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# Once seen as cheap knockoffs, Chinese brands are losing their stigma and winning over Singapore consumers

In the past, Chinese brands were often passed over by consumers who viewed them as cheap and of poor quality. Today, they're increasingly gaining favour, in particular, with younger consumers for being innovative, aesthetically pleasing and value for money.

For most of her adult life, Ms Shelly Chan, 41, steered clear of Chinese-made electronics.

Growing up, her parents had been wary of "Made in China" goods after experiencing a string of unreliable household appliances that did not last.

"So even though we were not well-to-do, my parents insisted on spending more for household appliances that were not 100 per cent made in China," said the business marketing consultant.

Influenced by her parents' experience, Ms Chan also made it a point to avoid appliances made in China when she moved to her own home.

The only exception she made was for appliances from big brands like Samsung, which is Korean, as she believed the company would have more stringent quality checks.

But her perspective began to shift in 2018, when a friend introduced her to Huawei, a Chinese smartphone maker, after her relatively new Android phone broke following a minor fall.

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The new phone, which was an affordable replacement, exceeded her expectations.

“I fell in love with it. The battery was long-lasting, the colours in the photos were beautiful, and the processing speed was fast. That was the turning point for me in trusting Chinese brands more,” Ms Chan said.

Today, some of her household products are from well-known Chinese brands.

Marketing communications professional Lester Kok, 41, similarly used to avoid Chinese products and had a preference for Japanese and Korean brands for their reliability and sleeker design.

“The label ‘Made in China’ was viewed as the least reliable,” he said, adding that his mobile phone, television and even car were carefully chosen to avoid Chinese manufacturing.

However, that changed after he tried mobile phones and other products, such as smartwatches and audio devices, from Chinese brands, as these products began to gain mainstream popularity. He was drawn to their innovative features and affordability.

“I always compare specs with Western brands like Nothing, Motorola, Google, and more.

“Chinese phones use the same (processors), boast more advanced battery and cooling technology, top-tier displays, and all the latest features, often at the same or lower price points,” he said.

Mr Kok said he was particularly impressed with his smartwatch from Huawei, which lasts him for seven to eight days on a single charge with regular use at the gym.

“I’m hard-pressed to identify what edge Western brands still have, especially since many of them are manufactured in China, too.”

Mr Kok and Ms Chan are among a growing number of Singaporeans whose views on Chinese brands have changed significantly over the years, influenced by improved product quality, competitive pricing, and innovative designs.

This shift in consumer sentiment is underscored by clear market trends, such as Chinese electric vehicle (EV) maker BYD’s rise to become Singapore’s top-selling car. BYD sold 3,002 cars, or 20 per cent of total vehicle sales in Singapore in the first four months this year.

It dethroned Toyota as the most popular car brand - the Japanese manufacturer sold 2,050 vehicles in the same period - and far outsold its main EV competitor Tesla, which sold 535 cars.

The rise of BYD is a strong indicator that Chinese brands are no longer seen as cheap knock-offs but as credible, mainstream choices, said retail experts and economists, adding that younger shoppers tend to hold this view.

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Beyond success in the automotive sector, other Chinese brands have also gained significant traction in Singapore.

Xiaomi has established itself as a major global player in consumer electronics, encompassing smartphones and smart home devices. Last December, it opened its first directly managed store in Singapore at Funan mall, adding to its seven existing outlets operated by distributor partners. The company has announced plans to open two more stores locally in 2025.

Haidilao, the popular Chinese hotpot chain, has also built a strong following in Singapore, where it is known for its long queues, theatrical noodle-pulling performances and exceptional customer service. Other Chinese brands like Luckin Coffee and tea chain Chagee continually draw crowds.

Even within the business community, perceptions have shifted. Mr Kimming Yap, the immediate past chairman of the Singapore Manufacturing Federation's (SMF) Lifestyle Industry Group, said that currently, Chinese manufacturers have exceeded expectations not only in quality but also in innovation.

“They’re doing serious R&D (research and development), and they’re developing technologies we don’t even see in this part of the world,” he said.

He added that Singapore brands have worked with Chinese manufacturers for decades, although historically it was for non-critical components, such as the plastic casing of a mouse.

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"We looked for the most cost-effective viable source," Mr Yap said. "But now, Chinese manufacturers are involved in core components too. We're seeing high-tech parts, like sensors and EV components, coming from China."


MAKING STRIDES GLOBALLY

This shift in consumer perception is not just happening in Singapore. Over the past five years, Chinese consumer brands have been closing the gap with international competitors worldwide.

