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Shanghai Expo
An international forum on the future of cities

Edited by Tim Winter
To Phil Mattravers
Quietly, gently determined
Contents

List of figures and tables xi
Contributors xiii
Acknowledgements xvi

1 A forum on the futures of cities 1
TIM WINTER

PART I
In context 23

2 Shanghai 2010, in a tradition of mega-events, nation-building and modernity 25
TIM WINTER

3 I Wish I Knew: comprehending China’s cultural reform through Shanghai Expo 44
HILARY HONGJIN HE

4 ‘Better City, Better Life’? Envisioning a sustainable Shanghai through the Expo 54
CAMERON MCAULIFFE

5 On Expo 2010’s hinterlands, ‘extrastatecraft’ and migrant workers 69
BRETT NEILSON

6 The ‘Economic Olympics’? Shanghai 2010 after Beijing 2008 83
DAVID ROWE
x  Contents

PART II
Encounter  

7  On display: the state of the world  101
   IEN ANG

8  Ordinary city, ordinary life: off the expo map  120
   WILLEM PALING

9  Cultural exotica: from the colonial to global in world’s fairs  137
   TIM WINTER

10  Culture, nation and technology: immersive media and the Saudi Arabia pavilion  155
    HART COHEN

11  Tracing the future: child’s play and the free fall of imagination  170
    SCOTT EAST

12  Video assemblages of Shanghai  187
    JUAN FRANCISCO SALAZAR

13  Afterword  193
    TONY BENNETT

   Bibliography  198
   Index  219

To see the documentary Shanghai Expo: City Above the Sea, Country Above the World accompanying this book, visit: http://shanghaexpobook.net/video
9 Cultural exotica

From the colonial to global in world’s fairs

Tim Winter

World’s fairs and expositions have long served as important sites of cultural display. From their earliest days, they have exhibited a wide array of material and non-material cultural forms, including architecture and archaeological objects, as well as a wide selection of arts and crafts, ranging from the so-called ‘fine’ to ‘craft’. Not surprisingly, culture has also been extensively performed through ‘human showcases’, to use Greenhalgh’s (1988/2000) term, with clothing (or absence thereof), dance forms and phenotypic features all being offered up for visual consumption by audiences. The history of these displays becomes particularly interesting when situated within the wider political economies of colonialism and postcolonialism. This chapter pursues such pathways by considering national culture and cultural nationalisms as palimpsests. For those countries previously under colonial rule, Shanghai revealed residual layers of colonialism or, more specifically, a distinct cultural continuity with colonial-era practices and ideas. To elucidate this, the chapter considers a number of contributory factors, both internal and external to the genre. In so doing, it asks questions about sovereignty, coloniality and the presence of auto-exoticism in today’s global economy.

Imperial connections

To return to the Great Exhibition of 1851, in both its scale and form the event provided an important template for what would become a distinct genre of display, classification and symbolic codification. It was also deeply infused with the encyclopedic paradigm of the mid nineteenth century, such that cultural display formed part of a wider manifesto of education and enlightenment. In an interior space covering 33 million cubic feet, displays were divided into four categories: manufacturers, machinery, raw materials and fine arts (see Greenhalgh 1988/2000: 12). This would prove to be a template adopted and modified by other international exhibitions held in Europe and elsewhere over the second half of the nineteenth century. As Greenhalgh notes: ‘The mix of the exhibits was extraordinary, ranging from classical sculpture to giant lumps of coal from a Nubian Court to wrought iron fire-places, from
steam engines to Indian miniatures, from rubber plants to stained glass windows’ (1988/2000: 12–13).

However, with its emphasis on industrialism and scientific prowess, in comparison with later events, the Great Exhibition’s display of cultural artefacts was modest. Moreover, those visual arts that were included, such as print media, were done so as much for their technological innovation as their artistic qualities (ibid.: 13). Four years later, Paris would offer a very different balance between technology and culture, seizing the opportunity to reinforce its (self-)image as Europe’s artistic centre by foregrounding the fine arts. Under the close instruction of Napoleon III, the fine arts were given particular importance in the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle, such that the event could be promoted as a marker of French national character. To this end, specific instructions were sent by letter to participating exhibitors:

> Considering that the improvement of manufactures is closely connected with that of fine arts; that however, all the exhibitions of industrial products which have been hitherto held, have admitted the works of artists in only very insufficient proportion; that it belongs to France, whose manufactures owe so much to the Fine Arts, to assign to them in the coming Universal Exhibition, the place which they merit.


From this point on, culture and technology would be juxtaposed in dozens of expos, providing the spectacle and spectacular in a zeitgeist of megalomania, as rivalries between organizers in France and Britain and later between France and the United States would stretch over decades. While the forty-three world’s fairs and expositions held in these three countries between 1851 and 1939 would be instrumental in the formation of the genre, events held in Asia, Latin America, Oceania and elsewhere in Europe also took inspiration from the template established in the 1851 and 1855 expos (see Findling and Pelle 2008).

