

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

Splendid China.

The \$100 million attraction includes replicas of Potala Palace and Genghis Khan's mausoleum.

The replica of Potala Palace, a holy shrine for Tibetan Buddhists, is insulting to some groups, who say the theme park is glossing over China's relationship with Tibet.

ANGELA PETERSON/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

### Controversy is a theme of this park

By Lesley Clark

of The Sentinel Staff

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KISSIMMEE -- Since opening in December 1993, Florida Splendid China has seen demonstrators, defections and now park-bashing Internet sites.

It's a lot of activity for what its owners say is just ``a little theme park in Kissimmee, Fla."

But protesters who have dogged the attraction for years see something more sinister.

They charge that, behind the pastoral scenes and tiny replicas of Chinese landmarks, is a propaganda effort by the Chinese government to polish its image and whitewash its mistreatment of minority groups. The protesters claim they have helped several Chinese workers escape the park and secure political asylum in the United States. Three of them, former dancers at Splendid China, are living in New York City, seeking permanent residency in the United States.

Now the protesters are taking their case to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and two congressional committees, asking them to investigate the park and its ties to the Chinese government.

``They're an organ of the People's Republic of China," said Jack Churchward, a Tibetan Buddhist and Clearwater electrical engineer who heads Citizens Against Communist Chinese Propaganda. ``It's a propaganda machine. It's just not another theme park."

Park owners dismiss the protesters as radicals with too much time on their hands and say the park is about entertainment and an ancient civilization.

``We're a theme park," said Scott Shaw, vice president of China Travel Service, which owns the park. ``Nothing more."

The protesters say the park sugarcoats the treatment of minority groups under Chinese rule, presenting them as a contented part of the People's Republic of China. The demonstrators have stood at the theme park's gates 22 times, most recently Saturday, waving the national flags of Tibet, eastern Turkestan and Inner Mongolia in hopes of dissuading tourists from visiting the park.

Shaw said Splendid China, which has struggled to find a niche in Central Florida's attractions market, just had its best year, with a new nightly show.

Churchward's group, along with the International Tibet Independence Movement and the Inner Mongolian People's Party, accuses the park of violating a little-known federal law passed in 1938 to combat Nazi propagandists.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act requires foreign governments, political parties and companies engaging in political activity in the United States to register with the U.S. Justice Department.

China Travel Service, which owns Splendid China, is not registered because it's not involved in politics, company officials said.

Despite reports that China Travel Service has ties to the Chinese government, park officials have long denied any link. ``That might be what the special-interest groups are claiming," Shaw said. ``But we're nothing more than an attraction, a 76-acre theme park in Kissimmee, Fla.

We're happy to promote awareness and education about the oldest culture in the world, that being the Chinese culture."

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Representatives for Reno and the congressional committees said they hadn't yet seen the protesters' complaint.

The \$100 million attraction includes a miniature Forbidden City and a small Great Wall, built of 6 million tiny bricks. But it also contains religious and ethnic exhibits that the groups find insulting, including a replica of the Potala Palace, a holy shrine for Tibetan Buddhists, and the former home of the exiled Dalai Lama.

“The fact that the palace is there is part of an attempt to gloss over the fact that Tibetans are not happy with the Chinese occupation,” said Churchward, who sports waist-length hair as a result of his 1993 vow not to cut his hair until the offending exhibits are removed from the park. “They're telling people the Tibetans are Chinese and happy to be there, when it's just not so.”

Those who take issue with the park include former employees who were brought over to Splendid China as dancers from Eastern Turkestan. Osman, 26, and Nur, 23, who would not give their last names, said they fled the theme park after seven months because they were overworked and their religious beliefs were ridiculed.

They were granted political asylum and are living in New York City, said their New York attorney, Lisa Dickinson.

“They tell the American people the wrong information,” Osman said.

The U.S. Border Patrol has confirmed it has searched for Chinese nationals who disappear from their jobs at the park.

Shaw said no employees have left since he took over two years ago.

“It was my understanding the problem could have existed before,” he said. “But we haven't had a problem. The government wouldn't continue to issue visas if we were losing people.”

As for the exhibits, Shaw said, they reflect Chinese history.

“Changing anything in the park is absolutely out of the question,” he said. “Whether you like it or not, it's part of history.”

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Osceola hopes to lure Mortal Kombat TV production  
Orlando Sentinel  
05/05/98

KISSIMMEE -- Osceola County officials are negotiating with a television studio that would produce 22 one-hour episodes of a new syndicated weekly series on location here.

The producer, New Line Cinema, is seeking \$160,000 in cash incentives from the county to produce ``Mortal Kombat." Osceola is competing with Auckland, New Zealand, to host the show.

