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ABSTRACT   *This article analyzes the Internet-based campaign for the "shanzhai" Spring Festival Gala in connection with the rise of "digital democracy" and the burgeoning economy of grassroots culture in China. Emerging as a bottom-up challenge to the political and economic monopoly of CCTV's annual Spring Festival Gala, the campaign rode on the popular myth of shanzhai culture, which captured people's imagination for its associations with grassroots digital democracy. By depicting how different social players appropriate the narratives of shanzhai to construct a collective social imaginary of democracy, the article explores the specific formation of an Internet-facilitated shanzhai democracy, arguing that the myth of shanzhai currently enables and confounds political resistance in China. It nurtures a political subjectivity that encourages the instrumental marriage of affective emotion, populist anarchism, and commercial self-branding and publicity, and cultivates a "shanzhai" democracy that thrives on the commodification of politics and the monetization of the netizen's and the public's affective labor. The myth of shanzhai reflects the contested nature of digital democracy in contemporary China, marking a transitional space, a symbiotic relationship with power, and a fluid frontier to be constantly redefined and defended.*

KEYWORDS: Shanzhai culture, digital democracy, grassroots culture, political resistance, cultural economy.

Introduction

Every Lunar New Year's Eve, at 8 pm sharp, after enjoying a traditional meal of dumplings and shooting off firecrackers, Chinese families gather in front of their televisions to watch CCTV's (China Central Television) Spring Festival Gala. As the most watched TV show in China,[1] CCTV's New Year's Gala has transformed into a national ritual over the course of its 25-year history. Much like the flag-raising ceremony in Tiananmen Square, the gala transmits state-sanctioned ideology, affirms shared cultural values, and integrates small family units—all through the television—into the big family of the patriarchal nation-state. In the last decade, following the commercialization of China's media, the gala's cultural domination has effortlessly translated into an economic monopoly under the auspices of the biggest "official-profiteering" cultural institution of CCTV, provoking widespread dissatisfaction among citizens.

The Chinese New Year special went unchallenged and uninterrupted until 2008, when Lao Meng, a 36-year-old migrant in Beijing working as a wedding planner, decided to launch an Internet-based shanzhai (parody) version of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, featuring grassroots culture and ordinary people. Greeted with tremendous enthusiasm and enormous support by the public, his campaign rode on the popular discourse of "shanzhai," a comprehensive term that refers to a spectrum of concepts, including anti-authoritarianism and parody, low-cost cloning based on grassroots ingenuity, and an alternative culture emerging out of the bottom-up energy of the marginalized. In the past decade or so, shanzhai has

been increasingly associated with new openings enabled by digital and network technologies in politics, culture, and commerce. However, in spite of the initial fanfare around the campaign—which promoted it as a symbol of digital democracy, and its organizer, Lao Meng, as grassroots hero—the campaign's legitimacy was seriously challenged and questioned as its own commercial ambitions became clear. Soon, the shanzhai gala devolved into a banal and amateurish imitation of CCTV's official gala in both content and style, offering little challenge to CCTV aesthetically or economically, and having been banned from broadcasting on the Internet and any mainland media platform on the eve of the New Year.

Rather than hastily dismissing the political valences of the shanzhai campaign or unquestioningly valorizing its significance, this essay intends to show how the campaign and the shanzhai culture in which it is firmly situated reflect the tensions and contradictions inherent in the rising discourse and culture of digital democracy in contemporary China. This essay considers shanzhai to be a cultural myth, a powerful story, and a historically embedded narrative that has combined the traditional Chinese metaphor of grassroots anti-establishment heroism with modern rhetoric of technology-empowered bottom-up democracy. This essay argues that the myth of shanzhai both enables and confounds political resistance in China, where three decades of technology-driven neoliberal globalization has energized democracy's social imaginary, creating a new site and impetus for democratization, but also complicating democracy's implications and practices, and confounding the means through which it can be pursued and realized.

The shanzhai campaign resides at the intersection of several competing discourses: although the Internet has opened new avenues for popular opinion, providing a venue in which public discontent about the authoritarian status quo can be voiced, disseminated, and heard, this new cyber-cultural space is neither external to commercial forces nor free from government control. Indeed, by explicating the trajectory of the campaign, disentangling it from contradictory media representation, and excavating the historical lineage of shanzhai culture, this essay will demonstrate that commercialism and capitalist expansion are, in fact, key motivators behind the shanzhai campaign. Contrary to popular belief, the Chinese party-state is neither independent of—nor in opposition to—information capitalism. By incorporating the shanzhai gala for both political and commercial interests, the party-state is just as concerned—if not more so—about CCTV's monopoly of the Spring Festival Gala market and about seizing the burgeoning market of Internet consumption as it is about shanzhai's subversive potential.

The convergence of politics with commerce and activism with commodity is neither an isolated phenomenon nor particular to China; rather, these coalitions reflect a global cultural shift marked by the "intersection of neoliberalism and digital media" and "a prevailing sense that capitalism is undergoing a new phase in relationship to activism and resistance" (Sturken 2012, x). Facilitated by digital technology, this transformation has rendered dichotomous thinking that separates politics from commercialism increasingly ineffective for understanding both constructs and their intricate interactions. The Chinese context has complicated the discussion by adding the dimension of a strong party-state in a post-Socialist society.