As we saw in Chapter 2, in the discussion of the cultural politics of expos and world’s fairs, the bulk of critical scholarship has concentrated on Europe and the United States. In the story of Europe, Peter Hoffenberg’s 2001 volume, *An Empire on Display*, and Paul Greenhalgh’s *Ephemeral Vistas*, first published in 1988, remain canonical texts. In presenting a similar analytical voice, their shared aim is to reveal the ties between the exhibitionary complex that emerged in the mid nineteenth century and the prevailing ideologies of empire. Together, they point towards the subtle and complex ways exhibitions advanced the cultural–political matrices of colonialism and European nationalism. As Hoffenberg states:

> Exhibitions were at the heart of imperial and national social and commercial enterprises during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. They were spectacles of tangible fantasy, in which participants forged nations
and the Empire, both imaginary and material. Imperial, colonial, and national inventories were linked at the exhibitions by official tests and jury reports, consumption, tourism, and historical pageants. The power to organize, study, and compare this diversity strengthened the authority of commissioners and their states, often revealing tensions between and within the Empire’s political communities.

(2001: xv)

In their respective accounts, both authors emphasize how the capacity for exhibitions to represent, advance and reflect the values of empire had to be learnt. Greenhalgh, for example, notes that, while the planning of the Great Exhibition of 1851 involved the assemblage of ‘colonies, dominions and dependencies into a huge imperial display’ (1988/2000: 53), the desire to impress and enthral visitors with the wealth of acquired possessions created confusion. The decision to display colonial territories as a ‘treasure house’ of raw materials, arts and crafts, machinery and so forth meant that countries were exhibited as quantifiable resources rather than as culturally distinct entities. Not surprisingly, apart from a French display of Algiers, the Great Exhibition only displayed items from Britain and its dominions. But, with Britain taking an extensive collection to Paris in 1855, the convention of displaying the possessions of empire in rival countries quickly evolved. The Dutch, Portuguese and Belgians would all participate in this arena, both hosting expos and sending increasingly elaborate displays to their counterparts. Given such events were taking place at the height of European nation-building and state-crafting, part of the commitment to hosting a world’s fair was ensuring your own displays were more spectacular and elaborate than those of your guests. Such rivalry contributed to the introduction of architecture in the 1870s, as a marker of grandeur and (possessed) wealth, with the arrival of colonial palaces and separate buildings dedicated to larger dominions (ibid.: 56).

Andrea Roeber (2008) argues that the Exposition Universelle held in Paris in 1878 provided a watershed moment in this regard. Although the expo is largely remembered for its distinctive Palais de Trocadéro, its most significant legacy would be the inaugural use of culturally representative architecture. It was proposed that participating nations should create entrances to their displays in the court of the Palais d’Industrie. In an interesting parallel to Shanghai 2010, Roeber (2008: 61) notes the American pavilion was criticized for being too nondescript, and it was considered that the inconsistent facades of China and Siam contributed to an aesthetically disagreeable pastiche. Nonetheless, the so-called ‘Rue des Nations’ was an important innovation in the expo genre, marking an explicit transition from industry towards culture. The 1878 expo also extended the prominence given to the fine arts, with the Palais de Trocadéro hosting a retrospective of decorative and visual arts. As the century came to a close, the use of architecture to represent cultures and nations, both near and far, became a standard feature of the expo genre. In Paris 1889, extraordinary palaces were built for Algerian and Tunisian exhibits. Mexico
was represented through an ‘Aztec Palace’, and a structure for Ecuador took its inspiration from the Incas. Swift evocatively summarizes this panoply in stating the expo was ‘replete with an eclectic assortment of picturesque replicas of historic buildings from all over the world’ (2008: 104). The 1889 expo was also notable for the contrast it struck between historical ‘quaintness’ and metropolitan modernity: the Eiffel Tower, specially constructed for the event, exemplified the latter category. Unlike earlier structures built for world’s fairs, the tower had no function other than to impress and entertain.

In all its forms then, modern and traditional, architecture helped ensure the world’s fairs of the late nineteenth century were unparalleled in their spectacle. However, more significant to this discussion, it is through architecture – both in its design and layout – that we begin to see how the representation of cultures and nations was mediated through distinct ideological values. The scene of an Eiffel Tower – in itself a powerful demonstration of modernity and industrial might – towering over an array of replica structures inspired by tradition and history provided visitors with a clear depiction of the hierarchies of empire. More specifically, it is in such settings that we see tangible manifestations of European imperialism, a process that, according to Said (1993), only fully formed around 1880. Said used the term to point towards the practices, attitudes and values at the heart of colonialism. As architectural showcases, fairs at this time drew heavily on the rhetoric of imperialism, a language ‘whose imagery of growth, fertility, and expansion, whose teleological structure of property and identity, whose ideological discrimination between “us” and “them” had already matured elsewhere – in fiction, political science, racial theory, travel writing’ (Said 1978/2003: 128).

