

News Are Chinese bikes getting better?

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The latest generation of Chinese-built bikes are closer than ever to their Japanese rivals in terms of ride, quality and spares back-up, an MCN investigation has revealed.

MCN road tested a cross-section of the latest Chinese runarounds and found they performed almost as well as a leading Japanese competitor, with far fewer compromises in quality than only three years ago.

Our investigation into spares back-up also showed that the Chinese marques had vastly improved, with the main importers now offering next day delivery on all common components. This is in stark contrast to only a few years ago when stories of non-existent spares back-up were commonplace.

Perhaps inevitably, then, Chinese bikes are grabbing an ever bigger chunk of the UK market. In 2009 13% of all new bikes registered with the DVLA were from Chinese manufacturers a total of 13,048 bikes. By comparison Triumph sold barely half as many – 7450 units – in the UK over the same period.

But what are you getting for your money? And the Chinese manufacturers' reputations for poor quality and reliability still warranted today? To find out we decided to pit three of the best-selling Chinese bikes against a popular Japanese rival: in this case Japan's Suzuki DR125SM. Here's what we found...



Are the Chinese reputations for poor quality and reliability still warranted today?

MCN'S DAN ASPEL



Lexmoto XTR S 125, £1199.99
£1200 may seem like a bargain price, but the XTR isn't the cheapest bike Lexmoto offer. That title is shared between the Arrow and Vixen models, yours for £849.99 apiece – that's an entire bike for the price of an aftermarket exhaust system.

Before we come to the XTR's surprising strengths, let's deal with some fairly disconcerting flaws: a missing end-plate off the chain adjuster, a mysterious nut rattling around in the underseat compartment, a gearchange that wouldn't select neutral with the engine running, a peeling sticker, a downright porky pie 'ABS' sticker on the front brake caliper, and the curious instruction: 'Don't ride after drinking wine' on the fuel tank warning label (see picture top right).

So far, so budget. But at £1199.99 it becomes easy to forgive these mostly aesthetic frailties and embrace the XTR as a kooky bargain. That's certainly



► **SUZUKI DR125SM - £2899**
The typical Japanese beginners' bike: high quality but pricey

► **LEXMOTO XTR S 125 - £1199.99**
Decent-looking, good parts back-up and cheap. Half Suzuki's price

Are Japanese bikes still in front of improving Chinese rivals?

Think Chinese bikes

► MCN investigates latest generation of Chinese 125s ► Quality now close to

the effect it had on MCN testers Steve (highly experienced commuter) and Trev (road tester for 20 years). The joy of the Lexmoto XTR is that while riding it you can forget its niggling flaws and start to enjoy a very affordable way to get around. The engine's nothing special, and it's certainly not a pleasant sounding thing, but it is a 125cc four-stroke that'll get you moving up to legal speeds in comfort and safety.



Lexmoto LSM125, £1599.99
The LSM125 is a perfectly reasonable 125 learner/commuter, but its performance styling is only skin deep – it's not a mad supermoto performer, it just looks like one. Without the budget appeal of its cheaper brother, the LSM125's flaws

seem less forgivable. It's not a bad bike – it runs well, and gives a comfortable ride, with mirrors, pegs and saddle all in the right place – but it's also not a particularly memorable one.

Only one of our testers had anything very glowing to say about the LSM once we'd got back to the warmth of the MCN office.

On the plus side, however, the LSM does boast a couple of neat design features which would have been unheard of on a Chinese bike a few years ago including some neat, little, diamond-shaped indicators.



Only one of our testers had anything very glowing to say about the LSL once back at the office

MCN'S DAN ASPEL



Three trailies, one roadster, but can you spot the Japanese one?

Your pictures. Plus what's got you talking in letters
Go to page 26

Biking gear tested by MCN staffers
Go to page 38



► SINNIS BLADE 200 - £1895
A bargain commuting tool if you've passed your test

► LEXMOTO LSM125 - £1599.99
Supermoto looks, good spares back-up. Several nice touches

The Chinese bikes here are a marked improvement on similar bikes I rode three years ago

MCN'S TREVOR FRANKLIN

MYKEL NICOLAOU

What MCN's testers said

STEVE FARRELL, 38, 5'9", 11-STONE SENIOR REPORTER. SPENT LAST WINTER COMMUTING 160 MILES A

DAYS ON A HONDA CBF125. OWNS A KAWASAKI AR125 AND A GPZ550

I was charmed by the XTR 125. I thought it was as good as any budget four-stroke 125, either as a learner bike or cheap runabout.

The brakes and suspension worked well, the riding position was comfortable and the mirrors were well-positioned. It usually managed an indicated 65mph and, with the benefit of a tail wind, reached 75. I'd go so far as to say it was fun.

The build quality issues – from the stickers to the chain adjuster – were unsettling, but then I looked at the price and, despite all its faults, found it impossible not to like. You'd have to check it was all there and tighten the odd bolt. Think of it like a kit that someone else has built. But for £1200 I'd be very happy with this little CBR125 lookalike.

