

CHINESE MIC MANUFACTURING'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

SHANGHAI SURPRISE

Forget the idea that all Chinese-made microphones are cheap copies or badged clones. On a recent trip to Shanghai, Neil Worley discovered that things are changing.

It's no secret that China is in the middle of an economic revolution. It's been every developed economy's cheap manufacturer for about 20 years, but the sleeping giant is now emerging as an economic superpower in its own right. And with that change has come a new confidence. Typical of this attitude is microphone manufacturer SE Electronics, the Shanghai-based manufacturing plant of which I was lucky enough to visit late last year.

Chinese whispers

The implication that most people take away from the phrase 'Chinese mic', is that the product is somehow inferior. And, to be fair, this isn't altogether surprising. China has historically been a low-price contract manufacturer of microphones marketed by Western firms. This has meant that it's frequently possible to spot identical (bar the label) products being sold by different companies, which of course raises uncomfortable questions for distributors. All this OEM activity has led many distributors to shroud in mystery the true origins of their mics, so being made in China has become something almost to be ashamed of.

SE is one firm that's turning this idea on its head. It has decided to make no mics or parts for anyone else, and instead concentrate on building its own brands. "No apologies here," says SE founder Siwei Zou. "We have top designers and great manufacturing facilities. We compete on quality and innovation, not price," he adds.

Come the revolution

If anyone can pull off this strategy Mr Zou is the man for the job. He's hugely impressive to meet, with energy to burn and a clear vision for his company. You can't help feeling that his experiences during the dark years of Mao's Cultural Revolution have formed a diamond-hard nugget of unshakable belief and endurance somewhere inside him.

Born in Shanghai, the son of a painter father and an academic mother (both of whom were Christians), and an accomplished bassoonist at a young age, it wasn't too hard to predict that he might be on the Party's hitlist.



SE's Deco-style manufacturing base in Shanghai (above) is reminiscent of the city's last great heyday in the 20s. SE founder and owner Siwei Zou (below) shows off SE's range of mics.

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The Revolution came in 1966, just after Siwei had been being offered a place at Shanghai's prestigious Conservatory at the age of 16. With the shutdown of most academic institutions, he found himself assigned to a cement factory on the outskirts of Shanghai, where he broke rocks by hand for five years – not an ideal profession for a budding bassoonist.

His 'rescue' came when the Shanghai Opera's first clarinet insisted Siwei audition for the first bassoon seat. He got the job. A further five years later, Deng Xiaoping seized power, the Cultural Revolution was over and Siwei was finally able to fulfil his destiny and ▶

