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A Better Life in New Shanghai?

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By Maura Cunningham

During the two years I recently spent in Nanjing as a student at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, Shanghai became an increasingly frequent choice when I needed to get away and wander the streets of China for a bit. With the introduction of CRH express train service in 2007, travel time between Nanjing and Shanghai fell to only two hours, and I rejoiced in the improved accessibility of Shanghai’s malls, restaurants, bookstores, and cultural events. However, I often found that I ended my Shanghai sojourns as eager to return to Nanjing as I had been to leave it only a day or two earlier. While Shanghai provided me with plenty of diversions, it also raised serious questions in my mind concerning the relationship between the foreign and Chinese communities in the city.

Now that the Olympics have passed, China has begun gearing up for the country’s next big international event: the 2010 World Expo to be held in Shanghai, beginning on May 1, 2010. In addition to massive Expo-related construction projects and infrastructure development, Shanghai officials are also testing the city’s Expo readiness by hosting smaller meetings and performances that are designed to attract international crowds. Broadway shows are now coming to Shanghai through the Nederlander China organization, and the city has been a tour stop for foreign musical acts as diverse as the Rolling Stones, Linkin Park, and the New York Philharmonic. Currently, visitors to the 7th annual Shanghai Biennale can ponder artworks centered on the theme of “mobility related to the urban, economic, and social developments;” next March, dozens of authors from around the globe will participate in the sixth year of the Shanghai International Literary Festival.

Despite this vibrant cultural scene, however, my own experiences at several events left me uncomfortable with the frequent lack of a hometown crowd in the audience. While attending last year’s literary festival at the swanky M on the Bund restaurant, I felt a bizarre sense of dislocation as I looked around the room. Chinese waiters unobtrusively cleared away empty coffee cups and wine glasses while festival ticket-holders—almost all foreigners—milled about and discussed the latest goings-on in the Shanghai expat world. Rather than signifying Shanghai’s move toward a “Better City, Better Life” (the Expo’s tagline), the event instead felt like an exclusive gathering open only to those fluent in English and wealthy enough to afford 65 RMB tickets for each session. Holding the festival on the Bund, the most visible reminder of prior foreign entry into China, only intensified my discomfort with the whole affair.

I was also aware, however, that the atmosphere at the literary festival was due in part to the nature of that particular event itself, as very few of the author presentations are given in Chinese. Performances in which language is less of a component—such as the ballet or music recitals—tend to draw a more mixed (or even Chinese-dominated) crowds. There is also, of course, a high-end Chinese-centric cultural world in the city, one in which many foreigners have little interest in participating, and which a large proportion of the Chinese population cannot access. My trips to Shanghai often brought to my attention the plurality of social spheres in the city; although they all brush against each other, these circles do not always create the Venn diagrams I had envisioned before I began attending events there.

This, then, is the contradiction in Shanghai’s efforts to promote itself as a cosmopolitan metropolis: the city is becoming the venue for more and more international events, but participation in such gatherings is generally limited to a thin slice of the populace. While all city residents must deal with the upheaval generated by Expo preparations, they do not always have the opportunity to reap the benefits of Shanghai’s new interest in placing itself on the world stage. With 18 months now left until the 2010 Expo begins, Shanghai city officials still have far to go in their attempts to create a “Better City, Better Life.”

Tags: Shanghai