However, as Bennett reminds us, displays of culture in the nineteenth century should be read, not as mere reflections of power, but as complicit agents in its production and circulation. In his discussion of museums, Bennett (2004) reworks Said’s Foucauldian analysis towards governmentality to argue that the expertise and knowledge acquired in these cultural institutions did not just convey and reinforce existing forms of state power, but instead constituted the structures of power themselves. From this perspective, we see how museums, and by extension world’s fairs, were institutions of cultural display that deployed ‘specific mechanisms, techniques and technologies for shaping thought, feelings, perceptions and behaviour’ (2004: 5). As Bennett points out elsewhere, as grand exhibitions and fairs evolved in the late nineteenth century, the rhetoric of progress shifted away from machinery and the stages of industrialization to a hierarchical ordering of races and nations. In architectural terms, this was achieved through design and spatial segregation, and, by the end of the century, the classification of pavilions in US fairs into racial groups was common practice. While pavilion zones might be classified along the lines of Anglo-Saxon, American, Latin, Oriental and Germanic, displays of aboriginal and black populations were typically subsumed into the narratives of conquered territories (Bennett 1994: 145–6). In essence then, the design, classification and layout of architectural structures formed as important
rhetorical mechanisms for advancing a teleological, racist vision of human progress to mass audiences.

Of course, such practices and values extended far beyond the realm of replica architecture. World’s fairs served as the ideal media for staging the ‘primitive’ via live performances and the display of the material accoutrements of ‘exotic’ peoples. In 1889, the Palais de Trocadéro was largely given over to ethnographic exhibits, housing an extensive collection of aboriginal, African, South Pacific and pre-Columbian artefacts. Indeed, the building would come to be synonymous with non-Western art until its demolition in 1937. To lend displays an aura of authenticity, ‘native villages’ were also constructed, wherein shipped-in performers would perform customary dances, make handicrafts and act out daily ‘traditions’ of rural life, seemingly drawn from another age (see Swift 2008: 104). Indeed, it was in one such village that Paul Gauguin first met his Tahitian ‘noble savages’. For the more adventurous visitor, rickshaws pulled by Indochinese men could be taken around the site. Creating a mild level of scandal, the 1889 expo also introduced belly dancing as entertainment along the ‘Rue de Caire’. For Zeynep Çelik, the belly dance took on particular importance as a metonym for the orientalist, patriarchal fantasies that constituted Europe’s vision of the Islamic world. As she states, ‘the ethnographic displays at the exhibitions recontextualized an erotic fascination with Muslim women, in a spectacle that linked imperial power, legitimate edification, and libidinal motivation’ (Çelik and Kinney 1990: 43). It also provided the theatrical centrepiece of an Islamic mise-en-scène incorporating replicas of mosques, markets and baths, all of which were populated with ‘natives’ dressed in costumes. Proximity, familiarity and difference were thus made to work in harmony in the geocultural ordering of the world that was the fair.

In both Britain and France, this was a narrative that was continually sustained through the depiction of a colonial Asia. In France, the growth of the exposition genre in the late nineteenth century coincided with its expansion into Indochina. By weav[ing] together the accounts of missionaries, botanists, anthropologists and archaeologists, this part of South East Asia became a ‘phantasmatic assemblage’, to use Panivong Norindr’s term (1996: 1). Tracing this process through the media of architecture, film and literature, Norindr argues that France’s sense of colonial edification relied heavily upon ‘imaginary scaffoldings on which Indochina as a fictional place, a lieu de mémoire, and a vision of an exotic utopia were erected and against which the fantasies of artists, writers, filmmakers, architects, political figures and others emerged’ (1996: 3). The Musée Guimet, with its displays of archaeological and temple artefacts, provided an important forum from the 1880s onwards for transmitting such ideas to the Parisian public. But it was via the extravagance of world’s fairs that France exhibited Indochina most lavishly to impress its colonial prowess on its rival powers and garner popular support domestically. The ‘ancient kingdom’ of Angkor (801–1432 CE) – embodied through reproductions of its highly elaborate temple architecture – emerged as a metonym
for the region, its people and its culture. In 1889, the first replica of Angkorean architecture appeared, with a scaled-down version of a central sanctum being one of the centrepieces of the Indochina pavilion. The depiction of bas-relief carvings, inscriptions and temple dance performances all tangibly demonstrated the advances in French archaeological and ethnographic scholarship being made at the time. As this scholarship evolved, so too would the trajectories of how Angkor was treated as an object of display. The reproduction of an Angkorean grotto in Paris in 1900, together with a 1906 Bayon tower and life-size Angkorean pavilion in Marseilles in 1922, became the centrepiece of exhibits that categorized Cambodian material culture into a linear historical narrative constructed in territorial and national terms. The ultimate expression of these ideas and beliefs came in 1931 with the *Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris*. Arguably the most extravagant and elaborate exposition to date, the show marked the fullest expression of imperial power, with France’s colonial territories refined, admired and displayed as secular spectacle through a process Anderson has described as a ‘logoisation’ of culture (see Anderson 1991: 182). Exhibition planners included a village for showcasing people and possessions collected from the territories of Algeria, Cochinchina, French Guyana, Laos and Senegal, among others. For Norindr, the choice of Angkor as the centrepiece of the show lay in its ability simultaneously to ‘embody the exotic most vividly’ and capture the ideals of ‘*la France des cinq continents*’ (1995: 47). Costing 12.5 million francs, the three-quarter-size replica of Angkor Wat was adorned with detailed reproductions of sculptures and bas-relief carvings along its facades.

