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Theme park to get 'Splendid' makeover  
One good sign: They're mowing the lawn again at China-owned attraction.  
Alan Byrd Staff Writer

KISSIMMEE -- The great weeds along the Great Wall are gone.

With a new manager at the helm and a renewed commitment from the Chinese government, Splendid China has started back on the road to recovery.

"We want to restore Splendid China's reputation," says Xiaoning Cao, the park's president and CEO, through an interpreter.

The theme park's public image has been tarnished in recent months, as poor ticket sales, crumbling attractions and a lawsuit overshadowed its once-bright promise: a \$100 million venture replicating several of China's most famous attractions -- in miniature.

But despite the heavyweight backing, the park -- which is partly owned by the mainland China government -- has struggled since opening day, when about 3,000 people entered the gates.

Attendance has dropped to 200 a day. At one point, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported, the attraction was losing \$9 million a year. By May of last year, Massachusetts-based Brookhill LLC had struck a deal to buy the attraction at bargain-basement prices. Shortly after the sale fell through, park executive Sunny Yang disappeared, reportedly being held under house arrest in China for mismanaging the park's finances.

As word spread through the tourism community about the problems, guest services companies, which sell attraction tickets to tourists and groups and are the lifeblood of most small attractions, tossed promotional materials for Splendid China in the trash.

"When they were in that stage of limbo, a lot of guest services quit selling them," says Jim Donovan, director of marketing for the Sheraton Four Points Lakeside, which is near Splendid China. "They didn't want to send customers there because they didn't know if it would be open."

Now, though, there appears to be a concerted effort to bring the attraction back up to par.

"The park is looking better," says former owner George Chen, who developed the park. "Mr. Cao is much more on top of things. He did start mowing the grass."

Cao clearly hopes to do much more.

Armed with \$2 million to upgrade the park, Cao will be bringing over artisans from China to renovate the exhibits during the next 90 days.

And after that is complete, the park will focus on bringing the guests back through increased entertainment options, including one special event a month.

The attraction started with its first event this month. In addition, Splendid China has started a new organization for Chinese children adopted in the United States. Next month, the attraction is hosting a reunion of former United States diplomats.

And later in the year, Splendid China will host an international martial arts festival and performances by the top Chinese acrobat troupe.

It's the stuff that Chen says the park should be doing.

"They need to do a lot of hands-on stuff," he says. "When they do that in China, they are very popular."

Already, it seems to be paying off. Attendance is up by a couple hundred a day. The park says it is handling about all the group business it can handle. And some of the nighttime shows are playing to packed houses.

Certainly Cao has the resume to breathe new life into the attraction.

Early in his career, Cao was a dancer, eventually moving into choreography and management. Among his accomplishments: producing the Chinese celebration of Hong Kong's return to Chinese control.

His most recent stint was at the Chinese Splendid China attraction, where he was vice president of entertainment for that successful park.

He hopes to bring some of that to Central Florida. "We definitely want to bring in more entertainment from Asia," Cao says.

The park's owners also appear determined to make a go of the park, says Splendid China spokesman Al Riley. "If people think this is just communist propaganda, it's not."

Florida Trend June 2001

Forbidden City

Can a new CEO lift the veil - and revenues - at China's troubled theme park in Orlando?

By Cynthia Barnett

On a spring day in Kissimmee, traffic backs up for miles along U.S. 192. Cars on their way to Disney inch past a huge pair of brightly painted Chinese dragons that clash with the garish signage for Taco Bell, World of Denim and countless minor attractions that line this main drag of Florida tourism. The dragons lure only an occasional driver onto a quiet road that winds under a pagoda on its way to Florida's most troubled theme park.

Splendid China Florida, a 76-acre compound owned by the People's Republic of China, is long on tranquility and short on thrills. Visitors pay \$28.88 to wander miles of sidewalks that wind through gardens, ponds and more than 60 handmade miniature replicas of famous Chinese sites such as the Forbidden City in Beijing and the terra cotta warriors of Xian. A 30-inch tall Great Wall meanders for about half a mile. Some 35,000 figurines inhabit Lilliputian villages and palaces, while large statues, including a 30-foot Leshan Grand Buddha, match the scale of their originals.

At the moment, however, the park is splendid only in its disarray. Many figurines, crafted by Chinese artisans, lie in pieces, with heads or hands broken off. Algae clog the peaceful ponds. Weeds grow through cracks in temples. Ants have moved into the miniature villages like invading armies. And tourists are scarce. On a perfect Friday afternoon, as some 70,000 people clink through the turnstiles at the Magic Kingdom two miles east, fewer than 100 visit Splendid China, most of them schoolchildren on a field trip. "This is dead," complains Joseph Chen, a Chinese-born editor from Maryland visiting with his two young sons. "There's no interaction. No roller coasters, no noise."

