

Shanzhai: Creative imitation of China in Highland Myanmar

Abstract: The Wa State of Myanmar is often called ‘shanzhai China’, that is, a lesser imitation of China. This essay unpacks the material and symbolic implications of creative imitation at the Chinese periphery, embodied in *shanzhai* practices. Literally ‘mountain fortresses’, *shanzhai* refers to creative and ironic brand imitation in contemporary China. Until the 1950s, the inhabitants of the Wa hills did indeed live in mountain fortresses – both a pragmatic necessity as well as a miniature repetition of Chinese imperial rule. The pragmatic limitations and creative potential of imitating China is shown for the cases of Maoism, authoritarian capitalism, and contemporary nationhood. Rather than an essentialised feature of Chinese cultural practice, the practices of *shanzhai* reveal that material and symbolic re-combination are essential to creative imitation.

Keywords: imitation, creativity, shanzhai, China, Wa

The Wa State of Myanmar looks like a smaller version of China: an area the size of Belgium in the so-called ‘Golden Triangle’, where the contemporary nation-states of China, Myanmar, and Laos meet. The inhabitants, ethnic Wa, Lahu, Shan, Akha, and Chinese, are mostly peasant-farmers, governed by an insurgent army called ‘The United Wa State Army’. Officially and on international maps, the Wa State is part of the Union of Myanmar; but in reality, the Burmese government and its army, the *Tatmadaw*, have little influence in the region. Bordering the People’s Republic of China, the Wa State is, in many regards, closer to China than it is to Myanmar. Even though the Wa have their own language (which belongs to the Palanguic branch of Austroasiatic languages), Chinese is the lingua franca of the Wa State, and the institutions of the army and the military state all carry Chinese titles, modelled on those of the neighboring People’s Republic: secretaries and chairmen, scribes and militias, at each level of the government hierarchy; regular assemblies and propaganda work, a one-party organization (the ‘United Wa State Party’), which engages in thought work; officials past their prime even go into semi-retirement into the local ‘political consultative conference’ (*zhengxie*). The army itself emerged from the guerrillas of the Communist Party of Burma, which had been propped up by the People’s Liberation Army. Modern infrastructure (electricity, water, and roads) is being constructed by Chinese companies, who bring their own engineers and often their own workers. The mobile phone grid is provided by Chinese state-owned companies (China Unicom and China Telecom), and the currency used is Chinese Renminbi. Chinese companies run mines, rubber plantations, supermarkets, and hotels; as well as casinos and brothels.

On this background, some people describe the Wa State as a miniature version of China, a cheap copy of the People’s Republic. Chinese observers call the Wa State ‘*shanzhai zhongguo*’. Literally, this means ‘mountain fortress China’, and it refers to a common term in

contemporary China: *shanzhai*, “mountain fortress”, the cheap copy of a brand product. Such cheap copies are made by poor mountain dwellers, who can’t afford the original. In China’s cities one can find countless *shanzhai* products: fake Nike sneakers, and fake Gucci bags for instance. Product names are slightly altered, and easily recognisable as fake: for instance, when a smartphone is called Istone instead of Iphone. Critics have interpreted *shanzhai* as creative appropriation (Yang 2016). The philosopher and media theorists Byung-Chul Han discusses *shanzhai* to illustrate Chinese notions of original and imitation that are entirely different from the Judeo-Christian traditions of the West. According to Han (2017), *shanzhai* continues Chinese practices of ‘de-creation’, in which originality and authenticity plays no role. Such a radical opposition easily slips into an orientalist black-and-white contrast, which implicitly devalues the imitation: “The Chinese like to copy”. Even though it is possible to re-value the copy (as does Han), the act of imitation always takes place within a constellation of unequal power relations, and therefore remains polyvalent and emotionally charged. Rather than something specific to do with contemporary China, *shanzhai* might be able to tell us something about the pragmatic conditions of creativity in general (see for instance, Kloet et al 2019). This is the case, not only for fake brand products, but also for the Wa State of Myanmar. The unequal power relations that are the background of *shanzhai* practices are embodied in the physical reality of defensive imitation: and this is particularly obvious when we look at the material realities of *shanzhai* practices: in the past, Wa villagers did in fact live in mountain fortresses – the original meaning of *shanzhai*.

When Chinese bloggers and journalists call the government of a rebel army in Myanmar “*shanzhai* China”, they convey that the Wa State is a cheap copy of the People’s Republic of China. And indeed, in many regards the Wa State appears to be a threadbare image of the big neighbor. But just like the mountain fortresses of the past, the *shanzhai* practices of today are

not just ironic pastime and imitation: but they emerge from practical necessities in the immediate neighborhood of China. Since the era of the Communist Party of Burma in the 1970s, the elites of the United Wa State Army have been in close contact with Chinese officials, soldiers, and businessmen, and subsequently have received different forms of financial and logistical support from China. Allegedly, this includes not only second-hand army uniforms, but even combat helicopters.¹ Even though there is probably only very little actual military support from China, the long-term association with China certainly plays a crucial role for the politics of the Wa State. For all these reasons, the Wa army has become the strongest military force among Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. And hence this *shanzhai* version of China is not only a ridiculous copy, but also a potentially very dangerous imitation of China's power.

