

SHANGHAI 2010: TOWARDS A GREENER CHINA?

BEIJING TO SHANGHAI

From 2001 to 2008, the Chinese government made the Olympics the foremost national project, sparing no effort to make them a success. And to its satisfaction, the Games took place without serious mishaps. In addition, the large number of gold medals won by Chinese athletes and the increased international prestige seemed to justify its huge investment of over US \$44.7 billion to stage the Games. Shanghai is already gearing up to host the World Expo 2010 and promising to make it the largest fair of its kind ever, expecting to draw 70 million visitors. With the Expo theme—“Better City-Better Life”—the city claims it is investing 40 billion *yuan* (US \$4.9 billion) from 2006 through 2008 to improve its environment. The Chinese structures at the Expo site will emphasize environmentally friendly green design.

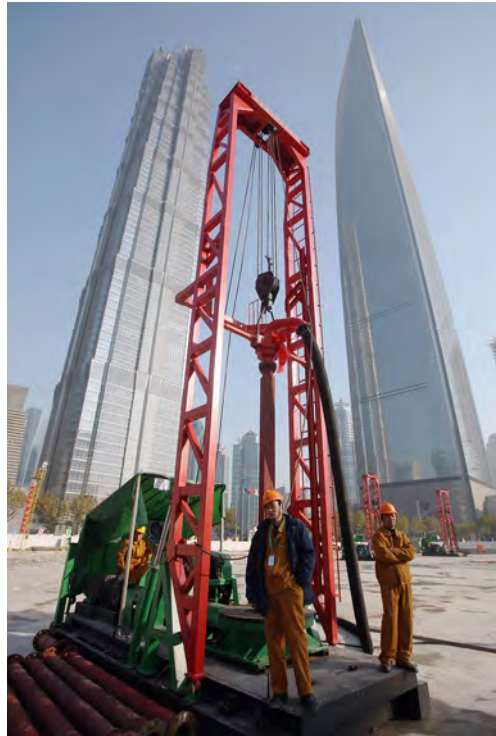
Shanghai is a city of more than 13 million people (20 million in its extended metropolitan area) with a significant industrial sector, in machinery, textiles and shipbuilding, all of which depend heavily on coal for fuel. For at least a decade now, the city has been experiencing a construction boom, with thousands of skyscrapers rising out of the ruins of the old city. The dust in the air is thickened by millions of vehicles traveling on narrow streets and newly built super highways. Over the years, every time I came back to the city, I saw more and more people coughing and spitting on the street. This unpleasant behavior is undoubtedly due to physical irritation from increasing air pollution, although the Shanghaiese

By Peter Kwong

prefer to blame it on the uncivilized out-of-town provincials (*waidiren* [外地人]) who have migrated to the city.

While many people in Shanghai believe the city is one of the least polluted among China’s major cities—the locals certainly boast that it compares favorably to Beijing—Shanghai has been ranked 71st in a list of the 72 most “green and livable” major cities in the world, just ahead of Beijing.¹ However, in Shanghai, you don’t need to read its PM10 levels to feel the pollution.² Just after a month spent in the city, I have counted only three or four clear and sunny days. The rest of the time, the city has been shrouded in a depressing low-lying gray haze. Only on rare occasions can one make out the odd

shapes of the city’s trademark giant skyscrapers, the popsicle Orient Pearl Tower and the bottle-opener World Financial Building (the third tallest building in the world), which lie in the new district of Pudong across the Huangpu River from the old city. Most visitors from the United States start complaining of sore throats and respiratory problems only a few days upon arrival.



Laborers wait to drill the ground during the ground-breaking ceremony for the Shanghai Tower in Shanghai’s Lujiazui financial district on November 29, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

“LEARN FROM BEIJING’S SUCCESS”

Cleaning up the environment, of course, had been the avowed goal of Beijing’s Olympics organizers, who tried to bring clean air to the choked city for the duration of the Games to

appease health concerns of the attending foreign athletes. Beijing officials took the extraordinary measures of shutting down factories in and around the city and

taking one million vehicles off the city's roads by using alternate day driving rules. The skies in Beijing finally did turn blue just in time for the Olympic Games. But the city abandoned all restrictions after the Games. The factories resumed normal operation, once again spewing fumes and carbon dioxide into the air. The Beijing government also decided not to keep the alternate day car-driving ban, because continuation of restrictive policies on private cars would face many challenges, according to a *Beijing News* editorial, especially from car owners reluctant to give up their freedom to drive.

