

ASIAN VISUAL CULTURES

Edited by Jeroen de Kloet, Chow Yiu Fai, and Lena Scheen

Boredom, *Shanzhai*, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China

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Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

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I Introduction

We Must Create?

Jeroen de Kloet, Chow Yiu Fai, and Lena Scheen

Abstract

Premised on the *imperative of creativity*, this introduction explicates discourses saturated with notions of individual talent marked by inspiration, newness, and innovation. It offers context to the book's aim to critically re-enter the idea of creativity, by aligning it to three concepts, considered by the authors to be emblematic for the Creative China of our time: boredom, *shanzhai* (a vernacular Chinese term connoting copying and appropriation), and digitisation. All three hover around ideas of innovation, newness, and their constitutive flip sides of copying and repetition. After a discussion of these concepts, foregrounding their concerns and the question of what creativity may enable as well as disable, the chapter introduces the organising logic of the book and the ensuing chapters.

Keywords: creativity, Creative China, boredom, *shanzhai*, digitisation

The future no longer seems to promise anything fundamentally new;
instead, we imagine endless variations on what already exists.¹

The imperative of creativity

The collaborative writing process of this introduction was like a rather strenuous, winding journey full of detours and distractions. While waiting inspiration, we would often go online, check our Facebook, or use WeChat to chat with one another and send some pictures. This writing process,

¹ Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014 [1992]), 1.

likely quite familiar to the reader, is often a fight with or against boredom, as searching for the right angle for the text, the right opening, the best structure, goes slowly and is, above all, a messy affair. Waiting for inspiration too often turns out to be like *Waiting for Godot* – it is destined never to arrive, really. Instead, it seems wiser to use an app that carries the apparently unintentionally ironic name of *Freedom*, which shuts down your internet connection, and then to just start writing, trying to ignore that feeling that haunts so much of our writing: it has to be something new! And yet, so much has already been written! We cannot and should not copy things we have already written, and, on top of that quite impossible demand, how to add something to the massive body of literature that has already been published?

These struggles, we believe, are not unique to the three of us, as they haunt both academic and creative work. What we like to call the *imperative of creativity* in this introduction, drags us into discourses that are saturated with notions of individual talent that is marked by inspiration, newness, and innovation. These celebrated notions often operate as disciplinary straight-jackets; they confine rather than liberate, to the extent that they may even paralyse our writing. How to liberate creativity from these straightjackets? This book is an attempt to critically re-enter the idea of creativity, hopefully to steer away from its disciplinary implications, and we do so by aligning it to three different and interconnected concepts: boredom, *shanzhai* (a vernacular Chinese term connoting copying and appropriation), and digitisation. As our short reflection upon our writing process already alludes to, these three notions are intimately entangled with creativity: the struggle of writing is often also a struggle with and against boredom, one that is dovetailed by a fear of copying, of writing nothing new. As Pang Laikwan writes, ‘the force of the new has always driven modernity – in the social discourse of modernisation and technological development, and in the aesthetic discourse of modernist arts.’² Today, our digital culture offers both a welcome escape route, but also makes the process of writing even more hazardous, as texts and information have amplified – we may well label the internet a loquacious device – to the point that we hardly know where to start researching and archiving, making the demand for the new seem all the more out of reach.

Boris Groys continues the line with which we open this introduction as follows, ‘For many people, it is depressing to imagine the future as an endless reproduction of the past and present. For others, a new age in social and artistic practice is dawning, one liberated from the dictates of the new and from diverse

2 Lai-kwan Pang, ‘“China Who Makes and Fakes”: A Semiotics of the Counterfeit’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25.6 (2008): 117-40.

future-oriented utopian and totalitarian ideologies.’ He wrote these words in 1992, at the heyday of poststructuralist and postmodern thinking, a time in which any claim towards either the new, or the utopian future would meet with suspicion and disbelief. While we are less mesmerised by the postmodern today, we do want to commit ourselves in this book to its questioning of the new, or maybe better, we wonder: can we rearticulate the new in such a way that it does not devalue ideas of copying, of repetition, and of mimicry?

The imperative of creativity is not restricted to the domain of cultural production. It permeates all professional and private realms: a manager, a scholar, a teacher, a parent, or a child all ought to be creative today. Self-help handbooks are written on how to foster your creativity; take, for example, Rod Judkins’ *The Art of Creative Thinking*, a book that is ‘passionately about taking the spirit of creativity that exists in the art world out into the wider world’.³ Throughout the book, quotes are given from the usual, and of course Western, creative suspects, ranging from Salvador Dali to Daniel Radcliffe and from George Eliot to Arthur Koestler. The latter is quoted saying that ‘creativity is the defeat of habit by originality’,⁴ a statement once again validating the demand for the new and the original. It is therefore not surprising that all around the world, city governments embrace the idea of the creative city and emerging economies jump on the same bandwagon in order to move from a place of manufacturing to a place of creation. This slowly pushes us towards the paradoxical situation in which all cities are creative – a situation in which creativity is bound to evaporate as a meaningful category. In creativities’ slipstream, other words like originality, innovation, smart, and sustainability often follow suit. China is part of this global trend. In this book, we want to steer away from uncritically celebrating the emergence of what Angela McRobbie aptly calls the creativity dispositif.⁵ At the same time, we feel uncomfortable with its inversion, the critique, often inspired by neo-Marxism, which reads creativity solely as a driving force for a global neo-liberalism that produces precarious jobs and propels further inequalities between classes as well as between places.⁶

We straddle these two positions, searching both for what creativity may enable as well as disable. We do so by way of probing, as creativity ‘has

3 Rod Judkins, *The Art of Creative Thinking: 89 Ways to See Things Differently* (New York: Tarcher Perigee, 2016), 2.

4 *Ibid.*, 234.

5 Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).