The article is based on two months of fieldwork and interviews with organizers of and participants in the shanzhai campaign in Beijing during the spring festivals of 2009 and 2010, and is supplemented by more than 200 newspaper reports about the campaign and a large volume of user-generated comments downloaded from major bulletin board services in China.[2] By unpacking the myth of shanzhai culture and depicting how different social players (organizers, participants of the gala, media, and netizens) appropriated shanzhai campaign narratives to construct a collective social imaginary of digital democracy, this article seeks to go beyond the binary to tease out the specific social formation articulated by shanzhai culture and the shanzhai campaign.

The monopoly of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala

Since its debut in 1983, CCTV's annual Spring Festival Gala has been the most popular show ever to appear on the country's television screens (Zhong 2001). And, like many similar media events in China, CCTV's five-hour extravaganza showcases government achievements, eulogizes socialist virtues, and sets the ideological tone for political events that have occurred in the previous year. Far from being a business success in a free market model, the gala's absolute monopoly over the New Year's market and its skyrocketing advertising figures are largely maintained by a curious union between state control and market efficiency (Lu 2009).

CCTV's monopoly over the Chinese television industry serves as the quintessential product of China's economic liberalization without political democratization. Three decades of commercialization and opening up reform under the one-party dictatorship of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have made the market and the authoritarian state strange bedfellows. After 1978, like many other institutions in China, the "throat and tongue" of the Party has diluted ideological fervor with doses of harmless entertainment and sanctioned investigative journalism (Zhong 2010), gradually transitioning CCTV into an irrefutable profit-making market entity. CCTV's political clout has easily converted into economic power, thereby allowing it to consolidate its dominant status in the TV industry. CCTV's complex ties to the state do nothing to unfetter the station from its service as a state apparatus, with profits that enable it to produce propaganda in increasingly subtle and effective ways.

The annual spectacle of the Spring Festival Gala, a gigantic example of "indoctri-tainment" (indoctrination packaged as entertainment) that usually requires a professional team of thousands up to six month to prepare, is CCTV's fattest cash cow. CCTV's role as an "official-profiteering monopoly" (Zhong 2001) is exemplified by its voracious effort to maximize profits under the auspices of the state. According to a journalist with *Lifeweek*, what makes the gala so successful is CCTV's unrivalled advantage in straddling two economic models, which allows it to organize the gala under the logic of a planned economy—absorbing talents and resources and attracting media attention through political influence—but to sell it based on the logic of the market, courting advertisers with rating statistics and guaranteed returns (Chen, Qiu, and Lu 2010). CCTV's gala is contemporary Chinese society writ small, in which the state-market nexus penetrating all aspects of life serves as a hotbed of corruption and scandal.

In the late 1990s, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala was initiated as a national enactment of the traditional Spring Festival family gathering (Zhao 1998). A decade into the new millennium, the gala found itself losing its grip on increasingly sophisticated audiences well versed in the language of entertainment—domestic or imported. In the pre-Internet era, the gala easily captured the minds and hearts of Chinese people in the imagined community of the nation-state —where packaged ideologies were delivered through "a small screen remote-controlled by the state" (Zhao 1998, 46). However, in an age of networked computers, the gala, like many other CCTV programs, more often than not ends up provoking resistance or even rebellion from disgruntled audiences mired in a culture of deep cynicism and "playful irreverence" in Chinese cyberspace (Bai 2010). Following the latest trend of muckraking, parodies, and joking in the Chinese virtual sphere (Yang 2009), CCTV and its beloved gala have come to bear the brunt of public ridicule. Other media and their journalists, long holding grudges against CCTV's tyranny and the gala's monopoly, have happily ridden this wave of online public opinion (Interview with journalist, January 2010). By its 25th anniversary, in 2008, the gala found itself besieged by headlines and online posts exposing the "inside story" of the gala's "money rule" (Xue 2012), denouncing it as "vanity fair." Shows of this type would have likely already vanished in a free market, but in China's bizarre system of official dictates and market profits, the gala survives in spite of degrading

quality and mounting controversies, as no serious competitor dares—or is able to—challenge its supremacy.

The myth of "shanzhai" culture and digital democracy

The Shanzhai campaign emerged as a response to the cultural, political, and economic monopoly of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala. In making an Internet announcement of his plan to organize an online "shanzhai" gala under the slogan "picking a fight with CCTV," Lao Meng stirred up quite a storm of anti-CCTV frenzy in China, Immediately, netizens and the media alike reacted with great enthusiasm and curiosity. However, the legitimacy of the shanzhai campaign as a spontaneous civic cause and grassroots alternative to the dominant commercial-political nexus was soon contested when the campaign strategies and goals grew increasingly commercialized and profit-driven, and its influence spread beyond the Internet into mainstream media. But to fully comprehend the shanzhai campaign's initial popularity and its commercial metamorphosis, we must first unpack the myth of shanzhai culture in its connection to the popular discourse of digital democracy.

For purposes of this discussion, "myth" is not used to refer to "falsehood" or "distortion," but rather to narratives and systems of signification that substantiate the relationship between man and society/nature (Flood 1996). Myths are "stories that animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life" and "offer an entrance to another reality, a reality once characterized by the promise of the sublime" (Mosco 2004, 3). Indeed, myths can be pacifying—when they deliver an ideal vision beyond reality, rendering the mundane and imperfect life bearable and thus functioning to validate a certain cosmic or social order (Campbell and Moyers 1988)—and stimulating —when their transcendent appeal helps to cultivate common identities and communities, which contain "the potential to energize change in a given society" (Mosco 2004, 30).

