

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Opinion

From the December 31, 1999 print edition
Letters to the Editor

Something Splendid

To the Editor

Re: "Not so Splendid, China," Dec. 24 edition of Orlando Business Journal

I just read your recent article on protesters who believe Splendid China misrepresents certain aspects of history. First, let me say that I was a United States diplomat in the advance party that opened relations with China in 1973, and stayed on until 1975. I have been to China three times in the last three years. For fun, I teach Chinese history, culture, religion and philosophy.

I believe the protesters have their history mangled. For example:

Potala Palace, Tibet. In the 600s during the Tang Dynasty in China, Tibetan King Gampo began a policy of expansion and moved militarily against both China and India -- so both gave him a princess as a bride to calm him down.

(The "Indian" actually was what would now be Nepalese.) He built the first palace to show the prestige of his growing power and incidentally for his two new brides and three Tibetan wives. The palace as it is today was built between 1640 and 1690 by the fifth Dalai Lama (who died during construction, his death concealed for 12 years so construction could continue, and whose gold-plated tomb is a main feature of the roof.)

Eastern Turkestan and the Tomb of Xiang Fei. In the 1700s during the Qing Dynasty, Xiang Fei's father led a revolt against the Chinese. He was defeated and Xiang Fei taken back to Beijing as a hostage to ensure that her family stayed peaceful. The tomb in the exhibit is a family tomb dating back to the 1600s and has about 70 "residents" -- but not Abakh Hoja/Xiang Fei.

I think I can say that she became the favorite concubine of Emperor Qianlong -- she is the only concubine that I am aware of who has a tomb equal to an empress. Xiang Fei is buried in the tomb complex of Emperor Qianlong.

Concubines were buried (often standing up, sometimes alive) under mounds, but not in an elegant tomb complex as is Xiang Fei.

In September 1998, I spent most of a day with the lady. I have photographs of the tomb and even of Xiang Fei.

Also on display was a cutting of hair taken from her body. The hair is gray, which supports the claim that she lived to a ripe old age and died in her 50s. The story that she committed suicide rather than submit to the emperor is just that -- a romantic story.

Finally, part of the confusion comes from the fact that Xiang Fei was a nick-name, not her official court name -- which is Rongfei. In ancient times, Rong referred to people from the west, which is where Xiang Fei came from. So her court name is probably western concubine, her nickname fragrant concubine.

Gingghis Khan, Mongolia. (Gingghis is the Mongolian word.) In 1227, Gingghis Khan defeated a Tibetan people, and while awaiting their final surrender began to move toward China to take on the Song Dynasty.

But he died en route. He was taken back to Mongolia to his wife, and he was then buried in a tomb, as he had requested, in the Erdos region of Inner Mongolia. The custom was to bury people under the ground and then run herds of horses over the spot to hide the location. So no one knows or admits to knowing exactly where the tomb is located. Bottom line, there were no ashes to be hauled around in a shrine. They used a "perpetual" fire (butter lantern) that they say has now burned for almost 800 years, and other paraphernalia, like his gold saddle, to create a mobile shrine that was moved about on huge carts pulled by oxen.

Because of the flat land, they could put their entire residence, a nomad tent called a yurt, on large carts and pull them around without having to break down and pack them. This went on until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when they settled in Inner Mongolia on a hilltop overlooking a river plain. A beautiful sight -- and I say that because I spent a day there in September 1998. I have photographic copies of the wooden structures used as the mausoleum up until the 1980s when the Chinese built the current structures. The mausoleum and the shrine are still guarded by the tribe designated for the job when Gingghis Khan died in 1227.

I hope this information is a bit enlightening. Xin nian kuai le: Happy New Year.

Al Riley,
Marketing department.,
Florida Splendid China

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Orlando Business Journal
Industry Wrapups

From the April 28, 2000 print edition

Tourism World

Splendid doors still open; Disney hosting quiet riot

Alan Byrd

Is Florida Splendid China closing its doors?

Not if you ask Sunny Yang, the Osceola County attraction's president.

"The park is still in its normal situation, and business is improving," says Yang of rumors that the attraction, which showcases miniature replicas of famous Chinese buildings, might be shuttered.

According to Yang, Splendid China attendance was approximately 200,000 in 1999.

Sources close to the park say that it was almost sold about a year ago, but that deal fell through.

One change has taken place. Bob Bissinnar, the park's director of marketing, has left the company. No word on where he went.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Orlando Business Journal
Exclusive Reports

From the May 26, 2000 print edition

Splendid China slated for sale

Negotiations involve Chinese-owned theme park, land and hotel

Alan Byrd Staff Writer

ORLANDO -- Fewer than seven years after it opened, Splendid China is about to be sold and possibly closed.

Sources close to the attraction independently confirm that representatives of the government-run travel agency that owns the attraction are in final negotiations to sell the 76-acre park, an adjacent 311 acres and a Days Inn motel.