The politics of the Wa state have much to do with its geopolitical situation in a buffer zone between China and Myanmar, as well as the history of drugs and war in the Golden Triangle, the border region where China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos meet. The Wa army emerged from the guerrilla troops of the Communist Party of Burma, which had been backed up by the People's Republic of China, staffed with Chinese volunteers and trained in the tactics of Maoist warfare by PLA advisers. Since China had scaled down its support in the 1970s, the taxation of local opium production and trade had become the main source of income for the local armies. Since the 1990s, the UWSA has successfully eradicated local opium poppies. This success is partly due to the support of UN organizations and NGOs, but also the pressure of the Chinese government. For the Wa army, the fight against illicit drugs is central in its struggle for recognition and legitimacy as an independent player in Burmese politics (for instance in negotiations with the Burmese government and other armed groups), as well as vis-à-vis international donors. Even though no more poppies are planted in the Wa state,

members of the Wa elite are still very active in illicit narcotics and have diversified into chemical drugs, in particular methamphetamines.

To substitute opium production, the Wa army has promoted cash crops (such as tea, tobacco, and rubber), and invited investments in mining and other industries (again, mainly from the People's Republic of China). Here, as well as politically, the Wa army relies on the goodwill and support of the People's Republic of China. Marginal and secondary, perhaps the Wa State is indeed just a cheap copy of Chinese modernity. Without, this is what local observers mean when they call the Wa State a *shanzhai* version of China. But this border region at the Chinese and Burmese peripheries might be able to prefigure multiple alternative modernities in this part of the world.

Chinese modernity itself is often measured against 'the West'. What is perhaps the most substantial difference of 'China' is its refusal to copy western liberalism, democracy, and human rights. Chinese modernity, in turn, relies on hundreds of years of exchange, translation, and confrontation with 'the West', but also Japan and others. And Chinese modernity, in turn, was often an exemplar others strived to emulate, in particular in the Third World. But for China's neighbors to learn from China always also means to cope with China. In the Wa State, just like elsewhere in the periphery of Greater China, becoming 'modern' always takes place both parallel to developments within the People's Republic of China, as well as articulated with the same developments. The quest for contemporaneity of the Wa state thus stands in a similar relationship to China, as the Chinese quest for contemporaneity stands to the world defined in Eurocentric terms. The conundrum of *shanzhai* – imitation or innovation? – is both a question of symbolic and discursive representation, as well as a pragmatic necessity of material action: And the fact that in the Wa State we do not only find

current *shanzhai* discourse, but real-existing mountain fortresses (*shanzhai*), is the best indicator to situate this problem of creative imitation within the parameters of material inequality and the pragmatics of violence.

The Wa State has been called a cheap copy, a miniature version, of China. But in reality, the inhabitants of this region have always actively engaged with their Chinese neighbors, as well as with Chinese models of statehood, Chinese civilization, as well as Chinese capitalism. Negotiating Chinese encroachment, the inhabitants of the Wa hills have managed to maintain their fragile autonomy, by creatively appropriating the military strategies of Maoism, as well as Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism. Their local adaptations of Maoism and capitalism are slightly different from the Chinese models. In both cases, the successful appropriation is not only due to the theoretical compatibility of both with local realities, but also to the unavoidable proximity of the People's Republic of China. And on this basis it is possible to recount a narrative that is both contingent and comparative, that is, a narrative that builds on the specific events of local history, and then puts them into a wider comparative frame. In the following, I dwell on four instances of *shanzhai* politics in Wa history, recounted on the basis of the historical sources available and my own long-term fieldwork in the Wa State.²

The first version of *shanzhai* politics in the region starts from the fortified villages – literally ‘mountain fortresses’ (*shanzhai*) – common in the region until the 1950s. Built for the purpose of local defense, the fortresses often mimicked the cities of others: because of the pragmatic necessities of the mountain environment, such imitation always included elements of combative refusal. The next type of *shanzhai*, the Maoist politics of the 1960s and 70s, doubles and triples such acts of creative refusal: itself a *shanzhai* version of Marxism, Mao

Zedong Thought and Maoist warfare arrived in the 1960s in the highlands of Burma, and the guerilla armies of the Communist Party of Burma quickly adapted those ‘Chinese’ models to local realities: for instance by translating Maoism into the *linguas francas* of the border world, by relaxing ideological control, and by pragmatically engaging with the local opium trade. After 1989, the newly established United Wa State Army started building a local version of the authoritarian capitalism practiced across the border. This third version of *shanzhai* practice in Wa history, again, is much more than a mere copy of the much larger and powerful Chinese political economy: with less bureaucratic coverage and a more immediate grounding in the garrison-entrepots of the UWSA, the authoritarian capitalism of the Wa State is the personal and predatory version of Chinese capitalism today. It is accompanied by a militaristic form of ethno-nationalism that is appropriately called ‘para-nationalism’ – the fourth type of *shanzhai* politics described here: a variation of Chinese models of nationalism adapted to the environment of war and ceasefire politics of highland Myanmar today.

Shanzhai I: past autonomy

The original meaning of the Chinese word *shanzhai* is ‘mountain fortress’. In the distant mountain regions of southern China, fortified settlements were indeed common until the 20th century. Fortresses were necessary for self-defense in the absence of a strong central government. Mountain fortresses often were built to fend off invaders and warlords. At the same time, rebel armies often retreated into mountain fortresses and from there prepared counter-attacks and raids into the plains. Rebellions against imperial rule often started from such mountain fortresses.³

The inhabitants of the Wa hills lived in villages fortified with palisades and surrounded by moats until the second half of the twentieth century (Fiskesjö 2001). One village typically housed several clans, which intermarried according to the principle of bilateral cross-cousin marriage. Several villages often united into 'village circles' around one 'parent village'. Such mountain fortresses offered protection in the frequent feuds with neighboring villages. Those fortresses lost their function only once the modern armies of the Chinese Nationalist and Communist armies arrived in the 1940s and 50s.

