

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

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Florida Splendid China

If you're going to Disney World, Peking hopes you'll also drop in on this nearby Florida theme park to learn how happy China's many oppressed people's really are -and bring the kids.

by Kenneth R. Timmerman

The Chinese Communist government in Peking has shrunk from nothing in its attempt to win the hearts and minds of U.S. lawmakers, from President Clinton down to members of Congress, whom they regularly invite on junkets to visit China's tourist spots and to witness the "economic miracle" of state-run capitalism. And Americans are gradually becoming aware of a much broader attempt by Peking to infiltrate American society, an effort that has taken a great leap forward during the Clinton-Gore administration. As chronicled in these pages, the Chinese have planted a top agent in the Commerce Department to obtain classified U.S. intelligence information and an inside preview of U.S. policy toward China. They've purchased entire U.S. defense plants closed at the end of the Cold War, and established thousands of U.S. trading companies to procure technology and serve as fronts for high-tech spying. They have tapped Wall Street's vast capital market to fund the corrupt enterprises of the Red Princelings and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), borrowing billions of dollars from top U.S. retirement funds to float bond issues for the Bank of China and regional development banks owned by the Chinese government.

Peking has even set its sights on American children. A Florida theme park owned by the State Council of the People's Republic is designed to convince kids, and their unwitting parents, that the Communist dictatorship is simply heir to 5,000 years of imperial splendor. This park, a monument to the manifest destiny of a Greater China that has never existed, richly epitomizes the propaganda strategy of the Chinese government toward the United States. On seventy-six acres of former ranch land in Kissimmee, Florida, just across the state highway from its more famous competitor Disney World, sits Florida Splendid China.

I went to see it on a chilly winter afternoon, and as I wandered through the theme park's eerily empty landscapes (the other tourists having flocked to heated exhibits at Disney World and nearby Universal Studios), I was repeatedly struck by the craftsmanship and harmonious design of these miniature landscapes, temples, monuments. But one aspect of the layout was especially noteworthy: All the representations of Tibet, East Turkestan, and Mongolia were neatly placed outside the half-mile long replica of the Great Wall, the original of which had been built between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries to repel nomadic invaders. Although barbarian Mongols, Manchus, and Tibetans ruled over China for centuries, the miniature models at Florida Splendid China perpetuate the fantasy of eternal Chinese rule over the vast territory claimed today by the Chinese Communist Party.

The park was conceived in the late 1980's by a Taiwanese American school teacher and real-estate developer, Josephine Chen, as a medium for cultural exchange between China and the United States. "My mom swore she'd never go back to China as long as the Communists were still in power," recalls her 42-year-old son, George Chen. "But this was before Tiananmen, and things were loosening up. She really felt she could make a difference, and could give something back to the United States and to China for her own success.

Mrs. Chen, now 74, traveled to China in 1988 and was welcomed by officials of a government agency called China Travel Services (Holdings) HK, or CTS for short. They gave her a grand tour of a soon-to-be-opened theme park dedicated to the glories of China's past and to its spectacular landscapes. Located in Shenzhen, on the mainland with close access to Hong Kong, Splendid China Miniature Scenic Spot was an immediate hit, welcoming more than three-and-a-half million visitors its first year and allowing CTS to recoup its entire \$100-million investment.

It took two years to negotiate an agreement with CTS, which is controlled by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the main propaganda arm of the Chinese Communist State Council. Under the agreement, Mrs. Chen provided the land and management services for the park, while the Chinese supplied the building materials, the architects, and the personnel. CTS brought in expert masons who laid more than six million miniature bricks to build the copy of the Great Wall. They molded 30-foot high replicas of giant Buddhas, and set up an entire lumber mill to manufacture the delicate tongue-and-groove beams and planks needed to build hundreds of miniature towns, palaces, and temples. To supervise the construction, Mrs. Chen convinced her son George to abandon his successful computer manufacturing business and become president of the new venture. "I worked 16-hour days," he recalls. "At the peak of construction, which took only two years, we had 130 workers from China living in a custom-built trailer park across the street that for them had all the trappings of a luxury

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hotel. We brought in two chefs from China, bought specialty foods and had the best Chinese restaurants in the area, just for our workers. I made it a point to buy each of them a season pass to Disney. We had a huge library of Chinese films in wide-screen video. And they had air-conditioning-for them, something unheard of but which they soon found they couldn't live without in the Florida heat."

Chen recalls negotiating with the INS, to obtain temporary visas for the Chinese workers (who were required to be paid American union wages), and with the FBI, which expressed concerns that some of the laborers might have been tapped by the Chinese intelligence services to spy on nearby Cape Canaveral. As construction began in December 1991, so did the problems-not with the American authorities, but with the Chens' Chinese partners.

"The Chinese wanted us to buy black pine beams for the park exhibits," recalls Chen. "Imported from China, they cost \$80 each. We found them here for \$5 apiece. Since the plans called for thousands of these, we were talking about major economies." Another example was the dyestuff used to color concrete used in the exhibits. "The Chinese said they had a supplier who would provide the dye for \$75 per gallon. Each gallon was enough to dye one-third cubic yard of concrete. I found U.S.-made powder dyes that cost thirty cents a packet, and that would color three cubic yards each." There were dozens of other such cases. "Each time, the Chinese said they had a supplier back in China, who could give them a special deal. I won't say it was kickbacks. But clearly, their goal was not to get the job done in the most efficient or cost effective way.

