

La Ville Sensuelle: Seeking a ‘Better City, Better Life’ in the French Pavilion

William Peterson

Monash University

ABSTRACT

By way of a peripatetic journey through the French pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai International Exposition, this article queries what the experience of the pavilion may have meant to the millions of Chinese who experienced ‘La Ville Sensuelle’ and emplaced themselves in its many virtual environments, capturing the experience with digital photography. The author argues that the pavilion, perhaps unwittingly, fulfils the larger Chinese political objective of nurturing a more sophisticated consumer by virtue of increasing their personal suzhi or quality, while leaving a deep and lasting imprint of Paris as the ultimate sensual city on and in their bodies.

Introduction

Over six months in 2010, in a vast, sensual, peripatetic environment created by young French production designer Pauline Leveque and the visionary architect Jacques Ferrier, millions of young Chinese performed aspirational, cosmopolitan identities at the most attended single event in the history of our species. My point of reference here is the brilliant, canny, and slightly diabolical French Pavilion, one of the most popular sites at the Shanghai Exposition, the largest and most expensive international exposition in a long history of such fairs dating back to the famed London Crystal Palace Exposition of 1851. Attracting an estimated 73 million participants, some nations, chief among them France, recognised the potential power of this event to imprint physically, emotionally, and sensually on the bodies of the millions of young and upwardly mobile Chinese who stood in line for hours to experience the French Pavilion. The French seemed to understand better than other nations that what happened in this carefully curated environment, created with a vast and brilliant production team of ‘creatives’ and housed within a shell designed by one of the country’s leading architects, would leave a lasting impression on Chinese bodies and exist in an afterlife through the hundreds of millions of photos taken by young Chinese men and women showing themselves, their friends and family inhabiting vast projections of life-sized urban landscapes throughout Paris.

The expo theme, “Better City, Better Life”, was re-interpreted by the French design team as “La Ville Sensuelle”, or the “Sensual City”. While other nations sought to showcase themselves as models of ethnic harmony and/or cultural diversity (Malaysia, Singapore, Aotearoa/New Zealand) or ingenuity (Finland, Sweden), the French cut to the chase, building on what they know others think they do better than anyone else, emplacing the feeling of ‘oooh la la’ in the body, and offering multiple visual platforms for recording that experience through digital photography and videos. My understanding of ‘emplacement’ and the way it functions here extends from the phenomenology of Edward Casey who asserts the primacy of ‘place’ over ‘space,’ arguing that space can exist as an

abstract concept without the placement of people in it. As Casey observes, “the living-moving body is essential to the process of emplacement: *lived bodies belong to places* and help to constitute them. ... Bodies and places are connatural terms. They inter-animate each other” (1996: 24, emphasis in original). It is this inter-animation of bodies in specific places in the pavilion that underpin this analysis. The fact that most of the environments in which body and emotion were so powerfully engaged were virtual creations is one of the great ironies in this particular exercise in place-making, recalling Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s observation that, “The production of here-ness in the absence of actualities depends increasingly on virtualities” (1998: 169). Every aspect of this virtual environment, from the entry through French Polynesia to the meanderings through the streets of Paris and the backstages of the kitchens where fine food is prepared was designed to provide participants on this journey with the opportunity to feel, taste, and experience the richness and fullness of a civilised, pampered, beautiful, cultured, well-fed urban life, ‘une vie sensuelle’ as much as it might have been a ‘ville sensuelle’.

