Shanghai and the History of the Future
A lecture
Jeffrey Wasserstrom
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Curtin Hall 118

With an audience overflowing into the hallway outside Curtin 118, Jeffrey Wasserstrom (History, UC-Irvine) delivered a compelling and entertaining lecture on “Shanghai and the History of the Future” on February 26.

To open, Wasserstrom related an anecdote regarding his forthcoming book, China in the 21st Century, part of Oxford’s What Everyone Needs to Know series. The format of the book, intended for a general readership, demanded that he devote one chapter to the future of China. With his training in history, Wasserstrom naturally felt comfortable working in the past, but having to deal with even the present was rather “risky” for him and to have to step into the future was “a bit like going into the void.” “The future,” after all, more commonly belongs to economists, political scientists, and science fiction writers. As a crafty historian, however, he could artfully dodge making predictions about China’s future by noting how, over the years, people have had remarkably faulty foresight with respect to China.

That artful dodging led to his current interest in just what is the history of how people thought about Shanghai’s future, and how that has changed from the past to the present. Shanghai of the early 20th century—known as “the Paris of the East”—was a “juxtaposition of cultures,” divided into primarily British/American and French sections that surrounded the Chinese “Old City.” A westerner, for instance, could feel comfortable in sections as modern and western as London, while simply walking a few blocks to visit “the Orient.” Likewise, rural Chinese could visit Shanghai to catch a glimpse of the modern West without having to leave the country.

In the 100+ years between its establishment as an international treaty port (1843) and Mao’s takeover (1949), Shanghai’s breathtaking modernization was accompanied by wild speculation about, and an obsession with, its future: it’s as if “a bravado were hardwired into the city’s personality.” Although Shanghai was in China, it was never felt to be of China. (For the
“true” China one looked to either Beijing or the rustic countryside.) During this period, the West viewed Shanghai as a marvel simply because it was up to the speed of other modern, Western cities, but it was never felt to surpass them—it was never felt to be “futuristic.”

The Shanghai of the early 20th century was a “juxtaposition of cultures.” Today, it is a “juxtaposition of eras.”

Over the last two decades, however, Shanghai has finally achieved that “futuristic” status. Its new architecture—with towering skyscrapers such as the World Financial Center (with its trapezoidal aperture at the top) and the Pearl of the Orient Tower (with its eleven spheres)—evinces a retro-futurism like The Jetsons, and the city itself has been described by Forbes magazine as “Las Vegas meets Blade Runner.” Its maglev train is the fastest in the world, with a maximum normal operating speed of 431 km/h (268 mph). Its Urban Planning Exhibition Hall houses the world’s largest scale model in the world, showing not what Shanghai currently looks like, but what it will look like in 10 years. (Residents of Shanghai visit to see if their neighborhoods will still be around in the future.) It is now a setting for science fiction movies and cyberpunk novels.

Most of the new architecture has been taking place across the river from Shanghai in Pudong, creating a stark contrast between the old “modern” Shanghai and the new “futuristic” Shanghai. For Wasserstrom, this “juxtaposition of eras” has been laid over the older “juxtaposition of cultures.” In this coming together of past and future, Shanghai is seen as “reclaiming a role it once had—as the center of Chinese cosmopolitan modernity.” This play between old and new works itself out in many ways. For instance, the basements of the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall and the Pearl of the Orient Tower also house 1930s Shanghai streetscapes and a wax museum that let visitors wander through a representation of old Shanghai.

As a city obsessed with its own future, Shanghai has, naturally enough, been focused on its upcoming World Expo (opening May 1, 2010), the first ever world’s fair for China. The city has countdown clocks to the start of the Expo, and statues of the mascot Haibo, a Smurf-blue cartoon character, now outnumber those of Mao. Wasserstrom noted some similarities between this World Expo and imaginary Chinese-hosted world’s fairs as envisioned by Lian Qichao, a leading Chinese intellectual and futurist of the early 20th century. Qichao noted that countries participating in world’s fairs typically fall into a hierarchical order: the “advanced,” modern countries that host the fairs—and show off their high technology and weaponry—and the “backwards” countries that display their own “exotic customs.” For Qichao, Shanghai’s 2010 World Expo would be the culmination of his vision and yet another step forward for a city that has always projected itself into the future.