Then there was the content of the park itself. The original Splendid China in Shenzhen featured one-fifteenth scale replicas of Chinese monuments such as the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, and spectacular landscapes such as the Stone Forest or the Lijiang river in dreamlike Guilin. Chen says he sought to erect a replica of the Statue of Democracy in the exhibit of Tiananmen Square -- the symbol of the pro-democracy movement brutally crushed in June 1989 "They croaked at that," he recalls. "Privately, they said that while they might agree, the project would get shot down by the Chinese government if we included it."

One of the supreme ironies of the park is the sheer number of Buddhist shrines among the exhibits, given that the Communists have systematically attempted to uproot religion, destroying temples, mosques, and monasteries, and slaughtering monks and nuns. In the 1:3 scale replica of the Longmen Grotto, two of the devotees of a female Buddha figure were reproduced with smashed faces. "We had a long discussion about that with CTS," Chen remembers. "The faces had been intact until Red Guards smashed them during the Cultural Revolution in 1969. The CTS people wanted to reproduce them intact, to avoid any political discussion. In the end, a panel of Chinese government historians was brought in, and even they agreed we couldn't remake history by giving them their faces back." By far the most controversial exhibit is a gigantic replica of the Potala Palace, the seat of the Tibetan government since the seventh century and home to the Dalai Lama since 1642-until he was forced into exile by Peking in 1959. It stretches majestically across an entire man-made mountain, giving off an unmistakable religious aura.

Chen said he agreed to include it because it was "one of the most beautiful buildings in China's sphere of influence. You don't have to be a Tibetan Buddhist to find it simply awe-inspiring." Until recently, Florida Splendid China also included a Buddhist prayer carpet rolled up on the slope leading up to the palace, which tiny Tibetan monks would unroll if visitors inserted a quarter into the slot of an electronic command. The message was purely Communist: Monks would perform any service for money. After repeated protests by Tibetan Buddhists, the park management withdrew that part of the exhibit.

### THE PLA STORMS TIBET

Nevertheless, including Tibet's Potala Palace in a theme park dedicated to the splendors of Chinese culture remains a highly provocative and ultimately political act. The United Nations has voted three resolutions condemning China's illegal occupation of Tibet, which began when Mao sent the first PLA units across Tibet's internationally-recognized borders in late 1949, only weeks after the success of China's Communist revolutionaries. Mao launched a full-scale invasion of Tibet the following year, overwhelming the 8,000 men of the Tibetan army. Alarmed at the Communist invasion, the Tibetan National Assembly convened an emergency meeting and requested that the fourteenth Dalai Lama, then 15 years old, assume full authority as head of state, and that he leave the Tibetan capital Lhasa for a town near the border with India to ensure his personal safety. The Chinese annexed whole portions of the eastern part of the country to the neighboring Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. The bulk of the Amdo region, together with a small area of Kham province, were split off to form a new province of the People's Republic called Qinghai. In 1951, Mao forced a peace treaty on a captive Tibetan delegation in Peking intended to bestow legitimacy on the Chinese military occupation, and created the Tibet Autonomous Regional Government within the PRC. Tibetans launched a full-scale rebellion against the occupation in 1959, when the Dalai Lama fled to India, followed by some 80,000 of his people. An official Chinese Army intelligence report from 1960 admits that the PLA killed 87,000 Tibetan resistance fighters in Lhasa and the surrounding areas between

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March and October 1959 alone. Following the exile of the Dalai Lama, international human-rights groups estimate that anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of Tibet's entire population was massacred by the Chinese. (The Dalai Lama's Office of Tibet conservatively estimates that just over 1 million Tibetans -- out of a total population of 6 million -- have been killed by the Chinese during the occupation.) Once the crackdown began, Mao ordered the PLA to attack the centers of Tibetan Buddhism, since the Dalai Lama had become a symbol of resistance for Tibetans. The new Communist rulers forced monks and nuns to copulate in public on the streets of Lhasa, according to contemporaneous accounts. The Tibetan Government in Exile claims that Chinese troops destroyed more than a thousand monasteries in 1959. Chinese government statistics paint an even more gruesome picture, with the cold-blooded precision only a totalitarian regime can muster. In a survey on "population changes," published in Peking in 1989, the Peking government revealed that the number of "functioning monasteries and temples" in Tibet had dropped from 2,611 in 1958, to just 170 in 1960, while the clerical population had been diminished over the same period from 114,100 to 18,104--clinical terms for describing mass murder. By 1976, according to official Chinese government statistics, only eight monasteries and nunneries remained in the whole of Tibet.

This year marks four decades since the bloody suppression of the Tibetan independence movement and the flight into exile of the Dalai Lama. As it happens, it also marks 50 years since Mao announced the "liberation" of the independent states of Tibet and East Turkestan, and sent the PLA across their borders to begin a half-century of military occupation and repression; 30 years since the Red Guards ravaged the Republic of Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution, slaughtering 50,000 Mongols while injuring and torturing over a million more; 20 years since the birth of the pro-democracy movement throughout China; and 10 years since the Tiananmen Square massacres.