The myth of shanzhai culture, whose origin can be traced back to imperial China, has always contained contradictions, the nature of which depends on the specific historical conditions under which it is evoked and referenced. In traditional Chinese, "shanzhai" refers to "villages in the mountain with stockade houses" (Qiu 2009, 122). For centuries, the medieval folk novel *Outlaws of the Marsh*, which depicts gangs of bandits setting up a mountain fortress to evade the corrupt imperial court and performing outlaw deeds in the name of the people, has captured the Chinese imagination with its Robin Hood–brand of nonconformity and heroism. The modern revival of the term dates back to the 1950s when "small scale family-run factories in Hong Kong" that produced cheap and low-quality household items were called "shanzhai" to "mark their position outside the official economic order" (Ho 2010, 1). But it was shanzhai electronics, low-cost but often more versatile knockoffs of brand names such as iPhone produced by small factories in Southern China, that brought "shanzhai" into the media limelight, making it a national phenomenon in the first decade of the new millennium (Qiu 2009). As one blogger wrote, with regard to shanzhai electronics, "Shanzhai is a strange amalgam of counterfeiting, national pride, and Robin Hoodism" (quoted in Ho 2010, 2).

However, a close reading of the cultural myth of shanzhai reveals more ambiguity than straightforward information. Inherent to the stories and narratives are tensions between the mainstream and the subcultural, the powerful and the powerless, whose boundaries are often less clear-cut than might initially be assumed. On the one hand, shanzhai represents a space that is alternative to the establishment, growing as it does out of the grassroots struggle for subsistence and survival. On the other hand, shanzhai is sustained by a parasitic relationship to the mainstream and the powerful, deriving its identity by subtle differentiations in size, practice, or price, while aspiring to join the ranks of the mainstream. If anything, shanzhai always connotes a sense of temporality and transition, ever existing in symbiosis with its

target of imitation For instance, the shanzhai communities in classic Chinese literature inevitably end up being either wiped out or incorporated by the imperial court; so, too, the modern shanzhai business. In 2012, the once-booming market of shanzhai cell phones began losing its grip on the new generation of smart phone consumers. But shanzhai forces never die out or become extinct, because where there's power, there's resistance.

By 2008, when shanzhai reached its apex of popularity, the ancient cultural myth took on new meaning, representing both continuity with and rupture from its former usage. Because its associations with grassroots ingenuity, subversion, and resilience dovetailed so well with the prevalent ethos of parody and playful irreverence of the web 2.0 China, shanzhai was picked up by Internet users and transformed into a cyber vernacular. With the confrontation of these two cultural strains, the myth of shanzhai culture became connected with the myth of the "digital sublime" (Mosco 2004)—technophile stories espoused by Silicon Valley and western scholars celebrating the democratic potential of the Internet. Networked technologies have provided the infrastructure and tools for a dispersed populace to come together to exercise and assert a "collective intelligence," sharing information, pursuing common projects, cultivating a community of empowerment, and engaging in creative cultural production—all of which naturally strengthen democracy (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008; Jenkins 2006). Terms such as "electronic democracy" have been coined to "connote a radically new form of democratic practice modified by new information technologies. Democracy is substantively changed by new technology" (Friedland 1996, 185).

Not surprisingly, the powerful myth of technology-driven democratization and social change finds a vast and eager audience in China, where three decades of neoliberal reform under a one-party dictatorship has intensified grievances over aggravated social maladies, such as official corruption and widening inequality. These issues are only heightened by the inexorable forces of globalization, which produce a steady influx of international cultural signs, images, and discourses that throw the discrepancies between the local and the global into sharper relief. Among the many competing social currents and exigencies, the myth of shanzhai has evolved into a distinct cultural formation to "address and articulate the globally determined, but locally conditioned socioeconomic reality with a distinct Chinese accent" (Zhang 2008, 144). Couched in the discourse of shanzhai, the popular rhetoric of digital democracy thrives in China, articulating a unique set of anxieties, aspirations, and ideologies.

Connoting everything from rebellious heroes in classic literature to parodic cultural icons of Internet subculture, shanzhai topped Google's list of the most popular search terms in China in 2008, when cyberspace was replete with photoshopped images and mash-up videos of, for example, a shanzhai national mascot—a trimmed dog dyed black-and-white to look like a panda (Canaves and Ye 2009), or a shanzhai Michael Jackson—a man dressed in black suit singing Jackson's songs on the streets of Beijing. Immediately scholars and social commentators joined the populist fervor, comparing shanzhai to cultural democracy and affirming the positive political function of participating in shanzhai culture by differentiating it from shanzhai electronics, which are often dismissed as piracy and mercenariness (Yang 2009).

However, often absent from these accounts are discussions of the symbiotic relationship between such "democracy" and the burgeoning "attention economy" of digital entertainment (Lanham 2007), as well as questions regarding the nature of the democracy: whose democracy this is, and will this shanzhai "cultural democracy" contribute to—or distract society from—political democracy? Many scholars have observed that the linkage between digital technologies and democracy in the context of Western society has been taken for granted. In one example, Mosco (2004) cautioned that the rhetoric of a digital utopia might have provided "the literal and figurative missing links that bring genuine, sustainable democracy and community to a world in desperate need of both," but that it risks shielding "cyberspace from the messiness of down-to-earth politics" (Mosco 2004, 31). Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009, 860)

warned that the celebratory discourses of web 2.0 run the danger of turning "the alignment of countercultural ideals with mainstream business interests into a hegemonic ideology supported by the masses."

