

# Paradise beyond the clouds

## Is Shangri-La a place in China or just a state of mind?

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LIJIANG, China — The mystical land of Shangri-La, lost and found in recent years, has moved. It has also upgraded its attractions. This eastern Utopia still offers the tea shops, Tibetan lamas and snow-capped peaks of James Hilton's 1933 bestseller "Lost Horizon," but today's pilgrims can also sample Internet cafes, pizza and cable cars.

Much of the credit or blame falls to former political prisoner Xuan Ke, a 71-year-old musician who first "discovered" the novel was set in southwest China. Six years ago, he pinpointed Shangri-La in his mother's native Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Today Xuan places Utopia in his own hometown of Lijiang, over 190 km to the south.

"I've changed my story because the authorities didn't give me enough credit," he explains. "Without me, they would not have the slightest idea about Shangri-La!" Written in Woodford Green, northeast London, Hilton's tale of an escape to paradise has

decades captured imaginations worldwide. But until Xuan made the connection, nobody in China's Yunnan Province realized they were sitting on a gold mine of Western fantasy.



Kawakarpo (White Snow Mountain)

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stumbling on ethnic harmony and eternal happiness in the valley of Shangri-La. But today you can alight from a 737 at Diqing's new "Shangri-La" airport, before choosing a hotel, restaurant or karaoke bar of the same name.

The exploitation of Shangri-La seems a long way from the genteel world of the novel Xuan received from an Indian friend in late 1994. "I read it with great interest," he recalls. "I had seen the black-and-white film version in 1946 in Kunming (Yunnan's capital). I thought it was set in Tibet, but I was young and didn't think about it again."

The book jogged his memory, and revelation followed on the crest of a hill, overlooking a lush green valley spotted with Buddhist lamaseries. Xuan was driving from Lijiang to the Diqing village of his Tibetan mother. In the distance, sunlight danced on the pyramidlike peak of Kawakarpo (White Snow Mountain), the spitting image of Hilton's Mount Karakal. "Damn it," I cried, "Shangri-La is here!"

Hilton never set foot in China. He must have read the descriptions of this region by Joseph Rock which were published in National Geographic." Back issues found in Hilton's home feature the Austro-American botanist's tales of exploring the wild southwest. From 1922 to 1949, Rock lived near Lijiang, center of the Naxi people, descendants of Tibetan nomads, where he hired and befriended Xuan's father, an English-speaking Christian.

### Life on the edge

Foreign connections like Rock spelled trouble for Xuan after the Communists took power. Party activists resented his missionary school education and even his German nanny. When Chairman Mao cut down the liberal Hundred Flowers movement in 1957, the 28-year-old conductor was thrown into a labor camp — for the next 21 years. "They thought I was a very dangerous figure!" he laughs today. "I survived by not thinking about the future."

On his eventual release, Xuan began assembling an orchestra of "excavated antiques," as he calls the octogenarian musicians still performing a unique repertoire. "The color and spirit of the music is Naxi, but it came originally from royal Chinese court music," he says. "Because of our isolation, it did not change for 500 years."

The traditions were kept



PRIDE OF PLACE — Xuan Ke, the Shangri-La of his mother's native Diqing Province. Jade Dragon Snow Mountain behind Lijiang, is claimed as his hometown.

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### Paradise beyond the clouds – is Shangri-la a place in China

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"I've changed my story because the authorities didn't give me enough credit," he explains. "Without me, they would not have the slightest idea about Shangri-La!" Written in Woodford Green, northeast London, Hilton's tale of an escape to paradise has for decades captured imaginations worldwide. But until Xuan Ke made the connection, nobody in China's Yunnan province realised they were sitting on a goldmine of Western fantasy.

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While the 'evidence' is circumstantial at best, Xuan tries hard to convince. "Hilton never set foot in China. He must have read the descriptions of this region by Joseph Rock which were published in National Geographic." Back issues found in Hilton's home feature the Austro-American botanist's tales of exploring the wild southwest. From 1922 to 1949 Rock lived near Lijiang, centre of the Naxi people, descendents of Tibetan nomads, where he hired and befriended Xuan's father, an English-speaking Christian.

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The geriatrics' audience gradually spread from foreign backpackers to most of the Communist Party Politburo. Pictures of Xuan with Chinese President Jiang Zemin take pride of place inside his Lijiang theatre. Nightly queues form outside, in contrast to the rival theatre established across the street by Xuan's "enemies" in the local government.

He claims these jealous officials prevented the UK's Channel Four from filming his show for the documentary 'Beyond the Clouds', an award-winning record of Lijiang life. In 1995, the orchestra toured the UK giving concerts dubbed 'The Sound from Beyond the Clouds'. Xuan was invited to speak at Oxford University, providing the basis for his self-appointed honorary doctorate.

Despite his gifts as a self-publicist, local authorities initially rejected Xuan's theories about paradise found. Some regarded Shangri-La as a colonial concept. Others feared it would promote Tibetan independence, but they changed their minds when a foreign tourist flood followed publication of Xuan's discovery in Asian newspapers.

In 1997, a government conference in Zhongdian formally declared Diqing Prefecture the home of Shangri-La. A vice county chief was praised for the discovery, and Xuan was not even invited onto the rostrum. The musician stormed out of the conference. "I brought them so much money, but they are not grateful!"

Xuan has since exacted revenge by shifting Shangri-La. "Only in Lijiang can you find the novel's 'painted tea-houses by the stream and the frivolously toy-like houses'", he now argues. "We have the 5,500 metre Jade Dragon Snow Mountain

behind us. Many nationalities and religions co-exist peacefully. There are Buddhist monasteries, mosques, Taoist temples, Catholic churches and even synagogues!"

Yet it may be too late to change the story. As the home of the Shangri-La airport, Zhongdian has successfully cashed in on paradise. Foreign visitor numbers are booming, but the invasion is led by domestic tourists, nearly two million last year, compared to several thousand in 1995. Few have read the English novel, or seen Frank Capra's celebrated film version, but all have heard of 'Shangri-La'. Chinese writers have compared the Western ideal with China's own lost paradise from the classical poem 'Peach Garden'.

Whatever their inspiration, the tourist hordes provide steady incomes to yak herders and barley farmers who can spurn their flocks and fields to sell horse rides on the grasslands. In Lijiang, which received three million visitors last year, Naxi families rent out homes as hotels, restaurants, and Internet cafes. Entrepreneurs are busy improving on nature, flattening hills for a water park near Zhongdian, and carving up Jade Dragon Snow Mountain with cable cars, skiing resorts and a golf course.

"This is a dangerous time", admits Zhang Ahui, owner of the Sun Moon Café in Lijiang. "We make money from tourism but there is always a contradiction between development and preservation. More Chinese like me come to run businesses here, and the purity and customs of the Naxi are changing. If we develop too quickly, within a few years tourists will go elsewhere."

Perhaps further north towards the Tibetan border, where officials in Deqin and Weixi counties dispute Zhongdian's claim to be the 'real Shangri-La'. Over the border in Sichuan province, Daocheng county stakes a rival bid. "I am fed up with such fighting," sighs Xuan. "Some people only care about money. In the end, it doesn't really matter where Shangri-La is, since it is just an ideal, a beautiful dream that exists only in one's heart!"

Lijiang's unofficial ambassador may have lost Shangri-La, but his fame is winning the battle to save his beloved music. "I believe tourism does not destroy traditions," he says, "but helps to preserve them." His dream to find an investor for a Naxi music school, ensuring his precious lutes and giant drums are played by generations to come. "Music is the soul of a place," Xuan concludes. "Without music, no place on earth can be called Shangri-La!"