fiercely to attract and maintain the audience. As a demand-based form of e-commerce, Shanzhai fashion business requires women designers’ dedication to digital fashion work, which gradually turn these women into online fashion idols who can then monetize their fashion production, both materially and immaterially. Shanzhai designers actively articulate the technological and aesthetic conventions of self-fashioning—shopping,

selecting styles, posting outfit photos—and of the Shanzhai labor process of designing, appropriating, factory-producing, and retailing clothes. The fashion work results in the informational and cultural content of Shanzhai production, which, though created collectively and interactively among designers and consumers, is compensated selectively. Shanzhai fashion nurtures a new class division as online fashion stars versus Shanzhai fashion fans, where the stars can be easily replaced by new fads and trends. Some high-profile women designers gradually lose popularity, and some once-popular online shops are shut down because of either the fickleness of fashion trends, the shifting tastes of the consumers, or changes in the trajectories of designers' personal lives.

Additionally, these women and their fashion work serve as a crucial link to other actors in the Shanzhai fashion industry. The work of fashion buyers, retailers, garment factories, as well as workers for individual Shanzhai shops are interconnected, relying on women designers to survive. While most women operate their online shops through Taobao, the biggest customer-to-customer shopping platform in China, and strive to maintain their popularity through posting and commenting on social media, the platforms are extracting huge amount of value from them because they contribute to the referral traffic on the Internet, pay for the expensive fees to advertise, and can hardly find alternatives to set up shop with less expenses. The fragile class boundary between women designers as fashion idols and Shanzhai fans, as well as the interconnectivity among actors in the broader Shanzhai fashion industry intensify the precariousness embedded in the business, pushing women designers to continuously and intensively perform new kinds of digital labor.

To be clear, these women designers' fashion work embodies a different understanding of precarity in the context of China. In Keane's (2016b) critical interrogation of China's creative industries, he argues that cultural production is still visibly controlled by the state's ideology, and the freedom to create and produce exists in tandem with a system of regulation and control. Rather than viewing precarity as totally negative, as a material constraint on workers and their creative work, Keane suggests that precarious creativity essentially adds to the knowledge capital of China's creative industries. Women designers who operate Shanzhai fashion businesses experience the apparently transient and unpredictable nature of work as well as an imbalanced input–outcome, but what is of utmost importance is that they are constantly constrained by the government's response to international demands to clean up IPR infringements. The very word Shanzhai has been redefined by the state and lost its critical edge for women designers, as will be elaborated below.

Women designers, imitation of fashion, and the state's "Shanzhai"

It must be noted that the women designers and their Shanzhai businesses discussed in this study are only part of a much larger and more complicated Shanzhai fashion industry, which comprises a hierarchical value chain. At the lower end of the chain are cheap knockoffs produced by apparel Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs)



Figure 2 A snapshot of the comparison of the original and the sample by a women designer, VIAN.

or factories that offer OEM services to transnational fashion powerhouses.³ Those factory-knockoffs usually feature brands like American Apparel, TopShop, ASOS, and H&M, and online shops sell those products at low prices with fast turnovers. Moving up the value chain are online shops that employ workers and set up their own garment factories to produce imitations of fashion labels. The production process therefore puts more emphasis on the modification and appropriation of the chosen original products rather than creating an exact copy; these are the cutting-edge practices of Shanzhai. The women designers I focused on are trailblazers of the Shanzhai fashion industry who practice this high-level, state-of-the-art form of Shanzhai production. Though emphasizing different degrees of creative modifications to the original products and pricing accordingly, women designers are the crucial link between consumers and fashion tastes, setting the trends for industrial practices. Their imitative activities are in fact emblematic of the fashion industry, or more broadly, creative industries as a whole in its ongoing transformation (Keane, 2013).

In recent years, some women designers use Z-versus-Y instead of Z-versus-S symbols when comparing the original and Shanzhai products. Y stands for the sample version, coming from the initial of the Chinese pinyin for *yangpin* (样品, sample). Most of time, women designers just display the final sample version, labeling products with their own names, as compared to the original branded commodity. Figure 2 shows another women designer VIAN's comparison of the original product taken from the 2015 summer collection of a local fashion label Cocoon (right), and the sample (left).⁴ VIAN took off the Y label and called her product "VIAN's version." She ensured her consumers in the description of the product on her online shop that the VIAN's version conformed to the original design and exceeded the quality of it.