The historical reality of Chinese society further complicates the issue of digital democracy, because political democracy of any sort has long been missing, and ordinary citizens have been deprived of any means of political participation. At this particular historical juncture, shanzhai culture marks a transitional and contested terrain, rich with paradoxes and possibilities: the emotional and affective power of disgruntled citizens (Grossberg 1988) finds an alliance in the commercial entrepreneurism of disaffected private and unofficial (*minjian*) capital; the ancient myth of shanzhai rebellion and heroism is energized by the populist rhetoric of digital democracy. The myth of shanzhai both empowers and confounds political resistance as it both constitutes and is shaped by an emerging political subjectivity and a practice of democracy that are inextricably linked to an emerging digital cultural economy and Web 2.0 rhetoric. This essay will unpack the myth of shanzhai through an in-depth analysis of how different social players partake in the campaign and appropriate the narratives of shanzhai to construct a collective social imaginary of democracy.

Orchestrating "shanzhai" democracy

Lao Meng the "trickster"

On a chilly winter day in Beijing in 2008, a white wagon traveling along major streets caught people's eyes with a red slogan painted on its side doors that read: "Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala: Pick a fight with CCTV, extend New Year greetings to people across the nation!" The owner of the car didn't forget to leave his website: www.ccstv.com, which stands for "China Countryside Television," a clever parody of CCTV. This spectacle was the shanzhai gala's first promotional event to grab the media's attention. When journalists from *Beijing Times*, a Beijing-based metropolitan newspaper, came for the scoop, they found Lao Meng pouring out his ideas to pedestrians on the sidewalk:

> I imitate you [CCTV] but am better than you in many ways. CCTV's gala is the business of a few big directors, but I count my show on the wisdom of netizens across the country. It is a gala by the grassroots and for the grassroots! We gonna beat CCTV at its own show! (Li 2008).

"Tricksters" are characters that "cross over the line, shape up the accepted reality, engage in double-cross and doublethink," and "thrive on ambiguity, ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox" (Mosco 2004, 46). Monkey King, a rebellious and naughty but highly intelligent character with supernatural capacity, is one such trickster in traditional Chinese literature and has left an indelible impression on readers. In modern Western society, tricksters are often represented by hackers who commit small evils against the established order thus delivering freedom to a greater number of people.

Lao Meng, the "shanzhai rebel," is portrayed as just such a character. The media-savvy, self-made cultural entrepreneur grew up in a small town in Southwest China. Leaving his hometown in his late twenties for Beijing, he dabbled in more than a dozen professions, including the IT business, before discovering his talent as a wedding planner. When asked during our interview how he came up with the idea of the shanzhai campaign, Lao Meng explained that he was eager to prove his exceptional creativity by planning an Internet-based event. More importantly, he had sensed and shared the growing discontent in cyber community over CCTV's monopoly and wanted to "do something about it" (Personal interview with Lao Meng, December 2009). As his story found a huge audience both online and offline, it became clear that Lao Meng was not alone in his frustration with CCTV. He knew from the very beginning that "shanzhai" would make an astounding buzz:

> They knew that readers would be interested, 'cause I dared challenge CCTV. Do you know that many media institutions are also resentful of CCTV? So to a certain extent, the system has helped me execute my ideas. Think about it, if I just threw an ordinary spring festival gala for my neighbors, I bet nobody would be interested. If they really think that I am a hero, then hero is known in times of misfortune. Only under China's current social system, can shanzhai gala proper. People want to see how I pick a fight with CCTV and what the consequences would be. To use an allegory to illustrate: there's this huge elephant in the forest that everybody hates. Suddenly a tiny ant comes out announcing that he's gonna rape the elephant. So all the animals get excited and cheer him on. What's funny is that the ant is so small that the elephant is not able to find it, let alone kill it. (Personal interview with Lao Meng, December 2009)

The image of the tiny but audacious and shrewd "ant" who dares to defy—or even to challenge—a giant "elephant" for the interest of the community is a powerful and universal archetype reminiscent of both shanzhai Robin Hoodism and the digital hacker-hero frequently depicted in Western popular culture (Thomas 2002). China's corrupt and unjust system only gives this image more legitimacy and a heightened sense of urgency. By drawing upon the rhetoric of shanzhai, Lao Meng successfully positioned himself as a fighter for freedom and a crusader for democracy, igniting the public's enthusiasm by summoning the ideals of grassroots digital democracy. But—we must remember—the trickster always has a double identity.

During our visit in 2009, Lao Meng and his shanzhai gala organizing committee occupied the second floor of a small firm in Beijing. Notably, that this firm specialized in creative and cultural business betrayed the campaign's relationship to the rising entertainment industry in China. Inside the office with his colleagues, Lao Meng identified himself as an agent in the entertainment industry who belonged to a rising professional group called the "Internet pushing hands." In his latest book on the Chinese Internet, Yang (2009, 120) gives a vivid description of the profession:

> "Pushing hands" is a skill in Chinese martial arts. Its basic idea is to defeat the opponent by avoiding, redirecting, or using his or her own force. An "internet pushing hand" refers to an individual, usually a Web editor, who manufactures Internet incidents by strategically "pushing" them to the front stage of the public attention.

The emergence of the profession of the "Internet pushing hands" since 2005 has paralleled the commercialization of the Chinese web. Compared to its political and cultural function, the Internet's commercial transformation in the past decade in China—and its implications—have been understudied. In its pursuit of profits, Internet business has tapped into dynamic user-generated interaction and online social production (Bai 2010; Li 2010; Yang 2009). Manufactured Internet cultural events and grassroots idols not only bring fame and fortune to the idols and their "pushing hands," but also attract "eyeballs" and drive up web traffic.

