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A Splendid Idea in China Turned Sour in Florida: The Rise and Fall of the Florida Splendid China

By Wenxian Zhang

Although Florida had been promoted as a tropical paradise to people with health concerns since the granting of statehood in 1845, the Sunshine State did not become a top vacation destination for thrill-seeking Americans until Disney World opened its doors in the early 1970s. Disney's appearance spawned several other major theme parks, including Sea World and Universal Studios, and some smaller attractions such as Wet and Wild. Florida Splendid China joined the ranks of Central Florida's regional theme parks in 1993. A high profile project, it represented one of the first and largest joint investment ventures between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The theme park, optimistically conceived yet poorly researched, well-executed but improperly managed, never took off in the competitive market of Central Florida. Political controversies and demonstrations plagued the park during its ten-year history, and it finally fell victim to the region's struggling tourism business following the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The history of Florida Splendid China was linked to the original miniature attraction in Shenzhen, China. Designed as a public relations showcase to promote tourism in China, the amusement park located near Hong Kong was the brainchild of

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Ma Zhimin (Ma Chiman),¹ general manager of China Travel Service (CTS) Ltd. Listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, CTS was the largest tourism firm in Mainland China owning travel agencies, theme parks, and performing arts groups. Many believed that the Chinese government held a majority of its stock. In 1989, Ma reflected on the conception of Splendid China: "During my trip to Europe in 1985, I visited the famous Madurodam "Lilliputian Land" in Holland when an idea came to me and I was thinking how great it would be if we could build a miniature scenic spot in which China's renowned scenic attractions and historical sites could be concentratedly displayed so that people could admire and know more about China's beautiful scenic wonders, splendid history and culture as well as various national customs and habits in a shorter time."² With sufficient funding from CTS, the idea quickly turned into reality.

Opened in November 1989 with an admission price of approximately \$11, the original Splendid China was an immediate success in Southern China, attracting more than 3.5 million visitors in its first year and recouping all its original investment. In November 1991, Ma opened the Chinese Folk Culture Villages nearby, where visitors could tour replicas of twenty-one villages representing twenty-four of China's fifty-six nationalities, including Mien, Yao, Hmong, Uyghurs, Bai, Mongols and Tibetans. Shortly afterward, a 119-acre park, the Window of the World, was constructed beside Splendid China, featuring models of 118 famous world sites including the Eiffel Tower, the Egyptian pyramids, and the Kremlin. The cluster of theme parks made Shenzhen a top tourist attraction in China. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping, the 88-year-old Chinese leader, toured Splendid China in a golf cart, further enhancing the park's prestige.³ It was during this trip to Southern China that Deng made his famous speech advocating the acceleration of China's privatization effort following the economic collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union.

Under Deng, acquiring wealth became a positive goal in the nominally Communist country, and Splendid China served as a

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1. Chinese names in this article are spelled in the standard pronunciation—Hanyu Pinyin, and listed with last names first following Chinese customs.
 2. Ma Chiman, Liu Chiping and Au Lai Wa, *Shenzhen Splendid China Miniature Scenic Spot* (Hong Kong: China Travel Service, 1989), 3.
 3. Stephen Magagnini, "China in Three Hours: Amazing!" *Sacramento Bee*, 3 October 1993, sec. TR1.

shining example. Its huge success made CTS leaders very confident and eager for business expansion. Florida Splendid China was conceptualized within this framework. The new business venture, as described by the magazine *Economist*, signaled China's headlong plunge into western-style capitalism.⁴

Frank and Josephine Chen owned the land on which Florida Splendid China would be built. Josephine Chen, who emigrated to the United States in 1968, had built a fortune through real estate development. During a 1986 trip to Central Florida, she bought a barren strip of 560 acres located off U.S. Highway 192, just west of the Disney property. After visiting the original Splendid China in Shenzhen, Josephine Chen began to consider a similar park in Florida. For the Chens, the Splendid China park would be the centerpiece of a larger development project that would be their legacy. On land adjacent to the park, they planned a housing development that would include nearly 500 single-family houses with a price range of \$100,000 to \$250,000, 240 condominium apartments, 1,400 hotel and motel rooms, 900 restaurant seats and more than 300,000 square feet of shopping space.⁵

The proposed Florida Splendid China park was a 50-50 joint venture between CTS and Chen's family business, the Florida-based American Eastern International (AEI), with a total investment that eventually reached over \$100 million. Under their agreement, AEI provided the land and management services for the park, while CTS supplied the building materials, the architects, and the personnel. In the venture's first public announcement on August 21, 1991, George Chen, a computer dealer and transplanted Los Angeles businessman recruited by his parents to run the project, outlined a 76-acre theme park that would attract tourists from Asia as well as Florida school groups and Disney visitors in search of something different. "We think it's going to be unique enough that it's going to be a complement to Disney or Sea World," he predicted and noted, "It's a static park rather than a dynamic park. It's [a] pensive, walk-through kind of thing."⁶ Although George Chen refused to estimate the cost of the project, he valued the replicas alone at \$40 million.

4. "Chinese Culture: Prettified," *Economist*, 331.7863 (14 May 1994): 92.

5. Susan Jacobson, "Park Would Bring China Closer," *Orlando Sentinel*, 21 August 1991, sec. D1.

6. Ibid.

Citing reports from economic and marketing consultants, Chen was confident in the future success of the proposed theme park. Optimism for the Florida Splendid China project rested on the success of similar attractions that featured miniatures of famous shrines or cultural icons. Miniature parks in Europe, for example, drew approximately one million visitors annually. Market studies of similar sites convinced the partners that the new attraction would be successful in Orlando. "We could make every mistake in the books and still come out ahead," predicted Chen.⁷ In addition to American tourists, he expected the park to attract Chinese visitors through CTS-arranged charter tours. Chen hoped the project would divert some Chinese travelers from their primary U.S. destinations of New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco and bring them to Central Florida.⁸

The competition for tourists' time in Central Florida has always been fierce, and industry analysts believe that the toughest market to crack may not be the top tier of theme parks such as Disney World and Sea World, but the secondary market. While the largest parks compete for visitors from around the world, the smaller, less expensive attractions pursue the "leftovers," tourists who come for Disney, but then have a few spare hours afterward. According to a market expert, a new theme park 'will have to be unique. It must be so different, so appealing and set a such a price that people will have to say, 'I've just got to get over there to see what this is all about.'"⁹ Despite industry studies indicating that the region had reached its limit, the partners believed a well-financed and well-executed park, one they could afford to keep operating through the usually tough first years, could succeed. Although a small British-themed park named Little England failed to materialize fully in the early 1980s,¹⁰ Chen and CTS remained confident that the variety of tourists visiting Orlando annually made Central Florida an ideal location for their planned attraction.

Intended to be both a tourist attraction and an advertisement for travel to the real China, Florida Splendid China was conceived

7. Ibid.

8. Mary Murphy, "Work Progresses Splendidly on China Theme Park," *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 May 1992, Osceola, sec. 1.

9. Vicki Vaughan, "Themed Out? New Attractions Pouring in Despite 'Saturated Market,'" *Orlando Sentinel*, 16 September 1991, Central Florida Business, sec. 1.

10. Ibid.

by its developers as an "outdoor educational museum."¹¹ According to George Chen, visitors to the attraction would have the experience of a National Geographic tour of China. "It is a journey to China, similar to *Gulliver's Travels* to Lilliput. We want the visitor to discover and experience the history, culture and customs of China, which date back 5,000 years."¹² Unlike Disney World and other area attractions designed for entertainment and family fun, Florida Splendid China would use culture and history as its key themes. From the outset, the partners clearly understood that the new park would be "somewhat more passive and reflective compared to Walt Disney World, leaping dolphins, performing whales, thrill rides and fireworks in the sky."¹³ But as Chen explained: "If you want to do an attraction at the doorstep of Disney, you need to complement them, not compete with them. We hope to appeal to some of the families that go to Disney."¹⁴

In designing the park, AEI and CTS aimed at providing visitors a genuine experience of China. Chen promised the restaurants of Florida Splendid China would offer the true Chinese cuisine that one would find nowhere else in America. To ensure guests a total Chinese experience, the partners planned to populate the park with Chinese entertainers, acrobats, Mongolian wrestlers, and martial arts experts. Furthermore, in response to the dark images associated with the recent suppression of student demonstrations in China, the Central Florida project sought to cast China in a more favorable light and "show off some of the positive things of China culture."¹⁵ The park would serve as a showcase for Chinese culture and a microcosm of the real China, reflecting the country's ancient history, cultural heritage, scenic wonders, diverse lifestyles, and artistic and architectural accomplishments. Unexpectedly, this public relations rationale generated many of the controversies associated with the attraction and made people question the justification for the park and the ownership of the Chinese company. Although several critics denounced CTS as a government-funded

11. Susan G. Strother, "Laying the Groundwork for Chinese Attraction: \$80 Million Park Expected to Open in '93 Near Disney," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 December 1991, sec. B1.