The change in naming a fashion imitation does not change the imitative practice of Shanzhai. Numerous tweets featured fashion imitations on Weibo and WeChat still use phrases like “beg for Shanzhai” (*qiushan*, 求山) or “start to Shanzhai” (*kaishan*, 开山), indicating that Shanzhai is still a dominant term when describing the production, consumption, and circulation of imitated fashion. For example, the Weibo account *Shanzhai Master Groupon* (山主团) constantly updates an inventory of the latest Shanzhai fashion products produced by a wide range of people and factories, providing links for consumers to purchase the recommended items.⁵ Shanzhai as a term circulates recurrently.

The lingering Shanzhai label attached to fashion products may indicate the general social attitude toward imitated fashion and the control imposed on such a practice. Public opinion toward Shanzhai fashion is ambivalent: On the one hand, the proliferation of these copies makes high-end labels accessible; on the other, the fact that celebrities who purportedly wear the imitations “by accident” induce backlash (Tencent Fashion, 2010). Shanzhai in fashion, rather than signifying grassroots ingenuity and creativity, is more often identified with ridicule and inferiority associated with Made-in-China, a label that has been discursively shaped by and loaded with ambivalent sentiments toward cheap Asian labor forces, which have contributed significantly to China’s economic progress and the transnational–national imagination of factory workers (Canaves, 2009; CNN, 2007; Lee, 1998; Pun, 2005).

The government recently took a more proactive stance in reclaiming the quality of and rebuilding the confidence in China-made products through creating and strengthening regulations of IPR, which is reflected in industrial self-policing as well. For example, Taobao as the dominant shopping platform and the hub of most fakes collaborated with a dozen e-commerce companies, releasing many anticounterfeits campaigns (Taobao, 2010). In spring 2015, many webpages featuring a popular trench coat that imitated a product of Korean fashion brand Imvely were censored and deleted by Taobao, without a notice given to either sellers or buyers. I myself bought such a coat from Wanzi. She notified her consumers that her webpage was deleted because, according to Taobao, it violated the copyright law by using Imvely’s original promotional images of the coat. This was not a unique incident; most webpages featured fashion imitations with copyrighted advertisements and images from the original brands were removed around the same time. The large-scale censorship on Taobao shops coincided with a nationwide crackdown on fakes sold online (Wong, 2015).

The act of renaming Shanzhai products becomes more and more prominent as both social backlash and governmental regulations on counterfeits are intensified. It also illuminates the intricate relationship between Shanzhai culture and the state. According to Yang (2016), Shanzhai as a copying practice signifies a collective conception of an alternative to the globalizing regime of IPR. In her analysis, Yang demonstrates that state ideologically separates Shanzhai into two regimes: the “Shanzhai economy” based on fake and illicit products, and the “Shanzhai culture” as a representation of ordinary people. While the Shanzhai economy runs contrary to the global

IPR system, the people in the Shanzhai culture possess the skills and collective energy to conduct profit-oriented activities. Learning from the Shanzhai economy's ability to buttress, though illegally, the industrial boom, the state appropriates Shanzhai culture in order to utilize human capital for producing legitimate national products to serve the purpose of nation building. In this way, the state reworks Shanzhai into a developmental force to build a national brand both compatible with global IPR demands and presumably representing the people (Yang, 2016).

Extending her theorization, we can see that the process of the state's expropriation of Shanzhai generates two intertwining effects. First, class as an analytical term loses its capacity to explain the current cultural regime where the state has deprived the people of Shanzhai as an antiauthority expression. Parting company with the old grassroots discourse of the bandit cellphone industry, which is conceived as a sort of folk-oriented IT sector and working-class ICT (Wallis & Qiu, 2012), now the grassroots-ness of Shanzhai is subsumed into the meganarrative of increasing innovative capacity and branding the nation. The Shanzhai spirit and its capability to encourage rebellion and resistance to authority encounters suspicion on top of the ontological anxiety and insecurity caused by daily concerns of food safety, environmental pollution, and natural disasters (Bristow, 2008; Chai, 2015; Watts, 2007). It seems to be safe to extract and reinterpret Shanzhai as only a consumer-centric and innovative means to facilitate business success, particularly under the name of Created-in-China (Keane & Zhao, 2012). The traits of this process can be found in the textbook example of Xiaomi. The Chinese smartphone maker is often described as China's answer to Apple (Lai, 2015; Linshi, 2015). From the mobile phone's appearance to its interface and the press conferences, it clearly has many features that match those of Apple, such as "snazzy design, glitzy launches, and the cult-like fervor it inspires in its users," and its CEO Lei Jun is often pictured in a trendy "Steve Jobs"-style wearing jeans and a black shirt (Taking a Bite Out of Apple, 2013). Though Xiaomi borrows heavily from Shanzhai as a business model, it is scarcely considered as a Shanzhai brand: Xiaomi has successfully transferred the extracted value of Shanzhai into its legitimate economic activities for profit. Such a business practice follows the technocratic developmental strategies and resonates with the techno-utopic imagery of the state: Xiaomi often presents an image redolent of aspiring young men pursuing their dreams in creative industries, which typifies a masculine technological space of Shanzhai and exemplifies the gendered nature of the state's developmental orientation.