As China's leaders celebrate 50 years of Communist rule this year, they no doubt would prefer to forget those more somber anniversaries. For Peking, 1999 is the Year of All Dangers. It began with the arrest of Chinese intellectuals seeking to form an opposition party, and in just a few short weeks led to the harshest crackdown on political dissidents since Tiananmen. China's latest actions fly in the face of promises made to the Clinton administration to show greater tolerance of political opposition, and directly flout a written pledge only six months earlier to accept the conditions of democratic discourse of the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights. The reason for today's harsh actions is simple: China's rulers understand that the conquered peoples under their control are straining at the yoke, and they fear that the string of anniversaries set to occur this year could prove the inspiration for their liberation.

### PROTESTERS AT THE PARK

"I think what happened in Tibet was close to genocide," says George Chen. But after consulting with a panel of historians sent over by the Chinese government to oversee the planning of Florida Splendid China, he says he came to the conclusion that including a model of the Potala Palace would "serve as a forum for people to express their concern with the behavior of the Chinese Communist government. Without it we would not have had the protests or the public discussions." Indeed, the inclusion of the Palace--and of several other exhibits from the formerly independent states of Inner Mongolia and East Turkestan--has inspired calls for boycotting the park.

One week before Florida Splendid China opened its doors to the public in December 1993 CTS bought out Chen and his mother. "It was clear our Chinese government partners preferred to have absolute control," Chen said. "They didn't want me around on opening day." The reason was simple, Chen believes. CTS had invested in Florida Splendid China on orders from China's State Council, and intended the park to serve as a vehicle for Communist propaganda. They didn't want to risk having a Taiwanese-American partner around who might spoil the effect by talking democracy or human rights.

If Chen and his mother had wanted the park to showcase China's ancient culture and its values, and suggest that the Communist regime was not eternal, the Chinese government sought to convey precisely the opposite message. So they put the squeeze on the Chens almost from the start, first by trying to micromanage the park's construction, and in the end by simply buying them out. By the time the park was getting spruced up for the opening, it was clear to Chen that CTS was determined to get rid of them and was, in effect, putting its "final offer" on the table. He feared that if he turned them down the family's entire investment would be at risk.

The park held a private viewing the day before it officially opened that was attended by 2,400 guests and dignitaries, including Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and three other top Chinese Communist officials. Messages of congratulation, reproduced in the park promotional brochure, were sent by President Jiang Zemin (then Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party), Premier Li Peng, and former PRC President Yang Shang Kun.

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The Chinese also assembled an "organizing committee" of prominent Americans they hoped would provide them with political cover, although few if any of those named in the Florida Splendid China official literature ever showed up. The committee included former President Richard Nixon (at the personal request of the PRC ambassador to Washington); Florida Governor Lawton Chiles; former Secretary of State Alexander Haig (who represents major U.S. companies seeking to expand their business in China); and Rep. Bill McCollum, who represents the district where the park is located. (McCollum's office says he never attended the opening and has no recollection of having endorsed the park.) A different group of guests-- uninvited and unwelcome showed up for the opening: Outside the front gates, Tibetan Buddhist monks wearing traditional saffron robes carried signs denouncing China's illegal occupation of their homeland. They were accompanied by Jack Churchward, a former U.S. Navy technician who converted to Tibetan Buddhism and now heads the Committee against Communist Chinese Propaganda in Clearwater, Florida. Churchward claims that a park security guard informed him that one of the visiting Chinese officials asked the chairman of CTS to call the police to have them removed. When told that was not possible, Churchward says, "He told the head of Park Security to have us killed." (The current director of Florida Splendid China, Sonny Yang, denies the charge.) According to the Orlando Sentinel, the protesters "have dogged the attraction for years....They charge that, behind the pastoral scenes and tiny replicas of Chinese landmarks, is a propaganda effort by the Chinese government to polish its image and whitewash its mistreatment of minority groups." The protesters have also set up a Web site detailing their case ([www.caccp.org/park](http://www.caccp.org/park)), and are calling on the Department of Justice to take action against the U.S. company set up to operate the park--arguing that the company serves as the unregistered representative of a foreign government, in violation of federal law. Sonny Yang dismisses the possibility of changing or removing any exhibits in exchange for ending the protests. "Florida Splendid China is not a political statement," he insists. "We're here to run a business, not to make politics." Business could be better. The park's first three years were rocked by protests, which attracted local media attention and helped keep attendance low. That period also saw some 42 Chinese performers--brought over for displays of acrobatics, traditional dance, and music--request political asylum in the U.S. One of these defectors wrote to a local central-Florida paper in January 1995 that management was holding the performers against their will, preventing them from meeting outsiders or from traveling outside the park. That has all changed, says Sonny Yang, who came to Florida in March 1996 from the CTS branch office in Hong Kong. "I don't know why those people left. Since I've been here, no one has left. They have two days off per week and can travel wherever they like." (In fact, the dancers and acrobats perform six nights a week, and include three children under the age of 12.) The early years of Florida Splendid China also saw a stream of official Chinese government delegations come to Kissimmee for propaganda tours and for surprise "inspections" --including, in October 1996, a tour bus bearing diplomatic license plates traced back to the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C. (According to a U.S. intelligence source, CTS officials were seen at the White House just before the bus tour, handing out free trips to Florida Splendid China to National Security Council staffers. Repeated calls to the NSC for comment weren't returned.) George Chen, who has continued to follow the park's ups and downs, claims that top Chinese government officials still seek to place their sons and daughters on the payroll, a practice he says began when work first started in late 1991.