Xiaomi, for instance, is now one of the leading smartphone brands globally.

The brand, established in 2010, ranked second in global smartphone sales as of August 2024, according to global research firm Counterpoint. In the first quarter of 2025, it also overtook Apple to reclaim the top spot in the global wearable band market, which grew 13 per cent to 46.6 million units.

Drone maker DJI is another notable example, currently holding around 70 per cent of the global drone market. Its drones are used in various sectors such as filmmaking, agriculture, and industrial inspections across more than 100 countries.

In the sportswear industry, Li-Ning and Anta are two of China's largest sportswear brands, and they are seeing rapid growth globally.

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For example, in 2024, Anta grew its global market share to 3.38 per cent, up from 2.92 per cent in 2022, while market leader US brand Nike's share dropped from 17.06 per cent to 15.72 per cent, according to financial publication Nikkei Asia.

Beyond technology and fashion, Chinese brands are making inroads into the global food and lifestyle sectors, signalling a broader acceptance of Chinese consumer culture worldwide.

Haidilao, China's renowned hotpot chain, has expanded its presence to over 1,300 restaurants globally, including locations in the US, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Closer to home, a recent report by Singapore-based research firm Momentum Works revealed that as of the end of 2024, over 6,100 outlets of Chinese food and beverage (F&B) brands were operating across Southeast Asia, with Singapore and Malaysia housing the largest concentration of these brands.

Momentum Works does not have a breakdown of how many are in Singapore but said that as of the first half of last year, 32 Chinese F&B brands were operating 184 outlets in Singapore.

Dr Samer Elhajjar, senior lecturer of marketing at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Business School, said these shifts reflect a broader change in global brand influence, as Chinese brands, once anonymous manufacturers behind Western logos, are now becoming visible, influential, and even aspirational brands in their own right.

"Ten years ago, the strategy was simple: undercut competitors on price. Today, price remains a factor, but there's a new sophistication in how these brands present themselves.

"Xiaomi, for example, no longer sells itself as a budget alternative to Apple. It's presenting a whole ecosystem from phones to smart air purifiers to wearables, and building an identity around technological convenience and design," he said.

Dr Elhajjar also pointed to other brands that draw on traditional Chinese aesthetics and heritage, using elegant packaging and storytelling to appeal to a global audience seeking something unique.

Veteran economist Song Seng Wun said China's focus over the past 40 years has been squarely on growth, creating jobs, lifting millions out of poverty and building businesses from the ground up.

"In the early days, it was more about copying and pasting existing business models. But over time, domestic competition pushed them to innovate and improve. They became highly adaptable and quick to adopt new technologies."

He added that Chinese companies excel at understanding consumer needs, often utilising data analytics to refine their offerings, which gives them a competitive edge.

Mr Song, who is also an economic adviser at CGS International Securities Singapore, said the success of Chinese brands today also reflects how closely aligned the country's policymakers are with the private sector in creating better-paying jobs across both urban and rural areas.

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“You can think of it like Singapore on a much larger scale. How do we upgrade agriculture, for example? Through machines, improved hygiene, and more efficient methods. This raises farmer incomes and boosts productivity.

“And with better infrastructure and digital connectivity, people can start businesses even in rural areas. They don’t need to migrate to cities just to find work,” he said.

“So the push isn’t just industrial. It’s also digital and service-driven.”

WHAT IS DRIVING THE SHIFT IN SINGAPORE

Value for money remains a top reason why many are turning to Chinese fashion, technology and home goods, as they believe these brands offer affordable options without compromising too much on quality.

Social entrepreneur Valery Tan, 28, told CNA TODAY that growing up, she remembers friends and classmates often saying, "Chinese products spoil easily" or "quality is bad", which influenced her views.


However, some purchases from Taobao, China's largest online shopping portal, shifted Ms Tan’s perception. She bought fashion accessories and customised décor, such as photo backdrops, that turned out to be well-made and exceeded her expectations.

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“These items might be on the higher end within Taobao, but they’re still very affordable. The design and craftsmanship of some pieces can easily rival well-known Western brands.”

Solutions engineer Alex Teo, 40, said that while he used to be cautious about buying from Chinese companies, mainly due to concerns over quality control and customer service, his view has shifted recently, after hearing or reading good reviews from other consumers about the reliability and responsiveness of their after-sales service.

“I was an iPhone user for years but started paying more attention to Huawei and other Android brands when I questioned whether premium upgrades were worth it,” he said.

“My partner uses a Vivo phone, and its camera quality is one of the best across the industry, especially in group photos.”