12. Ike Flores, "Park Shows China on a Small Scale," *Miami Herald*, 28 June 1993, sec. 1B.

13. Magagnini, *Sacramento Bee*, 3 October 1993, TR1.

14. Strother, *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 December 1991, B1.

15. Flores, *Miami Herald*, 28 June 1993, 1B.

travel agency, the general manager insisted that his company was a private entity which brought its own funds to the project. He asserted that the only Chinese government support came in the form of necessary permission to create replicas of sites such as Beijing's Forbidden City and Tibet's Potala Palace.¹⁶

On December 18, 1991, a number of Florida state officials attended the groundbreaking ceremony for Florida Splendid China. Grey Farmer, Florida Secretary of Commerce, declared that the project represented the largest Chinese investment in the state.¹⁷ Barry Kenney, Florida's Director of Tourism, believed the park would foster better relations between the United States and China, and possibly lure more foreign investment from other Asian countries.¹⁸ With this optimistic outlook for a bright future, construction began in earnest in 1992.

Constructing Splendid China proved to be a unique Chinese and American experience that exposed Americans to the Asian work ethic and introduced Chinese workers to American culture. Some 120 prominent Chinese artists were recruited to the United States to work on the exhibits. To fulfill the requirement of both the Chinese and American governments, each worker had to file a three-inch-thick stack of immigration documents. No women were included, and most men were masters in their artistic fields, including calligraphy, painting, stone carving, bonsai sculpting, and pottery.

Each work day began right after breakfast. The Chinese artisans worked until noon and went back to their dormitory for lunch and a nap until 2:30, then returned to the construction project until 6:30 or 7 pm.¹⁹ Although their work style seemed unconventional to Americans, they convincingly proved their effectiveness to their critics. When they started work on the Great Wall exhibit, American contractors projected a 12-month construction period. But it required only seven months to finish the project. Paid at the American union wage scale, Chinese workers lived on-site in a

16. Agence France Presse, "China in Miniature Opens in Florida," news release, 15 December 1993.

17. Strother, *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 December 1991, B1.

18. Annie Tin and Susan Strother, "A Splendid Attraction and a Big Challenge," *Orlando Sentinel*, 12 December 1993, sec. A1.

19. Frank Langley, "East Meets West: George Chen Offers a Grand Tour of Central Florida's Newest Attraction, where Chinese Artisans Have Re-created the Great Wall and Other Fascinating Landmarks of China's Past," *Orlando Sentinel*, 10 October 1993, Florida Sec. 9.

customized, air-conditioned trailer park until the job was completed. To ensure work productivity and lessen homesickness, two chefs were brought from China to prepare workers' meals, and a recreation area provided a television, VCR, and a wide assortment of Chinese-language videos that included everything from music programs to soap operas. The rooms where workers slept were equipped with bunk beds for two, four, and six men; George Chen occupied one of the beds.²⁰ He also bought each of the artisans an annual pass to Walt Disney World, and trips to the Magic Kingdom, Epcot Center, and Disney-MGM Studios were frequent.

Every province of China would be represented in the meticulously designed layout of the Florida project. Included among the leading exhibits was the Great Wall of China (comprising six and a half million one and two inch bricks, one-sixteenth the original size) and a full-size reproduction of a 1200 A.D. street scene in Suzhou, a Chinese city known as the Venice of the Far East. Some of the structures were assembled without nails, balanced by their own weight using the mortise and tenon method. However, local building codes demanded nails, which were added despite the fact that such buildings had been standing in China for hundreds of years. Much of the construction and tens of thousands of figurines were built on a scale of 1 to 15—everything was handcrafted, carefully detailed and sculpted by Chinese artists. There was no mass production, no fiberglass, no colored concrete. Reporters visiting the construction site were astounded by the craftsmanship and the marvelous attention to detail that was given to the tiny structures. The workmanship was so exacting and the colors so enticing that one easily became absorbed in the construction. As Chen explained: "We are using individually glazed, kiln-fired tiles, teakwood, gold leaf, granite; some of the carvings are done under magnifying glass. The domino-sized bricks are terra cotta. We even imported stones from Lake Taihu, which are very valuable. We want to capture the sense of excitement and feeling of Marco Polo's journey to China."²¹

Since authenticity was the trademark of the park, and great emphasis was placed on construction details, the escalating project budget became a frustrating issue for developers. George Chen

20. Ibid.

21. Flores, *Miami Herald*, 28 June 1993, 1B.



Splendid Florida's Great Wall of China. The wall was constructed brick by brick by Chinese craftsmen. The dragonfly on top of the stick in the foreground provides a sense of the scale of the structure. *From the personal collection of Dr. James Yu*

reflected as the park was being prepared for business: "When we undertook this project, we were under the impression that our total budget would be about \$12 million. Of course, we knew there would be overruns, and we expected to as much as double that figure. The red flags began waving when the figure reach \$50 million, and we are now exceeding \$100 million. I only wish I had enough money for all the bottomless holes and unending stream of wants and needs. I am responsible not only to my family but also to my partners in China."²²

A year into construction, the owners were persuaded to invest another \$20 million to make the attraction more exciting. Several new features were designed to enhance the overall experience: a 150-seat movie theater was constructed near the park's entrance to introduce visitors to China's history in preparation for their journey through the miniatures. A 1,000-seat amphitheater offered live shows, including Mongolian wrestling, kung fu

22. Langley, *Orlando Sentinel*, 10 October 1993.

demonstrations, and performances by dance troupes. Shortly before the park opened for business, two additional major investments were made: an adjacent tract of twenty-six acres was purchased for \$3.9 million, and the nearby Days Inn Maingate West Hotel with 365 rooms was acquired for \$8.1 million.²³ The goal was to offer tour packages that would include accommodations, recreation and admission to the theme park.

During the construction phase, a number of problems arose between the partners and between CTS and federal authorities. It became increasingly apparent that CTS and the Chens differed in their perceptions of the park's goals, and rumors circulated that negotiations were underway for CTS to buy out the Chen family interests. At the same time, although state and local governments had approved the project, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) remained concerned that some of the laborers might have been tapped by the Chinese intelligence services to spy on the nearby Cape Canaveral military base and the Kennedy Space Center. An unscheduled, midnight inspection was conducted to ensure that large containers imported from China did not contain high-tech equipment.

Despite those troubling signs, the project moved forward. The park planned to employ between 300 and 400 people. Half would be Chinese entertainers, tour guides, chefs, and artisans who would provide authenticity and maintain the structures. In the end, the attraction brought approximately 550 jobs to the local economy, 250 of which were part-time employment. Four hundred jobs were held by Central Floridians and 150 were Chinese entertainers and crafts specialists. Once construction began in December 1991, nearly 2,000 local contractors, surveyors, landscape architects, electricians, and rock sculptors were hired to work on the project, with half of the \$100 million investment spent on labor costs. By the first year of operation, the park had become a top taxpayer in Osceola County.²⁴

As the construction work wound down, management focused on the park's ability to attract "educated" tourists, people who

23. Annie Tin, "Splendid China Builder May Add Nearby Resort: China Travel Services Is Considering Buying More and Building Hotels Next to the Soon-to-Open Theme Park," *Orlando Sentinel*, 7 December 1993, sec. C1.

24. Annie Tin, "New Park Is Splendid for Tax Rolls: Osceola Looks East—to China—for Some of the Goodies Walt Disney World Brought to Orange," *Orlando Sentinel*, 17 December 1993, sec. D1.

would most appreciate the park's offerings. In late November 1993, the theme park kicked off its \$500,000 introductory campaign with a motorized billboard telling the story of the grand opening.²⁵ The marketing campaign included television, radio, newspaper, and magazine coverage and a bus painted in Splendid China graphics. While an elaborate marketing strategy targeting potential visitors from Europe, South America, Japan, and other foreign countries might prove useful in boosting attendance, Chen's original estimate of three million guests a year already seemed overly optimistic. Six months before the opening, projected attendance figures were revised downward to more than one million visitors in the first year.²⁶ On the eve of the park opening, Ma Zhimin, chairman of Florida Splendid China, still expressed confidence in regard to the future of the attraction, citing the large numbers of American, European, and Latin American tourists who visited the state annually. He further hoped that the park's miniature sights would persuade more people to visit China in order to experience the real thing. Despite such public expressions of optimism, by opening day, the projected target for the first year of operation had been revised downward again to 500,000 – 750,000 visitors.²⁷

A final challenge for the new park was to set an appropriate price structure for admission. The original suggested price was one-half to one-third of the Disney admission, which would place it in the \$11 to \$16.50 range. However, with mounting project deficits, and after some deliberation, the admission price was set at \$23.55 for adults and \$13.90 for children under thirteen years of age. In addition, there was a charge of \$5 per person for a guided walking tour, and \$9 for a tour by golf cart. Since the 76-acre park was packaged as a half-day attraction, some industry observers raised eyebrows over what they viewed as a full-day theme park price. Market experts also warned that the miniature re-creations of Chinese landmarks provided a more passive experience than many vacationers were prepared for, and park managers would have to contend with a basic lack of American understanding of

25. "Theme Park Breaks Splendid Campaign," *AD Week*, 29 November 1993, Southeast edition.

