Mickey's New Identity: How Disney's Theme Parks Successfully Arrived in China

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Abstract: *This paper examines the integration of the Disney brand into China in the form of theme parks to argue that a largescale entertainment company can successfully function in a country with high censorship and government control. Disney's partnership with China demonstrates the need to balance global and local values in order to both preserve the brand's identity and appeal to the customs of the Chinese people and government. An analysis of both the Hong Kong and Shanghai Disneyland parks as well as recent conflict regarding film content argues that while expansion into China may not be in the best interest of every global company, Disney successfully adhered to the strict demands of the Chinese government while maintaining the brand's image. This research paper concentrates on the business model that Disney used with China and should not be read as implied support for the repressive actions of the Chinese government.*

Keywords: Disney, China, glocalization, Disneyland Parks

The Walt Disney Company is without a doubt one of the most powerful entertainment companies in the world; the company's Parks, Experiences and Products segment reported earnings of $6.7 billion for the fourth quarter of 2019 (The Walt Disney Company 5). While the company has successfully applied global strategy to establish two theme parks in the United States and expand into France and Japan, Disney's largest challenge to global expansion was China. As of 2019, Disney has managed to open two theme parks in Hong Kong and Shanghai despite difficult negotiations with a strict communist government along with challenges and missteps while adapting to local Chinese culture. In this paper, I examine how cultural differences between China and the U.S. challenged the capability of such a largescale company to not only bring its films and media to the Chinese market, but also to develop its theme parks in a single-party communist country. I am using Disney's dynamic partnership with China to argue that global companies can successfully operate in a country with both high levels of censorship and government control. It is a momentous step for Disney to gain access to the Chinese market. However, global expansion into China requires reestablishing brand influence and strategy as well as a variation of marketing tactics for a new target market–a market that includes not only citizen visitors, but a foreign government entity.

To understand Disney’s success in China, it is imperative to examine how an internationally recognizable brand preserves its identity while adapting to a new cultural context. Jonathan Matusitz's application of Roland Robertson's theory of “glocalization,” which is defined as “the interface of the global and the local,” provides a framework for analyzing the actions of Disney, the Chinese government, and Chinese consumers from the 1940s to today (1). Matusitz argues that a brand that simply applies its own customs in other parts of the world does not guarantee success; therefore, companies must appeal to the local values in which they are conducting business. The glocalization theory can be applied to most global corporate expansions, but it especially holds true throughout Disney’s deals with China. While Disney's other international partners, such as France and Japan, have governments less wary of the company’s expansion plans, the Chinese government is protective of the localization portion of glocalization. A unique aspect about Disney's Chinese theme parks is that the Chinese government is the majority stakeholder when it comes to making national entertainment decisions, including Disney's ventures. In this case, glocalization is Disney's key to the Chinese market. Although the price of creating a successful partnership with China forces complete willingness to adhere to government influence and demands, Disney shows that it is possible for a company with capitalist values to glocalize enough to gain access to and bring their product to a communist nation.

In order to understand the current working relationship for theme parks between Disney and China, we must first examine their strained political history in which the Chinese government considered Disney's content not suitable for Chinese consumption. A case study by Hongmei Yu analyzes this history to demonstrate that shared economic interests have overpowered the ongoing political struggle due to ideological differences (1). These issues date back to 1949 when Disney's, along with all of Hollywood's content, was removed from the Chinese market following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Yu 2). It was not until the 1980s that the brand returned to China after Michael Eisner, Disney's CEO at the time, signed a contract with the sole Chinese TV station which allowed Disney characters to appear on screens in China once again (Yu 2). This event arguably marks the beginning of Disney's continuing relationship with China that exists today. The majority of Yu's case study focuses on the releases of Disney films *Kundun* (1997) and *Mulan* (1998) and how they shaped this partnership. Discussing the creation of these films is crucial to understand Disney's extreme cooperation with the Chinese government and China's limited acceptance of globalization, both of which were later carried over to glocalized theme park negotiations. In other words, both parties met in the middle, with regard to both films and the theme parks, in the best interest of economic growth for both.

