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## Back to the Future: Going to the World's Fair!

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## Back to the Future: Going to the World's Fair!

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By Shellen Xiao Wu

Once upon a time, world's fairs displayed the glory, wealth, and reach of European empires and those who wished to emulate them. Countries from Asia, Africa, and South America set up booths presenting "native" products, alongside the latest steam engines, repeating rifles and other technological wonders of the "advanced" nations. The first World's Fair in London in 1851 brought the translucent Crystal Palace; the Eiffel Tower served as the entrance arch to the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1889; in 1893 the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago symbolized America's entry into the ranks of powers.

In ten days, the Shanghai Expo is about to be unveiled, after the city spent billions building an extra air terminal, new subway lines, and sprucing up buildings and streets in the old colonial concession areas of the city. Like so many aspects of China's breakneck development in recent years, the Shanghai Expo is an intriguing blend of old and new and what one might describe as surreal. The expo heralds the arrival of what many in Asia believe to be the Asian 21st century, at the same time using a format that is a curious throwback to the 19th century. As a historian I am thrilled to have the opportunity to attend the Expo in June, but I am also fully prepared to feel overwhelmed by a sense of dislocation.

I grew up in Shanghai in the 1980s. As it turned out, those were the twilight years of the city's shabby, and drab, old-style communist era. My grandparents had lived in a gracious, art-deco era apartment building in the former international concession since the 1950s. Three families crowded into what had been a spaciouly appointed two-bedroom apartment. Bicycles filled the tiled lobby area, and the former garage had long been converted into living space. Neon signs still lined the main shopping street, Nanjing Lu, but in the daylight, one could clearly see the signs of their age and decrepitude.

Two years ago, I noticed that the municipal government of Shanghai had already launched into a beautification campaign of the old concessions areas. Excessive crowding issues were resolved – by moving people out to the outskirts of the city. Building facades were renovated, repainted, and restored. The gate to my grandparent's building, a solid, rusty piece of iron with a door cut-out, was replaced by shiny black wrought-iron. For the first time, I saw the Shanghai of its 1920s and 1930s colonial heyday. One effect of the Expo was to slow the demolition of old colonial architecture. The Sodom and Gomorrah of colonial treaty ports was suddenly chic again.

But back to my sense of dislocation. The restored colonial city, and the people who no longer lived there, felt curiously out of place, as though in a whirl of paint and plaster sixty years of Shanghai history disappeared. The future, it turns out, looks a lot like the past.

*Shellen Xiao Wu is a graduate student at Princeton University, and a contributor to the blog [History Compass Exchanges](#), where this post [first appeared on April 21, 2010](#). It is reposted here with permission.*

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