Xenophobic nationalism, class hatred, and female sexuality are some of the topics most likely to set a whole chat room on fire, attention that can be directly translated into advertising revenue for the business owner. Whereas practices such as flaming or "human flesh search engine"[3] help expose corruption and combat injustice in a society lacking a proper system of checks and balances, they are also easily manipulatable and monetizable. Shanzhai, with its connotations of grassroots disobedience and creativity, not only stands for digital democracy but also becomes a fashionable brand for the booming Internet entertainment business, obscuring the line between politics and marketing. That democracy and politics have never been external to the market is irrefutable, and throughout history, the market and the merchant class have been the impetus and agent of democracy, especially the formation of the bourgeois public sphere in their nascent stage (Habermas 1970). However,

the contemporary encounter between digital democracy and the entertainment and market-ing business in China heralds a new kind of subject—the digital trickster who thrives on the instrumental marriage among commercial self-branding/promotion, playful irreverence, and populist anarchism.

This type, which has become ubiquitous in cyberspace and mainstream media, resembles the neoliberal enterprising self depicted by scholars in the West (Banet-Weiser 2011a; Hearns 2012), but nonetheless is firmly rooted in Chinese history and culture—as represented by the shanzhai hero-bandit—and grows out of the reality of contemporary Chinese society. This new subjectivity both constitutes and is shaped by a distinct type of politics and construction of democracy that often prioritize affective and emotional catharsis, carnivalesque blasphemy and parody over rational deliberation and the formation of formal judicial and legislative order. As this article will demonstrate, this phenomenon is not confined to a few isolated cases or individual entrepreneurs, but has pervaded the society and culture as a historical condition.

Grassroots participants: dreams, grievances and opportunities

By evoking the myth of shanzhai, the campaign successfully ignited public enthusiasm and captivated its imagination of digital democracy. Participants flocked from all over the country for the audition, readily appropriating the myth of shanzhai to construct their own visions of cultural democracy. Mixing dreams of stardom with stories of grievances, aspiration for empowerment with narratives of self-branding, their accounts not only furnished rich materials for sustained media coverage but also gave a glimpse of the kind of politics and democracy that the shanzhai campaign enabled.

Many participants came with long-cherished dreams of becoming a star. The 19-year-old "big cannon" was a "Beijing drifter" (*bei piao*) who grew up a peasant's son in a village in Northeast China, where he apprenticed to "folk duet" (*err en zhuan*) performers. When asked why he named himself "big cannon," his face brightened with excitement:

> About a year ago, I had a dream that I became a big star, attending an award ceremony in Hol-lywood with Andy Lau. When I woke up, I told this to my mum and she said that it was a divine guidance sent to me by god through dream. I was destined to be a big star. So I came to Beijing and took a stage name "big cannon" hoping that I can score a massive smash and shoot myself to fame one day! (Personal interview, January 2010)

But bright dreams are often shattered by brutal realities. Participants' self-presentation also referenced their grievances and frustrations. Xiao Hua, a middle-aged woman whose plump figure and Western singing style reminded people of Susan Boyle in *Britain's Got Talent*, embodied one example of such emotion. Trained in a provincial art academy as a pro-fessional singer, she had migrated to Beijing 13 years previously, hoping to become a "world class" singer. "The city of opportunities only offers them to people who can afford," com-plained Xiao Hua. She often had to bribe her way into performances or auditions, only to find her money wasted in the end.

Although participants told of ardent dreams and very real suffering, reflections on the structural problems that had undermined their hopes and led to anguish were often absent from interviews and media representations. Still, the Internet-based shanz-hai campaign was imbued with the magical power of redressing the grievances of the grassroots supporters by offering a precious opportunity for cultural expression, an online platform for reaching a national audience, and invaluable media publicity and public attention—but only to people who knew how to take advantage of these opportunities.

"The shanzhai spring festival, unlike CCTV's gala, is for ordinary Joes like me," said Xiao Shi, a college student who had been working as a "professional fan" before joining the campaign. Professional fans are young people hired to shout, scream, or even fake fainting during pop concerts or media events—a curious but rising profession in China (Yang 2009). Apart from playing a small role in a comic skit (*xiao Pin*), Xiao Shi volunteered to help with the gala's "organizing committee." Being in charge of publicity, Xiao Shi told me, she learned how to "present" herself and "talk to the journalists" (personal interview, January 2010).

Compared with Xiao Shi, Xiao Han, the migrant worker singer, earned his chance the hard way, making it all the more precious to him. He told a journalist that he had been waiting years for such an opportunity to present itself:

> When I got the call from Lao Meng, telling me that I was selected for the gala, I couldn't control my tears. I sat on a stone in my backyard, crying tears of enjoy. Then I called my mum back in my home village to share with her the great news! Now I finally am able to do what I want to do with my life! If I become famous one day, I'd thank my parents and shanzhai spring festival gala!

These stories typify the kinds of narratives permeating the Chinese pop culture and entertainment scene today: talent shows such as *Supergirl* that feature ordinary people and invite public voting; blogs and microblogs set up by the so-called "entertainment agent companies" that have put "ugly-ducklings," such as Sister Lotus and Sister Phoenix, at the center of media gossip; entertainment sections of magazines, newspapers, and media portal sites headlined with "rags-to-riches" fairytales. "Shanzhai celebrities" or "grassroots stars" have not only become cultural phenomena and popular brands, but are also endowed by commentators with an aura of cultural democracy and political empowerment.