County Manager Rob Magnaghi and Tourist Development Council Executive Director Jeter Walker were authorized by the County Commission to negotiate with the show's producer, Wayne Morris.

The show, which would be filmed at studios at Walt Disney World and at the Splendid China attraction on U.S. Highway 192, is a period piece set in the 1400s with an Asian background, said Katherine Ramsberger of the Metro Orlando Film & TV Office of the Mid Florida EDC.

``Mortal Kombat" is the best-selling video game and was also a successful movie and animated TV series, officials said.

[Posted 05/05/98 12:21 PM EST]

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

### Osceola courts 'Mortal Kombat'

By Chris Cobbs  
of The Sentinel Staff

Published in The Orlando Sentinel, May 9, 1998

KISSIMMEE -- A syndicated TV series based on the Mortal Kombat movies and arcade games will be filmed in Osceola County if studio executives accept an incentive package from local government.

The county has offered \$160,000 in cash incentives to persuade producers of the planned weekly series to film the show at Walt Disney World and the Splendid China theme park.

Osceola is competing with Auckland, New Zealand, which offers lower labor costs, officials said.

Producer Wayne Morris said he was optimistic a deal would be reached. "I've sent the (county's) memo to the studio, and I think it looks very promising," he said.

County Manager Rob Magnaghi and Tourist Development Council Executive Director Jeter Walker represented Osceola in talks with the show's producers.

"Our focus was on determining what was needed to bring the project here," Walker said. "They really needed the cash. Once we determined that, we wanted to get as much value as possible for promotion of Osceola County and tourism."

To help boost the county's bid, the parent company of Splendid China will make nearby hotel rooms available to TV crew members, said Scott Shaw, the company's vice president.

"We see this putting our name alongside Universal Studios and Disney as a venue that movies and TV can use for themed movies," he said. "Mortal Kombat is a phenomenon in the age groups we want to draw to our park."

If officials can agree on a deal, preliminary production work would start in three weeks, followed by full-scale production in late June, Morris said.

No one connected with the production would identify any of the actors or actresses likely to appear in the show. Local talent would have a chance to try out for bit roles as extras.

The TV series would be set in medieval Asia, with good vs. evil as its general theme. It would differ from the popular arcade and computer games of the same name, Morris said, in that it would not be nearly as violent or bloody.

The producers want to make 22 one-hour episodes between June and February for the first year's syndication. If the show becomes a ratings success, it could have a five-year run, they said.

A full year's worth of shows would cost \$19.8 million to produce and would generate \$11.8 million in spending throughout the region's economy, said Kathy Ramsberger, senior vice president of the Economic Development Commission of Mid-Florida's film and television office.

Mortal Kombat has already earned \$4 billion worldwide from movies, video games, an animated series, toys and a theatrical tour, officials said.

[Posted 05/08/98 8:07 PM EST]

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

### 'Mortal Kombat' producers plan to pick site this week

Orlando Sentinel

05/11/98

KISSIMMEE -- Local leaders expect a decision this week on whether a weekly syndicated TV series set in medieval Asia with good vs. evil as its theme will be filmed in Osceola County.

The county offered \$160,000 in cash incentives to convince the producers of the new program Mortal Kombat to film the series at Walt Disney World and Splendid China.

The proposal, spelled out in a memo of understanding, was put together to woo the show to Osceola rather than Auckland, New Zealand, which offered lower labor costs, officials said.

Producer Wayne Morris said he was reviewing the memo of understanding, adding that he was optimistic a deal would be reached. A decision by Morris is expected this week.

County Manager Rob Magnaghi and Tourist Development Council Executive Director Jeter Walker represented the county in talks with the show's producers.

The TV show would differ from popular arcade and computerized games with the same name, said Morris. Unlike the game Mortal Kombat, the television series would not have many scenes of violence and bloodshed, he said.

There would be 22 one-hour episodes produced from June through February for the first year's syndication. If the show is a ratings success, it could have a five-year run, officials said.

It would cost \$19.8 million to produce the first year's shows, with a regional economic impact of \$11.8 million, said Kathy Ramsberger, senior vice president of Metro Orlando Film and TV for the Mid-Florida Economic Development Commission.

If the show lasts five years, the regional impact will be about \$65 million, she said.

Mortal Kombat has earned \$4 billion worldwide from movies, video games, an animated series, toys and a theatrical tour, officials said.

