

This essay, *In Search of Shangri-La*, is published in Issue 84 of *Idler* magazine, May 2022.

‘I am from the lamasery of Shangri-La.’ These first words spoken by Chang, the High Lama’s functionary, in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton, introduced the world to the legendary hideaway for the very first time. High up in the Himalayan mountains, virtually inaccessible owing to the treacherous narrow paths which lead up to it, Shangri-La is a vision of perfection lying beneath an eerie blue moon. For ninety years, we have embraced the place in countless ways: why did it embed itself so deeply in our collective psyche?

James Hilton was an unlikely midwife for Shangri-La. The son of an East End schoolmaster, he spent his 20s knocking out book reviews for the Telegraph and writing adventure yarns which never threatened the bestseller lists. He lived quietly in Woodford Green, the north-east suburb of London. After ten years of hacking, *Lost Horizon* was published when he was thirty three years’ old but it was *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, published the following year, which made him famous.

On the surface, they couldn’t be more different: *Chips* is a sentimental tale about the impact of a quiet schoolteacher upon generations of Fenland schoolboys, while *Horizon* tells of high drama in the Himalayas. Dig deeper, however, and you soon sense the deep mystical rumble that powers them both: Hilton, for all his conventional background and demeanour, was fascinated by woo-woo.

A quick summary of *Lost Horizon*, for those who haven’t read it: a party of four escapes a dangerous revolution in Afghanistan by aeroplane. They are a brave but eccentric British diplomat known as ‘Glory’ Conway, his puppy-like devotee Mallinson, an American called Barnard who turns out to be on the run from the Feds, and a British missionary, Miss Brinklow. Their plane is hijacked and they end up flying over the Himalayas and crash somewhere on the Tibet/China border. Chang and a retinue appear, take them to the nearby lamasery of Shangri-La, where Conway eventually meets the High Lama and discovers that the inmates have learned how to extend their lives by living in quiet tranquillity and moderation and breathing in the pure air of the remote mountain. The High Lama himself is over 200 years’ old.

Both *Horizon* and *Chips* made Hilton a celebrity almost overnight, and with commendable lack of restraint, he hot-footed it to California where he spent the rest of his life hob-nobbing

with the stars. It was Frank Capra's film version of *Lost Horizon* which came out in 1937 with Ronald Coleman as the dashing Conway which finally brought Shangri-La to the world's attention. Such was the impact of this romantic vision of a far-off, mountain utopia that President Roosevelt named the new federal government retreat that was completed in 1938 after it — Camp Shangri-La had its name changed to Camp David in 1953 by Eisenhower.

As the years went by, Shangri-La became a commercial shorthand for various notions of rest and relaxation. The Shangri-La hotel group was formed in 1971, and the Chinese-owned behemoth now has 100 luxury hotels around the world; for two thousand quid a night, you can stay at the Shangri-La in Paris and have a balcony overlooking the Eiffel Tower. Americans have proved particularly susceptible to the notion: car fan Bill Owen opened the Shangri-La Speedway track in New York in 1946, while a little-known Chinese takeaway in Queens, New York — the Shangri-La — inspired two sets of sisters to name their band after it. The Shangri-Las formed in 1963 and had a smash a year later with *Leader of the Pack*, touring with both the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The Shangri-Las created the whole concept of rebel pop, and even today feedback fiends Jesus and Mary Chain sometimes refer to themselves as a Shangri-Las covers band.

Hilton's fictional sanctuary seemed to inspire people to think of, on the one hand, a blissful place of peace, contentment and longevity; and on the other, of rebellion against the status quo. Take a look at the Shangri-La enclave at the Glastonbury Festival: first launched at Worthy Farm in 2009 as a far-out freak session for latenighters, it's now a full-on drum-bashing alternative politics sideshow which, according to the Glasto website, holds up a mirror to the masses, creates conversations, encourages activism and stimulates the senses. Not quite what Hilton had in mind, one suspects.

But what exactly did Hilton have in mind? Was his Shangri-La just a fancy, an idea of untroubled bliss at a time when Europe in the '30s was becoming increasingly unstable, or was there something more going on? The paradise that so appeals to Conway in the novel certainly sounds delightful, particularly perhaps to Idler readers. As Chang tells him at one point: 'It is significant that the English regard slackness as a vice. We, on the other hand, should vastly prefer it to tension. Is there not too much tension in the world at present, and might it not be better if more people were slackers?'

Life in Shangri-La, which extends for each person for decades, even hundreds of years more than it does for people in the West, is tranquil and unhurried, but by no means pious. Inmates are encouraged to drink, take drugs, have sex as well as perfect the arts, as long as they do everything in moderation. It is a life not unlike that proposed by Epicurus in his garden in Athens: modest food, good conversation, a sprinkling of stimulants and an abhorrence of politics and business. As the High Lama tells Conway: ‘Laziness in doing stupid things can be a great virtue.’