Mr Teo, who also runs a YouTube channel reviewing tech products, finds that Chinese brands are leading in many areas today, particularly in EVs and robot vacuums.

When it comes to tech purchases, he said he focuses on features and user experience rather than brand loyalty.

“Chinese brands have matured beyond competing just on price. They offer real innovation, user-centric design, and solid reliability. Whether it’s phones, vacuums or cars, the best tech I use today mostly comes from China.”

Mr Teo, who also owns a BYD, said his EV shopping experience came down to comparing Tesla and BYD, and he eventually chose BYD due to the driving experience.

"Tesla has a regenerative braking system that really changes the way you drive. I almost vomited during the test drive as I was not used to it, and there's no way to change the setting.

"Compared to BYD, the driving experience felt more like a traditional petrol car, which I preferred, even though Tesla offered better tech and app integration."

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For Ms Christel Goh, 34, founder of a public relations (PR) firm, buying her wedding dress from Taobao about 10 years ago was a practical choice that paid off.

The voluminous dress looked true to the pictures and while some lace detailing was slightly off, it photographed beautifully and didn’t feel inferior, she added.

“I already had no major concerns buying from China by then, but I knew there were still risks, so I always made sure to check reviews thoroughly.”

Ms Goh also sourced lights and shelves from Taobao for her home renovation to keep costs manageable.

“Design-wise, a lot of the options were not bad, and even now, some of the pieces are still around. Even when one light arrived broken, there were no issues with the refund.”

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For one consumer, a working stint in China led her to find Chinese products an attractive choice.

Marketing lead Vivienne Ong, 31, said she initially assumed “Made in China” meant poor quality as this was “what everyone was saying” at the time.

However, after spending eight months in Shenzhen in 2017, where she worked at a product manufacturing company that produced stationery and audio devices, and managed business-to-consumer sales for overseas markets, she realised this was not the case.

“Through my experience living and working there, I’ve learnt that Chinese brands have extremely high standards because of the fierce market competition. To branch out overseas, they ensure products go through multiple quality checks to stay competitive,” she said.

“When doing product and market research for my job, I also found that many American brands I loved and trusted were using Chinese manufacturers. So to save money, I realised it’s okay to buy directly from Chinese brands.”

Chinese brands that spoke to CNA TODAY said they increasingly view Singapore as a strategic testbed for innovation, premium positioning, and regional expansion.

To succeed here, they are localising their offerings through tailored marketing, high-quality retail experiences, and strategic partnerships, using Singapore as a launchpad into broader Southeast Asia.

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Among Chinese tech brands, Xiaomi has stood out for its early and sustained investment in Singapore, its first overseas market when it expanded globally in 2014.

Since then, the company has grown its local footprint with a directly managed flagship store at Funan and sells products on a number of online aggregator platforms.

Mr Michael Zhou, country director of Xiaomi Singapore, declined to give figures but said that the brand has seen strong performance in the premium smartphone category, especially with its Leica camera collaboration.

“We’re also seeing growing interest from younger consumers and new customer segments.

“Beyond smartphones, we’ve expanded into smart home and office devices, including robot vacuums, TVs and air purifiers, to serve different consumer needs,” he said, adding that these are some of the brand’s bestselling products in Singapore.

Mr Zhou added that they plan to continue to bring more products into Singapore, including smartphones, tablets, wearables, and robot vacuums.

Smart home brands like Aqara are also seeing steady growth in Singapore, driven by demand from new homeowners and tech-savvy consumers.

Mr Harry Zhang, Aqara’s senior sales manager, who declined to give figures, said that the brand has seen strong traction in both Housing and Development Board flats and condominium segments, with its range of smart switches, motion sensors and door locks proving popular.

“There has been a notable shift in consumer perceptions. Singaporean consumers are now more discerning, evaluating brands based on build quality, design, and interoperability, rather than their country of origin," said Mr Zhang.

“The success of several Chinese tech brands in Singapore has paved the way for broader acceptance … As the focus shifts to credibility, user experience, and long-term customer support, we remain committed to investing heavily in these areas.”

Other than BYD, other EV brands like Xpeng have quickly established a strong foothold in Singapore’s competitive EV market since its 2024 entry with the Xpeng G6 and a showroom at Alexandra Road.

Mr Alex Tang, head of Xpeng’s international division of sales and service, highlighted that the brand has seen “strong momentum” with over 500 G6 units registered here.

"Singapore is a strategic market for Xpeng, not just in terms of sales, but as a gateway to Southeast Asia and a real-world testbed for our global ambitions," he said.