6 For this critique, see, among others, McRobbie, *Be Creative*, and Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London; New York: Verso, 2015).

a strong tendency to resist definition',⁷ in particular the proliferation of different creativities in China – to see how they resonate and dissonate with experiences elsewhere. Seeing this as a journey with an unclear destiny, afraid as we are of overcoded and univocal arguments that are often driven by fixed binaries and strong and rigid ideological positions, we have tried to include different voices: those of PhD students who were in the midst of their fieldwork when invited to send in their tentative findings and thinking; those of scholars already engaged for a longer time with the issue of creativity and of Chinese creativity; and those of artists and curators, practitioners working in the creative fields. We must probably thank and blame the imperative of creativity for guiding us to edit the book this way.

In the essay following this introduction, Eitan Wilf traces a genealogy of the idea of creativity from the Greeks' divine inspiration, via the romantic idea of individual genius to its current commoditised and copyrighted version. His chapter, together with this introduction, constitutes the general framing of this book. The subsequent three parts are organised according to three interrelated phenomena that we consider emblematic for the Creative China of our time: boredom, *shanzhai*, and digitisation.

First, as already alluded to in our opening to this introduction, our lives are continuously haunted by the spectre of boredom, of monotony, of doing the same thing time and again. The daily routine of a nine-to-five (or, more likely, later than five) job, the writing of yet another academic article, household chores, the perfunctory performance of bouquets and chocolates at anniversaries – all seem to be entrenched in quotidian fixities that make us feel helpless and uncreative. Creativity may hold the promise here of an escape from boredom, of doing things and living lives differently, and of thrusting open an aspirational window on the future. But boredom may also be an important constitutive condition for creativity.

Second, the notion of *shanzhai* allows us to go deeper into, and question, the already mentioned notions like new, innovation, unique, and talented. The emergence of *shanzhai* culture in China, in which cities, buildings, phones, people, books, and so forth, are being mimicked, is often read as an infringement of copyright law – the juridical underpinning of the reading of creativity as something unique, individual (or better, locatable), and innovative. But *shanzhai* practices attest to something different: the 'fake' iPhone has more rather than fewer functions, while new items are added to the 'real' Paul Smith winter collection. In general, it has helped to engender a vernacular culture of copying and pasting that is embraced by many Chinese

7 Pang, "China Who Makes and Fakes", 118.

youngsters. Or think of the mimetic practice in calligraphy, where an ideal is to write like your master, to become a perfect imitator. *Shanzhai* cultures may also help to revalidate the importance of craftsmanship, as the focus is more on making than on creating. Amidst this diversity, we are interested in the contingency and potentiality in *shanzhai* practices.

Third, digitisation is a force that is currently transforming the global cultural and creative landscape at rapid speed. As elsewhere in the world, China aspires to become a leading nation in new technology and has initiated its Internet Plus policy as a driver for economic growth. At the same time, the penetration of new technologies in everyday life seems to surpass that in the West: *Weixin*, in addition to its Whatsapp-ish functions, is fast morphing into a financial tool, while the new generation's current career dream is to develop an app. New technologies also pose a challenge to traditional forms of creative education and legitimisation: nowadays, one can pick up a digital recorder, or say an iPhone, to shoot a movie, regardless of whether or where one is trained. Concomitantly, it also generates possibilities of 'citizen journalism', particularly relevant to a heavily controlled media landscape like that in China.

These brief accounts, a prelude to the remains of this introduction, concerning the intersections between boredom, *shanzhai*, digitisation, and creativity as played out in contemporary China, await elaborations, examinations, and problematisations. These three aspects may strike the reader as rather haphazard, but we contend that they are not. All three hover around ideas of innovation, newness, and their constitutive flip sides of copying and repetition. Boredom alludes to the repetitive in everyday life, and thus is perceived to be at odds with innovation and renewal. *Shanzhai* culture refers to the culture of the fake that proliferated so abundantly in China. As this volume will show, the culture of the fake does not exclude creativity, but rather may give it an important twist. Finally, the realm of the digital allows for the endless copying and circulation of cultural practices, once again pushing the dialectics of repetition and creation further. Thinking about the three aspects of boredom, *shanzhai*, and digitisation together, we argue, will help us to reimagine the imperative of creativity, in particular its driving forces of the new, the talented, and the original.

Thus, we wonder in this volume, how do boredom, *shanzhai*, and digitisation impact on creative practices in China, and vice versa? What is actually going on at the interface of creative and everyday lives? How (far) do 'Chinese' creative practices, as understood from the three interrelated phenomena, facilitate different ways of theorising and understanding 'creativity'? Before embarking on different ways to answer these questions, let us take a closer look at the three guiding concepts of this volume.

Boredom

We were never being bored
 'Cause we were never being boring
'Being Boring', Pet Shop Boys

These catchy lines, for the generation growing up with the electronic duo (including the authors of this chapter), have become some kind of mantra performing a paradoxical function. It celebrates the fun, the beauty, the youth of a party-going life and, at the same time, it laments its inevitable demise, when the parties end and the youthful grows into, to use another Pet Shop Boys hit, the suburbia of boring adulthood. 'Being Boring' was released in 1990. Five years earlier, educator and communication theorist Neil Postman published a book outlining a dystopic world ruled by the logic of pleasure, entertainment, and triviality. As enshrined in the alarming title – *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* – this new world thrives on the anxiety of being bored and boring, and turns itself, at least according to Postman, into something worse than the dictatorial and pain-inflicting regime of 1984. Indeed, citing in particular television and TV news in his time, Postman argues persuasively that it is not George Orwell's 1984 that we should fear, but Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. 'What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one'.⁸

The Pet Shop Boys' song and Postman's book differ in their central concern: youth ideals and entertainment culture, respectively. What they share is a sensitivity towards something happening in the 1980s and the 1990s they were experiencing. For one, it is the anxiety of boredom; for the other, it is the anxiety of that anxiety. Taken together, it is hardly surprising that boredom is often conceived as a modern affect, discourse, and invention; something, say, of our time. We become bored when the modern condition ushers us to attach increasing importance to leisure, to feel that we should be happy, to have largely abandoned religious preoccupations, to increasingly function individualistically, and to live in a standardisation of time and space.⁹ In