This article will map out the spectator/participant’s journey through this remarkable performance environment, demonstrating how the experience and its afterlife documented through photos achieve something akin to what Baerenholdt et al. have observed in photographs from family vacations, where “people perform the ‘private’ with ‘public’ scripts” (2004: 102). What is so remarkable about the performances I witnessed in the French Pavilion in October 2010, I will argue, is just how skilled the creative and production team were at creating a ‘public script’ that was tailor-made for a particular kind of upwardly-mobile, aspirational, cosmopolitan Chinese participant/actor. As Luigi Tomba (2009) asserts, one of great ‘civilising’ missions that the Chinese state is engaged in, as it incorporates an increasingly urban population into the statist project, is the cultivation of a more refined citizen by increasing their *suzhi*, or ‘quality.’ The related project, essential to the continued economic growth of the country, is to turn this individual with excesses of *suzhi* into a consumer of goods of increasing quality. China’s future is utterly dependent on a sustainable urbanism, one that requires contented citizens as well as increasingly sophisticated consumers. As Tomba asserts:

China’s quest for modernization, economic development, and a more appropriate place in the world has been accompanied by a ‘civilising’ project, which aims at producing a strong correlation between the *suzhi* (quality) of the population and the strengthening of the nation, between the ‘responsibilization’ of the citizenry and the goal of an orderly and productive market society. (2009: 592)

At the core of this project is the creation of an “urban, educated, and resource-rich middle class,” a group that comprises “the backbone of the so-called ‘advanced forces of production’ (*xianjin shen-changli*)” (Tomba, 2009: 592). The Chinese model is focused on developing a higher quality of consumption through the development of what Tomba identifies as the urban “arch-consumers” who will “keep the engine of economic growth going” (2009: 593). In order to change consumption patterns, this group needs to be educated in the ways of achieving higher *suzhi*. I will argue that the experience of the French pavilion fulfils this key statist function, though perhaps unwittingly.

The secondary and interrelated theme in this analysis, and one I will return to in the conclusion, is the way in which the pavilion branded France by conflating the country with a set of urban, profoundly emplaced experiences to be consumed by the participant in their peripatetic journey through the pavilion. In the conclusion I respond to a business case study of the pavilion by Catherine Becker that appeared in a prominent French management journal, *Revue Française de Gestion* (Becker, 2011: 45-51). Becker argues that the pavilion’s creators lost the opportunity to set forth a dynamic, future-oriented vision of urban French life, instead creating the impression that the best of France is situated in the past. I will argue that Becker failed to understand the tremendous power of emplacing the individual into an environment that builds on and embodies what they already know about France, leaving them with an imprint of place that they carry with them back into their lives. Thus I will assert that the French creative team successfully ‘sold’ a particular image of France, and that while opening up the eyes and ears of the audience, they contributed to the

creation of a more sophisticated and discerning consumer that will drive the engine of China's economic growth as it moves beyond bricks and mortar to industries where wealth is generated by its capacity to add value through higher levels of *suzhi*. And this added value is discernable only to those who are indoctrinated into the highest levels of consumer culture, something the pavilion experience facilitates.

'Better City, Better Life' and *l'expérience sensuelle*

To understand the centrality of the city in this event and what it signifies for the Chinese, it is important to remember that the most attended event in history has been preceded by the largest migration of people in history, as China has been transformed from a predominantly rural society, to one where now the majority live in cities, many of which are among the largest in the world. As China has relaxed the policies regarding internal freedom of movement, millions of rural peasants have come to the cities such as Shanghai, seeking a better life. Thus the English translation of the exposition motto (*chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao*), "Better City, Better Life" was consonant with this migratory shift, implying that the expo would offer exhibits and experiences that would point to ways to make the city a better place in which to live, thus improving the quality of one's life. Indeed, most national pavilions and virtually all of the theme- focused pavilions focused to some extent on ways in which countries or new technologies and new building and ecological practices are contributing to a more sustainable future (Fernsebner, 2010), a theme that seemed especially relevant in a city such as Shanghai where the pace of new building construction is breathtaking.

