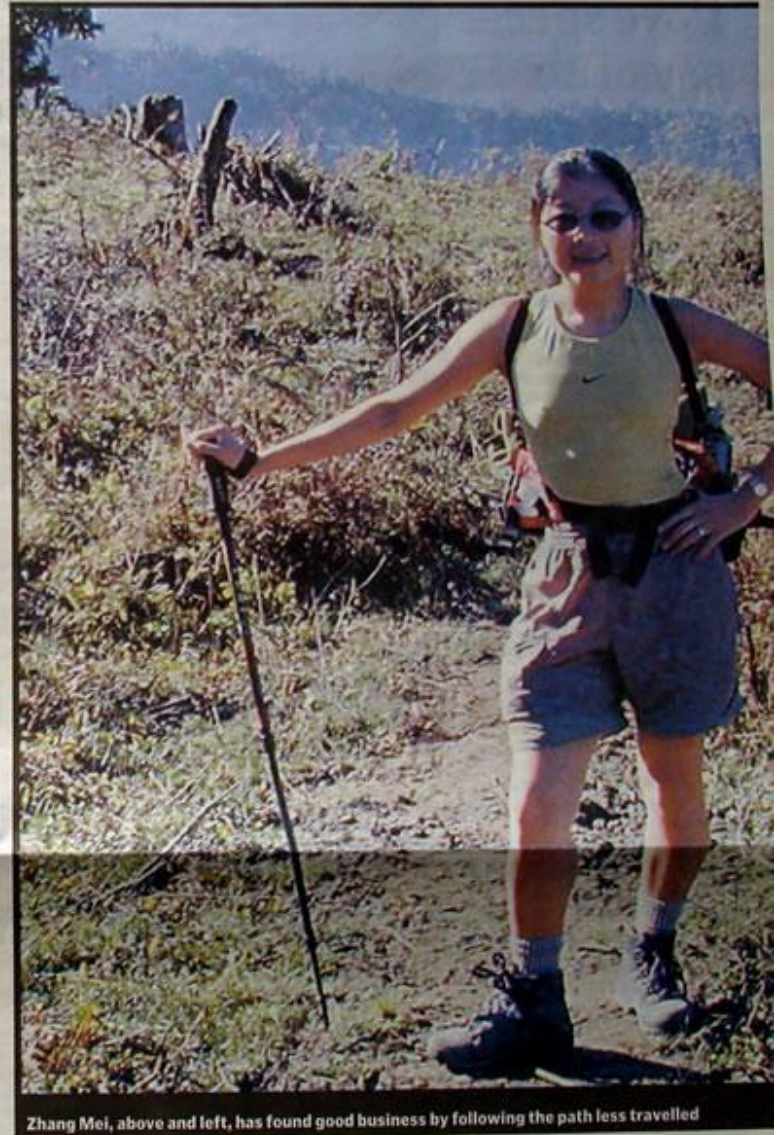




Route to riches

Zhang Mei knows just how difficult it is to travel in China. Inspired by wanderlust, the entrepreneur is breaking new ground in the travel industry. **Zhang Lijia** reports



Zhang Mei, above and left, has found good business by following the path less travelled

WHEN she was a country girl, Zhang Mei dreamed of traveling to "wild" places all over the world. "Now, my job is to help others realize their dreams."

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While many dotcom companies turn to notcoms, travel specialist WildChina.com is fast becoming one of the hottest tickets in China's booming tourism sector. Thousands of paying customers have accepted the firm's invitation to 'Experience China Differently', way off the beaten tracks that channel millions past the terracotta army and onto the Great Wall.

"When I first came up with my e-travel plan, right in the middle of the dotcom craze, everyone laughed at me," recalls Zhang Mei, the 31-year-old founder and CEO of WildChina. "They said 'e-commerce: you should talk big, think big and have big plans. Internet means big money, big business, big dreams.' All the people around me said my plan was too small to attract any venture capital. It was not flashy enough to attract eyeballs, and too service oriented."

That was back in mid-1999 when start-ups were starting up right across China. Restless with ambition, Zhang was also tempted to try her hand. Her track record boded well. Born in the Bai minority town of Dali, in southwest China's Yunnan province, she secured a university place to study English in Kunming, the provincial capital. While working as

an interpreter there, Zhang met and impressed a Thai banker who decided to pay her through an MBA at Harvard Business School.

