# Chinese bikes, changing the face of British biking?

Brands like Lexmoto, Zontes and WK are filling up spaces in bike parks around the country. Will they shake up the motorcycle market in the same way that the Japanese did in the 1960s?

**By** Mark Williams **Pics** Chippy Wood

JAKE ATKINSON'S FIRST ever roadbike is a hot-looking 125cc Pulse Adrenaline supermoto. In six months 17-year-old Jake's done more than 3000 trouble-free miles on it. As a fairly typical owner, he's pretty happy with what he's got.

In bike parks around the country you'll increasingly see unfamiliar brands like Lifan, Hercules, Zontes, Kymco, Pulse, AJS, King – 50 and 125cc machines owned by youngsters who, with insurance and training costs being so stratospheric, buy them as the first rung on the ladder to getting a bike licence and joining our happy band. And with a typical Chinese 125 costing around £900-1200, or less than half the cost of the Japanese equivalent who can blame them?

Sales figures suggest these Chinese lightweights are steadily making inroads into a market the Japanese Big Four once called their own. In 2014 almost 18,000 of them were sold here, 15% up on 2013, and last month, Lexmoto, the biggest of the Chinese importers with 130 dealers nationwide, sold 561 bikes making them the fifth best selling UK brand – ahead of Suzuki, Harley-Davidson and KTM.

A reputation for cheap-but-shoddy is based largely on the first generation of machines imported from China from around 2003 – often 'no-name' brands brought in by the odd container-load by freelancers, or cowboys as we might call them, but sometimes by importers of other types of machinery and even furniture. And sold on eBay. They were invariably – not to put too fine a point on it – crap.

Some importers still sell exclusively over the internet at rock bottom prices, but as one unhappy and anonymous Welsh owner of a shabby looking two-year-old 50cc scooter told me, 'What with delivery costs and the nearest service agent 40 miles away, I wish I'd paid a bit more and bought something better from a dealer.'

Dean Clements, who also imports European off-road brands Gas-Gas and Fantic Motor as well as Chinese fiaotian scooters and Zontes motorcycles, explains. 'By the time we began with Zontes in 2010 we were into the second or third generation of Chinese exports. We went to the factory five times in the first year and found them working very hard to develop bikes that we perhaps wouldn't see here until two years later, and they respond well to input from us on features we need to suit our market – gearing, suspension, cosmetics and so on.'

Bikes like Pulse's Adrenaline with its Suzuki-licenced GS125 engine and Zontes' trendy-looking sports naked Panther are perceptibly well-built with frames, bodywork and switchgear generally on a par with their Japanese equivalents. Warranty concerns still niggle away, something the established importers have countered with two year parts and labour guarantees. This gives comfort to dealers such as STP in Hereford who now sell up to 20 Lifan, Pulse and Lexmoto products a month because, as managing director John Strike notes, 'We've hardly had any claims. A very thorough PDI is key and provided they're properly serviced, few problems arise but if we do need parts they're usually available in 24 hours.'

Jake Atkinson, who bought his Pulse after taking his CBT and plans to move up to something Japanese when he's 19 and A2-eligible, reckons that although it's way less powerful than the RM125 moto-crosser he raced as a schoolboy, the bike, 'does what I need it to do,' which is commuting, rain or shine. But that's also taking its toll on the finish. 'When I'm ready to move on, I doubt it'll be worth more than £500-600,' he says. 'But as it was so cheap to buy new and had a decent warranty I don't care.'

Most UK importers source their models from a variety of manufacturers with varying standards of build quality. Clements cites the up- and downsides of this: 'Because some factories are primarily building for the Chinese market their models aren't developed over time, whereas Zontes have an R&D department actively catering to Europe, and factories who aren't addressing the upcoming Euro 4 and 5 directives with fuel-injection and so forth will lose out here.'

But as Lexmoto's Daniel Frost predicts, 'As we work closely with our suppliers to develop the bikes we know these changes will cause a slight price increase from 2017 across all manufacturers, but will also bridge the gap between the Japanese and Chinese branded products.'

And that's a gap that the Big Four must be concerned about… despite increasingly sourcing their own products from outside Japan in an effort to reduce prices. Honda UK's Head of Motorcycles Nick Campolucci claims that, 'Even against a fluctuating market, Honda's share of the 125 segment has grown over the past few years. With a varied lightweight model offering and the launch of the new CB125F, priced at £200 less than its predecessor, the best selling 125 bike in the UK since its launch in 2009, we anticipate this trend to continue.'

But at £2499, the strong-selling Honda still costs a grand more than a Chinese 125. So it's tempting to predict that the Big Four's market share will continue to diminish, especially with their dealer networks shrinking just as the Chinese importers expand theirs: for example the city of Hereford lost its sole remaining franchised Japanese dealer a year ago, and in Peterborough there are three Lexmoto outlets, but just a single Honda dealer.

Henry Maplethorpe whose WK operation began importing from China and Taiwan in 2005 and entered the first ever Chinese machine in the Isle of Man TT in 2013, says, 'As quality and ranges improve more people will accept them, just as people have done with Korean cars. The Japanese are seeing what's coming and starting to bring out budget 500s because they know that if they don't they're going to get swallowed up.' Hyundai is now a strong UK brand. You see Kias everywhere and that firm has 187 UK dealers.

Dean Clements is more cautious. 'We mustn't flood the market with budget bikes that turn people off biking due to poor quality,' he says. 'Budget bikes need to lure people into motorcycling and we must concede that some will want to move onto Japanese bikes. But hopefully in the future we can offer products that will meet their aspirations so they stick with us.'

And comparing the latest WKs, Lexmotos and Zontes with some rubbish 'first generation' Chinese 125s I've ridden, the prospect for these bikes looks promising. Especially if they make motorcycling more accessible. Steve Kenward, head of the Motorcycle Industry Association which now includes Chinese importers Clements Moto, AJS and Herald on its board, says, 'Any credible market offering has got to be good for the future because today's small capacity purchasers are tomorrow's core motorcyclists.' BIKE

'In bike parks around the country you'll increasingly see unfamiliar brands'

Not the best names most people consider when it comes to buying a new bike but things are changing

## THE *BIKE* LEXMOTO ADRENALINE

We have a Lexmoto Adrenaline on long-term test. It is an interesting, and in many respects, competent and commuter-friendly bike. The engine is smooth and revs well, with little around 2000rpm to warn of impending Armageddon at just over the 6k redline. The gearbox is one bright exception, and although it moves quickly enough, it isn't the front runner in their class. Comparatively, it is full of excellent bits, though. The tank looks and manoeuvres like one of our big, fat, Italian models, and has a comfortable seat and bars. Little niggles, but things like that simple cushion and compression damper in the rear, and 17-inch wheels on the latter, cause annoyance. The clutch is already showing signs of wear, at just 1500 miles – will wear very soon and they'll identify the issue with their Hangzhou factory which is possibly cause there is low quality, abrasive, sand contaminated friction material. Which, unfortunately, is enough to colour for someone, a typical user, who's proud of what I had to pay for the price. I'm sure we'll bring it back up to scratch, but it's a shame. Because it's a good, pleasant, easy-to-ride, well-finished machine that deserves more than this comment.

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