The Shanzhai campaign and other popular entertainment featuring and targeting ordinary people—especially the urban working class and peasant population—boast growing economic power and cultural demand. However, exaggerating the democratic and political potential of shanzhai culture—and the cultural and economic shift it embodies—or equating shanzhai with democracy without specifying the nature of both, runs the risk of siding with the hegemonic neoliberal discourse and ideology that often perpetuate inequality and reinforce injustice (Rose 1999). The stories of the grassroots participants might have a therapeutic function and raise public awareness of their suffering, but close scrutiny reveals that they are not your typical middle-class lifestyle stories: they often sound too idealistic or even bizarre and ludicrous to audiences. In short, the participants' lack of cultural and social capital, when coupled with outrageous dreams of stardom and ambition, can generate a sense of absurdity that prevents most people from identifying with their experiences.

Shanzhai culture, examined in light of the experience and narratives of those who participate in it, reflects and cultivates a form of subjectivity analogous to that of the digital trickster, a figure that connects political empowerment to media publicity and branding of the self, and democracy to the populist appeal of the Internet and popular culture. However, compared with the trickster, grassroots participants are usually less adept (in this case, at digital production) and have less control over how their stories are constructed and interpreted, a distinction that often reflects their socioeconomic status. Although the shanzhai campaign has given grassroots movements a platform for their voices, it nonetheless begs questions about the extent to which it truly constitutes democracy or political empowerment, especially given that, in the not-too-distant socialist past, the urban working class and peasants used to be portrayed in a positive light as the "Masters of the country." Whereas shanzhai culture and digital democracy certainly signal growing ideological pluralism and the waning of state power, this shift is accompanied by the changing social identification of individuals from citizens to productive consumers of the digital age (Andrejevic 2008). Nevertheless, grassroots stories have provided the media with rich material, helping sustain the popularity of

shanzhai for several months before the lunar New Year. Online discussion soon converged with offline media coverage. As the media narrative unfolded, different forces vying for power and control increasingly contested the meaning of digital democracy and grassroots resistance.

Media narratives and the imagination of digital democracy

After news of a "Beijing drifter" who dared "pick a fight with CCTV" got out on November 29, 2008 (Li 2008), media outlets across the nation immediately followed up with reports attaching significance to this "shanzhai" democracy and "grassroots rebellious upsurge," speculating on its prospects for success, and imagining the "subversive programs" that might be featured in the gala. Glowing commentaries were charged with revolutionary fervor:

> People who walk with naked feet will not be intimated by those who wear shoes. Provincial TV stations dare not compete with CCTV for audience ratings. But this grassroots citizen has nothing to be afraid of: "I have nothing to lose, and all I could lose are the shackles that bind my feet!" If anything, from the moment that this ordinary citizen painted his car with the slogan "Pick a fight with CCTV, extend New Year greetings to people across the nation," he is already a winner no matter what! (Zhang 2009)

Still others indulged in imagining the shanzhai campaign posing challenges to CCTV's monopoly:

> It has never occurred to us that a "Beijing drifter" who posted his idea of organizing a shanzhai spring festival gala on the web could evoke so many responses! It's likely that CCTV who has monopolized the golden time of New Year Eve, would have a grassroots competitor who's gonna "grab a slice of this cake." Shanzhai gala has brought the popularity of "grassroots culture" to a new apex! (Chen and Wan 2008)

Some media reports and comments online offered suggestions for programs and urged the shanzhai gala to adopt a political bent. One month into 2009, a fake "shanzhai Spring Festival Gala Program" spread quickly on the Internet and was made up of 15 items, each of which was a satirical take on a political or social controversy of the year; these included a comic skit called "Those who have milk might not be your mum," performed by Sanlu corporation, the producer of the poisoned milk powder that killed many infants, and a stand-up comedy entitled "Why I always get hurt," starring Meng Xuenong, a high-ranking Chinese politician who was sacked twice, once during the SARS crisis in 2003 and, more recently, as a scapegoat for a Shanxi coal mine accident (http://www.xinhua.net, 2008).

The situation took a dramatic turn when the campaign's commercial ambition gradually revealed itself, and defending its grassroots authenticity and political significance became increasingly difficult. Soon after it started to publicly canvass for financial support, the campaign found itself mired in headlines lamenting the "commercial incorporation of shanzhai" or the "metamorphosis of shanzhai gala" (Ye and Zhang 2010), while emails and comments from disappointed netizens poured in (interview with Lao Meng, January 2010). Further inflaming matters, when it attempted to shake off its "shanzhai" status and go "legit" by migrating from the digital platform to the mainstream TV media, the campaign ran into further trouble. In mid-December of 2008, the shanzhai campaign announced its plan to "cooperate" with Guizhou Satellite TV, a state-owned provincial TV station in Western China. Media and netizens soon responded, bemoaning the demise of grassroots resistance and interpreting this act as recuperation by mainstream culture. This action not only upset the public, which had already questioned the "grassroots nature" of the shanzhai gala, but

also hit a nerve with the state, which feared that the shanzhai gala would pose a legitimate challenge to CCTV's ratings on New Year's Eve if it were broadcast simultaneously via satellite TV to a national audience (interview with Lao Meng, December 2009).