A well-paid job as consultant for McKinsey and Co. soon followed, lending her valuable experience of other people's business, and sparking the desire to set up her own. "I learnt a great deal from McKinsey," admits Zhang. "I got to know different sectors and industries. But I felt that I never had the chance to execute the ideas, I only gave advice. It was a bit like midwives helping to deliver others people's babies, but not producing anything. So I decided to give it up so that I could realize my own ideas. Or at least try to."

In chorus with many other ambitious Chinese returning to their motherland, Zhang was chanting the 'new economy' mantra. But in the face of strong opposition, she grew unsure of her e-travel proposal, and went to work for someone else's dotcom. Half a year later, she quit. "I could have done a better job in running the company. Like many such start-ups, the money came together too quickly. The marketing person often had millions of dollars to play with even before the company worked out a sound business strategy. With nothing substantial to support the business, the firm went downhill quickly as the money burnt out."

As dotcom bubbles burst all around her, Zhang dared to revisit her original plan. With 500,000 yuan from her own pocket, a friend to help out, and capital from two other friends, Zhang launched WildChina.com in August 2000. The idea first surfaced when she took six months off from McKinsey to backpack around the world. "I lingered in some breathtakingly beautiful places in my home province Yunnan. I realized that China has so much to offer to visitors, yet the travel service is so appalling. There is a big gap between what the travelers desire and what they can get. My task is to bridge the gap."

The Internet is proving a powerful tool for stoking her customers' desires. "Traveling is an area where people need to do lots of reading and research," she says. "It used to take people years to decide an important trip, from getting the brochure, doing the research to planning the trip. Now, with the Internet as the perfect marketing channel, travelers have instant access to the information they need. Therefore, they tend to make decisions much faster."

The itineraries and photos on the WildChina web site are tempting enough to inspire a quick decision, if your budget permits. For US\$100 to 150 a day, WildChina will then escort you to a Tibetan Festival on the roof of the world, colorful minority villages in Guizhou, or the snowed capped mountains of 'Shangri-La', reputed to lie in northwest Yunnan. Sample trips include an 11-day journey from southern Gansu to western Sichuan (US\$2,240), or 5 days exploring traditional architecture in Shanxi (US\$268).

Zhang works hard to devise fresh and adventurous routes to entice even the most seasoned world traveler, or second or third-time visitors who want to get beyond China's standard, crowded tourist fare. "Some travelers are content to take a cable car, while others prefer something more challenging," she says. "We want to give our clients a more in-depth cultural experience."

American William Brent, a Shanghai-based media consultant, still raves about his 7-day trek through Shangri-La country, the Three Rivers region of north Yunnan, bordering Tibet and Burma. "It was one of the most fascinating trips I have taken in my life. The region is stunningly beautiful with Tibetan sacred mountains, crystal clear rivers and alpine trees, yet so untraveled and unspoiled. It is a Tibetan area, yet the Tibetans have been converted to Catholicism by French missionaries in the 19th century. Our charming Tibetan guide Dakota, as well as Zhang Mei, are very knowledgeable about the local culture, and we were followed by mules. It would be difficult for me, a long-term China resident, to organize the logistical side. But it would have been impossible for my fellow travelers who flew in from outside China."

And there will be many more of them flying in over the next few years. China is tipped to become the world's leading tourist destination by 2020, leapfrogging traditional favorites France, Spain and the United States. Hopeful that tourist revenues will rise to 8 per cent of China's gross domestic product, the government is investing in the travel infrastructure, lending WildChina clients quicker access to the firm's embarkation points for adventure. For example, China Southwest Airlines will next month connect 'Shangri-La' and Tibet with the start of a weekly round trip flight from Chengdu to Kunming to Deqen and finally Lhasa.

So far, Zhang is enjoying her success. “The number of bookings has exceeded my expectation,” she enthuses, without divulging details or turnover figures. Staff numbers have risen to ten, including an IT expert and marketing executives. “My ambition is to establish ourselves as a premier travel company in China,” says Zhang. “And I’m having great fun! Maybe because I was trapped in a small place, I dreamed to travel in the wild places of the world when I was a little country girl. It gives me pleasure to help others who share my wanderlust.”

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