



audio



Once Again to Cathay: The Good Doctor Remains Seduced ...and an update on the perils of Chinese Audio

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Foreword

I have been both intrigued and repelled by my ongoing experience with Chinese audio.

Intrigued primarily because the prices bring some very interesting designs into the reach of even modestly-heeled audiophiles, and repelled by how these products are typically distributed and the lack of customary safeguards for consumers.

Make no mistake about the attraction ...tubed DAC's and CD players, for under two-K, 300-b/805 based SE monoblocks for \$1600. The careful and canny buyer can get a whole lot for their money, but most American audiophiles view the Chinese imports with the same caution they do Squirrel & Kim Chee Fried Rice.

For myself, I have seen some pretty good efforts from China, but I was finally seduced by the Ming Da, EL-34-AB, a unique EL-34-based integrated amplifier, which can be run as a stand-alone power amplifier, features a beefy external power supply, and is switchable on the fly between triode and pentode operation. This little sweetie easily drove the huge ESP Concert Grands I had in at the time for a review, all on only 70-watts pentode/40 Watts triode. The amp had great dynamics, and a most engaging sound.

Ultimately, I was not comfortable with the distributor so I did not keep the review piece. Our discussions about an accommodation purchase made me uneasy, so I passed.

But like lost love ...I have missed the danged thing more than I thought I would ...so I decided to try to find one. When I began this *hegira*, I assumed I was condemned to gray market, because I could not find a legitimate US dealer.

The Perils of Pauline

There is no question right now that Chinese audio can be a very dangerous territory for the unwary. Horror stories abound of distributors disappearing into the night, cheesy replacement power supplies, smoking amplifiers, "B" and "C" stock substitutes, and, of course, the nefarious practice of some US retailers buying Chinese equipment, re-badging it, and charging US and European prices.

While maintaining my oft repeated mantra, "*caveat emptor*" I think things are growing a bit less scary, and I would like to try to clear the waters a bit.

Slave and Child Labor

Other than reliability, generally the first thing I get from US audiophiles is this issue. With great outrage American's decry the use of convict, "slave" and child labor in developing countries, while forgetting we were the model for just this sort of behavior in our own development. This does not excuse their egregious behavior in this regard, nor does it ours ...but it should temper our reactions.

The history of US economic development is the history of exploitation, both of our own people, and of any one else we could get our hands on. I object to some of the practices currently in use in China, but not with some phony high-moral tone. Frankly, we did it first and we did it more viciously. All you have to do is to review the history of Chinese immigrants around the building of the transcontinental railroad to get a feel for how vicious we were ...or to understand that the root of the unions in the US were actions to try to stop people from sending six year old boys (and girls!) into the coal mines.

One of the major problems with exploitive labor has always been that it is undependable and unskilled, for the most part. While it may be that your \$15 Wal-Mart Shirt is made by forced labor, it is very unlikely your \$1000+ audio component will be.



My understanding is that audio manufacturers generally pay higher than prevailing wage rates and provide better than average working conditions, for the most simple of all reasons: because they want to attract and hold skilled and dependable labor.

It is very unlikely a chained six-year old is doing point-to-point wiring of the tube amp you ordered on eBay.

That being said, I find their exploitive labor practices as abhorrent as I do our own practice of exploiting entire countries for cheap resources. Pot calling the kettle, and all that...

Chinese Marketing and Distributing: Always remember, just a few short years ago, the Chinese economy was as centrally regulated as any in the communist world, and while they have embraced capitalism with the fury of true believers, they are still a developing world, under an essentially communist regime, with all that implies. Neither their emerging world view, nor their mainstream business practices synch with the dominant western model yet.

For example, the concept of "sole distributor" is apparently alien. Most factories sell to whomever they can. This creates enormous uncertainty for the distributors, who may contract for "X" number of units, only to find they are only delivered "Y" —and that the factory is also selling to their competitors.

Add to this the fact that many audio manufacturers are state-owned. To appreciate this fully, try to imagine that the DMV is making audio equipment, shudder, and then you will understand how precarious distribution can be. It takes patience, knowledge of the culture and system, and deep pockets.

And while it is very true that the Chinese have initially relied upon western design in electronics manufacturing, this is increasingly less common, with novel and interesting designs emerging from the Chinese market (300-B driven, 805-based SE Mono's, tubed DACS and CD players, etc.).

And then there is that looming specter ...*quality control*. Are the Chinese manufacturers as sophisticated in this regard as their US and European counterparts? Well, yes and no. The vast majority of consumer-level electronic products is no longer made in America or Europe, or even Japan ...heck, even Taiwan has lost significant share ...from Mexico to Sri Lanka, increasingly our consumer goods are being made in developing countries.

I have two Chinese-made \$50 DVD players I use to feed two Sony recorders. They both have great pictures and great sound, and they have been in extended, more or less daily use for over a year. One of them is a replacement for a unit that worked one day and then quit. I replaced it at Best Buy, with nary a question or comment.

I think these shockingly priced players are "reliable" by any reasonable measure one might wish to impose.

But, herein we have the crux of the reliability issue. Frankly, if you are going to have a major problem

with inexpensive electronics, you will probably have it during the first few days. If it lasts that long, you are probably good to go for a while.

It is that initial transaction where most of the grief with Chinese audio is likely to occur (DOAs, not what you ordered, First Week Puff of Smoke (FWPS), etc.).

It has been common for the darker side of importers from China to bet you are not willing to force the issue, because shipping back to China will cost you more than the unit itself in many cases. They are hoping you will take your lumps and move on.

As I watch the blogs, US consumers are understandably cautious and even disparaging of Chinese audio, which is a little curious, because many have purchased Chinese sourced products without ever knowing they were doing so. (Don't necessarily assume you know where your stuff comes from without checking).