Until then, the Wa had lived in a 'stateless' society. James Scott (2009) has described the Wa and similar societies in the highlands of Southeast Asia as 'escape formations', which had retreated into the mountains and adopted a lifestyle that allowed them to avoid state domination. The opposition between mountains and valleys in mainland Southeast Asia is indeed striking, and numerous scholars have noted the distinction between the states in the valleys and the barbarians in the hills.⁴ In the valleys, sedentary farmers practiced irrigated rice cultivation, a system of expert scribes maintained the holy scripts and the temples of world religions, and a well-functioning traffic network facilitated government bureaucracies and the taxation and pacification of the rural populations. In the hills, however, semi-nomadic ethnic groups made a living of foraging and swidden agriculture, with their rituals and worldviews permeated by animistic cosmologies, and general fluidity and mobility of social life that guaranteed political autonomy. The relations between valleys and mountains are a central theme in the history and social anthropology of 'Zomia', the highlands between Assam in India to Laos and Vietnam.

Even though the Wa are typical mountain dwellers in this scheme, the characterization as 'escape formation' does not exhaust all aspects of Wa society: if it meant to imply that it was

based on a conscious decision and political movement for egalitarianism, it is both simplifying and mis-describing historical reality: Rather than ‘choosing with their feet’, the Wa fled the plains because they had been defeated by their Shan neighbors. Everyday life in the mountains, however, was never ‘egalitarian’, but structured according to a strict code of honor and an ethics of feuding. Based in mountain fortresses, Wa villages often raided surrounding Shan and Wa settlements, and entered long-standing feuding relationships with neighboring Wa villages. Headhunting was common on the Burmese side of the border until the 1970s, and Wa communities held elaborate rituals around the heads of dead enemies that served to strengthen potency and fertility. As such, until the second half of the twentieth century, Wa society remained an autonomous ‘predatory formation’.

Social autonomy had its counterpart in the autonomy of each person, writes the foremost ethnographer of Wa society, Magnus Fiskesjö: “Until the end of Wa autonomy in the 1950s, in the central Wa country every man, and generally also every woman, was regarded as independent and autonomous in themselves, according to an ethos that strongly emphasized equality and that was bolstered by codes of honor and moral norms” (2010: 244). Conflicts between clans and villages extended into long-term feuding, which however never led into wider supra-village government, and thus ultimately ensured local autonomy. The mountain fortresses were an integral part of this segmentary politics in which each unit struggled to remain independent, with the result of a ‘peace in the feud.’⁵

But just like the notion of ‘segmentary politics’ was possibly inspired by civilizational states and then copied onto ‘stateless societies’ elsewhere (Dresch 1988), the mountain fortresses of the Wa obviously imitated the fortified cities of the surrounding states. When interviewing local intellectuals and elders about the ruins of the old mountain fortresses in the Wa hills, it

was often pointed out to me that the walls resembled the great Chinese cities (respectively the great Shan cities, or Burmese cities, on the other side of the border). The walls and moats of Man Rai – a famous village in the Northern Wa hills –, “had nine gates, just like Beijing!”, an old Wa scholar, who had studied in Beijing, would point out to me. In this case, the imitation is recognized after the fact (those who built the walls of Man Rai almost certainly had never heard of the gates of Beijing). But some of the old fortifications in the Wa hills were probably built as a replica of a great city: following the common Southeast Asian theme according to which the same organizational principle is repeated at different levels, in the Wa hills villages were sometimes given the names of ‘city-units’ in the Wa and Shan languages, such as *veng*, *cing*, and *meng*, and local leaders were called the ranks of Shan administrators (for instance *khun* and *lam*), often jokingly. We can only assume that the similarities and differences between the Wa fortresses and the Shan cities did not escape their builders.

Withstanding the invasions of Chinese and Burmese armies, and British Colonial rule in Burma, the central Wa hills maintained their autonomy. British colonial officials undertook several expeditions (the first one in 1891) but concluded that pacification of these hills was not worth the effort. The “really wild Wa ... should be left alone till the frontier is demarcated, as they do no harm (headhunting only in their own territory), and would not repay administration (having nothing to export save opium and buffalo horns, and nothing to import save salt)” (Harvey 1933: 32). During the Japanese invasion, there were no battles in the central Wa hills, only some minor troop movements at the Wa periphery. After the end of WWII, negotiations about the independence of Burma began between the British colonial rulers and a group of young Burmese intellectuals. In the Panglong agreement of February 1947 the Burmese leaders under Aung San (the father of Aung San Su Kyi) granted the right to self-determination to the ethnic groups of Northern Burma. The Wa, like several others,

were not part of these negotiations, and therefore after the Panglong agreement, a commission was called to negotiate the position and role of the ethnic minorities within the Union of Myanmar. This so-called Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry held meetings with the leaders and representatives of various groups for several months. Four representatives of the Wa States met with the commission but did not have much to say, apparently. Asked, whether they would be prepared to enter alliances with the Shan or with the other peoples of Burma? One Wa chief replied that the Wa would prefer to continue living as they did in the past, that is, independent of others. One member of the commission, Thakin Nu (who later became premier minister of Burma), asked whether the Wa would not appreciate having schools, clothes, good food, new houses, and hospitals? The Wa chief Khun Sai replied: “We are wild people and we do not appreciate these things.” The commission concluded that it would not be necessary to invite the Wa to further meetings, given that “no one amongst them would be able to contribute anything to the future constitution of Myanmar”. For the same reason, the Wa hills should be administrated as part of the Shan states for the time being.⁶

But the administration of the Wa States as part of the Shan State existed only on paper: the new Union of Myanmar and the government of the new Shan State lacked the resources to establish government offices in the Wa hills. Yet, the Frontier Areas Committee of Enquiry was the first of a long series of encroachments by foreign armies and states, that ultimately would lead to the end of Wa autonomy. Until then, Wa communities had lived in relative independence, of each other, as well as of their neighbors (including Shan, Lahu, Chinese, and Burmese). The might have appeared as uncivilized primitives at the meetings of the Frontier commission, yet at the same time they inspired respect and fear as warriors and

head-hunters. Feuds with neighboring mountain fortresses, and raids into the valleys, thus sustained Wa autonomy until the 1950s.

