

Searching for Shangri-La

Two visions of the future compete for the soul of China's western frontier.

By Mark Jenkins

A cheerful group of Chinese tourists, all from eastern cities, are pushing against an enormous Tibetan prayer wheel.

On a bus tour of China's wild west, they're having fun trying to get the giant instrument spinning. No less than 50 feet tall and 25 feet in diameter, the Fortunate Victory Prayer Wheel depicts, in bas-relief, China's 56 ethnic groups working together in fabled harmony.

Three maroon-robed monks, shorn and strong, arrive to give a hand. The tourists have been trying to push the prayer wheel counterclockwise—the wrong direction in Tibetan Buddhism. The monks reverse their energy and get the wheel twirling like a gargantuan top.

Someone's cell phone trills a Chinese pop tune. A woman in lavender tights digs into her oversize purse. A man in a suit reaches into his black leather overcoat. A girl in plaid Converse high-tops rummages in her silver backpack. But it is one of the monks who steps away from the wheel and pulls the gadget from the folds of his robe.

He shouts into the phone while staring out across the city below. There is the Paradise Hotel, a five-star colossus enclosing a swimming pool and an enormous white plastic replica of sacred Mount Kawagebo. There, sprawling in all directions, are gray concrete tenements. There, against a far hillside, is the restored 17th-century Ganden Sumtseling Monastery, a smaller but no less inspiring version of the grand Potala in Tibet, gleaming in the wood-smoke haze like an imaginary palace.

Welcome to Shangri-La.

A decade ago this was an obscure, one-horse village on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Today, after an extreme makeover, it's one of the hottest tourist towns in China, gateway city to the Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage site in northwestern Yunnan Province.

Ten years ago the original village was becoming a ghost town of derelict buildings and deserted dirt roads. Most residents had moved out of their traditional homes—commodious chalet-like farmhouses with stone walls and magnificent wooden beams—into more modern structures with running water and septic systems. The historic quarter they left behind seemed doomed.

Tourism saved the place. The Tibetan farmhouses were suddenly rediscovered as unique, endemic architecture that could turn a profit. Redevelopment began immediately. Water and sewer lines were buried beneath the crooked lanes. Electricity and the Internet were

snaked in. The old homes were rebuilt and turned into fancy shops. New shops were constructed in the same style but with baroque facades—ornately carved dragons and swans and tigers—to attract Chinese tourists. Which they did: More than three million tourists, almost 90 percent of them Chinese, visited Shangri-La last year.

Take for instance the woman in black leather pants who steps out of a Hummer in the parking lot of the Sumtseling Monastery, hands off her little purse, and climbs up on a wildly decorated yak tended by an elaborately costumed Tibetan, sword and all. Her friends snap photos. She could as easily be a tourist mounting a horse in Deadwood, South Dakota, or standing beside a buffalo in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Just as Native American culture has been commodified in the American West, Tibetan culture has been commercialized in China's west. In the old town, high-end shops selling faux Tibetan jewelry, knives, and furs—the spotted cat skins are actually dyed dog hides—have replaced the chickens and pigs that once inhabited the ground floors of Shangri-La's homes.

At the giant prayer wheel the tourists and monks have tired of the gilded merry-go-round and are leaving, when an elderly Buddhist woman arrives. She's wearing a traditional wool apron, but it is filthy, as if she'd walked a great distance and performed many prostrations along her pilgrimage. A fuchsia head scarf is plaited into her graying braids. She is thumbing through 108 prayer beads while repeating in a humming whisper the holy mantra *om mani padme hum*, a prayer for compassion and enlightenment.

The old woman grabs the rail of the giant spindle and, throwing her full weight into this act of devotion, keeps the wheel turning.