Cultural bridge

That's pretty much what the park's founder had in mind. Splendid China is the brainchild of a Taiwanese-American named Josephine Chen, who wanted to create a quiet celebration of China's landmarks and landscapes as a cultural bridge between Chinese and Americans. Well-known in Taiwan as an educator, she made a name for herself - and a good bit of money - in the U.S. as a real estate developer. When she traveled to China in 1989, officials gave her a VIP tour of a theme park under construction outside Hong Kong. Chen loved Splendid China Shenzhen, which has drawn huge crowds since opening day with performance art and miniature depictions of Chinese landmarks. She negotiated with its Hong Kong-based developer, China Travel Service (CTS), to build a similar park in Orlando. Listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, CTS is the largest tourism firm in China and owns travel agencies, theme parks and performing arts groups, among other companies. The mainland government owns the majority of its stock. Chen put up the land for Splendid China Florida, while CTS brought in 120 builders, masons and artists who worked for two years to create toy-like villages, temples and palaces using some 8 million tiny bricks. The final price tag: \$110 million.

But Chen and her son George, the park's first president, say they had a hard time dealing with the Communist officials who controlled CTS - men George Chen describes as paranoid, dictatorial and corrupt. Among other things, he says they pressured him to provide high-paying jobs and work visas to children of high-ranking officials - kids who couldn't speak English and weren't qualified to work at the park.

One week before Splendid China Florida opened in December 1993, CTS bought out the Chens. It was clear, George Chen says, that the government wanted complete control.

The problem was, the government didn't know much about running an American theme park. Prices were too high. The park did almost no advertising or marketing. And secretive executives didn't go out of their way to make friends in Orlando's business community. For almost all of the park's eight-year history, neither its CTS managers nor the American PR executives they hired would acknowledge the government's ownership share in CTS.

Missteps

Former CEO Sunny Yang now gets most of the blame for Splendid China's physical decline. Al Riley, a longtime employee and one of the first U.S. diplomats in China in the 1970s, says Yang spent park proceeds on himself rather than on maintenance.

Yang also set his sights on selling the park - though whether he did so with the support of CTS is a matter of speculation. Last May, he reached a deal with a Massachusetts company called Brookhill LLC to sell Splendid China Florida for \$56.5 million.

Word of the sale - and the possibility that the park would be razed for housing - sparked anger among Chinese in both Beijing and the U.S. Soon, the deal was off. The government hauled Yang back to China, where he remains under house arrest, according to park officials.

Brookhill has sued to try to force the sale, but the case is stalled in Osceola Circuit Court because Brookhill's attorney can't get Yang back to the U.S. for a deposition.

Some park employees say privately that they believe Yang is just a scapegoat for his bosses' poor business practices. About the same time Yang was negotiating to sell the park, China Travel Service's chairman in Hong Kong came under investigation by Beijing and was replaced, according to the South China Morning Post.

Last hope?

Yang's replacement at the park is a former ballet dancer and choreographer named Xiaoning Cao (pronounced "Chow") who thinks he can make Splendid China splendid once again. "There are a lot of challenges involved," he says through an interpreter. "But the park has incredible potential."

Cao, a 45-year-old workaholic who was an executive with Splendid China Shenzhen, has spent his first six months at the helm on the basics: Making sure the weeds are pulled and the paint is bright. Maintaining the sprawling grounds is tough. As revenues have fallen, the number of employees has dipped from more than 500 when the park opened to about 90 today. Everybody does manual labor. Each employee - from the lowest-paid to the highest - has a section of the grounds to keep free of weeds. Cao rolls up his sleeves and paints. Even the park's performers, including children, are tapped for grunt work.

Since Cao arrived last summer, attendance has risen from fewer than 100 a day to an average of around 300. Cao says he can break even with 500 a day - and he has a plan.

Cao's vision of Splendid China's future is shaped by his experience as the head of one of the largest performing arts companies in Beijing, a CTS company called China Heaven Creation that he still runs. The company books top Chinese dance, acrobatic and other stage performances all over the globe.

Cao thinks the Florida park can succeed by focusing less on the historical replicas and more on performances by Chinese artists. The park's 90-minute nightly show, which features contortionists, martial artists, acrobats and dancers, is one of its strong points.

Selling his bosses at CTS on the plan is another matter, however. The sale to Brookhill may be off, but the future of Splendid China as a theme park is far from assured.

