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CAMEo CUTS #12

Festivals in Shanghai:
Tradition, Creation
and Leadership

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CAMEo CUTS

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FESTIVALS IN SHANGHAI: TRADITION, CREATION AND LEADERSHIP

REN MING

The changing nature of festivals and festival culture is the subject of this latest CAMEo Cut. Ren Ming explores the forces shaping the transformation of traditional Chinese public festivals and the growing influence of new modern festivals designed to showcase Shanghai as a global cultural city. How local residents of Shanghai respond to these changes, and governmental attempts to create new traditions around these festivals, is the focus of discussion.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FESTIVALS IN SHANGHAI: TRADITION, CREATION AND LEADERSHIP

In the modern city, festivals and celebrations are highlights of both the city's calendar and the daily lives of its residents. They break up routines and give the public an opportunity, time and space to do and enjoy something different, whether it is a centuries-old tradition or a new celebration. Festivals are important for modern cities because they enable collective experiences for local residents, which eventually turn into shared memories, enriching and strengthening the identity of the city.

Shanghai is a huge city with a population of over 24 millionⁱ and since the beginning of China's economic reform in 1978 and its subsequent opening up to the West, the city has been under the influence of both Western and Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival are celebrated in Shanghai alongside modern state-organised and Western festivals, such as New Year and Christmas. What follows is an analysis of the current festival scene in Shanghai, observing the decline and changing nature of traditional festivals, and the invention and the public reception of modern festivals, particularly some of the festivals created and resourced by the government. It hopes to prompt questions on how a city should treat its traditions and how newly established events can themselves start to emerge as traditions truly embraced by local residents.

THE STAMPEDE AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

On 31st December 2014, shortly before midnight, around 310,000 local residents and tourists gathered in the north-east corner of Chenyi Square in the Bund area of Shanghai, waiting for the countdown to 2015 and the

light show that usually takes place afterwards. Tragically, a stampede caused a crush that killed 36 people and injured another 49. The whole of China was shocked and saddened by the unfortunate incident, which happened in one of its most well managed cities. After investigation, the Municipal Government of Shanghai published a reportⁱⁱ, announcing that the incident was a public safety liability case and the District Government of Huangpu District and Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Public Safety were liable for the incident. Later, 11 government officials in Shanghai, including one District Chief and two Deputy District Chiefs, were dismissed from their posts or seriously reprimanded on recordⁱⁱⁱ.

The tragedy was precipitated by a late change of venue from the Bund to the nearby Rockbund, with the new countdown ceremony planned for only 3000 people. However, the organising party, the Huangpu District Bureau of Tourism, only made the announcement of a venue change on 30th December, and most people did not receive this information. On New Year's Eve, when local people and tourists walked in the streets in a festive mood, they headed towards the Bund for the New Year countdown ceremony. The number of people congregating at the Bund reached around 310,000 and, as the authorities had

not anticipated this, there was a shortage of police to manage the crowds. This was officially regarded as a 'severe insufficiency in safety forces' in the investigation report. The following year, the government cancelled all the New Year countdown ceremonies in the Bund or the Rockbund area.

Following this incident, the New Year Folklore Lantern Festival at Yu Garden and the Lantern Festival at Fangta Garden and Guyi Garden (three gardens located in separate districts in Shanghai), which had previously been held annually, were all cancelled due to public safety concerns. The Lingyin Temple in nearby city Hangzhou also cancelled its Laba Rice Porridge Day event -- at which free porridge is given to the public on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month -- following the Bund incident. This event attracted about 30,000 people in the previous year.