France was alone among developed nations in almost completely ignoring this implicit imperative embedded in the English-language motto, offering a take on city life that would at first glance appear almost reactionary in its conservative evocation of a romantic, history and culture-rich urbanity, one not engaged in any discernable way with issues of sustainability. According to José Frèches, the general director of the 50 million euro pavilion occupying 6,000 square meters (Wang, 2009), "The sensual city is France's response to the general theme" (*La ville sensuelle c'est la réponse de France à la thème générale*)¹ (Flair, 2010). Frèches' comments signal France's willingness to essentially go it alone, to interpret the theme as a 'general' one, rather than one that points to ways in which urban life may be enhanced. Instead, as Frèches observes, "We offer visitors a walking course that is at the same time visual, olfactory, sensitive, and aesthetic" (*On propose aux visiteurs un parcours qui est à la fois visuelle, olfactif, sensible, et... esthétique*) (Flair, 2010). Roman Hatal, in charge of the projections that filled much of the space, echoed this sentiment, noting that he sought to capture "moments of beauty" (*moments de beauté*) (Flair, 2010). Similarly, the composer who compiled the diverse score for the installation-like experience, speaks of how he layered "the elements of nature and the city, water, fire, snow" (*les éléments naturels et de la ville, l'eau, le feu, la neige*) adding that "there are these specifically French things in work" (*il y a les trucs spécifiquement français dans le travail*) which added another layer of sound texturisation (Flair, 2010). This division of creative labour was carried out on the scale one would expect for a large movie project, while their work was displayed and emplaced in a neutral, gallery space where a vast installation project offered an experience that ignited all of the senses.

The internal cohesion of the vision, and one that felt youthful in its internal logic, was guided by production designer Pauline Leveque, who had less than ten years of work experience, primarily in the field of cultural programming and coordination. By placing someone this young in charge of the project's creative dimension, the French seemed to anticipate that in order to connect with a non-Francophone audience and maximise the impact on the under-30s likely to form a disproportionate share of the participants entering the pavilion, a youthful vision was necessary. Leveque and her collaborators created what was essentially an installation space, one devoid of distinctive architectural features, and dominated by vast visual fields that shifted subtly and came in and out of view as one moved through wide hallways laid out in straight lines, meeting at right angles at each of the building's four corners. The structure was designed to accommodate up to

4,000 persons passing through in an hour, and up to 50-60,000 each day (Flair, 2010). Clearly anticipating its popularity, the core structure, like many other national pavilions at the expo, housed a slowly ascending or descending internal walkway capable of handling massive foot traffic. In the French pavilion, one entered first through a vast, open space and then started the interior experience at the uppermost level after ascending a vast escalator.

I will map out the peripatetic pavilion journey below, drawing forth its sensual dimensions, while making observations on the types of public performances of 'private texts' that I observed as I moved slowly through the shifting spaces and aural and visual fields that successively unfolded. Many of my observations record how I experienced a particular set of phenomenon, and as such cannot be used to make absolute claims about the experience of others. Nevertheless, and in the absence of opportunities to conduct extensive fieldwork and interview participants in a language I do not speak, I posit myself as a kind of 'ideal spectator' at times, as much of what I describe below is what was present in the shared physical and aural landscape of the pavilion. Further, there are ways in which the physical journey of moving through this space was clearly designed to elicit a particular set of responses from the generic participant. One additional insight I can modestly claim extends from my young life as a devoted Francophile; thus I understand how seductive French culture can be for a young person from a place that somehow feels less sophisticated. It is in this capacity that I occasionally step into the bodies of some of the younger Chinese participants, who in the course of their experience inside this extraordinary box were offered a foreign, highly Other place. The final section of this article will look at the criticism levelled at the pavilion, while I conclude by situating the experience in a larger socio-political Chinese context, from where one may see it as a qualified success.