For one, CTS has undergone a major management reshuffling that observers say reflects the government's determination to ferret out corporate corruption before China enters the World Trade Organization. CTS reportedly plans to concentrate more heavily on domestic tourism. As trade revs up, Chinese officials predict that by 2010, China will be the world's top tourist destination, with 2 billion to 2.5 billion visitors a year. CTS hopes to land a good chunk of that business by purchasing 300 travel agencies on the mainland and selling non-core businesses - possibly including Splendid China.

A key clue to the park's fate will be what CTS decides to do with 311 acres of prime land it owns along U.S. 192 between the park and a Days Inn motel that it also owns. Cao estimates the land is worth \$45 million.

CTS has long eyed developing the land for timeshares. Cao, however, wants to sell off a chunk of it and pump the proceeds back into the park. He also wants to use some of the acreage for an upscale performing arts theater that would feature Chinese artists offering the sort of high-end entertainment now found only at Cirque du Soleil at Downtown Disney.

Short on thrills

Industry analysts think Cao could be on to something. They blame Splendid China's poor admission figures on the educational nature of the venue. In Orlando's attraction-saturated market, most tourists will choose thrills over cultural enlightenment, says industry analyst John Robinett, senior vice president at Economics Research Associates in Los Angeles. Cao's plan to make Splendid China a show-based attraction "would make the attraction more appealing, more competitive and would pull it up from the living history category, where it's been struggling," Robinett says. "There are some performance-based attractions in Orlando, but nothing like what he's talking about." Cao also is asking Orlando's business community for help in tapping into the lucrative convention business. In exchange, he wants to help local efforts to forge international trade with China. The People's Republic is Orlando's fifth-largest trading partner, with \$88.7 million exported by Orlando firms in 1999.

The business community is responding, says Jim Shipley, part-owner of Trading Wise Inc., a Longwood international trade consulting firm with strong connections to China. "Already, (Cao) has done an amazing job with very few resources - he's performing miracles over there," Shipley says. And in contrast to the park's former executives, he says, Cao "is an open guy, a total straight arrow."

Indeed, Cao is the first and only manager at Splendid China to acknowledge that the Chinese government is the majority owner of the park, though he maintains that Chinese businesspeople - not government officials - call all the shots. He points with pride to the park's mission statement, painted in large, black Chinese characters and framed on the wall of a conference room. Its translation: "Let the world understand China." Chinese President Jiang Zemin wrote the delicate marks by hand.

Balancing act

Cao recently traveled home to pitch his plan, and he expects to receive final word on CTS' answer sometime this summer.

Meanwhile, like his president, Cao continues to navigate a tricky course between openness and his country's nationalist values. Like China, the park has been a target of both the far-left and the far-right of the U.S. political spectrum. Critics on the right complain that the park is a Communist propaganda tool to brainwash American schoolchildren and that its managers should register as foreign-government agents. The conservative American Spectator magazine two years ago crafted a 5,000-word diatribe against the place.

Others, meanwhile, complain that Splendid China should own up to the persecution of religious and racial minorities in China. Not unlike some American theme parks' portrayal of U.S. history, Splendid China's take on Chinese history is antiseptic. At the Longmen Grottoes, two statues are accurately portrayed with smashed faces - with no mention that the destruction came at the hands of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution in 1969. Most offensive to a small group of protesters that has picketed the park regularly since opening day: A miniature replica of the Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's traditional home in Tibet. China invaded Tibet in 1950 and has ruled repressively since, closing temples and persecuting monks and their followers. The park's Buddhist temples and statues, however, feature only light, chatty descriptions of their background.

The park's management, Cao included, has chosen to paint the protesters as cranks to be ignored. Theme park analysts agree the protests make little difference to the bottom line. "Your typical visitor is not interested," says Robinett. "Cultural curiosity would completely compensate for any concern about oppressed people."

What will make a difference is whether Cao can jazz up Splendid China. While the Chinese, Cao says, feel their culture is misunderstood, it's clear that many of the park's troubles have come because the Chinese built it based on their own cultural notions of entertainment rather than on an understanding of American tastes.

Rollins College anthropology Professor Robert Moore, a frequent visitor to China who's studied Chinese culture for 30 years, says parks like Splendid China are wildly popular there. At World Park outside Beijing, for example, Chinese love to wander among tiny replicas of the Egyptian pyramids, Eiffel Tower, Kremlin and other global landmarks. "When they built Splendid China Florida, there was a bit of a marketing slip-up," he says. "To Americans who can travel anywhere they want, this sort of not-quite-real travel experience is much less exciting than it would be to the Chinese."

