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Shanghai Expo: The US Pavilion is On

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Last November, we ran a little preview of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, pointing you to a few readings about this big “coming distraction.” Last week the US finally committed to attend the Expo, prompting a new round of Expo stories around the web.

1. It’s pretty unusual for the U.S. to land on any world list between San Marino and Andorra, but that’s its position on the Expo sign-up sheet, as reported by the AFP:

The United States signed up Friday the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, officials said, making it the last major country with diplomatic ties to China to join the event… Fundraising difficulties had threatened to prevent the US from building a pavilion for the Expo but organisers said they got a boost from donations in the past two months from Pepsi, General Electric and KFC owner Yum! Brands...

The US is the latest country to sign up after San Marino, the world’s smallest city state.

The Western European principality of Andorra is now the sole Expo holdout among countries with diplomatic relations to China, according to Expo organisers.

2. As the Wall Street Journal notes in their report on the last-minute fundraising for the US pavilion, financial woes wouldn’t serve as a sufficient excuse for an American absence:

Clearly, the global financial crisis hasn’t made it easy for U.S. firms put their hands in their pockets, particularly considering there are better ways to use their advertising budgets. However unintentional, thought, the absence of the world’s largest economy from next year’s event would inevitably be perceived as a slight by the Chinese organizers. “An undercurrent of ill-will” is what Frank Lavin, former commerce department official and chairman of the USA Pavilion steering committee, predicted when he spoke to The Journal back in April.

The concern hasn’t been lost on the Obama administration, with Secretary of State Clinton, in addition to Locke, throwing her weight behind the effort. In a March letter to Amcham in Shanghai, Clinton said...
U.S. participation is “crucial” and will “demonstrate America’s commitment to...a forward looking, positive relationship with China.”

In an era of instant communications, Expo is in many ways an anachronism. Why do you need a foreign government to come build in your city a projection of how they want you to view their country? But that’s not really what Shanghai 2010 is about. It’s about China projecting itself to the rest of the world. So from the vantage of Shanghai, participation isn’t optional.

3. Access Asia has provided a typically caustic write-up (that makes for delicious reading, as usual) of the American reluctance to commit to the Expo:

Of course, America’s will they/won’t they EXPO shenanigans has been a political issue at heart. The official Sino-American line is that the financial crisis was to blame for the inability of the Americans to raise much funding – US diplomats argue this (in public at least) and the Chinese media is all over this argument, like a cheap suit, backing it up. But what everyone really knows is that the lack of funding was due to a lack of enthusiasm and interest from American corporates – and who can blame them? They, like most of us, just didn’t see the point of the EXPO. The only winners at EXPO (excepting the Chinese) are the host of shonky PR companies and other liggers who’ve jumped on the bandwagon, knowing a free lunch when they see one, and smaller countries that can use the EXPO to get some “face time” with officials. Of course, come 2010, the other winners will be the plague of politicians and jumped-up petty officials getting a free trip to Shanghai at their respective tax payers’ expense too – we can’t wait for Shanghai to be infested with them! The losers are the larger (in terms of economic investment in China anyways) countries, who have had to cough-up plenty of tax payer money for a non-event they all know they’ll get little to no benefit from.

The US EXPO effort has also been weird, to say the least. That is something that will probably continue, as the job of constructing a pavilion that is not a cause of national embarrassment, despite the depleted budget, still lies before them (this is less of a problem for those of us from declining nations who are now used to this state of affairs – it’s a new sensation to the Yanks)...

And Access Asia also made a point of introducing the made-over Haibao dressed in cowboy hat and jeans (shown above; the focus of the web chatter on this is...well, the Shanghaisist tongue-in-cheek take on the costume, titled "Haibao looks gooood in tight jeans!", should give you a sense of it). This costume is part of a series of costumes for Haibao, including the image at right and many others here.

4. Meanwhile, China Daily provides a typically enthusiastic take on the announcement:

...the Asian power was earlier worried the world’s biggest economy might skip it as the 1991 American law blocked the nation from using government funding for expo projects. The signing of a participation contract with Chinese organizers last week put an end to the speculation.
“Our pavilion will be among the largest and we want it to be one of the best,” said US Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke, who arrived in Shanghai to witness the groundbreaking ceremony. “United States and China enjoy many areas of friendship and cooperation, and we believe our pavilion will deepen that bond.

“It will provide insight into the life and culture of American people, insights that will intrigue millions of visitors expected at the 2010 World Expo, including visitors from China and all around the world,” he added.

He also said the Obama Administration is committed to strengthening the relationship between the two nations’ governments and friendship between the two peoples.

Calling on more US firms to help fund the country’s presence at the mega event, Locke said: "I want to assure you that your commitment to the US Pavilion and building the friendship with China and Chinese people will not be forgotten."

5. As Adam Mintner points out at Shanghai Scrap, those are pom poms on the shovels used for the groundbreaking of the US pavilion. (Surely these aren’t Haibao’s “favorite things”? *cue the music* “Pom poms on shovels and bids for more sponsors…” We’re still working our way toward an Expo mood around here.)

Tags: Shanghai, Shanghai Expo 2010