26. Ike Flores, "Park Shows China on a Small Scale," *Miami Herald*, 28 June 1993, sec. 1B.

27. Jack Schnedler, "The Great Wall Is Coming to Central Florida," *Chicago Sun Times*, 17 October 1993, Travel, sec. 2.

Chinese culture. To many Americans, China meant Communism, egg rolls, or the 1989 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square.²⁸ Nonetheless, the partners remained convinced that the park would draw crowds of “educated” travelers more likely to appreciate the “beauty that’s all its own.” When Florida Splendid China finally opened its doors, the local newspaper, the *Orlando Sentinel*, dubbed the region’s newest theme park “a \$100 million gamble.”²⁹

On Saturday, December 18, 1993, hundreds of public officials, local dignitaries, and special guests attended the grand opening ceremony. Through his emissary Charles Wright, Governor Lawton Chiles proclaimed December 18th Splendid China Day. Former U.S. President Richard Nixon, Florida Governor Chiles, Nobel laureates C. N. Yang, T. D. Lee, and C. C. Ting, former Secretary Alexander Haig, U.S. Representatives John Mica and Bill McCollum, and Orlando Mayor Glenda Hood served on the honorary opening day committee. Chinese President Jiang Zemin, former President Yan Shangkun, Premier Li Peng, and Chinese Ambassador Li Daoyu sent their congratulations on the inauguration of the park. Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and three other Chinese government officials attended the opening ceremony. President Jiang’s remark, “Let the world learn more about China” was chosen as the park’s mission statement. Qian Weichang, vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, commented on the occasion: “Chinese culture does not only belong to the Chinese people, it is the common wealth of people of the world. An opening China needs to know more about the rest of the world, and the world needs to know more about China as well. The Splendid China Theme Park, reflecting the characteristics of Chinese culture and ideology, can serve as window of Chinese history and culture.”³⁰

On the following day when the theme park officially opened for business, more than 3,000 tourists and Central Floridians flocked to the new attraction.³¹ Across the country, newspapers

28. Tin and Strother, *Orlando Sentinel*, 12 December 1993, sec. A1.

29. Ibid.

30. Ming Djun, “Splendid China Takes Root in U.S.,” Xinhua News Agency news release, 18 December 1993.

31. Annie Tin, “The Public Gets to See the Splendor: Florida Splendid China Opened to the Paying Public Sunday and Drew More than 3,000 Visitors, Surpassing Expectations,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 20 December 1993, sec. A1.

praised the new attraction. The *Chicago Sun Times* commented: "There are no rides and no glitz, but there is a marvelous immersion in Chinese culture and history, including performances by 165 of China's top entertainers."³² The *Houston Chronicle* noted: "Strictly from a visitor's standpoint, Splendid China is a remarkable achievement . . . Attention to detail is mind-boggling . . . Throughout its 76 acres, the facility is awash with color and beauty."³³ The New Orleans *Times Picayune* called the attraction an "exquisite, monumental work,"³⁴ The *Tampa Tribune* enthused, "Walking among even miniature replicas of Chinese landmarks, one begins to feel a figure in a Chinese painting—a tiny part of an expansive space, a pinpoint in a timeline 5,000 years long,"³⁵ One reporter noted: "from an artistic point of view, much of Splendid China is so good it really doesn't belong here. There are no rides, no light shows, no water slides, no monsters, no trips to outer space at this park. You're supposed to walk through it quietly and admire it. Set against all the other thundering tourist attractions of Central Florida, Splendid China shines like a small jeweled Faberge Easter egg in the middle of Jurassic Park."³⁶ Complaints about the malfunctioning sound system, cold food, and too few activities for children were lost in the amazement that characterized the impressions of most visitors.

Amid the enthusiasm, one news release caught the attention of the tourist industry. Two weeks after being recognized as a "mover and shaker" in Central Florida, George Chen of the American Eastern International abruptly sold his half interest in the theme park for \$26 million to China Travel Service.³⁷ On January 15, 1994, an announcement cited philosophical differences over how to run the attraction as the cause of the split that

32. Joan Dunlop, "Splendid China: No Glitz, But Marvelous Miniatures," *Chicago Sun Times*, 3 April 1994, Travel, sec. 3.

33. Harry Shattuck, "Splendid Florida: Splendid China Is State's Latest Offering," *Houston Chronicle*, 15 May 1994, Travel sec. 1.

34. Millie Ball, "Florida's China is Splendid," *Times Picayune*, 16 April 1995, Travel sec. 3.

35. Cindy Rupert, "Park Recreates Splendid China Landmarks," *Tampa Tribune*, 31 July 1994, Travel sec. 4.

36. Michael Browning, "A Splendid China Setting Florida's Newest Theme Park a Small and Elegant World," *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1993, sec. 1A.

37. Annie Tin, "New Order: China Controls Central Florida Theme Park. The Communist Nation Becomes Sole Owner of Florida Splendid China After U.S. Partner Pulls Out," *Orlando Sentinel*, 15 January 1994, sec. A1.

left CTS the sole owner of Florida Splendid China. Two years later, Chen reflected on the experience of dealing with his Chinese partners: "We were banging heads a year before we opened. We already felt that the bureaucracy was overwhelming. It was a tremendously frustrating experience."³⁸ According to Chen, their differences existed in almost every area, from CTS reluctance to bid out certain construction projects to Chinese views on marketing, including the rejection of his proposal to put a shop in the Orlando International Airport. Unable to reconcile his entrepreneurial instincts with the slow, bureaucratic approach of his Chinese partners, Chen bailed out only days after the park opened for business.

The split notwithstanding, the new attraction continued operation. To boost park attendance, Florida Splendid China early offered ticket discounts. A half-price special was offered to all visitors during the opening week, and in the spring of 1994, Florida residents who purchased a full-price ticket at \$23.55 gained unlimited return visits through Memorial Day. After several weeks of trial operation, CTS claimed that business had been good: week-day attendance averaged 1,000 visitors per day, and as many as 2,500 came to the park on weekends.³⁹ However, by the end of the first year, park administrators were admitting publicly that the new attraction had not met its 1994 goals. Park president Zhang Yuanxing noted: "While we had disappointments in the number of guests we welcomed, we take comfort in knowing that we shared this disappointment with every other attraction in Central Florida, due to an extremely depressed tourism year."⁴⁰ In spite of the difficult market conditions, management vowed to improve the park environment, boost its marketing efforts, and do a better job of communicating China's story to visitors.

Splendid China's problems began at the top. Although several Americans served on the board of directors and held many of the administrative positions associated with the park's management, the chairman and general manager were Chinese. The park

38. Christine Shenot, "Splendid China Turns Up Flash to Lure More Elusive Cash: The Park Has Been Tough to Market to Tourists Who Are Drawn Here by Disney's Fantasy Appeal," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 January 1996, sec. A1.

39. Meredith Gavin, "China in the USA," *China Business Review*, 21.2 (March/April 1994): 5.

40. Jill Krueger, "After Not-so-Splendid First Year, Park Pushes Marketing," *Orlando Business Journal*, 11.29 (23 December 1994): 8.

president had no background in tourism and spoke very little English. Meticulous attention to details characterized the construction phase of the project, but management failed to understand what it would take to lure Americans into the theme park. CTS stuck to its successful Shenzhen Splendid China blueprint and ignored the fact that the passive experience of a walk-through outdoor museum park had limited appeal to Central Florida tourists. Moreover, CTS complacently resisted the flashy, in-your-face advertising and promotions that dominated tourism in Orlando, considering those tactics undignified. One market advisor observed: "They hired the wrong kind of top executives, and they refused to listen to the consultants' advice after they opened."⁴¹

Although the attraction became known as a quiet park where visitors could stroll leisurely and enjoy the scenery, park management acknowledged that "the entertainment is our biggest draw. We needed more places for performances."⁴² Recognizing the need for more live entertainment, CTS approved an additional investment of \$3 million to build a new theater and replace a troupe of folk dancers with acrobats, jugglers, and martial artists. In connection with the celebration of Chinese New Year, the attraction extended operating hours, offered new discounts, and gave away a grand prize of a trip for two to China.⁴³ In 1995, the park opened its \$2 million Golden Peacock Theater with an acrobatic show.