Shortly after Disney began a working relationship with the Chinese government in the 1990s, the company went forward with a film that would severely damage its reputation in China. *Kundun* was released in 1997 by a Disney-run film studio. It told the story of the Dalai Lama's exile to India after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took control of Tibet and destroyed longstanding religious customs (Yu 2). Prior to the *Kundun* premiere, the Chinese government issued a threat to end all of Disney's business in China due to clear anti-Communist messages in the film (Yu 4). This was also reported in a Newsweek article in 1996 by Richard Turner and Corie Brown who claimed that Disney had more to lose than any other studio if the movie was released (1). As a massive global entertainment company, Disney's key to the Chinese market lies in the idea of total cooperation with the CCP. It seemed as though the release of *Kundun* would completely obliterate any chance that Disney had to secure a share in such a highly desired market. In an attempt to salvage the company's relationship with China, Michael Eisner pledged that *Kundun* would not be openly advertised but ultimately could not be cancelled due to high production costs. Eventually, the film quietly failed with a budget that was over four times its revenue (Yu 5). This failure raises the important question: can we conclude that the success of Disney's entertainment in China outweighs the cost of the sacrifices to provide it? Here some businesspeople may question whether there is a way to achieve a cost-benefit balance in the company's favor, but Disney's ongoing negotiations with China suggest that a partnership can be successful with the right amount of commitment and willingness to adjust for a local culture.

In 1998, *Mulan* aimed to repair the partnership with China by representing Chinese culture in a more positive light and tapping into the CCP's interest of spreading its connotations around the world (Yu 5). Yu writes, "[t]he fact that Disney was the initiator of the action speaks directly to the importance of the Chinese market in a global era" (5). In other words, the attempt to reconcile with China supports the idea that access to the enormous Chinese market is extremely valuable for a global company such as Disney. *Mulan* was essentially Disney's attempt at an apology for *Kundun*, and left China to determine if a partnership with Disney risked the preservation of their national culture, or if it was within the best interest of their economy. The latter occurred when Chinese consumers were ecstatic about *Mulan* and admired the quality animations, which Chinese films could not replicate. While the government initially attempted to preserve the nation's film business in response to the unwanted demand, there was a realization of a large demand in China for global content that could not be ignored (Yu 7). The essence of Yu's case study is that despite their political differences in the past, both Disney and China realize the influence of the market which gives the Chinese government power to exert control and restriction within projects in exchange for market access (9). What Yu observes with the films is also true of the theme parks and serves as a base for the start of negotiations. Ultimately, what is at stake is entry to a powerful foreign market; the history serves as support that a company with global ambitions must be willing to compromise and cooperate with China beyond customary business negotiations in order to establish a place in their economy. In Disney's case, the choice to follow this path eventually led to the brand's success in China following the theme parks, leaving the market to be one of the company's largest sources of international revenue.

Prior to the opening of Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) in 2005, public accounts of specific negotiations between Disney and China in regard to the theme park made it clear that Disney was in it for the long run. Chinese officials are well aware that their market is highly sought after, which allows them to demand majority control and input on projects proposed by global companies who are eager to gain access. In a June 2005 *Wall Street Journal* article by Geoffrey Fowler, it was revealed that the Chinese government acquired the majority equity stake at 57% while Disney kept the minority of 43% (2). Although this fact alone represents Disney's sacrifice just in terms of ownership, the true challenge was to tailor a primarily American theme park to appeal to a locally based culture and government. Due to the disadvantage of minority ownership, the final decisions for HKDL were in the hands of the Chinese government. The bulk of complications Disney faced in the planning of HKDL, then, pertained to the balance of American and Chinese touches. According to Fowler, Disney's research concluded that Chinese consumers wanted an experience that was true to the Disney brand (par. 13). This observation eliminated the company's original idea to base the theme of the park on Chinese fairy tales (Fowler par. 14). Therefore, Disney had some freedom to stay true to elements from the American parks which led to their ultimate success in China. Instead of directly incorporating Chinese culture into the park themes, Disney opted for more subtle elements such as a private gazebo meeting area within HKDL dedicated to Mulan, the only Disney character local to China, for photos and autographs. Fowler's article reminds us that although Disney had to avoid direct reference to the "American Dream" in the design of HKDL, the Chinese consumers still demanded a product that was true to the brand (Fowler par. 14). Fowler quotes Tom Doctoroff, North Asia CEO of an ad agency responsible for bringing major brands like Nike and Ford to China, on these challenges and China's position: "Dreams, yes

