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Notes on the Shanghai Expo

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By Jonathan Hwang

Jonathan Hwang is a UC Irvine alum and currently a graduate student at the Hopkins-Nanjing Center. Hwang visited the Shanghai Expo last month and shared his initial impressions of the event with us. Here, a few of his thoughts on what he saw during his first day at the Expo.

1. One of my Chinese classmates mentioned that what really mattered for Chinese visitors were the big exhibitions: Japan, China, Europe, and the US. While still interested in the big exhibits, most Westerners were also astounded by the fact that North Korea and Iran were among the countries with pavilions at the Expo. The pavilions, although far from spectacular, showed a side of the “rogue” nations that is impossible to see in Western media, which often focuses on the proliferation of nuclear weapons and anti-US sentiment. The North Korean Pavilion showed video clips of the Mass Games and random shots of people working in factories and walking through a college campus. You could even buy North Korean stamps and memorabilia. On a light note, one of my friends bought an Expo passport (a small booklet where you get stamps verifying that you did, indeed, go to certain exhibits). She was denied a stamp at the South Korean Pavilion because of her previous visit to the North Korean exhibit.

The Iranian exhibit featured microscopes, pharmaceutical drugs, and modern technology that seemed to date from the '70s; Persian rugs were also being hawked on the second floor for US\$100,000.

2. What's notable about the Expo is not necessarily what was featured, but perhaps more interestingly what was absent. Absent were any groundbreaking technologies such as those that have characterized previous World Fairs (for example, the telephone in 1876 and the IMAX in 1970). Here is a list (compiled by the *People's Daily*) of [6 amazing technological achievements of the Shanghai Expo](#), highlighted by a wall that can absorb carbon emissions.

Absent also was any mention of religion. Turkey, perhaps trying to associate itself with Europe, mostly mentioned its ancient history and also its ties with Grecian culture. Israel and Iran, countries in which religion dominates domestic politics, had no reference in their exhibits to Judaism or Islam, respectively.



3. The American Pavilion. The first video segment inside the exhibit focused on how bad Americans are at speaking Chinese. Even the announcers couldn't speak correctly. It was funny when the pavilion volunteers, after showcasing their Chinese as if in a Chinese-speaking competition, asked the crowd

whether or not their Chinese was good. The majority of listeners responded, “很好” (very good), but one person in the back yelled, “不好!” (bad). I concurred.

The next video segment was simple; it emphasized what America stands for: freedom, liberty, and democracy, with video shots of New York and interracial couples walking through a park. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton also gave short speeches about (of course) how important US-China relations are. It was the only video, or even image, of world leaders I saw the entire day. The American exhibit ended with what is perhaps most important about America: corporations. You leave the place with a sense of bewilderment that Microsoft and General Electric get the last say on what America is about — but, then again, they did pay for the pavilion.

4. The China Pavilion. The wait is long, perhaps the longest at the Expo. Outside, there are figures like how many kilometers of highway China has built since 1978 and how many people have become urbanites since reform started. The tour starts with an introductory video, which is epic. It starts off with views of people on the North China Plain. They’re looking for something — I’m not sure what — but the video then skips over the majority of modern Chinese history. There’s no mention of the Qing dynasty or emperors, for example. They simply flash forward from an agricultural existence to the city of Shanghai, where workers put on their construction hats and begin the hard work of city-building with wide smiles on their face. So it seems that history has been abstracted not only out of time, but also out of space. The only thing that truly matters is the material progression of the nation and the people — not the chronology of time that usually defines the onward march of history. The last image is of a peaceful, clean Shanghai, a projection of a city that has not yet been achieved, and you leave feeling like something was missed.

In the rest of the pavilion there are windmills emphasizing China’s nascent environmentalism, children’s drawings of Shanghai’s modern city, and even a Disneylandesque ride taking you through figures of [dougongs](#) and shattered pictures of the Temple of Heaven — but throughout the entire exhibit, there is no mention of Mao Zedong, the Communist Party, or even Deng Xiaoping.

Photo by Michelle Jackson

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