Instead, city planners' proposed solution to the pollution problem is construction of a more extensive underground subway system. Critics say that any system will be ineffectual, given that 1,000 new cars are added to Chinese roads each day. By all accounts, Beijing residents are experiencing the same level of air pollution as before the Games. And yet, ironically, banners prominently hung in Shanghai's public places urge its residents to "learn from Beijing's success in organizing the Olympic Games to make Shanghai Expo a success."

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As in Beijing, Shanghai's residents are not likely to give up their freedom to drive, despite horrendous traffic jams created by millions of cars during rush hour, made worse by millions of scooters and motorcycles that clog side roads and pedestrian walkways, adding tons of additional fumes from their exhaust. Automobile commercials are everywhere, promoting the desire for car

ownership. Audi and Mercedes showrooms are located on the most fashionable downtown blocks, with Ferrari and Maserati dealerships attracting the most attention. To further heighten Shanghai's yearning for cars, the

city started hosting Formula One Chinese Grand Prix races at the US \$450 million Shanghai International Circuit race-track, designed by the internationally well-known racing circuit designer and auto racer Hermann Tilke and completed in 2004.

To make sure Shanghai's image is not overshadowed by Beijing's, the city

leaders are making frantic efforts to erect glitzy high-rises and showy infrastructure projects utilizing the latest technology, including extending the German-designed high-speed magnetic levitation (maglev) rail line beyond its current Longyang Road Station, Pudong-Pudong International Airport route to reach the World Expo site.

And most likely Shanghai will do exactly what Beijing did: after wasting enormous amounts of money and energy, abandon it all after the Expo as the country moves on to another national project.

In a rare act of opposition, Shanghai residents defied the government ban on public demonstrations to protest near the planned extension of the maglev line, because its use of powerful magnets to propel the trains could be harmful to people's health. The protests forced city officials to withdraw the plan. This setback notwithstanding, Shanghai officials seem fixated on projects aimed to impress, such as repairing and repainting facades of old buildings in areas the tourists are most likely to visit, rather than on undertakings that would really make the city better by correcting pollu-



A laborer works on the scaffolding at a construction site in Wuhan, Hubei Province on November 26, 2008. Photo credit: Stringer/REUTERS

tion and environmental problems. And most likely Shanghai will do exactly what Beijing did: after wasting enormous amounts of money and energy, abandon it all after the Expo as the country moves on to another national project. Sadly, with the current global economic crisis, chances of a successful and well-attended Expo are slim, and the people's resources will have been wasted without obtaining desired results for the nation's and city's leaders.

GRASS-ROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

China's central government often presents an encouraging face, indicating it wants to improve the environment, especially when it has made green promises to host international events such as the 2008 Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo. But whenever rising conflicts affect the interests of party officials, the authorities shy away from siding with public interest. This is the inevitable result of a one-party system where party interests rise above all else. Some of the most serious polluters in China are energy companies, and they are, without exception, controlled by the offspring of the highest officials known as the "princelings." If their interests are threatened, there is no easing off.

The Chinese people are not suffering in silence, however. There have been thousands of demonstrations against air and water polluters all across the country. Zhou Shengxian, Minister of Environmental Protection of the People's Republic of China, has admitted that the number of riots, demonstrations and petitions across the country is rising due to growing public anger about pollution. He realizes that the public is refusing to accept the increasing degradation of the environment, and that its anger is now turning toward those officials who ignore environmental standards in exchange for bribes.³

Many of these demonstrations are spontaneous, but the overall public consciousness of environmental issues is also rising. As the demonstrations are becoming widespread, so is the sophistication of the tactics, including use of technology such as text messaging. There are now also 2,000 officially registered NGOs devoted to environmental issues, drawing hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens into environmental activities and forging a national movement independent of state-directed policies.

