

Welcome to Paradise!

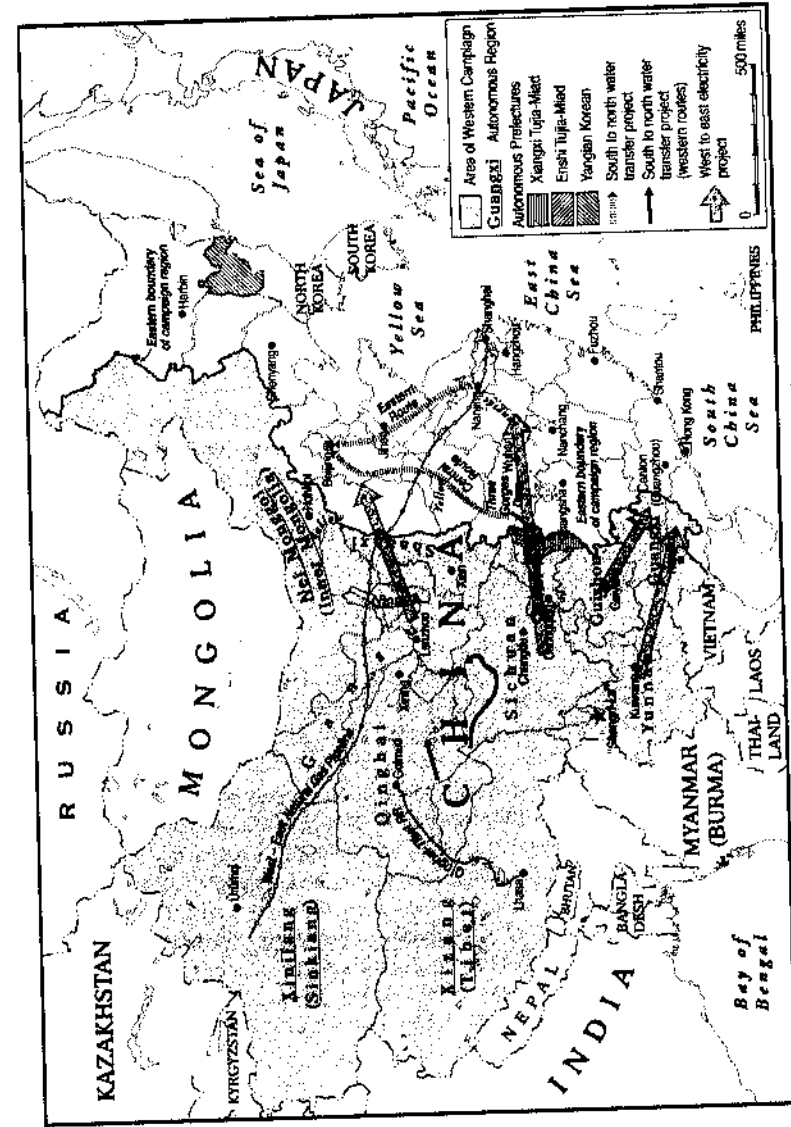
A Sino-U.S. Joint-Venture Project

Tim Oakes

The vastness of China's west makes it impossible not to think of the American west. America's west has the rugged cowboy; China's west has the rugged Tibetan. America's west has [the] majestic Sierra Nevada. China's west has the world's most majestic Himalayas. And wealth in resources? China's west has an even richer future than America's!¹

—Zhang Guangming and Wang Shaoyi

When China launched its campaign to "Open Up the West" (*xibu dakaiifa*) late in 1999, comparisons to the experience of the United States were inevitable. This one, however, gave me pause. Rugged Tibetans? It first struck me as odd that such an image could be conjured to express the promise of China's western regions. Tibetans were, after all, a prime target of the campaign's efforts to "civilize" China's frontiers. The very ruggedness of the Tibetan was, for the most part, a problem that the campaign set out to solve. Li Dezhu, minister of China's State Nationalities Affairs Commission, had said so himself. The western region's "traditional cultures," Li argued, were "deep seated" and "relatively backward."² Because of this, Li continued, it was important to recognize that while traditions that are "suitable" to development should be recognized, "we must also be adept at assimilating the cultural traditions of the Han nationality and all other advanced nationalities." China's campaign to Open Up the West, in other words, asserted that "backward nationalities" (like Tibetans) would have to adapt to the ways of the "advanced nationalities" (like the Han). As one observer puts it, this approach treats Tibetan culture as "a problem to be overcome" rather than "a feature to be protected and nourished."³



Map 12.1. Regional Extent and Key Projects of the Open Up the West Campaign

How strange, then, that the decidedly cowboyish qualities of the “rugged Tibetan” should be drawn upon to shed a favorable light on China’s western development campaign in comparison to the history of America’s westward expansion. After all, the Tenth Five-Year Plan for Tibet—coinciding with the initiation of Open Up the West—called the nomadic Tibetan herdsman “out-dated.” The Tibetan cowboy could “neither take full advantage of pasture or cope with natural disasters, nor facilitate the modernization drive of social lives.” Accordingly, Qinghai province called upon Tibetans and Mongols (the Chinese West’s other cowboys) to slaughter their animals and settle down, thereby raising their “quality of life” and increasing their wealth.⁴ Furthermore, Open Up the West would help improve the “quality” of the Tibetans by introducing them to more Han people. The campaign’s promotion of westward Han migration from China proper was likened by Li Dezhu to “a peacock flying west,” with the assumption that the “higher quality” Han would provide a healthy example from which the rugged Tibetan could learn.⁵

Like the American cowboy, the rugged Tibetan cowboy is a myth that obscures a much more disturbing reality. Put this way, there was nothing odd about Zhang and Wang’s comparison at all. For at the same time that Open Up the West sought to resurrect China’s colonial designs on its western borderlands, it professed to solidify China’s national identity. In this respect, the campaign was self-consciously modeled on the U.S. precedent. What Zhang and Wang saw in the U.S. experience of westward expansion is a successful example of national mythmaking. The U.S. frontier cowboy was in fact underpaid, overworked, and in most other respects quite unromantic. And the U.S. frontier, far from being the virgin land of opportunity that it has been mythologized to be, was a land of conquest, a land whose indigenous population was eliminated with such systematic deceit and violence that the United States would easily have been indicted for genocide were it happening today. Indeed, Beijing has not passed up opportunities in the recent past to point this out, whenever it issues its inevitable rebuttals to U.S. dispersions of China’s human rights record. This bickering is predictable between two imperial powers who share the same basic geopolitical ambitions. At any rate, the more accurate comparison would be between the Tibetan and the Native American. But this would have landed Zhang and Wang in some hot water that they no doubt sought to avoid. Criticism of America’s imperial past was no longer appropriate, now that it was the model for China’s development strategies in the twenty-first century.