The state's expropriation of Shanzhai, particularly in the development of ICT, has been officially consolidated on the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in November 2012 when Innovation-driven Development Strategy (IDS) was put forward as a key strategy to transform and optimize the economic structure (Hu, 2012). Compared to the top-down plan of IDS, the Chinese Dream discourse officially announced later in the same month tried to delicately suture the state's ideology into people's everyday life, admitting individual interests and encouraging personal pursuit that eventually lead to the prosperity of both the individual and

the nation (Kuhn, 2013). The Dream discourse highlights the moment when the state strives to implement a top-down campaign for promoting cultural power and appropriate bottom-up activities of the people to increase the innovative capacity, evident in the transformation and success of some domestic IT companies such as Xiaomi discussed above.

In tandem with the state's expropriation of Shanzhai, women designers have lost the language to seek alternative space to express themselves. In Shanzhai's earlier modern usage, women who made copies of fashion products intentionally called their practice Shanzhai. What legitimates this identification is that these practices signify the motivation and desire of Shanzhai participants to make their own versions. Yet, unlike the imitated cellphones and technological gadgets that initiated the Shanzhai sensation, fashion imitations have rarely been celebrated as symbols of grassroots creativity and resistance, nor are women designers recognized as subjects who establish a new means of cultural production and consumption. This is true even though Shanzhai, first and foremost, is a business strategy for these women to make a profit, just as it was for those in the imitated cellphone business. Therefore, they are in fact outliers of the recognition of Shanzhai in its discursive formation to epitomize the power of the people and provide collective cultural imagination.

In Judith Butler's (2009) analysis of gender performativity, she illustrates the ways in which performativity is bound up with precarity. She writes that illegal immigrants took to the streets in Los Angeles in May 2006 and sang the national anthems of the United States and Mexico in both English and Spanish. These people petitioned the government to allow them to become citizens by exercising rights of protest and petition that only citizens can have. Butler (2009) argues that precarity emerges from such a performance where illegal immigrants were asserting a right they did not have in order to claim that they should have that right. Similarly, in Shanzhai fashion, women designers' work is not acknowledged in mainstream male-led Shanzhai discourse. And these women are calling themselves Shanzhai, which itself does not grant them recognition, to make the case that they should be part of Shanzhai culture. The self-claiming of Shanzhai exposes these women to the precarious position, where they are now the targets of the state's regulation and social condemnation as ineligible to take part in this cultural meaning-making practice. Yet such name-claiming, as the Z-versus-S comparison foregrounds, is the political language through which women designers experience the impossibility of recognition yet explore the possibility to resist and challenge their conditions as unrecognizable.

However, with the reworking of Shanzhai into the nation-building agenda, women designers are gradually losing this precarious language of Shanzhai to make themselves visible. More often than not, the Z-versus-Y comparison signifies a retreat from laying a claim to recognition to which they are not yet entitled. Therefore, these women designers are in a double state of precarity within the process in which the state has co-opted Shanzhai: On the one hand, they are excluded from identification as "the people" that Shanzhai supposes to represent; on the other, they are further deprived of the language and therefore the space to articulate the lack of recognition.

Instead of seeking collectivity within Shanzhai, women designers increasingly internalize the precariousness of their fashion businesses, turning to self-reliance. It is reflected in the fact that some women designers consciously emphasize the term *Zi-Zhi* (自制, self-design or self-produce) or *Ding-Zhi* (定制, custom-made) in naming their online shops. In Chinese, *Zi* stands for “the self,” indicating an anticorporate position; while *Ding* refers to “according to,” implying a consumer-oriented way of production. *Zi-Zhi* or *Ding-Zhi* also illustrates the development of self-accountability in the political and sociocultural atmosphere of the privatization of the self under socialist control (Ong & Zhang, 2008). They are self-made designers in Shanzhai business, who occupy a liminal space of the creative economy. From these name-changing phenomena, we can see an emerging consciousness among these women: They increasingly brand themselves as designers and their products as creative designs rather than copies.