However, Mr Tang acknowledged that Singapore also presents its own unique set of challenges.

"As one of the most competitive and tightly regulated automotive markets in the world, navigating the COE (certificate of entitlement) system, limited road space, and high consumer expectations requires us to offer clear, differentiated value," he said.

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"But these challenges push us to innovate with greater focus ... and continually raise the bar for what intelligent mobility can look like in an urban setting."

Following the launch of the brand's G6 and X9 models, Mr Tang said consumers can expect refreshed and updated versions of both units, which will feature design enhancements and upgraded smart features, in the coming months.

Another EV brand, Zeekr, entered Singapore’s luxury EV market – its 500th global showroom – in August 2024 with models like the Zeekr X and 009, and has since seen strong interest from younger drivers and first-time adopters seeking premium alternatives.

Mr Alex Bao, head of Zeekr’s Southeast Asia division, said that the company recognises that past perceptions of Chinese-made products often equated affordability with compromise.

"That’s a narrative we’re actively shifting. Rather than competing on volume or price, our focus is on craftsmanship, technology, and delivering a truly elevated driving experience," he said.

Following the recent release of the Zeekr 009 Deluxe, a single-motor variant, Mr Bao said Singaporeans can look forward to the upcoming launch of the Zeekr 7X – a family-oriented SUV that has already attracted interest from over 100 local customers – as well as more brand collaborations.


LINGERING STIGMA OF ENVIRONMENTAL, ETHICAL IMPACT

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Despite their growing presence and innovation, Chinese brands in Singapore still face some lingering perceptions regarding quality and reliability, especially among older shoppers, said experts.

Ethical and environmental concerns associated with the production of some Chinese goods persist, as consumers question the mass production of such goods at such low prices.

Chinese online retailers Shein and Temu are two examples of the mass-production model, offering a wide variety of low cost items.

Both firms quickly became popular around the world but raised serious concerns over labour practices, including poor working conditions in their China-based supply chains, as well as their contribution to overconsumption and environmental pollution.

In response to CNA TODAY's queries, Temu said that it strictly prohibits the use of forced labour and enforces a third-party code of conduct across its supply chain, terminating any seller or partner found in violation.

The company added that it does not encourage overconsumption, stating that its platform is “about access, not excess” and that many customers rely on it for their daily essentials.

Temu also cited its streamlined supply chain, which connects independent sellers directly with consumers, as a way to reduce environmental impact.

"We also work with leading global testing and certification agencies, including TÜV SÜD, Eurofins, SGS, and Bureau Veritas Group, to ensure third-party seller products meet required standards."

Shein referred CNA TODAY to its most recent updates on labour practices and sustainability. The company said that it has committed US$70 million (S$90.3 million) over a five-year period starting from 2023 to support and empower its suppliers and their workers, and continues to rely on third-party audits to monitor compliance.

It also highlighted several initiatives aimed at reducing its environmental impact, including the use of recycled and deadstock materials, reducing virgin polyester use and expanding more energy-efficient production methods, such as cool-transfer denim printing.

In May, Shein’s 2050 goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions was validated by the Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi), a global organisation that guides corporate climate action.

While environmental and ethical concerns persist, they do not seem to have deterred shoppers from purchasing these products.

Data analytics firm GlobalData found that Shein was the biggest winner in the global apparel market for 2024, with its market share forecast to have risen by 0.24 percentage points to 1.53 per cent, outperforming its competitors.

Meanwhile, Temu has surged in global popularity. As of April 2025, it is the world’s second most-visited shopping site, just behind Amazon and ahead of Chinese e-commerce giant AliExpress, according to web analytics firm Similarweb.

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Dr Sean Shin, senior lecturer of accounting at NUS Business School, said there is no doubt that low-cost goods, whether from China or elsewhere, often come with ethical and environmental trade-offs. However, he added that framing this as a "uniquely Chinese problem" would overlook the broader history and global dynamics of manufacturing.

"Wages for factory workers in China often comply with local labour laws and are above national poverty thresholds, but they do fall short of global living wage benchmarks.

"That said, this issue is far from new. In the 1990s and early 2000s, brands like Nike and Adidas came under heavy criticism for sourcing from so-called 'sweatshop' factories across Southeast Asia, particularly in countries like Indonesia and Vietnam."

Dr Shin said these cases sparked global conversations about labour rights, prompting many multinational companies to adopt stricter codes of conduct, supplier audits, and corporate social responsibility frameworks.

Today, many Chinese brands operate in a similarly globalised environment, where cost efficiency is a core competitive advantage, he said.