Hoffenberg traces similar processes for British displays of India. Beginning with the 30,000 square foot Indian court at Crystal Palace in 1851, monumental gateways, tents and carved screens provided the backdrop for increasingly elaborate displays containing arts and craft works, including inlaid woodwork, silks, carpets, pottery and jewellery. Seen together and along with various ethnographic models these enabled ‘visitors to imagine and envision a timeless India of fantasy and tradition’ (Hoffenberg 2001: 149). Of particular note in this regard was the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886. India, the ‘jewel of the empire’, occupied nearly one-third of the overall exhibit space, with a display five times larger than any previous exhibition (see Prasch 2008: 90). The showcase was an Indian palace featuring a Durbar Hall and a theatrical architectural entranceway, the Gwalior Gate. As Prasch explains, both the hall and gate were the result of concepts drawn up by Englishmen and implemented by Indian craftsmen. Neither accurately reproduced any existing structures found in the subcontinent, but instead set out to showcase a range of stone-carving techniques with designs ‘typical’ of their genre. Prasch thus concludes: ‘The “India” offered at South Kensington was an increasingly hybrid beast, the product of British imperial management over the production of “traditional” Indian arts and crafts’ (2008: 90).

Hoffenberg offers a similar critique. He argues that, although such displays essentially appealed to a glorious cultural past, they did not so much recreate
as reconstruct, and in ways that naturalized a series of relationships that
together constituted an Anglo-India. The particular dynamics by which this
process continued to evolve is something I shall return to shortly. At this point,
however, it is important to note how such cultural representations of India
formed part of a much wider categorization of Britain’s colonial territories.
America, Australia and New Zealand, for example, were notable for being
captured via markedly different narratives, whereby an elision of their
indigenous pasts facilitated a depiction of them as new world, frontier
territories. Indeed, where India was represented through artisans and traditional
craftsmen, Australia would be captured through horticulture and miners.
Although both might be presented and juxtaposed as ‘industries’ of sorts, the
former very much conveyed the idea of a premodern, pre-industrial nation,
with the latter being the frontier of an industrial age in need of raw materials.
Hoffenberg (2001) argues that these national constructions were made to work
in complementarity, advancing the core–periphery hierarchies of empire in
economic, cultural and political terms. In other words, for both Britain and
France, exhibitions played a vital role in delineating the peoples and nations
of empire into particular ‘social categories’ and communicating such ideas to
mass audiences, both at home and overseas.¹

World War II put an end to the hosting of universal expositions in Europe
and elsewhere. By the time the first post-war expo (Brussels 1958) took place,
an era of European colonial rule was coming to an end, and yet, for Stanard
(2005) and Stanard et al. (2005), in spite of the collapse of the hegemony of
Europe, imperialist attitudes towards colonial and former colonial territories
remained evident. Stanard’s argument centres on the representation of the
Congo, a country that would gain its independence two years after the Brussels
expo. As previously, African culture was presented as backward and primitive,
in part through its juxtaposition with surrounding futuristic architecture such
as the ‘Atomium’. As Stanard states:

The village indigène was located virtually in the shadows of the literally
and figuratively super-modern Atomium and its straw huts and dirt ground
contrasted severely with the surrounding modern buildings constructed of
glass, metal and concrete. Congo section organizers placed a statue by
Albert Dupagne of a nude African couple at the entrance of the Palais du
Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi. Viewing photographs taken of the
statue, again with the Atomium in the background, the contrast between
primitiveness and modernity is hard to miss.

(2005: 274)

This village indigène, he suggests, perpetuated the expo tradition of
dehumanizing and humiliating colonial subjects by putting humans at the
mercy of the white gaze. Stanard thus concludes that the representation of the
Congo was not only ‘a shocking throwback years after the defeat of biological
racism’ (ibid.: 282), but also failed to address the wrongdoings of colonial rule.
Perhaps most strikingly, the bust of Leopold II at the entrance to the Palais du Congo honoured his reign, effacing a brutal history of millions of deaths and mutilations.

Hoffenberg’s (2001) perspective on such processes is less critical. In contrast to the outright critique of Miller, Stanard and others, Hoffenberg suggests we read the emergent ideologies of world’s fairs in terms of negotiation, moments of uncertainty, dissent and consensus, wherein scholars and bureaucrats from all parts of empire contributed to and shaped ideas. Indeed, much of his book _An Empire on Display_ is concerned with addressing how, in expos held in Britain, Australia and India, particular narratives and discourses were advanced through a network of imperial scholars and cultural bureaucrats. Accordingly, he states:

Exhibitions not only circulated objects and information, but also created and sustained communities of experts, many of whom were both imperial and national. . . . Australian experts were linked with other Australians, but also with their complements overseas in Britain and India. Contact at the shows and the constant exchanges of displays between the exhibitions provided the shared experiences necessary for this sense of communal identity and continuity, generated at the nexus of political, social, and cultural boundaries.