Churchward's group has written park management repeatedly, requesting they change exhibits that refer to minorities and to the occupied countries of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and East Turkestan as if they were happy parts of China. In addition to the Potala Palace, the group objects to the inclusion of replicas of the Mausoleum of Ghengis Khan, the Mongol emperor who conquered China (and much of the rest of the world) in the thirteenth century; the Id Kah Mosque, which is located in the East Turkestan city of Kashgar and is one of the best known in the Muslim world; and the Tomb of Xiang Fei, the widow of a slain Uighur king, Apak Hoja.

The Xiang Fei tomb provides a clear example of how the Chinese Communist planners were seeking to "rewrite history," George Chen believes. In the caption on display in the park, the tomb is said to have been built by the Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong, who took Xiang Fei as a concubine after slaying her husband in battle. The Emperor was so taken by her "wondrous bodily fragrance" that he built a splendid tomb in her memory, the caption reads, informing viewers that the name Xiang Fei means "fragrant Imperial Concubine." That story is simply a lie, according to Chen and to Ablajan Layli Naman, head of the International Taklamakan Uighur Human Rights Association. The building where Xiang Fei was buried was actually built by Uighurs as the tomb of Apak Hoja's father, more than 70 years prior to the Chinese government claim, and contains no fewer than 72 members of the Kashkar ruling family--but not a single Chinese. Xiang Fei never became the concubine of the Chinese emperor; rather, she committed suicide shortly after her husband was slain in battle in order to prevent her own capture by the Chinese. "The tomb of Apak Hoja is an expression of national resistance," Layli Naman says.

As for the Id Kah mosque, the park claims it was built by the Chinese in 1789, when in reality it was built more than 300 years earlier by residents of Kashgar, in 1442. "Why are they trying to appropriate our history?" Naman asks. His group has

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protested the inclusion of the mosque, which he calls an "East Turkestani religious icon," because it gives the impression that the PRC looks benevolently toward its Muslim minority when in reality it has conducted a systematic 50-year campaign of repression against it. In 1996, the PLA put down pro-independence riots that had spread throughout East Turkestan, killing dozens of protesters by official accounts. The Chinese government refers to the Uighur independence movement as "splittists"-- the same term it uses for the Dalai Lama and his followers. It fears that ethnic and religious rights movements will lead to the break-up of the People's Republic of China, just as the Soviet Union was broken up in 1991.

### PROPAGANDA MISSION

By all accounts, Florida Splendid China has been a commercial flop. Sonny Yang admits that the park averages a scant 400 to 500 entries per day but insists it began making money last year after repaying the initial \$100 million investment. George Chen believes that's a stretch. "The Chinese government continues to pump in fresh money for maintenance and salaries. They can't allow the park to fail, because that would mean losing face. They send money whenever it is needed." Why spend all that hard currency to maintain a failing theme park in the backyard of giants Disney, Universal Studios, and SeaWorld --each of which banks tens of thousands of entries on an average day! First of all, to "exemplify Sino-U. S. economic and technical cooperation and our abilities to productively interact with one another," the park's Chinese founder, Ma Chi Man, explains in a promotional brochure. The park is "the eternal symbol of Sino-U.S. friendship." More significant is the effort to "tell the story of the Chinese people." That's where the exhibits on subjugated minorities and occupied lands become important. In previously secret minutes of the 1993 Beijing Propaganda Conference obtained by the International Campaign for Tibet, the strategy of the Chinese Communist Party toward ethnic minorities and occupied territories is made crystal clear:

With regard to the attacks by the West and the Dalai [Lama] clique and their frequent activities, our external propaganda should launch offensives. We should expand our spheres of influence, in particular, we should infiltrate our propaganda into the mainstream life of the West. Firstly, we should continue to send Tibetan scholars and Tibetan singing and dancing troupes abroad to lecture and perform. Secondly, relevant embassies and consulates should aim at public opinion and the activities of the Dalai Clique in the countries they are stationed and utilize speeches, picture exhibitions, special articles and other forms to carry out propaganda work, so as to win over officials and people of those countries. Thirdly, TV programs for external broadcasting should include programs about Tibet. We should broadcast to Europe and America so that our propaganda can directly reach audiences of the Western countries.

Cultural exchanges, dancing troupes, exhibits--that is exactly the mission of Florida Splendid China. The goal is to present smiling peasants, industrious artisans, and spectacular scenery, all as parts of a unified China.

### GOING TO DISNEY WORLD

The Chinese government also offers images of smiling Mongolian horsemen and other docile minorities at Disney World's international showcase, known as Epcot. An exhibit in Epcot's China pavilion called "Land of Many Faces" (prepared with the help of the Yunnan Provincial Museum in the mainland city of Kunming) highlights four Chinese minorities, the Miao, Naxi, Yi, and Mongols, "to offer a window into the many cultures of China's ethnic groups." The propaganda message is only slightly more heavy-handed in a 360-degree film of Chinese landscapes, narrated by an eighth century Chinese poet who appears in holographic projection. From Mongolian yurts, where the poet is offered tea by smiling tribesmen, the scene changes to Peking's Forbidden City, where the message becomes more openly political. "Gone are the warlords, the landlords, and emperors," the smiling poet says. The former Imperial Palace "is now a special place for all Chinese." Street scenes of desperate poverty from the market place in the capital city of Xinjiang province (occupied East Turkestan) are accompanied by gay music, reinforcing the image of contented peasants. Disney appears to have learned from Florida Splendid China's travails, and carefully makes no reference to Tibet. But Peking's message was as clear as ever.