CTS also made some administrative and marketing changes. Yu Jiannian, a Harvard-educated executive with a background in tourism, was appointed the new president, and Bob Morgan, a marketing veteran with twenty years of experience in theme parks, was named marketing director. As a result, new public relations campaigns were launched to broaden the theme park's appeal beyond its niche of older, more educated and affluent visitors. Fresh advertisements aimed at attracting the mainstream family market of Central Florida. Among other measures, the park offered a holiday two-for-one admission with a Sprite[®] coupon; negotiated a marketing alliance with Coca-cola[®] and Tsing Tao Beer; and offered discounts for special events such as the Chinese

41. Shenot, *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 January 1996, A1.

42. Leslie Doolittle, "Splendid China Adding Features to Please Visitors," *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 April 1994, sec. B5.

43. Business Wire, "Splendid China Welcomes Chinese New Year with Colorful Two-Week Long Celebration," news release, 24 January 1995.

New Year's celebration and a kite festival. The attraction sponsored many martial arts and karate competitions,⁴⁴ and park managers made an effort to enhance the attraction's appeal for school and youth groups, conventioners, and senior citizens. Advertisements promoting "Splendid China Learning Adventures" appeared across the state. As a result of these efforts, business increased approximately fifteen percent over the earlier figures.⁴⁵ Although management stabilized, and the park seemed to be headed in the right direction, the fundamental problem of a mismatch between what the attraction offered and what tourists looked for when they came to Orlando remained.

To the unpleasant surprise of the park managers, food service also presented a problem. According to a quote by Confucius that appeared on the attraction's brochure, "a man cannot be serious enough about his eating, for food is the force that binds society together." Although park management made genuine efforts to bring authentic cuisine to Central Florida, Americans were apparently not ready for exotic Chinese dishes; initial responses were lukewarm at best. Jellyfish was compared with shredded plastic by an *Orlando Sentinel* restaurant critic. The whole, boned grouper, he said, tasted as if it had arrived on a slow boat from Asia. Roast duck was greasy and fatty, squid snapped back, Mongolian beef was salty, and the vegetables in Buddha's delight were soggy and flavorless.⁴⁶ As the attraction continued to struggle, food services deteriorated further. In 1998, one journalist sniped: "If the restaurant I ate at served authentic Chinese food, then I feel sorry for the billion Chinese who eat this stuff every day."⁴⁷

Early problems did not dissuade park officials, and CTS remained committed to the Central Florida tourism market. On May 5, 1994, it was reported that CTS had paid a record \$15 million in a cash transaction to add 274 acres to its land holding for

44. George Diaz, "Theme Park Has Splendid Karate Competition," *Orlando Sentinel*, 14 November 1994, D13.

45. Christine Shenot, "Splendid China's Fortune Is Beginning to Improve: Theme Park Learning to Bill Itself as a Secondary Attraction," *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 February 1996, Central Florida Business, sec. 9.

46. Scott Joseph, "Not a Splendid Experience: the Cafeteria-Style Restaurants Inside Splendid China Deliver Meals with Little Flavor," *Orlando Sentinel*, 18 February 1994, Dining sec.; "Semi-Splendid Dining," *Orlando Sentinel*, 20 February 1994, Florida sec., 18.

47. Mike Thomas, "Splendid Isolation," *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 August 1998, Florida, sec. 19.

future development in conjunction with the Florida Splendid China park.⁴⁸ Although attendance figures lagged behind expectations, park officials confidently entertained a number of ambitious proposals for expansion. One proposal added a luxury hotel, which would offer its customers tour packages to Florida and the theme park; another idea proposed the construction of an Asian trade center, which would feature an exhibit hall for Asian goods and an office complex for Asian and Western companies engaged in East-West trade.⁴⁹ Upon completion, with 500,000 square feet of space, 200 showrooms, and 400 exhibition booths, the proposed \$50 million trade center would be nearly one-and-one-half times the size of the Orlando Arena and would mark over \$200 million of total investment by CTS in the Central Florida economy.⁵⁰

In 1996, CTS presented a modified proposal to state and county officials. The master plan included an Asian Trade Center with one million square feet of space, plus a 75,000 square-foot culture village as a natural extension of the park, and a 70,000 square-foot Hong Kong Village mixing shops, restaurants, and entertainment. In addition, the plan called for the construction of 100 villas, 360 single family time-share units, and hotels with a total of 1,000 rooms.⁵¹ As late as 1997, CTS remained enthusiastic about its 20-year massive expansion plan for Central Florida.⁵² Nevertheless, a top official cautioned: "We need to walk before we run," noting that future development would be monitored carefully as the needs of the existing park changed.⁵³

Disney Chairman Michael Eisner was among the high-profile visitors to Splendid China. In August 1996 when Eisner and his

48. Annie Tin, "China Buys Osceola Land for \$15 Million; the 274-Acre Tract Along U.S. Highway 192 Adjoins the Florida Splendid China," *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 May 1994, sec. B1. The price tag of \$54,700 per acre was the highest price paid per acre on a tract that size in the history of Osceola County.

49. Leslie Doolittle, "Asian Trade Center in the Works as Neighbor to Florida Splendid China," *Orlando Sentinel*, 10 May 1994, sec. B1.

50. Annie Tin, "Splendid China Unveils Plans for Trade Center: the Center, 2 Miles from Walt Disney World in Osceola County, Will Cost \$50 Million," *Orlando Sentinel*, 11 May 1994, sec. B1.

51. Robert Sargent, Jr., "Splendid China May Expand Trade Center, Restaurants, Shops Part of Proposed Park Additions," *Orlando Sentinel*, 6 April 1996, sec. B8.

52. "More Splendid?" *Orlando Sentinel*, 11 August 1997, CFB sec. 2.

53. Robert Sargent, Jr., "Splendid China Targets Families with Expansions, Animal Shows; AAA Members Can Buy a Pass to Cypress Gardens, Fantasy of Flight, Splendid China and Bok Tower," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 January 1997, Special sec. 9.

top executives toured the neighboring Chinese theme park, rumors spread that Disney wanted to acquire a panda for its Animal Kingdom and sought CTS assistance with the Chinese government. Another rumor speculated that Disney wanted to collaborate with CTS in the development of a theme park in China. Some even claimed that Disney was considering the purchase of Splendid China at whatever the asking price in order to ease relations with China that had been damaged by a Disney movie about the Dalai Lama.⁵⁴ Although the rumors proved to be groundless, the theme underlying the gossip was the public perception of close business ties between CTS and the Chinese government.

At the beginning of the summer tourist season in 1996, the theme park underwent some sudden changes. President Yu Jiannian returned to Hong Kong along with Vice President Wu Xian and General Manager Ma Qimou. Yang Guang was named the new president over the park, the Gateway Tours that owned Days Inn Gateway West on Highway 192, and CTS Investments Inc. (USA), the development company that held the 400-acre expansion area adjacent to Splendid China.⁵⁵ The move was seen as a step to reduce bureaucracy and consolidate the decision-making process. To further trim operating expenses, Yang fired the park's comptroller and director of administration who disagreed with management changes, and cut the marketing staff from twelve to seven.⁵⁶ Moreover, in order to give the park more exposure in the competitive market, hours were extended to 11 pm, and the front courtyard, renamed Chinatown, was designated as an area where visitors could shop, dine, and watch performances without paying admission fees.⁵⁷ However, after five months and \$400,000 in advertising, park officials reconsidered as the promotion only attracted people to the free area staffed by independent vendors.

Hoping to break into the region's lucrative family market, management added animal shows and miniature cities carved out of ice

54. Paul Dillon, "Eisner's Splendid China Visit Sparks More Splendid Rumors," *Orlando Business Journal*, (20 December 1996): 1.

55. Leslie Doolittle, "Splendid China Chooses New Leader," *Orlando Sentinel*, 20 May 1996, Central Florida Business, sec. 3.

56. Jill Jorden Spitz, "Splendid China Streamlines Staff: Several Employees Have Left the Attraction As It Tries to Become More Efficient," *Orlando Sentinel*, 29 August 1996, sec. B1.

57. Christine Shenot, "Even-More-Splendid China in a New Marketing Strategy: The Park Opens Its Courtyard Free of Charge for Chinatown," *Orlando Sentinel*, 20 July 1996, sec. B1.

to attract children and families.⁵⁸ In addition, the park teamed up with Cypress Gardens, Fantasy of Flight, and Bok Tower to offer a new multi-pass for members of the Automobile Association of America (AAA).⁵⁹ When the park partnered with Tiger's Eye Productions in Oviedo, Florida, to present exotic animals, including lions, tigers, leopards, and pythons, the admission price was raised for the first time in the park's history to \$28.88 per adult.⁶⁰ With a renewed concentration on entertainment, good Chinese food, and a "very relaxed cultural experience," the ticket price covered park admission, a refurbished show, and dinner. Visitors could pay a reduced price of only \$16 for dinner and a show.