(2001: 31)

Crucially, it’s an analysis that extensively details the agency of individuals from across the British Commonwealth in order to refute the idea that an imperialist exhibitionary complex was merely imposed on the passive, unwitting subjects of empire. Discussing the years spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he argues:

The activities of imperial and colonial exhibition experts point to the interactive and dynamic process by which such knowledge was produced; apparent representations of imperial power also established the foundation for local, colonial authorities. Increasingly, the participation of exhibition commissioners from the colonial periphery made imperial culture a more collaborative and less hegemonic practice. The exhibitions created early nationalist intellectual communities and public cultures, as well as the cultural sinews of the British Empire. The ways in which English, Australian, South Asian, and Anglo-Indian commissioners created and diffused knowledge asserted both imperialism and colonial nationalism at and after the shows.

(2008: 62)

As Hoffenberg suggests here, exhibitions became important arenas for colonial territories seeking to assert a sense of national cohesion and identity, both domestically and on the international stage. Indeed, if we recall Benedict
Anderson’s (1991) analysis of this period as a time when many countries around the world sought legitimacy and belonging in the modern community of nations, we can see why rivalries emerged as nations fought for the most prestigious spots for their pavilions and built larger, more elaborate structures. Although Europe lost its appetite for world’s fairs and expos after Brussels 1958, the genre would continue to flourish elsewhere, most notably in North America and Japan. It is a geographical departure that has been accompanied by a shift in the scholarship on world’s fairs. In the post-war, postcolonial decades of the twentieth century, much less attention has been given to the representation of culture, nations and peoples at these events, or how they advanced ideologies or states of hegemony. One notable exception is Penny Harvey’s (1995) analysis of Expo ’92, held in Seville. Harvey pays particular attention to the role of technology in the production of culture as national brand. Her account insightfully details the use of information technologies such as electronic displays as a pivotal factor in forging a hierarchy of nations. Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway, she argues that, unlike the technology displays of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these electronic technologies do not categorize or impart knowledge via object lessons; rather, they produce sensations by fragmenting and reassembling culture as a series of visual collages (1995: 101–104). With the power of the nation conveyed in effective terms, this technoculture creates a whole new realm of semiotics to which only the ‘more advanced’ countries have access. Those still displaying the material culture of handicrafts, clothing and so forth, as was the case in many African and Asian pavilions, remain grounded in a world defined by literal representation and a stability of cultural production and reproduction.

Vestigial cultures

Intriguingly, Harvey’s account and analysis of Expo ’92 remains remarkably informative for interpreting the cultural dynamics of Shanghai 2010. However, rather than merely rehearse her observations, I wish to incorporate them into a wider discussion: one that traces deeper historical connections and, in so doing, raises questions about enduring colonialities and the implications of cultural ‘imagineering’. In a parallel to Expo ’92, Shanghai Expo was characterized by what Harvey referred to as ‘a division of labour’ between nations, with some looking backwards to the past and others projecting themselves and their audiences into the future. Given the discussion above, the focus here is on those that are past-oriented in their national brand, and, once again, pavilion architecture offers some illuminating pointers.

India, for example, welcomed visitors with a language of harmony between man and nature, past and present. With a strong emphasis on the country’s cultural heritage, the Indian pavilion also took design inspiration from premodern religious architecture. The focal point was a large bamboo dome, designed to be reminiscent of the famous Sanchi Stupa, built by Ashoka Maurya (273–236 BCE). Intended as a ‘showcase for the wisdom of ancient
Indians’, the 35-metrediameter dome was constructed from thirty-six bamboo ribs, with the exterior lined with grass (Figure 9.1). Throughout India, the dome is a recurrent motif in religious architecture and a common feature across Hindu and Jain temples, Muslim mosques and Sikh gurdwaras, as well as sacred Buddhist sites. Not surprisingly then, in Shanghai, the dome was depicted as an icon of ‘unity in diversity’ for a country defined by real religious and cultural diversity (see India at Expo 2010). The parallels with the London international exhibitions of 1871–4 and the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition are striking. One of the centrepieces of the 1871–4 exhibitions was a reproduction of the Eastern Gateway of the Sanchi Stupa. Through photography and sketches, the original structure, located in central India as it is today, was recast as a full size replica in England. Exhibited in the 1870s, the architecture of Sanchi was primarily admired as an exemplary of Indian art and architecture, whereas, in 2010, its architecture and ornament were elevated to notions of harmony, happiness and enlightenment. In Hoffenberg’s account of the 1886 exhibition, we also hear about structures built from bamboo covered with thatch and, as a parallel to the description of the Stupa of Shanghai, a Gwalior Gate designed to ‘represent typical structures in feudal India’ (2001: 160). The continuity extends inside through the privileging of ‘traditional’, pre-industrial culture, as depicted through reconstructed bazaars displaying carpets, silks, jewellery, woodcarving and so forth. Interestingly, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, specific geographies and cultural contexts lend authenticity to artisanship. In 1886, Punjab

Figure 9.1 India pavilion

Source: Tim Winter
and Bengali culture were celebrated, whereas, in 2010, it would be Kashmir and Jaipur (Rajasthan). The subtheme of ‘harmony’ in 2010 also meant that culture, in the form of regional dance performances and cuisines, was instrumentally coded to service a rhetoric of national unity through diversity.

