

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

China Becomes Theme Park, but Cultural Debate Remains Real

New York Times

DATELINE: KISSIMMEE, Fla., Jan. 8, 1994

Just two miles west of the main entrance to Disney World, a 76-acre chunk of Chinese history and culture has been transplanted to Central Florida. But to its critics, the Splendid China theme park that opened here late last month is a virtuoso exercise in fantasy and illusion that exceeds anything Walt Disney or Universal Studios has ever concocted. When a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks gathered in front of a miniature replica of the Potala Palace, the exiled Dalai Lama's headquarters in Lhasa, Tibet, to pray on opening day, it was not one of the park's planned attractions. It was an effort by human rights groups to protest Beijing's 35-year occupation of the real Potala Palace and the way Splendid China, which is partly owned by the Chinese Government, sanitizes Chinese policy toward Tibetans and other minority groups. "It's just an outrage that they would use religion and minorities in a theme park to entertain Americans, when in fact they are destroying these groups in China," said John Ackerly, director of the International Campaign for Tibet, a human rights group in Washington that organized the protests. "This is a very political and ideological exhibition that American visitors are not going to pick up on, which makes it immensely effective as propaganda". Tibet was invaded by China in 1950, and the Dalai Lama, Tibet's supreme religious and political authority, fled into exile in 1959. Since then, China has closed Buddhist temples and persecuted monks and their followers.

Goal Is Tourism

Pan Xianliang, managing director of the United States China Travel Service Inc., the American subsidiary of the Chinese Government company that owns Splendid China, denied that the park had any political purpose and even denied a direct connection with the Government. He said China had envisioned the park as "a cultural exchange." "We want to let people know what China has to offer in the field of tourism, and we think this could be a real eye-opener for the average American," he said. "My parent company has moved this miniature China to the U.S. so people can see it and feel it. And maybe when the children grow up, they would like to see the real China." Built at an announced cost of \$100 million, Splendid China Florida is a joint venture of a subsidiary of China Travel Service Holdings Hong Kong Ltd. and American Eastern International Corporation, described by park officials as a company in Los Angeles formed by a family of investors from Taiwan. Since 1989, the Hong Kong company has also owned and operated a Splendid China theme park in Shenzhen, in China's Guangdong province near Hong Kong. Mr. Pan and other Chinese officials have repeatedly described China Travel Service Holdings as a private Hong Kong corporation independent of China. But a stock prospectus and other documents filed in Hong Kong indicate that it is one of the largest companies owned by the Chinese Government in Hong Kong, a British colony. By the ever-more-glitzy standards of Central Florida theme parks, Splendid China is something of an oddity. For its \$23 admission fee, it offers no fancy death-defying rides based on cartoon heroes, emphasizing instead some 73 remarkably faithful miniaturized reproductions of Chinese landmarks like the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the terra cotta warriors of Xian.

Placards Are Removed

At the Potala Palace replica, which enraged protesters when the park opened the week before Christmas, a placard describing the exhibit has been removed, and a recording with similar information has been disconnected. Frank Langley, the park's publicity manager, said the explanations had been removed "so there wouldn't be an incident." Mr. Langley said the park's explanatory placards had been prepared by China Travel Service and were virtually identical to signs at the Shenzhen park. He said he was puzzled by the protesters' complaints, adding, "There's nothing to offend them, except to define what Potala Palace was." But China experts are also questioning several other assertions in the park about various ethnic and religious minorities. A reproduction of the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, north of Tibet, says, for instance, that "like other mosques, this one is also used for Islamic lectures." But Dr. June Teufel Dreyer, director of East Asian programs at the University of Miami and a specialist in Chinese minorities, said that "it's really not true" that Uighurs, Huis and other Muslim groups are free to practice their religion. "Every time the Muslims attempt to exercise some discretion, the Government cracks down on them," Dr. Dreyer said. She also disagreed with the exhibit's assertion that "Confucius has always held a place of great prestige in China, and so have his descendants." She noted that China had conducted virulent campaigns against Confucianism. Still another placard describes Christianity as one of three "major Chinese religions." However,

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

human rights groups and China scholars report a recent surge in the persecution and repression of Roman Catholics who are loyal to the Vatican rather than to the Catholic church controlled by the Chinese Government.

