

China in
Ten Words

People

人民

Leader

领袖

Reading

阅读

Writing

写作

Lu Xun

鲁迅

Revolution

革命

Disparity

差距

Grassroots

草根

Copycat

山寨

Bamboozle

忽悠

by
Yu Hua

"Captures the heart of the Chinese people. . . . If you think you know China, you will be challenged to think again. If you don't know China, you will be introduced to a country that is unlike anything you have heard from travelers or read about in the news."
—The Wall Street Journal

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山寨 copycat

The story of contemporary China can be told from many different angles, but here I want to tell it in terms of the copycat, a national myth playing itself out on a popular level.

The word here rendered as “copycat”^{*} originally denoted a mountain hamlet protected by a stockade or other fortifications; later it acquired an extended meaning as a hinterland area, home to the poor. It was also a name once given to the lairs of outlaws and bandits, and the word has continued to have connotations of freedom from official control.

In the past few years, with the increasing popularity of copycat cell phones that offer multiple functions at a low price, the word “copycat” has given the word “imitation” a new meaning, and at the same time the limits to the original sense of “imitation” have been eroded, allowing room for it to acquire additional shades of meaning: counterfeiting, infringement, deviations from the standard, mischief, and caricature. With visas such as these one can gain entry to the Land of Imitation and take up residence in Mountain Hamlet. It would not be going too far to say that “copycat” has more of an anarchist spirit than any other word in the contemporary Chinese language.

Copycat cell phones began by imitating the functions and designs of such brands as Nokia, Samsung, and Sony Ericsson; to muddy the waters further, they gave themselves names like Nokir, Samsing, and Suny Ericcsun. By plagiarizing existing brands and thereby skimping on research and development costs, they sold for a fraction of the price of established products; given their technical capabilities and trendy appearance, they soon cornered the low end of the consumer market.

With the rapid growth of the copycat industry there is now a dizzying variety of knockoff phone brands. One has recently appeared in the stores under the mantle of Harvard University. Claiming to be manufactured by “Harvard Communications,” the brand presents

President Obama as its spokesman and sports a beaming Obama on its advertisements. His smile, seen everywhere these days, has to count as the most famous—and the most powerful—smile in the world, but now it's been hijacked and made to appear in promotions for Chinese copycat cell phones. "This is my Blackberry," Obama tells us with a grin, "the Blockberry Whirlwind 9500!"

Obama is today's symbol of that long-running American dream, but I am pretty sure he could never have imagined such an outlandish misuse of his image, and Americans at large would no doubt be flabbergasted to see their president serving as brand ambassador for a Chinese knockoff. We Chinese take it all in our stride, for we don't see anything wrong with copycatting Obama. After all, in China today, with the exception of the party in power and our current government leaders—plus retired but still living party and state leaders—everybody else can be copycatted and ridiculed, imitated and spoofed, at will.

Thirty-three years after his death, Mao Zedong—our erstwhile Great Leader, Great Teacher, Great Commander, and Great Helmsman—like Obama came to play the starring role in a Chinese copycat advertisement. On October 1, 2009, the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the contemporary Chinese state, a karaoke parlor in Zhejiang posted two huge red banners on either side of its door. On them Mao Zedong appeared in military uniform and cap, with microphone in hand, belting out a song; he looked nothing like the charismatic leader of the revolutionary era and much more like the kind of petty bureaucrat who haunts nightclubs at all hours of the night. In the bottom right corner were listed such patriotic anthems as "China, Today Is Your Birthday," "My Motherland," "China, I Love You," and "O People of China." "We put the poster up on October 1," one of the staff proudly explained. "It's our way of marking this great national celebration."

In 2008 Mao's home province of Hunan embarked on a campaign to select Mao look-alikes from all over the country. Lured by such tempting bait, surely plenty of tourist fish would throw themselves on the hook; visitors would flock to Hunan and line its coffers with a more ample store of legal tender. "This is an innovation in our

cultural system reform,” a local official explained. “It will effectively promote the development of our cultural tourism industry.”

One hundred and thirty Mao Zedong look-alikes traveled from all corners of the country, braving every hardship to arrive at their destination. After several elimination rounds thirteen finalists entered the last stage of the competition. At the news conference they sat in a row on the stage, each with a fake mole stuck on his chin. Some struck the classic pose of the historical Mao Zedong, a cigarette between their curled fingers and an ankle resting on their knee. The real Mao Zedong spoke with a genuine Xiangtan accent; copycat Xiangtan accents spilled from the mouths of the copycat Maos. Most were dressed in Mao jackets of gray or green; one wore a replica of the octagonal cap in which Mao was photographed during the Long March; the others had their hair styled in the backward sweep that Mao favored. All at different stages in life, they declared that they represented Mao Zedong at varying stages in his career: the Jinggang Mountains version, the Long March version, the 1949 founding ceremony version.... One was so confident in his appearance that he refused to put on makeup; another put on makeup but claimed to be “the most physically unaltered.” A third mock Mao, facing the packed audience below, improvised as giddily as a pop singer. “I’m a hundred and fifteen this year,” he declared, clutching the microphone tightly, “but it gives me such a lift to be here, I feel just as young as you see me!”

Yet another Mao Zedong look-alike imitated Mao’s speech at the founding ceremony: “Greetings, comrades!” His phony Xiangtan accent enlivened the atmosphere, and the audience cried happily in return, “Greetings, Chairman Mao!”

“Long live the people!” he continued.

“Long live Chairman Mao!” the crowd roared.

These past few years Mao Zedong has been copycatted constantly. In the most bizarre instance, a female Mao impersonator appeared in southwest China, making such an immediate impact that she was hailed by the Chinese media as “sweeping aloft in majesty,” a literary expression over which Mao once claimed exclusive rights. When this fifty-one-year-old woman made herself up as Mao Zedong and

walked along the street, waving to the crowds that gathered, she looked uncannily like the Mao who waved to the parading masses from Tiananmen, and the crowds pressed toward her, rushing to be the first to shake her hand. In a moment the street was a dense throng of humanity, and it took her more than half an hour to walk just a few hundred yards.

Everybody felt that this female copycat was even more like Mao than the male impersonators they had seen. Of course, the cost to her personally and financially was far higher, for she had to invest enormous effort to master Mao's accent and mannerisms to the point where she could resemble him so closely in every way. Each time she made herself up to look like Mao it took her four hours and cost her 2,000 yuan in cosmetic expenses. To conceal her deficiencies in the stature department, she wore the highest possible elevator shoes. The real Mao was six feet tall, and she was not quite five foot six. After careful viewing of newsreel footage and endless hours perfecting the simulation of Mao's accustomed gait, this female copycat Mao Zedong managed to walk with her thickened insoles in such a way that people who saw her thought she looked just like Mao strolling along in his flat cotton shoes.

Once copycat cell phones had taken China by storm, copycat digital cameras, copycat MP3 players, copycat game consoles, and other such pirated and knockoff products came pouring forth. Copycat brands have rapidly expanded to include instant noodles, sodas, milk, medications, laundry detergent, and sports shoes, and so the word "copycat" has penetrated deep into every aspect of Chinese people's lives. Copycat stars, TV programs, advertisements, pop songs, Spring Festival galas, Shenzhou 7 space capsules, and Bird's Nest national stadiums have all made a splash on the Internet, each revealing their own special flavor and gaining instant popularity.

Copycat stars appear in imitation shows, just like the ersatz Mao Zedongs. The difference is that sham Maos require a physical likeness, whereas the copycat stars aspire merely to a similarity in spirit. However different their looks, so long as they can capture a