– American, no. There has been no example of a product that has built success in China on an American identity alone" (qtd. Fowler par. 11). In order to give HKDL that Chinese identity, Disney implemented features that differed from their usual theme parks. An article in the *China Business Review* reports that the company conferred with a *feng shui* expert to ensure that the layout of the park brought good fortune, which appealed to the valued Chinese custom (Miller 3). From these examples, we can see that Disney's mindful planning and cultural adaptations for HKDL were on track to appease the Chinese government as well as its consumers.

Despite careful preparation for their first Chinese theme park, HKDL opened its gates on September twelfth, 2005, to many cultural and political criticisms in a less than successful launch. A paper by Jonathan Matusitz, professor in the School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, outlines some initial problems. HKDL was small in comparison to other Disney theme parks, received criticism from the Chinese government and celebrities alike, and failed to explain the essence of Disney-brand theme park enjoyment to guests of a culture who were not familiar with it yet (Matusitz 5). Traditional Chinese theme parks are based on local culture, history, and heritage. The purposes of these theme parks are to "display, preserve, and restore a nation's or region's culture" and "freeze culture in time and space" (Zhang 2-3). Themes are expressed through exhibits, performances, ceremonies, and other cultural events in the theme park (Zhang 4). These cultural expectations and values associated with traditional Chinese theme parks are in stark contrast to Disney branded attractions. While American Disney theme parks do include idealistic representations of small-town America, the themes are not concentrated around American history or culture in the same way. Instead, Disney focuses on fantastical fairy tales and characters which serve as inspiration for attractions, shows, and theming. Therefore, a Disney theme park residing in China would introduce alternatives to these local norms of culture-based theme parks but should still acknowledge and honor Chinese traditions.

While there is an established difference between the elements of traditional Chinese and Disney branded theme parks, it was crucial for the company to consider local Chinese customs while globalizing. In the case of HKDL, Disney experienced a few missteps after opening day. For example, a case study by Jonathan Hills and Richard Welford of the University of Hong Kong reports that news was spread of Disney's plan to serve shark's fin soup on property, which raised massive protests among environmentalists. This puzzled the company, who observed that it is Chinese tradition to offer the dish at events out of respect for guests (Hills and Welford 3). A local legislator later explained that China actively works to eliminate problematic cultural traditions (Hills and Welford 5). Eventually, HKDL announced that it would only serve shark's fin soup upon request after educating guests on shark endangerment; persistent public backlash led to the complete removal of the dish a few weeks later (Hills and Welford 4). This instance contextualizes Disney's initial misunderstandings of current Chinese culture, and it is the first of many issues that arose after opening day at HKDL.

An equally important matter that arose in the making of HKDL was the adaptation of labor practices. Disney's theme park dynamic is built on the idea that employees, referred to as cast members, are to play a part in the "show" that is the theme park (Matusitz 9). Speaking from personal experience, this is the case for all Disney parks around the world. Cast members are expected to not only do their job, but also play a role in their area of the park to ensure that guests are fully immersed in the Disney world. For example, a cast member residing in Fantasyland would provide an experience based on fairy tale and "happily ever after," while one in Adventureland would offer a sense of discovery and conquest. However, the common ground for all cast members is that they are expected to smile and exert extreme friendliness to all guests who walk in the gate (Matusitz 9). Although this is a main company value that Disney promotes globally, the Chinese are more reserved and unexpressive than American cast members (Matusitz 10). Additionally, people exhibiting an extreme amount of pleasantness are often seen as suspicious instead of welcoming in the way that Disney intends (Matusitz 9). An article by Kimburley Choi of the University of Hong Kong explains that these emotionally demanding management guidelines can be seen as disrespectful and controlling to HKDL cast members (12). While these changes in work environment are in contrast to the typical Disney employee expectations in the U.S., they are crucial to reach the goal of localization within the Chinese adaptation of a Disney theme park.