These popular traditional celebrations were removed from the city's calendar, illustrating the challenges faced by government in managing big events and how vulnerable traditional festivals can be when confronted with the issues of public safety and control in modern cities. In fact, traditional festivals have been undergoing a long process of change since urbanisation began advancing in modern China. The physical and affective environment of the modern city is very different from the environment in which traditional festivals were born hundreds even thousands years ago. A procession in a small town or village can feel like a river flowing along its course, gathering crowds naturally, like banks on either side of the river, while the procession in a big city often feels like climbing a mountain - a desperate need to bypass all the tall buildings to have a better view. The number of cars in city streets

also makes natural gatherings and processions almost impossible, and a considerable police presence is required to control traffic and crowds in the practice of festivals or public celebrations. Having to be carefully planned, instead of happening spontaneously, can make festivals in modern cities less appealing to the government. However, festivals also often act as a showcase for a city's political, economic and cultural establishment, which has motivated governments all over the world to host and encourage public festivals, despite the huge responsibilities they present. This is the context of Shanghai's festival scene.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

In the past, families in China used to set off their own fireworks as a way of ringing out the old year and ringing in the new one during the Spring Festival. Because of safety concerns, this kind of family-oriented firework activity has been largely banned from Chinese cities in recent years, and replaced by public light shows or fireworks displays organised by local governments at landmark locations. Such public celebrations require detailed planning and financial investment, and have been tightly controlled, monitored and regulated at city level.

In this vein, traditional festivals in Shanghai have undergone a process of increased closure and, additionally, commodification. In 2015, while the Huangpu District Government announced that there would be no official New Year countdown activities in the local area (the ceremony used to be the landmark of the New Year celebration in the city), Xintiandi - New Heaven and Earth, a famous commercial and tourist area in Shanghai - announced that its neighbourhood park would be the only place

holding a New Year countdown ceremony in Huangpu District. The event, however, was not free of charge. Attendees needed to spend 1688 RMB (about 188 UK pounds) at a designated shopping malls two weeks before New Year's Eve to get a voucher for two tickets^{iv}. The event has been held by Xintiandi since 2003, and famous pop stars have often been invited to give performances on the stage. Marketing the event as the sole New Year countdown ceremony in the central District, the audience number was limited to 5000. The majority of the public was recommended to watch the countdown ceremony on TV or through streaming media, which hardly comprises direct access to 'public celebration'.

An earlier example of the commodification of traditional festivals in Shanghai is the Lantern Festival at Yu Garden. The Lantern Festival comes immediately after the Spring Festival – the fifteenth day after the Chinese New Year – and has been a source of public celebration for more than 2000 years. Embedded with rich folklore traditions, ceremonies and literatures such as legends and poems, the Lantern Festival is celebrated worldwide by the Chinese community. The Yuyuan (Yu Garden) Tourist Mart is a popular tourist and commercial area in Shanghai, redeveloped in the mid-1990s with clusters of shops selling souvenirs and other goods to tourists and local residents. The company running the shopping area have been holding an annual Lantern Show since 1995. The event is attended by millions of visitors each year, and was listed as National Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2010 due to the history it has enjoyed since the Ming Dynasty (A.D.1368-1644).

Following the stampede on the Bund, the Lantern Show at Yu Garden was cancelled

due to 'public safety concerns', which was a disappointment to local people and criticised by the media^v. In the following year, the company in charge resumed the show. The Lantern Show at the Yu Garden area is not a free event: a few days ahead of the Lantern Festival, the area is enclosed and visitors are charged an admission fee. The standard fee is 50 RMB (around 5 UK pounds) and an additional fee is charged on the Lantern Festival Day. From the organizing company's point of view, the policy and the charge is reasonable, and the Lantern Show has been popular among tourists and local residents. In fact, Yu Garden has been praised by local media as the best place to experience the true feeling of traditional festivals in Shanghai^{vi}. Comparing the Lantern Show run by a commercial company with the open public celebration at the Bund area that has disappeared from the public horizon, one might speculate that managed commodification is the best way for some of the traditional festivals to survive, and thrive, in modern society. However, does tradition have to find its room only when mediated by the market? I would like to suggest this is not necessarily the case.