The Pavilion experience

Christopher Connery notes that at the time of the expo there was a popular expression that went, "Miss the expo and you'll regret it for life. Go to the expo and you'll regret the whole day" (*buqu shibo, houthui yibeizi; qu shibo, houthui yitian*) (2011: 207). There is no doubt that the expo experience was taxing on the human body. The experience of just getting into the grounds of the most attended international expo in history was a daunting one. There were eight entrances into the expo grounds, with three subway stations on the periphery of a vast geographical area that spanned the Huangpu River that separates 'old' Shanghai from Pudong, the postmodernist fantasy world of glass towers where the majority of the expo was situated. Once inside, one could stand for hours in queues that snaked back and forth under block-long open-air tented structures designed to keep participants from passing out in the summer heat, present throughout much of the event, which ran from May until October. If one was under the illusion that the expo was an international event in terms of spectatorship, standing in line for a few hours and observing the virtually exclusively Chinese audience would quickly convince one otherwise, a reminder that pavilions were at least partly created as environments in which exhausted Chinese bodies could renew themselves. And the French understood this very well, as we shall see.

After finally emerging from the tent gulag into the open air, one entered the pavilion along with a group of 50-70 others, who were in turn followed by successive groups spaced at approximately one-minute intervals. Unlike other pavilions, the entry into the French pavilion involved walking into a vast internal courtyard, one that could not have been anticipated at street level as the structure looked like a giant, modernist box. Rather than experiencing the open-ness of the space, which featured hanging gardens of greenery in geometric shapes that extended from the eaves along the roofline, one's visual focus was instead directed outward into the courtyard to a sea of what at first glance appeared to be grass huts. But before further questions about grass huts could be answered, a gorgeous, sleek silver Citroën sedan captured the eye. Enclosed in an enormous glass case, the auto was displayed like a rare art object, too precious to touch or to come too close to. It

was indeed a pretty car, a sexy thing, and I found myself coveting it, even though and perhaps because I will never have the financial resources to obtain it.

My gaze then shifted out into the courtyard where the grass huts revealed themselves as booths, each spruiking a different aspect of the glories of French Polynesia, specifically Tahiti, while a soundtrack pumped out generic, upbeat islander music. On display were 'Tahiti Black Pearls' incorporated into jewellery, presented in glass cases as if they were for sale. Next up were 'Tahiti Aromes', proclaimed as "essentially natural" in the booth's signage, and sold by a youthful, Chinese-appearing man in a Hawaiian-style shirt that was apparently meant to signify Tahiti. One of the many giant photographic images of the human life in this French colony featured a handsome, totally ripped, shirtless Polynesian man in the foreground, as cultural dancers with exotic headdresses posed behind him, beckoning wealthy Chinese tourists. Just as I began to wonder if this experience would be an updated version of the French Colonial Exposition of 1931, one that involved vast ethnographic displays from European colonies, I spied a gaggle of ethnic-Chinese teenage girls, all wearing blue berets and a snug but tasteful top with stripes of red, blue, and white that suggested the French national flag, the 'tricolore'. Presumably part of a vast army of 700,000 mostly school-age volunteers (Connery, 2011: 212) these young women were evidently tasked with milling about the far side of the plaza, guiding those ambling through the pleasures of French Polynesia into the pavilion proper. Suddenly, as if on cue, one of the acculturated girls in my midst held her wrist to her nose as I passed by, breathing in the sweet aroma of Tahiti that presumably she had been scented with at the 'Tahiti aromes' booth by the fake Tahitian man in the Hawaiian shirt. Thus I came into La Ville Sensuelle via French Polynesia, feeling 'sensuelle' after seeing a beautiful and powerful car, images of hot young men, inhaling 'les aromes du Tahiti', and walking past a bevy of charming Chinese girls enacting an idea of Frenchness, taking in the delights of perfume.



Figure 1. This girl, part of a team of Chinese girls wearing berets and the French tricolore savours the pleasures of perfume. Photo: William Peterson

From this charming place of respite from the summer heat, I then walked back through the relatively narrow structure of the building to a vast double escalator, situated between the actual structure of the building and a gently curving outer steel frame that gave the building greater depth and character. Without this outer skin, the pavilion would have been revealed for what it was, just a square box with a large open-air courtyard. At the escalator landing was the threshold to another world, signalled by a beautifully designed silver logo for La Ville Sensuelle in classy, conservative Helvetica font, placed on a background of polished stainless steel, with the Chinese equivalent in characters below the French. Here old and young alike posed under the logo for the first of many emplacements inside this space of performance. From this point of entry, one could look out over the inner courtyard, which from this vantage point miraculously appeared as a lush, green sea, while the gentle swooping arches of the Lupu Bridge perfectly framed the roofline of the building.

