

Sara Liao, **Fashioning China: Precarious Creativity and Women Designers in Shanzhai Culture**, London, UK: Pluto, 2020, 224 pp., \$95.00 (hardback).

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Fashioning China: Precarious Creativity and Women Designers in Shanzhai Culture by Sara Liao examines the cultural and political dynamics of our time. This study explores the concept of “Shanzhai,” a term that has evolved over time in China. Originally, Shanzhai referred to remote “mountain fortresses” that existed beyond governmental control, conjuring images of resistance and defiance against mainstream authority. In modern China, however, the term has taken on a new meaning: counterfeit or imitation products, especially mobile phones. These Shanzhai goods are not mere replicas; they often come with their own unique features and are usually budget-friendly, making them particularly popular among the working-class and migrant populations.



The dawn of the 21st century is characterized by challenges that transcend both the digital and physical realms. Digital landscapes and political systems serve as conduits linking people, yet they do so within a context of heightened monitoring and the commercial exploitation of personal existences for marketing ends. By focusing on the experiences of Shanzhai female designers, the book explores issues connected to gender, creativity, and cultural production in contemporary China. This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the Shanzhai phenomenon within the fashion sector, highlighting how it enables innovative design while also offering affordable options for consumers.

Fashioning China consists of six chapters. The opening chapter discusses fashion work, precarious labor, and the role of women designers in Shanzhai culture. In chapter 2, the author uses conjunctural analysis to explore the fluid and contested nature of Shanzhai fashion, linking it to Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony and societal forces (p. 29). This analytical approach, endorsed by Lawrence Grossberg (2010), delves into the temporary social structures and tensions that manifest, often subtly, as a form of social crisis. Chapter 3 focuses on the production culture of the fashion industry, highlighting the digital work done by women as a part of their daily routines. The politics of copying and creativity in Shanzhai fashion culture are discussed in chapter 4. The intersection of women designers’ aspirations in Shanzhai and the Chinese Dream is explored in chapter 5. In chapter 6, the relationship between Shanzhai culture and national ideologies is explored, revealing the dual nature of transnational capitalism.

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In the initial chapter, the author investigates the lives and contributions of women designers in the Shanzhai fashion sector. The chapter elaborates on this Chinese phenomenon involving imitations or counterfeit goods, often infused with humor and subversive elements. According to the author, women designers in Shanzhai fashion embody "precarious creativity," striving for autonomy in their work despite the uncertainties and constraints of China's shifting cultural landscape. The notion of "precarious creativity" is introduced, indicating a state in which individuals aim for some level of control over their creative output, even while navigating an unpredictable and insecure broader cultural context.

Chapter 2 examines the historical foundations of Shanzhai fashion, tracing it back to China's emphasis on clothing manufacturing in the late 1970s. The "reform period" fostered the collaboration between the state, corporations, and consumers. Domestic e-commerce and media platforms rose as a notable outcome of this alignment. These reforms have exacerbated material disparities and produced a digitally savvy generation that promotes anti-authoritarian perspectives online while facing expectations to conform to state-endorsed principles of patriotic consumption.

Within this complex landscape, the role of women designers gained prominence. Their "precarious creativity" is not a passive attribute bequeathed by external entities such as digital audiences, cultural influencers, corporations, or state institutions. It is a response to multiple forces shaped by active practice. Liao examines the intricate relationships between women designers, creative processes, cultural engagement, corporate mandates, and governmental impact. She explains the crucial role of women designers in shaping the fashion industry amid unstable socioeconomic conditions.

Chapter 3 conducts an in-depth investigation of the Shanzhai fashion production chain, breaking it down into four essential moments of fashion imitation: selecting images of items to copy, purchasing the original product, focusing on in-house production, and gathering feedback to loop back to the initial selection phase for potential reproduction. The chapter traces the lifecycle of various goods, from clothing and accessories to images of famous outfits, as they move through the Shanzhai process, guided by consumer suggestions. This examination not only focuses on the material value of these products but extends its analysis to their intangible consequences, especially in terms of social relationships. Within this network of interconnected elements, women designers emerge as key players. They deliver the digital labor needed for the conversion of ordinary items into Shanzhai fashion pieces, resulting in shifts in associated value systems, employing digital technologies to foster diverse forms of participation, and maneuvering through a complex web of relationships.