An analysis of Cambodia’s pavilion at Shanghai Expo reveals similar historical parallels. As Figure 9.2 illustrates, the narrative of the nation is primarily oriented around the ancient temples of Angkor. In the hierarchy of pavilion design at Shanghai, Cambodia sat in the middle category: having its own building, but using the standard box-shaped container supplied by the organizers. To customize this structure, the Cambodian designers lined the exterior with large-scale images of Angkorean architecture. On entry to the pavilion, visitors were encouraged to ‘travel back in time’ as they passed under a plaster reproduction of a corbel arch reminiscent of the Bayon temple and they entered into a room containing a miniature of Angkor Wat and a replica of a tree-covered gallery from the Ta Prohm temple. It is a combination that has particular pertinence, as these three elements – beatific faces, majestic towers and an encroaching jungle – were consistently reproduced and circulated in a French colonial imaginary of Indochine – a landscape littered with the mysterious, romantic ruins of lost civilizations. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, the notion of a jungle-covered ruin was a semiotic reading that proved highly expedient in advancing the goals of European empire (Winter 2007). The framing of Angkor as a dormant relic of a once glorious,

Figure 9.2 Angkorean archway, Cambodia pavilion
Source: Tim Winter
but dead, ancient civilization solidified with the supposed ‘discovery’ of the
temple complex by the traveling botanist Henri Mouhot in 1860. The romance
of civilization decline, followed by quiescence and re-awakening facilitated
by an account of loss and discovery was retained through the decision to
preserve two of Angkor’s temples, Ta Prohm and Preah Khan, as partial ruins.
A conservation strategy of freezing these sites in the jungle-covered condition
at the time of their ‘rediscovery’ as jungle-covered ruins effectively effaced
histories of ongoing inhabitation and intra-regional pilgrimage that spanned
centuries. In the cultural–political dyad of empire, it was a narrative that gave
legitimacy to the interventions of French scholars and bureaucrats. In looking
at the political economies of conservation at Angkor today, I have argued that
a paradigm of world heritage in combination with international tourism sustains
these Eurocentric readings of the site and Cambodian history. Crucially, it is
a narrative that the royal government of Cambodia is at once forced into and
yet complicit in upholding.

Not far from the Cambodia pavilion, one of the expo’s more architecturally
distinct pavilions, Thailand, is particularly intriguing here. At a time when
much of Indochina (today’s South East Asia) was under European colonial
control, Siam successfully maintained its political sovereignty. Nonetheless,
and as scholars such as Craig Reynolds (2006) and Tongchai Winichakul
(1994) have extensively illustrated, European culture and state-crafting played
a heavy hand in shaping modernization and the country’s emergent nationalism
in the nineteenth century. In Shanghai, we once again see strong parallels
between the paraphernalia of Thailand’s cultural nationalism and that of India
and Cambodia. Various elements of the pavilion’s architecture – both structural
and ornamental – were revealing in this regard. As part of a symbolically
laden design, the roof featured five tiers in the shape of inverted rectangular
bells and as such was ‘designed according to age-old customs ... as a mani-
ifestation of homage to the Buddha and/or various deities’ (Thailand Pavilion
2010: para. 1; see Figure 9.3). This traditional ‘Thai-style’ multi-tiered
roof was featured across the pavilion. Upon entry, visitors passed under the
main entrance gate, a feature that emulated the ‘Bunthalaeng-styled gate of
Bangkok’s famed Marble Temple ... an ancient architectural statement that
became popular during the peak of the prosperous Ayudhya Period’. Pavilion
designers also stated that the ‘elegance of the pavilion’s main gate is further
enhanced with the addition of many components of traditional Thai decorative
finery’ (ibid.: para. 6). As Figure 9.4 shows, to the right of this stood a
reproduction of a ‘Sala’, a structure that, ‘built to provide relaxing seating by
the water, typifies the close bond between Thai people and their waterways’.
Crucially, it is in such descriptions that we begin to see how the pavilion
attempts to convey not just a national identity, but also the sense of a national
character as found in its people. This is more clearly seen in its mascot ‘Tai’
(see Figure 9.5), whose design is described as:

Inspired by mythical giant Indrajit, a traditional iconic figure with a fierce
gaze who stands sentinel at temple entrances. The world expo version,
Figure 9.3 Multi-tiered roof, Thailand pavilion
Source: Tim Winter

Figure 9.4 Sala, Thailand pavilion
Source: Tim Winter
Figure 9.5 ‘Tai’, official mascot, Thailand pavilion
Source: Tim Winter

However, is a cute child-giant who beams friendliness, cheerfulness with an air of courtesy, that is characteristic of the Thai people... his big round eyes mirror kindness and compassion, the moral qualities of a happy Thai.

