

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

### Human rights violations deprive entertainers at Splendid China

Central Florida Future  
Letters to the Editors:  
January 10, 1995

I am an employee at Splendid China, and the reason I am writing to you is to inform you of the many injustices that are currently conducted against the Chinese entertainers here.

Splendid China officially opened on Dec 13, 1993. The purpose of the park is to provide a cultural exchange between our country and China.

It is true that the performers here are providing a taste of China with their colorful costumes and performances, but it is not a mutual cultural exchange between our country and China. The entertainers are being culturally exploited by the local director of Splendid China, Mr. Ma. The entertainers are merely puppets sent from Mainland China to perform for the American public. They are not allowed to fraternize with the locals. This includes engaging in conversations with Americans, riding in their cars and visiting their homes. Furthermore, Mr. Ma took all the entertainers documents which include their working visa, travel documents and social security cards. He presently has them under lock and key. To control them even further, they are not given any valid ID. He has the power to freeze their bank accounts so that they will not be able to access their money until they return to China. Presently, all the performers have an account with Barnett Bank. And I have reason to believe that Splendid China currently owns and operates a Barnett Branch. Splendid China also currently owns and operates a Days Inn Hotel which is nearby Splendid China. All the performers are presently staying at the east side of the hotel and are not allowed to have "outsiders" in their rooms. Plus, none of the performers are allowed to receive or make phone calls. Mr. Ma enforces this rule by posting a security guard at the east side of the building. If any of the performers get caught breaking Mr. Ma's rules regarding fraternization with Americans, they are required to pay a \$100 fine. And there are rumors that a concentration camp will be built to house these Chinese performers so that it will protect them from "foreign influences."

As you can see, the performers here at Splendid China are treated like criminals. As one performer said to me, "I have a lot more freedom in China than here. I thought that this was supposed to be a free country." Splendid China was built to provide a cultural exchange between our two countries. This hasn't been the case so far. How are they going to learn about our culture and our country if they are constantly being watched?

I ask you to help these people by doing an undercover investigation. You can start by driving to the Days Inn hotel and checking the security that is posted on the east side to verify my story. Maybe you can stay at the hotel for one night and secretly invite one of the performers for an interview. But you must do this covertly so that you can gather all the necessary evidence to support my story. You will need an interpreter who can speak Mandarin fluently because the entertainers can speak only a little English.

I risk losing my job if anyone here finds out that I am writing this letter to you, so at this time I would like to remain anonymous. I feel it my moral obligation as an American to make this country aware of the injustices that are presently happening in our own backyard and to insure that these people are treated with dignity. I hope that once they can get their freedom, they will learn more from our ideals of human rights, our culture, and our freedom.

One day, once they return to China, they will share their experience in America with their fellow citizens.

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### Global Village: Surreal Shenzhen brings the world's wonders to China

Far Eastern Economic Review  
January 26, 1995  
Nury Vittachi

#### Excerpt from page 37

... There are no fewer than three other parks to visit, making Shenzhen China's Florida. One, Splendid China, sits next to Window of the World. This quaintly named theme park features miniature versions of the wonders of China. Some lose a bit of their majesty in miniature: the Great Wall, for example, is reduced to a pebble parapet. The nearby China Folk Culture Villages features 24 life-sized 'villages' from the country's minority nationalities. Genuine Tibetans, Mongols, Dais, Dongs, Gaohans and others entertain visitors with their homespun dancing and music. In the evening, a laserbeam show dazzles the audience - although it's not clear which Chinese tribe claims to have originated these lights in the sky.

Some displays are highly realistic. British visitors were upset that a group of Kazakh mountain goats were kept on uncomfortably short leashes - until the rams looked up from their grazing, and gave an electronic "baa-aa-aa," betraying their electromechanical innards.

It's doubtful that China's replica theme parks can be successfully transplanted to the West.

