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Shan-Zhai: Economic/Cultural Production through the Cracks of Globalization

"Shan-Zhai" (alternatively spelled Shan-zai 山寨, literally, mountain village, mountain stronghold, bandit fortress), the creation of an outlawed but communal form of self-preservation in times of utter social unrest or in face of invasion by alien tribes, carries significant socio-historic-political connotations of criminality and nonconformity, as   well as those of fraternity and heroism, in the non-western linguistic and cultural context of Chinese history. The term is now widely used in the greater Chinese world to characterize the emergence of a new mode of production, esp. in the mobile phone industries located in Southern China, that had begun as imitation and copycatting but has now developed beyond traditional rules and practices of production with surprisingly successful results in innovative products, locally-customized designs, as well as unconventional business practices. Viewed as "the Third World's stronghold of the weak" and riding on the complex/conflicting sentiments and needs of economic gains and national sovereignty, shan-zhai the concept and its practices have captured public imagination and come to stand for a growing trend of witty, sometimes outlandish, parodization in almost every cultural sphere, sending off reverberations that jerk on elitist as well as nationalistic nerves surrounding the rise of China. Seemingly mainstreaming but also proudly rebellious and provocative, shan-zhai remains illusively fascinating. In this talk, I would like to use the concept of shan-zhai to discuss the relentlessly productive possibilities for the marginalized in the midst of new technologies and new modes of production offered up by globalization. Such innovative appropriations, though often enabled by the problematic forces of commodification and commercialization, have also afforded numerous possibilities for non-conforming genders and sexualities, thus further complicating the contemporary identity scene.