Government officials also had different expectations from Disney's American leadership regarding how the Chinese government would engage with day-to-day park operations. Hills and Welford also present a case study in which health inspectors arrived at HKDL to investigate reports of food poisoning and were asked to remove any gear that revealed their occupation (7). This is a regular practice used at Walt Disney World in Orlando and is implemented as to not alarm any guests or draw attention to a potentially negative situation. American cast members and officials seem to understand this logic because the state government, which has a long history of partnership with the Disney Company, collaborates with them to handle problems and provide the most enjoyable experience possible for all guests. In comparison, Chinese officials reacted poorly to this incident and claimed that a theme park is not exempt from the law (Hills and Welford 7). This comparison is especially relevant because it shows that many of Disney's errors were the results of a lack of understanding of general Chinese culture, and an assumption that the government giving Disney special treatment would be beneficial for the park and the government. These concerns allow us to understand that many of Disney's mistakes in regard to HKDL were not a result of furthering the company's global agenda, but instead a misunderstanding of cultural norms during an attempt to appeal to local customs.

Although Disney experienced many obstacles which hindered HKDL's initial success, the most important pieces of information on Disney and China's partnership stem from the adjustments that Disney was willing to make to achieve success in China's market. Disney executives observed that the Chinese spend longer at meals than Americans, which resulted in extra seating due to long wait times at restaurants (Matusitz 8). Since Disney parks are widely known as premium vacation destinations, the company mistakenly charged similar high prices for HKDL despite the fact that China was still a low-income nation. Tickets were also able to be used on any given day, which caused crowd control issues around Chinese holidays when many families opted to visit. The company remedied these setbacks by lowering ticket prices in general and establishing price differences according to peak attendance times (Matusitz 6). In regard to the labor issues, Disney had to adjust management practices and assure flexibility when it came to cast member expectations. A spokesperson for HKDL apologized to the Chinese government after the health inspector incident and explained the situation as a miscommunication (Hills and Welford 7). Hills and Welford's examples support the argument that glocalization yields success in a local culture like China. While globalization and localization are contradictory, they unify when applied to global brand expansion. Lu Wang from Shanghai Polytechnic University emphasizes this notion in relation to the marketing and communication strategies used in Disney's China theme parks: “It is this kind of contradiction and tension that can better facilitate effective communication and dialogue in the context of different cultures” (4). Disney was willing to appeal to the local values, which allowed HKDL to turn from a failing destination to a thriving vacation hotspot.

After Disney's first lesson on theme parks in China with HKDL, the company opened Shanghai Disneyland in 2016 at a total cost of $5.5 billion (Barboza and Barnes 1). Opening a theme park based in Shanghai had been a company goal since the planning of HKDL, given that over 300 million potential Chinese consumers lived within a three-mile radius (Barboza and Barnes 1). Shanghai's project was spearheaded by Robert Iger, the current Disney CEO, who brought an alternative dynamic from the method used for HKDL. Iger's approach was built on personal relationships; he focused on making a bond with Chinese leader President Xi Jinping and invested a large amount of time traveling to China himself to participate in in-person conversations with Chinese officials (Barboza and