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One example of environmental activism and government response is the work of Sun Xiaodi, a Chinese writer and journalist who wrote about the massive unregulated uranium contamination in China's Gansu Province. In 2007, he was arrested, sentenced to three years in prison on charges of subverting state power, and fined for extortion. In 2006, he had already been detained for eight months after he attempted to petition the central government over the same issue. In

2006, Sun received a Nuclear-Free Future Award, the globe's most prestigious anti-nuclear prize, for resistance. Unable to leave China to attend, Sun sent a message: "Since my release from detention, I have been in an extremely insecure situation in which I am threatened, intimidated and harassed. I felt tremendously honored and

touched when I learned that I had been selected as this year's Nuclear Free Future Award recipient, because I have seen the great power of world peace and development."⁴



Cars travel along a main road in central Beijing on November 19, 2008. Photo credit: David Gray/REUTERS

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

There is no doubt that Sun and China's other environmental activists are facing great odds, and that's why international support for their work is so important to them. But it should also be remembered that the self-sacrificing, brave Chinese fighting for the environmental health of their nation are also fighting for all of us. After all, pollution has no national boundaries.

A study by the British Tyndall Centre at Sussex University recently concluded that 23 percent of China's carbon emissions were produced in manufacturing goods for export to the West and the rest of the world. Just as we have off-shored our manufacturing to China, so we have off-shored our carbon emissions. Multinationals are making profits by using Chinese labor and at the same time leaving all the chemical waste and pollutants in China as well. Moreover, by offering little to the Chinese side, the multinationals are also encouraging the Chinese to cut corners when it comes to environmental concerns.

That is why UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has called on world leaders to rethink the global financial system in a way that includes the environmental costs of economic activity. Ban imagines a "green New Deal" that will make environmental technologies the new, hot growth industry to jump-start the ailing world economy. The international community also has the responsibility to demand that foreign companies doing business in China make their products under sound environmental conditions and not resort to bribing local officials to ease restrictions.

Finally, the challenges of improving the global environment present an important opportunity for China and

the United States—the world's top two polluters—to work together. The incoming Obama administration in the U.S. may provide the leadership to repair relations with China and build a partnership to address the global environmental crisis that would contribute to a better physical world for all.

Notes

1. Matthew E. Kahn and Fran Lostys, "Living Green: Ranking the Best and Worst Countries," *Reader's Digest*, October 2007, <http://www.rd.com/your-america-inspiring-people-and-stories/greenest-locations-on-the-globe/article45585.html>. The article rated 72 major cities according to how 'green and livable' they were. According to the article, "The sources included The Millennium Cities Database for Sustainable Transport (2001) by Jeff Kenworthy and Felix Laube of Australia's Murdoch University, the World Bank's Development Economic Research Group Estimates, and our own reporting on local environmental laws, energy prices, garbage production and disposal, and parkland."
2. According to a World Bank study completed in 2006 on PM10 levels (particulate matter), Shanghai had a level of 87 micrograms per cubic meter, as opposed to a WHO target level of 50 micrograms per cubic meter. Shanghai's level ranks it the 58th dirtiest out of 130 cities of populations greater than a million in China surveyed. Kiran Dev Pandey, David Wheeler, Bart Ostro, Uwe Deichmann, Kirk Hamilton, and Katie Bolt, *Ambient Particulate Matter Concentrations in Residential and Pollution Hotspot areas of World Cities: New Estimates based on the Global Model of Ambient Particulates (GMAPS)*, The World Bank Development Economics Research Group and the Environment Department Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2007).
3. "Pollution Undermining China, Report Says," Associated Press, July 17, 2007, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/07/17/news/beijing.php>.
4. Human Rights in China, "Sun Xiaodi Receives International Nuclear Activism Award," December 2, 2006, <http://www.hrichina.org/public/contents/31764>.