But it is more than the geopolitics of empire that China’s campaign has in common with the United States. The two countries share a much deeper cultural fascination with their western frontiers. Discourses of the western frontier have been fundamental to shaping the imperial and national imaginations of both China and the United States. There are vast differences in these

discourses, to be sure. The western frontier has been a defining aspect of Chinese identity for several thousand years, making the U.S. version a mere blip in history by comparison. Likewise, the settling of the western United States was played out in extremely different historical and geographical contexts, not least of which is the fact that the U.S. West has a coastline, which China’s interior obviously lacks. But China’s West has—like America’s—inspired myths that have become fundamental to the telling of the nation’s history. China’s West has also—like America’s—inspired alternative narratives of national identity, some utopian, some radically unorthodox. By launching a campaign of western development, China has also initiated a new era of mythmaking.

And here the U.S. experience suggests yet another model. For the settling of the western United States is not simply a myth of national identity. It is also a commercial product. The myth of the West sells. It sells books, paintings, clothes, children’s birthday party themes, and, most importantly, tourism. The U.S. model of western development offers not only the rugged cowboy but a theme park in which to play the cowboy. And the theme park model is certainly one that China has taken to heart. If California was singled out by the campaign’s framers as the model par excellence of nineteenth-century land development and twentieth-century high-tech industrialization, then Disneyland’s Frontierland in Anaheim, California, surely marks the apogee of America’s ability to turn myths into money.⁶ The theme park’s alchemic magic, churning the ephemera of myth into hard cash, is something that the U.S. West has also bequeathed to China.

This chapter is about the growing commercial power of the frontier myth in China. My focus will be on the reconstruction of the myth of the western frontier as a product of the campaign to Open Up the West as well as a broader pattern of intercultural exchange between China and the United States, and my argument shall be that the myth of the frontier serves to re-centralize state power in China’s western regions. By mythologizing the western frontier, the campaign to Open Up the West packages itself as a new civilizing mission, and one to which commercial tourism development in particular is contributing.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR NEW MYTHS

When China officially launched its western development campaign in 2000, national mythmaking was not part of the official agenda. In fact, the official agenda was ambiguous at best. Premier Zhu Rongji saw the new impetus for western development as

crucial to the efforts to boost domestic demand, promote sustained national economic growth and bring about coordinated development of regional economies

for eventual common prosperity as well as to strengthen national unity, safeguard social stability and consolidate border defense.⁷

Zhu's shopping-list approach to characterizing the campaign to Open Up the West reflects the basic features of what has been called a soft policy, or a campaign designed with sufficient ambiguity to allow—in its various local implementations—for a broad spectrum of competing, shifting, and even contradictory agendas “producing a diverse array of goals and measures.”⁸ There is no single policy document that summarizes the campaign to Open Up the West. Indeed, the campaign has been something of a work in progress since at least the early 1990s, and the various official announcements—throughout 1999—of its imminent launch indicate more the culmination of a set of longer-term trends than a bold or innovative re-orientation in state regional-development policies.

The most readily identified of these long-term trends is the CCP's repeated promises throughout the 1990s to eventually redress growing inequalities associated with market-oriented reforms and economic decentralization. Thus, official pronouncements of the campaign to Open Up the West characterize it as the party's promised response to decades of festering inequality between China's rapidly growing eastern provinces and its stagnating western regions. Western leaders had been grumbling for some time about the state of things, pointing out with increasing urgency that China's uneven growth was resting on an ever-flimsy scaffold of social discontent. As early as the mid-1980s, western leaders had been forming alliances to do for themselves what Beijing was at the time unwilling to do. Officials and scholars from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces, for instance, formed the Research Forum for the Strategy to Open Up the Southwest, while leaders from Xinjiang, Gansu, and Ningxia Huizu did the same—albeit with less success—for the Northwest. When Deng Xiaoping made his well-known Southern Tour in 1992, he addressed these growing concerns by noting that by the end of the century, China would have attained a “moderately high standard of living” and would by then be able to more directly address its income disparities.⁹ In the subsequent years leading up to 2000, the extent of those disparities was subject to increasingly vocal academic criticism within China. Probably the most influential of these critical voices came from Hu Angang, director of the State Council's Research Institute on National Conditions, who wrote that China's pattern of development was not only unsustainable but could well result in state failure and territorial devolution similar to that experienced by Yugoslavia.¹⁰ With this intellectual urgency added to the CCP's standing promise to appease China's discontented western provinces, the stage was thus set for a major campaign to kick off the new century.

One of the greatest initial difficulties was to simply define which “West” the campaign's planners were targeting. Getting it right was of crucial im-

portance, of course, for immediate and very practical political reasons. But it was also important because, as will be discussed in greater detail later, the western region has always been fundamental to Chinese constructions of political, social, and cultural identity. To proclaim a campaign of rapid development for such a region was to invite a complicated and perhaps even disquieting discussion about how certain localities have historically fit into the broader narrative of “Chineseness.” But by far the most important question at the outset of the campaign was simply who was in and who was out—which regions were to be bestowed with the promised flows of cash and favorable policies?

Beijing has a well-established history of carving China up into regions to help determine the distribution of resources and favors. During the Seventh Five-Year Plan, which covered the second half of the 1980s, a tripartite regionalization scheme was conceived that identified a coastal belt of provinces that would benefit first from reform policies featuring modernization and liberalized trade and investment policies, and central and western regions that would supply energy and other raw materials, as well as labor, to the “coastal front” in China's engagement with the global economy. The western region identified under this scheme—which had explicitly been given the role of little more than a support base for eastern economic growth—was the same western region initially defined in the campaign to Open Up the West in 1999. By late 2000, however, two additional provincial units, one previously central (Inner Mongolia), and one previously eastern (Guangxi), had been added. This was most likely due to their status as autonomous regions, which complemented the campaign's goal of building solidarity among nationalities. Not only were they autonomous regions, but they were autonomous regions where the Han were a clear majority and where the dominant minority were relatively assimilated to the “advanced” ways of the Han.