The local residents and tourists appear quietly to have accepted the disappearance of the traditional free or low cost festivals, and accepted commodification as an option, when they want to have a taste of the 'traditional festivals'. It has become more accepted in China that charging for entry is a way to balance supply and demand. It is more widely believed (at least by organisers and governments at different levels) that if admission is free, public congregation in popular destinations such as the Yu Garden would be out of control, and incidents or tragedies would be just around the corner. The stampede on the Bund seems to have proven this point.

After the Bund incident, although the Municipal and the District governments of Shanghai appeared reluctant to organise large public celebrations for traditional festivals, their commitment to other major gatherings such as those based around the National Day, the Shanghai Tourism Festival, and some cultural ‘mega events’ continues. The dynamics between these different events, and the neglect of the traditional festival, and what this means for Shanghai as a rising city, are all ripe for discussion.



THE RISE OF THE MEGA EVENTS AND THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CITY

While traditional festivals have become under the increasing purview of the market, the government have also created several ‘mega events’ to promote the city and enrich its cultural life. These include the Shanghai Tourism Festival (created in 1990), the Shanghai International Film Festival (established in 1993), the Shanghai International Arts Festival (established in 1999), and Shanghai Citizens Art Festival (established in 2013). Like the creation of the Edinburgh International Arts Festival in post-war Britain, the new festivals in Shanghai were created with a

distinct purpose: to boost tourism and profile for the city and to cultivate and display local talents. However, while the Film Festival and the Arts Festival have been recognized by professionals and established their reputation in arts and cultural circles, the Tourism Festival and the Citizens Art Festival, which are open to the public and resemble a modern version of traditional festivals, are far from being embraced as ‘tradition’ by local residents.

Shanghai Tourism Festival (STF) was developed from the Huangpu District Tourism Festival, which debuted in 1990 as a means to promote the central district of Shanghai to international tourists and business people, and operated under the leadership of the District Government of Huangpu for six years. In 1996, the festival was transformed to become the STF, hosted by the Tourism Bureau, the Culture, Broadcasting, TV and Film Bureau, the Governing Committee of Pudong New District, the District Government of Huangpu District and Nanshi District. This upgrade expanded the scale of the festival and brought more international partners and attendees. Over the years, a standing committee and a subordinate company were set up to supervise and run the festival. For a number of years, the festival’s host organizations were three municipal governmental departments: the Tourism Bureau, the Culture, Broadcasting, TV and Film Bureau, and the Commerce Committee. 2019 marked the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, which prompted all the 16 District Governments of Shanghai being involved in the host list.

The festival normally lasts for around 20 days, starting on a Saturday in September. Activities such as sightseeing, leisure, entertainment, sports, exhibition, cuisine and shopping take

place all over the city during this time, which attracts 10 million people annually on average. Remarkably, the number of participants in 2019 reached 25.7 million, doubling the figure of the previous year (12.75 million in 2018)^{vii}. This record-breaking achievement demonstrated the mobilising power of the 16 local governments, as they co-organized 100 events and encouraged local communities to participate. Besides the events organized by the local governments, the majority of the activities are commercial such as shopping, cuisine and leisure.

The Shanghai Citizens Art Festival (SCAF) was created in 2013 under the leadership of the Municipal Bureau of Culture, Broadcasting, Film and TV. The goal of the festival is to enrich the cultural atmosphere of the city, to encourage and support civil cultural development and promote a vibrant cultural life for local residents.

In order to achieve this goal, the SCAF encourages and organises cultural activities at all levels including in community centres, District and citywide, and tries to attract and involve more local communities in cultural activities. One way of doing this is by organising arts competitions in choir, dance, theatre, photography, calligraphy, painting, writing, and family concerts (an ambitious plan, where some of the categories have met difficulties or found it impractical to be carried out every year). All the events are free for local residents to take part in. The SCAF aspired to create a new mechanism to achieve its goal, which has been summarised as: 'led by the government, supported by society, multiple contribution, collective benefits'^{viii}. However, with 45 District Governments and government departments as its supervision bodies, and a public-funded cultural division - Shanghai Mass Art Center,



which lacks authority or power over other organizations in the city - as its operating body^{ix}, the inspirational mechanism turns out often to be empty words.