Despite the changes, by 1998, attendance showed no substantial improvement, and the park continued to lose money. The *Tampa Tribune* called the attraction a dose of tranquility, a place of serene reflection or a meditation garden; sporadic visitors felt it was a peaceful place to see.⁶¹ But the *Orlando Business Journal* described the theme park as a "ghost town."⁶² And a *Orlando Sentinel* columnist called it "Central Florida's forgotten theme park." The sarcastic journalist described the attraction as either too real or too fake; calling himself an everyman as shallow as one of the miniature ponds, he claimed he would rather be blown away by "Twister" than visit Splendid China.⁶³ The situation further deteriorated in 1999, as attendance dropped to a few hundred patrons per day. The attraction was losing a reported \$9 million annually, although park management insisted it was "very close to breaking even."⁶⁴ A year later there was still no upturn in sight. Daily attendance dropped to 200 per day, most of them senior citizens, and even a drop in admission prices failed to improve matters.

With 160 full-time staff on payroll and more than half of its multi-million-dollar investment loan still outstanding to the Bank of China, rumors circulated that the attraction was up for sale. In May

58. Jill Jorden Spitz, "Splendid China Revamping Park to Lure Families: The Chinatown Area Will Be De-Emphasized in Favor of Big Cat Shows and Tiny Ice Sculptures," *Orlando Sentinel*, 28 December 1996, sec. C1.

59. Robert Sargent, Jr., *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 January 1997.

60. "Splendid China Raising Prices," *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 February 1997, sec. B1.

61. Philip Morgan, "The Pace Is Slow at This Educational Exhibit in Theme Park Land," *Tampa Tribune*, 16 April 1999, Baylife sec. 1.

62. Bob Mervine, "Splendid Spin on Resort: Bull from the China Shop?" *Orlando Business Journal*, 19.5 (6 September 2002).

63. Mike Thomas, *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 August 1998.

64. "Intelligence," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 162.19 (13 May 1999): 8.

2000, Massachusetts-based Brookhill LLC struck an agreement for the park at a bargain price of \$56.5 million. However the deal quickly fell through when word of the sale and the possibility that the park would be razed for housing sparked angry protest among Chinese both in China and the United States.⁶⁵ The park's top executive, Yang Guang was summoned back to China and mysteriously disappeared; reportedly he was being held under house arrest for mismanaging the park's finances.⁶⁶ Although some industry insiders claimed that he spent park proceeds on himself rather than on maintenance, others believed that Yang was a scapegoat for his bosses' business mistakes. Around the time Yang was negotiating to sell the park, the CTS chairman in Hong Kong came under investigation by Beijing and was also quickly replaced. Disgruntled by the chaos, Brookhill sued to force the sale. However, the suit stalled in the Osceola Circuit Court as the company's attorney could not get Yang back to the United States for deposition.⁶⁷

Following the aborted sale, CTS renewed its commitment to the theme park. Cao Xiaoning, vice president of entertainment at Shenzhen Splendid China, was appointed president and CEO of the Florida attraction.⁶⁸ Cao, a ballet dancer, who eventually moved into choreography and management, determined to turn the troubled park around. With a reduced staff of 90 employees, the workaholic chief ordered everyone to perform some maintenance duties in addition to their job requirements; employees from performers to managers, including the CEO, were assigned sections of the park for grounds keeping duties.

Cao planned to convert the park into a show-based attraction with a \$2 million upgrade and sponsor a series of events including the reunion of former U.S. diplomats to China, a gathering of American families with adopted Chinese children, and international martial arts festivals and performances. The park also sent performance groups to other parts of the country to promote Chinese

65. Alan Byrd, "Splendid China Slated for Sale: Negotiations Involve Chinese-Owned Theme Park, Land and Hotel," *Orlando Business Journal*, 16.53 (26 May 2000); Alan Byrd, "Not-so-Splendid Suit Follows Failed Park Sale," *Orlando Business Journal*, 17.10 (4 August 2000).

66. Alan Byrd, "Where in the World is Yang?" *Orlando Business Journal*, 17.23 (3 November 2000); Byrd, "Theme Park to Get 'Splendid' Makeover," *Orlando Business Journal*, 17.39 (16 February 2001): 3.

67. Cynthia Barnett, "Forbidden City," *Florida Trend*, 44.2 (1 June 2001): 48.

68. Alan Byrd, "Orlando Business Journal," 17.39 (16 February 2001).



Trolley Ride at Florida Splendid China. Note the few patrons, an indication of the poor attendance. Photo from the personal collection of Dr. James Yu

culture and the Florida attraction.⁶⁹ With the renewed effort, attendance gradually rose from fewer than 100 patrons per day to a daily average of 300—an improvement, but still some distance away from the break-even point of 500 per day.⁷⁰ But, a year later, Cao was replaced by Lin Bochun, former managing deputy general of CTS.⁷¹

The effect of frequent changes in management and direction and the low-morale among employees that accompanied poor attendance were evident in the physical landscape. Peeling paint gave some replicas a shabby appearance, and dozens of figurines were broken or toppled over. Grass pushed through cracks in the sidewalks, and many of the kiosks had been abandoned. The few remaining staff members congregated around the entrance and talked to one another.⁷² The attraction was so shoddily managed,

69. Adrian McCoy, "Splendid New Year," *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 19 January 2001, Arts & Entertainment, sec. 29.

70. Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, 1 June 2001.

71. Keith Miller, "Big Trouble in Splendid China Part of the Past," *Amusement Business* 113.28 (16 July 2001): 14.

72. John Lee, "American Dreams: If You Wish It Was Christmas Every Day, Or Want to Do China in Miniature, There's Only One Place to Go," *Guardian*, 8 June 2002, Travel sec. 10.

one reporter described his disappointing visit to the park in stark terms: "these potentially magical reproductions are as one-dimensional as the park's poorly written guidebook."⁷³ Clearly, the management problems had become so severe, it was unlikely anyone could save the doomed attraction. To make matters worse, the attraction became embroiled in conflicts that undermined its cultural goals.

Like any other business, tourism is not immune to controversy: Columbus Day celebrations have been criticized for years by Native Americans, and Florida's Sea World is called an "abusement park" by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Several years ago, when Disney announced its intention to build a new American history theme park in Virginia, cultural historians expressed their concerns about what they perceived as the "cleaning up" of historical facts. Likewise, it was debatable whether Chinese history should be presented as theme park material, and controversy materialized in the opening days of the attraction. Despite a considerable number of studies and extensive preparation, no one evidently anticipated the controversy that emerged over the park's rendering of the Potala Palace, the official residence of the Dalai Lama. Furious over the exhibit of the Tibetan palace, the Washington, D.C.-based International Campaign for Tibet claimed that Splendid China had whitewashed history and demanded removal of the replica.⁷⁴ The Florida Splendid China management refused to remove the replica and insisted that the park was not constructed in order to make a political statement, but to promote cultural understanding. Unappeased, the Tibetan group proceeded with its planned opening-day protest, labeling the park as part of a Communist plot.

On Sunday, December 19, 1993, several Buddhist monks staged a demonstration outside the park, holding signs reading "End Chinese Genocide in Tibet!" and "No Communism in Kissimmee!" Four monks paid admission and quietly walked through the park to the Potala Palace, where they stood in silent prayer and wept. The protestors became an attraction themselves as a throng of reporters

73. John Lee, "Not-so-Splendid China," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 24 July 2002.

74. International Campaign for Tibet, "Chinese Propaganda Theme Park Opens in Florida: 'Splendid China' Promotes Idyllic Image of Tibet and Other Cultures," news release, 6 November 1993; Gus Constantine, "China Tries to Change Its Image Over Rights Violations in Tibet," *Washington Times*, 16 November 1993.

and photographers followed them past the exhibits.⁷⁵ A spokesman later commented: "We feel the inclusion of the Potala Palace hides the atrocities the Chinese have committed in Tibet. We feel it is a false attempt to beautify something that is totally ugly."⁷⁶ From the perspective of the demonstrators, the park was nothing more than a propaganda device that used fantasy and entertainment to improve China's image. By demonstrating against the theme park, the group hoped to draw attention to the issue of Tibet and to dissuade the State of Florida from sponsoring school group visits to Splendid China. According to the protestors, patronizing the recreation of China's past would subsidize the Communist regime: "We would hope that the state of Florida would not spend taxpayers' money to indoctrinate American schoolchildren with what is essentially a propagandized view of Chinese history."⁷⁷

Although the number of demonstrators was small, the controversy and protest received widespread media coverage⁷⁸ and some

75. Laura Griffin, "Newest Attraction Attracts Protesters: Buddhist Monks and Others Quietly Protest the Opening of Splendid China Near Orlando," *St. Petersburg Times*, 20 December 1993, sec. B1; Ann Bakkalapulo, "Pickets Greet China Theme Park's Opening," *Tampa Tribune*, 20 December 1993, sec. A1.

