

DISNEY INTERNATIONAL PARKS: GLOCALIZING MICKEY AND THE LOCAL MARKET

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Faculty Adviser: Dr. Ji-Hyun Ahn

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,
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Introduction

Before there was “Disney Magic”, before you could enter the gates of a Disney Park, and before the 100 years’ worth of entertainment and media there was a mouse. The Walt Disney Company (TWDC) would not stand here today as the media powerhouse it is without Mickey Mouse. The Mickey cartoons are what saved the company, and allowed for full length features, and the eventual theme parks to be built. One cannot begin to discuss Disney, especially the parks, which were originally built as a way to allow guests to meet the famed mouse, without acknowledging Mickey as being the core of what is called “Disney Magic”. As seen in this quote from Glassdoor (2024), “The monarch of this magic kingdom is no man but a mouse -- Mickey Mouse. TWDC is the world's largest media conglomerate, with assets encompassing movies, television, publishing, and theme parks.” (Glassdoor, 2024, para 1). Mickey is intrinsically linked with the company, as seen in the above quote. Headlines good or bad are often put on the shoulders of Mickey himself, this is because as consumers, Mickey is seen as the face of Disney. The nearly 100-year-old mouse serves as a reflection not only of his American audience, but his audience worldwide, adapting and reflecting the cultures of the over 130 countries that Disney operates in. This cultural adaption has become the key to the company’s theme park success. Through their international theme park expansions, Disney has learned that global success is tied to the cultural responsibility they have to their international guests. The allure of a Disney theme park lies in the “Disney Magic” only their parks can provide, but the long-term success is derived from the integration, respect, and application of the local culture of their international locations, an obligation which stretches beyond the gates of the castle.

This explores the international parks specifically, discussing Disneyland only as background to highlight the American-Disney experience that others have explored being

bridged with the cultural identities of the countries the parks exist in. Furthermore, this paper links the Disney experience back to Mickey specifically. Setting to claim that the root of Disney Magic is in Mickey himself. If a park has millions of moving parts and needs, many of which change due to location, then the power source is Mickey. This paper brings a unique perspective of introducing Mickey as the birth of Disney and the elusive “Disney Magic” that ultimately leads to the birth of all the parks which now hold the importance of not just pushing Americana but upholding, sharing, and celebrating local customs and cultures. Ultimately, Mickey is the root of these park’s stories, the first introduction of Disney in each of these countries, however, these trees could not grow with the beautiful branches and leaves they have today without the Walt Disney Company learning the how to strike the right balance of local culture and Americana.

Literature Review

There are a few key pieces that this paper addresses that have not been seen in the current literature. On Mickey specifically, there have been many research that examine the evolution of Mickey (Apgar, 1999; MacFadyen, 2014; McGowan, 2018) and how he has become this highly recognized character, even recognizing his importance to the company, but not how he closely he relates to the parks. With the parks almost all of the discussion in surrounded on their connection to the American Narrative. While some have zoomed in on the creation of one of the specific international parks, there is very little connecting them as a whole.

There has been immense literature on Mickey Mouse (Handy, 2004; Wallace, 1996) and his importance on collective memory and nostalgia, particularly in the U.S. Anto Mario, writer for ToonsMag attributes Mickey’s enduring status to four main points:

1. *Timeless design: Mickey’s simple round design has proved timeless and adaptable across various mediums.*

2. *Innovation and Adaption: From black-and-white cartoons to digital animation, Mickey has adapted to changing technologies, ensuring his relevance.*
3. *Nostalgia and Sentiment: For many, Mickey Mouse represents cherished childhood memories, creating a solid emotional connection.*
4. *Iconic Status: Mickey has transcended his role as a cartoon character to become a global icon, symbolizing joy, creativity, and the magic of Disney (Mario, 2024, Cultural Legacy section).*