Chapter 4 focuses on the multifaceted world of Shanzhai, marked by a proliferation of copies. The novel concept of "Shanzhai of Shanzhai" is mentioned, indicating the practice of replicating an already-replicated fashion article. This concept creates an innovative space for women to explore alternative futures. The chapter examines Shanzhai adaptations of "celebrity styles," shedding light on the emerging class distinctions between fashionistas, who function as style icons, and consumers who imitate them. The creation of these fashion stars and their ensuing appropriation harmonizes with the extensive, ongoing activities within Shanzhai fashion consumption and production and illustrates the Deleuzian perspective of the simulacrum (p. 117). Herein, a copy of a copy manifests the potential and affirmative aspects of replication. "Shanzhai of Shanzhai" underscores a capacity to question conventional beliefs about

originality and authenticity, invigorating the very act of copying while nurturing creativity through internal diversifications. In this context, copying evolves into a catalyst for creativity.

Chapter 5 explores the relationship between women's digital labor, the Chinese Dream, and the Shanzhai phenomenon. The Chinese Dream is a national narrative designed to encapsulate the aspirations of the Chinese people for individual and collective success, a harmonious society, and national rejuvenation. Nevertheless, this chapter contends that the Chinese Dream simultaneously co-opts and marginalizes the Shanzhai aspirations of individual women designers. Indeed, Shanzhai refers to crafting imitative or unlicensed versions of popular products, incorporating innovative elements. Female designers in China partake in Shanzhai fashion, creating unique and imaginative designs that challenge traditional notions of authenticity and originality. The ambitions of these designers, rooted in their ingenuity and yet vulnerable labor conditions, contradict the dominant narrative of the Chinese Dream. While this grand narrative aims to include innovative phenomena like Shanzhai in a nation-building project, it simultaneously sidelines them because of their ambiguous legal status. Women designers navigate an environment shaped by techno-utopian aspirations, profit-motivated patriarchal systems, and the dominant discourse of the Chinese Dream. The interplay of inclusion and exclusion informs the experiences of women designers.

Despite challenges, women designers in China uncover avenues to express their unique subjectivities. They navigate sociocultural, political, and economic factors, engaging with ideals of a brighter future in terms of relationships and personal aspirations. Through their artistic endeavors, they carve out zones of resistance and emancipation.

The final chapter reiterates the book's key argument, underlining the importance of examining women's digital labor in an age of uncertainty. Women's creativity is influenced by a complex web of sociocultural, political, and economic determinants. The book uncovers unexpected ways in which gender, precariousness, and the replication industry intersect in China, leading to resistance and liberation in digital societies.

Liao argues that the diverse expressions of these women highlight a crucial tension among cultural creators in China. The state and Shanzhai manufacturers shape ambitions and dreams. The text acknowledges the limitations and tensions set by dominant narratives while celebrating women designers' agency, resilience, and creative potential. It uncovers how they maneuver through the complex interplay of creativity, gender, and societal expectations. The book provides an illuminating perspective on how these women revolutionize contemporary Chinese fashion and design, offering valuable insights into the cultural, social, and economic facets of this exceptional creative phenomenon. In so doing, it challenges conventional notions of authenticity in the fashion industry. However, understanding Shanzhai within its socioeconomic context necessitates more than a cursory knowledge of China.

Liao weaves key aspects of Chinese history into the narrative, integrating phrases like Mao Zedong's "women hold up half the sky" (p. 133) and Deng Xiaoping's concept of "jumping into the sea" (*xiahai*; p. 38) to encourage private entrepreneurship. While these historical references are presented in an accessible way, it is easy to overlook the cultural and historical elements that underpin the book. The

use of such phrases serves to contextualize the modern phenomena discussed in the study within a broader historical tapestry, adding layers of meaning and complexity. The book is not just a contemporary analysis; it is also a journey through China's past, offering readers a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon of Shanzhai. A solid grasp of key events in modern Chinese history would undoubtedly enhance the value of this book. This does not, however, diminish the text's manifold merits.

Reference

Grossberg, L. (2010). *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.