

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

A Little Good News from the U.S. Pavilion ^[1]

There has been plenty of bad news concerning the unimaginative U.S. pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai. But let me for the moment, share a little good news.

Indeed, like many who have visited the pavilion, I couldn't find any "wow" moments. Still, there are noteworthy highlights, especially when viewed from the vantage point of a Chinese visitor.

It is important to bear in mind that the Expo is not made for everyone ? just like state fairs are not for everyone. While the Expo is billed as a global gathering, it remains primarily a local event. This is particularly true of this Expo, with more than 90% of the visitors coming from China. Therefore it is all the more meaningful to discuss the Expo from the perspectives and experiences of the locals, rather than from afar.

For many Chinese visitors, the greetings by President Obama and Secretary Clinton, projected on giant movie screens, are considered a highlight. The two American public diplomats, popular celebrities in their own right in China, appear personable, engaging, and respectful. This is poignant, because in the Chinese context people do look up to leaders and authorities, and in terms of communication style, Chinese leaders are, in contrast, often seen as remote and removed.

There is a lot of criticism of the ubiquity of corporate logos in the American pavilion. There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with corporations being involved in such events. In fact, one may argue, as corporate citizens, they should contribute to such global engagement based on their enlightened self-interest. The question is how.

I also think some of the "brand integration" in the pavilion was poorly executed (e.g., the prominent logo featured on the polo shirts worn by spokespersons in one of the movies). Any marketer would find such placement crude and not smart at all.

Fortunately, in China, American brands (including most of the pavilion sponsors) are well liked and even admired. The Chinese people are probably more trusting of the brands from these companies than the policies of the American government. Needless to say, Chinese brands pale in comparison as well.

If there is one shining moment at the U.S. pavilion, it is the "student ambassadors." These are American college students who come from across the country to volunteer at the pavilion as guides to Chinese visitors. (By the way, my home institution USC is the lead school for this program, but I am not personally involved).

More than any other country at the Expo, America is better represented through the physical presence of these young people (all speak some level of Chinese). They have daily, direct contact, pleasant or otherwise, with Chinese visitors who typically have to wait in line for a couple of hours to get inside the pavilion. This is truly people diplomacy in action.

Most importantly, these young people represent the future of U.S.-China relations and, for that matter, of America's relations with the world.

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