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**Shanghai Expo 2010:
Metropolis reloaded?**

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Shanghai Expo 2010: Metropolis reloaded?

Bonn, 26 April 2010. On 1 May, the Expo 2010 will start in Shanghai, moving the city into the international limelight just as the Olympics did with Beijing in 2008. This will highlight the fact that Shanghai has become an international metropolis of the rank of New York, Paris, London and Tokyo in the twenty years since the establishment of Shanghai's Special Economic Zone "Pudong" in 1990.

Since then, most of the exciting changes arguably happened on the eastern shore of the Huangpu (i.e. Pudong), but there is an building in the old Shanghai that still has the quality of a landmark: "Shanghai Mansion". Built in the 1930s and 40s, and located in the centre of Shanghai not far from the famous "Bund" – it sticks out for its peculiar architecture. When I saw Shanghai Mansion for the first time in the 1980s, it clearly differed from the colonial-style buildings of the Bund and the prevalent socialist-realist architecture of that time. And, surprisingly, the building immediately recalled images of the 1927 film "Metropolis" by Fritz Lang.

It is a mere coincidence that the reconstructed version of "Metropolis" has been launched in the same year as the Shanghai Expo. But this coincidence is intriguing due to the messages conveyed by the historic film. Metropolis tells several stories, and different spectators may remember different messages, but probably there is a consensus that the film portrays a science fiction-like vision (at the time of its production) of a modern city, with sky-scrapers, multi-lane and highways crossing each other in levels. Fritz Lang even envisaged the absence of pedestrians on the streets and notorious traffic jams. In addition, the film is highly critical of the underlying social structure of the city. While the rich and glorious enjoy the luxury of the city above the ground ("*Oberstadt*"), the whole system is driven by workers underground ("*Unterstadt*") whose work is dictated by the rhythm of huge machines. The life of many workers is sacrificed in order to keep the city above ground running.

Seeing the film again at the beginning of this year, the degree to which China's large cities like Shanghai and Guangzhou have developed into copies of Metropolis is striking, if not shocking. The first highway on pillars crossing Guangzhou was already constructed in the 1980s. By now, multi-lane and multi-level highways have become an important aspect of urban transport infrastructure in many major Chinese cities, not least Shanghai. China's automobile market is by now the largest globally. While Chinese visitors to Western countries in the 1980s were astonished to experience cities with more cars than people on the streets, the same impression arises today when driving through the main streets in China's large cities. Traffic jams are a daily experience, too. Also, Chinese cities and especially Shanghai are places full of sky-scrapers and at times daunting and futuristic architecture. The Pudong skyline is a telling example of this.

At the same time, China has been labeled "the factory of the world" in recent years, referring to its unprecedented role in global production and trade. The concentration on a labour-intensive, export processing-oriented mode of production is generally deemed to be the core of the Chinese economic success story. And the not-so-secret secret behind this success story have been – amongst other factors - millions of migrant workers who are willing to work hard and long for low wages while living temporarily and under rather simple conditions in special compounds for factory workers. These migrant workers generally do not enjoy the rights of permanent citizens and are not supposed to stay on once they lose their job. Though they do not and did



not live or produce underground, a resemblance to the workers as portrayed in Metropolis easily comes up in one's mind.

This "factory" of the world has contributed a lot to global consumerism and wealth and to the spectacular development of Chinese cities into metropolis – but will this be sustainable in the future? In Lang's film, the system collapses due to protests from the workers, an insightful, emphatic young representative of the wealthy establishment, and a love story. In China, the awareness of the social problems associated with the incumbent growth model and the "factory of the world" has clearly grown, both on the part of the migrant workers and the political decision makers. While the former have become less willing to accept low wages and demand citizen rights, the latter search for a new growth model, social security schemes and an extension of citizen rights to migrants in order to secure social stability without compromising economic success and the living standards of the incumbent economic and political elite.

Against this background the central slogan of the Shanghai Expo that will start next week becomes important: "Better City, Better Life" (or "City, let life become more beautiful" if translated literally from the original Chinese slogan). It is a tradition of world exhibitions to expose the artistic and technological frontiers of architecture, both by the extravagant exteriors of exhibition pavilions and by exhibitions within the pavilions visualising developments in different countries. By all expectations, the Shanghai Expo will top past Expos in the number of countries – especially developing countries – participating as well as the extravagance of many pavilions. With expected 70 million visitors it may also top the number of visitors ever seen at a world exhibition.

The Expo is a global event, not only representing China, but still the motto seems to especially address the challenges posed by China's metropolis. Will the exhibition live up to the expectation of the motto? Or will we just see another futuristic view on cities, the beautiful part, blinding out the "underground" workforce and machinery that may be needed to keep the wealthy and shiny part running? Will it address the fundamental challenges related to the growth model of industrialisation that China has so successfully emulated for its own economic development? Will the Shanghai Expo 2010 provide any suggestions for solving the pressing social problems of today's China? Will anyone mention the fact that in order to build the Expo at its current site, a huge number of citizens had to be moved from their traditional place of living? It would be a nice gesture if those displaced citizens would be honoured as special guests to the Expo. It would be even nicer to imagine that Shanghai's migrant workers will find the spare time and money to visit the Expo and get a glimpse of a future metropolis less socially divided.



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