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Another side of the Shanghai World Expo: Forum on ICT and Urban Development

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This posting marks my return to blogging after a break following my participation in the founding of The China Beat in 2008 with my postings from Beijing leading up to the Olympics. Contacts I made during the Olympics led to an invitation to do some informal work for the Forum Department of the Expo Organizing Bureau, and so I am now in Shanghai and blogging about China’s second mega-event.

As the Expo organizers conceive it, the Expo consists of three categories of activities: exhibitions, events, and forums. Of the three, the forums most closely carry out the main concept and ideas of the Expo.

The 1889 Paris exposition was the first to include a Scientific Congress that aspired to assemble the top minds in the world (in those days, the "world" meant Europe and North America). For many decades world’s fairs functioned to gather great thinkers into one place, which facilitated the transnational flow of knowledge and possibly accelerated globalization (a possibility that, in my opinion, awaits fuller exploration by historians). The assertion that the International Congress of Arts and Science at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (about which I have edited a book) constituted "the most noted assemblage of thinkers the world has ever seen" was not far from the truth. The list of luminaries in attendance included Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Henri Poincaré; in the fledgling discipline of anthropology the friction between WJ McGee and Franz Boas expressed there arguably contributed to the paradigm shift toward cultural anthropology.

Recent Expo Forums do not seem to have matched their former luminescence, probably because modern communications have made it unnecessary to physically collect great minds in the same place anymore. The Shanghai Expo aspires to emulate the old model. Between April 2009 and April 2010, some 60 public forums were held all over China and in Hong Kong and Macao. Six international “Theme Forums” will be held during the sixth months of the Expo, culminating in a “Summit Forum” in Shanghai on the final day. The purpose of the Theme Forums is to put forward “significant strategic recommendations” for sustainable urban development. The Summit Forum will bring together heads of state and the U.N. and other leading figures. At the Expo closing ceremony, the “Shanghai Declaration” will be read out and signed. China considers it a very important document that will consolidate the results of the forums and express a consensual declaration of intent to achieve sustainable urban development. The Expo Bureau hopes that it will be one of the main achievements of the Expo that will shape the future of global society.

Input into the content of this document is being sought from multiple groups and individuals, of which I am one. However, I suspect that my more important contribution might be to help the Forum Department with English translation. In any case, on May 15-16 I attended the first forum, the Forum on ICT and Urban Development in Ningbo. As a cultural anthropologist, I admit that the topic was so foreign to me that I first had to figure out that ICT means “information and communication technology,” which is how the Chinese 信息化 was translated. The latter is a word that demonstrates that in some cases Chinese is a better language for the 21st century than English, since it is the more elegant equivalent of the awkward English “informatization,” or sometimes “cyberization.”
Wall outside the Forum hotel

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