### TEACH AMERICA'S CHILDREN WELL

A key part of Florida Splendid China's marketing strategy is the outreach program to American school children. The park sends out promotional mailings all over the country, offering special discounts to school groups and teachers. "We get tens of thousands of kids coming to the park each year, says marketing director Kristie Joyce. "We offer them guided tours, and let them bring their own lunch and eat in the park. It is definitely a major part of the park's activity to attract school children." You can be sure they don't get a history lesson on the People's Republic of China during their visit. Field trips sponsored by public schools "implies legitimacy and approval and state and local government," says Jack Churchward. "They are trying to brainwash young kids into believing that places such as Tibet, East Turkestan, and Inner Mongolia are

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part of China, when in fact they are occupied territories that make up two-thirds of the territory of the PRC. If the Chinese Communist government can convince people that these areas are Chinese, then half the job is done.

Churchward's committee has tried to counter the park's propaganda by appealing directly to Florida school boards and teachers' associations. In 1995, they convinced the Pinellas County Teachers Association to enact a ban on using public money for field trips to Florida Splendid China. Churchward says this didn't faze park officials, who were willing to snub the seventh-largest school district in Florida and the 23rd-largest in the U.S.-in order to maintain the fiction of happily occupied lands and contented minorities. "That shows that the park's message is more important than income," Churchward adds. In April 1996, the Florida Teaching Professionals-National Education Association State Conference in Orlando passed a resolution banning personal or school trips to Florida Splendid China for its members, recommending that the ban remain in place until the exhibit on Tibet was removed or until China "recognizes the sovereignty of the Nation of Tibet." Confronted with these disputes, Kristie Joyce has nothing to say. Asked if she is aware that Tibet and East Turkestan were invaded by the Chinese Communist government and remain under military occupation, or that China has been condemned in the United Nations repeatedly for its occupation of Tibet, she finally answers: "I'm not going to comment on what I'm personally aware of or not." In one of the park's souvenir shops, American employee Ray Weeks showed similar ignorance as he gushed about the beauty and peacefulness of the park. "This is an intellectual's paradise," Weeks said. "It's not meant for people looking for thrill rides like Twister." When told about the military occupation of Tibet and East Turkestan, Weeks said: "That's news to me, but I intend to find out more." He certainly won't find it by touring Florida Splendid China, where the only message is that of an eternal China, at peace with itself, living in harmony with its subject peoples.

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Splendid mess  
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You probably know that Florida Splendid China is not the busiest attraction in town. And you've heard that it is owned and run by the Chinese government, basically as a soft-sell propaganda organ. But if you want the whole dark story (and maybe a bit more), see the piece by Kenneth Timmerman in the March issue of the American Spectator.

Be warned: The Spectator dwells on the conservative reactionary fringe. But though its prose is blustery and its reasoning often skewed, the mag has more than 250,000 readers. And as the Senate Intelligence Committee opens hearings into alleged Chinese espionage, Splendid China may come under increasing scrutiny.

The Spectator story connects the dots, from founder Josephine Chen's idea for a cultural center to the Chinese government's hostile 1993 buyout of Chen, to the 42 defections that occurred before 1995, to the propaganda mission outlined in Chinese Communist Party documents, and their supposed link to the park.

The piece relies in part on Jack Churchward, a convert to Tibetan Buddhism who has organized rallies and a boycott of the park over China's oppression of its ethnic minorities. (His next demonstration at the park's entrance is March 13.) Churchward helps maintain a website for Citizens Against Chinese Communist Propaganda, which argues that Splendid China's corporate parent, China Travel Services (Holdings) of Hong Kong, ought to register with the U.S. Justice Department as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938.

"We know nothing about that," says park president Sonny Yang. "I'm just the operator of the park. No one told me nothing about that."

Actually, the law is pretty clear, but a call to the Justice Department went unreturned at press time.

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### China-themed park draws protesters to front door

By Mike Schneider  
Associated Press Writer  
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KISSIMMEE, Florida (AP)

Waving a "Free Tibet" sign and a Tibetan national flag, Jack Churchward looked out of place on the quiet stretch of road behind a busy tourist strip of motels, Waffle Houses and discount shops.

After walking up the road, he and two other protesters parked themselves in front of Florida Splendid China, a theme park they claim is owned by an agency of the Communist Chinese government, they spent the next several hours trying to persuade tourists to turn their cars around and go to one of Orlando's dozens of other attractions.

Protesters, like Churchward, who object to the inclusion of exhibits about ethnic minorities oppressed by the Chinese government, have for the past five years injected politics and human-rights abuse issues into the normally escapist, fantasy landscape of Orlando theme parks.

"It's a propaganda theme park," said Churchward, 41, who converted to Tibetan Buddhism 13 years ago and works as an electrical engineer at an aerospace firm from Clearwater.

"They came here and thought all of us Floridians were dumb, stupid hicks and that we wouldn't read and not know any better," said Churchward, coordinator of a group called Citizens Against Communist Chinese Propaganda. "I can't in good conscience not say anything."