76. Browning, *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1993, 1A.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Karen Haymon Long, "Buddhists Plan Demonstration China Park," *Tampa Tribune*, 30 November 1993, Florida/metro, sec. 1; "New Florida Theme Park Stirs Controversy Over Tibet Exhibit," *Houston Chronicle*, 5 December 1993, Travel sec. 10; Cathy Hainer, "Re-creating China: Discerning between Propaganda, History," *USA Today*, 9 December 1993, sec. D6; Cable News Network, "China Theme Park in Florida Criticized by Tibetans," news transcript, 17 December 1993; David Holmberg, "Is Central Florida Ready for Splendid China?" *Palm Beach Post*, 18 December 1993, sec. A1; Annie Tin, "Buddhists Want Tibet Out of Park," *Orlando Sentinel*, 18 December 1993, sec. A14; Annie Tin, "Theme Park Takes Bow as Activists Create Row," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 December 1993, sec. B1; Ike Flores, "Checking Out 5,000 Years of History: the Splendid China Theme Park Near Orlando Opens to the Public Today, But Not Everyone Is Overjoyed About It," *Tallahassee Democrat*, 19 December 1993, sec. B7; Al Levine, "Looks Like China? It May Be Florida: New Park Packs Great Wall, Forbidden City and Controversy Into 76 Acres," *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 November 1993; "China Theme Park Not so Splendid, Protesters Say," *Bradenton Herald*, 19 November 1993; "New Florida Theme Park Based on Chinese History Opens to Protest," *New York Times*, 20 December 1993, sec. A14; William Booth, "Park's Tibetan Display Draws Buddhist Protest: Miniature Palace Creates Huge Controversy," *Washington Post*, 23 December 1993, sec. A3; "Hands Off Tibet, Activists Say of Florida's Chinese Theme Park," *Seattle Times*, 26 December 1993, sec. K5; Gren Mauel, "Florida Park Irks Rights Campaigners," *South China Morning Post*, 31 January 1994, Business sec. 2; Mike King, "Florida's Miniature Version of China is Splendid, But Should You Visit?" *Montreal Gazette*, 26 February 1994, sec. I3.

heated responses. One reader expressed her "great sense of loss at seeing the Potala Palace in a place called 'Splendid China.'" ⁷⁹ Another person angrily commented: "While I understand China's desire to promote tourism, I find it hard to believe that Orlando is allowing itself to be part of China's ploy to legitimize its invasion of Tibet . . . It's as if Saddam opened a park to promote Iraqi tourism and included Kuwait as one of its provinces."⁸⁰ A local resident wrote: "Though China may indeed be beautiful, its splendor is stained with the blood-red blotches of the massacres of its sons and daughters. Somehow I doubt that is of focus in this theme park. I guess Orlando really is fantasia."⁸¹ While the *Miami Herald* staff dubbed the attraction the "torturers theme park," the *Economist* described the controversy as "Chinese Culture: Prettified."⁸² The widely publicized controversy attracted supporters from all walks of life. Adam Yauch, of the rock group Beastie Boys, spoke against the park at his performances.⁸³ One sixteen-year-old student asked: "Why should Florida schools send students to see Chinese propaganda?"⁸⁴ A Clearwater teacher petitioned the school board to ban field trips to the attraction.⁸⁵ The son of a Flying Tigers pilot argued, "The Potala Palace of Splendid China is a gory trophy of war. It has no business on American soil."⁸⁶ Upset by the "sanitized, doll-house version of China," one newspaper columnist declared: "What they need here is Tiananmen Square—miniature tanks squashing little ceramic students."⁸⁷

In addition to the Tibetan protest, some Mongols and Mongolian Americans also resented their culture being presented

79. Julie Hodges, "Sad Over Splendid China," *Orlando Sentinel*, 21 December 1993, sec. A18.

80. Scott Meikie, "Tibet Is Splendid, But It Isn't Part of China," *Orlando Sentinel*, 12 December 1993, Florida, sec. A18.

81. Kendra Musselle, "Bloodied Splendor," *Orlando Sentinel*, 30 December 1993, sec. A22.

82. "The Torturers' Theme Park," *Miami Herald*, 18 December 1993, Editorial sec. 34A; "Chinese Culture: Prettified," *Economist*, 331.7863 (14 March 1994): 92.

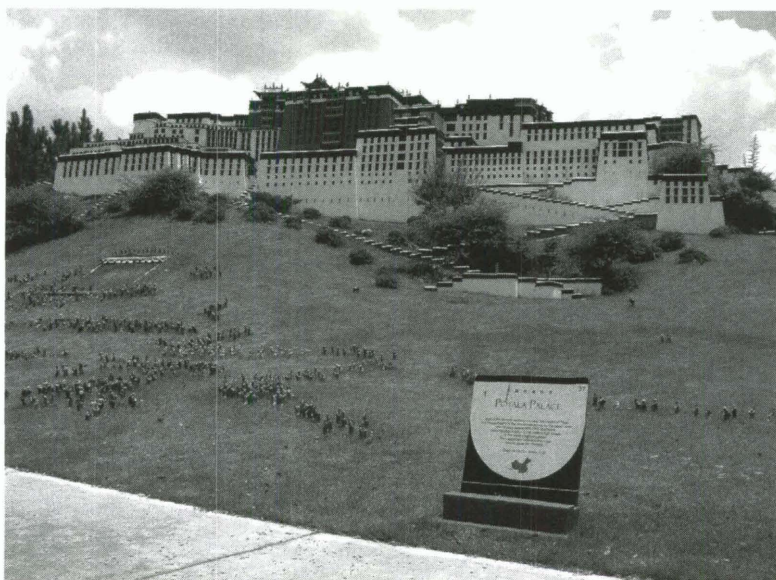
83. John Bankston, "Splendid Mess: On the Anniversary of an Uprising, Park Miniatures Still Incite Big Debate," *Orlando Weekly*, 9-15 March 1995.

84. Elizabeth Churchward, "Letter to Editor," *Tampa Tribune*, 30 December 1993, sec. A14.

85. "Teachers Rally Against Splendid China," *St. Petersburg Times*, 6 November 1995.

86. Daniel R. Baisden, "Letter to the Editor: Theme Park Ignores Oppression," *Savannah Morning News*, 30 November 1993.

87. Mike Thomas, *Orlando Sentinel*, 23 August 1998.



Florida Splendid China's Miniature Replica of Potala Palace. *Photo from the personal collection of James Yu*

as a Chinese tourist attraction.⁸⁸ Next to Genghis Khan's mausoleum exhibit, porcelain figurines showed a Mongolian wedding ceremony and a jousting tournament. All together some twenty ethnic and religious minorities from Mongols to Muslims were represented in the Florida theme park. Human rights groups charged that the park portrayed a false picture of social harmony and contentment among China's persecuted religious and ethnic minorities. A spokesperson remarked: "It's 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."⁸⁹ The extensive media coverage highlighting Chinese conflicts with Tibetan and other minorities no doubt affected park attendance figures. Protesters claimed the park was not placed in attention-rich Florida simply to make money; it was a political

88. Laura Griffin, "New Park, Old Controversy," *St. Petersburg Times*, 12 December 1993, sec. B1.

89. Larry Rohter, "China Becomes Theme Park, But Cultural Debate Remains Real," *New York Times*, 9 January 1994, sec. I.12.

statement. In addition to their opposition to several replicas featured in the park, human rights groups also voiced their displeasure over the apparent role of the Chinese government in funding the attraction, claiming that CTS was a “quasi-government “corporation, a viewpoint shared by some visitors.⁹⁰ Recognizing the park as principally an educational experience and acknowledging the unprofitable nature of such exhibits, one visitor commented: “I don’t know who else besides the government would sponsor this, because it’s obviously not a profitable enterprise . . . You wonder how long they can keep it up.”⁹¹

Amid the mounting controversies, another concern was raised regarding the treatment of the park’s 150 Chinese worker, most of whom were entertainers or artisans. An anonymous letter in the *Central Florida Future* asserted that performers were “treated like animals.”⁹² Several park employees stated that their activities and ability to move around freely after work were “regulated.” While management claimed that park employees lived in the company-owned Days Inn for convenience, some believed the living arrangements reflected a fear that workers might defect and request political asylum.⁹³ In 1998, one group of protesters reported that they had assisted several Chinese workers in their escape from the park and in securing political asylum in the United States.⁹⁴ Three of the Chinese workers were identified as former dancers from the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of Western China. Another report asserted that as many as forty-two Chinese employees had escaped from the park.⁹⁵

Faced with criticism and protests, park managers insisted that Florida Splendid China was intended to generate tourism in China, and that the attraction was not a political park. “There is a

90. William Booth, “Theme Park Not Splendid to Tibetans: China-Sponsored Exhibits Called Misleading,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 25 December 1993, sec. 5X; John Ackerly, “China Theme Park Under Fire,” *Times Picayune*, 21 April 1995, sec. B6; Mike Schneider, “China-Themed Park Draws Protesters to Front Door,” *Ocala Star Banner*, 22 March 1999.

