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Shanghai’s Expo: What Everyone Needs to Know

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In exactly one week, the countdown clocks in Shanghai will all finally hit zero. This is because this year May Day will also be Opening Day for the 2010 World Expo, an event that has been largely ignored in the United States (at least until very recently), but has been the subject of an enormous amount of advance publicity (and hype) within China, in part because it will be that country’s first World Fair and the first large-scale spectacle held there since the giant National Day parades of last year and the Beijing Games of 2008. It is an event worth paying attention to, even if one feels, as many Americans do, that the era of great World’s Fairs has come and gone, since this one will be the largest in history, at least in terms of the size of the grounds and the number of countries represented by pavilions, and perhaps also it terms of total number of attendees.

I’ve been getting a lot of questions about the event’s meaning and significance lately, as I travel around giving talks linked to my new book, *China in the 21st Century: What Everyone Needs to Know*, in part because it seems curious to many Americans that the PRC moved right from holding the costly 2008 Olympics to preparing for this new extravaganza. Luckily, I have answers ready, because the new book is all in the Q & A format and there are several questions I address that relate to the Olympics, the Expo, or both of these mega-events.

So I thought I’d share with readers of this blog the explanation I give in the book for why this World’s Fair is taking place in the wake of the Games. The excerpt will provide readers with a sense of the book’s style (something that they can also get from a short pieces on different subjects that ran recently in *Foreign Policy* and *Forbes*) and perhaps encourage some of them to order the publication or drop in on one of the upcoming book launch events I’ll be doing next week in Washington, D.C. on April 27, New Jersey on April 28, and New York City on April 29 and April 30:
Why hold an Expo so soon after the Olympics?

Given the expense of the 2008 Beijing Games, the Chinese government’s efforts to move straight into gearing up for a World Expo has baffled many foreigners. Also perplexing has been its efforts to cast the Expo as an Olympic-like event.

Part of this befuddlement comes from the fact that in Europe and North America now, World Expos, which are sponsored by an IOC-like organization known as the BIE, tend to be seen as relatively minor affairs that do not necessarily take place in top-tier cities. In 2000 the German city of Hanover played host to one; in 2005 the Japanese city of Aichi did the honors; and among American cities, Knoxville, which would not be considered to even have a shot at hosting the Olympics, is among the urban centers that has held a recent World Expo (in 1984). This makes it seem odd that local and national authorities in China have been promoting the Expo as an “Economic Olympics,” and generally working hard to establish a connection between the Olympics and the Expo, in the hope that they will be perceived as a pair of linked mega-events, not a major one followed by a second-rate one.

The lead-up to Shanghai 2010 has followed closely some parts of the Beijing 2008 blueprint: the Expo, too, has a slogan (“Better City, Better Life” to match “One World, One Dream”), a theme song, and an educational campaign oriented in part around familiarizing people with the history of World’s Fairs (especially the ones in which China participated and the best-known ones of the past, such as the 1889 Parisian Universal Exposition for which Eiffel built his famous tower). The cutesy “Fuwa” Olympic mascots have their counterpart in the Expo’s “Haibao” (a blue Gumby-like figure). In addition, in Shanghai during the lead-up to 2010, as in Beijing during the lead-up to 2008, the city has been undergoing a dramatic facelift, thanks to large infrastructure developments (including the building of new subway lines) and building projects (at the Expo site and in nearby areas).
As was the case in Beijing, the new development is being carried out on a staggeringly large scale and on land made available through relocations of longtime residents of neighborhoods. Shanghai’s Expo promises to be the most expensive World’s Fair in history, the one that has the biggest urban footprint, and the one at which the largest number of countries are represented by official national pavilions—display areas that, as in previous World’s Fairs and World Expos are designed to showcase the cultures, histories, products, and in some cases also the latest technologies of specific lands.

One way to think of the 2008 Games and 2010 Expo is as a combination of events that China hopes will signal how far it has come in the course of a century or so, and how far behind it has left its former reputation as the “sick man of Asia.” Its intention is to leave no doubt that it is now a place with not just one but two cities where great global events can be held. It is not even certain, moreover, that the country will be content to have just a pair of urban centers, Beijing and Shanghai, in the special category of locales worthy of mega-events—for in late 2010, just after the World Expo is over, Guangzhou will host the “Asian Games,” an Olympic-like spectacle, albeit one on a somewhat reduced scale as it brings together teams from across a continent only, as opposed to participants from around the globe.