8 Niel Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin Books, 2005 [1985]), xix.

9 Ben Anderson, 'Time-stilled Space-slowed: How Boredom Matters', *Geoforum* 35.6 (2004): 739-54.

the words of Elizabeth Goldstein, '[i]n a time when the drives to novelty and innovation, speed and progress that have always defined modernity have become the foundation of a process of continuously accelerating transformation, boredom haunts the Western world'.¹⁰ Citing a number of philosophers (from Pascal to Adorno) and writers (from Goethe to Pessoa) on boredom, Lars Svendsen notes that all of them 'belong to the modern period'.¹¹ Some turn to language to argue for the modern emergence of boredom. They argue that the word 'boredom' has a relatively short history, emerging somewhere in the eighteenth century but only morphing to general usage decades later. 'To bore' is traced to the following century, in 1812 to be exact,¹² and 'boredom' to 1864.¹³ Such genealogy is troubled by a quote from Søren Kierkegaard, who passed away in 1855, and is claimed to have expressed 'How dreadful boredom is – how dreadfully boring [...] I lie prostrate, inert; the only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness'.¹⁴ In response to such disqualifications, and making a leap in time towards the present, others have argued that boredom can also be considered a virtue. Brian O'Connor, for example, argues in *Idleness – A Philosophical Essay*, drawing in particular on German idealism and its aftermath, that 'while idleness involves a way of living that has ceded from social pressures, thereby reducing the scope of the influence of socialisation itself, it too may be understood as an expression of flourishing'.¹⁵ He draws on, among others, Schiller's and Marcuse's claim on the importance of play in life. Idleness can be considered boredom's twin, and O'Connor's view helps us to redirect our gaze from sheer condemnation towards its more productive dimensions.

Taking boredom as a state of mind, literary scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks traces the contemporaneous rise of both the idea of boredom and the genre of the novel in the context of early modernity, particularly that of leisure. Another line of work that connects boredom to modernity is informed by practices of non- or pre-modern cultures. Anthropologist Yasmine

10 Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience Without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1.

11 Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion, 2005), 20.

12 Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, 'Introduction: The Delicate Monster: Modernity and Boredom'. In *Essays on Boredom and Modernity*, eds. Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 11.

13 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 32.

14 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life* (Copenhagen: University Bookshop Reitzel, 1843).

15 Brian O'Connor, *Idleness – A Philosophical Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 20.

Musharbash studies the life of aboriginal populations in Australia before colonisation.¹⁶ Demonstrating how they were living in the moment, Musharbash believes that they did not experience boredom and their language had no word to such effect or affect. The colonisers, bringing with them clocks, other modernist gadgets, and conceptions of linear time – i.e. the past and memory – brought boredom to the aboriginal world. Such studies resonate with earlier thinkers reflecting on time and modernity. Henri Lefebvre, gesturing to Heidegger, considers life in pre-modern societies ‘was organised in relation to the endless, undulating cycles of birth and death, remembrance and recapitulation that mark the natural world’, generating ‘constant newness within continuity’.¹⁷ This marks a stark contrast with the modern time, or the time of the modern, organised by repetition, which ‘is derived from the dictates of technology, work and production’.¹⁸

Are only modern human beings capable of being bored? Some wonder. Firstly, a host of studies in such disciplines as neuroscience, psychology, and psychiatry has sought to demonstrate the biological and thus universal nature of boredom. Drawing on these studies, philosopher Peter Toonley argues against the modern history of boredom. He is of the view that human beings have many ways to express such boredom without necessarily resorting to naming it directly. At the same time, he makes a useful distinction between two kinds of boredom, the quotidian and the existential, the latter of which seems to be what many scholars on boredom are reflecting on. If we are talking about the boredom we may experience on a daily basis, Toonley does not believe it is the privilege of the moderns. Instead, ‘[h]umans always have had the capacity for this emotion [of boredom]’; it is just that ‘not all societies enable or require humans to experience boredom’.¹⁹ Having established this premise, Toonley proposes to revisit boredom in the current society – he cites the credit crunch as a defining characteristic – and presents boredom as a useful emotion, particularly as ‘an early warning signal that certain situations may be dangerous to our well-being’.²⁰

Similar to Toonley, we want to focus on the quotidian kind of boredom that, we believe, shows the most immediate and interesting bearings with the general theme of this book: creativity. We place our inquiry in contemporary

16 Yasmine Musharbash, ‘Boredom, Time, and Modernity: An Example from Aboriginal Australia’, *American Anthropologist* 109.2 (2007): 307-17.

17 Michael E. Gardiner, ‘Henri Lefebvre and the “Sociology of Boredom”’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 29.2 (2012): 43.

18 *Ibid.*, 44.

19 Peter Toonley, *Boredom: A Lively History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 156.

20 *Ibid.*, 174.

China and seek to examine the intertwining of boredom with a society whose citizens are groomed with modern and cosmopolitan longings, aspirations, and needs;²¹ whose youth negotiate surveillance and discipline with spaces opened up in the realms of entertainment and popular culture;²² and whose state policy of soft power works in tandem with local and global capital to engender an ideology and proliferation of practices loosely described as creative.²³ In short, it is a society on the trajectory of modernity, but, so to speak, with Chinese characteristics, and our take on boredom here is how does this society of contemporary China enable or require its populations to experience boredom through creative practices?