Portrayals of Minorities

All told, about 20 Chinese ethnic and religious minorities, from Mongols to Hakka, are represented in the theme park, which also includes restaurants and shops with Chinese goods and crafts. The groups are uniformly presented as apparently content under China's rule. In Chinese, even the name chosen for the park subtly conveys that political message.

The park's owners have chosen to refer to China not as "zhongguo," which means the Chinese nation, but "zhonghua," an ethnic designation implying that China's minority groups are not separate nationalities and have no distinct identities.

Human rights groups have also raised questions about the treatment of the park's 150 Chinese workers, most of them entertainers or artisans. Many of them are members of the ethnic and religious minorities depicted in the park. Interviewed separately in Chinese, out of earshot of their supervisors, several employees said their activities and ability to circulate freely after work were "regulated," apparently out of fear that they may defect and ask for political asylum. "Our situation is somewhat difficult," one worker said. The employees asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals. Mr. Pan, the China Travel Service executive, said the park's workers lived as a group at "a Day's Inn that we recently purchased" because the managers and workers found that to be "convenient." Human rights groups are now mounting a campaign to discourage schoolchildren from making field trips to Splendid China. Mr. Ackerly said his organization had already written to Gov. Lawton Chiles to complain about the park and would soon be sending letters to school boards.

"Americans ought to know that if they visit this theme park, in the end, part of their money will be going to the Chinese Government and subsidizing the suffering of an occupied people," he said. "But we also think that if they know that, they will not want to go."

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

New order: China controls Central Florida theme park

The communist nation becomes sole owner of Florida Splendid China after U.S. partner pulls out

The Orlando Sentinel

01/15/94 Saturday

Kissimmee - The Chinese government has bought all of Florida Splendid China, although officials have said for months that the \$100 million theme park had no direct financial ties to that communist nation.

China Travel Services H.K. Ltd., a government-owned travel service organization assumed full ownership Thursday, said Quimou Ma, senior vice president of Florida Splendid China and an official of China Travel. There was an intermediate sale, completed in December.

George Chen, the park's American partner, said he sold his half of the 76-acre attraction for \$26 million to a company representing China Travel. No announcement had been made at the time of that sale.

Chen, president of American Eastern International Corp. based in Los Angeles, sold his holdings to Hwang's International Inc. It is a Florida company created a day before the sale agreement was signed Dec. 23, public records show. Chen said Hwang's was formed by China Travel Services. Hwang's transferred its holdings in the park to China Travel on Thursday in Hong Kong, Ma said. Chen had announced plans in 1991 to build the museum-like theme park as part of the 513-acre Formosa Gardens development, a resort and residential project about two miles from Walt Disney World. Chen retains ownership of the development project.

The theme park, which opened last month off U.S. highway 192 near Walt Disney World, showcases more than 60 miniature versions of China's most famous landmarks, including the Great Wall and Forbidden City, as well as live entertainment and authentic foods.

With lingering memories of the government's 1989 suppression of the pro-democracy student uprisings in Tiananmen Square, human rights groups have criticized the theme park as the Chinese government's attempt to polish its world image.

Since the opening, Splendid China's public relations assistants and managers have fielded questions from media across the United States about the park's ties to China, but those links were discounted by the company's American spokesperson.

"It is sort of an open secret," said Wong Joon San, business news editor of the 'South China Morning Post', an independent daily newspaper in Hong Kong. "Everybody accepts that."

China Travel Service is described as the largest Chinese government-owned travel service in a stock prospectus and financial records. The documents were obtained from Wardley James Capel, a Hong Kong-based investment research company.

China Travel built its first theme park, similar to Florida Splendid China, in Shenzhen, in south China near Hong Kong, in 1989. Two years later, China Travel announced plans to build Florida Splendid China in Osceola County with American Eastern International, headed by Chen.