Shanzhai II: Maoism

From the 1950s onwards, the invasions of modern armies finally brought an end to the old mountain fortresses and the political autonomy of the Wa. Palisades and moats had done their service against arrows and spears, even against muzzle loading guns, but they could not protect against the modern rifles and semi-automatic guns of British, Chinese, and Burmese armies. At the time of independence, new military technologies were matched by local militarism throughout Myanmar: in several parts of the country and in particular in the Shan state, Maoist guerrillas emerged, led by young Burmese intellectuals. Colonial administration, followed by government of independent Burma, mobilized against the Maoists by building village militias. In the mountains of the North-west, there were now large contingents of the Chinese Nationalist Army (KMT), which had retreated following their defeat in the Chinese civil war. Throughout the 1950s, these armies remained within Burma, preparing a counter-attack against Communist China. In China, the communist government had begun to integrate the ethnic groups in the frontier areas into the new People's Republic. In 1950 and 1951, the first battalions of the Communist Army arrived in the Wa hills, where they pitched their camps and 'pacified' the wild Wa. But the exact coordinates of the international border were not agreed yet, and in the 1950s, the camps of the communist and the nationalist armies were sometimes in view of each other. In 1957, finally, the governments of the new countries of Myanmar and China agreed to follow the so-called '1941-line', that is, the border line the nationalist government of China and the British colonial administration had agreed on in a treaty in 1941. In the 1950s, the communist

army had established garrisons, and a provisional government and even schools in some parts of what is now the Wa State. Once the border line was finally agreed, the Chinese communist army retreated, and by 1960, the international border was finally surveyed, and border posts established. This is the same border that continues until the present day, with ethnic Wa settled on both sides of the border.

Many Wa that ended up on the 'Burmese side' of the border post 1960, however, remained in contact with their relatives on the Chinese side, as well as with the Chinese officials that had been in their villages in the 1950s. Given the threats of various local warlords, and marooned KMT troops, Chinese border police and military started to train Wa militiamen on both side of the border. Chinese communist soldiers supported several local Wa groups in their feuds against others that received support from the KMT. In the 1960s, these militias grew, and in the last years of the decade turned into Maoist guerrilla brigades, supported and supervised by China. During the 1950s and 60s, several units of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), had gone into exile in China, with several hundred individuals settled in Sichuan and Guizhou, and (mainly Burmese) intellectuals in Beijing. In China they received systematic training and eventually, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, were sent back to Burma to lead the Communist Revolution there. They joined the remains of the Communist Party of Burma in the border region of the Wa hills, and quickly conquered several strips of land along the Chinese border. They were joined by several thousand Chinese 'red guards', many of them from 'bad class backgrounds' in China, who simply ran across the border, and sometimes were assigned units of the CPB by border guards and Chinese army advisors. For three years (1968-71) the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong openly supported communist guerrillas in Burma, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The Chinese army delivered uniforms, weapons, and rice, and numerous local Wa, and Chinese red guards from

elsewhere in China, joined the revolution in Burma. In the new geopolitical environment of ping-pong diplomacy, the PRC entered a fragile rapprochement with the Burmese military government, and downscaled its open support for the Maoist guerilla in Myanmar. Most of the Chinese Red Guards returned to China at the end of the Cultural Revolution. But throughout the 1970s, Chinese support remained essential to the state-building efforts of the CPB (Lintner 1990).

Over the next two decades, local Wa guerrillas became a core element of the KPB and fought for the communist side against the Burmese army and the remaining KMT troops. Most Wa entered the rank and file of the CPB, whereas most of the members of central government of the party were Burmese intellectuals. These two groups were brought together by the large numbers of Chinese volunteers and advisers, which had come across the Chinese border. On the basis of Chinese support and Chinese resources, Chinese became the lingua franca of the party, and many local Wa learned to read and write with the Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung as their reading primer. But aside from Chinese support, the principles of Maoist organization also helped to bridge the differences between the Wa soldiers and the Burmese elite. In some respects, this was the crucial challenge of the communist revolution: and the main concepts of Maoist warfare and Maoist organizations had been developed to deal with it (Scott 1979). The Maoist 'mass line', for instance, meant that every party cadre had to stand on the same line with the masses, and only from there, and on the basis of the continuous interaction with the masses was it possible to continue the revolution. On the Long March, and then during the formative period of Yan'an, the Chinese Communist Army had gone through a crucial learning process, which included in particular the pragmatic engagement of local powers and the forces of the 'old society' (including clan organizations, warlords, bandits, and secret societies). This pragmatism was absolutely crucial for the integration of

local populations into the Maoist movement, and thus it would be simplistic to say it was a betrayal of the original cause, and the ideals of the revolution.⁷ Instead of abstract propaganda discourse, what mattered were concrete questions of military organizations and warfare. And here in particular, the ‘mass line’ and the ‘united front’, as well as the pragmatism of ‘parochial mobilization’, proved effective. Maoist warfare, therefore, became a driving force for state-building in the Wa hills.

