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China's Gardens of Time and Space

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Fifteen years of economic revolution has moved the People's Republic of China out of Communist isolation and onto the world stage. As an increasingly active member of the international community, China has absorbed certain aspects of foreign culture and has redefined its own heritage, often with a global market in mind.

At the Splendid China miniature theme park in Shenzhen, just across the border from Hong Kong, China's immense cultural endowment has been distilled to a "marketable essence." The fruits of 5,000 years of civilization have been compressed and arranged on a 75-acre site, enabling the visitor to experience the time-space immensity of China "all in one day."

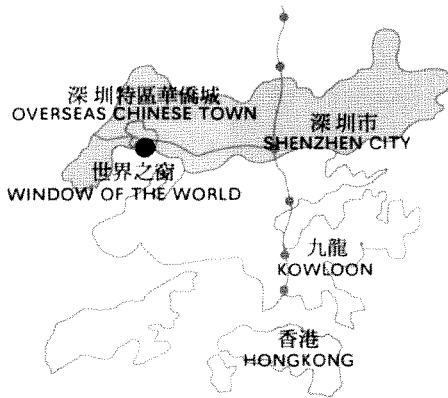
Superficially, Splendid China is a profit-earning venture which, in the six years since its opening, has become one of the most popular tourist attractions in the Pearl River region. But more, it has become an effective purveyor of a debugged, politically neutral vision of Chinese national culture. Beneath the veneer of frivolity and cuteness, Splendid China projects to the world a highly manipulated clip from the coffers of history.

Touted as the "World's Largest Miniature Scenic Spot," Splendid China contains models of the nation's most famous monuments and natural

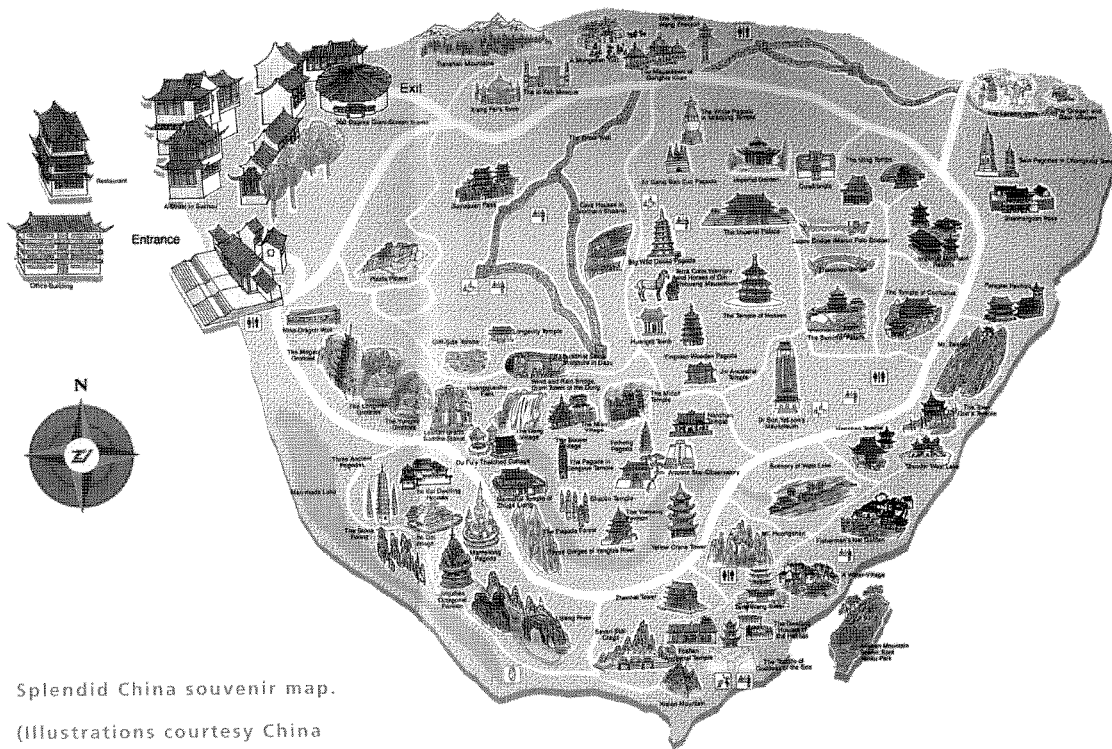
landscapes — spanning "5,000 years and 10,000 miles." It is a masterpiece of the miniaturist's art, architectural cousin to the magnificent bonsai gardens of Suzhou. The superbly detailed models, mostly at a scale of 1:15, are constructed with tiny bricks, rare woods, carved stone and gold leaf. The grounds are landscaped with small trees and manicured hedges; hidden speakers fill the air with Chinese classical music. Some 50,000 figurines populate the various displays, attired in costumes researched by the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

The "dwindled" natural scenes are arranged "roughly according to their position in China." Among the architectural monuments are the Temple of Heavenly Peace, Tibet's Potala Palace and the Forbidden City. A rambling model of the Great Wall, five feet tall and composed of six million little bricks, snakes its way across the north side of the park.

