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California Dreamin’ at China’s World’s Fair

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By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

Shanghai can be a surreal place to visit in ordinary times. This is due to the juxtaposition of buildings, modes of transportation, and lifestyles that seem to belong to not just different decades but different centuries. And this aspect of the city was heightened for me last summer by the presence of the 2010 World Expo.

The displays I saw on my late June and July visits to this spectacle, which is both China’s first World’s Fair and the biggest event of its kind in history, often used decidedly twenty-first century technologies. And yet, I often felt while in Shanghai that I had stepped back in time. For the relentless way that the Expo is being hyped in the media there seems a throwback to late 1800s or early 1900s, when World’s Fairs were the most important genre of global event.

A different sort of surreal experience came when I returned to California in August. Many people would give me a blank look, or seem to have just a vague sense of what I was talking about, when I mentioned that I had been to China’s first World’s Fair and it had made me think of Epcot-on-steroids, due to the scores of national pavilions and hangar-sized multi-country display halls there, which give attendees a sense of being able to take a virtual trip around the world.
Seeing their baffled or bemused reactions, reminded me that, though the Expo made headlines every single day I spent in Shanghai, it had remained stubbornly off the radar here. Then, in mid-September, when Arnold Schwarzenegger’s visit to the fairgrounds briefly raised the event’s profile in the state that he and I both call home—I had my most surreal Expo-related experience of all. For I found thoroughly bizarre the former body building champ turned movie star turned Governor’s announcement that he would work to secure the rights to bring the 2020 World Expo (the 2015 one is already slated for Milan) to Silicon Valley. “Shanghai demonstrated that when you host the World Expo, the world comes to you,” he said, “and I want the world to come to California.”

One problem with his plan has to do with audience. The Shanghai Expo will soon become the most attended World’s Fair in history, but will do so because of its appeal to a very particular audience. The vast majority of the people going to this World’s Fair, as was often the case with earlier ones, have been citizens of the host country who have not had the opportunity to travel extended distances. They go to the fairgrounds partly to get a glimpse of futuristic technologies, but largely because they are curious about what distant lands (and indeed, when held in big countries like the U.S. and China, what far-off parts of their own nation) look like, how people live there, what foods are eaten there, and so on.
The virtual travel aspect of an Expo would have little appeal in contemporary America—for the same reason that some of the more cosmopolitan Shanghainese I know were blasé about the mega-event currently taking place in their city. In earlier periods, holding World’s Fairs in the U.S. made sense. But not when so many Americans can go abroad (even if lots of us never do), and when Epcot, Las Vegas, and the food courts at megamalls, international airports and other locales so readily provide us with a vicarious sense of journeying or eating our way around the world.

A second problem with Arnold’s idea is that California currently can’t make ends meet. Sure, backers of the Silicon Valley Expo plan would like to see the gala underwritten largely by private funders, but there’s something bizarre about contemplating even a small amount of state funds going to an Expo. (Did I mention that members of the University of California department I chair not only faced pay cuts disguised as “furloughs” last year, but recently had to give up their office phones as an austerity measure?) And the show that impressed Governor didn’t come cheap. It’s worth remembering that China has spent even more on the 2010 Expo than it did on the big budget Beijing Olympics.

The third drawback to a 2020 Silicon Valley Expo bid is that California’s political leaders have been proving singularly ineffective lately at accomplishing, well, anything. The annual state budget is way overdue—yet again. The chronic overcrowding of K-12 classrooms is a joke that stopped being funny long ago. These are just two items on a very long list of illustrations of the phenomenon.

It’s no surprise that the term “dysfunctional” is appearing a lot in commentaries on California. But that’s not a word used much by even the harshest critics of China’s recent mega-events.

These critics have usefully drawn attention to various issues. The tight controls on the press during the Olympics and now the Expo, for example, and the fact that, as was sometimes the case with early World’s Fairs, workers with few rights have had to labor for long hours in dangerous conditions to get glitzy venues ready in record time. No one has suggested, though, that China’s leaders can’t get things done.

There is a 2010 Asian spectacle other than the Shanghai Expo that’s been in the news this, though, which has inspired commentators to use terms like “dysfunctional” and point out the problems that the relevant group of political leaders have in getting basic things accomplished. This is the Commonwealth Games, Olympic-like spectacle that just got off to a better than expected start in Delhi, but was plagued by a staggeringly diverse set of problems beforehand, including pieces of a stadium’s roof and all of a bridge falling down last month.
Arnold would like to think that hosting the 2020 Expo would give California a boost like the one Shanghai is getting now or perhaps even like the bigger one Beijing got in 2008. Like him, I’m rooting for my beloved and beleaguered state to make a comeback, as it has done before. I’m worried, though, that hosting a World Expo would result not in a rebooting of the California Dream, but a Pacific Coast version of the Delhi spectacle that some critics in India took to calling the “Common Woe Games” as the time for their start drew near.

There’s nothing 20/20 about our soon-to-be-ex-Governor’s Expo plan, except the year when the event would take place.