This expansion was followed, probably for similar reasons, by the further addition of three autonomous prefectures, in Hubei, Hunan, and Jilin. These latter additions stretched the concept of a Western Interior quite thin. Guangxi, after all, is a coastal region, while Inner Mongolia and Jilin stretch far into China's Northeast. However, it is best to understand the West of the campaign in metaphorical, rather than territorial, terms.¹¹ The campaign's West is a frontier region of poverty, ethnic minorities, and poor economic infrastructure. It is a place, in other words, in need of a civilizing boost from the East. To be sure, the region is also home to great concentrations of wealth (for instance, in its major urban centers of Xi'an, Chongqing, Chengdu, and Kunming), a vast majority of Han Chinese, and some of the most sophisticated technological infrastructure in China. Many parts of this region thus compare favorably with the rest of China in a whole range of socioeconomic categories.

Given such a vast and diverse region, it seems impossible that the campaign would not seek to address a broad range of concerns. According to one analysis, five agendas addressed by the campaign can be identified: (1) regional equality, (2) private investment, (3) infrastructure investment, (4) integration and assimilation of nationalities, and (5) environmentally sustainable development.¹² These five agendas also suggest a chronology of the campaign's gradual design. Regional equality (agenda 1) had, rhetorically at least, been on the CCP's long-term agenda for some time and, as suggested above, formed the primary impulse for the campaign's gradual formulation in the late 1990s. The party's initial answer to inequality was infrastructural investment (agenda 3), and it was this kind of development that dominated official announcements associated with the campaign in 1999 and 2000. Thus, several massive projects that had been planned during the 1990s were officially unveiled to coincide with the campaign's launch in 2000. These included, at a combined estimated cost of over US\$90 billion, a South-North water diversion project, a West-East natural gas transfer project, a West-East electricity transfer project, and the Qinghai-Tibet railway.¹³ To these could be added, for an additional \$25 billion, what many regarded as the infrastructural lynchpin of the whole campaign: the Three Gorges dam. Significant as they were in terms of absolute investments, these high-profile projects carried perhaps even more symbolic weight as markers of the state's commitment to developing the West. Certainly they were promoted in the media as such, even though China's overall pattern of investments continued to overwhelmingly favor the eastern coastal provinces. The campaign's key projects, in other words, cannot really be seen as a significant departure from established state regional-development expenditures.

The other component of the campaign's economic development agenda—the encouragement of private investment (agenda 2)—can therefore be seen as an implicit acknowledgement of the state's inability or unwillingness to fundamentally transform its investment priorities in regional terms. The private sector is expected to fill in the gap. But here the campaign has offered much more in terms of rhetoric than capital, and there have been many concerns voiced by scholars of the western provinces that the campaign in fact offers very little for improving the climate for private investment in the western region. This was, for instance, the message of a 2001 conference held in Guizhou in which participants—mostly scholars and officials from various western provinces—complained that instead of improving conditions for the expansion of the nonstate sector locally, the campaign was little more than an intensification of eastern exploitation of western resources.¹⁴ This was, to be sure, a criticism directed as much toward conservative and protectionist local governments as toward the campaign's central designers. But it suggests that the campaign's implementation has emphasized high-profile infrastructure projects (all of which focus

on natural resource extraction) at the expense of more basic and smaller-scale concerns such as education and local state capacity.

Indeed, to view the campaign from the perspective of a poor province like Guizhou is to see an unprecedented intensification of resource extraction that brings western provinces and their resources into Beijing's orbit as never before.¹⁵ For some, the campaign was reminiscent of the center's previous power over resource allocation and distribution during the planned economy of the Mao era.¹⁶ As was noted in the *South China Morning Post's* coverage of the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, whenever talk turned to western development, "officials barely touched on fashionable subjects such as private investments and entrepreneurs. Just as the rest of China is accelerating the move towards a market economy, the western region appears to be a throwback to the planned economy of an earlier era."¹⁷ Potential investors in Hong Kong seemed to agree. A high-profile delegation of seventy-one Hong Kong businessmen toured the Chinese West in 2000 and managed to cough up only \$30 million. An editorial in the *South China Morning Post* at the time argued that the needs of western development and the expertise that Hong Kong was able to provide were a "poor match."¹⁸

The center's apparent reluctance to see the campaign as an opportunity to shift paradigms in terms of economic development brings us to another agenda that emerged from the initial concern with inequality. Hu Angang's dire warnings of China becoming another Yugoslavia put nation building and ethnic solidarity (agenda 4) front and center in the eyes of many in the CCP. In this sense, the large-scale infrastructure projects heralded by the campaign may be more about the recentralization of state power in the western regions than about basic development. This is an aspect of the campaign that has attracted less attention in the Western media. Articles on the campaign in the *New York Times* and *Fortune*, for example, have focused on evaluating the success of privatization and foreign investment but have had little to say regarding broader political implications.¹⁹ In an article about Chongqing, *Fortune* writer Richard Tomlinson emphasized the growing role of the private sector in the city's exploding economy as an indicator of an emerging class of independent entrepreneurs. Tomlinson, in other words, looked to the campaign to produce the kind of class that a publication like *Fortune* could relate to. Yet further analysis makes clear that, to the contrary, Chongqing's massive infrastructure investments associated with the campaign to Open Up the West will only make it more beholden to the bureaucratic directives of the center.²⁰ This is because private-sector development has remained stagnant in Chongqing while the city's \$23 billion infrastructural spending spree—including eight highways, a monorail network, a sewage system, a new airport, and a container port—is incurring a vast debt that municipal revenues, let alone the private sector, will not come close to covering. One analyst's conservative estimate that the center will be expected

to carry the city's nearly ¥600 billion shortfall during the Tenth Five-Year Plan is an illustration of the way the campaign will entrench the role of the center in western development more broadly.²¹ While *Fortune* scouts the streets of Chongqing for evidence of a rising middle class founded on private enterprise, state control is being redefined and rearticulated in more fundamental ways.