Officials at the theme park near Walt Disney World deny that Splendid China is owned by the Chinese government, claiming it is owned by a Hong Kong holding company. However, Churchward claims the company, China Travel Services H.K. Ltd., is owned by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, part of China's highest government body, the State Council of the People's Republic of China. The theme park, which opened in December 1993, offers visitors dozens of replicas of Chinese landmarks such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City as well as music, dance and acrobatic performances and a free dinner. When it opened, opponents began waving protest banners and flags outside its 76-acre (31-hectare) property, which was modeled after the original Splendid China in the city of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong.

"We have been telling them it is a cultural theme park," said Jim Yu, a marketing representative for Splendid China. "It has nothing to do with politics."

The \$100 million park has had troubles carving a niche in Orlando's crowded theme park market. In contrast to the flashy rides and name-brand characters that parade around Walt Disney World and Universal Studios, Splendid China is a subdued and quiet experience, geared more for adults than children. The park attracts only several hundred visitors a day, compared with the tens of thousands of people who will visit the larger theme parks daily.

They also had difficulty with their own performers, many of whom come from China each year. In the first three years, dozens of those workers requested political asylum in the United States.

Churchward and members of his group have repeatedly written to Splendid China's management to either remove or change exhibits on Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, which the Muslim minority there calls Eastern Turkestan.

The Tibetans, Mongolians and Uighurs, the Muslim minority who live in Xinjiang, claim the Chinese have stolen their independence, discouraged religious traditions and used torture and mass killings to crush dissent. China, which denies the claims, fiercely opposes giving up the land where the ethnic groups reside.

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### A park with a different theme

South China Morning Post

04/29/99

by Steven Knipp

Florida residents are long accustomed to encountering fantasy in their daily lives.

Two-metre-tall talking mice named Mickey and Minnie, flying elephants named Jumbo and tiny winged pixies named Tinkerbell are well-known residents at the state's mega theme parks like Universal Studios and Walt Disney World. But even in the United States, it seems, you can sometimes go too far with fantasy. Since its opening six years ago, the Chinese Government-owned Splendid China theme park (a copy of the Splendid China theme park in Shenzhen) has proved controversial for its "fast with the facts" portrayal of Chinese history and culture.

Since its opening day, the \$778 million, 30-hectare Florida attraction had modest expectations of drawing one million American tourists per year: a pittance, compared with the 62 million visitors who make their way to the 10,900-hectare Walt Disney World complex just three kilometres up the road.

Like its sister park in Shenzhen, which opened four years before the Florida version, Splendid China is owned by the Beijing-based China Travel Service (CTS) and showcases 60 miniature versions of China's most fabled attractions, everything from the Great Wall to the canals of Suzhou. The park was initially a 50-50 joint venture between CTS and Taiwanese-born American property developer George Chen. However, Chen sold his stake to CTS within weeks of the park's opening.

But what Florida's Splendid China did not expect at its invitation-only grand opening in 1993 were more than a hundred protest marchers - a vocal combination of Americans and Tibetan monks living in the US who were part of the International Campaign for Tibet, a Washington-based human rights organisation. Also on hand were dozens of Mongolians holding up "Free [Inner] Mongolia" signs.

"It's a contradiction to confuse the outside world," said Tsengelt Gonchig, 26. "The Inner Mongolia situation is like Tibet. We have no religious rights or cultural rights. The Chinese destroy Mongolian culture here, in this country, in this park." For the past six years, protesters, both Florida-based and from across the US, have kept up a growing barrage of criticism of the park. Objections are especially strong against the depiction of Tibet's Potala Palace as being part of Chinese culture. In a statement last year, the elder brother of Tibet's Dalai Lama, Thupten Jigme Norbu, said: "The treasures of Tibet, Southern Mongolia and Eastern Turkestan do not belong to a Chinese theme park because they are not Chinese." Mongolian protesters resident in the US also object to the depiction of Genghis Khan's mausoleum, and Mongolian yurts, as being part of Chinese culture. While Splendid China's Florida management team steadfastly insist that its attractions are strictly for entertainment purposes, the possibility of the park having subtle political overtones has been picked by some leading American newspapers.

In an editorial soon after the park opened, the influential Miami Herald's editorial thundered: "The owners of 'Splendid China' have every right to operate here. But Florida officials have no place at the opening of this propaganda palace. Tax dollars should not pay for field trips in which school children might soak up such nonsense. Not all fantasy is fun. There's a difference between make-believe and lies. Florida, a state specialising in 'real' fun, should be the first to notice."

Soon after that and other editorials ran, several school districts stopped sending their pupils for field trips to the park. Over the years, nearly a dozen high-ranking Chinese officials have quietly visited the park. Deng Xiaoping visited just before its opening and was followed by Jiang Zemin and Li Peng.

Human rights group Citizens Against Chinese Propaganda has conducted more than 25 demonstrations outside the park's gates and continues to do so every other month. The group's founder is Jack Churchward. Married for 22 years with three children, Mr. Churchward is an electrical engineer and a practising Tibetan Buddhist.

"We are volunteers. We have no paid staff, no expense accounts. All our activities have been underwritten by volunteers. We have not received any money from His Holiness the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan Government in Exile."

Mr. Churchward said that apart from Tibetan groups, his organisation's demonstrations are supported by Inner Mongolian, Uyghur/Eastern Turkestani and Taiwanese organisations.