Cao agrees. But he says that his experience in the U.S. gives him a better handle on how to market the park to Americans - and still get the PR message across. The recent tensions between the U.S. and China make the cultural exchange more important than ever, he says.

"Both the East and the West have advantages and disadvantages," Cao says. "The only way the human race can go forward is to learn from each other. That's what Splendid China Florida is about."

#### Propaganda?

Jack Churchward, a Clearwater engineer and Tibetan Buddhist, has organized protests at Splendid China Florida since it opened in 1993 and has asked management to remove or change five exhibits, including the Potala Palace - the Dalai Lama's home before he was forced into exile in 1959. "They can say whatever they want about the Chinese exhibits," he says. "But they're falsifying history about the Tibetans. ... It's pure propaganda."

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Tourism World

Cheeburger Cheeburger coming to a China near you

Alan Byrd

Just like mainland China, Splendid China is being Americanized.

The Osceola County attraction has inked a deal with the Fort Myers-based restaurant chain Cheeburger Cheeburger Inc. to serve good old-fashioned American cheeseburgers to visitors.

"In this market, we need some alternative foods," says Al Riley, spokesman for the park.

Initially, the restaurant chain will be featured only at special events. The first of those: the China National Tourism Administration, a mini-travel trade show with 98 representatives for China's tourism hot spots, complete with a performance by the Beijing Dance Troupe and Peking Opera -- and free admission to the attraction.

The shindig is being broadcast in China.

On the executive front, Xiaoning Cao, who stepped in after the park was nearly sold amid reports of financial mismanagement, has gone back to China. According to Riley, Cao requested the transfer because he didn't speak English.

In his place is Lin Bo Chun, former director of China Travel Service (Holdings) H.K. LTD. and managing deputy general manager of China Travel Service (H.K.) LTD, Splendid China's owner.

Chun speaks English, so there should be no language barrier.

Cultural barriers could be different: Chinese foods typically don't feature any cheese, much less cheeseburgers.

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Author: Keith Miller

When Florida Splendid China opened in 1993, there was much anticipation about the \$100 million attraction because its impeccable Asian cultural theming was unique to the Thrill park environs of Orlando. But years of mismanagement and neglect left the park on the brink of dissolution. Now, under new management, Splendid China is attempting a comeback.

Located on 76 acres near Walt Disney World with 90 full-time employees, Splendid China took two years to construct. It features 60 replicas of famous Chinese landmarks, including the Forbidden City the Terra Cotta Warriors archaeological site, and a half-mile reproduction of the Great Wall. The park also owns a Days Inn motel and an adjacent 300 undeveloped acres.

The park was developed by George Chen, a local businessman who owned the property where it resides. Shortly before the park opened, he sold it to its current owner, Chinese Travel Service, Hong Kong, in which the Chinese government is the major investor.

On opening day, almost 3,000 people passed through the gates, and the park's future appeared splendid indeed. But trouble was on the horizon.

Steve Baker, president of Baker Leisure Group of Orlando, which does business planning and development for theme parks and other attractions worldwide, said there were warning signs from the beginning.

"The park was never properly marketed," he contended. "It was really beautiful and unique, but extremely passive for this market and just couldn't garner families."

Under General Manager Sunny Yang, the park began to deteriorate. "There was much neglect, and money was never reinvested in the park," said Baker. "Landscaping died, buildings deteriorated, and attractions fell apart."

Al Riley, whose been PR manager of Splendid China since its inception, said the problem was the management, not the product. "The degradation really began in 1996," he said. "Yang purposely made the park look like it was failing so he could be the agent in a sale [of the park] where there would be personal gain for him."

A new park president, Xiaoning Cao, took over in August 2000, and attempted to restore Splendid China.

Fresh landscaping, physical repairs to attractions, and a fresh coat of paint improved the park's appearance.

In mid-June, 2001, Cao was replaced as president by Lin Bo Chun, former managing deputy general of China Travel Service (H.K.). According to Riley, Cao requested the change because he doesn't speak English and Chun does.

Riley noted that though daily attendance is currently hovering around 200, the park only needs a few hundred guests a day to survive. It's offering various admission discounts to boost attendance, including one free admission with each checks in at local hotels, \$5 admission discount coupons, and free after-show dinner for guests who attend the park's live evening stage production.

The park also brought in 85 Asians and invited Florida travel industry and government representatives to a June 25 trade show-like event to boost Chinese commerce.

As for the future, Riley said they'd like to become a shopping destination with Asian-themed stores that aren't exclusively Chinese, and continue to restore the park, saying, "We must rebuild the image of the park, which was really hurt by Sunny Yang. We're going to get this park back to like-new."