Unlike other places with mythically resonant names, such as Timbuktu or Machu Picchu, Shangri-La never actually existed until now. The name comes from James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, a tale of plane-crash survivors who find their way to a utopian lamasery called Shangri-La in the wastelands of Tibet. In the book the lamasery, founded in the 18th century by a Catholic missionary named Perrault and now administered by a high lama, sits at the base of a mountain called Karakal, a fulgent pyramid of snow and rock. Home to more than 50 monks from nations around the world, all deep in spiritual studies, the lamasery is a grand repository of humanity's wisdom, embracing the best of both East and West. Midway through the novel readers discover that the high lama is actually Perrault himself. He's more than 200 years old, having been well preserved by serious study, the immersional serenity of Shangri-La, and isolation from a modern world mindlessly drifting toward holocaust.

Hilton is said to have taken his inspiration for Shangri-La in part from the writings of the eccentric botanist Joseph Rock, whose tales of exploration and adventure in remote Yunnan, Tibet, and elsewhere appeared in this magazine from 1922 to 1935. The irascible Rock led expeditions in search of exotic plants and unknown cultures. He wrote of sliding over the Mekong on a bamboo zip line, of attacks by brigands, of mysterious rituals and meetings with kings. Rock's flair for the flamboyant must have captivated Hilton, a British romantic who wrote 22 novels, including *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*.

Hilton also drew from another source, one much older than the writings of Joseph Rock. Shangri-La sounds like—and almost certainly is—a thin disguise for Shambhala, the earthly paradise in Tibetan Buddhism where there is no war and no suffering, and where people live in peace and harmony through meditation and self-discipline. In Buddhist texts

Shambhala is said to reside beyond the Himalaya at the base of a crystal mountain, its inhabitants untouched by the venality and avariciousness of the outside world. For Hilton, born in 1900 and witness to the devastation of World War I and the Depression, this alluring Eastern legend would have had powerful appeal.

Mix a novelist's imagination with Tibetan mythology, add a dash of Joseph Rock and a generous helping of longing, and you get a nice recipe for *Lost Horizon*. Although the novel is rarely read today, the word Shangri-La and what it symbolizes—a faraway place of beauty, spiritual replenishment, and supernatural longevity—have long been part of world pop culture.

Of course the problem with the book is the problem with all utopian narratives: It downplays the negative but no less natural afflictions of humankind, such as jealousy, lust, greed, and ambition. In the end, this makes both the book and its unifying theme, Shangri-La, seem simplistic—precisely the opposite of the modern-day city of Shangri-La, a place that could hardly be more complicated or confounding.

In its previous incarnation, Shangri-La was Zhongdian, a 10,000-foot-high trade-route town located just east of some of the deepest and most dramatic gorges in the world. Three great rivers—the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Salween, separated by towering mountain ranges and known hereabouts as the Jinsha, the Lancang, and the Nu—all sweep east of the Himalaya, then drop due south in tight parallel formation before pouring off in different directions. This was the remote region that Rock explored in the 1920s and '30s.

But much has changed since then. Large-scale commercial logging began in the 1950s. Roads were gouged into the mountains, and thousands of acres of old-growth forest were clear-cut from the sheer slopes. By the mid-1990s, more than 80 percent of the area's income came from timber operations. Then in 1998, due in part to overlogging of the Jinsha catchment, the river flooded. Nearly 4,000 people died, and millions lost their homes. In response, the Chinese government banned all commercial logging in the Three Rivers region.

Forced to retool its economy, Zhongdian turned to tourism, capitalizing on its distinctive architecture and proximity to stupendous geography. At the time Zhongdian had no airport, and it took two days on a rough road to reach the town from Kunming, the nearest major city. An airport was built in 1999, and the Kunming road was finished a year later. By 2001, revenues from the tourist industry had already surpassed what had once come from logging.

That same year, after considerable lobbying, canny local officials were given authorization from Beijing to rename their town and county Shangri-La—a marketing coup, given how many other savvy villages in Yunnan and Sichuan were vying for the famous appellation. The Fortunate Victory Prayer Wheel was erected the next year, and hotels and gift shops began sprouting like the expensive matsutake mushrooms that Tibetans pick in the summer for export to Japan.