As summer arrives in steamy central Florida, things could be heating up for Splendid China, too.

Next month a conference, called Exposing Communist Chinese Influence In America, is planned in nearby Orlando. With US President Bill Clinton's sex scandal over, prominent Republicans with an eye on the White House are expected increasingly to raise the issue of Chinese spying and contributions from Beijing to Mr Clinton's campaign funds, as well as PLA investments in the US.

Citizens Against Chinese Propaganda has already contacted US attorney-general Janet Reno and Florida governor Jeb Bush, charging that the theme park has not registered as an agent of a foreign government as is required by federal law.

Meanwhile, Scott Shaw, a US-based vice-president of CTS, said: "We're a theme park. Nothing more. Changing anything in the park is absolutely out of the question. Whether you like it or not, it's part of history."

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

### Not-So-Splendid Deal

Far Eastern Economic Review  
INTELLIGENCE (Page 9)  
05/13/99 issue

### Not-So-Splendid Deal

One of China's most disastrous overseas investments ever, the Splendid China theme park in Orlando, Florida, is about to be sold, say business sources in the city. Two investment groups, one American and one from China, are in the final running. The park has bled money ever since it was opened in December 1993 by Hong Kong China Travel Service (Holdings), a Hong Kong company owned by the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs of the State Council, or chinese cabinet. Boring attractions, poor maintenance and constant protests outside the park about its depiction of china's ethnic minorities have deterred attendance, which the sources say is only a few hundred a day. One local businessman who saw the park's books last year says it loses about \$ 9 million a year. Total investment, he says, has been about \$ 200 million, more than half of which is still owed in loans to the state-owned Bank of China. Park spokesman Jim Yu says he has heard rumours but cannot confirm that a sale is imminent. He says the park, which employs 160 full-time staff, is currently "very close to breaking even."

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

About.com  
Florida Splendid China  
Dateline: 12/10/99

In the world of Central Florida theme parks, things are not always as they appear: trees turn out to be fiberglass, Presidents turn out to be robots, and the park that appears the most serene turns out to be the most controversial.

Florida Splendid China, a 76 acre theme park just West of the main entrance to Walt Disney World, brings to visitors the beauty and landmarks of China in miniature form. Accurate scale models of some of that China's most interesting architectural and cultural sites, peopled with a motionless ceramic population, are scattered along the park's curving, well landscaped (if not too shady) paths.

The miniatures include replicas of:

The Great Wall of China, here this version is still a half of a mile long and was built brick by brick.

The Terra Cotta Warriors of Xi'an, a miniature version of the archeological find of the century. The row upon row of clay soldiers aren't life size, but it does give you a sense of the scope of the original site.

The Leshan Grand Buddha Statue. The original is 236 ft. high -- this one is at 1/8th scale, but you still have to look up to it.

The Forbidden City, including a miniature Emperor's wedding procession. and Potala Palace, the spiritual center of Tibet and traditional seat of the Dalai Lama, still imposing in its lofty mountainside perch.  
and more than 50 more representing the diversity of cultures within the region.

Although all of the miniatures are meticulously done, some are more effective than others. The Yurts of Mongolia, for example, are on so small a scale compared to the surrounding grass that they appear like nothing so much as upended dog bowls. A few of the scenes are beginning to show cracks and other wear, and some of the small figurines that populate them are now broken or missing entirely.

In addition to the miniatures there are shows scheduled throughout the day that including a review of Chinese culture and music and troops of acrobats who do truly amazing things with jars, hoola-hoops, and their own bodies.

Aside from the show schedule, visitors are free to wander the grounds and look at the scenes, or to just sit, relax, and enjoy the view. Kids can get bored here quickly, but there is a large play structure, Panda Playground, where they can burn off some restless energy.

Entrance to the park is through a small shopping and dining complex, Florida Chinatown, where souvenirs from China are sold and there are two Chinese restaurants: The Seven Flavors, with cafeteria style service, and Suzhou Pearl, with waitress service.

In the evening in the Chinatown section's large theater there's a stage production featuring acrobatics, dance, and music: "Mysterious Kingdom of the Orient," which requires a separate admission and can be combined with dinner at the Seven Flavors restaurant.

Florida Splendid China has no rides, no bright lights, and no frenetic action and flashy stunts like you find at the other theme parks in the area. It's designed for relaxation and contemplation of the beauties of the Orient. On the surface, the park is serenity itself -- but in the background, if you listen, you can hear the sounds of protest...

Splendid China: Protests and Politics

Florida Splendid China presents a peaceful picture of China as it was -- the temples are populated by quaint, colorful monks, there are no troops stationed in Tibet, and no tanks in Tiananmen Square.

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Since before the park opened in 1993, protestors have charged that Florida Splendid China is a tool for propaganda rather than entertainment, and have often staged demonstrations outside the park and have worked to end school field trip visits.

The park's critics charge that:

Depictions of Tibet's Potala Palace, Mongolian Yurts, and other landmarks from other cultures as being within China are attempts to legitimize Chinese Communist occupation of formerly independent areas.

The multiplicity of religious sites gives a false impression of religious and cultural tolerance within China today when those religions are now oppressed. And that

The park is actually owned and operated by the Chinese Government (through China Travel Services) and is in violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

Park officials have denied that there is any political purpose to Florida Splendid China. As the vice president of China Travel Service told The Orlando Sentinel: "We're a theme park. Nothing more."