Government regulatory agencies started to take a series of measures one month before New Year's Eve. SARFT first issued an order forbidding all provincial satellite TV stations from carrying the shanzhai gala while sending a warning to Gui Zhou TV, which had just signed a contract with the shanzhai gala to carry the show on New Year's Eve. On January 20, just five days before the scheduled event, the "Coalition of Online Audio-Video Service Providers," a "non-government" organization set up under the auspices of SARFT, sent out a notice entitled "A Notice of Boycotting the Online Dissemination of the Shanzhai Spring Festival Gala" to all Internet-based audio-video service providers in China, warning them against carrying any content related to the shanzhai gala (Jiang and Ma 2009). On the same day, websites that had already signed a contract with Lao Meng to broadcast the gala live backed out. According to Lao Meng, after gala participants from all over the country streamed into Beijing for the final rehearsal, a government "cultural inspection" team paid several visits to the rehearsal site, requesting copies of the program and asking to "have a chat" with participants and volunteers. The situation got so tense that Lao Meng decided to abort the plan to broadcast live and instead recorded a dress rehearsal, which was later aired on the website of a Macau-based television station (interview with Lao Meng, December 2009).

The shanzhai campaign's commercial debacle and political downfall fueled the public's imagination of anti-authoritarianism and grassroots democracy, ironically, restoring its innocence and "grassroots purity" and salvaging the campaign from a mounting legitimacy crisis. Public opinion finally shifted in support of the campaign and of Lao Meng, condemning the government's intervention and bestowing the entire effort with sympathy, recognition, and celebration. Headlines announcing, "[S]hanzhai gala symbolizes the ascendance of grassroots discursive power" (Zhu 2009), and "[T]he silent exit of the shanzhai gala doesn't hurt its value" (Han 2009) appeared, dismissing the humiliation of failure through the ritual of grassroots justice.

The trajectory of the shanzhai campaign intersected with different forces competing to define the social imaginary of digital democracy and shanzhai in an attempt either to unleash or to contain their power. Ironically, the political valence of digital democracy, in the case of the shanzhai campaign, was both authenticated and constrained by its "shanzhai" status—in other words, by representing grassroots interests, being based primarily on the Internet, and standing as an alternative to the political economic nexus represented by CCTV. As such, only when it ceased to be "shanzhai" was the gala offered the opportunity to enter the mainstream political economic system, thus posing a real threat to the monopoly of CCTV; paradoxically, it could no longer defend its authenticity and legitimacy. Notably, however, the complex relationship and interaction between the state and the public cannot be fully appreciated or understood within the simple dichotomy of grassroots versus mainstream or labels such as oppositional versus resistant, as neither the party-state nor the so-called "grassroots campaign" represents or encompasses the full spectrum of interests in contemporary Chinese society any longer. As a result, the winds of public opinion shift as different forces and interests compete for control and power.

Conclusion: the paradox of digital democracy in China

The shanzhai campaign emerged in response to the more than two decades–long domination of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala, holding up the promise of challenging the latter's cultural and political economic monopoly via digital peer production and networked grassroots power. Riding on the myth of shanzhai culture, the campaign represented a Chinese

articulation of the discourse of digital democracy, which itself has garnered enormous media attention and captured the public's imagination of democracy. Focusing on how different social actors appropriate the discourse of shanzhai to construct a collective social imaginary of "shanzhai" and digital democracy, this article has explored the nature of the specific types of politics and democracy constituted by shanzhai, as well as the phenomenon's impetus, characteristics, potentialities, and limitations. We have argued that, at this particular historical juncture, the myth of shanzhai, with the tensions intrinsic to its historical meaning, both empowers and complicates political resistance in China. This analysis has raised questions regarding Western assumptions about digital democracy and the challenges provoked by the changing relationships between politics and commerce in a globalized network society increasingly subsumed in the logic of neoliberalism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012).

This article has also questioned the technology-determinist view of digital media and any assumption of a natural and unproblematic causal relationship between digital technologies and democratization, offering, instead, a culturally and socially embedded account of an Internet-based cultural campaign said to have been rooted in the democratic promises of digital technologies. As Gitelman (2008, 6) has argued, "new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such"; the contested meanings of shanzhai culture and the trajectory of the shanzhai campaign epitomize such complex negotiation and struggle. Shanzhai stands as a site of mediation, where social meanings of "new technologies," "democracy," and "digital democracy" are questioned and debated, generating competing interpretations and representations, which are mediated through the historical materiality of contemporary Chinese society.

Specifically, digital democracy, as mediated by shanzhai, unleashes the creative energy of an oppressed people, opening new channels of communication and presenting opportunities for a disfranchised populace with no formal medium of democratic deliberation to develop a collective cultural identity. The articulation and interaction between narratives of digital empowerment and the myth of shanzhai resistance and heroism give meaning and rhetorical freight to aspirations for democracy in a society founded upon the communist ideals of a classless equality, but nonetheless witnessing weakening beliefs, morality, and community amid skyrocketing economic growth and swift social change. In essence, the authoritarian dictatorship in contemporary China has been replaced by a neoliberal developmentalist ideology with a state-market alliance, engendering a rich breeding ground for official corruption and an ever-widening social gap. As such, the specific type of democracy represented by shanzhai is both determined by—and constitutes— the transitional reality of the Chinese society.

However, studies often neglect shanzhai culture and the shanzhai campaign's intimate relationship with commercial forces and government control. Contrary to the popular belief that the shanzhai campaign—and the digital grassroots participatory culture it embodies—is a non-commercial and non-proprietary force opposed to the dominant state-market nexus, the emerging creative and cultural industry has found, in the wealth of cyber culture, new sources for its regeneration and further expansion. The flourishing participatory culture generates not only an eager audience with a voracious appetite—a market segment whose cultural tastes and needs have long been neglected by the mainstream—but also battalions of free or underpaid labor, whose virtual presence in cyberspace, via posting comments, writing stories, creating videos, or uploading pictures, translates into significant value and profit.