Barnes 2). In comparison to the approach to HKDL, Disney went into Shanghai negotiations with the expectation that the Chinese government would be in control of all aspects of the park, which in turn actually simplified the process (Barboza and Barnes 1). According to the *New York Times*, Iger said, "We're kidding ourselves if we think we're going to get everything we want" (1). Even though this seems like a negative mindset, this is essentially a successful way for an American company to approach business in China. Although the Chinese government is presented with a major opportunity to expand their economy by making the Disney brand more widespread, officials are not ready to sacrifice the control that the country possesses in terms of what their citizens are exposed to. For example, Disney's Marvel Studios films are available to the Chinese population but with a few changes; Captain America is shown with a Chinese-branded phone, and Tony Stark is saved by Chinese surgeons in their version of *Iron Man 3* (Bisset, par. 15). When a CEO, like Iger, of an important global brand agrees to adjustments like these, it is more likely that Chinese officials will be open to negotiating potential business, which can lead to further global success. An article in *Media: Asia's Newspaper for Media, Marketing, and Advertising* reminds us that Disney is still limited in the media content that is permitted in China, despite partnerships with Chinese television networks to air certain movies (Leung and Nicholson 2). As a result, Disney will not own a television channel in China in the near future. Although this is beyond the realm of theme parks, it represents one less active disagreement between Disney and China that allowed the Shanghai Disneyland talks to thrive.

Shanghai Disneyland also gave a larger presence to Chinese culture than HDKL; the park is approximately four times the size of the Disneyland in California and has the largest castle out of all six Disney resorts (Barboza and Barnes 1). Iger paid great attention to the inclusion of local culture due to the fact that Chinese officials were concerned that children would grow up to enjoy Western culture more than Chinese culture (Barboza and Barnes 4). In his response to this concern, Iger assured Chinese propaganda officials that the company would use

Shanghai Disneyland to promote Chinese culture to the rest of the world (Barboza and Barnes 5). This is closely related to the idea of creating *Mulan*, where China was pleased that Disney portrayed the country's traditions in a positive way. As a result of this promise, the theme park donned some notable Chinese touches, such as native trees, culturally accurate restaurants, and original rides that avoided Western ideals (Barboza and Barnes 1). Iger also created a slogan for Shanghai Disneyland, considering the park "authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese," which is frequently referenced by all company executives and is a symbol of respect towards China (Barboza and Barnes 5). In making this slogan, Iger had completely changed the dynamic of the partnership between Disney and China from a point of misunderstanding with HKDL to a sense of cooperation with Shanghai Disneyland. As mentioned in Mary Yoko Brannen's article in the *Academy of Management Review*, this can be seen as "recontextualization" to fit a theme park to Chinese culture (1). In other words, Iger actively changed the context of a traditional Disney theme park to appeal to a culture that the company desired to be a part of. Although Iger controversially accepted China's intense demands, which shaped a new territory for the company, the results yielded a booming tourism business in Shanghai and success was shown in both Disney's revenue and China's economy.

This dynamic of negotiations continued during Iger's rule in 2020 with the live-action adaptation of *Mulan*. As with the original animation, various efforts were made to ensure that the Chinese would respond positively to the film. One of the earliest efforts was to cast Liu Yifei as the title character–a household name in China (Barnes and Qin par. 13). Disney heeded advice from Chinese consultants, such as removing a kissing scene, avoiding the focus of a particular Chinese dynasty, and choosing filming locations to "showcase the diverse scenery of China" (Barnes and Qin par. 27). The director insisted that she had "an army of Chinese advisors" assisting with the logistics (Barnes and Qin par. 26). However, the film was not absent of criticism; 2020 held a great deal of turmoil in China, including the Hong Kong protests and Uighur Muslim internment camps in Xinjiang. Audiences around the world called for a boycott of *Mulan* when Liu Yifei came out in support of the Hong Kong police during the protests (Barnes and Qin par. 2). Additionally, the filmmakers expressed thanks to the government entities in Xinjiang in the end credits of the film due to the fact that the controversial area served as a filming location (Barnes and Qin par. 5). As of 2020, the dynamics between Disney and China remain similar to that of the 2010s; cultural success in a venture such as Shanghai Disneyland does not guarantee special treatment for future projects in China.