Americans don't seem to have embraced Florida Splendid China. Unlike its sister park in China, Shenzhen Splendid China, which has been a major success with thousands of visitors each day, the Florida park is rarely crowded. It seems to have been built for a much greater volume of guests; several restaurants built within the park remain empty and closed. If it's propaganda, the message isn't getting out as widely as first planned. Compared to the other theme parks of Central Florida, it doesn't seem so splendid, after all.

Florida Splendid China: More Information

If you visit Florida Splendid China, be prepared for a long walk. The grounds are large and, especially in Summer, the weather can get extremely hot -- so don't forget the sun screen. There isn't much shelter from the rain, either, making it not the best choice for rainy day touring.

The park offers wheelchair, electric scooter, and stroller rentals for a fee. Guided tours are also available, including tours by golf cart (extra charge).

Florida Splendid China is easy to find, it's off of U.S. 192 between I-4 (exit 25-B) and U.S. 27, just head West of the main entrance to Walt Disney World outside of Kissimmee, Florida. Turn South at the signs -- the park is just behind the Formosa Gardens shopping center, at 3000 Splendid China Boulevard.

The Florida Chinatown section is free, so if you just want to shop or try out the cuisine you don't have to pay to see the miniatures. You can purchase tickets for just the park, just the evening show, or various combination tickets.

Admission is currently under \$30. Look for discounts on their website, in area travel publications, and through AAA.

For more information, current hours, or prices, call the park at (800) 244-6226 or (407) 396-7111.

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Orlando Business Journal  
Still More  
From the December 17, 1999 print edition

Around Orlando

In the red?

How is Splendid China faring?

Depends on who you ask.

Recently, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported Splendid China was losing about \$9 million a year.

Splendid China's director of marketing, Bob Bissinnar, says the figure is exaggerated.

However, without divulging the park's financials or attendance figures, Bissinnar admits that, "After a couple of years, we realized that this was a difficult sell. People associate attractions with rides, and we don't have rides."

Instead, Splendid China was built on the belief that tourists would flock to painstakingly crafted miniatures of such landmarks as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.

However, crowds failed to materialize, and now, says Bissinnar, marketing strategy is being reworked. "We're focusing on retired people and people who like this sort of thing," he says ...

Staff report compiled by Alan Byrd and Jill Krueger.

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Orlando Business Journal  
Exclusive Reports  
From the December 17, 1999 print edition  
Protesters to park: Not so splendid, China  
Alan Byrd Staff Writer

ORLANDO -- Jack Churchward has been to Splendid China more than most.

But his visits to the theme park, owned by the Chinese government, weren't spent gawking at miniature versions of the Great Wall of China and other exhibits. They were spent outside the park's gates, handing out brochures and chanting "free Tibet."

This weekend, the sixth anniversary of the park's opening, Churchward, a Tibetan Buddhist, will have more company than usual, as he leads yet another protest -- his 32nd.

And if Churchward's dogged protests seem unusual, consider the focus of those protests: what he says is Splendid China's wrong-headed interpretations of history.

"It's outrageous," says Churchward, the Florida coordinator of Citizens Against Communist Chinese Propaganda, regarding Splendid China.

So that group has taken to the streets of Kissimmee in a search for historical accuracy.

And it's quite a group: College students and grandparents, 2-week-old babies and their mothers have marched side by side to U.S. Highway 192, waving flags and handing out brochures demanding historical accuracy.

The brother and nephew of the Dalai Lama have attended. A group of Buddhist monks, on tour with the Lollapalooza rock concert, came by.

Certainly, there is plenty of political fodder for any protest involving Tibet and China, which has tightened its control on the country in recent years.

But, says Churchward, his is "a joyful exhibition.

"We haven't gone after the radical crowd because we don't want hatred or anti-Chinese positions at the protests."

What Churchward and other critics do want is a change in five exhibits.

Each features replicas of buildings built hundreds of years ago. And each, says Churchward, wrongly depict Tibetan and Chinese history.

The main point of contention: the Potala Palace, winter home to the Dalai Lama and the center of Tibetan government since 1645.

Churchward says the exhibit explains only that the palace was built by the Tibetans as a present to a Chinese bride in the 8th century.

"It doesn't provide the true story of the Tibetan people," Churchward says.

For the people of Eastern Turkestan, the Xieng Fei's Tomb exhibit is the most upsetting. That exhibit re-cords Xieng Fei was a concubine, who worked eagerly for the Chinese emperor.

To begin with, says Churchward, the exhibit wrongly gives the woman a Chinese name. Her real name was Abakh Hoja, and, he says, she is best known in Eastern Turkestan for committing suicide rather than having conjugal relations with the Chinese emperor.

Finally, the Mongolian people are upset with the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan, which Churchward says never really existed.

Instead, he says, Mongolians built small memorials and took Khan's ashes throughout the countryside. When the People's Republic of China took over Mongolia, the Chinese built a structure -- faithfully recreated at Splendid China -- and put the memorials inside.

However, those memorials are believed to have been destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution, when the structure was used to store salt.

Splendid China's director of marketing, Bob Bissinnar, who was with the park when it opened, says the park won't comment on the protests, except to say, "The exhibits are part of our park, and we have no plans to change them."