The affiliation between shanzhai culture and digital media, on the one side, and the officially sanctioned mainstream media and the party-state, on the other, is far more complicated than these binaries suggest. Although the state's political appropriation of the effort led to the campaign's commercial calamity, it also legitimized the campaign by substantiating its symbolic resistance against authoritarianism, thus, reinforcing the myth of shanzhai culture and

the democratic potentialities of digital media. Equating shanzhai with political democracy risks simplifying the fluid and equivocal interactions between state and society, central and local government, state and private capital, emerging media and traditional media institutions. Not until the shanzhai campaign began to converge and collaborate with a provincial satellite TV network did the state muscle in; that is, when the state—in this case represented by the market-state nexus of CCTV, SARFT and the Ministry of Culture—sensed the arrival of a real challenge to its monopoly of the market. If it had stayed in cyberspace and remained a supplement to the mainstream culture market, the shanzhai campaign might have been allowed to prosper or perish on its own.

Despite the shanzhai gala's commercial failure, the myth of shanzhai culture endures and is, in fact, gaining momentum in the realm of branding and marketing. In 2010, the year following the shanzhai campaign's initial proposal of a grassroots Internet-based spring festival gala, Beijing satellite TV, a leading state-owned TV network in China seized on the idea and launched a formal "Internet Spring Festival Gala." Sponsored by China's major portal site, *Sina.com*, and the state-owned telecommunication giant *China Mobile*, the gala tapped into the vast pool of cyber cultural events and pop idols that had surfaced on the Internet in the previous year and featured an interactive network-based audience voting system. Even more ironic was that CCTV kicked off its version of "Internet Spring Festival Gala" two years later, in 2011, by inviting pop idols who had shot to fame on the Internet to perform in its TV-based gala. The symbiosis and mutual constitution between the shanzhai campaign and the market and state (Wu 2010) generates a "shanzhai" democracy that thrives on the commodification of politics and the monetization of the netizens' and the public's affective labor. Consequently, it nurtures a political subjectivity that encourages the instrumental marriage of affective emotion, populist anarchism, commercial self-branding, and publicity—a result that confounds and complicates the resistant and emancipatory potential of shanzhai culture and digital democracy.

Rather than dismissing the shanzhai campaign as a mere commercial incorporation of grassroots politics or colonization of individual subjectivities by business—or valorizing its democratic potential and political progressiveness—this article has sought to depict both the "complex situatedness and embeddedness" of mediatized Western democracy and liberalism in contemporary Chinese society (Hay and Couldry 2011, 482), and the disorder and incongruities that characterize the present-day Chinese cultural economy and political scene. The murky boundaries between politics and commodity, tradition and modernity, authenticity and reproduction is not exclusive to shanzhai culture—or to Chinese society—but have become a defining characteristic of a postmodern world that demands a reconceptualization of these terms and their relationships (Banet-Weiser 2011b; Yang 2009). A positive correlation between democratization and digital technologies is neither pre-determined nor guaranteed; rather, technologies—like democracy and liberalism—are culturally embedded and historically situated practices, as well as products of locally mediated negotiations. Digital democracy in contemporary China is a contested process shot through with tension and incongruity. Compared with offline politics, digital democracy is more volatile and unpredictable, evolving rapidly, along with the shifts of public opinion—a dynamic reflected in the very myth of shanzhai: it marks a transitional space, a symbiotic relationship with power, and a fluid frontier meant to be constantly redefined and defended.

Notes

1. According to research conducted by CTR, a leading marketing research firm in China, 95.6% of the families interviewed in 406 regions nationwide reported having watched the gala (Zhu 2012).
2. The current project is the fruit of a 17-month ethnographic study of the shanzhai gala. I started following media reports and online discussions of the gala in November 2008, when Lao Meng and the gala first

found themselves in the limelight. As a media researcher interested in new media and communication technologies, I was struck by the enormous amount of public attention and grassroots revolutionary fervor attached to the so-called "new media event" (*xin meiti shijian*). With a pre-conceived idea of the shanzhai gala as technology-facilitated grassroots culture (based on its media representation), I approached the organizer of the gala, Lao Meng, through the Internet on July 2009, as he was about to start campaigning for the second shanzhai gala. I was able to join the QQ group (an instant messenger service in China) of the gala's organizing committee and befriended some volunteers through informal chatting. Later, from December 2009 to February 2010, I worked as a volunteer organizer for the gala both on site in Beijing and remotely through the Internet in Hong Kong, where I interviewed participants and organizers of the gala as well as journalists from all over the country. As it turned out, my fieldwork with the participants and organizers involved several "ethnographic breakdowns" and prompted me to reconsider the grassroots nature of the gala and its social, cultural, and political significance from a different perspective.

3. Flaming refers to hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users, often involving the use of profanity; Human Flesh Search (*ren rou sou suo*) is a primarily Chinese internet phenomenon of massive researching using Internet media such as blogs and forums.

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Special Terms

Shanzhai 山寨
Pick a fight with CCTV 向中央电视台叫板
Internet Pushing Hands 网络推手
Manufactured Internet Cultural Events 网络文化事件
Grassroots Icons 草根名星
Monkey King 孙悟空
Human Flesh Search Engine 人肉搜索引擎
Folk Duet 二人转
Xiao Pin 小品
Ren Rou Sou Suo 人肉搜索

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