5-9-2009

Some Interviews (and Answering a Question I Wasn’t Asked)

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/545

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
I’ve recently been lucky enough to be asked to do a couple of radio interviews to promote *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments*, and also to get an opportunity to explain what I was trying to do in the book to various journalists working for Chinese and English language publications. This is a very nice development because I wrote the book with general readers as well as academics in mind, and because I hoped that my ideas about Shanghai would start to make their way into Chinese as well as English language discussions of the city’s past, present, and future. It was gratifying, for example, to see part of my conversation with Mina Choi (held before I spoke at the Shanghai International Literary Festival in March) appear last month in the Beijing-based English language magazine *China International Business* (the text as well as her review of the book is available [here](#)); to see a podcast show up on the web of the conversation I had with Jerome McDonnell for his excellent “Worldview” show; and to come across several pieces online (like [this one](#)) that draw on a discussion I had with a group of Shanghai journalists before giving a talk at Fudan’s new Institute for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences.

One question these recent interviewers didn’t ask, perhaps because they were too polite, is one that a couple of colleagues, who knew how long I took to finish *Global Shanghai*, asked me before I finally delivered my manuscript to Routledge. They wondered whether I was worried that being so slow to finish it up would have adverse effects on the book’s impact and reception, due to either my being scooped by another writer producing a very similar book, or the Chinese and international fascination with Shanghai petering out.

In the end, I don’t think the delayed appearance of *Global Shanghai* was a problem on either of these fronts. A lot of Shanghai books, including some superb ones, had already been published when I started work on mine, and many more appeared while I was working on Global Shanghai. But I felt from the start that there was one thing in particular that would set *Global Shanghai* apart from other works on the city in English: namely, the fact that it would be a scholarly yet accessible book that was by a single author and dealt with both the treaty-port era and the post-1949 one in detail, highlighting both the continuities and discontinuities between the internationalizations of these two periods.

When the release date of *Global Shanghai* finally arrived late last year, there was still no English language book, at least that I know of, that fit this category. The closest thing to direct competition, I had long thought, was *Histoire de Shanghai*, an excellent book by Marie-Claire Bergère, but that is still only available in French (and perhaps also in a Chinese edition). It is, however, a good thing that I didn’t wait yet another year to finish *Global Shanghai*, as *Histoire de Shanghai*, retitled *Shanghai: China’s Gateway to Modernity*, is finally coming out in English from Stanford University Press toward
the end of 2009. Though this development might have left me concerned (about the fate of my own book) as well as pleased for my colleague and friend Marie-Claire (who has been very generous to me throughout my career), I can now welcome the appearance of this translation without mixed feelings. After all, it would be great from my point of view to see the two works, which differ in some intriguing ways, end up being taught and perhaps even reviewed together.

As for worrying that the fascination with Shanghai would dissipate as I finished my book, I’ll admit that this did cause me a bit of concern at a few points, especially during the build-up to the Beijing Games. Back in 2004, Giorgio Armani who, as I’ve noted elsewhere may be no urban theorist but certainly knows a thing or two about trends, apparently told a journalist from China Daily that he considered Shanghai to qualify as the “world’s most talked about city,” but around 08/08/08, the city’s northern rival had a much better claim to that distinction. Nevertheless, there are plenty of indications that Shanghai’s past as well as its present and its future continue to generate a good deal of interest, both near to and very far from the Huangpu River. I’ll end this post by simply listing a few widely varying and in some cases rather peculiar developments that suggest to me that Shanghai has by no means been completely eclipsed, either in the local or global imagination, by Beijing’s Olympic moment:

1. There’s a new countdown clock in Beijing, but it is ticking away the time not until a local event begins but until the Shanghai Expo starts.
2. The melodramatic play "Shanghai Gesture," which opened on Broadway in 1926 for a two-year run and after that was rarely performed (though it was transformed into a von Sternberg film—his second one linked to the city, for he'd previously directed the Marlene Dietrich star vehicle "Shanghai Express"), has just been revived by a New York theatre company.

3. The city’s name continues to show up in the titles of English language works of fiction (including a whodunit called The Shanghai Moon that just came out).

4. Hollywood films that have scenes set in the metropolis and sometimes also invoke its name in their titles haven’t stopped being made, with one starring John Cusack and Gong Li and called simply “Shanghai” due out in the fall.

5. Though the latest Shanghai Biennale (that ran late in 2008) had many themes, not all of which were focused on the place that was hosting the events, works drawing attention to aspects of the local past and present and expectations for what the future holds in store for people living near the Huangpu figured prominently in some displays (as the accompanying photo, which I took last November, indicates).