Specifically, while we are not interested in taking boredom as a warning, or as something to celebrate and to lament, we follow many of the works cited earlier and take boredom not necessarily or exclusively as something negative; rather, we take it as a useful starting point to lodge two questions that are possibly one: how does creativity help mitigate boredom? And how does boredom incubate creativity? We are aware that these questions and assertions are not new and hasten to add that such a demand for the perpetually new actually runs counter to the spirit of this volume. Indeed, boredom and being idle is considered by a wide range of authors, ranging from philosophers to novelists, and from psychologists to writers of self-help books, to be constitutive of creativity. One example from the genre of self-help books comes from *The School of Life*, written by Eva Hoffman, with the telling title *How to be Bored*.²⁴ In this book, Hoffman suggests that modernity has gone berserk, ushering in a world of speed ridden with anxiety and hyperactivity and, like Neil Postman, it is the media, this time the digital media, that are one of the main culprits. The book offers an array of counter strategies to stimulate and foster boredom, ranging from introspection and idleness to creative play and keeping a diary.

In this volume, we are similar to and distinct from the aforementioned treatises on boredom. We are similar, for instance, to Michael Gardiner's re-entry into Lefebvre's 'sociology of boredom' when he points to Lefebvre's interest in the question of 'how the vague dissatisfactions we usually associate

21 Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

22 Jeroen de Kloet and Anthony Y. H. Fung, *Youth Cultures in China* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

23 Michael Keane, *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); *Creative Industries in China: Art, Design and Media* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013); Francois Jullien, *The Silent Transformation*, trans. K. Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Seagull Books, 2011).

24 Eva Hoffman, *How to be Bored* (London: The School of Life, 2016).

with boredom can elide into other, more transformational instances'.²⁵ We are similar in striving for a better understanding of 'our human propensities for passionate engagement, play and the ludic [...], the pleasurable and the aesthetic'.²⁶ Nevertheless, our enquiries here are less oriented towards the existential, at least not in the utopian sense of the transformative potentials of boredom: 'a slow but profound modification of the everyday – of a new usage of the body, of time and space, of sociability; something that implies a social and political project'.²⁷ We agree with Ben Anderson that boredom matters but we do not align exactly with his thinking on 'movements-from boredom, such as joy, hope and despair' for Bloch's conception of the 'not-yet become'.²⁸ We are sceptical of uncritical celebrations of boredom as an antidote to a world of speed and anxiety, such as Hoffman's book. But her connection to hyperactivity and speed does gesture towards the case of China. In its dazzlingly rapid change, its compressed modernity, in its hyperactive and deeply digitised everyday life, China strikes us as a unique case. The difference with other places is less a matter of cultural particularity and more a matter of sheer intensity. When everyday life in the Chinese city resembles that of a pressure cooker, especially for the young generation,²⁹ what are the possible alliances and articulations between boredom and creativity? And between boredom, *shanzhai*, and digitisation? Our inquiries on creative practices in contemporary China may well shed light on these grander questions of humanity's and China's future; but our immediate remit is less philosophical than empirical, as we seek to discover how some populations on earth deal creatively with boredom in the now.

Reverting to the issue of language, the Chinese equivalent to the word 'boredom' may well be 悶: pictorially a heart 心 inside a door 門.³⁰ While some would read the imprisonment of the heart within a door as something akin to boredom, it would be equally persuasive to emphasize the heart beating to break out. What is boredom? It is the dynamic between the heart and the door, the politics of closing and opening that intrigues us. In other words, we do not deliberate on what boredom is, but what boredom *does*, and we do it in the field of creative practices in a modernising and globalising China.

25 Gardiner, 'Henri Lefebvre', 53.

26 Ibid.

27 Henri Lefebvre, 'Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx's Death', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. L. Grossberg and C. Nelson (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 86-7.

28 Anderson, 'Time-stilled Space-slowed', 740.

29 de Kloet and Fung, *Youth Cultures in China*.

30 Available at <http://www.fantizi5.com/ziyuan/>, accessed July 13, 2017.

In the section on boredom, Anneke Coppoolse connects boredom with the modern condition of commodification and consumer culture to tease out what she calls the ‘aesthetics of overabundance’ in the works of two artists based in Hong Kong. In her study of the traditional performance of *muyuge* in Dongguan, Wen Cuiyan examines what boredom does to this particular intangible cultural heritage amidst state-sanctioned nationalistic narratives and economic imperatives. Following these two essays, Esther Peeren zooms out from the Chinese context and offers an intervention in rethinking boredom and creativity through the Bored Panda website and adult colouring books. Invoking a photo of vertical gardening, which he took with his smartphone in Hong Kong, Christoph Lindner considers the digitisation of the image and the slowness of the imaged practice to question the culture of speed and connectivity, quite the antidote to boredom, on creative practices. As field notes from the public parks in Beijing, Laura Vermeeren observes and explores how elderly people practice an ephemeral form of art – water calligraphy – as a way to let the ennui of their retired life evaporate with words they write on the park grounds. Li Hao, on the other hand, outlines the emergence of a new television genre in China – the male Cinderella drama – as audiences are presumably bored by the conventional female prototype. Finally, artist Kingsley Ng and composer Kung Chi Shing engage in a dialogue on performativity in what the interviewer Lo Yin Shan calls the age of banality.

Shanzhai

There is no such thing as too much *shanzhai* ~ only more *shanzhai*~
 The Chinese people are great
 Chinese people's creativity is limitless
 Long live the Chinese people
 Resolutely attack legitimate products, support pirate products
*Comment by a Chinese netizen under a blogpost on shanzhai products*³¹

A life-sized virtual image of the Chinese student Fu Xin at the exhibition of the Chinese-American exchange programme ‘Bringing the Chinese Dream to the U.S.’ (made by his classmates after Fu was denied a visa to join the programme);

³¹ Available at <https://www.chinasmack.com/funny-clever-chinese-shanzhai-brands>, accessed July 13, 2017.

a smiling President Obama above the text 'Obama's BlackBerry. My BlackBerry Whirlwind 9500' on the advertisement of a knock-off BlackBerry made by the 'company' Harvard Communication; a Chinese idol girl group named SNH48 in a music video performing the same dances and wearing the same Japanese high-school uniforms as the Japanese idol girl group AKB48... These are just some objects on the list of *shanzhai* practices featured in this book's essays. By no means exhaustive, the list nonetheless shows the richness and diversity of the phenomenon as well as the difficulty in defining the concept; *shanzhai* has become a vernacular term that can refer to nearly anything, from consumer goods and cultural products, to even people.