Thus, rather than heralding the rise of a region where the free market will reign, the campaign can be read as a response to the problems wrought by two decades of decentralization and localism. A clear statement in this regard was not simply the center's carving off Chongqing from Sichuan in 1997 (in response to Sichuan's reluctance to bear the costs of the Three Gorges project) but more tellingly, its humiliating removal of Chongqing's home-grown leadership in 1999, to be replaced with outsiders from Hunan and Jiangsu.²² Elsewhere, China's provinces had been acting like little fiefdoms, engaging in "cabbage wars" and "cotton wars" and needlessly duplicating themselves in everything from oranges to electricity.²³ In this respect, Beijing saw the campaign as an opportunity to recentralize its control before the situation got entirely out of hand.²⁴ Clearly the West would have to develop so that incomes in Xinjiang caught up to those in Guangdong, which in 2000 were already twice as high. But if in acquiring Guangdong's level of wealth Xinjiang also acquired that province's sense of uppity autonomy from Beijing, it could mean serious trouble for China's sensitive borderlands. Equality would have to be achieved by strengthening the center's control, rather than relinquishing it, for example, to market forces. Equality would, in short, be a colonial project. The *kaifa* (opening) of the West, then, connotes more the exploitation of resources than a new kind of liberalism. True, the campaign professes to open the Chinese West to the global marketplace of investment capital, but Beijing is keeping both hands firmly on the door.

But it is perhaps in the area of ethnic relations that this centralizing aspect of the campaign achieved its most significant expression: that of a civilizing mission. As noted at the outset of this chapter, the campaign to Open Up the West was accompanied by a rhetoric encouraging a new generation of pioneers to leave the comforts of their eastern cities and head West. This rhetoric illustrates the CCP's desire to reverse the dominant West-East direction of mobility witnessed during the reform era. But it also marks what one Xinjiang observer called a "radical alteration" of the state's nationalities policy.²⁵ Li Dezhu's likening of this new migration to "a peacock flying west" was accompanied by the acknowledgement that what was being promoted in the campaign was in fact the *ningjuhua* (homogenization) of the western population. Before Li's article came out in *Seeking Truth*, the party had never before hinted that the dilution of western minority nationality groups with an influx of Han immigrants was even remotely con-

nected to state policy. Li's advocacy of Han immigration marked not so much the departure from a trend—such dilution had, after all, been going on all along anyway—but the party's willingness to finally break the taboo of publicly acknowledging that trend. Li thus admitted that some "conflicts and clashes" should be expected as western minority groups found their world increasingly dominated by the Han. It was all for their own good in the long run, Li said, but the transition might be difficult for some.

It is here that comparisons with America's westward expansion achieve their most significant symbolic power. Li Dezhu's article perhaps marks the beginning of a rhetorical reconstruction of China's western frontier as a virgin land, a clean slate. America's development had never been hindered by an explicit policy professing tolerance for and recognition of different nationalities. Native Americans weren't a nationality group. They weren't even citizens. They were simply in the way. Li's article suggests that the CCP feels the time has come for China to adopt a similar attitude. "America is West and the wind blowing," wrote the poet Archibald MacLeish in 1930.²⁶ China's promoters of western development saw the same America that MacLeish saw; they saw an America that drew its strength from its (empty) frontier. Economists Tang Songan and Li Yongtai, for instance, write that "the American west is a region of incredible resources and wealth, but its most important resource is that which is *undeveloped*. America's west is America's *hopes*. The west preserves the hopes of the American nation [italics mine]."²⁷ They also note that the idea of a boundless frontier continues to invigorate and strengthen the United States today, remarking, for instance, on the continuing relevance of Frederick Jackson Turner's well-known frontier thesis. At Chicago's 1893 Columbia Exposition, Turner famously proclaimed that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."²⁸ But while the frontier's wealth of "free land" was, for Turner, responsible for nurturing a distinctly North American form of republicanism, Beijing's western frontier is called upon to reestablish the authority of the central government.

It is in the campaign's function as a recentralization and entrenchment of central power in the West that the associated myths of the frontier serve their most immediate purpose. The myth of China's western regions as a frontier enables a new kind of spatial imaginary, one that symbolically underpins the authority of the center. This spatial imaginary also underpins a growing tourism industry throughout the region, one that is beginning to be an economic force in its own right. In fact, in some parts of the western region, tourism is just about the only industry in which the private sector has begun to play a significant role in regional development. The call for Han migrants to go west is echoed by a call for eastern tourists to do the same. Moreover, tourism development has been singled out in campaign

announcements as a key component of the drive to develop the western regions economically.

Tourism is significant not only because it represents the leading edge of economic restructuring in many of the western region's most remote places, but also because it thrives on the civilizing myths of the frontier. While western China's dramatic scenery makes tourism an obvious target for promotion, frontier imagery and mythology have also become increasingly visible in tourism promotion. In Guizhou, a history of early Ming frontier warfare and colonization has become central to the province's incipient heritage-tourism industry, while local histories of Han penetration into the region—previously dominated by minority groups such as the Miao and Buyei—have become packaged in various ways as return-to-the-past tourism for urban Chinese seeking to return to China's wild frontiers for a day.²⁹ In these cases, tourism development has tended to play on the imagery of a barbarian frontier becoming civilized under gradual Han influence, and this is an image in which local governments are increasingly finding commercial potential.

A significant feature of Guizhou's frontier tourism, however, is not simply the commercial replaying for tourists of China's deep-seated civilizing mission but the reconstruction of a place once lost. The heritage villages being promoted in Guizhou, so the story goes, have preserved a unique, frontier way of life because the past centuries of chaos, warfare, socialism, and most recently, reform and modernization have largely passed them by. Preserved in isolation, they are now promoted as "living fossils" of a way of life long forgotten in China's bustling eastern metropolises. Planeloads of tourists from Nanjing now come to Guizhou to "search for their roots" on the frontier.