Yet this attractive prospect conceals a deeper, mystical vision, which accounts for the curious anomaly whereby Shangri-La today can stand for pampered capitalist luxury hotels at the same time as radical, right-on political posturing. I suspect only Hilton could have achieved this. The American antiquarian bookseller Jerry Watt has developed a splendid theory that Hilton was actually the real author of a book called *The Eye Of Revelation*, first published in America in 1939 by an author called Peter Kelder. The book introduced to the West for the very first time a series of esoteric yoga practices called The Five Tibetans which laid the grand claim that, by following them every day, one could extend one’s life by decades. Go to any yoga studio in the world today and at some point someone will suggest running through the Five Tibetans. When Bruce Forsyth was about to marry the Puerto Rican beauty queen Wilnelia Merced, who was considerably younger than him, her mother gave him a copy of *The Eye of Revelation* and told him to follow it religiously, in order to keep time with his younger wife. Like the good soul he was, he did so every day for the next thirty years.

*The Eye of Revelation* has been a bestseller for decades, also going under the name of *The Fountain of Youth*. But no-one has ever seen this Peter Kelder, ever; he is a total mystery. His publishers claimed that he lived in Los Angeles at the time of publication in 1939 — the same city as Hilton. Jerry Watt draws plenty of fascinating parallels between the story as set out in the Kelder book and Hilton’s Shangri-La, concluding that Kelder and Hilton are one and the same. I like to think he’s right, because it accords with Hilton’s concealed fascination with Eastern esotericism.

Shangri-la as a name and concept has its roots in the Bon religious tradition of Tibet, which goes back at least to the tenth century. Believers, known as Bonpos, have often been regarded by traditional Tibetan Buddhists as an heretical anomaly, following as they do a lush Shamanic idea which contrasts colourfully with the somewhat dour precepts of pure Buddhism. The Bonpos believed — still do believe — in a cast of animist household Gods

who all sound a lot more fun than the strict non-attachment rules propounded by Buddhists, with all their weighty instructions about Good Talk and Good Actions.

The Bon people were originally from a Tibetan plateau region called Khang Ripoche, which can be translated as snow precious; the snowy path leading to it is known as Khang-ree la. The Bon people also lived in a region called Shang-Shung which is believed to be the location for the mythical kingdom called Shambhala. Shambhala is a place of sanctuary imagined by both Tibetan Bonpos and Buddhists, a spiritual place of peace and perfection. The idea of Shambhala was popularised in the West by oddball spiritualist Madame Blavatsky in her 1888 book *Secret Doctrine* and represented something akin to the Shamanic idea of the Upper World, the home of the soul rather than the body or the mind.

This is where we get to the secret heart of Shangri-La. Eventually, the High Lama tells Conway that Shangri-La exists as a kind of Ark in readiness for when the world finally goes completely mad and a final, awful global conflict takes place. ‘He foresaw a time when men, exultant in the technique of homicide, would rage so hotly over the world that every precious thing would be in danger, every book and picture and harmony, every treasure garnered through two millennia, the small, the delicate, the defences — all would be lost...when the strong have devoured each other, the meek shall inherit the earth.’

Hilton’s Shangri-La is in effect a heresy to be feared and persecuted by all those who would have us toe the official line, just as the Catholic Church ruthlessly slaughtered the 13th century Cathars for their refusal to believe that human life had any purpose other than as a waiting room before the soul could merge with the infinite. The powers that be don’t like people believing that life on earth has little meaning, because it discourages them from grasping the importance of work, duty, paying taxes and obeying the law. Once you start believing that Shambhala, or Shangri-La, is real, the urge to be a model citizen according to the diktat of Church or State begins to subside.

That’s why the wayward anarchists at Glasto can lay claim to Shangri-La and the Shamabala Festival in Northampton can this year celebrate “twenty years of adventures in utopia” with a decidedly leftfield, eco-political fervour and a lovely-looking audience right out of an Alice in Wonderland fantasy; it’s why the Shangri-Las with their rebel-girl aesthetic — He turned around and smiled at me, You get the picture? Yes we see — could flourish in a country whose President chilled out at Camp Shangri-La. There is a secret code hidden inside the

name Shangri-La which I believe thrilled the ostensibly conventional schoolteacher's son James Hilton and led him to create an heretical vision of a world beyond the control of our masters. It is a world waiting for us where we finally can lead a life of contentment, community and unbridled pleasure.

'Conway found it pleasant to realise that the serene purpose of Shangri-La could embrace an infinitude of odd and apparently trivial employments, for he had always had a taste for such things himself. In fact, when he regarded his past, he saw it strewn with images of tasks too vagrant or too taxing ever to have been accomplished, but now they were all possible, even in a mood of idleness.'

At the end of the novel the narrator pictures Conway, having allowed his regrettable sense of loyalty to lead him to support young Mallinson in escaping the mountain-top lamasery, struggling single-handedly to return through the inhospitable terrain of the high Himalayas to the mystical lamasery. The last line in the book reads:

'Do you think he will ever find it?' I asked.

And of course, we all hope that he does.