The park was developed by China's State-owned tourism development corporation (Hong Kong-based China Travel Service Ltd.) with the deep pockets of Hong Kong and overseas Chinese in mind. It is located in Shenzhen's "Overseas Chinese Town," an export-oriented center and base for introducing foreign Chinese to the land of their ancestors. Since opening



Splendid China is located just north of Hong Kong in Shenzhen, one of the cities that China has earmarked for foreign investment.



Splendid China souvenir map.
 (Illustrations courtesy China
 Travel Service/Hong Kong
 Ltd. unless otherwise noted)

in 1989, only several months after the Tiananmen massacre, it has drawn as many as 40,000 visitors a day from Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, and abroad. Some observers have placed Shenzhen “in the major league of tourist attractions and on par with such spectacles as Disney World.”¹

Splendid China serves as a promotional agent for a selective vision of Chinese cultural history. It offers a controlled (and therefore distorted) representation of the past, a doctored snapshot of reality. While individual models replicate historical minutia with extreme accuracy, the ensemble is purely fictive. Places, peoples and artifacts far removed in time and space are compressed in a vortex of miniaturization, creating a blemish-free common

heritage. The unspoken aim is to embellish China’s image abroad, to enhance its appeal to foreign tourism and investment communities.

Achieving this means sidestepping contentious sociopolitical issues. Sharp historical edges are sanded over to create an idealized vision of Greater China. At Splendid China, numerous minority groups are presented as contented members of an extended Chinese family, their cultural landscapes annexed as curios and exotica. The theme park manufactures a thornless national identity, ignoring pleas for Tibetan autonomy or the de facto independence of Taiwan.

Another distortion is the manner in which Splendid China showcases landscapes on the verge of extinction —



Model of the Temple of Heaven, where emperors worshipped heaven and prayed for good harvests.

something like setting up a zoo for rare tigers while tacitly approving their extermination. For instance, the traditional *hutong* (lane houses) of Beijing, rapidly falling to make way for shopping malls and villas, have been beautifully pickled at Splendid China.

Nearby is a model of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River — in reality a majestic canyon landscape considered to be among China's most spectacular scenic treasures. Three Gorges is at present being inundated for one of the largest hydroelectric and flood control projects in history. Studies have predicted apocalyptic ecological impacts and the forced relocation of some 1.2 million people. Frozen in its splendor, the miniature Three Gorges has become one of Splendid China's most popular sites.