A copy of the Splendid China park opened in Florida, near Orlando's Disneyworld, in December 1993, but had a quiet first year. reports say only about 700 to 1,000 visitors a day entered during the high summer season, compared to 33,000 a day in the Magic Kingdom, a nearby Disney attraction of the same size.

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### Splendid Mess: On the Anniversary of an uprising, park miniatures still incite big debate

Orlando Weekly March 9-15, 1995

by John Bankston

At the Potala Palace replica, a quarter gives tourists a quick viewing of a reproduced religious artifact. It's one of many displays that Splendid China officials believe offer an opportunity to experience the beauty of a region many have yet to discover. But to critics, it's a crass commercialization that demeans a Tibetan people persecuted for decades by the Chinese government that conquered their country.

When the park of miniature architectural and geographic reproductions opened Dec. 19, 1993, the event was marked by small but significant protests. Around 60 people, including representatives of the International Campaign for Tibet, gathered outside the park's gates.

Inside, four Tibetan Buddhist monks, dressed in ceremonial garb, silently prayed before the Potala Palace miniature. It is a place that to them recalls a horrific past that began 36 years ago this week with the Chinese occupation of Tibet and continues with the exile of their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

Although the park allowed the monks' religious protest to go on, officials did prohibit the display of signs or any attempts to talk with tourists about the park. "They realized it was a lose-lose proposition. If they kept us out, they'd have to keep out Tibetans who grew up in Potala," says John Ackerly, director of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT).

Sam Mok doesn't see it that way. As chief executive officer for G.L. Associates, a management consulting firm in Washington DC, he has been guiding Splendid China executives since before the park's opening. "We don't know if they are Tibetan monks. I'm an auditor/accountant by training, so I always question things," Mok says. In fact, he compares the opening day actions to those that accompanied the Vietnam War; as Mok puts it, most war protesters couldn't find Vietnam on a map.

Since that first day, there have been mixed signs concerning the effectiveness of the campaign to shame Splendid China. ICT regularly sponsors protests outside the main gate, despite the fact that according to organizers, Splendid China has tried to stop them. Yet since the road to the gate is funded with public money, there is little that park officials can do other than watch.

In addition, the Tibetan rights campaign has found an unusual ally in Adam Yauch, a member of the rock/rap group Beastie Boys. Yauch, who performed on the Lollapalooza tour last year, was responsible for the appearance of the eight Tibetan monks who opened each show on the tour with a prayer. Yauch also has spoken against Splendid China at his performances. (A small anti-Splendid China concert had been planned for the day before the tour hit Central Florida last summer, but weather prevented it.)

Such activities are described by Ackerly as "very successful in terms of a lot of national media - we were able to show what they were up to and who actually owns the place."

Indeed, who owns the park has been the subject of some dispute. Splendid China officials won't comment on ownership, and Mok answers that he honestly doesn't know. Although the park is technically owned by China Travel Service Holdings Inc., a publicly traded Hong Kong company, numerous pieces in the Hong Kong press and elsewhere have pegged the true owner as the People's Republic of China. One piece in the New York Times characterized the holding company as one of the largest companies owned by the Chinese Government in Hong Kong.

It is this ownership that is such a source of consternation for human-rights groups like the International Campaign. Even A.M. Rosenthal, a nationally syndicated columnist for the Times, describes the modern-day Tibet as a "concentration camp." His opinion of the park? "The idea of the captors using the captives to promote their own goods is disgusting." He told the Orlando Weekly.

Ackerly says his organization has even mailed letters to travel agents and school superintendents requesting that they not encourage field trips to the park - not that the affected numbers are significant. The Far Eastern Economic Review reported in January that, during the height of the past summer season, Splendid China counted no more than 700-1,000 visitors a day. It may be a sign of distress that the park recently named a new president, Yu Jianin, who studied business management at Harvard.

Erin Potts, director of the pro-Tibetan Milarepa Fund and spokesman for Yauch, sees the park apparent struggle as a sign that the protests are working. "I foresee in the near future that they will have to remove the Potala Palace because the pressure will continue and, economically, it will be difficult for them to maintain it with the protests." Mok counters that such fiscal challenges reflect normal growing pains. As for the protests?