The literal translation of *shan-zhai* 山寨 is 'mountain fortress', an image known from Shi Nai'an's famous novel *Water Margin* 水滸傳 (1589), which tells a Robin Hood-like story about a group of 105 men and three women fighting a corrupt official in the Song Dynasty (960-1279). In the 1980s, the term *shanzhai* became mostly known for its reference to poor-quality, cheap counterfeits of brand products produced in the, often underground, factories in the Southern parts of China. In particular, the city of Shenzhen, which after its designation as one of the first Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in 1980 grew from a market town with 30,000 residents to a city of twelve million today, has become known as the centre of *shanzhai* production.

At the beginning of this century, *shanzhai* was mostly associated with copycat mobile phones made by small, semi-legal workshops, which were sold for around one third of the price of the original brands. Since both the producers and the consumers of these cheap mobile phones are migrant workers, *shanzhai* has come to be viewed as a product by and for the working class. While advanced-economy countries harshly criticise the (potential) violation of international Intellectual Property Laws (IPR) (copyrights, trademarks, and patents), many Chinese celebrate the 'democratising' power of *shanzhai* products and, in particular, of *shanzhai* mobile phones, providing access to the 'information have-less'.³² According to a Chinese survey conducted in 2009, almost 65 per cent of the people 'supports' *shanzhai* as an expression of the 'voice of the people' (民间声音), while only 30 per cent are 'against' it and view it as 'counterfeit, piracy, and fraud'.³³ It is in this

32 Fan Yang, 'China's "Fake" Apple Store: Branded Space, Intellectual Property and the Global Culture Industry', *Theory, Culture & Society* 31.4 (2014): 71-96; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Elizabeth Vann, 'The Limits of Authenticity in Vietnamese Consumer Markets', *American Anthropologist* 108.2 (2006): 286-95.

33 Five per cent had no opinion. Y. Hu, '*Shanzhai* de wenben jixi yu dangdai meijie biaoyi [A textual analysis of *shanzhai* and its representation in modern media]', *Sanxia Luntan* 3.238 (2011): 10.

vein that some Chinese scholars regard *shanzhai* as a modern-day version of Maoist ideology, i.e. the Mass Line, the People's War, and the principle of self-reliance. Xiao Yuefan, for example, argues in this volume that Maoism 'has decisively pre-configured the contours within which present-day *shanzhai* activities operate'. Made by and for the masses, *shanzhai* products are the outcome of a collective practice without an identifiable individual designer, inventor, patent owner, or an official brand.

This collective creative process makes the phenomenon at odds with common notions of creativity as a form of individual and original expression. Then again, the practice of copying existing, 'original', brands is at odds with common notions of creativity itself, where authenticity and originality are generally juxtaposed with fakeness and copying. *Shanzhai* challenges this idea of authenticity as original expression in relation to IPR laws, a specific Euro-American concern, as also argued by Vann: IPR laws 'are employed to maintain clear distinctions between the authentic and the fake, the genuine and the counterfeit. International IPR laws [...] derive from a history of legal decisions in Europe and the United States that linked authorship to ownership, privileged originals over copies, and turned ideas into property'.³⁴ Likewise, scholars like Vann (2006), Bhabha (1994), and Taussig (1993) have pointed out how the concept of authenticity has often served as an exclusionary category in colonial settings in which the coloniser was always represented as 'the original' and indigenous cultural practices and products as 'inferior copies'. The act of *shanzhai*-ing thus disrupts taken-for-granted understandings of 'original/authentic' and 'copy/fake' that haunt the discourse of creativity by revealing their roots in a global legal-economic system of exclusion and inequality.

In this light, it is interesting to take a closer look at the most well-known *shanzhai* product: 'fake' mobile phones. While the first *shanzhai* mobile phones date from before the development of smartphones, they were among the first mobile phones to experiment with additional apps that would later be standard on smartphones. This had everything to do with the fact that these mobile phones were primarily consumed by the 'information have-less' who had little to no access to other technology and fully relied on their *shanzhai* mobile phones.³⁵ In sharp contrast to the earlier discussed Maoist readings of *shanzhai*, this innovative potential of *shanzhai* is frequently

34 Vann, 'The Limits of Authenticity', 288. See also Jeroen de Kloet and Chow Yiu Fai, 'Shanzhai Culture, Dafen Art and Copyrights'. In *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*, eds. Chris Berry, Koichi Iwabuchi, and Eva Tsai (New York; London: Routledge, 2017), 229-41.

35 Fan Yang, 'China's "Fake" Apple Store', 86.

linked to the concept of ‘creative destruction’ (Schumpeter) in the domestic discourse; the capitalist idea that competition leads to innovation. Within the still strictly regulated Chinese economy that mainly focuses on Made in China, *shanzhai* becomes the place where innovation happens, where one can find the most creative people, products, and ideas, where the step to Created in China is taking place.

