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WORLD

## Imitation Is the Sincerest Form of Rebellion in China

Copycat Culture Hits High Point With Lunar New Year Show; Elvis in a Pink Wig

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China Central Television's Lunar New Year gala regularly features movie stars such as Jackie Chan and Zhang Ziyi, hundreds of choreographed dancers and lingering close-ups of major policy makers. The state-sponsored performance, which airs Sunday, annually rates as one of China's most-watched shows.

But for the first time in its 27-year history, the official broadcaster's show has competition -- from a 36-year-old wedding planner named Shi Mengqi.

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### A NEW SPIRIT OF SHANZHAI

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Mr. Shi's planned do-it-yourself variety show will eschew celebrities, flash and, in some cases, talent. Broadcast only online, on the same night as the big TV event, it will feature common people recorded with handheld cameras or whatever else might be handy. Performers will include amateur singers, a dancing troop of monks imitating an eight-armed Buddha and a man who

can pedal a bicycle with his hands. Its overriding theme, says Mr. Shi: "If you can do it, then I can as well."

His show also marks a new high point for China's "shanzhai" culture. Shanzhai, which literally means "mountain fortress" and implies banditry and lack of state control, refers to China's vast array of name-brand knockoffs. Shanzhai versions of Apple Inc.'s iPhone, for example, include the HiPhone, the SciPhone and the deliberately misspelled citrus-themed iOrgane.

Recently, the definition of shanzhai has expanded. On China's Internet, blogs, bulletin boards and news sites carry photos of automobiles jerry-rigged to run on railroad tracks ("shanzhai trains"), fluffy dogs trimmed and dyed to look like

the national mascot ("shanzhai pandas") and models of the Beijing Olympic Games' National Stadium made out of sticks ("shanzhai Bird's Nest").

A property developer in Nanjing, hoping to lure business and buzz, set up storefront facades with logos such as "Haagon-Bozs," "Pizza Huh," "Bucksstar Coffee," "KFG" and "McDnoald's." Images of what became known as "Shanzhai Street" spread rapidly online.

Once a term used to suggest something cheap or inferior, shanzhai now suggests to many a certain Chinese cleverness and ingenuity. Shanzhai culture "is from the grass roots and for the grass roots," says Han Haoyue, a media critic in Beijing, who sees it as a means of self-expression. "It gives people another choice and the possibility of resisting dominant cultural values."

Chinese authorities appear to regard shanzhai warily, especially when it comes to intellectual property issues. "The shanzhai culture as a celebration of the DIY [do it yourself] spirit or as a parody to mainstream culture can add fun to our daily lives," said one recent editorial in an official state newspaper. "However, we should remain vigilant against it as a justification for rip-off products."

State media, particularly China Central Television, or CCTV, inspire many shanzhai works. In the southern China boom town of Shenzhen last month, four young women started up their own reporting team for a "shanzhai television station" that spoofs local news and uses a camera tripod fashioned from a fan stand and a toilet plunger. A Beijing man, repeatedly rebuffed in his attempts to appear on a popular CCTV academic program, now produces his own "Shanzhai Lecture Room" show on the Internet, in which he holds forth on the heroes of the Song dynasty for a six-hour stretch.

While the shanzhai New Year's celebration has generated big publicity within China, CCTV appears unfazed by the competition. Qin Xinmin, chief planner for the CCTV spring festival gala, told Chinese media last month: "They can go ahead and do it if they want. So many people want to use CCTV to become famous.... We won't bother responding every time."

Mr. Shi is producing his show under the banner of his own self-styled CCSTV, short for "China Countryside Television." Yet he shies away from the idea of supplanting the CCTV gala. CCTV "does their exquisite show, and we do our grass-roots one. Neither could replace the other and satisfy everyone."

So far, he has drawn more than 1,000 applicants competing for 30 performing slots. He has received donations of money and equipment, as well as a partnership with one of China's biggest Internet companies.

Mr. Shi grew up the son of peasants in China's Sichuan province. An active imagination made up for what he lacked. "When I was a little boy, I wanted so

badly to drive a car," he said. "But then it was rare even to see a car on the road, let alone drive one. So I would make a car from blankets and drive in bed. It was great fun!"

The ebullient Mr. Shi sports close-cropped hair and collared-shirt-and-sweater combinations more suited to an office worker than a guerrilla filmmaker. A tech-industry dropout, he says the shanzhai gala was inspired by his new line of work as a wedding planner, which introduced him to singers and dancers and required him to learn to use a camera.

In addition to the singing, dancing and comedy routines that populate the official CCTV gala, Mr. Shi's show will feature elements that even he finds difficult to categorize. Potential performers include a pair of wheelchair acrobats and a singing five-year-old boy in an Elvis-style jumpsuit and pink wig. "I guess you could call these 'folk performances,'" he says.

A can-do spirit permeates the headquarters of CCSTV, which is run out of his rented office space and staffed with volunteers. A longtime friend and freelance Web designer, Zhou Yan, has become Mr. Shi's publicity maven. The facility's elderly janitor was drafted into becoming a cameraman.

Recently, Tencent -- the show's Internet partner and one of China's Web giants -- expressed some concerns that the show might be getting too sophisticated for its own good. "We found that more and more elements were added to the show, and we felt that they might be walking away from the original intention -- grass-roots party for grass roots," says Dong Xianhui, who runs Tencent's news page.

Mr. Shi, assuring the Internet company that his program would not stray too far from its down-home spirit, turned down an opportunity to have his show broadcast on TV by a local satellite channel in southwest China. He plans to give the bulk of tickets to the live show, which will be staged in a to-be-determined Beijing venue, to migrant workers who are stuck in Beijing during the holiday.

That doesn't mean the performers aren't hoping for their shot at fame. Zhou Changchun says he has tried for years to get on the CCTV broadcast as the "king of bike" -- a title he claims for his ability to do bicycle tricks while clad in a colorful superhero-style outfit. Mr. Zhou has thrown himself into Mr. Shi's broadcast and has plastered "shanzhai" labels across his bicycle, which he points out is old and banged-up.

"The CCTV show is an expensive and exquisite party," he says. "But it's not necessarily the thing we common people want the most."

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