He compares them to the people who have attacked the embattled National Endowment for the Arts. "I consider Splendid China to be an art and cultural kind of thing - good art, good cultural exhibitions always generate controversy."

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### Teachers Rally Against Splendid China

11/06/95 The St. Petersburg Times

A Pinellas educator and the teachers union want the School Board to ban field trips to the park because of its portrayal of Tibet.

From the day it opened nearly two years ago, the Splendid China theme park has gone after the educational field trip market, offering special rates and tours for student groups. And every day, several public-school buses roll into the \$100 million attraction in Kissimmee for a few hours of entertainment and education. But a Pinellas County school teacher believes that Splendid China is misleading visitors, especially in its portrayal of Tibet, a tiny neighbor invaded by China in the 1950s.

Now high school teacher Dennis Harrison has asked the Pinellas County School Board to take a stand against China's subjugation of Tibet, and remove Splendid China from the district's list of approved field trips.

"I know that this isn't the biggest issue on everyone's mind," said Harrison, who teaches at Pinellas Technical Education Center. "But its an opportunity to show that we stand for what we teach. If we teach justice and non-violence, then we ought to stand up for it."

Harrison has the backing of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association, which voted this week to urge teachers and their families not to visit Splendid China. The union has also joined Harrison in urging the School Board to ban field trips to the park.

So now the board is faced with an issue that has frustrated Western politicians and diplomats for decades: how to deal with human rights abuses by one of the most powerful but thin-skinned regimes in the world. A decision is expected this month. "No, this is not your typical School Board issue," said Betty Douglas, the supervisor of secondary social studies for Pinellas schools, and the woman who must make a recommendation for board action. "Its a fascinating issue, but it's not an easy call to make."

Indeed, Douglas has found no easy answers. Experts tend to agree that the China/Tibet issue is a thorny one, and that things are not as rosy as portrayed in the theme park. One of Splendid China's miniature architectural wonders at the park is the Lhasa Potala Palace, a structure surrounded by porcelain Tibetans in colorful robes. In reality, the monastery in Tibet was nearly destroyed in the Chinese invasion, and monks are no longer allowed to pray there.

Now, years after the Chinese occupation and occasional reports of killings and torture, Tibetans still hope to regain their independence, or at least retain their separate language, culture and Buddhist religion.

Given the troubling facts, the question is what, if anything, the Pinellas School Board should do.

Harvey Nelson, professor of international studies and modern Asian history at the University of South Florida, had this to say: "Clearly the problem of human rights abuse in Tibet is a serious one. It's pretty horrendous. But does that mean that students should be prohibited from visiting this park ? I don't think so."

"If a teacher wants to visit the park and say something about Chinese imperialism, they're free to do so."

A different point of view is held by Nathan Katz, professor of religious studies a Florida International University. "I enjoy the park, but I do object to the inclusion of Tibetans and other minorities under the rubric of being Chinese," he said.

"The park is intended to be entertainment and education, but when you're talking about a field trip, you're talking about education. This is propaganda and misinformation by the Chinese. I would take it off the field trip list."

The 76-acre theme park southwest of Orlando is no stranger to controversy. Even before it opened, protesters sought to call attention to the Tibetan issue.

And the theme park has sought to deflect criticism. "Our park has nothing to do with the politics," said Splendid China spokeswoman Ellen Siu. "The best thing is to come in and see for yourself. We can show the architecture, the culture, and the art of Asia. We really don't want to touch on the politics side."

But critics say the park is all about politics. "It is run by a Chinese agency; it's run by the Chinese government," said John Ackerly, director of the International Campaign for Tibet. "The reason the park is here is because the Chinese government wants to improve it's image in the West. That's political."