Entering a darkened corridor, one moved into a sea of video projections, which gently seduced the viewer, turning them into a participant. One of the first mammoth wall video installations was snow swirling dramatically in the streets of Paris in an attractive and iconic environment which featured stately residential apartment buildings, all with signature Mansard roofs. This dynamic and hypnotic projection, shot at street level and extending down to the floor, was at least 10 metres long, beckoning participants into the landscape, while providing enough room for multiple photos to be composed and shot featuring primarily young Chinese who posed singly, as couples, or in groups of families and friends. In this urban landscape oddly denuded of actual French people, Chinese participants filled the streets of Paris, as the gentle sounds of a snowbound city provided the soundtrack. Some performed a kind of private script that was less about illustrating the relationship with those who were present there with them, but rather sought out a position that embedded themselves in the snowy streets, recording still and video images of themselves moving through this powerfully exotic landscape that darkened gently and turned to night. One young



Figure 2. Young Chinese posing for photos in a virtual Parisian snowstorm. Photo: William Peterson

woman, laden with shopping bags, posed in stop-motion frames as her friend took multiple shots, images that were clearly meant to signify returning home from a shopping trip. That it virtually never snows like this in Paris is beside the point. What happens in this walk through the virtual, snowy streets of Paris imprints powerfully on my body, and even now as I look at the soft shadows of my fellow travellers in the photos that I took of them in this snowy cityscape, I almost weep at the delicate beauty of it all.

The next significant site along the darkened corridor invited scopophilia rather than an invitation to perform. Looking through what appeared to be a window, the viewer watched professional chefs creating and plating up gorgeous food in a fully-functioning kitchen of what appeared to be a fine restaurant, working quickly and with great precision. Rather than appearing as a projection that one might wish to walk into, the placement of these large 'windows' with 'panes' precluded the possibility of placing one's self into the image. Additional views from another virtual window provided quite another perspective on the kitchen, looking down panoramically at the entire sweep of the action, while another window, constructed to appear real, created the impression of standing on the other side of a pane of glass from a chef as he chopped, sliced and diced. At this point I became briefly convinced that there must be a restaurant connected to the pavilion, and that what we were seeing was the backstage area. Dean MacCannell's influential concept of the "staged backstage" in tourist environments (1999) is taken a step further in this virtual environment; not only are we being offered the 'authentic' backstage view, but here we are invited into a virtualised backstage that we resist reading as fake. I create the absent 'front stage' in my own mind, and because it is unattainable, I find myself longing, wanting, desperately wanting the 'real thing', the elusive food emanating from that kitchen.



Figure 3. Looking through the 'window' into a virtual kitchen, one sees a prep cook expertly cutting up yellow cherry tomatoes. Photo: William Peterson

In the next gigantic projection, I walk into the lively stalls of a weekend street market where there is just enough empty space in the frame for the viewer to feel they are being warmly invited in. I take a photo of an exuberant Chinese boy with his arms raised above his head, flashing a peace sign, and grinning for the camera. His pose here reflects the kind of attitude that suggests a laying claim to the space that I have witnessed at major tourist attractions elsewhere, where Asian tourists in particular pose in a manner that foregrounds their own present-ness, often flashing the peace sign, as if saying through the photographic record, "I am alive, and I was here!" I pass through and past two successive screens that further develop a theme that I retrospectively identify as a 'lazy weekend'. Here the moving images invite me to imagine myself in Paris marketing for fresh fruit and vegetables, stopping out for a quick cup of espresso, watching an older gentleman drinking a glass of wine, sitting at a table featuring a gorgeous glass of fresh apple juice from which only a sip has been taken, looking out across the tables from my seat in a sidewalk cafe, or watching as pedestrians pass by on a cool, crispy sunny day in autumn while the soundscape mixes the gentle patter of people chatting in acoustically bright spaces with a soothing but energising melody provided by an acoustic guitar. All of these projections are scaled much larger than the human bodies of those passing in front of them, inviting them in but this time through their own absence rather than their presence.