Four top officials from China's Communist party attended the park's Dec. 18 opening ceremony.

The Chinese government's ownership of Florida Splendid China was news to the park's spokesperson.

"You're telling us more than we've known," said Rod Caborn, Splendid China's public relations director. "We've asked those questions of them, and I just couldn't confirm that before. They just said they're a Hong Kong company." At Amnesty International's China Coordination Group in Washington, D.C., the park's opening was viewed as evidence that China is concerned about shifting the attention away from its poor human rights reputation. "Clearly, it shows that they are on the defensive," said Louisa Coan (sp?) , a spokeswoman.

"They are responding to the international protests of their human rights record. It shows they care what people think of their record."

Amnesty International tracks alleged human rights abuses worldwide. Splendid China managers acknowledge that part of their goal is to present a more positive image of China.

The park is intended to highlight the nation's rich culture and history, they say.

Managers say they believe the park achieves that goal. The park's ties to the government are of no consequence, they say.

"I really don't think it matters," Caborn said. "everything is run out of Florida. They don't ask China every time they have to change a shingle. I don't think it's going to change a thing."

For the people who matter most in the debate - tourists - the controversy over whether the Chinese government owns the park isn't keeping them away so far. Jack Stoner and his wife, Dortha, visited the park this week from Ohio. The couple said that they weren't concerned about the park ownership. "We were very impressed," Jack Stoner said. "we

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

couldn't afford to travel to China, so this is a good way to learn about the country." Don and Lynn Allen of Rocksville, Md. , agreed.

"I think times are changing, " Don Allen said. "It's a matter of a few more years before China is primarily democratic."

Public officials also dismissed any controversy. The new jobs, and increased tax base and the tourism, sales and gas taxes the park pumps into the local economy are significant, they said.

Over the years, Chen and his Chinese partners had developed philosophical differences over how to run the attraction and the kinds of features it would have.

And now, although the price wasn't exactly what he asked for, it was time the two partners went their separate ways, Chen said, adding that the talks were amicable.

Chen said he plans to forge ahead with a new 256-room Comfort Suites hotel on an adjoining 10-acre parcel and an upscale shopping center.

"We are glad to have sold it," Chen said. "everybody came out happy. It's onward to the rest of the development."

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Theme and Variations: Splendid China, Kissimmee, Florida

January 24, Time Magazine (International Edition)

Since its December launch, the \$100 million Florida theme park Splendid China has been unable to shake criticism from those who see it as fantasy distorted for the purpose of propaganda.

Dozens of protesters, including Buddhist monks, demonstrated on opening day to object to the replica of the Potala Palace, a centuries-old shrine and monastery in Lhasa. Once the home of the Dalai Lama, it was taken over by the Chinese when he fled into exile in 1959.

In an editorial, the Miami Herald denounced the attraction as "the torturer's theme park". Critics contend that one of the parks co-partners, the Hong Kong subsidiary of Beijing's China Travel Services, which operates the original Splendid China in Shenzhen, is an arm of the Chinese government. A spokesman for the Florida park maintains it is "part entertainment, part history," playing down the connections to Beijing. Says John Ackerly, director of the human-rights group International Campaign for Tibet: "Splendid China represents the officially sanctioned way of presenting China and China's minority policy to the West. The park shows Tibetan and other cultures as if they are being honoured and uplifted - when they are in fact being persecuted." His organization is trying to persuade local school officials not to schedule class trips to what he sees as a less than splendid China.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Florida Park Irks Rights Campaigners

South China Morning Post

01/31/94

by Gren Manuel

The attempt by China Travel Service to run a Splendid China theme park about three kilometres from Disney World in Florida is meeting strong criticism from activists who are now launching a schools boycott campaign.

The park, a copy of the Splendid China theme park in Shenzhen, opened amid great fanfare just before Christmas. But it has met fierce criticism and become a focus for protesters concerned about human rights in Tibet and other sensitive issues.