For two years, Ackerly's organization has urged school groups to stay away from Splendid China, though he is unaware of any districts that have banned trips to the park. Ackerly's concern is that teachers and students will be unfamiliar with the Tibetan controversy and will unknowingly accept Splendid China's view of the world.

From what Douglas has learned in Pinellas County, it appears that Ackerly's fears are well-founded. Douglas has spoken with teachers at the handful of Pinellas schools that already visited the park to see how they handled the issue. They generally were unaware of the Tibetan controversy, she found.

Regardless of what decision the school board makes, Harrison hopes to raise the awareness of the issue.

Katz, the FIU professor, said the decision by the school board members might be more significant than they realize.

"The main hope for Tibetan independence is for the world to keep focusing on the issue," he said. The Chinese are well aware of what happens in Orlando and in Splendid China. I think that Beijing will be interested to see what happens in Pinellas County."

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### Transcript of Pacifica Radio News 11/95

Announcer: A teacher in Pinellas County Florida who teaches about conflict resolution and human rights, is putting what he teaches into practice. He along with the Teacher's Union is asking the School board to ban all field trips to the Splendid China theme park located next to Walt Disney World. The theme park has a miniature replica of the Potala Palace a sacred sight of Tibet. But makes no mention of Chinese occupation and human rights violations since 1949. Bill George looks into the conflict over the central Florida theme park.

Splendid China announcer: The Chinese are famous for their skills and creativity and unique styles of acrobatics, next we bring you a very interesting act ladies and gentlemen please welcome Mr. Wu Jougui (Chinese music)

Bill: The audience reacts with delight as the performer throws a hand made boomerang over their heads, the 100 million dollar, 76-acre park is an outdoor walkthrough museum with shops, restaurants, and live shows. There is an identical park in China, both theme parks are owned by China Travel Services, a Chinese Government owned company. The theme park targets its marketing to senior citizens and students.

Siu: Hi, Ni Hao, I'm Ellen Siu director of corporate communications

Bill: Siu gives a tour of the 60 miniature replicas of famous sights and monuments in China.

Siu: I like to draw attention to the great wall on your right, now this great wall here is half a mile long. Even the material that used in this great wall, this miniature great wall, is the exact replica I mean of the real one. Just imagine we have used six and a half million small bricks in building this half a mile long great wall.

Audio tour tape: The Potala Palace located in the heart of the old Lhasa capital of the Tibet autonomous regions was built in the seventh century by king Songtsam Gampo 617 to 665...

Bill: The audio tour makes no mention of the palace being the monastery for Tibetan buddhist monks and a residence successively for Dalai Lamas for more than 300 years It also fails to mention the Potala Palace was bombed in 1959 by the Chinese government. which forced the current Dalai Lama to flee into exile. The monastery is no longer used for religious practice, but is a museum. Again, spokesperson Ellen Siu.

Siu: I really wouldn't comment on this, as I've said the only reason why we have the Potala Palace in this park is really we want people to appreciate the art and the beauty of it.

Bill: Do you think it represents China?

Siu: (long silence)

Bill: Siu never responded to the question. She repeated that the architecture is the reason the palace was selected to be in the theme park.

Siu: This is purely a commercial setup we wouldn't want to touch on the political side.

Bill: In front of the palace are hundreds of ceramic hand sized figurines in traditional Tibetan dress. For a quarter, the figurines will unroll a six foot tapestry of the Buddha. Siu encourages everyone to come and see for themselves what the park is all about. Last year, 20,000 students walked through the gates of Splendid China, where they strolled, watched a show, and ate a fast food Chinese meal.

(sounds of machinery)

Two hours from Splendid China is P-tech, Pinellas Technical education center. The school offers an alternative education program, and special education for high school students. Students study everything from automotive repair, to welding, to business skills. Dennis Harrison, who was named teacher of the year in 1989, teaches conflict resolution, multi cultural studies, and drop out prevention. He also trains other teachers in conflict resolution, a process of giving kids skills to get along when they have disagreements. Harrison's commitment to peace and non-violence interested him in Tibet. He says it

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was the Chinese government that brought the issue to his doorstep. According to Amnesty International and the United Nations, more than a million Tibetans have been tortured, starved, or beaten to death as a result of Chinese occupation.