91. Philip Morgan, *Tampa Tribune*, 16 April 1999.

92. “Human Rights Violations Deprive Entertainers at Splendid China,” *Central Florida Future*, 10 January 1995.

93. Larry Rohter, *New York Times*, 9 January 1994.

94. Lesley Clark, “Controversy Is a Theme of This Park: Protesters Say Florida Splendid China Is Actually a Propaganda Tool Owned by the Chinese Government,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 18 March 1998, sec. B1.

95. Kenneth Timmerman, “Florida Splendid China,” *American Spectator*, 32.3 (March 1999): 28.

lack of understanding overseas of China,” commented Ma Shimin, and he hoped the attraction would be “a way for people of the world to better understand China.”⁹⁶ The park’s public relations director stated: “To a certain extent, Florida Splendid China was a victim of politics between China and the United States. Some people, unfortunately, still have a Cold War mentality—anything related to China is bad.”⁹⁷ According to another park official, “The recent tensions between the U.S. and China make the cultural exchange more important than ever. Both the East and the West have advantages and disadvantages. The only way the human race can go forward is to learn from each other. That’s what Splendid China Florida is about.”⁹⁸ CTS claimed the theme park was designed to be neutral, and the Potala Palace was selected as one of the visual highlights because of its architectural beauty and its historical and religious significance. George Chen also defended his parents’ motivation in presenting something beyond the stereotypical images of Chinese as chefs and shop owners. Moreover, through its experience with the park, he believed that the Chinese government could learn about American freedoms and ideals: “Anything that piques the interest of people and gives them the opportunity to judge is good. [The protest] brings forth attention on this issue that may put political pressure on China. In the end, the truth will come out.”⁹⁹

To rebut early criticisms published in the *New York Times*, Pan Xinliang, the managing director of CTS USA, wrote a letter to the paper. He adopted the standard management view that the park was strictly a cultural and tourist attraction, built to introduce Americans to China, and promote tourism and cultural exchange. He further noted the historical fact that Tibet had become part of China during the Tang Dynasty 1,000 years ago, and claimed that his employees were happy to have the opportunity perform and experience life in Central Florida. As the park had generated jobs for Americans who constructed the attraction and were employed in running it, he asked, “Why deprive children of a learning experience in the name of politics?”¹⁰⁰ Rejecting Pan’s argument, a

96. Ike Flores, *Tallahassee Democrat*, 19 December 1993.

97. Philip Morgan, *Tampa Tribune*, 16 April 1999.

98. Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, 44.2 (1 June 2001).

99. Laura Griffin, *St Petersburg Times*, 12 December 1993.

100. Pan Xinliang, “Leave Politics Behind at China Culture Park,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1994, sec. I.20.

Columbia University professor of religion responded with a letter to the *New York Times*, claiming that "Tourist spectacles like the Splendid China theme park in Kissimmee, Fla., may be legitimately criticized if they obscure a contested history, whose victims, like the Tibetans, continue to suffer through loss of national autonomy and repressive alien regime."¹⁰¹

While the debate raged in the press, various groups continued their protests at the park. In March 1996, a crowd of Taiwanese Americans organized a demonstration outside the attraction to protest China's stance toward the island.¹⁰² During this event five students from the Students for Free Tibet formed a human chain to block the park's entrance and were handcuffed and taken to the Osceola County jail.¹⁰³ A year later T. J. Norbu, elder brother of the Dalai Lama, led another demonstration in front of the attraction, accusing China of showing off its conquest of Tibet, Mongolia, and eastern Turkestan. Fed up with the protests, the park's management refused to respond.¹⁰⁴ After China cracked down on the Falun Gong religious movement, its practitioners joined the picket line.¹⁰⁵

In time, the protesters became better organized. Among the several groups regularly voicing their opposition to the theme park, the Citizens Against Communist Chinese Propaganda (CACCP) stood out. Originally named the Citizens Against Backyard Communism, the group was headed by Jack Churchward, a former U.S. Navy technician from Clearwater, Florida, who converted to Tibetan Buddhism in the 1980s.

101. Matthew Kapstein, "Chinese Trace Claim on Tibet to Mongols," *New York Times*, 19 February 1994. Among all the criticisms of the theme park, the most comprehensive denunciation came in 1999, when Kenneth Timmerman published a lengthy article in the *American Spectator*. A frequent contributor to the conservative publication, Timmerman traced the early history of the park, interviewed protesters, and vigorously condemned the mission of the attraction.

102. Associated Press, "Seventy-five People Protesting China's Aggressive Stance," news release, 16 March 1996; Susan Jacobson, "Seventy-five at Theme Park Protest China," *Orlando Sentinel*, 17 March 1996, sec. B3.

103. Beth Foushee, "Protest Target Splendid China: Missile Test Near Taiwan Prompt a Demonstration at the Theme Park," *Tampa Tribune*, 17 March 1996, Florida/ Metro sec. 4.

104. Jim Stratton, "Dalai Lama's Brother Protests at Theme Park: Splendid China Sugarcoats China's Ties to Areas That It Rules, Demonstrators Say," *Orlando Sentinel*, 13 October 1997, sec. C1.

105. "Clarifying the Truth at Floria's 'Splendid China' Theme Park," news release, Falun Dafa Clearwisdom.net, 2 August 2002.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the CACCP set up a web site, appealed to Florida School Boards not to send schoolchildren to the theme park, and complained to the U.S. Department of Justice that Splendid China had not registered as an agent of a foreign government as required by the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938. The group wrote to the park's management offering to suspend demonstrations in return for negotiations on five contested exhibits. As the proposal went unanswered, CACCP routinely organized protests on politically significant days, attracting approximately a dozen people each time. Sometimes only two or three protesters showed up, as happened on the 40th anniversary of the Tibetan conflict with the Chinese government. Nevertheless, the protesters managed to keep their issues in the media. CACCP centered its protest on the alleged false representations fostered by the park exhibits and deliberately avoided the promotion of hatred or the advocacy of an anti-China position. The group effectively used students, seniors, and mothers with babies to catch public attention and generate sympathy.¹⁰⁶ According to their own figures, CACCP organized fifty demonstrations in a ten-year span. In addition, the group videotaped statements in front of contested exhibits and launched a letter-writing campaign. Churchward believed the attraction functioned as a "lightening rod for public criticism and [a] rallying point for the opposition." He claimed that the protests sponsored by the CACCP "were the ultimate nail in the coffin that closed Florida Splendid China."¹⁰⁷

Though protesters claimed responsibility, tourism analysts denounced the protesters' claims and countered with depictions of culturally complacent American vacationers: "Your typical visitor is not interested. Cultural curiosity would completely compensate for any concern about oppressed people."¹⁰⁸ In reality, the attraction fell victim to the erratically recovering tourism industry in Central Florida, a situation that was exacerbated by management's poor decisions. As described by Mike Schneider, the park's demise "marked the latest in a Darwinian shakeout in Central Florida's tourism market, where only the biggest and strongest have survived two years of stagnant growth since the Sept. 11

106. Alan Byrd, "Protesters to Park: Not so Splendid China," *Orlando Business Journal*, 16.29 (17 December 1999).

107. Jack Churchward, "Chinese Theme Park Incited Anger Instead of Amusement," *Insight on the News*, 10 May 2004, Fair Comment sec. 51.

108. Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, 44.2 (1 June 2001).

terrorist attacks.”¹⁰⁹ By the time the park closed on December 13, 2003, it had a skeleton work force of forty employees, half of whom were performers who would return to China. The original \$100 million investment was valued at only \$12.8 million by the county property appraiser’s office.¹¹⁰ According to a news release issued by the park: “This determination [the closing of the park] was reached primarily due to the continued downturn in the tourism economy, as evidenced by the closing of other tourism-dependent businesses in the area. Despite several years of attempting to achieve successful theme park operations, the company has concluded that it would no longer continue to incur significant losses.”¹¹¹ After a decade of struggling for its niche in the competitive tourism market, the theme park finally joined the ranks of Central Florida failed attractions that included the Jungle Land Zoo, Movie Rider, Wild Bill’s Dinner Theater, Haunted Mansion, Guinness World Record Experience, the Masters of Magic, American Gladiators, and Cypress Gardens.

