2010

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A House Museum Café: Part 1

October 14, 2010 in Museums/exhibits, Shanghai by The China Beat | Permalink

By Leksa Chmielewski

Winners and losers in a twist on a museum café

In American museums, the museum gift shop or café stands as a constant reminder—before exhibit visits, after them, even in between them—of the dire financial straits in which nonprofits chronically find themselves. Museum gift shops and cafes are multiplying in Chinese museums too, even though the vast majority of Chinese museums are state-affiliated and enjoy full government funding. Chinese academics who work with museums lament that the Chinese museum scene still has much to learn from the American nonprofit-based system—but if that implies budget cuts, layoffs and a proliferation of museum shops selling finger-puppet versions of classic paintings, it’s not entirely clear why.

Museum gift shops and cafes are common in America and becoming more common in China, and those that museum staff (in my experience, both American and Chinese) find more acceptable are those that manage to integrate product offerings with exhibit themes. But few go as far as the Liu Changsheng House in Shanghai’s Jing’an District, where visitors conclude their walk through an exhibit about the Communist Party’s pre-liberation underground activities with a cup of coffee flame-percolated the old fashioned, labor-intensive way, and by a very overqualified librarian.

The Liu Changsheng House Museum in Jing’an District

The Liu Changsheng House, now located on Yuyuan Road beside the Jing’an Si subway station, was built in the early 1920s, according to those who work there. It was occupied by at least one foreign family, including a family of Jewish refugees, before Liu Changsheng moved in. Liu Changsheng was Vice-Secretary General of the CCP, and after the Party went underground in the late 1920s, some secret meetings were held in the home.
Plotting the revolution over a cup of joo. Wax models of Liu Changsheng (in Chinese dress) and Liu Xiang (in Western garb) "consulting on the strategy for the revolutionary struggle" in secret.

The rough narrative according to staff, who disagree on some of the details, is that the Jing’an District Library petitioned to save the house as a historic site, and it was dragged bit by bit down the street before the Jiuguang Mall was built over the original site. The house was renovated and given a permanent exhibition taking up the second and third floors, and an old coffee shop relocated into the ground floor from a site a few blocks away. After a total investment of 40 million RMB, the Liu Changsheng House opened in 2003. The permanent exhibition on the second and third floors tells a politically correct story of the CCP in Shanghai until 1949, with a focus on the time it operated underground. Visitors can enter for free and opt for a self-guided tour or a tour led by student volunteers recruited by local schools and universities. Visitors are fed into a teleological funnel from 1927, by way of the only possible path through the exhibit, to 1949, which looms inevitable and festooned with red banners and lanterns at the end of the second floor of the exhibition. Visitors may then opt to stop by the first-floor coffee shop before they leave.

It seems I didn’t hide my surprise very well when I first heard of the ground-floor coffee shop. The tour guides rushed to explain that Liu Changsheng and his cronies used to sit around in the house drinking coffee while they made their woodblock printed newsletters and dreamed of the utopian future. It wasn’t until I reached the coffee shop itself and had a chat with the staff there that I realized what most visitors who walk through, even stop to have a drink, never do: visitors might pause to appreciate the 1930s-era décor and flame-percolated offerings without ever learning that the shop is the latter-day incarnation of an actual café which was located a few blocks away, frequented, according to staff, by the likes of Eileen Chang. It turns out that the café staff and museum staff belong to separate departments of the same work unit. The café and museum are two separate (but similarly themed) units coming together in one building, and they may not be the only ones. The museum exhibit includes a small “water jail” exhibit in a corner where a dummy appears to be submerged in water up to its waist. When the tour guide presses a button, the display is bathed in blue light, a “fire” burns in a sconce on the wall, and a soundtrack of rattling chains plays. The guide explains that this is a recreated scene from a jail run by the municipal government under Japanese occupation. The original jail was nearby on what is now Wanhangdu Road. Now a school stands there.
It appears that what was at first glance a museum café better integrated with the theme of the Historic House than most in-house money-making ventures, is actually all that remains of a historically significant café. The “water jail” recreated display in the exhibit area, and three framed original manacles on the wall, are likewise all that is left of the nearby jail. Suddenly the high cost of moving the Liu Changsheng House is put into perspective: does that price tag include the “preservation” of the café and the jail as well? And who ended up footing the bill to move the house—the Jing’an District Government, or the developers who wanted to build the Jiuguang Mall over its original location?

Perhaps the less obvious questions have to do with the relationship between the (at least) three targets of preservation—the house, the jail, and the café—housed in one building: the jail is relegated to a small corner of the house museum’s display about the CCP; what does it mean when one is reduced to a bullet point that bolsters the message of the other? The café hosts events that bring in a tidy 20,000 yuan for a four-hour party; what does it mean when one supports the others financially?

A house, a jail, a café: winners and losers.

*Leksa Chmielewski is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. Part 2 of “A House Museum Café” will appear at The China Beat tomorrow.*