I think it is the process by which Chinese products come to us, where most of the real issues reside. There are a few basic import scenarios and they all operate somewhat differently.

The contracted re-seller

This is someone who either goes to, or has representatives in, China. The factory is given design specs, or "modifications" to one of their existing products, and the re-seller buys a set number of products, generally to be shipped home by container. Most often this type of distributor will rename the piece(s), make at least some cosmetic changes, and then sell it with a warranty, which the importer services. The primary advantage here is that this reseller is *invested*, and therefore much more likely to provide reasonable support to insure the value of the balance of his or her inventory.

The downside is that markups are higher, largely because of cost of capital and risk to the re-seller. They will have to eat warranty work. If the piece doesn't sell, they have to eat the inventory. You pay for their risk.

Historically, this has been the safest scenario for the consumer.

The conventional distributor

This is someone who works out some sort of relationship with the factory and tries to represent them in the US. This is a checkered model, with one end being the "fly by night," barely solvent, and going from unit to unit for financing. These folks appear and disappear regularly.

Witness Nirvana Trading, from whence I originally received the Ming Da EI-34-AB I reviewed for *PFO*. They were less than thrilled with my somewhat equivocal treatment of the distribution issue (I got weird vibes from the distributor and so I was cautionary), and queried me if I would update readers when they became the sole distributor ...of course I agreed. Outcome? Their website is gone and they are no longer taking emails ...hum, I wonder how many people got hosed on that one?

Moral of the story ...when the good doctor urges caution, you best listen.

The gray-market importer

Generally based or sourced in Hong Kong, these range from relatively large (such as New York Sound and ORNEC) to individual re-sellers on eBay. I have tried repeatedly to talk with ANY of these folks, and been steadfastly ignored. I take this as a very bad sign.

I suspect this type of sourcing is at the root of a lot of the complaints about Chinese Audio. I noted that for both ORNEC and New York Sound, shipping charges for the Ming DA EL-34-AB were enormous (\$367, and \$340, respectively). This suggests to me that when you place your order, they run your card and the piece is air freighted to you directly from Hong Kong. ORNEC was the cheapest in comparison for the Ming Da unit, but offered a "DOA only" warranty. Definitely *caveat emptor*.

There is little question you can save a few bucks here, and you pretty much get access to the entire line offered by a given manufacturer. But ...and *this butt* is about as large as Delta Burke's ... assume you are on your own if anything goes awry. Also, always keep in mind that a piece coming directly from Hong Kong is going to be subjected to at least two customs inspections, and try to guess how meticulous they are about putting things back to rights after checking. This is before we get to the whole "B" stock substitution scenario.

It is common to find older models, "B" and "C" stock and outright fakes in this type of distribution. You roll dice and take your chances.

The Modifier

When I went over the original Ming Da EL-34-AB with Jennifer Crock of Jena Labs, she talked about the amp as an obvious candidate for serious upgrading (everything from wire to tubes). It is not surprising that small companies have arisen to do just that. From Response Audio to the DIY'ers, there is apparently a healthy cottage industry.

From what I can see, the mods serve both sonic and reliability issues. Of particular interest to the buyer, is that generally there is a longer and presumably more enforceable warranty.

Of course, modifications are hand work, and push the price up, in some cases to where the final bill is comparable to more conventionally sourced equipment.

The Insurer

This is a new model. Pacific Valve (<http://www.pacificvalve.us>) is a US-based, venture funded company with long-term goals to be the supplier of choice for Chinese tube-base audio in the US. They have representatives in Hong Kong who deal directly with the Chinese manufacturers, do testing, and some modifications prior to shipping to the US.

I spoke recently with Joe Kline, Pacific Valve Office manager, via telephone to interview him about their marketing model after learning more about their approach, which is somewhat unique. He describes their approach as "insurance" for the American consumer.

Joe tells me the principals of the company are audiophiles who lamented the loss of entry level companies like Heathkit and Dynaco ...affordable tube audio, and came to see the current situation in China as a way to provide affordable, high quality audio products to the US market.

While they have staff in Hong Kong, they do not deal with Hong Kong resellers. They do not carry a manufacturer's entire line, only those pieces they have personally tested and proved to be reliable and an excellent sonic value. They do no power supply changes; the pieces they import are manufactured for the US market.

They ship containers both by sea (to reduce transportation costs for heavier equipment) and air. Basically, their current goal is to have a container of product in transit at all times.

When the products are received here, they are individually tested again and re-boxed. Joe says this is insurance against the DOA misery, which they view as absolutely unacceptable.

Each unit is sold with a thirty-day money back guarantee, and a 1 year conventional warranty. This means you get essentially the same protections you would with domestic products or those purchased from a large chain, such as Best Buy. They do their own warranty repair work.

Prices are very slightly higher than the gray market folks. As of the time of this report, the EL-34AB unit sells for \$1205 at New York Sound, \$1102 at ORNEC, and \$1237.15 at Pacific Valve (including shipping). Interestingly, re-boxing and shipping charges for Pacific for the Ming Da are only a little over a hundred dollars compared, to three times that for the gray market importers.



It took me about six seconds to decide to order the Ming Da EI34-AB through Pacific. Sadly, it is backordered and I won't see it until shortly after July 4th, when the container is set to arrive.

Follow-up

I intend to write about the entire experience, including plans that Jennifer Crock of JENA Labs and I have for tube rolling with the EL-34-AB (JJ has some really nifty new tubes), and perhaps even trying out her socket adaptors that may allow us to substitute JJ EC-99's for the 6SN7's that come in the stock unit.

For good or bad, I will write honestly and completely about the experience.

Stay tuned.