The park was dubbed "the torturer's theme park" by an editorial in the Miami Herald.

"Don't look too hard for the Murdered Dissidents' Pavilion," said the Miami Herald, which supported the right of the park to operate but criticized "the brutal hand of China's police state for its lies".

"Tax dollars should not pay for field trips in which school children might soak up such nonsense," it said.

Frank Langley, a representative for the park, told Business Post that we are not political. "The park does not make a political statement in any way."

The park has a stated total cost approaching US\$100 million, and was originally a equal joint-venture between Hong Kong-registered China Travel Service (Holdings) and American executive George Chen.

However, Mr. Chen sold his stake to a China Travel Service company for US\$21.2 million, according to county records made public on January 14.

Similar to its counterpart in Shenzhen, the park mixes 73 miniature copies of China's most famous landmarks such as the Forbidden City, with displays about the many ethnic groups in China. Like the Shenzhen park, it has some members of these groups in traditional costumes demonstrating their culture.

Entry is US\$23, and the parks' 31 hectares are in the heartland of the Orlando tourism area. Splendid China's Mr. Langley said it was not, however, competing head-on with Disney World, which charged \$36 for entry to its 10,927 hectares.

"There's nothing in the world to compare with Disney World," he said.

Like the Shenzhen park, it has drawn fire for presenting a distorted view, with the replica of the Potala Palace and China's treatment of Tibet a particular focus.

The International Campaign for Tibet, based in Washington D.C., is mounting a campaign against the park and its "insidious political messages", and says it has 60 people collecting signatures asking the state to rule that the park should not be used for school field trips.

The campaign says that as a subsidiary of a state-controlled company, the park will always echo Beijing's line on sensitive subjects.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Chinese Trace Claim On Tibet to Mongols

The New York Times: Letters to the Editor

02/19/94

To the Editor:

Pan Xinliang, managing director of China Travel Service, writes (letter, Feb. 5) that Tibet "became part of China during the Tang Dynasty between A.D. 618 and 907." This is incorrect. Neither the two versions of the official Tang Dynasty history, the "Tangshu," nor available Tibetan histories, nor such surviving documents as the A.D. 821-822 Chinese-Tibetan bilingual treaty refer to relations between the two countries except in terms of mutually recognized independence. Far from becoming part of China, Tibet even invaded the Tang capital, now Xian, in 763. Not even in China do responsible historians repeat this error any longer. The most extensive and up-to-date history of Tibet published under Chinese auspices so far, a three-volume 1989 work from the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, refers to the Tang period China-Tibet connection as "a relation of friendship and equality."

Further, it is generally agreed that China had no authority in Tibet during the Song Dynasty (10th to 13th centuries) and the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), or between 1912 and 1951.

That leaves the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368) and the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), during most of whose rule, all parties concur, Tibet at least nominally acknowledged the authority of China's rulers.

What Tibetans deny, and the Chinese insist on, is that Mongol and Manchu power may be invoked as a precedent for China's post-1951 domination of Tibet.

Tourist spectacles like the Splendid China theme park in Kissimmee, Fla., may be legitimately criticized if they obscure a contested history, whose victims, the Tibetans, continue to suffer through loss of national autonomy and a repressive alien regime.

MATTHEW KAPSTEIN

New York, Feb. 7, 1994

The writer, professor of religion at Columbia University, is a Tibetan studies specialist.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

China buys Osceola land for \$15 million

The 274-acre tract along U.S. Highway 192 adjoins the Florida Splendid China theme park.

The Orlando Sentinel

05/05/94

Kissimmee - The Chinese government has paid a record \$15 million to add 274 acres to its land holdings at the Florida Splendid China theme park.

The purchase, by a company linked to China Travel Services H.K. Ltd., the travel conglomerate owned by the communist Chinese government, works out to about \$54,700 an acre.

"Good God," Osceola Property Appraiser Bob Day said Wednesday. "That would be the highest price paid per acre on a tract that size in the history of Osceola County."