Importantly, *shanzhai* as a reproductive innovation process primarily reproduces *foreign* products *locally*. For this reason, it is also seen as a counterculture towards the Western ‘global innovation culture’ and the capitalist system by copying Western luxury goods into cheap and low-quality local products.³⁶ The idea of Chinese producers creatively ‘destroying’ Western brands is also behind the nationalist pride that many Chinese feel towards *shanzhai* products. ‘Long live the Chinese people / Resolutely attack legitimate products, support pirate products’, in the words of the Chinese netizen quoted at the opening of this section. One can even claim a quite specific history of copying here, Pang Laikwan argues that practices of copying defined life in China during the Cultural Revolution: ‘The mastery of an art often begins with copying, and it is only through copying that the underlying rules and patterns can be revealed, and the new discovered. Copying is always the foundation of different art trainings. But the acts of copying exercised by the Chinese people went far beyond the confines of the arts’.³⁷

At the same time, *shanzhai* can also turn *against* the Chinese state. ‘Essentially, *shanzhai*, or copycatting practice, occurs when people cannot consume certain products because of either price or policy’, Anthony Fung and Yiyi Yin observe in this volume. Just like there is more space for innovation and creativity in the production process of *shanzhai* luxury goods, the production of *shanzhai*-ed popular culture has opened up unique spaces for critical voices. Since 2008, the so-called Year of *Shanzhai*, there has been an explosion of *shanzhai* as, what Fan Yang calls ‘counterfeit culture’.³⁸ The fast development of new media and technology have made a kind of ‘do-it-yourself’-*shanzhai* possible, where websites like *Bilibili* and *Youku* are flooded with parody movies, music videos, and TV shows. For example, in his famous essay ‘Copycat’, the writer Yu Hua describes a *shanzhai* TV show

36 Josephine Ho, ‘*ShanZhai*: Economic/Cultural Production through the Cracks of Globalization’, plenary presentation, ACS Crossroads: 2010 Cultural Studies Conference, Hong Kong, June 2010.

37 Pang, *The Art of Cloning – Creative Production During China’s Cultural Revolution* (London: Verso, 2017), 247.

38 Fan Yang, *Faked in China: Nation Branding, Counterfeit Culture, and Globalization* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

made in the period of the Chinese milk powder scandal, ‘in the ponderous tones of Network News they announced that the regular anchors had been poisoned by contaminated milk and rushed off to intensive care; they had been brought in at the last minute to deliver that evening’s broadcast’.³⁹ Probably the most well-known example is the dozens of *shanzhai* Spring Festival Galas, some of which have attracted around two million viewers. While this becomes far less of an impressive number if one realises that the official Spring Festival Gala attracts around 800 million viewers, these spoof shows display a uniquely direct and open critique to the immensely popular and propagandistic TV show. This is particularly remarkable considering that while political satire, a genre more common in Western popular culture, is intensely censored in the Chinese context, framing it as a *shanzhai* practice seems to offer a discursive shield against official surveillance and enhance its survival and circulation. ‘Seen in this way, it represents a challenge of the grassroots to the elite, of the popular to the official, of the weak to the strong’, as Yu Hua asserts.⁴⁰ It is with these counterfeit cultural products, evoking a sense of illegality and subversion, that *shanzhai* regains the rebellious connotation from its etymological origin as the ‘mountain fortress’.

The rebellious connotation will become all the more evident when we juxtapose the term *shanzhai* with other possible ways of naming something faking, copying, or counterfeiting. In the Chinese nomenclature, *jia* 假 (and its variations such as *jiamao* 假冒 and *zuoja* 做假), meaning fake, usually refers to things that are not the real ones, but pretend to be. It is sometimes applied to *shanzhai* products, and what is worth noting is that when the products or practices become harmful, they are invariably called *jia*. Reverting to Yu Hua’s essay, the TV show is *shanzhai*, but the adulterated milk powder that became a health hazard to Chinese children will always be called *jia*. The latest scandal surrounding substandard vaccines shows similar linguistic use; they are *jia*, not *shanzhai*. This apparently impromptu vernacular distinction underwrites the positive connotation of *shanzhai*, of its alliance with the people, understood in juxtaposition to the state and corporate capital. However, just as the boundaries between *shanzhai* and *jia* are unsteady and porous, the rebellious potentials of faking, copying, and counterfeiting practices are always contingent. And it is this contingency and the potentiality opened by *shanzhai* practices that the inquiries in this book seek to examine and understand.

39 Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, trans. Allan H. Barr (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 186.

40 *Ibid.*, 188.

As the examples above show, *shanzhai* is about copying, but not quite, as there is so much more to it than just copying. Following this insertion of contingency and potentiality in connecting *shanzhai* with creativity, one could reconceptualise it as a form of cultural translation: with each translation from an assumed original to a copy, meanings slip away while other meanings proliferate.⁴¹ It is precisely in this process of translation that creativity comes into play. In their essay, Anthony Fung and Yiyi Yin analyse Chinese ‘second-degree reproductions’ of foreign cultural products such as Korean TV shows and Japanese anime, to argue that these radically *shanzhaied* versions ‘emphasize a kind of autonomy and self-owned authority’ that enable Chinese youth to create an alternative discourse within ‘the complex dynamic between commercial culture and the nation’s anti-globalisation policy’. In his study of Hong Kong-based artist Leung Mee-ping’s work ‘Made in Hong Kong/Shenzhen’, Louis Ho challenges the ‘individual model of creativity’ that undervalues craft labour, asking ‘who is the real artist of the work?’ Drawing on Maoism, Xiao Yuefan brings in a very different conceptual framework for understanding *shanzhai* and traces the participatory aspirations of *shanzhai* in Mao’s emphasis on art of and for the masses that served as a mobilisation vehicle for broader social equality. Lena Scheen questions why *shanzhai* products make us laugh and traces this apparently unsettling effect of *shanzhai* products in their ‘resistance of the newness dogma dominating Euro-American cultures’. After providing a rich overview of the *shanzhai* phenomenon in all its various forms and readings, Stefan Landsberger suggests copyrighting the term *shanzhai* itself and to transform it into a brand that signifies the turn from ‘made in China’ to ‘created by China’. Feng Fan reports on an exchange programme between Tsinghua University and the University of New York at Buffalo, where students made projects inspired by the question of whether the Chinese Dream is, in fact, a *shanzhai* version of the American Dream. In his field notes from interviews with television makers at Changsha’s Hunan Satellite TV, Arjen Nauta explores how the notion of ‘banal creativity’ can help us understand how television makers conceptualise and interpret creativity. Finally, two Shenzhen-based artists and curators Dai Dai and Deng Chunru discuss their experiences of the ‘two sides of SZ’ – Shenzhen and *shanzhai* – in relation to their own works.