The most spectacular example of tourism development along China's frontiers, however, is found in Yunnan. Tourism has grown in recent years to become Yunnan's largest foreign-exchange earner. Already in 1999, before the official launch of the campaign to Open Up the West, Yunnan was earning \$350 million from tourism, or 25 percent of the entire western region's tourism income that year. This represented an astonishing twenty-two-fold increase over the province's 1990 earnings. And the region of Yunnan that has grown most rapidly has been the province's northwestern frontier with Tibet. In Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, tourism grew from some fifty thousand visitors in 1998 to well over 1 million just two years later.³⁰ This growth preceded Diqing's official recognition and name change, in 2001, to Shangri-La (see figure 12.1). While the relationship between Shangri-La and the frontier mythologizing of the campaign to Open Up the West will be discussed later, here we may simply note that, as in Guizhou, tourists have been flocking to Yunnan to discover a paradise that was once lost but has now been found anew.

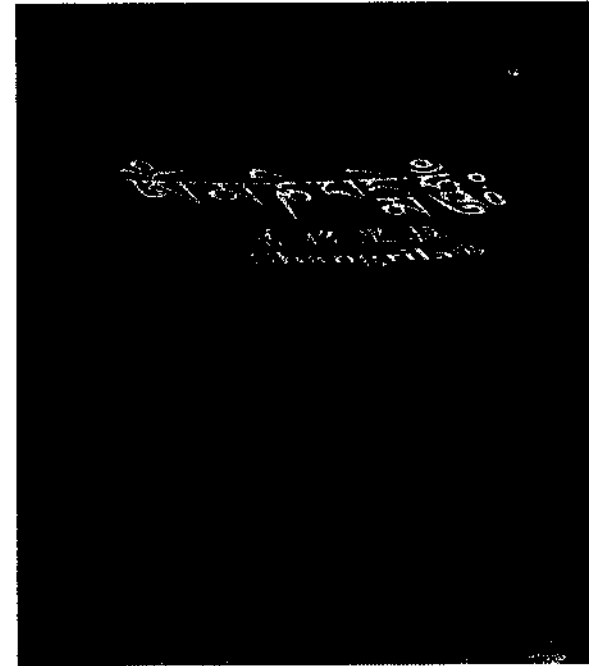


Figure 12.1. Hillside sign for Shangri-La, a province that decided to change its name to attract tourists. (Photo: Tim Oakes)

PARADISE LOST: THE ROLE OF THE FRONTIER IN NATIONAL AND TOURIST IMAGINATIONS

Turner's claim that the successive westward settling of a receding frontier created a distinctly U.S. kind of individualism and democracy is well known. Turner's claim that a vast expanse of free land was responsible for nurturing a unique American republicanism was, clearly, mythmaking of the first order. For it was not just the land that helped build America but a frontier connoting an open, progressive future toward which Americans equally strived. What made Turner's mythmaking particularly brilliant was the fact that he couched it as a nostalgic look back on something that had disappeared as soon as our gaze turned its way. Turner's thesis was, after all, delivered on the occasion of the "closing" of the frontier. In this sense, the frontier was a kind of utopia, a place that could only be appreciated once it was lost forever. Turner's lament of its closing was what, more than anything, solidified the frontier as a core myth of U.S. national identity.

In closing the frontier, Turner assured us that it would, paradoxically, stay open, as a metaphor, forever lodged in the North American collective imagination. The frontier is alive and well in the United States today as a metaphor for technological innovation, progress, and "the edge of exciting possibilities."³¹ Far from closing, the frontier is again and again invoked in any number of "openings." It just keeps forever receding—like the shooting stars on the screen of the starship USS *Enterprise* in the television series and movie *Star Trek*—into the infinity of "Space: The final frontier." At the same time, however, this closing of the frontier managed to freeze in perpetuity an ideal, the kernel of the myth, of utopian possibility. The Jeffersonian yeoman invoked by Turner was a plea against an inevitable corrupting of the dream, now that the West had been definitively "settled."³² And as if either to confirm Turner's worst nightmare or to realize his ultimate dream (depending on your perspective), the frontier can now be visited again and again, all for the price of admission to Disneyland. The necessity of this closing, and of a nostalgic look back, made possible the conversion of myth into capital: the frontier's resurrection as Frontierland in Anaheim, California. If Turner created a paradise only by closing its doors forever, Disney promises the impossible: a return to this paradise lost. This is, after all, what theme parks do; they knit together fiction and reality for those of us willing to suspend disbelief for a few hours.

But if a few hours of suspended disbelief is all a theme park asks of us, a nation asks a great deal more. The problem with Turner's thesis is that it has inspired the suspension of disbelief for much more than a few hours. The dominant narrative of U.S. history has required the suspension of disbelief for well over a century. This was a frontier less of democratic progress than imperialism and colonialism.³³ The land wasn't free, it was taken. And this is the history upon which Guizhou's frontier heritage villages rest as well. Remarkably well preserved, the villages display a frozen landscape of conquest and warfare, established as they were six centuries ago by Chinese soldiers sent from the eastern heartland to take the land from indigenous groups that had been there long before them. Today, tourists can visit their colonizing settlements as they would a theme park and relive—Frontierland-style—the myth of the frontier.

Of course, the myth of China's frontier, like that of America's, has required vigilant management and control by the state. Frontier archaeology, for example, has been subject to strict state control.³⁴ Thus, the possibility that the frontier could be an open zone where Chinese civilization acquired foreign influences was deemed unpatriotic and worse, politically suspect during the Mao era. The suggestion, for instance, that copper and bronze metallurgy might have emerged first in western Asia and then brought to China somewhat later was once denounced as the "clamor" of "imperialists

and the so-called archaeologists of the revisionist Soviet Union."³⁵ The state's sense of control over interpretations of frontier history has been so haunted by the possibilities of an open frontier that for decades foreign archaeologists were simply banned from fieldwork in China. And when the China Borderlands Research Center was established in the 1990s to promote modern Chinese frontier studies, things hadn't really changed that much. The key themes of frontier research in China were still identified as national unity, ethnic solidarity, and social stability. Frontier studies, the center declared, would help develop patriotism among Han Chinese and minority nationalities. As one historian pointed out, "The rigid boundaries of territory and identity implied by [China's] nationality policy require fixed historical interpretation and ideological reinforcement. Frontier studies in China reflect the center's fear of losing its grip on the definition of national essences."³⁶