The next segment along the route invited the kind of stop/think/act participation of the sort that can be exhausting, as it was in the Swedish pavilion, where it felt like being trapped against one's will in a hyperactively-interactive science museum. A relatively content-free sequence of static visual images was presented under the heading of "The Essence/Taste of Life" (*Le Gout d'une Vie*), which featured generic images of ethnic Chinese people in environments resembling doctor's offices or clinics under the headings in Chinese and French proclaiming "Care and Prevention, the Sources of Health" (*Soins et prevention: les sources de la santé*) and "Access and share a duty of health" (*accés et partage un devoir pour la santé*). This was perhaps the most impenetrable sequence of images in that it seemed extraordinarily patronising, as if the Chinese needed the French to teach them about the connection between health and quality of life. Was it a passing nod to the expo theme? If so, then there was nothing in the content to suggest these issues were being explored or examined in any manner that was specifically urban in nature. Unbelievably, this was the only station that invited any form of critical reflection or personal engagement that was not rooted in the experience of the body moving through space. Instead, the content was about how to maintain the body so it could continue to experience pleasure.

From here, participants walked through a series of projected visual environments that invited emplacement into two iconic visual fields: under the Eiffel Tower, with only the rounded structural supports of the lower level serving a metonymic function for the larger structure, and looking back toward Notre Dame Cathedral from a position on the Left Bank of the Seine. The Eiffel Tower seemed to invite formal, solemn portraiture, while some of the other projections displayed spectacular views shot from great heights, rendering individual emplacement in the image impossible. Other video images changed only subtly in 'real time', inviting one to gaze out, as I did in a particularly arresting image of the lights of the city flickering in the distance, shot from the perspective of a window only slightly above a sea of unprepossessing roofs.

At the next station, a series of screens showed scenes from black-and-white and sepia-toned films shot on the streets of Paris. Many were recognisable as famous French "New Wave" (*Nouvelle Vague*) films of the 1950s and 1960s, and all, regardless of narrative content, evoked the singularity of Paris. From this point on, the intended experiential and potential narrative thread for participants began to break down, as what was presented forced one back into viewing mode, but without the scopophilia present in the earlier encounters with food and food preparation. It was as if in this final last blast before the exit, all of the necessary afterthoughts and iconic brandings of corporate sponsors were tossed out for Chinese consumers. Perhaps not so surprising given that a Citroën greeted the pilgrims at the gate, a cute, cartoonish and corny Michelin Man was present on the way toward the exit, as was a paen to Lafarge proclaiming in English-language signage: "Lafarge is the

world leader in building materials, with top-ranking position in all of its businesses: Cement, Aggregates and Concrete and Gypsum. With 78,000 employees in 78 countries, Lafarge posted sales of Euros 15.8 billion in 2009". In a city that is devouring half of all the concrete produced in the world for its construction projects (Campanella, 2011), this claim to being massive in concrete perhaps had special resonance, though no one appeared to be interested.