Here many global businesspeople would probably object that there is not a true opportunity for a company's success in China. Admittedly, global business in China can yield more conflict for some companies than others. For example, Barboza and Barnes highlight companies who suffered from major disagreements with Chinese principle. McDonnell Douglas reported that Pepsi's factory machinery had been relocated to another that manufactured missiles, and Beijing Jeep saw differences in quality control (Barboza and Barnes 3). Don St. Pierre Sr. from Beijing Jeep was quoted saying that he now advises companies to avoid a venture in China if they don't necessarily need one (Barboza and Barnes 3). Disney is similar to these companies in that it also faced major complications due to the fact that entertainment companies are subject to strict regulations in China (Barboza and Barnes 3). Also, Shanghai-based groups that assisted with Shanghai Disneyland did not exert the same loyalty to the company as American entities involved with them. In the interest of economic expansion in China, these groups continued to move on to projects such as development of land around Disneyland, construction of competing theme parks, and partnerships with media competition, such as DreamWorks and Sony (Barboza and Barnes 4). In the case of the 2020 adaptation of *Mulan*, the political reality in the United States was a contributor to criticism. The Trump administration, often clashing with the Chinese government during its four-year term, criticized Hollywood for adhering to demands of the foreign country. Former U.S. Attorney General William Barr condemned Hollywood studios for making changes to films such as *Doctor*

Strange (2016) to avoid disputes with China (Barnes and Qin, par. 19). Despite these obstacles, Disney determined that the benefits of expansion into China were worth the criticism. No company is the same and each that considers a venture into China must evaluate the circumstances and decide if the profits are worth the costs.

Businesspeople, of course, may now want to question whether difficult negotiations with China are able to generate success in gaining access to this large market. While it is true that global business in China is extremely difficult to negotiate, it does not necessarily follow that success in these ventures is impossible. Disney's cooperation with China has yielded substantial benefits for the company, including government assistance in building, land clearance, and relocation of existing structures that were in the way of the resort (Barboza and Barnes 3). The careful planning and collaboration led to park tickets for the first two weeks of Shanghai Disneyland's operation selling out in just a few hours of the website launch, which saw about five million viewers in less than thirty minutes (Barboza and Barnes 4). Although a successful partnership with China seems trivial to some businesspeople, it is in fact crucial in terms of succeeding in the vast global market that exists today. It should be noted that the research focus of this paper concentrates on the "glocal" business model that Disney used with China and should not be read as implied support for the repressive actions of the Chinese government, some of which are mentioned above. Disney CEO Robert Iger concluded that the company would tremendously benefit from market access in China, and therefore vowed to establish personal relationships with Chinese officials and appeal to the people as a representative of a company that the country can trust. While this may not be the case for every company looking to go global, Disney achieved profitable success in a market that was previously seen as forbidden.

Disney's full history with China suggests that, despite cultural mistakes and difficult negotiations with a restrictive Chinese government, it is possible for a company with global ambitions to work in a country with distinctive local values. The films

Kundun and *Mulan* provide a framework for the theme park negotiations, in which Disney learned to negotiate with the Chinese government and appeal primarily to positive, local values in China. While *Mulan* (1998) somewhat repaired the business relationship post-*Kundun*, the effects of the newest adaptation of *Mulan* (2020) reminds Disney that localization is crucial to bring new products to China. Global ambitions must be met with a degree of "glocalization" to combine a company's domestic values with the culture of a communist nation to achieve success. Through the theme park negotiations, Disney localized food options, labor practices, and theme park attractions to appeal to the government and the demanding Chinese public while staying true to the Disney brand itself. The popularity of both China theme parks shows that, regardless of potential difficulties with Chinese officials and culture, it is not necessary for global companies to shy away from such a massive potential market. While a venture in China may not be in the best interest of every globally driven American company, Disney's actions support a commitment to an ongoing process of cross-cultural communication. Respect for Chinese culture can support the global expansion of a brand identity while serving the interests of both a globalizing company and local consumers.

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