

Shanghai: Formula One™s last ride

By Kerry Brown,
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Shanghai lobbied hard to get the right to host Formula One. The city sent letters and delegations to the office of Bernie Ecclestone, and even had to fight off a counter-approach by the inland city of Xi'an. Its persistence was rewarded [1]. In 2003, it held the first-ever race, on a brand new, state-of-the-art course. To Shanghai [2], it was another symbolic advance in its long campaign to become *the* modern city of Asia.

Formula One should appeal in China. Like the bustling, hectic life on the streets, it's a sport without pause, or reflection. The noise and power of the cars acts as a metaphor for what China, and Shanghai in particular, has become - non-stop juggernauts [6] of growth, leaving trails of smoke in their wake as they forge ahead. Socialism, at least in Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's [7] China, was always about progress, hurtling forward. It appeals to the Chinese that F1 cars never go in reverse.

The circuit is an impressive sight: an hour's drive along newly constructed highroads from the mighty Bund [8] in the centre of the city. Shanghai, with 2,000 skyscrapers over twenty stories tall, might be one of the most densely populated places on the planet. But at least out where the racing is, there is some open space. Like the skyscrapers, what might take years to build in the west was put together in the space of a matter of months. Even four years on, the place looks like it was opened yesterday. The grass still looks like it is getting settled in. There are a few, immature trees. The buildings by the track still have the smell of plaster, concrete and paint.

It wasn't ever very likely that a project this size, involving this amount of money, was ever going to avoid the great endemic of modern Chinese public life: corruption. In September 2006, the number-one Communist Party official in the city, British-educated Chen Liangyu [9], was felled for involvement in massive graft scandals involving housing and pension funds. But everyone knows here that he would have only sat at the tip of a very large iceberg [10]. Under him were hundreds of thousands of other officials and business-people up to every imaginable scam. After the fanfare of the circuit opening, therefore, the usual rumours of impropriety circled around. The track had been built with dirty money, and gained by backhanders, favours, and graft.

That might account for the lack of politicians at the event on 5-7 October 2007 [11]. Party officials are always eager for the chance to leave their prints over any event, no matter how seemingly low profile it might seem. The F1 is a big deal, a sport with a global audience, and

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Also by Kerry Brown on **openDemocracy**:

"China's top fifty: the China power list [5]" (2 April 2007)

"China goes global [5]" (2 August 2007)

"China's party congress: getting serious [5]" (5 October 2007)

massive media coverage. But Shanghai's two leading political figures - its new party secretary Xi Jinping [12], and its longer-term mayor Han Zheng [13] - are nowhere to be seen, either during the practice days or when the big race itself starts. For once, it seems the threat of reviving claims of corruption has preserved the sport from the sort of political manipulation that afflicts everything else in this city [13], and country.

The result is to give the 2007 event an oddly genuine international feel. There are no opening declarations from red-festooned podiums by leaders with fiercely slicked-down, dyed hair; no ribbon-cutting ceremonies, with *qi-pao* clad young women draped around impassive-looking senior party officials; no resounding words of praise for a "more open, more prosperous, more developed China". There is only the briefest playing of the Chinese national anthem as the cars rev up and get ready on the starting-grid. Then a nervous pause, as a few of the English-language banners imploring Lewis Hamilton [14] or Fernando Alonso [15] to win flutter amid a few specks of rain in the slight, pre-typhoon breeze, before the cars tear off.

The great divide

Shanghai's attentions, like China's generally, have been refocusing around the gigantic, global event of the Olympic games [16] in Beijing on 8-24 August 2007. But the city is also already looking beyond, to its hosting of the World Expo [17] on 1 May-31 October 2010. The F1 is hardly on the same scale, but even with the job well done it may strike the Chinese attending that, with no Chinese driver, it's not after all really "their" sport; more just another piece of westernisation they feel they need to buy into, but nothing that, in the immortal words of Mao Zedong (in talking about revolution) "touches the soul".

The impression is reinforced by the visual contrast between (on one side) the cavalcade of phenomenally well-paid drivers, technicians, car-company executives and corporate guests and (on the other) the hordes of people who line the roads towards the circuit holding out forged tickets, parking permits, and pit-stop tags. At a slightly further remove, the peasants working on nearby fields appear quietly indifferent to the astounding parade of wealth and privilege.

Perhaps the peasants are right. China, indeed, would never have got anywhere without their back-breaking labour [18] in the early years of the reform period; and today, the surplus labour from the farms now moves into the cities to build the mighty skyscrapers that are coming to dominate the urban landscape. They, along with many members of the new Chinese middle class in the city, must wonder whether all the effort, investment and work to get Formula One was really worth it.

An indication of the ordering of the event is that the evening headlines on the night of Lewis Hamilton's sudden exit [19] focus not on the race but on the "special Olympics [20]" being held at the same time, on 2-11 October. In some ways. Shanghainese have moved on before Formula One even had a chance to arrive.

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