For me, none of the other motorcycles here offer as much for your money. The Suzuki is obviously a better machine, but you could get two XTRs and a £500 holiday for the same money. While with the other Lexmoto, you're getting the same worries the XTR comes with but paying £400 more.

The Sininis was fine, but it also had its problems – such as the poorly set-up controls – and as budget transport or teenager's first bike it just wasn't as cheap and cheerful as the little Lexmoto.

LIAM MARSDEN, 20, 6'2", 12.5-STONE JUNIOR WEB PRODUCER. CLOCKED UP 6000 MILES IN A YEAR ON A YAMAHA

YZF-R125. CURRENTLY RIDES A KAWASAKI VERSYS

For me the Sininis is the best of the Chinese bikes. On hills its extra 75cc really makes a difference and its quality didn't feel any worse than the Suzuki, everything was where it should be and it all felt solid enough. Shorter riders found its height a bit of a problem, but it was the only bike that wasn't too small for me. Plus it doesn't have a silly, spring-loaded side stand like the Lexmos.

I am a little sceptical as to how well it'll last and its resale value could be an issue, too. As such, it doesn't come with the peace of mind you get with a Japanese machine.

TREVOR FRANKLIN, 48, 5'8", 14.5-STONE CHIEF ROAD TESTER BEEN ROAD TESTING BIKES FOR 22 YEARS.

The decline of cheap Chinese tat via dodgy internet sites is a good thing. In their place are solid importers offering comprehensive warranties on not-bad machines. The bikes here are a marked improvement on similar bikes I rode three years ago. They're still not perfect though... the auto-retract sidestands being one example.

The cheap and cheerful XTR will never win-over seasoned bikers, but the price makes it a real option for a 17-year-old on his birthday, or even a 33-year-old wanting to pass their test.



All are frugal, decent commuters that need infrequent fill-ups



The trail/supermoto-style bikes are at their best around town



Suzuki is far better than the Chinese – but far more expensive, too



Even Chinese warning stickers can be a bit, well, unusual

are rubbish? Think again

Japanese, but at half the price ► Spares and dealer back-up improved as well



Sinnis Blade, £1899.99

Tack an extra £300 on to your budget and you'd find yourself with a Sininis Blade. At 200cc, this motocross-a-like is unsuitable for learners, instead appealing to commuters and riders looking for a cheap second bike. In that regard it's a success. Liam chose it as the best of the Chinese bunch.

The slight boost in power the extra 75cc brings makes it a more useable tool on the road, while the 21in front wheel and general solidity of the build inspire more confidence than the Lexmos. Sininis – known as "Jinan Qingqi" [pronounced "Chin Chee"] in China, hence the confusing logo on this bike – base their engines on both Peugeot and Suzuki designs.

Based in Brighton, the Sininis brand is a Sino-British hybrid that's well represented by this impressive starter's trailie. Apart from an badly adjusted gear lever its faults were few and is a good choice for those wanting to venture off road for the first time on a budget. A 250cc version is expected within two years.



Suzuki DR125SM, £2899

The Suzuki's finish, ride, suspension, dash and engine are all better than the Chinese alternatives but it's also £1000 more expensive than the Sininis Blade and £1700 more than the Lexmoto XTR. You'll get a higher resale value with the Suzuki (the Chinese bikes suffer nigh-on 50% depreciation as soon as you ride them home), but that won't wipe out

The Suzuki's finish, ride, suspension etc are all better... but it's also £1000 more expensive

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the initial saving, and, ultimately, all the Chinese bikes here do a very similar job to the Suzuki for far less money. The DR highlights Japan's problem: by building bikes to a quality and spec level they consider the minimum acceptable, they've left themselves open to being undercut by increasingly competent Chinese rivals.

Tell us what you think
www.motorcyclenews.com

BUT WHAT ABOUT SPARES BACK UP?

In July 2007 a leading dealer told MCN: "We won't touch Chinese bikes... you simply can't repair them economically... there is no spares backup". So have things changed?

In a moderately scientific test, MCN anonymously ordered a brake lever for all the bikes tested. The first surprise was Lexmoto's website (chinesemotorcyclepartsonline.co.uk) which lists all parts, and shows price, availability and delivery options – it's as slick as Amazon. Suzuki and Sininis

have no online ordering – you just ring your local dealer and they order it. The results were:

Lexmoto LSM 125: part arrived in 3 working days. Lexmoto XTR S 125 (ordered separately): 3 working days. Suzuki DR125 SM: 4 working days. Sininis Blade: 5 working days.

MCN also spoke to a sample of UK dealers who backed up our test. They all said that in their experience, the major Chinese importers have got their act together.

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MCNcompare.com

"I'm not too good on computers, but I had no problems saving £160 for my Kawasaki Z750."

Malcolm Williams, 68, Aberdare



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*Based on quotes generated in June 2010 for two popular customer profiles on six of the most popular bikes on www.MCNBikesforSale.com. Full details of our research can be found here www.mcncompare.com.