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Knock It Off: A Thai Museum for Counterfeit Goods

By Thailand

It was a typical evening stroll along Bangkok's bustling Sukhumvit Road, among the ramshackle stalls that line that tourist-magnet thoroughfare. I landed one knockoff Fred Perry polo shirt in navy blue and a pirated DVD copy of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Both purchases were mildly disappointing: the shirt, once I tried it on back at the hotel, appeared to have been made not from cotton but from itchy polyester — hardly ideal for the sticky Thai climate. The Hollywood blockbuster had been dubbed into Russian. I cursed the waste of 10 bucks on shoddy merchandise.

By the following afternoon, this buyer's remorse had morphed into full-blown guilt. Clemence Gautier, an intellectual-property consultant with law firm Tilleke & Gibbins, took me on a tour of Bangkok's Museum of Counterfeit Goods, a 1,070-sq.-ft. (100 sq m) Aladdin's cave of thousands of illicit products. Incongruously chic, with its polished wooden floor, shimmering glass display cases and subdued lighting, the museum is incorporated into the firm's offices on the 26th floor of downtown Bangkok's Supalai Grand Tower. ([Read about the war on knockoff bags.](#))

According to Gautier, stallholders on Sukhumvit are not the main beneficiaries of transactions like mine. Criminal gangs are behind Asia's black market in fake goods, and misguided shoppers like me inadvertently support child labor, human-trafficking and other nefarious undertakings by indulging in the cheap goods. The directness of the revelation is sobering. "Money spent on counterfeits is easy profit for criminal organizations," the soft-spoken French native insists, "and supports other activities like prostitution and drugs."

As Gautier spoke, she stood in front of a large wall of contraband streetwear. Lacoste, Adidas, Kappa, DKNY: all the labels and logos so prevalent on Sukhumvit as well as in the backpacker ghetto of Khaosan Road and in neon-drenched Patpong Market were on display. A Fred Perry shirt hung there, accusingly, in pink. "In countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, very often it's kids involved in the manufacturing," Gautier says. "People think, 'Oh, it's just a T shirt and it's no real harm,' but we try to explain where the money is going. What if a 10-year-old girl is working every day to make those T shirts?"

Established in 1890, Tilleke & Gibbins is Thailand's oldest law firm. It got involved in intellectual-property law in the early 1980s, and by 1989 the company had stockpiled so many phony bags, clothing and sunglasses as evidence in its IP cases that a senior partner decided they could do a valuable public service by putting them on display. In today's troubled economic times, the role of the appointment-only museum is arguably growing in importance as consumers worldwide become desperate for bargains. Security experts with the Hong Kong-based consultancy Asia Risk recently estimated that international trade in counterfeit goods could rise to nearly \$1 trillion in 2009. The business has long exceeded the value of the global narcotics trade.

As early as 2005, in fact, high-end fashion houses like Burberry and Louis Vuitton were warning that profits from cheap reproductions of their desirable goods might be used to fund terrorist organizations. Many people were skeptical of alarm bells emanating from such well-heeled manufacturers until Interpol backed up the claims. "North African radical fundamentalist groups in Europe, al-Qaeda and Hizballah all derive income from

counterfeiting," John Newton, an Interpol officer specializing in intellectual-property crime, told the *London Times* in 2005 when it came to light. "This crime has the potential to become the preferred source of funding for terrorists."


The most surprising thing about the Museum of Counterfeit Goods, however, is the sheer diversity of its exhibits. Any tourist in Bangkok would be familiar with the knockoff Rolex and Tag Heuer watches, the G-Star jeans, the Nike sneakers. But ripoff shampoo and candy? Toothpaste that might have been cobbled together in a grubby lab on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh? Ballpoint pens? Staples? For a moment the guilt dissipates and I wonder why I've sacrificed an afternoon to a museum showcasing the most basic wares to be found in any stationery store. (I could, after all, be at Bangkok's Siriraj Medical Museum, where stands on display the preserved corpse of Thailand's most notorious serial killer and cannibal, as well as a deformed human testicle 18 in., or 45 cm, in diameter.)

But a skip through the Counterfeit Museum is not about macabre trivia. In many cases, the global trade in fakes is a matter of life and death. Fake pharmaceutical drugs — their active ingredients either missing or present in insufficient volumes to be effective — are proving increasingly difficult to discern by IP investigators. "The technology used to copy holograms [on packaging] is so good now that manufacturers have to change them all the time," Gautier said. "It's difficult to stay in front." Gautier also explains that product-counterfeiting, as with legitimate industries, is frequently determined by geography, and some countries have developed expertise in certain products. Cambodia, for instance, is to knockoff name-brand cigarettes what Belgium is to quality chocolates. Malaysia pumps out pirated DVD movies faster than the Scots can sink single malts. And China? Secreted factories across China are copying just about everything you can imagine, says Gautier. "If there's money to be made, there's not much that people will not to try to copy these days."

While I am heading back to the hotel in a taxi, one of Bangkok's countless motorbike taxis weaves erratically through the traffic. A young woman rides sidesaddle behind its rider, and I flinch at the potential for tragedy. There was a complete scooter on display in the museum, and Gautier had informed me that every single component — tires, brakes, fuel tank and all — had been manufactured on the sly. As the taxi veers east onto Sukhumvit Road, the traders are busy erecting their stalls for another evening of busy commerce. But me? Tonight I'll hole up in the hotel. I'll chuck that shirt in the garbage, order a pizza (is it possible to fake a pizza?) and watch a movie on HBO. Shopping is just too scary.

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