



THE SHANGHAI EXPO

Defining the city of the 21st Century

By Professor Jean-Pierre Lehmann - April 2010

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Globalization and being a global actor can be quite challenging and unpredictable.

Today, in the 21st century the question still remains why it was Europe – that small corner of land on the Western end of the Eurasian continent – that began emerging as the global dominant power 600 years ago. The great global explorer Zheng He preceded Europe's explorers by several decades; he commanded a much bigger fleet, his travels were more far-reaching and his general navigational technology and know-how were second to none.

The first seaborne Portuguese explorations came later, but, as the CCTV series *The Rise of the Great Powers* demonstrated, the big difference is that there was a succession of explorers. The process once started was sustained. After early Portuguese explorers came the Spaniards, the Dutch, the British and the French. Hence while the name of, for example, Vasco da Gama tends to be widely known whereas the name of Zheng He is little known outside China. The reason lies in the fact that Vasco started something which continued on for centuries, while Zheng achieved a remarkable feat that was not repeated and therefore did not lead to anything.

Europe's ascendancy reached its apogee in the 19th century, following the French and Industrial Revolutions, whereby Britain and France especially came to dominate the world technologically, militarily, socially, politically and culturally. This phenomenon was highlighted, among other things, by the first World Expo ever held, in London in 1851 under the title: "Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations". This expo consecrated the new world of industry and the culmination of several decades of the industrial revolution.

While there were many great European cities in the 19th century – London, Berlin, Vienna, etc – it was Paris that gained the designation as the city of the 19th century. This renown was heralded by the holding of the World Expo in Paris in 1889, marking the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution, and in which was erected the Eiffel Tower, the universal symbol of Paris ever since. Paris was also the international city of the 19th century, spilling over into the 20th, as it attracted numerous artists, philosophers, architects, political thought leaders and of course financiers and merchants from throughout the world. Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai, Zhang Shenfu, Liu Qingyang, Zhao Shiyan, Chen Gongpei, Cai Hesen, Li Lisan, Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Guo Longzhen and, of course, Deng Xiaoping were among those who were attracted by the Parisian magnet and temporarily resided there.

Just as Europe began to be challenged in the early 20th century by the rise of American power, so Paris, though it retained its global luster for a few decades, came to be replaced by New York which emerged as the global city of the 20th century. Its World Expo in 1939/40 was obviously overshadowed by the coming war, though America's victory definitely confirmed it as the leading superpower. The 1964 New York World Expo – which I visited as I had a girlfriend at the time who worked as an official guide in the Spanish pavilion – allowed many countries and companies to pay homage to the city that represented the center of the US' power.

In the 1980s, as the Japanese economy was growing at a tremendous rate, as Japan's influence seemed to be spreading to the world, and as the great architect Kenzo Tange was leaving his impressive imprint in the construction of new buildings, it seemed that Tokyo might become the city of the 21st century. However, abruptly, in the 1990s, as the Japanese economy tanked, Japanese society in general and Tokyo in particular turned inward, thus reneging on the possibility of being a sequel to Paris and New York.

One of the major developments of the late 20th/early 21st centuries has been the resurgence of China as a leading global player and the renaissance of Shanghai as a global city. Shanghai stands to be the outstanding candidate as the city of the 21st century, inheriting the mantle from Paris and New York. To realize this ambition, however, China must learn from its own history, from the success of Paris and New York, and from the failure of Tokyo. A global city must exhibit hard power – in finance, commerce and business – but also in soft power: as a center of learning, of the arts and a source of global inspiration.

Having myself been visiting Shanghai for three decades, I am sure it can achieve this position. The Shanghai World Expo of 2010 may turn out to be the event that will consecrate this aspiration.

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