Splendid China's president, Sunny Yang, confirms the hotel property is about to change hands; however, both the law firm of Baker and Hostetler, which is involved in the negotiations, and Yang decline to confirm or deny the park is being sold.

"I have no information," Yang says. "I'm still carrying out the normal day's business."

Splendid China opened for business in 1993, a \$100 million venture replicating several of China's most famous attractions - in miniature. More than 100 Chinese artists and craftsmen created scaled-down versions of the Forbidden City and other famous Chinese landmarks, which promised a much more passive experience than the roller coasters and water slides featured at Disney World and Universal Studios.

The park was notable for another item, as well: the participation of the government of mainland China. Hong Kong China Travel Service (Holdings), a company owned by the Office of Overseas Chinese Affairs of the State Council, or the Chinese Cabinet, is the park's owner.

But despite the heavyweight backing, the park has struggled since opening day, when about 3,000 people entered the gates.

Today, attendance has dropped to 200 a day, says Yang, most of them senior citizens. Late last year, the Far Eastern Economic review reported that the attraction was losing \$9 million a year.

Recently, admission prices have been cut from \$28 to about \$19, and the park has struck admission deals with nearby hotels. The Days Inn, which has made money, has been subsidizing park operations, admits Yang.

"The park is difficult," he says. "We have been attracting more and more people, however."

The sale would open up the property for a variety of uses. For example, Epcot's 290 acres would fit on the site. So would the 218-acre SeaWorld Florida.

Whatever the property is used for, area officials don't like the prospect of losing an attraction.

"We are always saddened to hear about an attraction that doesn't make it," says Tim Hemphill, executive director of the Kissimmee-St. Cloud Convention & Visitors Bureau. "As dynamic as this market is, however, something great will replace them."

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Orlando Business Journal
Still More

From the July 21, 2000 print edition

The commies did it. Did irate communists throw a monkey wrench into sale talk at Splendid China?

Despite losing money, some people in the Chinese Communist Party may want to keep the attraction open because it provides a place for family members to work -- and also is a popular junket for officials to come to Florida under the guise of business.

Some Internet sites frequently used as a sounding board by the Chinese elite are full of criticism about the proposed sale.

Once the politics have cleared, the future of Splendid China will be determined. Until then, it's all behind a great wall of silence ...

Staff report compiled by Alan Byrd, Nancy Pfister, Jill Krueger, Cindy Barth and Noelle Haner-Dorr.

Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Orlando Business Journal
Exclusive Reports

From the August 4, 2000 print edition

Not-so-Splendid suit follows failed park sale

Alan Byrd Staff Writer

KISSIMMEE -- A deal to sell Florida Splendid China to a Massachusetts company at bargain-basement prices has fallen through, but the fallout is just beginning: The would-be buyer, Brookhill LLC, is asking the courts to force the Chinese government to sell the Osceola County attraction.

The lawsuit follows repeated denials by the park's management that the flagging attraction was in the process of being sold.

While neither party would comment on the suit or the sale, court documents record that the two entered into a sales agreement this past April. Terms called for Brookhill to pay Chinese Travel Services International -- a corporate arm of the Chinese government -- \$52 million for both the park and several acres adjacent to the park.

But there was a stumbling block. The Chinese employees of the local theme park, including management, did not want to pack up and go home, according to the suit.

"There was a reluctance on the part of local management for the sale to occur because of the prospect of losing their jobs and having to return to China," attorneys for Brookhill contend in the filings. Further, say the lawyers, the critics of the sale took to an Internet Web site frequented by Chinese officials, where they proceeded to post messages undermining the sale.

Finally, on July 5, Splendid China returned Brookhill's \$300,000 deposit and terminated the sales agreement.

"It appears that the termination was a reaction to malicious and libelous statements made on the Internet and in newsprint ... by individuals who were interested in causing the deal to fall apart," the suit says.

Brookhill is asking the court to enforce the contract and award it attorneys' fees and other relief.

If the sale contract is enforced, it would mean a hefty loss for the Chinese. The \$52 million price tag is less than half of the reported \$100 million price of the park in 1993 -- a figure that doesn't include a Days Inn hotel next to the park and 274 acres purchased later for \$15 million.

However, it's also widely believed the low-key attraction, which showcases miniature versions of Chinese landmarks, has been losing money for some time. Since opening day, when 2,000 first entered the gates, attendance has dropped to 200 a day, according to a park official. By contrast, Disney World averages more than 46,000 visitors a day. In fact, the more profitable Days Inn hotel has subsidized the park for several years.

It's not known if the prospective buyers would have tried to turn a profit with the 79-acre park and the 311 acres next to it. However, sources close to the deal say plans originally called for Brookhill to level the theme park and build houses on the acreage, primarily for use as vacation rentals.