Yet this orthodoxy has also contributed to the occasional idealization of the frontier in China as a space to which the nation could always return if a crisis of integrity were to befall it. And this is precisely what has happened again and again throughout Chinese history. Indeed, the campaign to open up the West can also be interpreted in this way. If nationalism in China, as one historian has argued, has "gone south," then Beijing's call to "go west" can be read as a campaign of return to the frontiers to recentralize an increasingly chaotic and open discourse of national identity.³⁷ If the frontier, in other words, was where "Chineseness" was originally forged, then the frontier needs to be found again so that such an identity can always be recovered if need be. Confucius was only the first in a line of scholars to recognize this. The *Han Shu* records the Great Sage saying, "Lost rites can be recovered from the remote peripheries."³⁸ He is also said to have declared that it was on the frontiers that his philosophy was most likely to be realized.³⁹

More recently, many intellectuals of the early twentieth century looked to China's frontiers as spaces where the nation might recover a lost vitality in the face of foreign subjugation.⁴⁰ China shared with Europe and the United States a tendency to idealize "the savage" in times of social or cultural crisis, attributing to the Other all those qualities that its own society had lost.⁴¹ The frontier continues to provide this kind of alternative space for the resolution of social and cultural crises of identity. Hui writer Zhang Chengzhi's historical novel *Xinlingshi* [*A history of the soul*] narrates the history of the Jahriyya sect of Islam in Gansu, and the rise of Ma Mingxin, who gathered a large group of followers and whose religious movement was violently suppressed by the Qing in 1781. Zhang "depicts an open frontier that offers opportunity for creative spiritual development . . . For him, the frontier becomes the source of an alternative history, a support for a private quest

utterly divorced from the imperatives of imperial or national politics."⁴² Zhang's frontier is less the poor and barren region subject to the civilizing force of Beijing's Open Up the West campaign than a "seedbed for China's only truly humane community."

This idea of the frontier as salvation has inevitably spread from these intellectual projects to contemporary popular culture. The growing popularity of cultural geography in China reflects this trend of repackaging the frontier to fit the needs of China's current reforms. In the volumes *Renwen Zhongguo* [*Human China*] and *Diyu Zhongguo* [*Regional China*], for example, traditional frontier provinces are described as either lost regions now rediscovered (thereby maintaining their purity and vitality) or as cradles of Chinese civilization, places where China can rediscover a history appropriate for the times. The Tang capital Chang'an (today's Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province) is thus recalled not only as a frontier city but as one of the first "world cities." In fact, Chang'an's place at the hub of the silk road trade network is said to have inspired China's global sojourners to name each of their communities *Tangrenjie* (or "Tang neighborhood," commonly translated as "Chinatown").⁴³ This revision replaces the conventional explanation for the name *Tangrenjie*—that they were founded by Tang people from China's southern coastal regions—with one linked to the myth of the frontier. It is further claimed that Shaanxi people, in their walled-off isolation, have preserved the "winds of reform" that started blowing as early as the Western Han dynasty but are only now reaching the rest of China.⁴⁴ Pastoral Mongols are said to embody a freedom that compares favorably to stiff Han Confucianism in this day of openness and reform, while Xinjiang is said to retain the ancient Silk Road spirit of openness that China proper needs to learn anew.⁴⁵

Inevitably, these mythical reinventions have been absorbed and reproduced by the tourism industry. Back in Guizhou, Miao villagers are reminded by industry officials that they are "the Chinese of the Tang Dynasty."⁴⁶ As such, they are responsible not simply for maintaining Miao customs for outsiders to appreciate and purchase but for recalling what Chinese culture once was. This role of the frontier Miao as keepers of tradition recalls an earlier time, when a local Qing magistrate referred, in 1727, to the *Miaojiang* (Miao borderlands) in Guizhou as a *taohuayuan*, a "utopia."⁴⁷ After a year of the region's violent subjugation at the hands of the Qing army, the magistrate was inspired to praise the noble Miao for their "self-sufficiency," "lack of want for anything," and their "courtesy." But while the magistrate's view of a lost paradise of noble savages was only possible once the destruction of that paradise was finally assured, tourism in Guizhou and throughout the western region is promising a return to this lost frontier paradise so that the roots of the nation may once again be discovered.

THE WESTERN FRONTIER AS COMMERCIAL UTOPIA— WELCOME BACK TO PARADISE

This reminds us, again, that shadowing China's dominant narrative of strict frontier control and management as the forward-looking key to good statecraft is a narrative of nostalgia for a purer past, an ideal world lost. Mahayana Buddhism had already predisposed Chinese popular culture to look west for paradise, for the "pure land" where true enlightenment could be achieved. Wu Cheng'en's sixteenth-century romance *Xiyou ji* [*Journey to the West*] further helped solidify the association of the West with a fantasy land. Indeed, Wu's romance was canonized by the CCP under Mao as a metaphor for China's own journey toward a Communist utopia.⁴⁸ Elite Chinese cosmology also reinforced the West as paradise by locating there the sacred Kunlun Mountain, the pivot between heaven and earth. The most iconic symbol of paradise, however, is the classic *Taohuayuan* [*Peach blossom spring*] by fifth-century poet Tao Qian, a work the title of which has become synonymous with utopia. *Taohuayuan* is a brief prose poem about a fisherman who stumbles upon an orderly land of happy people wearing foreign-looking clothes. They tell the fisherman that they are descendants of refugees who themselves stumbled on the place to avoid the chaos of the Qin unification. Since then they have been completely cut off from the world. After much wining and dining, the fisherman bids them farewell but is told to keep his mouth shut about the place. He fails to do this, however, and announces his discovery as soon as he reaches the nearest prefecture town. This weakness on his part makes return to the orderly land impossible. The local magistrate sends someone with him to find the place again, but they get lost along the way and never find it. The narrative ends on a curious note: "Liu Ziji of Nanyang was a person of noble character. When he heard this story he was happy and planned to visit the place, but before he could make the trip, he died of illness. Since then, no one has ever looked for the place." Tao thus constructs a myth of paradise as an ever-present possibility, a place that could perhaps be stumbled upon again.