"But they now face similar scrutiny around working conditions, particularly in the fast fashion and electronics sectors.

"The ethical concern is not about China per se, but rather about how global businesses prioritise cost and manage that balance with responsibility toward workers and communities."

Meanwhile, other experts pointed out that the low pricing of some Chinese brands is not necessarily linked to a compromise on worker welfare or impact on the environment.

Dr Seshan Ramaswami, associate professor of marketing education at Singapore Management University, said that Chinese brands' ability to offer good quality at low prices stems from factors like lower worker and input costs, efficient supply chains, and, in some cases, government subsidies.

"It is also possible that regulations may be laxer in some areas of worker treatment and the environment, so some of the social costs are not reflected in the cost of manufacture."

SMF's Mr Yap, who is also the managing director of brand and design consultancy Creativeans, gave a different perspective, saying that many of these factories and manufacturers are state-owned enterprises.

"They're not purely profit-driven. Sometimes, there's even a nationalist motive to get their products out into the world. Because profit isn't their only concern, they can be more competitive on pricing."

Addressing the stigma around mass-produced, low-cost goods, Dr Ramaswami said that such products – whether from China or global players like Swedish furniture giant Ikea – are often not built to last, but they provide affordability to millions of consumers.

He also said that it is easy to blame them for fuelling a throwaway culture or encouraging unsustainable behaviours.

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"But in the end, it is the choices that consumers make that determine which brands succeed and how sustainable the market becomes."

A NEW REALITY FOR SINGAPORE BRANDS

For years, Singaporean brands carved out a niche by promising quality, reliability, and a local touch – traits that once allowed them to command slightly higher prices compared to mass-market imports.

But the rise of Chinese brands, many of which now offer comparable, if not superior, quality at significantly lower costs, has upended that equation.

These shifts have raised tough questions for Singaporean brands as they must now navigate stiff competition and reassess their value proposition.

Mr Edmund Ong, director of local supplier Daiyo Electronics, said that competition is also strong online – particularly after COVID-19, when there was a surge in e-commerce, which enabled Chinese sellers to penetrate the local market through platforms like Lazada and Shopee.

"What sets local brands like us apart is our warranty and after-sales service. A lot of people still feel insecure buying from overseas sellers," he said.

"Some customers have even told me they stopped buying from Taobao because of safety issues. One had a wire that overheated and burned their floor, so there is this group of people who prefer the reassurance of a local service provider."

That concern resonates with interior designer and director Benjamin Toh, 32.

While he is "consistently impressed" by the innovation and features of Chinese tech products, he remains cautious about purchasing large appliances with "complex moving parts" like washers, dryers, or refrigerators.

"While the prices and features are tempting, I worry about what happens if they break. After-sales support can be challenging, and local technicians might not be familiar with the models."

SMF's Mr Yap also echoed Mr Ong's sentiment, saying that Singaporean consumers are savvy, and local brands can no longer play the same game by competing just based on quality.

"Local brands need to innovate and justify their higher prices, whether through better customer service, return policies, after-sales support, or holding their own (patented innovations).

"If not, they're just drop-shipping, and they won't survive long term," he said.

Drop-shipping refers to selling products without holding any inventory. The items are shipped directly from a third-party supplier, which means the seller has limited control over quality and delivery.

Such sentiments are also keenly felt in the F&B sector. Ms Irene Low, founder of local bubble tea chain Woobbee, said that with the rapid rise of Chinese brands, the "impact on local players like us is real".

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“Many of these brands are backed by significant capital, allowing them to secure prime retail locations that we often struggle to access,” she said.

Ms Low said Woobbee’s regulars now have to “go out of their way” just to visit their outlets.

“As their operations are large-scale, they are also able to offer higher pay packages and incentives to attract employees, causing a significant change in the F&B dynamics.”

Despite these pressures, she said Woobbee is doubling down on what makes the brand unique, such as strengthening digital engagement and rolling out exclusive promotions to its members.

“Every cup is still prepared fresh, one at a time. Our customers know they're getting a handcrafted drink, not a mass-produced product dispensed by machine,” said Ms Low.

“We will continue to innovate through seasonal drink launches and local-inspired flavours, offering something distinctly Singaporean that big-chain competitors often overlook.”

Ultimately, Mr Ong believes that Chinese brands will continue to be a normalised part of Singapore’s retail ecosystem.

“In terms of how we choose suppliers or market to consumers, it’s really about staying competitive and meeting expectations. The market is fast-changing, and we need to adapt to how consumers shop and what they’re looking for.”