The pragmatism of Maoist organization made perfect sense for the Wa hills (as it did in many other parts of the world, see Lovell 2019): specifically, the simplification of political oppositions into a black-and-white scheme of friend and foe, and the pragmatic engagement with local conditions (i.e. the opium trade) distinguished the Maoist guerillas from competing armies, including the CIA-supported marooned battalions of the Chinese nationalist army. But the ‘theoretical’ compatibility of Maoist organization with local conditions was possibly not enough: what really made the difference was the direct and immediate support (in weapons, food, equipment and resources) by the People’s Liberation Army.

Using the theoretical, practical, and material resources provided by the Communist Party of Burma, Wa soldiers and commanders, then quickly adapted Maoism for their own purposes. This meant, concretely, that already from the early 70s, CPB commanders got involved in the local opium trade. In that sense, it could be argued that they followed the model of the Chinese Communist Party, which campaigned against opium but also relied on opium taxation during the crucial Yan’an period (Chen 1995). Pragmatism, here, didn’t mean that the ideals of the revolution were discarded; much rather, their realisation was deferred temporarily. At the very least, the communist army prohibited their own soldiers to trade opium, let alone use it. In all these regards, the Chinese communist army was a model for the

Communist Party of Burma, as well as the UWSA. But in the Golden Triangle, ideological guidelines possibly played even less of a role than in China.

Instead of an opposition between ‘reds’ and ‘experts’ as in the ups and downs of the Chinese revolution, what became central to the internal politics of the Communist Party of Burma, was the ethnic opposition between the Burmese intellectuals in the leadership and the Han Chinese, Wa, Shan and Lahu rank and file (see Lintner 1990). This opposition erupted in 1989. Already months before the Iron Curtain went down in Europe, a mutiny effectively destroyed the Communist Party of Burma. Chinese and Wa soldiers refused to follow the orders of the (overwhelmingly Burmese) leaders of the CPB, and in April 1989 declared the end of the CPB, and soon after the establishment of a new organization, the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Some reasons for the coup had been apparent already in the early 1980s. After the death of Mao Zedong, the leaders of the People’s Republic of China were less and less willing to support communist parties in Southeast Asia. Some saw the allies in the jungles of Southeast Asia as an embarrassing reminder of Maoist internationalism, while Deng Xiaoping led a rapprochement with the military junta in Myanmar. In the absence of Chinese support, the CPB, consequently, had to procure income and increasingly relied on the local opium trade. At the same time the internal divisions between the Burmese elite of the party, the Chinese official in mid-level positions, and the local ethnic soldiers intensified. While the aging Burmese leader barely ever left the headquarters, from where they issued press releases and gave commandos, Wa and Chinese soldiers fought back-breaking battles with the Burmese army. Resentment against the Burmese intellectuals steadily grew, and finally led to the mutiny that was led the only local members of the central committee of the Communist Party of Burma.

One main point of disagreement between the Burmese elite and the local soldiers had been how to deal with the production and trade of opium. Many members of the CPB had stakes in the opium trade; since the end of Chinese support, the taxation of the drug trade, as well as the production of heroin, had become the main source of income for the communist army. The Burmese intellectuals in the headquarters, however, tried to impose strict measures to restrict the drug trade. These efforts, in turn, aggravated the conflicts between the leadership and ordinary soldiers.

In March 1989, the insurgency started with ethnic Chinese CPB soldiers under the leadership of Peng Jiashen in neighboring Kokang. Wa troops that were sent by the CPB headquarters to suppress the rebellion in Kokang, revoked their order, and after a brief consultation, decided to storm the headquarters of the CPB in Pang Hsang. They burned all the records and papers of the CPB, and then sent off the Burmese intellectuals across the river to China. Soon later, the new army was renamed the “United Wa State Army”. Bao Youxiang and Zhao Nilai, two of local Wa leaders of the mutiny, were declared generals of the new army and chairmen of the “United Wa State Party”. At first, the members of the new army worried about the possible reactions on the Chinese side. The Chinese government did indeed receive the Burmese officials, and those who are still alive now live in retirement in China. The relationship between the UWSA and China quickly normalized on the basis of long-term personal relationships between Chinese and Wa across the border.

Shanzhai III: authoritarian capitalism

The UWSA has been fighting opium production in its area of control since the 1990s. One important reason for this policy has been the proximity to China: The Chinese government

did not want to see any poppies at the border, and in general had come to regard the production and trade of illicit drugs at its border as a security risk. Yet even though the era of ‘socialist brotherhood’ had ended, the Wa state more than ever relied on economic and military support, or at least good-will from the big neighbor. Drug eradication, therefore, became a prestige fight, a struggle for recognition and legitimacy, in particular from China. Bao Youxiang, the head of the UWSA, gave speeches in which he said he would guarantee with his own head that from 2005 onwards there would be no more poppies planted in the Wa State – thus directly referencing the headhunting practices of the past, in which Bao had taken part himself as a young man in the 1960s. According to most observers, the Wa army has been very successful in its struggle against opium. This success was not the least due to forceful means of the UWSA, which forced peasants to stop planting opium, and often simply mowed down mature poppies at harvest time.

For ordinary farmers the eradication of opium meant a radical and difficult change. Even though the army announced the promotion of substitution crops, such as rubber, tobacco, and tea, many farmers lost their main livelihood. Rubber, tea and tobacco plantations needed at least a few years before crops could be sold on the market. Without capital and knowledge, it was in fact impossible for local farmers to invest in cash crops. Instead, the army appropriated land, and either planted cash crops in monoculture, or gave the rights to those plantations to private investors.⁸ In the process, the army forcefully re-settled entire villages. Forceful resettlement had first started in the 1990s, when the UWSA had won substantial territories at the Thai border, and then re-settled up to 120 000 people from the Northern Wa (LNDO 2002).