Between the ode to concrete and the exit, just as one was starting to race downhill toward the exit, the viewer was given a smattering of high culture in a compressed mini-art gallery featuring some of the greats, starting with Rodin's iconic *The Age of Bronze* (1877), his heroic-scaled statue of a young, naked man with a perfectly toned body. Other offerings included Manet's *The Balcony*, Cezanne's *Woman with Coffee Pot*, Van Gogh's *The Dance Hall*, and Gauguin's *The Bananas*. After encountering the last of the great masters, one walked into a three-dimensional environment that suggested the richness and ornamentation of La Belle Epoque, and as the eyes focused further down the pathway one made out the iconic branding of Louis Vuitton. The link between this brand, one that signifies class and sophistication to a certain kind of upwardly mobile consumer internationally, was cleverly placed here, positioned so as to encourage the viewer to connect artistry with consumption, suggesting that the brilliance of French impressionism was now something one could purchase, for a price. Now only the credits remained, a detailed, rich, classy inscription of the names of all individuals and organisations involved in bringing the pavilion to life, and as I walked past them on the wall, they struck me as film credits. Even the titles given to members of the creative and production team mirrored those found in French films. Exiting through a final sea of corporate logos, one descended for the ride down to the ground level just outside the periphery of French Polynesia, whose sights, smells, and sounds accompanied the participant as they were expelled from the building, back out onto the pavement and an expo where further queuing was their lot.

The city and the fashioning of a better citizen

If the French seemed unconcerned with the expo theme, offering sensuality and consumption rather than setting forth pathways to a more sustainable urban life, then it is not without some degree of irony that the experience on offer inside their pavilion came closest to embodying the meaning inherent in a more literal translation of the expo motto, *chengshi, rang shenghuo geng meihao*. As Christopher Connery observes, instead of signifying "Better City, Better Life", the Chinese meaning was closer to, "The city will make life even better" (2011: 208). For a state that has "committed itself unambiguously to urbanism" (Connery, 2011: 209) this event offered the Chinese an opportunity to valorise urban life, to demonstrate that Shanghai is poised for a glorious future, and that the city can more than hold its own with Beijing, which had just two years earlier hosted the Olympics. So what might this event have offered to a Chinese city-dweller? It is here that the French pavilion fulfils—possibly quite unwittingly—an exemplary function.

As noted at the outset, the formation of an urban citizen with suitable reserves of *suzhi*, or "quality", a requirement to drive the engine of spiralling and increasingly sophisticated consumption patterns capable of fuelling economic growth, is subject to a program of conscious engineering by the government. Perhaps the most striking example of this with respect to the expo is reflected in a book disseminated by the Shanghai Municipal Committee for the Construction of Spiritual Civilization entitled, *How to Be a Lovely Shanghainese: Instructions for the Shanghai Citizen* (Tomba, 2009: 206-207). Intended as a guide for citizens in their interactions with the masses of foreign tourists that failed to materialise, the book sets standards of civilised behaviour, identifying both "moral standards" and "seven don'ts" which include: "don't spit, don't litter, don't damage public property, don't destroy public greenery, don't dress in messy clothes, don't smoke in public places, don't use coarse language" (Tomba, 2009: 607). Ultimately a less-coarsened citizenry will be better positioned to contribute that 'value-added' element in a more creative, cultured society that will also be worth more in the marketplace. It is instructive here to return to the placement of Louis



Figure 4. Louis Vuitton assumes a prominent visual position as the final image at the end of a long hallway just before the exit into the pavilion courtyard. Photo: William Peterson

Vuitton in the French pavilion. When is a bag not just a bag? The answer is perhaps when it is a Louis Vuitton bag, when it is placed in a context that suggests opulence, elegance, and great artistry. When it signifies something beyond the bagness of a bag: when it is a bag with a pedigree. The fetishisation of the commodity-as-art-object both creates and requires this kind of 'civilised' citizen, one who appreciates and can pay for such objects that require discernment and taste. Such a citizen, in turn, is capable of themselves someday creating products, be they tangible or not, that reflect these higher-order values, and that command higher prices in the market place.

