12-15-2008

Reclaiming Old Shanghai?

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A few weeks ago, it was reported that horseracing had returned to China for the first time since 1949. Though this time, the horses are running in Wuhan, horseracing in China was for a long time almost synonymous with Shanghai. In case that history is new to you, here are a few places to go for more on Shanghai’s racing history:

1. When news came earlier this year that the government might allow horseracing in Wuhan (and that spectators would be allowed to participate in a “lottery”—gambling remains illegal), Far Eastern Economic Review posted a short excerpt from a 1983 book called China Races on mid-nineteenth century races at the “Hankow Race Club.”

2. Shanghai Star states that “Shanghai was once known as a ‘Paradise for Adventurers.’ Few places could conjure up a more graphic picture of old Shanghai’s decadence than the former horse race track on what is now People’s Square,” and includes in this short article the claim that the present-day word for road, malu, is named after the foreigners who rode horses from the racetrack to the Bund. In a nod to continued disdain for Shanghai’s decadence (and in an expression of the continuing anger over the inequalities built into semi-colonial Shanghai society), the article notes that while the races may have been entertaining for foreigners, they were “a vehicle through which to exploit the Chinese.”

3. Horseracing was only one of the vices that plagued old Shanghai (and today intrigues those eager to recapture its past debaucheries). For a few more, along with historical context, see this piece at City Weekend, “Party Like its 1929.”

4. Finally, no site describes old Shanghai like Graham Earnshaw’s “Tales of Old Shanghai,” which hosts a collection of contemporary books and images. Here is one excerpt that captures the feeling:

“Shanghai flames with millions of flashing jewels at midnight. The centre of night life is a vast crucible of electric flame.

“The throb of the jungle tom-tom; the symphony of lust; the music of a hundred orchestras; the shuffling of feet; the swaying of bodies; the rhythm of abandon; the hot smoke of desire, desire under the floodlights; it’s all fun; it’s life.

“Joy, gin, and jazz. There’s nothing puritanical about Shanghai.”
5. Check out the Tales of Old Shanghai index for more images of Shanghai (like the image above).

Tags: Shanghai