(Thailand Pavilion 2010: para. 3)

This idea of the pavilion embodying a set of traditional, essential characteristics of Thai culture was also carried through into the interiors. It was a concept that directly reinvoked the orientalist tropes of a European colonial era: a morally pure, child-like people, at one with nature.

Heritage tourism colonialities

In designing their exhibits, countries such as Thailand and Cambodia were mindful of the economic potential of tourism and the importance of signalling a strong national brand. For a number of Asian countries, particularly the least developed, inbound tourism has become a major component of their national economies. In the case of Cambodia, as peace and stability returned in the early 1990s after an era of conflict and genocide, the country witnessed a growth in tourism unparalleled anywhere else in recent history. Angkor, its premier attraction, started from a figure of 9,000 visitors in 1993 and surged past the million mark fewer than ten years later. In the 2000s, with this growth
continuing, a distinct change in the nature of the inbound tourism occurred. Where previously the country’s arrival statistics had been dominated by the nations of France, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, from 2000 onwards there was a dramatic shift towards Asia. In a few short years, the key source markets would become Taiwan, China, Thailand and, most dramatically, Korea. From around 2007 onwards, more than 70 per cent of tourist arrivals were from within the Asia region. Its neighbour to the north, Laos, witnessed an almost identical statistical shift. Both countries expect this intra-regional mobility to remain a long-term pattern, primarily because of a rapidly rising outbound Chinese market. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), China is expected to create around 100 million outbound tourists by around 2025 (Winter et al. 2009). This figure is even more remarkable considering the Chinese were rarely granted permission to travel overseas up until the late 1990s. In such a context, Shanghai Expo provided a uniquely important opportunity for countries to entice a vast audience of future travellers. The desire to host up to 50,000 visitors a day was pivotal in shaping both the concept and layout of pavilions, an issue taken up elsewhere in this volume. Beyond the logistics of visitor management however, tourism played an instrumental role in defining how countries such as Cambodia presented themselves and responded to the theme of ‘Better city, better life’.

Tourism is an industry founded on difference. Not only is the desire to travel across borders typically predicated on the possibility of experiencing difference, but countries also have to persuade why they are worthy of attention in comparison with their regional counterparts. From the earliest days of leisure travel, one of the easiest ways for countries to proclaim difference has been through their cultural pasts. In this regard, tourists have been enticed not just to travel across space, but through time as well. Indeed, in the arena of international tourism, the past has become a repository of uniqueness, and of the aesthetically and experientially appealing. As David Lowenthal (1986) so succinctly put it, we need to see ‘the past as a foreign country’. But, more specifically, it has been through such space–time travel that notions of ‘the exotic’ emerge. Although this has long been the case – as we have seen above in the ways India and Cambodia were framed as ‘exotic’ in the contexts of colonialism – today, the centrality of tourism to the national economies of many developing countries means such cultural representations endure. In the highly competitive arena of today’s global tourism industry, the most ‘valuable’ asset many developing countries have for attracting their guests is their ‘rich’ cultural pasts or sites of natural beauty.

The case of India further illustrates this point. In addition to the central bamboo dome noted earlier, many of the static exhibits focused on the traditional, whether it be music and its instruments, performance arts and their costumes, or home furnishings and their technologies of manufacture. The pavilion’s central courtyard was also dominated by a performance space and a series of shops selling handicrafts. Together, these and various other pavilions in Shanghai illustrated how a discursive framework of heritage gave vitality
and validity to a wide, yet remarkably familiar, range of cultural nationalisms. By embracing heritage, an arena of public culture typically perceived as benign and humanitarian in its ethos, these expressions of identity were able to connect with the globally roaming (albeit increasingly nebulous) ideas of sustainability and harmony, both of which lie at the heart of a language of safeguarding tradition and inherited pasts. Of course, the very real subtext to all this remained tourism and the desire of nations to market themselves as distinctive destinations.

However, a closer examination of this heritage discourse reveals the ways in which, in certain cases, it perpetuates the narratives and tropes characteristic of an age of European empire. Through its inherent temporalities, heritage in the twenty-first century creates a chronological ordering of global culture. Those nations that primarily rely on their pasts both position themselves in relation to, and are positioned by, the other of industrialized modernity. In other words, a cultural nationalism principally oriented around the notion of heritage places a country in the less ‘modern’ category in the hierarchy of nations today. More specifically, the examples of Cambodia, India and Thailand all illustrate how heritage becomes a language through which the nation is re/presented in veritable, yet reductive, terms. When architecture, mascots, displays of material culture and live performances ‘that typify’ are made to stand as literal metonyms of a country, culture, people and history, absolutist essentialisms inevitably appear. The desire to claim heritage as inalienable, as seen through associations of cultural pasts as distinctly ‘Thai style’ or ‘uniquely Indian’, also serves to reproduce and (re)create reductive, culturally determinist projections of a nation and its people.