41 Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Scheen, ‘Pudong: The *Shanzhai* Global City’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16.6 (2013): 706.

Digitisation

Dragging around folders, zooming in on random objects and double-clicking around in open space. With computers omnipresent in both work and private lives, idle fiddling via digital interface has become the equivalent of doodling in notebooks. Enter Chinese artist Lin Ke – pronounced similar to ‘link’ – the master of digital procrastination.

*Art magazine Sleek*⁴²

How to think the third theme, the digital, in relation to the first two themes of this volume, boredom and *shanzhai*? The digital artist Lin Ke explicitly connects the themes of boredom, copy culture, and digitisation in his work, turning digital procrastination into works of art.⁴³ By blending layers of images taken from the internet with material from computer software and videos of himself, any meaningful distinction between what is ‘real’ or ‘virtual’, ‘authentic’ or ‘copied’ dissolves, reducing the spectator – those who are pleaded to ‘like’ him – to passive consumers of yet another stream of images. According to the above-cited art magazine *Sleek*, ‘Ke describes the oversaturation-induced apathy that has left an entire generation of Internet users unenthusiastically switching between tabs for hours on end’.⁴⁴ Lin Ke aspired to become a painter, but when he could not afford a studio, and witnessing people around him wasting time behind computer and telephone screens, he decided to turn the computer into his studio and become a digital artist. Ironically, while immersing himself in digital cultures, he moved away from the city and is now living at the outskirts of Beijing, avoiding art openings and leading a quiet and solitary life. In his video work ‘Like Me’, Ke raps the foreshadowing postmodern words from a *Star Trek* episode from the 1960s, commenting on our increasingly digitised world, ‘When dreams become more important than reality, you give up travel, building, creating. You just sit, living and re-living other lives left behind in the thought wreck’.

Since the emergence of the internet, there has been much discourse about its liberating potential for China.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, the Chinese internet

42 Donna Schons, ‘The Chinese Artist Turning Digital Procrastination into Art’, *SLEEK* 54 (blog), accessed July 13, 2017, <http://www.sleek-mag.com/2017/07/13/lin-ke-art/>.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Yang Guobin, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, reprint edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

is perceived as a controlling machine, warded off by what is termed the Great Firewall – a problematic, simplifying, and Orientalising metaphor as Lokman Tsui has argued convincingly.⁴⁶ Much research has problematised univocal and technological deterministic readings of the internet in China, arguing, for example, how its development is very much shaped by the rise of a new ‘rule by morality’ that is only understood from its specific socio-cultural context.⁴⁷ Others have shown how beyond the battle between utopian and dystopian narratives, something quite different seems to have emerged in China over the past decade: a fragmented digital realm that penetrates everyday life deeply and that has by now become a profoundly commercialised space. In the words of Jens Damm, ‘This commercialisation of the Internet is significant because it has underpinned much of the trivialisation and de-politicisation of Internet content and usage in China. And in many ways, it is precisely this depoliticisation that has helped to create social spaces in which marginal groups such as gays and lesbians can claim a voice.’⁴⁸

Much has changed over the last decade, aside from an intensified commercialisation, we can see the shift from computers towards mobile phones and the related emergence of platforms like *Taobao*, *Weibo*, Taxi Didi, Mobike and, the multi-functional app without which one cannot survive in China today, WeChat. We are now witnessing the platformisation of Chinese society in which social life is profoundly mediated and structured by digital technologies. While in the recent past such platforms were often celebrated as vehicles of the ‘participatory society’ and the ‘sharing economy’,⁴⁹ they often prove less progressive than they appear at first sight. Rather than simply stimulating citizen participation and entrepreneurialism, they enable the ‘datafication’ and ‘commodification’ of all social relations: collecting, algorithmically processing, circulating, and selling user data.⁵⁰ Whereas in

46 Lokman Tsui, ‘An Inadequate Metaphor: The Great Firewall and Chinese Internet Censorship’, *Global Dialogue* 9.1/2 (2007): 60–8.

47 Wai-chi Rodney Chu and Chung-tai Cheng, ‘Cultural Convulsions: Examining the Chineseness of Cyber China’. In *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, eds. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 23–39.

48 Jens Damm, ‘The Internet and the Fragmentation of Chinese Society’, *Critical Asian Studies* 39.2 (2007): 291.

49 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

50 José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, ‘Understanding Social Media Logic’, SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2309065, Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 2013, accessed July 13, 2017, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2309065>.

the West, governments are increasingly trying to regulate platforms like Uber and Airbnb, the case of China is quite peculiar given the already strong involvement of the government. The government is eager to embrace the political and economic potentials new technologies have to offer, earlier in its e-government initiatives, today in its Internet Plus policies. These are geared towards updating the conventional industries in China through the use of the internet and other information technologies. As Michael Keane shows in his chapter, related terms like the 'Cloud' and the 'Internet of Things' are all part of these new policies and resonate with today's global movement towards more surveillance and an intensified datafication of social life.

However, just like the *shanzhai* examples of counterfeit culture described in the previous section, digital technologies also allow for the constant making and circulation of creative spoofs and parodies, and in more general terms, they *afford* the proliferation of different creativities. One example is the contrasting of pictures of Xi Jinping and Obama with Winnie the Pooh that went viral in China, after which the government quickly censored any mention of the yellow bear. Such memes constantly stir up laughter as well as debate, and can be read as a visual guerrilla warfare revolving around pleasure and humour, rather than direct political critique.⁵¹ It is not just the political context that may set digital cultures in China apart from other contexts, also the speed with which these cultures change, as well as their easy and rather smooth diffusion in particular towards the urban areas of China, seems to be extraordinary. Within less than a year, many young people in Beijing started to cycle again due to the massive distribution of rental bikes that are operated via an app (e.g. Ofo and Mobike). Food delivery to home turns out to be a way not just to save time, but also to avoid the air pollution and traffic jams. Due to the massive popularity of online shopping, streets are now occupied by delivery vans and motorbikes.