What Osceola County wants

- Filming on location would take place at Splendid China
- Credits given to Kissimmee-St. Cloud and Splendid China at end of each episode
- Give Osceola vendors first chance to supply goods and services
- Allow Osceola residents first opportunity to compete for jobs in production or as extras
- Use Mortal Kombat cast, sets and name to produce public service commercials enhancing Osceola's image

[Posted 05/11/98 12:17 PM EST]

## Florida Splendid China Media Coverage

### SPLENDID ISOLATION

The Orlando Sentinel

08/23/98

Section: FLORIDA

By Mike Thomas of The Sentinel Staff

I shall be delighted to serve as a member of the Honorary Committee for the Celebration of the Florida Splendid China . . . I am sure the Orlando Park will be a great success. Due to other commitments I shall not be able to come to Orlando for the opening ceremonies but I look forward to visiting the Splendid Park in the future. Sincerely,  
Richard Nixon

Perhaps the great tragedy of Richard Nixon's life was that he died before fulfilling his dream of visiting Splendid China.

I wish I had.

But seriously, is there anybody here?

Anybody at all?

Hellloooooo! I haven't felt this isolated since hiking the Appalachian Trail. My God, what if I break my leg out here and starve to death?

If you don't like crowds, if you don't like small gatherings, if you don't even like parties of two, this is your kind of place.

Splendid China: Central Florida's forgotten theme park.

So let me fill you in on the place just in case you've got nowhere to go this weekend or you're a fleeing felon.

Because all kidding aside, it is possible you may want to go there.

If you are a better person than I.

And that sums up the basic flaw in Splendid China.

The people who built it overestimated their audience (something I've never done). They expected tourists who come here to see a giant mouse, a giant fish and a giant gorilla to appreciate the wondrous culture of the Far East shrunk down to Lilliputian size.

I wish I could live up to their expectations.

I wish I could appreciate the beauty of China and a culture that dwarfs ours.

I wish I could appreciate the incredible craftsmanship that went into building these elaborate, miniaturized duplications of China's greatest landmarks.

But to be quite honest, I'd rather get blown away by ``Twister." I'm as shallow as one of these miniature ponds.

I am Everyman.

Or at least Everytourist.

I want bigger. Bigger thrills. Bigger monsters. Bigger drop-offs on water plunge slides.

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Size matters.

And all I'm getting here is smaller.

I must admit though, even in its reduced state, the Forbidden City is impressive. It is spread out over about 10 yards, and the tallest building probably comes up to my belt.

Mothra Vision.

There are temples with beautiful golden roofs, and thousands of tiny ceramic humans celebrating an emperor's wedding. It would be really neat to bomb them with firecrackers.

But immature.

There are a few other sites I recognize, like the Great Wall of China.

The real Great Wall is 4,200 miles long, or 4,199 1/2 miles longer than the Splendid China Version. But this duplicate still contains 6.5 million tiny bricks, each laid by hand with real mortar.

I feel guilty that I don't spend an hour studying it and appreciating the attention to detail.

One of the best displays is the Terra Cotta Warriors. If you don't know the story, some long-ago egotistical emperor wanted to take his army with him into the next life. So he had sculptors make life-sized clay statues of 8,000 soldiers and horses to put in his tomb. He also had a few family members and flesh-and-blood concubines buried with him.

Most of the world's great treasures and marvels come to us via wackos, tyrants and slaves.

Democracy and labor unions have eliminated the extraordinary.

We've gone from the Parthenon and Hanging Gardens of Babylon to the asparagus tower in downtown Orlando.

This is why there is no Splendid United States in China.

I've never heard of most of the 60 displays at Splendid China. The Zhaozhou Bridge. The Big Wild Goose Pagoda. The Temple of Heaven. It's hard to appreciate how well they've duplicated something if you don't know what the something is.

What they need here is Tiananmen Square - miniature tanks squashing little ceramic students.

But not anytime soon. Splendid China toes the party line. Rumor has it the Chinese government is involved in the attraction, which if true would explain the Asian economic crisis.

Splendid China sure can't be making it on the price of admission, which is too much at \$26.99.

You don't have to pay to shop in the neighboring Chinatown. Unfortunately, this Chinatown is little more than another phony strip of tourist shops. And if the restaurant I ate at served authentic Chinese food, then I feel sorry for the billion Chinese who eat this stuff every day.

Splendid China is either too real or too fake.

If you do decide to go, however, check out the very real acrobats. One girl sits on an 8-foot tall unicycle, pedals with one foot and with the other tosses bowls in the air that land right-side up on her head. She stacked six bowls on that little noggin of hers, followed by a cup and spoon. It is much more amazing than a Penny Hardaway slam dunk.

A young woman followed that up by bending over backwards and sitting on her head. She defied all laws of bone and body tissue.

And she was gorgeous.

Now, for Central Florida, that's entertainment.