At the same time, the UWSA selectively granted permission to Chinese investors to extract minerals. Bauxite, Gold, Silver and Tin are mined in various smaller sites throughout the Wa State. There are also some larger mines, including one major area of tin mining. The majority of those mineral resources are mined and then transported to China for refinery. According to some reports, the mining of tin has rapidly increased between 2014 and 16, to a degree which had an impact on the tin prices throughout the region (Martov 2016).

In the various towns of the Wa State there is an increasing number of hotels, casinos, supermarkets, and brothels, many of them opened by Chinese entrepreneurs. Local traders and markets offer the same products ‘made in China’ as in neighboring Yunnan. The biggest casino of the Wa State in the capital Pang Hsang has about 500 employees and offers poker, Black Jack, Mahjong, gambling machines, karaoke, and various restaurants. Some ethnic Wa (mostly the elite, or their relatives and business associates), have stakes in these companies, or have opened their own hotels and restaurants.

The largest investments in the last few years came from a Chinese business group in 2015, the so-called ‘Yicheng Group’. Representatives of the group had approached the Central Wa government to agree on a portfolio of investments, including the establishment of an entire “Special Economic Zone” in Aicheng, a remote district of the Wa State, bordering China. In the challenging conditions of the rugged mountain ranges, the Chinese investors started construction in July 2015, of what appeared to become an entire little town, with a residential district of mansions, a hospital, and public plazas. Because there was barely any plain area in the district, entire hills and mountain tops had to be moved to produce enough plain area for construction. Yicheng brought huge numbers of machines and workers to the construction site, as well as a number of other construction sites that had been open all over the Wa State:

hospitals, casinos, a new TV station. In September 2015, traffic jams – previously unheard of – were logging most of the border passes entering the Wa State: hundreds of trucks and cars had to wait for days before they could pass the border controls and enter the Wa State, where they would be employed on the building sites of the Yicheng Group.

To build the new ‘special economic zone’, the Yicheng Group also employed large numbers of local workers. Members of the Wa elite helped to recruit villagers via middlemen. But local workers were not used to the strict labor discipline of the Chinese companies, and often problems of communication led to tensions with the Chinese foremen. When conflicts broke out, representatives of the Wa army were called to mediate. As a guest of local officials, I heard about numerous conflicts in summer 2015, but it proved impossible to directly observe what was happening on the construction sites. Following some of these conflicts, hundreds of local workers fled the construction sites and simply walked back to their villages.

The arrival of the Yicheng Group in the Wa State speaks of the boom and bust of internet commerce in contemporary China: The main investor of Yicheng was the CEO of the company ‘E Zubao’, which by early 2015 had become one of the largest online market places for so-called ‘peer-to-peer credits’ (p2p) in the People’s Republic of China. The platform connected private creditors and debtors and offered only minimal transaction costs for online credit. In May 2015, the daily turnover on the online platform had risen to 5 billion RMB (then about 800 Million USD). The company only provided the online platform, on which creditor and debtors could meet without the mediation of banks. But in December 2015, it emerged that the company actually lacked the funding to cover a large part of the online transactions that had taken place, and within days, the CEO, several managers and board members were arrested in China. A large number of individuals who had invested in ‘E

Zubao' lost their money (Wuhong 2015). And the construction at various sites in the Wa State was cancelled immediately. Machines, foremen, and manager, disappeared without a trace.⁹ The unfinished buildings of the TV station in the Wa State capital, Pang Hsang, and the abandoned mansion district in the 'special economic zone' of Aicheng remind the visitor of this brief episode in the history Chinese investment in the Wa hills.

The plantations of cash crops, small-scale Chinese investments in trade and infrastructure, as well as the boom and bust story of the special economic zone, represent different forms of contemporary Chinese capitalism. In the development of authoritarian capitalism, China is both the standard of comparison, as well as the major variable as the Wa State's big neighbor. The kind of authoritarian capitalism that has developed in the Wa State has similar effects as in China. Even though relative inequality has risen exponentially, living standards are higher and absolute poverty is lower than in the past. The elites of army and state who have become patrons of Chinese business are clearly the main beneficiaries. The hierarchies of the Wa State are based on the command structures of the army, and only recently there have been efforts to improve civil government. In this military state, Chinese capitalism is clearly reduced to its authoritarian aspects. There is no illusion of any separation of powers, or rule of law that would control the echelons of government and army: if possible, the Wa State version of Chinese capitalism, is thus even more personalized and predatory than its neighbor. This 'shanzhai' version of Chinese capitalism thus creatively responds to local constraints, both by symbolic and pragmatic adaptation.

Shanzhai IV: authenticity and statehood

“Now we are the Africans of China”, an official of the Wa state said to me in 2016, when we had just mentioned British colonialism in Myanmar and across the globe. And indeed, the Wa State does resemble a neo-colony of China. And as in other colonial situations, the colonial relations here are characterized by the ‘partial presence’ of mimicry: that is, a metonymic repetition, in material practice, that is never complete (Bhabha 1984:128 ff.). If the Wa State indeed is a colony of the Chinese metropolis (and my friend, the official denies it is, when speaking in public), even then the politics of such a colony are never a one-to-one copy of metropolitan and dominant models. The basic contours of the Maoist state, as well as contemporary authoritarian capitalism can be identified, yet they have not been taken directly from China, but have changed in the process. If we measure the Wa State against such an ‘ideal type’ model of statehood, sovereignty, and modernity, we can only conclude that this is a failed state. Yet the failure lies in the terms of the comparison.