Precarious creativity: Selling a Chinese dream

Creativity in Shanzhai culture should be understood as a social and interactive activity corresponding to the collective imagination of cultural production, both in its ability to copy and produce original work (Pang, 2012; Yang, 2016). Such an understanding of creativity is not only found in Shanzhai, but also refers to a multiplicity of imitative activities; other concurrent worldwide phenomena of participatory culture, such as remixing audio-visual arts and counterfeit production, are indicative of a collective form of knowledge production and defy legal or official claims of “property” in privatizing cultural expressions (Jenkins, 2004; Lessig, 2004; Sundaram, 2010).

Women designers’ Shanzhai practice that highlights the effort to modify, appropriate, and create are symptomatic of the power of the copy. For one thing, the industrialized creativity as a function of copying grants the imitated products the power to destroy the aura of the “authentic” commodity (Benjamin, 2007). For another, the very act of copying again confers the aura of authenticity and exclusivity onto the original (Tam, 2014). In many cases only the legal recognition of official-ness serves as the distinction between the original and the copy (Ho, 2010). Additionally, some Shanzhai fashion products inspire their own imitators, and multiple *Shanzhai of Shanzhai* have been produced with profound reverence to the “original” copycats. In Chang’s (2004) thought-provoking analysis of the global networking of counterfeit production and consumption, she describes logomania in East Asia through the case study of faking LV’s products in Taiwan, poignantly critiquing the fact that the world of copies and counterfeits is subject to global fashion consciousness yet simultaneously subverts global capitalism by appropriating its power of dissemination.

A case in point is the woman designer Grape-Lee, who makes high-end shoes. On 29 April 2016, she posted a short video in her Weibo, featuring a shoe OEM with which she collaborated to copy luxury shoe brands such as Jimmy Choo, Roger Vivier, and Givenchy (Grape-Lee, 2016). Unlike a sweatshop, the factory shown in the video has clean floors, modern facilities, both skilled manual workers as well as white-collar

workers, and good organization with different departments for research and design, storage, production, and quality control. Grape-Lee introduced it as a top-tier shoe OEM in China, describing the exclusive contract she signed with the factory to prevent copycats of her shoes. In numerous retweets and comments of the post, it is clear that the concern of being Shanzhai-ed by others is tangible and real for both the designer and consumers, for not only economic reason but also the cultural aspect of maintaining the StudioLee brand. Here, a pair of copied shoes deconstructs and rebuilds the aura of uniqueness and exclusiveness, or fetishism, that conflates two perceptions of creativity. The meaning-making process of Shanzhai fashion transforms individuals' aesthetic expressions into folk knowledge production and value-making practice in specific market situations, and fits into the individual-based conceptualization of creativity as well as the global system of IPR concerning the creative industries (Pang, 2012). Therefore, these Shanzhai of Shanzhai not only rewrite the story of mimesis, but reflect an autonomous mode of modern technological reproduction (Appadurai, 1986; Pang, 2008), situating creativity in a precarious elaboration of transnational consumer culture, the state, fashion imitations, and women designers as individuals.

Such a phenomenon is common in current China's cultural landscape, where the postsocialist China faces, to borrow Yang's (2016) theorization, a cultural dilemma: The state attempts to establish the nation as a brand through the globalized discourse and norms (i.e., IPR as a rational system of creativity) to counter global hegemonic forces, while encountering resistance (i.e., Shanzhai) that appropriates the very global hegemony of transnational mass culture to disseminate. Interrogating women's practice in Shanzhai fashion uncovers more nuanced facets of the situation, which further complicates this picture. As mentioned earlier, women designers are self-made designers, whose economic capability and cultural expression are enormously constrained by the state because of its ability to silence and co-opt their utterance of recognition. Remarkably, it is exactly the same state, which advocates the Chinese Dream that also provides them the leeway to seek recognition, evident in the Shanzhai of Shanzhai products discussed above.

