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“An Oasis of Peace and Quietude”: The 1964/’65 World’s Fair China Pavilion

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By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham



The Unisphere

My grandfather took his job as family photographer seriously, and over the course of four decades he produced several huge boxes of slides that my mother has recently begun scanning and digitizing. Mixed in with the usual snapshots of weddings, birthday parties, and holiday gatherings are photos he took during a family trip to the 1964/’65 World’s Fair in New York.



New York State Exhibit

On other occasions he took dozens of pictures, but there are only seven slides from their day at the World's Fair ("It was *really* hot," my mother offered as a possible explanation for her father's uncharacteristic photographic reticence). He got two shots of the Fair's symbol, the Unisphere, and a couple of landscape photos, plus a blurry picture of the Thai pavilion. The final slide is this view of the Chinese (Republic of China, that is) pavilion, sitting beneath the Swiss Sky Ride:



Thanks to [this site](#), I was able to learn more about the exhibit, in the same words that my grandfather might have read in the "[1964 Pavilion Guide](#)":

This is the first time that such a building, in the best architectural style of the Chinese imperial palace, has been erected in the Western Hemisphere. Every piece of roof tile was handmade, and every ceiling panel hand painted in Taiwan, repository and defender of Chinese culture. Everything in this pavilion has a meaning, from the ceremonial arch guarding the grounds, to the intricately carved wood screen immediately inside the entrance. The latter, entitled "100 Birds Pay Tribute to Queen Phoenix," symbolizes visitors coming from all over the world to see the New York World's Fair.

Interestingly, in the 1964 guide, the author wrote that "The Chinese Pavilion hopes to offer an oasis of peace and quietude that is different from the myriad attractions of the Fair. The purpose is not to impress or dazzle, but to provide a change of pace, a place for reflection and quiet enjoyment of a mellow culture, a heritage of one of the world's oldest nations." By the following year, however, the tone of the guidebook had changed. [Visitors in 1965](#) were no longer encouraged to seek refuge in the pavilion, but instead urged to educate themselves about life in Taiwan:

Larger than life beauties, in a photo-mural from the "Miss China" pageant, reign over the exhibits from a raised palace room. Products are arranged to show how the Chinese dress (fabrics to fashion styles), what they consume (Chinese cuisine, canned food, table wines and tobacco), how they live (building materials to low-cost housing projects), and how they travel (sedan, motorcycle and bicycle). All objects shown are, of course, made in Taiwan, which enjoyed Asia's highest growth rate in the last decade.

In addition to this shift in focus from the history of Chinese culture to the modernity of Taiwan, the pavilion also added a restaurant for the 1965 season, offering "the standard Chinese dishes." No indication of what that meant, but it has piqued my curiosity; if anyone has knowledge of what was on the menu, please send me an e-mail ([thechinabeat\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:thechinabeat[at]gmail[dot]com)).

All photographs by William R. Thompson

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