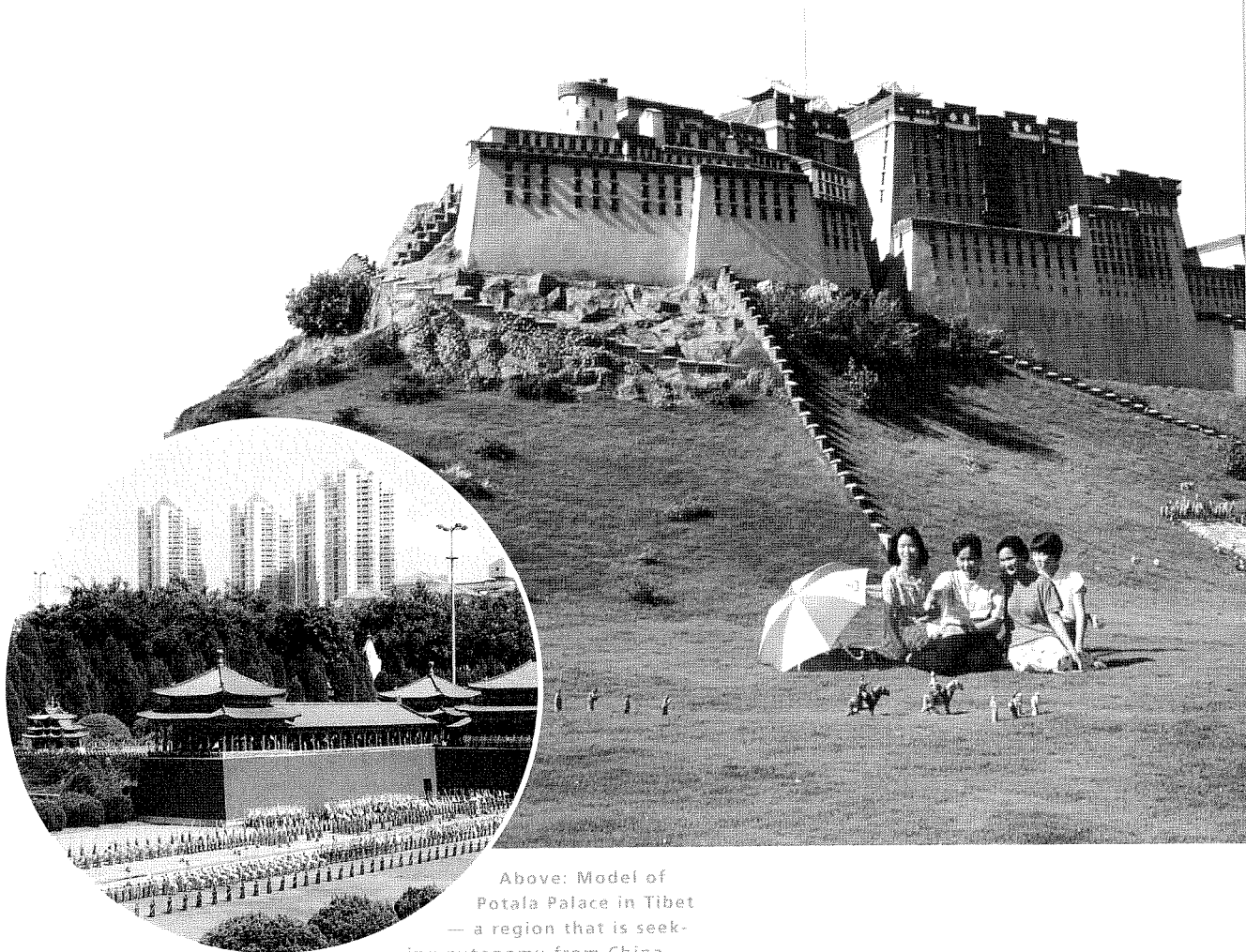
The items omitted from Splendid China are often as revealing as those included. The twentieth century, a

tumultuous time in China's history and much too fresh in the collective memory for even the most enthusiastic of boosters to sweeten, has conveniently been deleted. There are no traces of the Long March, the Cultural Revolution, the Glorious Revolution or the Great Leap Forward. There is not a single miniature *dan wei* or agricultural commune, no People's Parks or Liberation trucks or tiny statues of Chairman Mao. In front of the Forbidden City there is a space said to be Tiananmen Square, but it is empty and contains no Great Hall of the People or revolutionary memorabilia. In fact, the only item from the profoundly transformative twentieth century is a model of the birthplace of Sun Yatsen, the first president of the Chinese Republic and the father of modern China.

In what surely must be one of Southeast Asia's most remarkable juxtapositions of built form, the miniatures of Splendid China are viewed against a rising wall of skyscrapers. The park is an island of faux antiquity in the clutch of one of China's most bold experiments in modernization — the city of Shenzhen.

The Open Door reforms of the Deng Xiaoping era turned the Chinese economy into one of the most formidable in the world. Shenzhen, the first of several zones earmarked for foreign investment, became the maiden city of China's modernization drive. It captured international attention as it transformed from a quiltwork of rice paddies into a metropolis of two million and one of the fastest growing cities on earth. Today Shenzhen still has an adolescent air, with a crane-spiked skyline and streets crowded with ox carts and Mercedes limousines.

One is tempted to invoke David Harvey's observation about the post-modern embrace of nostalgia in the



Above: Model of Potala Palace in Tibet — a region that is seeking autonomy from China.

Inset: Splendid China's miniatures contrast with Shenzhen's expanding skyline. (Thomas Campanella)

face of radical change, as shelter against capitalism's "bombardment of stimuli."² In this reading, Splendid China would be a reconstitution of the past to soothe a traumatic present. But this is clearly not the case. Both the emergent skyscrapers and the new-old relics at Splendid China are poignant expressions of the complexity and double coding of the so-called New China.

Like Shenzhen itself, Splendid China is expressive of the renewed spirit of optimism and outlook (as well as a new emphasis on materialism and consumption) that has become a leit-motif of post-Mao China. Shenzhen is the maiden city of China's opening-up to the world, and Splendid China is its

cultural ambassador. The park is not a glance through a rosy lens but, rather, an act of outreach and annexation; not shelter against change, but one of its agents, a device adopted for distributing a revamped cultural identity to the four corners of the globe.

Notes

1. King Chung Siu and Nick Stanley, "(Re) Presenting Chinese Culture: The Shenzhen Chinese Folk Culture Villages," unpublished paper, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 10-11.
2. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Blackwell, 1990).