Tao Qian did not explicitly situate *Taohuayuan* in the West. But, as the example from Guizhou's *Miaojiang* indicates, the name has been invoked at times to capture the utopic qualities of China's frontiers. The word *utopia* means, literally, "nonplace." A utopia is inherently impossible, an ideal that can never be actualized. This theme of impossibility resonates not only in the Western myth of Eden and other versions of paradise lost but also with Tao's fisherman and his inability to return to *Taohuayuan*. Utopia can only be discovered when we are not looking for it, and once found, it can never be left. This sensibility has found much appeal in both Chinese and European-American traditions. It is a sensibility that, it turns out, was destined for cross-fertilization between these traditions, and such

cross-fertilization was most spectacularly initiated by James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.

Lost Horizon's resemblances to Tao Qian's prose poem deserve noting. Like Tao's fisherman, Hilton's protagonist, Robert Conway, does not purposefully stumble onto paradise. He is hardly searching for utopia, but once there, he is quickly entranced by its beauty, calm, and orderliness in juxtaposition to the chaos of the outside world. Shangri-La is, like Taohuayuan, a place where everyone is happy and where everyone wears foreign-looking clothes (at least from the perspective of Conway and his marooned companions). Like Taohuayuan, Shangri-La is a place inhabited by refugees from the chaos of the outside world. And like the fisherman, Conway voluntarily leaves. These similarities are not meant to suggest a set of universal qualities to which all utopias must subscribe—for there are also a great many differences between the visions of Tao and Hilton—but rather to suggest one possible explanation for the obvious resonance *Lost Horizon* has had in China. It is telling, then, that when Frank Capra's film version of the novel was released in Shanghai in the late 1930s, it carried the Chinese title *Taohuayuan yanji* [*Romance of the peach blossom spring*]. A few years later, another film produced a theme song that would help cement the name *Shangri-La* in Chinese popular culture. "This Beautiful Shangri-La" was very popular in the late 1940s, and according to one cultural critic, "Many educated Chinese of the pre-1949 generation still remember the tune, if not the entire lyric."⁴⁹ More recently, the term *Shangri-La* conjures associations with a Singapore-based luxury hotel chain and with a new tourism destination along China's Tibetan frontier.

Shangri-La is a term that has its own social history, one that bridges China, the United States, Tibet, Britain, and probably a few other places like Singapore and Dharmasala as well. Its remarkable currency in China speaks to a frontier fascination that is particularly shared by China and the United States alike. Only now, China's frontier has expanded and merged with America's. The frontiers of China and America meet and converge in Shangri-La, and it is the commercial dimension of the frontier idea that has enabled this.

China has been a kind of frontier for U.S. travelers for some time now. Under Mao, China was a mysterious yet highly desired frontier for many U.S. radicals looking for an alternative to the debacle of the Vietnam War. For post-Vietnam-era students like me, China was the newly opened frontier of culturally authentic otherness. And for travelers from all over the world, China has been on the frontiers of cultural tourism since the early 1980s. A curious book was recently published, in English, by a U.S. business consultant who, tired of the money-making rat-race that Beijing has become, heads west to find Shangri-La.⁵⁰ Lawrence Brahm's "alternative philosophy travelogue" makes clear that America's western frontier didn't simply stop at the California coast but reemerged in China, first in places

like Beijing where opportunities were fresh and fortunes could once again be made. But as Beijing soon came to resemble the worst urban nightmare of many U.S. residents, the frontier kept heading west, to ultimately find in Zhang and Wang's "rugged Tibetan" the cowboy spirit of the western United States born again.

Brahm tells a friend in Beijing about his dream to go west in search of a truer frontier, and this friend tells him that this West sounds like Shangri-La, "a place she had heard about once, maybe twice." She adds that "people talk of Shangri-la, but there are many controversies over where it really is. If you want to search for it, I think it must be in the west. Take a road and follow it, just go without any direction."⁵¹ The journey leads Brahm to initiate a multimedia project, "Searching for Shangri-La," to record the "still uncontaminated" cultures of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau before they are lost "due to overdevelopment, careless tourism, and short-sightedness." Thus like Turner before him, along with all good frontier mythmaking more generally, Brahm drives his project forward by invoking the ever-eminent closing of a frontier as he attempts to "document the 'lost horizon' before it is lost."⁵²

As a product of intercultural exchange, then, the myth of Shangri-La derives much of its power from a mutual fascination with the frontier and, increasingly, a desire to translate that fascination into political power (Beijing's civilizing project) or capital (tourism development). *Lost Horizon* itself, scholars have argued, did not appear in a cultural vacuum but was the result of a unique historical moment (the 1920s and 1930s) of intercultural exchange between Tibet and the West.⁵³ Indeed, it has been argued that Tibetans, particularly those in exile, have gradually succumbed to Hilton's fantasy of a Western utopia in Tibet. This is a succumbing that reveals not only a desire among Tibetans to see their country as a kind of paradise valued by Westerners but also the growing impossibility of return for most of them.⁵⁴

The fact that Brahm heads west to search for something that, by definition, is impossible to find alerts us to an important shift that has occurred in the development of the Shangri-La myth. That shift is first seen in Frank Capra's film version of Hilton's novel: in the Hollywood *Lost Horizon*, Conway gets to come back to Shangri-La. It is this return to paradise that puts a tourist's spin on the search for an authentic paradise. Unlike Tao Qian's fisherman, Capra's Conway finds his way back, even after he tells everyone about it. And this is exactly what commercial tourism promises: a return, again and again, to paradise. While the promise of everlasting return is a cornerstone of the international tourism industry in all its multifaceted guises, it reaches its zenith in the theme park, especially in the zenith of theme parks, Disneyland. Frontierland is always open.