The crowning tourist-catching achievement came in 2003 when the United Nations officially acknowledged the prodigious biodiversity of the river gorges and designated the region the

Three Parallel Rivers World Heritage site. Instantly, Shangri-La became the new hot spot for Chinese travelers willing to pull on hiking boots and experience the frontier firsthand.

Fed by monsoon storms, the three great rivers have bulldozed staggeringly deep chasms that often exceed 10,000 feet, twice the depth on average of the Grand Canyon. The World Heritage site also embraces more than a hundred peaks higher than 16,000 feet. Because of the stunning verticality, ecosystems can range from subtropical to arctic-like in the space of mere miles.

Described by the UN as the "epicenter of Chinese biodiversity," Three Parallel Rivers has more than 6,000 vascular plant species—more than 200 types of rhododendrons, 300 species of timber trees, and some 500 medicinal plants. With such floral diversity, it follows that the fauna would also be extensive. There are at least 173 mammals—including rare species such as the clouded leopard and red goral—as well as more than 400 types of birds.

Radical topography also engendered human diversity. Separated by uncrossable rivers and soaring mountains, individual ethnic groups developed distinct languages and traditions unique to their own environments. Three Parallel Rivers has at least a dozen ethnic groups, including Tibetan, Yi, Naxi, Lisu, and Nu, comprising some 300,000 people.

World Heritage designation is meant to preserve irreplaceable environmental and cultural diversity, so it's ironic that the Three Parallel Rivers charter doesn't protect the rivers themselves. One reason is that much of the natural habitat along the rivers has been affected by human settlement. But excluding the rivers serves another purpose: meeting China's desperate need for energy. Eighty percent of the country's electrical supply is provided by coal-fired power plants. But coal is dirty energy, and air pollution endangers the health of millions of Chinese. Hydropower, which now generates 15 percent of China's electricity, represents an obvious, and controversial, alternative. A dozen dams are planned for the Jinsha, four of which are already under construction. The Lancang has three existing dams, with two more being built, and up to nine more proposed. Only two dams have been built on the Nu, but a proposal put forward in 2003 called for 13 more. Alarmed, activists have been toiling to save the river.

"Damming the Nu has become a national debate in China," says Yu Xiaogang, founder of Green Watershed. So far Yu, along with environmental journalists and academics, has helped block further dam construction on the Nu and reduce the number of proposed future dams from 13 to four. But given the ballooning energy needs of China and nearby countries—much of the electricity is intended for sale outside China—at least some of the proposed dams will likely be built soon.

While the nearest of the monumental gorges lies within easy reach of the tourist hotels in Shangri-La, almost none of the biological diversity of the Three Parallel Rivers region can be found near the city. If another Shangri-La exists—a place of seclusion and serenity resembling the spellbinding myth in our collective imagination—it must lie out where Rock discovered a beguiling if brutal place that Hilton transfigured into a paradise. That's where I went looking for a truer Shangri-La.

Cutting through snowdrifts beneath an archway of prayer flags snapping like whips, my hiking companion, Rick Kent, and I are literally blown off 16,000-foot Shu Pass, thrown from

Yunnan Province across the knife-edge border into Tibet. We're crossing from the Lancang watershed into the Nu watershed. The flat-line distance between the two rivers is 22 miles, but the landscape here is anything but flat. Mount Kawagebo, the highest mountain in Three Parallel Rivers, soars to more than 22,000 feet, its summit during this season hidden in clouds.

The two-day climb to the pass starts at 7,000 feet, where the Lancang is broad and brown with mud and the hillsides are spiked with cactus—the valley so warm that farmers are growing grapes. Every thousand feet above the river brings a new ecozone: crackling deciduous forests, yellow leaves strewn on the trail like brooches; evergreen broad-leaved forests silent as a shadow; temperate coniferous forests with pungent, almost foot-long pine needles webbed in strands of lichen; alpine meadows with green grass knifing up through snow.