The Chinese Dream was officially introduced on 29 November 2012, leading to many top-down campaigns to promote the idea that "Everybody has a Chinese Dream," which encourages people to think about traditional moral concepts such as filial piety, diligence, persistence, and fighting for the good, with the ultimate goal of nation-building. Yang (2014) argues that the Chinese Dream as a global-national ideological formation engenders the vision of Created-in-China to conform to the global discourse of IPR and attempts to secure the state's subject position in the cultural context of globalization and national development. The Dream discourse nonetheless involves a variety of actors, or "dreamers," who dream a dream of their own and simultaneously are hardly captured by the state (Callahan, 2013).

Shanzhai fashion exemplifies the multifaceted dimensions of this type of production in China. Women designers are interlopers of the Chinese Dream: They desire individual prosperity through digital fashion work, but are excluded and denied entry into the very Dream they aspire to achieve. Their creativity does not legitimately count

as a force to innovate the nation and their collective production of knowledge and information in the fashion industry does not receive acknowledgment from the state as a contribution to the prosperity of the nation. It is precisely this precarious situation that characterizes the discursive formation and ideological operation of the Chinese Dream, through which the motivation of private initiatives and growth paradoxically coexist with political limitations on individual expressions (Ong & Zhang, 2008; Rofel, 2007).

Precarious creativity thus, first and foremost, entangles top-down national campaigns of Created-in-China with bottom-up practice of Shanzhai culture being packaged and sold as a version of the Chinese Dream. It is safe to argue that Shanzhai fashion inverts the hegemony of global fashion labels which fetishizes commodity and class: Women's digital labor de-fetishizes the labor process and de-mythicizes the class-ideology embedded in fashion production and consumption. Nonetheless, women designers (as participants in creating a Shanzhai imaginary) struggle to claim for themselves the right to be part of the cultural process. On the one hand, the Dream discourse opens up possibilities for women designers to gain recognition for their participation in Shanzhai culture: They are women who embrace entrepreneurship and the DIY spirit, aspire to the glamor and fantasy of transnational consumerism, and want to obtain the desirable status associated with fashion awareness and cosmopolitanism, resonating with the postfeminist sensibility across the globe (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Not only do these designers create copies of fashion products through appropriation, modification, and innovation, they also must actively monitor fickle global fashion trends; consume high-fashion products; maintain contacts with factories; establish and network with a consumer base; sustain popularity through social media; and stay alert to the political and economic climate, especially to e-commerce policies and rules. On the other, the very act of copying and the counterfeit nature of Shanzhai fashion products do not fall into the rational system of creativity, which legitimizes the state's expropriation of Shanzhai to innovate the nation, a vision of a great cultural power also comprised in the Chinese Dream. Women designers are impossible Chinese Dreamers, being pushed away by the same Dream they yearn to fulfill. In other words, women designers' Shanzhai practice exposes from within the possibility and impossibility of the Chinese Dream.

The precarious creativity of Shanzhai fashion in China is an elaborate dance, in which the relation between the power of copying and the power of policing is becoming strained in a global context. Shanzhai women designers aspire to the promises of Shanzhai fashion, and meanwhile they are also exposed to the dangers and crises inherent in such practice. The Chinese Dream is tangible but evasive, promising but vanishing, indeterminate as to what Berlant (2011) called "cruel optimism" (p. 1). It forces these women designers to embrace creativity in the precarious space between danger and promise, crisis and hope, survival and success. In this way, these women designers not only epitomize the ambitions of other Shanzhai practitioners or Chinese Dreamers, but also are becoming a pivot of the precarious creativity that is prevalent in the ongoing cultural transformation of China.

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Notes

- 1 RooCool's post was accessed on 30 April 2016 through [https://shop102472691.taobao.com/?spm=a230r.7195193.1997079397.2.wQPiAs](https://shop102472691.taobao.com/?spm=a230r.7195193.1997079397.2.wQPiAsRooCool's+post+was+accessed+on+30+April+2016+through+https://shop102472691.taobao.com/?spm=a230r.7195193.1997079397.2.wQPiAs)
- 2 The image was accessed on 30 January 2016 through <https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?spm=a230r.1.14.9.HkCOjW&id=522123590344&ns=1&abucket=17#detail>
- 3 China's apparel OEMs or OEM services receive orders from transnational fashion houses and produce garments with the design, fabric, and other raw materials provided by them.
- 4 The image was accessed on 30 January 2016, through <https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?spm=a1z10.5-c.w4002-12986378084.45.Y12QP5&id=4477002328>
- 5 The Weibo account was accessed on 3 May 2016 through http://weibo.com/shanzhutuan?from=myfollow_group&is&uscore;all=1

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