The only land sale in recent history which comes close was for the defunct Little England project in the mid-1970s, which was purchased for \$14,000 an acre, Day said.

"You just don't have large tracts like that close to [U.S. Highway] 192 any more," Day said.

Pao Lin Ball, the company's in-house counsel would not comment Wednesday on plans for the site, but park spokesman Frank Langley said, "It's an absolute sign of Splendid China's commitment to Central Florida."

Once dotted with citrus groves, the land is 3 miles west of Interstate 4, adjacent to the 76-acre theme park, which is owned by China Travel. The land also adjoins China Travel's surrounding property, and has about a half-mile of footage along U.S. Highway 192, according to seller James A. Fowler, the Orlando trustee.

"it was an all-cash transaction," said Fowler, noting the wire transfer came from Hong Kong, where China Travel is based. "Its no doubt the buyer is well-financed. I have \$15 million more than I had last week."

The private closing took place Friday, said real estate broker Jean Hsu, who attended.

"CTS [China Travel Service] owns it now. It's a piece of land that will serve whatever purpose they have."

China Travel officials said last year they were interested in building a resort on the property- one that would include a luxury hotel, recreation areas and admission to the museum-like theme park. The travel company's goal is to offer its customers tour packages to Florida and to promote the park, which insiders say has not met attendance expectations.

More recently, sources close to the negotiations sat China Travel's ideas have been broadened to include an Asian trade center.

Company officials are expected to make a formal announcement about their plans at the theme park on Tuesday. Ma Chi Man, vice chairman and general manger of China Travel, is scheduled to come from China for the public announcement.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Chinese culture; Prettified

The Economist
05/14/94

WITH the world's largest McDonald's now installed near Beijing's Great Hall of the People, some might see equity in the opening of a Chinese-owned theme park next door to Disney World. Since the \$ 100m park known as Splendid China opened in central Florida last December, tourists have gawked at a miniature replica of the Great Wall two miles down the road from the Magic Kingdom.

Signaling the depths of China's headlong plunge into Western-style capitalism, the meticulously reconstructed wall is but one of the marvels of this new 76-acre (31-hectare) attraction devoted to Chinese history and culture.

Splendid China is a showcase that aims to lure foreign visitors and foreign investors to China itself. Cultural understanding is another aim, according to park officials. But its critics regard the park as a propaganda ploy, using make-believe and entertainment to policy China's image as preferential trade terms with the United States come up for renewal next month. "Don't look too hard for the Murdered Dissidents' Pavilion," is how the Miami Herald put it in a recent editorial.

Amnesty International and other human-rights groups charge that the park, which features more than 60 miniature versions of such famous Chinese landmarks as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, portrays a false picture of social harmony and contentment among China's persecuted religious and ethnic minorities. In China, dissent is quashed. At Splendid China, Buddhist monks and human-rights activists are staging sporadic protests against the theme park and Chinese repression.

The International Campaign for Tibet, a Washington-based pressure group, is particularly agitated by the placid scene involving the replica of the Potala Palace, the exiled Dalai Lama's residence in Lhasa, Tibet, which was invaded by China in 1950. The Dalai Lama, Tibet's religious and political leader, fled into exile in 1959 and since then the Chinese authorities have persecuted Buddhist religious orders and shut down temples in Tibet.

Another group of protesters is angered by the way the theme park presents the Mongolians as people content with their lot. In the tableau of the Forbidden City, there is no mention of Tiananmen Square, known to most Americans as the place where the pro-democracy movement met a bloody end in 1989.

Pan Xin Liang, the managing director of the American Subsidiary of the Hong Kong-based China Travel Service (CTS), which owns the park, denies the charge of propaganda.

"People have been trying to stress the political side instead of the cultural exchange and instead of what is more peaceful," he says. Since 1989 CTS has owned and operated another Splendid China theme park in China's Guangdong province near Hong Kong.

The narration of the introductory film shown at the Florida park explains that this enterprise was such a hit "that the Chinese people wanted to share it" with people in the United States.