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Some Expo-Disney Connections

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Needless to say, the Shanghai-Disney story, which has just taken a dramatic turn, is one that I’ve been following with great interest. How could I not, when the University of California-Irvine, where I teach and “China Beat” is based, is closer to the original Disney theme park than any other major research university? When my last book not only looked at Shanghai’s past but speculated a bit about what it may become in the near future as it continues to develop? When I’ve published a travel-themed commentary-cum-memoir that alluded to the role that visits to the Magic Kingdom in Anaheim played in my childhood? And when one of the short pieces on globalization I’ve written refers to the strange uses to which Mickey Mouse’s visage was put during a public health campaign carried out in Shanghai in the mid-1980s?

There’s also another reason I’m intrigued by the story, though, which inspires this post. Namely, like many other people who live in or simply regularly visit and are interested in Shanghai, I’ve been fascinated by what the upcoming World Expo has been doing to and could do for the metropolis. And like many other people who have taught and written about World’s Fairs, I’ve thought a lot about the complex ties between the International Exhibition lineage that the 2010 Expo will continue, on the one hand, and Disney theme parks, on the other. Curiously, though, I haven’t seen much attention in the coverage of the Shanghai-Disney story to the ties between World’s Fairs and theme parks, and sometimes, even in generally good articles about the Disney deal, the fact that an Expo is about to take place in the city isn’t even mentioned.

Yes, there are brief allusions in some Shanghai-Disney stories to the fact that the city is about to hold an Expo. Yes, some references have been made to the fact that the World’s Fair planned for 2010 has already involved and the theme park that could open as early as 2014 will require a lot of land being acquired and a lot of major construction. And, yes, there have been scattered comments about how the Disney park could keep a local tourist boom going after the Expo has ended. These Expo-Disney angles all have relevance, especially the land expropriation/construction boom one, as both raise the question of how much more development the already hyper-developed metropolis by the Huangpu River can take, whether those being forced to relocate are being offered appropriate compensation, and how much in general is just too much. Still, at least for the historically minded, the Expo-Disney connections worth pondering go deeper.

Consider these tidbits:

1) Walt Disney’s father worked as a carpenter at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, the Chicago World’s Fair that is famous for many things, including the premiere of the first Ferris Wheel. Disney grew up hearing stories of the wondrous “White City” created in Chicago, which was visited, according to some reports, by one in five Americans.
2) Walt Disney was deeply involved in the planning of the 1964 World’s Fair held in New York, and there was talk at the time of it becoming an East Coast equivalent to the Magic Kingdom he had recently opened in California. In the end, this didn’t take place, but when Epcot Center opened in Florida, as part of the Orlando Disney complex, it had many aspects reminiscent of a World’s Fair, including separate sections devoted to the food and culture of individual countries. (I’d seen this noted before, but my visit to Epcot definitely came to mind a few years ago, when I took the photo of the scale model for the 2010 Expo grounds that illustrates this post, though in Florida, you go from country to country by walking around a lake, not along a river.)

3) Several attractions created for the New York World’s Fair, including “It’s a Small World,” gained new leases on life after the event at Disney parks (a version of the one just mentioned can be found in the Paris, Tokyo, and Hong Kong as well as U.S. venues).

4) Japan got its Disneyland, the first in Asia, after hosting the first Olympics held on the continent (the 1964 Tokyo Games) and then the first World’s Fair held on the continent (the 1970 Osaka Expo) – though in that case, in contrast to the Chinese one, the Olympic city got the Disneyland, while the Expo one settled for a Universal Studios.

5) Paris is, perhaps not coincidentally, both the only European city with a Disney park and the city on that continent (where the tradition of grand international expositions originated with London’s Crystal Palace exhibition of 1851) that is most closely tied to the World’s Fair lineage (and early variations of what cultural historian Vanessa Schwartz refers to as "multi-sensory amusements" more generally) – it hosted many of the first great events belonging to this lineage and its most iconic structure, the Eiffel Tower, was built for one of these.

As the Shanghai Disney story develops, it is worth keeping the connections between the World’s Fair and theme park traditions in mind. This is especially true given that the Expo is being promoted within China as an event that carries into a new century the tradition of the 1893 White City that Disney’s father helped build – though an early plan to construct the world’s biggest Ferris Wheel by the Huangpu River near the world’s tallest building has thankfully been dropped.

This is one case in which, at least so far, the most interesting quote I’ve seen has come not from any foreign news report but from a Shanghai Daily story. The quote, attributed to Huang Renwei of the Shanghai Academic of Social Science, says this of Shanghai Disneyland: “It will be like a never-ending Expo.” If so, let’s just hope that one of the distinctive local “accents” that everyone is saying this particular Disneyland will have will not take the form of performances that team Mi Laooshu (the Chinese name for Mickey Mouse that, given the different rodents dubbed “laoshu,” can also evoke “Mickey the Rat”) with the Gumby-like blue Expo mascot HaiBao whose omnipresence in Shanghai these days has been discussed before on this site.