Throughout this essay, I have emphasized the pragmatism of the inhabitants of the Wa state. Since the 1950s, some Wa have managed to strategically and tactically adapt to challenging circumstances, for instance, by positioning them between Chinese and Burmese demands, when fighting local opium production as well as when dealing with Chinese investors. We have so far mainly focused on the Wa elite; and one of the main consequences of state building since the era of the Communist Party of Burma has been that this elite has been increasingly separated from ordinary farmers: since the 1980s, a new elite has accumulated substantial personal wealth on the basis of income from the drug trade, as well as mineral resources, and later further investments in plantations. The new networks of acquaintances formed in the army and through business network, and their separation from ordinary people in villages, is the framework of press-gangs through which children are forced into the ranks

of the army (see Author 2019). The mounting inequalities and the violence of military government is countered, and to some extent normalized, by a new sense of ethnic identity.

Many young Wa participate in the co-production of a new sense of ethnic identity. Officials of the Wa State, cultural workers and local intellectuals, as well as many people who only have a mobile phone and a social media account, are concerned with 'Wa culture' and 'tradition'. On social media people constantly forward songs in the Wa language, and postings about Wa culture. One central issue here is the authenticity of Wa culture, that is, the authenticity of 'land and people'; as a justification of the (relative and limited) sovereignty of the Wa State, this issue is of central ideological significance.

The Wa army engages in a lot of cultural work and propaganda: in every district of the Wa State, there are propaganda units which perform dance and song at festivals, holidays and private events of the elite. There are a number of TV stations, which broadcast in Wa, Shan, and Chinese, and several departments also have webpages. On social media, numerous songs and videos about daring soldiers and beautiful girls are forwarded. On all these media, the representation of the 'land and the people' in their authenticity provides justification for the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Wa State and its government. The relative improbability and fragility of the Wa State adds urgency to this preoccupation with authenticity and sovereignty.

Such efforts are in many ways similar to other nationalist movements that gather around lost causes. The historian Prasenjit Duara has described similar aspects of the nationalism of Manchukuo in the 1930s. This puppet regime of Imperial Japan in Manchuria lasted only for a decade and was doomed from the beginning. Yet Duara has emphasized how even in such

unfavorable conditions some general features of nationalism can be found (Duara 2004). He points in particular to the connection between authenticity and sovereignty. Especially in regions where national sovereignty was completely impracticable, the concern about a representation of ‘land and people’ as the real representatives and as the fundamental legitimation of the state was the more common.

The situation of the Wa State today is very similar: there is little to no hope for international recognition and the status of the Wa State within the Union of Myanmar remains fragile. Additionally, the Wa State depends in different ways on Chinese support, as discussed here. Nevertheless, many Wa take part about what constitutes ‘authentic Wa culture’. And when they sing songs about the soldiers of the Wa army, or share videos of Wa dances and lyrics, sometimes the conclusion that Wa authenticity justifies Wa sovereignty is evident. That means that ‘land and people’, ordinary folks – the poor farmers in the villages, as well as the soldiers who serve in the UWSA – are the constitutive personnel of the Wa State, and its core justification. Some observers say this justification is really just cynical propaganda: in reality it is precisely the same ordinary people that are neglected by the Wa elite, or sacrificed on the battlefield. Both Western and Chinese media often present the Wa state as the personal fiefdom of a bunch of drug lords. Ultimately, it is impossible to know whether the intentions of the leadership are sincere; but it is also undeniable that the representations of ‘authentic’ Wa culture serve important purposes for Wa para-nationalism. This para-nationalism does not aspire for the recognition of the Wa State as an independent nation, but instead seeks a pragmatic co-existence with the Burmese national government. The same nationalist program receives a lot of support from the Wa diaspora in Burma, China, and Thailand. Para-nationalism, thus, is the last instance of a long history of *shanzhai* in the Wa hills: creative

imitation that responds symbolically and pragmatically to the material realities of China's remote peripheries.

Conclusion

At first sight, the Wa State looks like a cheap copy of China. But the parable of the mountain fortress can mean many different things in the Wa hills. First of all, it refers to an obvious historical reality: in the past, the Wa indeed did live in mountain fortresses. Such fortresses were necessary for local defense and an essential element of local warfare. The mountain fortresses of the past embodied both the defense against, as well as the replication of imperial rule. Similarly, *shanzhai* products and *shanzhai* discourse in China today stand for the ambivalences of imitation: There is a certain unease associated with being an inferior copy – maybe even just a fake version of the original. But then it might be possible to strategically take advantage of this position of inferiority – after all, one has to cope with such a situation. This is the basic constellation that explains the ironic manipulation of brand products in Chinese *shanzhai* practices, as well as the creative imitation of China in the Wa State: a creative imitation that is indispensable to open up fragile spaces of political autonomy. If this applies to Chinese nationalist discourse (Yang 2016), it applies the more to the identities at the Chinese periphery – such as Wa. The case of the Wa state also has the additional advantage that it represents 'real-existing' mountain fortresses, and thus the original meaning of 'shanzhai': an extremely pragmatic self-assertation in a situation of insecurity and threat. This self-assertation can be defensive and pro-active. It is by necessity an imitation using whatever is at hand, but this imitation carries a lot of innovative and creative potential. In this essay, I have given four examples of such creative imitation in the Wa hills: the mountain

fortresses of the pre-colonial past; socialist development in the 1970s and 80s; authoritarian capitalism and para-nationalism today.