Above it all, Mount Kawagebo rises out of the mist like a monster, its summit ominously loaded with cornices of snow hundreds of feet deep. Seventeen Japanese and Chinese climbers died in an avalanche there in 1991. The mountain is now closed for climbing, not because of the danger but in deference to its religious significance. Kawagebo is one of the most sacred peaks in Tibetan folklore. Every year thousands of Buddhist pilgrims circle the massif on foot on a two-week *kora*, or circular path, the purpose of which is to seek purification and thereby ensure a more propitious reincarnation.

But times are changing. We can hear one group of pilgrims—all Tibetan youths, singing and giggling—before we see them. They pass us like a circus troupe. No solemn, somber affair for these kids, a pilgrimage is a big party. One of them is waving a Chinese MP3 player, the volume turned up to a tinny blare.

Dropping continuously, the trail becomes so steep it starts to switchback every 20 feet, the path a two-foot-deep trough worn into the soft rock. Snow gives way to talus, then to trees, then to dense forest. At an overlook I peek down through a hole in the strands of gray lichen as if into another world. Thousands of feet below us, wedged in the crook of a valley beside a steep, old-growth forest, is a tiny square of brilliant green—another vision of Shangri-La.

It takes hours, descending hundreds of switchbacks, to reach the enchanted place. A man with a load of wood on his back is waiting. He leads the way beneath a giant walnut tree, down through skittish pigs and oblivious goats, over a stone fence, along a neon barley field, to a whitewashed, fortress-like Tibetan home. Up a dirt ramp, we pull the leather thong, a little door opens, and we step into the 15th century. A shrunken woman in a red head wrap greets us with both hands, pours two cups of boiling yak butter tea, then disappears.

The floor plan is traditional Tibetan: In the center is a large, open-to-the-sky atrium, warm sunlight dropping inside. A wooden railing—set with planters of various herbs—boxes in the atrium on the main floor, keeping crawling kids from falling to the ground floor, where pigs and chickens live in splendid squalor. Up a hand-hewn ladder is the roof, a flat mud surface with the atrium cut from the middle. The roof is covered with stores of food and fodder: pine cones piled like pineapples, two varieties of corn, chestnuts spread across a plastic tarp, walnuts on another tarp, three varieties of chilies in various stages of drying, green apples in a basket, sacks of rice, slabs of pork air-drying, the carcass of what appears to be a marmot.

Grandparents, parents, kids, and an uncle all share the farmhouse. All have their tasks: the scrawny uncle carrying sacks of corn and sorting horseshoes; the young mother, baby on back, tending the stove and preparing dinner; the patriarch slowly writing something in a ledger in shaky Tibetan script. The sinewy woman who served us tea is the matriarch. She slops the hogs with a kitchen pail, dumping the contents over the railing, then goes outside, where she milks the cows and feeds the horses and churns the yak butter. Through pantomime she explains that she has pain behind her eyes and asks us for medicine. All I have is ibuprofen.

At nightfall it is pitch-dark and frosty inside the house. A terrific screeching cuts the stillness. The patriarch is turning a metal crank mounted on the wall, winding up a cable. As he locks the crank arm in place, compact fluorescent lightbulbs dangling around the house burst to life. The metal cable, it turns out, extends to a creek 400 yards from the farmhouse. There it attaches to a trough carved from a log. Turning the crank pulls the cable, which lifts the trough, sending a flow of creek water into a large wooden cask. Plugged into the base of the cask is a blue plastic pipe that carries water down to a Chinese-made micro-hydropower generator the size of a five-gallon drum.

Dinner is served. Rice with assorted dishes—pork fat in garlic sauce, yak meat with peppers, fried vegetables, glasses of homemade, throat-scalding barley wine, apples for dessert. And then the patriarch opens a carved cabinet door and clicks the remote. There's a soccer match on TV he doesn't want to miss.