Concerned with the negative 'branding' of France through the pavilion, Catherine Becker conducted market research to determine what the Chinese identified with France. In answer to the question, "What is France to you" (*Pour vous la France qu'est-ce que c'est?*), the most common response was invariably "it's romantic" (*c'est romantique*) (2011, 46).² Becker conducted around a hundred 'mini-interviews', both in person and through blogs and forums, seeking Chinese responses to the French pavilion. While Becker clearly regarded the way France branded itself as a lost opportunity to demonstrate how forward-looking and dynamic the nation was, she failed to consider that brand France in the Chinese mind, for all of its apparent backward glancing, offers qualities that are attractive to the Chinese, and ways of being in the world that many find missing in their own culture. As one of her informants observed of the pavilion experience, "We Chinese, we need this because we live in a country without taste, that's boring. France is perfume, cuisine, wines, so it's full of tastes" (*Nous les Chinois, on a besoin de cela car on vit dans une société sans goût, ennuyeuse . La France c'est du parfum, de la cuisine, des vins, donc c'est plein de goûts*) . Another observed that, "It adds perfume to life" (*On ajoute du parfum à la vie*), while yet another opined that "Paris is *gan xing* 'sensual', *xing gan* 'sexy' (*Paris est "gan xing" sensuel et "xing gan" sexy*) (Becker 2011, 48) . This kind of physical imprint on the body is not one that is likely to be easily forgotten. While participants may forget which Scandinavian nation set the highest standards for cleverness, they

carry within them the feeling of the romantic, the 'sexy', the 'sensual' city, one that 'adds perfume to life'.

Even the weather in France is transformed into something other than mere weather. As one of Becker's informants observed, "In France when one says that it's raining or snowing, one isn't talking about the weather, one is speaking of the images of rain and snow" (*En France quand on dit qu'il pleut et qu'il neige, on ne parle pas du temps, on raconte les images de la pluie et de la neige*) (Becker, 2011: 48). This final point is the most powerful one for me as being in the snow, being radically and wholly immersed in the state of 'snowingness' marked the point of entry into the pavilion. This experience clearly imprinted deeply on many of the Chinese I observed, and it provoked even in me sweet nostalgia for something I took for granted as a child and young man growing up in a cold climate. Here Becker's informant was able to articulate what an achievement this really is: the French had turned something that costs nothing, indeed something that is not so much a product of winter in Paris as it is winter in Stockholm or my home town of Minneapolis, and transformed it into an experience that is deeply embodied, deeply French, and felt differently in France than it is felt anywhere else in the world. And this is a quality that is both free and priceless, one that costs nothing and one for which people will pay any sum of money. Think Louis Vuitton.

Notes

1. All translations from the French throughout the article are my own.
2. The original pagination of this article was not preserved in the version available online through Proquest.

References

- Baerenholdt, J., Haldrup, M., Larsen, J., Urry, J. (2004). *Performing Tourist Places*. Aldershot (UK): Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Becker, C. (2011). La marquee France vue de Chine: à travers le prisme du Pavillon française à l'Exposition universelle 2010. *Revue Française de Gestion*, 37 (218/219), 45-51.
- Casey, E. (1996). How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological prolegomena. In S. Feld and K. Basso (Eds.), *Senses of Place* (pp. 13-52). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Connery, C. (2011). Better City, Better Life. *Boundary 2*, 38(2), 207-227.
- Campanella, T. (2011, June 20). Rise of the Asian megacity. *BBC News Asia-Pacific*. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13799997>
- Fernsebner, S. (2010). Expo 2010: A Historical Perspective. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 69(3), 669-676.
- Flair Production. (2010). Making of 'scénographie du Pavillon de la France à Shanghai. Video. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from <http://www.flairprod.wordpress.com/2010/10/6/making-of/>
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998). *Destination Culture: Tourism, museums, and heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- MacCannell, D. (1999). *The Tourist: A new theory of the leisure class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tomba, L. (2009). Of Quality, Harmony, and Community: Civilization and the middle class in urban China. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 17(3), 592-616.
- Wang, Z. (2009, July 15). French pavilion to house historic art at Shanghai Expo. *China Daily*. Retrieved June 29, 2012 from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010expo/2009-07/15/content_8430095.htm