An ambitious project, the festival lasts throughout the year and is divided into four seasons. The SCAF's website and WeChat account provides a comprehensive timetable of the current season's event programme running at the 230 community cultural centres, or other public spaces, with workshops or classes available on an almost daily basis. However, most of the activities take place during office hours, which excludes working people from participating. The civil arts competition looks like a good platform to mobilize local participation and discover talents; however, judging from the winning list of some of the competitions, the majority of the participants are retirees or senior groups. The young and middle-aged groups are seemingly not so attracted or involved, which partly undermines the government's unspoken ambition of creating a new tradition for the city to be embraced by all local residents and enjoyed year by year.

PUBLIC RECEPTION

In 2018, a research project themed on 'local residents' cultural consumption in the festivals in Shanghai' surveyed consumers of a range of festivals divided into five categories^x:

1. Traditional Chinese festivals, such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival;
2. Shanghai local folklore festivals, such as the Lantern Show at Yu Garden and the Temple Fair at the Longhua Temple;
3. Western festivals such as Christmas and Halloween;

4. Modern and national celebrations such as National Day and New Year;
5. Cultural, arts and tourism-related festivals such as Shanghai International Film Festival and Shanghai Tourism Festival.

According to researcher Cheng Peng's findings, local residents are less satisfied with the cultural provision during traditional Chinese festivals and local folklore festivals, compared with Western festivals and modern festivals: the 'very satisfied' rate was (across categories 1-5 above) 15.6%, 12.8%, 19% and 18.1% and 16.6 % respectively, and the 'dissatisfied' rate was 10.6%, 15%, 6.9%, 6.9% and 7.8% respectively^{xi}. The five categories shared a similar rate of 'generally satisfied' (each between 72% -- 75%), which shows the abundance of cultural provision in Shanghai and people's routine reception of it. Yet, a gap between the marketing and media profile of the festivals, and people's participation in them, was illustrated by a 2011 survey, which was carried out from September to October and covered the time of the STF. It found that fewer than 20% of the 448 respondents who had heard of STF (69% are local residents, and 31% are visitors from outside of Shanghai) attended its activities^{xii}. More than half of STF attendees are visitors from outside of Shanghai, domestically or internationally^{xiii}. A study in 2007 looked at the public awareness of three major festivals in Shanghai - Shanghai International Film Festival, Shanghai Tourism Festival and Shanghai International Arts Festival. The findings showed that local residents' participation, enthusiasm and loyalty to the three festivals was not very high, even though they recognised the importance of having the festival in the city^{xiv}. Actually, in Cheng Peng's research, local residents' acknowledgement of traditional

festivals are much higher than the newly created festivals: 50.6% of the respondents replies that they are 'highly aware of the coming and the activities of traditional festivals', only 12.8% so with the 'cultural, arts and tourism-related festivals' in the city^{xv}.

THE WAY FORWARD

The contradiction in Shanghai's festival scene is two-fold: on one hand, the traditional festivals have been neglected by the government and left to the market, with a foreseeable consequence that traditions will be eroded by the diluting effect of consumerism. On the other hand, the government has spent a large amount of money organising cultural 'mega events' to try to create new traditions and heritages for the city, as attempted by the Shanghai Tourism Festival and the Citizens Art Festival. However, despite good intentions, these events have the shortage and life-draining effect of being 'provided' to the citizens, instead of being mobilized, actively created and participated in by them. Yet these latter qualities are where true tradition must grow from. A major issue here is the reluctance of the government to take the opportunity to cultivate civil bodies during the operation of the major new festivals.