Before the end of political autonomy in the 1950s, most Wa lived in actual mountain fortresses. Modern warfare and the organizational structure of militias and guerrillas then laid the fundamentals for a new military state. The guerrilla army of the Communist Party of Burma in these mountains relied on Chinese support, and then the taxation of the opium trade, as well as the production of narcotics. In the last decades, opium production has been almost completely eradicated and instead new cash crops (tobacco, rubber, and coffee) have been introduced. Mining (of tin, gold and silver) also has become an important source of revenue for the Wa elite. At the same time, members of the Wa elite have also diversified into the production and trade of chemical drugs, methamphetamines in particular. Much of the investment in all these industries, including mining and drugs, comes from China, as does a big part of the investment in supermarkets, retail, hotels and casinos. The local military states, thus, carefully adapts itself to authoritarian Chinese capitalism.

What is happening in the Wa state should not be reduced to war, drugs, and Chinese influence. The leaders of army and state have to find their position in a region that political scientists often describe as a ‘buffer zone’ between Chinese and Burmese spheres of influence. Wa intellectuals in the Wa state, as well as in Burma, Thailand, and elsewhere in Myanmar, work hard to spread authentic representations of Wa culture. And such ‘authentic’ representation provides a core argument for the claims to sovereignty made by the Wa State.

It is impossible to separate imitations of Maoism and capitalism at the Chinese periphery from the inevitable proximity and the influence of China. Yet the same proximity and

influence also prefigure the ambivalence of imitation: The Wa did not adopt Maoism and capitalism because they like to copy. The same, actually, can be said about the People's Republic of China itself. Maoism, for instance, has been called a *shanzhai* version of Marxism, and perhaps 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' is really just a *shanzhai* version of capitalism and liberal democracy? If this was accurate, I don't think it is down to an essentialized Chinese tendency for imitation, and a disregard for authenticity (this is, essentially, the argument of Byung-Chul Han's essay on *shanzhai*, 2017). Instead, it is creative adaptation and situated re-invention (see Kloet et al. 2019). As such, Chinese and Wa practices of *shanzhai* speak of practical creativity, as well as real-world constraints.

Yet, at the same time, *shanzhai* implies danger and risk, as it stands for potentially transgressive practices and discourses. In this sense, it should not be reduced to a form of nation-branding: that is, allowing for harmless *shanzhai* culture, while limiting and managing the *shanzhai* economy of counterfeits and fake (this is the argument proposed by Yang 2016). There are many others forms of creative appropriation in *shanzhai*, such as those of Maoism, authoritarian capitalism, and para-nationalism that we have re-visited here. China's mountain fortresses, past and present, are miniature versions of the imperial state, but also serve as the refuge and linchpin of rebellion against the same imperial state.

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¹ There are no reliable sources about the military support the Wa army receives from the People's Republic of China, and reports about the delivery of combat helicopters have been denied by spokespersons of the UWSA, see for instance Kha and Weng 2014. The UWSA has long been able to manufacture its own uniforms, as well as weapons. Nevertheless, rumours of Chinese army uniforms, Chinese weapons, Chinese helicopters and Chinese military training, circulate widely and captivate the outsider's attention. The same rumours, and so many other titillating stories about drugs and war, are peddled by Chinese and Western pundits.

² Between 2013 and 2017, I have carried out 18 months of fieldwork in the Wa Hills of China and Myanmar, of which about one year was spent in the village of Yaong Rai in the Northern Command of the Wa State (all names of smaller places and ordinary people are pseudonyms). This article is part of a larger book project about the dynamics of sovereignty in the Wa State; here I outline a general argument about *shanzhai* as a modus of relating to China, and only make selective use of my ethnographic data. Elsewhere I have explored local history, military government, moral economies, and para-nationalism on the basis of ethnographic analysis (see Steinmüller 2019; 2020; forthcoming; n.d.; Ong and Steinmüller forthcoming).

³ There are numerous examples of peasant uprisings and rebellions, some of them millenarian, which started from mountain fortresses. One famous peasant rebellion that was based in mountain fortresses in the Dabie mountains (the watershed between the Yangzi and the Yellow River) in 1770-52 is described by Barent ter Haar (1998: 236ff).

⁴ See for instance Leach (1954), Kirsch (1973), and Russell (1989).

⁵ 'peace in the feud', is of course, the notion that Evans-Pritchard (1940) suggested to describe the segmentary politics of the Nuer in Southern Sudan.

⁶ See Kramer (2007: 9-10).

⁷ Chen Yung-fa (1986) suggests that the techniques of ‘controlled polarisation’ and ‘parochial mobilisation’ were crucial for the success of the Communist revolution in China. Both notions speak of the pragmatism of Chinese communism: polarisation between friend and foe is necessary for the revolution, but at the same time, this polarisation needs to be controlled and kept within limits; mobilisation takes place on the basis of local interests and personal relations (rather than abstract ideals)..

⁸ There are numerous accounts of the UWSA’s fight against opium production and efforts to build up substitute crops, including the difficulties and hardships of the local population. In these efforts, the UWSA was supported by the United Nations’ Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which started work in the Wa State in 1995, and expanded to the so-called ‘Kokang and Wa Initiative’ (KOWI) in 2003. Chinese law enforcement, including border policy and provincial police departments, also played an important role in the process. For the former, see Renard (2013), for the latter, Tang Cheng Dao Xiang (2009).

⁹ As in many of its other investments in the People’s Republic of China, local workers and small companies had to bear the brunt of the bankruptcy of the Yicheng Group. According to blog posts, the Yicheng Group owed more than 170 Million RMB to local individuals and companies in the Wa State when it went bankrupt (huazong diule jin gubang 2016).