

Nov 04, 2016 by [Jian \(Jay\) Wang](#)

Shanghai Expo: Not Just a Site for China's Image-Construction ^[1]

To characterize the Shanghai Expo as mainly China's showcasing of its soft power misses an important point.

It is true that China's hosting of the event, especially on the heels of the spectacular Summer Olympics two years ago, sends an unmistakable signal of the country's return to global prominence. Nonetheless, the Expo is also a grand stage where, over the next six months, nearly 200 participant countries will be courting and engaging the Chinese public. And this, I believe, will be of far greater significance and consequence for China, and the world, in the long run.

There are very few mega-events that can grab any global attention. One may count the Olympics, the World Cup, The Oscars, and perhaps the World Expo. But unlike the others, the Expo is not a media event. It is best experienced in person, not much different from visiting an amusement park. The half-year-long event doesn't make for good television; neither does it lend itself well (at least so far) to presentation in any forms of the new, interactive media. So, the Expo's global reach and influence will be limited in comparison.

But the bigger story will be in China and inside the Expo Park. According to the official estimate, the Expo will attract some 70 million visitors (only 5% of which will be from outside China). That is, 5% of the Chinese population will be visiting the Expo?more than the entire population of France.

I toured the Expo Park earlier this month. The structures and designs of many of the national pavilions are certainly eye-catching. If there is any gravitational pull of China's soft power, it is that the entire world is represented in the park. What's more, participant countries seem to take the event seriously; thereby giving a great deal of face to their host.

The prospect of China being a major global power depends as much on how the Chinese will come to view what's beyond the Middle Kingdom as on the modes of response other countries will choose to deal with its rise. As Martin Jacques, author of *When China Rules the World*, has pointed out, the Chinese attitude toward difference will be a crucial factor in determining the outcome.

As the Shanghai Expo brings the world to China's door-step, Chinese visitors will have an opportunity to sample the sights and sounds of varied cultures and innovations.

Granted, what these national pavilions present are idealized, dramatized visions of their respective countries; still, this is a good start for dialogue, and for a rapidly growing China and the world to ponder a fruitful relationship going forward.

To find out more about Jay Wang's CPD research project: **Nation Branding at Expo Shanghai 2010**, click [here](#).