The Xi Jinping as Winnie the Pooh meme can be considered a bottom-up, everyday creative practice influenced by popular culture and facilitated by digital technologies; arguably a form of vernacular creativity. This term gestures to the mundane and everyday, to the banal and the trivial and, as such, to the constant making and circulation of GIF stickers on WeChat, the use of emoticons to replace words, and the memes discussed earlier. For Jean Burgess, 'one of the most useful questions cultural studies can ask about

51 See Bingchun Meng, 'From Steamed Bun to Grass Mud Horse: E Gao as Alternative Political Discourse on the Chinese Internet', *Global Media and Communication* 7.1 (2011):33-51; Thomas Poell, Jeroen de Kloet, and Guohua Zeng, 'Will the Real Weibo Please Stand up? Chinese Online Contention and Actor-Network Theory', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 7.1 (2014): 1-18.

new media is: “which technologies, practices and forms most effectively communicate vernacular creativity?”⁵² The word ‘communicate’ seems to be rather odd; instead, we wonder which practices *enable* or, following Keane in this volume, *afford* vernacular creativity. In Burgess’s reading, these creativities increasingly turn consumers into producers, a reading we doubt given that only few users of, for example, YouTube, actually create videos themselves.⁵³ What the term ‘vernacular creativity’ does do, in our view, is to recuperate the banal and everyday and thus allow for an understanding of creativity that steers away from the celebration of the purely unique and the absolute original. Instead, we are left with new configurations of already existing materials, of *shanzhai*’ed versions of the real, and it seems to be that especially new media cultures allow for such reconfigurations. This resonates with Burgess’s definition of creativity, which, for her, refers to ‘the process by which available cultural resources (including both “material” sources – content, and immaterial resources – genre conventions, shared knowledges) are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognisable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination’.⁵⁴

Aside from potentially being a boredom machine, new technologies also allow for the endless replication, repetition, and circulation of images, sounds, and words. As such, they somehow resemble a *shanzhai*’ing machine. The artwork *Chinternet Plus – A Counterfeit Ideology* by Miao Ying is a parodic take on the CCP’s Internet Plus policies (integration of the internet with traditional industries to fuel economic growth). The work is exhibited, but also exists online.⁵⁵ It was featured in *The New Normal – China, Art and 2017* exhibition in the Ullens Center in Beijing’s 798 Art Zone in the Spring of 2017. There, screenshots and videos were displayed and played, remaining partly hidden as they were surrounded by a wall punctured with holes, clearly a reference to the Great Firewall. The celebratory discourse on creativity is pushed to the parodic extreme in this work, for example when claiming that ‘the most creative aspect of Chinternet Plus is that it makes the original a counterfeit. In this reality, commentary does not just replace the content, here reality serves comments and gets tips’. The digital

52 Jean Burgess, ‘Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling’, *Continuum* 20.2 (2006): 207.

53 José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

54 Burgess, ‘Hearing Ordinary Voices’, 206.

55 Available at <https://www.chinternetplus.com>, accessed July 13, 2017.

and the copy conflate in the work, thus instructions are given on how to counterfeit a logo:

To create a counterfeit logo, one has to walk a fine balance to make it just right. The logo cannot look too much like the original, yet still should remind people of the original. One needs to play it cool; in order to do so, one has to catch the 'spirit' of the original.

An app is presented that will turn the polluted sky blue, on the website and in the clips, accompanied by a bizarre mixture of cultural texts from around the world, presenting a cosmopolitan bricolage of people, places, and artefacts. 'Reality is not efficient enough, but your smart apps are', the artist (prophetically?) proclaims.

In his essay, Michael Keane examines traditional roots of Chinese creativity in Confucian and Daoist approaches and its connection to nature and the market, showing how the concept of affordances provides a new way of understanding Chinese creativity. The essays by Zeng Guohua and Chen Siyu both present an analysis of the rapid emergence of digital cultures in their discussions of the omnipresence of WeChat in payment and retail. Zeng analyses the popularity for online shopping for safe, natural food, as a response to issues of food unsafety, whereas Chen probes the intricacies of online payment, connecting this to both issues of control and regulation as well as to enabling forms of vernacular creativity.

Zoénie Liwen Deng shows in her field notes that parody and critique are not the only mode Chinese artists mobilise when engaging with new technologies; the art projects *Cyber Nails* deliberately mingle the online world of WeChat with offline practices, exploring the schism, or what Deng terms the Möbius-strip-like relationship, between online and offline, between showing and seeing. Rowan Parry reports from his research on independent documentaries how new technologies, in particular the internet and WeChat, are profoundly changing film cultures in China not only at the textual level, but also in terms of production, circulation, and reception. In their dialogue with Lo Yin Shan, curators Isaac Leung and Janet Fong explore the changes in both society and the art world enabled by new technologies. Like most authors, while acknowledging the transforming potential of platforms like WeChat, they are highly suspicious of their possible drawbacks; there seem to be far too many minuses to the Internet Plus.

By bringing the notion of creativity into conversation with the themes of boredom, *shanzhai*, and digitisation – i.e. notions that are usually juxtaposed with creativity but that are common features of creative practices in China

– this collection offers alternative pathways to rethink creativity. It may help to look for new ideas, which may not be new after all; nevertheless, isn't this *shanzhai*-ing of knowledge, of creative practices, the mechanism, the process that propels the continuous proliferation of new thoughts, of new practices?

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