1-22-2009

China at the World’s Fairs

Susan Fernsebner

University of Mary Washington

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/435
Five Things to Know about China’s Links to World’s Fairs and International Expositions
By Susan Fernsebner

The city of Shanghai will be the official host to Expo 2010, an international event celebrating the theme "A Better City, A Better Life,” with an opening celebration next May. As the event’s website and preview videos below reveal, Expo 2010 is intended as an example of a new and shared urban modernity. Visitors will have the opportunity to tour the site personally and, if lacking an opportunity to visit Shanghai next summer, also to take a virtual tour of its grounds online.

As the videos note, Expo 2010 is intended as an event that will fulfill and expand upon the legacy of world expositions while also helping to make the “world feel at home in China.” This endeavor of global exchange amidst the scene of the exposition is one in which China has, in fact, its own lengthy history of participation. An account of important events in this lesser-known history follows...

1. Chinese objects and merchants were both on hand for what is commonly considered the first major exhibition of the modern day. In 1851, a variety of actors displayed Chinese goods at London’s Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held at the Crystal Palace that summer. While the Qing state did not send an official contingent, at least one Chinese merchant participated alongside Western diplomats and merchants in offering displays of Chinese goods at the grand event, winning a commendation for fine silks.

2. Between 1851 and the First World War, China would participate in at least twenty-eight world’s fairs and expositions including grand events staged at London, Madrid, Paris, Philadelphia, and Vienna, among others.

3. Though originally planning to attend, the Chinese government would withhold official participation in Chicago’s “World’s Columbian Exposition” of 1893 as a protest against the exclusionary Geary Act. The passage of this act in 1892 by the United States Congress renewed restrictions on Chinese immigration and imposed a strict regulation system for Chinese laborers residing in the U.S.

4. In 1904, Prince Pu Lun of the Qing imperial clan would personally attend the St. Louis Exposition and host a grand reception for over three thousand guests at one of the city’s fine hotels that spring. His visit also would be preceded by the reformist critic (and temporary expatriate) Liang Qichao, who toured the exposition grounds during the course of their construction the previous year (this was not the first time Liang Qichao spent time thinking about Expos, as in 1902 he wrote a story that imagined a Chinese international exhibition taking place in Shanghai in the far-off future date of 1962...).

5. China staged its first national fair, the 1910 Nanyang Exposition in the city of Nanjing under the co-sponsorship of the Qing state and independent investors. Intended as an event that would further industrial development and “enlighten the people,” the exposition offered discounted tickets for students and soldiers and included presentations by Japan, the United States, England, and Germany, among other nations. The exposition grounds would also offer multiple theaters, musical arenas, shops, restaurants, and a grand display of over fourteen thousand electric lights. As organizers noted, China had, like other nations around the world, reached a day in which both an education in material things and popular amusement itself was indeed “a certain necessity.”

Susan Fernsebner, an associate professor of history at the University of Mary Washington, is currently completing a book-length study on the history of China’s participation in world’s fairs and expositions.

Tags: Shanghai, Shanghai Expo 2010