

# KEVIN ASH

## THE MOST OUTSPOKEN MAN IN MOTORCYCLING



# The rise of the Chinese bike

**A**fter many years of haphazard imports of some spectacularly awful motorcycles and scooters, the Chinese sector of the UK bike industry is finally beginning to mature. Better quality machines along with more professional importers are bubbling to the top.

It's fascinating to observe, as the Chinese and their importers operate in such a very different way to the rest of the motorcycle world. With every other country's bike industry, the brand belongs to the factory. From Triumph to Suzuki to Kymco and every other brand you can name outside China, the factory itself decides on the new models, the marketing, the brand image and philosophy, and the name stays on the bikes. But the Chinese - or rather their western importers, operate on a completely different model.

Last week I visited the impressive premises of Llexeter, Chinese bike importer and owner of the Lexmoto and Pulse brands. Yes, owner of the brands - these are UK brands which belong to the importer, there is no Pulse scooter factory in China, Lexmoto don't exist outside this country.

The bikes and scooters in the Pulse and Lexmoto ranges in fact come from several different Chinese factories. The UK importer takes a look at the many different models being produced, and there are thousands of them, then selects a handful it thinks will do well in our market. In many cases it's possible for different body panels, headlights and so on to be selected, and instead of the factories' names appearing on the tanks, the names Pulse or Lexmoto are applied on the production lines.

This is like me deciding to set up my



UK importers pick and choose Chinese bikes and add their own badge

own Ash motorcycle brand, getting a GSX-R600 from Suzuki, an S1000RR from BMW, a Ninja 250 from Kawasaki and a Piaggio X10, telling the factories to take their own badges off and put the highly acclaimed 'Ash' logo on the tanks instead.

This gives me the choice of the best bikes available, but it also means I have no way of directly influencing what new models will be appearing or having coherent brand values. That might matter at the high end of the market, but at the commuter and utility end, two wheelers are white goods, ridden by people with little interest in their wheels other than for the money they can save and the convenience. There's still plenty of room for brand values: if 'Pulse' means low costs yet a proper network of dealers with spares support, which it does, then it's preferable to a completely unknown brand.

It's an unusual way of operating

so it throws up some unusual issues. Another importer might well choose the same bikes to bring into the country but with its own badging. Some will even piggyback other importers' facilities: internet supplier Direct Bikes for example, which has made an appearance on the BBC's Watchdog, has copied and pasted Llexeter's dealer network list for its customers and gives the Llexeter parts phone number as its spares supply!

That's fine where it means more business for Llexeter, but customers often don't realise the importers are unrelated and often direct the complaints about Direct Bikes at Llexeter.

The quality of Chinese bikes has a long way to go still but it is improving. The massive home market is becoming increasingly affluent, and with domestic consumers becoming fussier, the Chinese factories will have to up their standards to survive.