The women of the household are up for hours before dawn, hauling water and wood, milking and feeding the animals. The young mother pours us yak butter tea. Her name is Snaw. She is wearing a black baseball cap embroidered with a skull and crossbones, a tattered purple sweater through which you can see her bony body, a thin, fake-fur scarf, tight jeans, and green Chinese army sneakers. Her baby in one arm, she is simultaneously breast-feeding, loading firewood into the stove, checking the rice, stirring the yak butter tea, tossing potato peels over the railing to the pigs, washing dishes, sorting peppers, and talking.

Snaw is 17. Her baby is three months old and has some indiscernible medical problem. She says her dream is to leave this place—the Shangri-La of my imagination—and go to the real town of Shangri-La. She's heard that women her age go to school there and on Saturday go shopping, walking arm in arm along the mall.

Some young women's dreams have already come true. Yang Jifang, a tall, striking 22-year-old Naxi woman, graduated from the Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI) in downtown Shangri-La. There she learned English and computer skills; she now works as a guide at the Khampa Caravan, an adventure-travel firm. She has her own apartment and goes back to her rural village every month, bringing money and medicine to her parents.

"Life for my parents in the village is very hard," she says. "There is no business, just farming."

The training institute was founded in 2004 by Ben Hillman, a professor at the Australian National University who specializes in development in western China. The institute hosts an

intensive 16-week, live-in, fully funded vocational school designed to help students from rural areas bridge the gap to urban job opportunities.

"Culture is something that's constantly evolving," says Hillman, who warns me not to apply a Western sense of authenticity to the modern Shangri-La. We're sitting at the Raven café in the old town, listening to Dylan and drinking Dali beer. The Raven, a rebuilt cobbler's shop, is the kind of funky coffee bar you find in Kathmandu—carrot cake on the menu, a poster of John Coltrane on the wall. Owned by a Seattleite and a Londoner, it's operated by two independent Tibetan women.

"Economic development can rekindle interest in cultural heritage, which is inevitably reinterpreted," Hillman says. "I don't think we can judge that without reverting to some kind of elitism, where wealthy and fortunate people who can travel to remote parts of this planet want to keep things locked in a cultural zoo."

The real challenge for Shangri-La's ethnic minorities, Hillman says, is to develop skills for the modern world. "They are traditionally agropastoralists, experts at subsistence farming—growing barley, raising yaks and pigs. But these aren't the skills that most youth need today."

His students hail from disparate ethnicities—Tibetan, Bai, Lisu, Naxi, Han, Yi—but most come from dirt-poor farming households. All had to beg their parents to let them attend this school, a place of clean-scrubbed classrooms, dorm rooms, and a homey kitchen. None intend to return to hardscrabble farm life. The training institute is the kind of place Snaw dreams about while milking yaks in a freezing snowstorm.

Late in the afternoon several graduates of the institute sit together on a couch in the teachers' lounge, so excited to tell their stories that they can hardly contain themselves. The last to speak is Tashi Tsering, a lanky, vibrant 21-year-old with a shock of jet black hair in his face. A Tibetan, he too learned English and service industry skills at ETTI and now works as a guide, taking tourists to Tibetan towns and villages as far away as Lhasa. Conscious that he has escaped a life of drudgery, he wishes his friends back in the village could have the same opportunity he has enjoyed. "Now I can play an important role in the future!" he says.

Tsering looks over at his fellow alums with pride, then out the window at bustling Shangri-La, the construction cranes swinging over stone farmhouses, the taxis swerving around horse-drawn carts, tourist trinkets on sale next to great slabs of yak meat. His eyes follow a plane descending into the Shangri-La airport.

We can't see it from here, but in the center of the first intersection leaving the airport stands a large white stupa, a sacred Tibetan monument that Buddhists walk around clockwise, the same direction a prayer wheel spins. But cars negotiating the intersection must circle the stupa counterclockwise. Consequently, Buddhist tradition sends women bent beneath giant loads of cornstalks, heading home to feed their pigs, and men herding yaks as they have for centuries, straight into the paths of oncoming busloads of tourists. There have been collisions, but somehow it's working.