Harrison: I really have serious concerns about our students being given the message that yes there is a genocide taking place in Tibet, but let's ignore that, let's put that aside and go to this entertainment theme park for the day and have a good time, have some amusing times watching some jugglers or having some Chinese food. The message there that the students get is that it is alright to ignore the genocide, it's alright to ignore the pain.

Bill: And the real message Harrison says wants student to learn is...

Harrison: That we are not going to go to this theme park as a way of supporting Tibet, and its culture and its people. If our students get that message then that message is a message of learning how to stand for justice, and to do what's right, and to have compassion and to have a sense of universal responsibility.

(crowd chants China out of Tibet, China out of Tibet, China out of Tibet)

Bill: Two years ago, Splendid China opened in a cloud of controversy. 45 protestors showed up on opening day. Four Tibetan Buddhist monks, including one who fled after he witnessed the Potala Palace bombing, wept in front of the replica. Demonstrators waved Tibetan flags and held signs that read "Free Tibet". John Ackerly, director of the International Campaign for Tibet, has made numerous trips to Tibet. Ackerly has asked the park repeatedly to remove the Tibetan exhibit which management has ignored. He says the park is a whitewash of China's history.

Ackerly: The park portrays Tibet and Tibetans as a very peaceful place where everyone is happy and practicing their religion freely and in fact the opposite really is the case. Today the monasteries in Tibet are under incredibly close control and surveillance by the government and this park is very deceptive.

Bill: Ackerly says the Tibetan culture is deeply rooted in Buddhism, by repressing their religion, the Chinese government is striking at the heart of their identity. The Chinese now outnumber Tibetans six to one in Tibet. Ackerly says everywhere you look there are Chinese soldiers and numerous military checkpoints.

Ackerly: It's a very tense place, and uh one of the only places in the world that I've been when you're walking in the street and people will literally grab you and pull you aside and stuff pieces of paper in your hand, and that will be appeals to the United Nations and to the U.S. government to help them. And that is a common occurrence, when you're in Tibet.

Bill: A representative and the Pinellas county school board has recommended that student be allowed to visit the park as long as they are briefed on the issues regarding Tibet before and after the visit. But Harrison says he'll present the issue again in an upcoming meeting. Ackerly says he'll be back in Florida this spring to continue protests and Splendid China says that it will increase marketing, add a Panda exhibit, and eventually a ride such as travelling through the dynasties.

For Pacifica Network News I'm Bill George in Kissimmee Florida.

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### Clearwater, Florida to Ban the School Visits to China Theme Park

11/06/95

Reuters/Variety

CLEARWATER, Florida (Reuter) -

Public school teachers voted Monday to halt student field trips to a theme park operated by a Chinese government agency because they said it gives an inaccurate portrayal of Tibet.

The Pinellas Classroom Teachers' Association said they had voted to urge teachers and their families not to visit the \$100 million theme park because of what one educator called "propaganda and misinformation" about Tibet.

"It's an opportunity to show we stand for what we teach," said teacher Dennis Harrison of Clearwater. "If we teach justice and non-violence, then we ought to stand up for it."

The Splendid China park, south of Orlando near Disney World, opened nearly two years ago.

China invaded Tibet in 1950, and the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, later went into exile with tens of thousands of followers.

In the Maoist Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, fanatics destroyed all but a handful of Tibet's 2,000 monasteries. One of the park's exhibits is a model of Tibet's Lhasa Potala Palace, surrounded by statues of Tibetans in colorful robes.

"Our park has nothing to do with politics," said Splendid China spokeswoman Ellen Siu.

But John Ackerly, spokesman for the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "The park is here because the Chinese government wants to improve its image in the West. That's political."

Reuters/Variety

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