What tourism does with the equation is insist that paradise be located in a specific place. Without a location, paradise cannot be sold. Hilton's riddle of Shangri-La's true location would have to be solved if tourists, like Capra's

Conway, were to have the opportunity to themselves achieve the impossible. There have been many claims made by would-be Shangri-Las throughout China's Tibetan frontier regions, but Yunnan's Zhongdian county in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was the quickest to grasp the commercial potential of branding itself as paradise. The county also legitimized its claims with scholarly accounts that served to transform Shangri-La from an external, imported idea, to an indigenous one by claiming it, in effect, for China and Tibet. In so doing, the county also implicitly linked Shangri-La to the broader mythmaking project associated with the Open Up the West campaign. The commerce of tourism development would naturally reinforce that project and allow a place like Diqing to reinvent itself not just as a tourist's paradise but as a region faithfully leading the Open Up the West campaign's charge to integrate and colonize the frontier and turn the "rugged Tibetan" into a servant of national myths. And this was the role played by Hilton's Tibetans as well; they helped Shangri-La become a vault for the treasures of civilization.

Zhongdian's panel of scholars set out to prove beyond a doubt that Zhongdian was not just the place that Hilton had in mind when he wrote *Lost Horizon* but that Zhongdian was Shangri-La before Hilton himself came up with the name *Shangri-La*. In other words, it was not enough to accept that Hilton invented the name—even if he had an actual place in mind—the name itself had to be Tibetan. Thus, *xiang ge li la* is said to derive from the Tibetan *Shambhala*, which in the dialect spoken in Diqing supposedly means "The sun and moon of the heart." Indeed, it is likely that Hilton derived his term from *Shambhala*.⁵⁵ But in Zhongdian, the claim is that Hilton derived it precisely from the Diqing version of *Shambhala*. At any rate, there is no corroborating evidence to even remotely suggest any truth to this claim that *Shangri-La* is derived from a Diqing dialect word for *paradise*.⁵⁶ The real issue for Zhongdian is not so much the Hilton connection but the nailing down of a free-floating, cultural idea and the actualization of a fantasy. Shangri-La needed to be pinned down and located so its tremendous commercial power could be unleashed. The claims of Zhongdian's experts are really about preparing a place for commoditization.

Visitors may now fly directly to Diqing, and one of their first sights upon disembarking is a huge, white, Hollywood-style message written into the side of a nearby mountain: Shangri-La. In other words, welcome to paradise, Hollywood-style. Western tourists have told me that the sign makes them feel like they're arriving at a theme park. But for the local government, the theme-park allusion also serves to mark Diqing as a civilized place, a leading prefecture.

The myth of Shangri-La contributes to civilizing Diqing in two ways: as a frontier repository for "lost rites" and "spiritual vitality" (of the type that contributes to national strength) and as an advanced and innovative place

on the cutting-edge of change. That cutting edge represents the frontiers of commoditization in China—a new economy of cultural symbols and exotic images—and this is precisely what the Open Up the West campaign promises to bring to China's remote western frontier. "Local government officials often speak of Shangri-la as a 'leading' Tibetan area in China—an area that can set an example for others in terms of social stability and economic progress."⁵⁷ This progress comes about by the materializing and locating of myths and fantasies. Diqing's Shangri-La is like a theme park because it marries fantasy with reality; it locates a nonplace and enables one to visit and enjoy this place at will. But it does more than simply traffic in the profitability of a powerful myth authored by a British novelist. It actualizes a frontier myth that already had much power in China but that has become a product of intercultural exchange.

It should also be noted that such neat and tidy myths are naturally quite difficult to sustain, despite the power they may hold over a nation's collective imagination. The intercultural exchanges that helped produce Shangri-La as a viable myth of western development in China are also capable of producing unforeseen outcomes as well as opening new spaces capable of challenging the center's hegemony of frontier mythmaking. The myth of Shangri-La is part of a much larger process of exchange in which China's frontier regions become globalized spaces. Northwest Yunnan has been the setting for new environmental and cultural politics in which international agents, such as the Nature Conservancy, actively contribute. The result has been new articulations of Tibetan cultural politics as seen, for instance, in a debate over using the Tibetan name (Kawegabo) or the Chinese name (Meilixue) for Diqing's highest mountain, an unexpected decision to ban mountaineering on the same peak in deference to its sacredness, and in a rise of alternative tourism in the region, a tourism that deliberately challenges the Shangri-La myth.⁵⁸ Similarly, in Guizhou, minority Chinese have made known their displeasure with the government's promotion as heritage of a landscape of Han colonization and conquest. While a civilizing message may dominate the rhetoric of western development emanating from the government, intercultural exchanges are both capable of reinforcing and subverting this rhetoric. In the United States, the idea of a frontier has become so politically charged that some historians can barely bring themselves to utter the word *frontier*, at least without scare quotes.⁵⁹ And perhaps this too will be an unexpected outcome of China's Open Up the West campaign.

CONCLUSION

In her film *Shangri-La*, New York-based artist Patty Chang makes the point that a lot of work goes into the construction of a nonplace. Shangri-La may

be an ephemeral destination, but its myth requires very real fabrication, nails, and hammers. Chang journeys to Diqing and films the building of several installations that materialize the myth of paradise: a mountain made of plywood and mirrors and driven around the dusty streets on the back of an old pickup; a decorated cake shaped like the mountain in *Lost Horizon* and displayed on the shelves of a cake shop. In one scene, she films a group of local monks climbing a rocky mountain. We quickly realize, however, that the mountain is fabricated and that, in fact, it is inside the large, glassed-in atrium of a hotel. The hotel, it turns out, is the Paradise Hotel with real monks climbing a fake mountain under a glass ceiling in Paradise. The film is full of plays on the arbitrariness of the divide between the real and the fake, giving us the sense that fakery is a necessary part of utopia, that the facade is crucial to authenticity. Chang's point is that the contrived fake, the whole commercial project, the theme park itself, not only cannot be avoided but is essential to the building paradise on earth.

The campaign to Open Up the West has set the stage upon which this façade of paradise is now being built in Diqing. And while the exoticism of Tibet sets the scene and provides the drama, Chang reminds us that paradise is a construction project like any other, with workers, dust, plywood, and glass. Paradise is a commercial venture on the frontier, where the false-fronted shops suggest the unlimited possibilities of a civilized future, and where "rugged Tibetans" become lucrative symbols of the new leisure economy that continues to transform China. The myth of a frontier paradise now informs a national identity of leisure and consumption in China today. The myth imagines a shiny future for the nation—like Chang's mountain of mirrors—that will emerge out of the vast construction project of Open Up the West.

NOTES

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