On the last day of business, the park attracted approximately 750 visitors, although attendance had dropped to fewer than 200 people per day before the announcement of the park’s closure.¹¹² Some of the final visitors expressed sadness at the closing. “It’s a

109. Mike Schneider, “Splendid China Shuts Down While Other Parks Thrive,” *Miami Herald*, 4 January 2004, sec. 6B; Mike Schneider, “China Theme Park Unable to Survive in Stagnating Florida,” *Vventura County Star*, 18 January 2004, sec. Escapes, 6; “Chinese Theme Park Closes After 10 Years,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 18 January 2004, sec. 3H; Mike Schneider, “It’s the Survival of the Fittest in Florida,” *Houston Chronicle*, 18 January 2004, Travel sec. 6; Mike Schneider, “One Theme Park Closes As Others Thrive, Splendid China Visitors Say Park Not Well Maintained,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, 19 January 2004, sec. 2D; “Florida Theme Park Just Couldn’t Compete,” *Guelph Mercury*, 24 January 2004, sec. H10; Mike Schneider, “It’s Feast or Famine at the Theme Park,” *Hackensack Record*, 25 January 2004; Mike Schneider, “Theme Parks Thinning Out: Sept 11 Fallout Still Being Felt Across Florida Vacation Spots,” *Windsor Star*, 31 January 2004 sec. F4; “Only the Strong Survive,” *Vancouver Province*, 1 February 2004, sec. B20; Schneider, “Survival of the Fittest: Some Florida Theme Parks Fold, Others Flourish,” *St. John’s Telegram*, 7 February 2004, sec. E3.

110. Mark Pino, “Splendid China Loses Tourism Fight: A Theme Park on U.S. Highway 192 Featuring Miniature Versions of Chinese Landmarks Has Closed Its Doors for the Final Time,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 31 December 2003, sec. J1.

111. Mike Schneider, “Splendid China Theme Park to Close Today: Few Visitors, Bad Economy Cited as Reasons for Closure,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, 31 December 2003, sec. B5; “Economics Close Controversial Theme Park,” *Mobile Register*, 31 December 2003, sec. B5.

112. Dennis M. Blank, “Chinese Theme Park Near Orlando Closes,” *New York Times*, 25 January 2004, sec. 5.3.

pity. It's a big park, beautiful, but it's a wasted investment," a Delaware couple with children commented.¹¹³ A season-ticket holder from Mount Dora stated: "I think a lot of people don't even know it exists, but once you see it, you can see how special it is,"¹¹⁴ Another woman noted, "It's different than just entertainment here. You come away from here with a bigger understanding of history."¹¹⁵ The spokesperson for the Kissimmee-St. Cloud Convention and Visitors Bureau remarked: "Every trip there was a good one. I enjoyed the opportunity to tell the media we had something of that culture here. It was a plus for us."¹¹⁶ A Vietnamese American observed on the park closing: "In anything Asian, there is a part of us in there."¹¹⁷ A retired Illinois couple described their experience: "We loved it more than Disney or Sea World. We are crushed that it is closed . . . It was about the culture of China; there was no propaganda that we saw. Most displays dealt with ancient China. We went away from the park with a good feeling that was more about the Chinese people than the government."¹¹⁸

After China entered the World Trade Organization, CTS reportedly decided to liquidate its non-core businesses, like Florida Splendid China, and concentrate extensively on its domestic market.¹¹⁹ After searching for a year to find a suitable buyer for the defunct theme park, the company put the attraction on the auction block. By that time, a year of neglect had taken its toll: bonsai trees were ragged, weeds had overgrown the flower beds, algae clogged the peaceful ponds, and cracks marred the curving tile roofs. In addition, three hurricanes had toppled trees in the gardens, and thieves and vandals had trashed some exhibits.¹²⁰

113. Jerry W. Jackson and April Hunt, "Splendid China Closes Today After 10 Years: Dwindling Attendance, Significant Losses Blamed," *Orlando Sentinel*, 31 December 2003, sec. C1.

114. April Hunt, "A Last Chance, Then It's Time to Move-on: An Appreciative Crowd Bid Farewell to Splendid China on the Park's Last Day," *Orlando Sentinel*, 1 January 2004, sec. C1.

115. Ibid.

116. Mark Pino, *Orlando Sentinel*, 31 December 2003.

117. Willoughby Mariano, "Chinese Treasures Find New Homes," *Orlando Sentinel*, 10 December 2004, sec. C1.

118. Marvin G. Cotner, "Selling Off a Theme Park: Auction Continues at Splendid China," *Osceola News Gazette*, 10 December 2004.

119. Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, 44.2 (1 June 2001).

120. Willoughby Mariano, "Bidding Farewell to Splendid China: Park's Small Wonders Are on Auction Block from Goldfish to the Great Wall, a Kissimmee Attraction Is Up for Sale," *Orlando Sentinel*, 6 December 2004, sec. A1.

The final bargain-basement sale was handled by Lakeland auctioneer Randy Kincaid.¹²¹ Kincaid's company spent six weeks cataloging 40,000 items that many artisans labored over two years to create. More than a thousand people previewed the site, and several hundred potential buyers, including theme park operators, restaurant owners, private collectors, and curious individuals, registered for the auction. All the items, including the replica of the Great Wall, were sold within three days, and successful bidders had sixty days to remove their "as is" purchases from the park.¹²² While some regretted that they had not visited the park before its closing, a few made last-ditch efforts to save the most notable exhibit, the Great Wall of China.¹²³ However, regrets and eleventh-hour efforts had no effect, and park officials issued a final statement on the closing of the attraction: "To our friends and supporters, we express extreme regret that this action has become necessary."¹²⁴

Several factors contributed to the failure of Florida Splendid China. CTS management certainly bore the major responsibility for the theme park's demise. It is ironic that the managers of a park constructed for the promotion of cultural understanding failed to understand the tourist culture of American society. Their successes in managing the original park in Shenzhen did not prepare them for operating an American theme park in the highly competitive market of Central Florida. They failed to recognize that vacationing Americans would choose thrills over cultural enlightenment and stuck to their blueprint. However, unlike the dominant position CTS enjoyed in China, the company was competing as one of the region's many second-tier attractions, and the passive experience of a walk-through outdoor museum park had limited appeal to Central Florida tourists. CTS's fundamental error was the construction of a park based on their own notions of entertainment rather than a careful study of American tastes. Focusing on the details of workmanship during the construction phase, attraction managers paid little attention to what it would

121. Mariano, "Wonders of China,' Could Be Yours," *Tallahassee Democrat*, 9

122. Randy Diamond, "Want a Bargain on Beijing? Here's the Auction for You. Everything Must Be Sold at Splendid China Park," *Tampa Tribune*, 9 December 2004, Moneysense, sec. 1.

123. Willoughby Mariano, Wall's Great Fan Chunks It Online: A Man Sells Pieces of Splendid China's Great Wall Replica in a Bid to Save It," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 February 2005, sec. B6.

124. Mark Pino, *Orlando Sentinel*, 31 December 2003

take to get Americans into the theme park. The park's advertising and marketing campaigns were poorly sustained and largely ineffective.

Day-to-day operations also suffered from poor management. Frequent change of managers made it impossible to develop successful long-term strategies. Allegations of corruption marred relations between CTS and AEI. George Chen, resentful of what he saw as high-handed action by CTS, described the Chinese managers as paranoid and dictatorial. He publicly revealed that he had been pressured to provide high-paying jobs and work visas to children of high-ranking officials, and claimed that many of the jobholders could not speak English and were not qualified to work at the park.¹²⁵

More than a year after the park closing, CTS sold 366 acres of land and the Days Inn Maingate West Hotel to Rolling Oaks Investment Properties LLP for a reported \$40.2 million.¹²⁶ After ten years of struggle, Florida Splendid China regrettably disappeared. Although it had signaled China's headlong plunge into western-style capitalism, by any standards, the attraction had been a complete failure. Labeled as the state's most troubled theme park, associated with passive attractions, poor management, and continual protests, it represented not only one of the most disastrous overseas investments ever made by a Chinese company, but also a major fiasco in the history of Florida tourism.

125. Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, 44.2 (1 June 2001).

126. Jack Snyder, "Splendid China Land Sold: A Group Led by Daryl Carter Acquires the 366-Acre Property for More Than \$40 Million," *Orlando Sentinel*, 19 May 2005, sec. C1.