The suspension of the government-led Longhua Temple Fair and the popularity of the Lantern Festival at Yu Garden illuminate the problems of government-run festivals. The market appears to be a more powerful and efficient force in allocating resources and balancing supply and demand. However, this does not rule out the need for government to provide the opportunities and space of collective cultural activities for its citizens, where new traditions can be born. In 'The Invention of Tradition' (1983), British historian Eric Hobsbawm claimed

that 'traditions' which appear to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. There are 'traditions' which have been constructed and formally introduced as well as those which emerge in a less easily traceable manner and establish themselves with great rapidity. He gives the Cup Final in British Association Football as an example of the latter^{xvi}. Therefore, the problem with an invented tradition doesn't lie in the fact that it was invented by someone or some organisation, but in the issues involved during and after the invention, that is, which bodies or communities should implement it to make it a true tradition? This question is persistent and crucial in the current festival scene in Shanghai.

From its origin, a festival is a celebration expressed by the freedom and resonance of spirit and soul, which are best realized through free participation and voluntary activities on the part of the public. The key issue of festival activities in Shanghai, it seems, lies in the imbalance between government leadership and local, voluntary involvement and empowerment, be it mediated through the market or not.



NOTES

- ⁱ *The Overall Population of Shanghai*, 2017. <http://www.shanghai.gov.cn/nw2/nw2314/nw3766/nw3783/nw3784/u1aw9.html>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ⁱⁱ *The Investigation Report of the “12•31” Stampede in the Bund area of Shanghai*, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0121/c1001-26424342.html>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Investigation Report Announcement of the “12-31” Stampede in the Bund area of Shanghai*, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-01/21/c_1114075965.htm, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^{iv} Zhu, Ling. 2015. *The New Year Countdown Continues at Xin Tiandi*, http://www.sohu.com/a/49424056_114812, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^v *The Lantern Show at Yu Garden was Canceled Local Residents disappointed with Festive Reduction*, 2015, <http://news.sohu.com/20150113/n407770892.shtml>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^{vi} Cao, Lingjuan. 2016, *Yu Garden Lantern Show Arrives on Time This Year*, <http://sh.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0131/c134768-27664239.html>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^{vii} *Shanghai Tourism Festival: A Perfect Curtain Fell*, 2019, <http://sh.eastday.com/m/20191006/u1ai20046645.html>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^{viii} Yan, Weiqi. 2017. *2017 Shanghai Citizen Arts Festival Opens its Curtain*, http://difang.gmw.cn/sh/2017-03/22/content_24035103.htm, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^{ix} <http://www.smwhj.org.cn/eastday/enjoy1/smwhj/n967872/n973295/u1ai8848657.html>, last accessed on 23rd Nov. 2019.
- ^x Cheng, Peng. 2019. Research on the inheritance and protection of folk festivals intangible cultural heritage in Shanghai, *Annual Report on Intangible Cultural Heritage Development of Shanghai* (2019). 174-183.
- ^{xi} Ibid. p.177.
- ^{xii} Fang, Bin. 2012. *Research on the Objective Influencing Factors of Public Participation in the Shanghai Tourism Festival*. May, Dissertation for the MA on Tourism Management, Shanghai Normal University.
- ^{xiii} LUO, Yeyun. 2015. Research on Tourism Festival' s Innovative Development on Promoting Coherent City Image, *Media Today*, Issue 2, 2015. 165-167.
- ^{xiv} Xu, Aiping. Lou, Jiajun & Wang, Juan. 2011. Research on the Public Awareness of Shanghai's Festival Activities, *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, Vol.24 No.6 Jun. 2011. 51-54.
- ^{xv} Cheng, Peng. 2019. Research on the inheritance and protection of folk festivals intangible cultural heritage in Shanghai, *Annual Report on Intangible Cultural Heritage Development of Shanghai* (2019). 174-183.
- ^{xvi} Hobsbawm, Eric. & Ranger, Terence. 2012. Eds, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2012 (Reissue).

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