However, it is also important to consider how factors internal to the genre itself retain the vestiges of empire and colonialism. Two interrelated issues are pertinent here. First, the format of world’s fairs and expos is now well established. As noted earlier, there is a remarkable continuity between events over decades, both in terms of content and structure. Pivotal to this is the BIE, which, through expertise, consultation and documentation, provides a template for each host city. But more apropos to this discussion is the role played by a select number of ‘cultural agents’, to recall Hoffenberg’s term, who move between expos. Continuing a tradition that began in the late nineteenth century, events such as Shanghai relied upon an established international network of designers, architects and consultants in order to create much of the content. It is a network that provides world’s fairs with a vital ‘institutional memory’ as the genre moves around the world, event by event. In the design and concept development of pavilions, experience and personal connections are critical to the securing of tenders, commissions and contracts. And, where experienced, creative individuals highly familiar with a well-honed genre format move between events, it is of little surprise to find that particular discourses and narrative representations solidify and continually reappear.
Conclusion

As we have seen over the course of this chapter, from their earliest days, world’s fairs and expos have deployed a wide array of material culture, including architecture, archaeological objects, craft works and so forth. With the fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries firmly embedded in the tropes of Orientalism and the ‘imperial eyes’ of empire, notions of the primitive, backward and exotic pervaded expos in both Europe and the United States. Grand exhibitions served as important mechanisms in the cultural–political dyad of empire and territorial occupation, whereby people and their cultures were presented as inferior to, and antecedents of, a modern and civilized European Métropole or white America. This chapter has argued that these histories were vestigial in the production of culture at Shanghai. As with other recent expos held around the world, Shanghai 2010 relied upon a division of labour between nations, with some projecting present-futures and others concentrating on present-pasts.

Given that world’s fairs and expos reflect the geopolitical dynamics within which they take place, it has been highlighted why the presentation of self and other through culture remains a politically infused process worthy of critical attention. Accordingly, the chapter has considered cultural nationalism at Shanghai Expo as palimpsests, wherein earlier ‘inscriptions’ remain part of the ‘text’ in the crafting of identities. It is evident that traces of the past continue to constitute the present, such that there is a postcolonial persistence of former colonial ideas and practices. Shanghai Expo thus brings into sharp focus some of the ways in which, and reasons why, social and cultural continuities continue to envelop nationalisms that are more readily associated with ideas of rupture and political discontinuity. In tracing an exhibitionary genealogy for Shanghai, we have also seen how cultural nationalisms are continually formed through participation on the global stage. In much the same way as they were in the nineteenth century, hierarchies and oppositions appear to be reconciled in the rhetoric of ‘international community’ or ‘family of nations’. Today, however, cultural industries such as heritage and tourism, with all their connotations of sustainability and nature–culture harmonies, are the arenas through which the exotic and traditional continue to be mobilized. But, where the primitive and exotic were once offered as the ‘other’ of progress and modernity in the geographies of empire, today they are self-ascribed. However, although on the one hand auto-exoticism speaks of the retention of a hierarchical ordering of cultures and nations, it also needs to be seen in terms of the agency and sovereignty it affords and authorizes. It is not only cultural continuity we see here, but a continuation of the types of agency highlighted by Hoffenberg that come from a spirit of participation. In this regard, Shanghai 2010 tells us much about contemporary globalization, its historical fashioning and the complex ways in which the palimpsests of cultural nationalisms continue to reveal their layers as they reach into new spaces of expression.
Notes

1. See Hoffenberg (2001: 28) for more detailed discussion of these ‘social categories’.
2. To cite their pavilion concept description: ‘The civilization of India is one of the oldest ones in the world, with a kaleidoscopic variety and rich cultural heritage, spanning more than 5,000 unique assimilations of various cultures and heritage’ (*India at Expo* 2010: para. 3).
3. Although it included a skin of concrete for structural integrity, it is noteworthy that this was concealed, ensuring visitors looked up at a ceiling and roof made from more ‘traditional’, ‘natural’ materials.
4. Hoffenberg (2001: 153) cites journalistic reports of the exhibit, stating, ‘It captivated English and Anglo-Indian officials alike as “one of the most remarkable” examples of “Buddhist architecture – the oldest type of Indian art known”.’
5. The official website for the India pavilion states: ‘The essence of the design approach at Sanchi is harmony with the environment and all living things, expounding harmonious living as a way of life and a core philosophy to happiness and enlightenment’ (*India at Expo* 2010: para. 15).
6. Hoffenberg (2001: 160) describes how artisans and their crafts were used to convey ‘the magical Punjab filled with village-communities and princely leaders, considered by many to be the true “India”, or a traditionalist space within the modern cities of Bengal’.
7. In a similar vein, the pavilion’s logo, ‘the Kanok’, is described as ‘a basic motif in traditional Thai graphic design’ made up of a mosaic of squares that represent[s] the side-by-side harmony of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds who share the Thai way of life today. The vertices of the Kanok, all pointing one way, signify the unity of the people and the commitment to move the country forward in the same direction. (*Thailand Pavilion* 2010: para. 1)
8. Strong parallels could be seen in a number of Middle Eastern countries, such as Palestine, Iraq and, most notably, Afghanistan. Unfortunately, given limitations of space, these examples have not been discussed here.