The vast majority of the conversation has been surrounded by Mickey's recognition rate, and how he has become the Disney branding tool. As stated in the documentary, *Mickey: A Story of a Mouse*, "He's plastered over every t-shirt, every billboard. He speaks multiple languages. He's everywhere." (Malmberg, 2022). The L.A times in 2008 reported Mickey as having a 97% global recognition rate. (Menn, 2008). Mickey is used as a placeholder for The Walt Disney Company across media reports often with terms like "the mouse house" or just "the mouse" which further shows the link that is seen and felt between Mickey and Disney as a whole. This description of Mickey being explored through the changes of Mickey through the years. Even Disney released their own documentary of their famous Mouse for his 90th birthday titled, *Mickey: The Story of a Mouse*, which discussed Mickey's evolution and connection to American culture both good and bad. His connection to American culture and Disney as a whole being a representation of Americana is not argued here, rather, that Mickey has been at the heart of Disney's international expansion, specifically where the parks are concerned. With two of the six parks residing in the U.S. and originating here, there has been a lot of diving into how the parks reflect the country. In Bethanee Bemis' book (2023), *Disney Theme Park and America's National Narratives*, she discusses how Disney symbolizes America, using examples of the parks being used as diplomatic spaces. All but two presidents since Dwight Eisenhower have made a visit to the parks. Dating back to WWII Disney, through their characters (namely Mickey and Friends) have been utilized by the American governments as goodwill ambassadors (Bemis, 2023). The parks continued this legacy as they have been used as the location for cultural diplomacy being

used as “the best of America” for visiting politicians and dignitaries. Bemis (2023) states, “King Mohammed (of Morocco) would later tell an American journalist Disneyland was what he enjoyed most about his United States visit.” (p.29).

Disney parks as a location for diplomatic meetings have been much discussed and how they have created more than just a cultural print on America, but a political one as well. This has also been explored through how Disney, both as a company and through the parks, have changed alongside America. From social movements where the parks have been both ahead and behind their times, to making changes to racially insensitive rides like Splash Mountain. The parks are inherently linked as a piece of American culture. Little has been said about how much the international parks have also been embedded into the cultures of the countries they reside in.

Since most research (Bemis, 2023; Jackson & West, 2011 Wallace, 1985) has taken an American viewpoint, this paper offers a global lens of Disney parks. Further, this paper sets to connect the importance of Mickey to the parks in a way that has not been discussed before, and how the international parks have a unique set of challenges to connect to their local audiences. There is minimal discussion surrounding the international parks, with most of the focus lying on the Paris location due to the company’s blunders through the process and how it has not been able to perform at the level of its sister parks. By zooming out to look at how each international park has developed and changed, a clearer picture is painted in how Disney has learned the importance of cultural adaption that hasn’t been explored beyond individual parks. These are connected stories. Looking at all the parks shows the cultural connection that is felt through Mickey and the magic of Disney, but how local cultures whether they are American, Chinese, Parisian, etc. want and need to be seen and represented by companies like Disney in order to fully experience the emotional connection that Disney is known for telling.

Methodology and Framework

This research takes a qualitative approach. It specifically utilizes narrative methods, which understands how stories are created using personal experiences with the influence of historical, cultural, and social factors on story telling. (McLeod, 2024). This method explains both the history of Mickey and his importance to the company and the story of each of the parks.

The key framework, however, is the concept of glocalization in respects to the four international parks. The Japanese idea of global localization served a precursor to glocalization, the practice of conducting business according to both local and global considerations. Glocalization is an interdisciplinary concept with heavy roots in social-science and business literature. Craig Stroupe, professor of information design at the University of Minnesota describes glocalization as being a combination of the utopian ideal of a “gift economy” of connecting the local and global with the global corporate strategy of tailoring commodities to the local market. (Stroupe, n.d.).

There are three main theories of glocalization. This paper will lean into Robertson’s theory of Glocalization. This theory describes an interconnectedness and interdependence of the global and local, seeing them as different sides of the same coin. (Roudometof, 2020). Claiming, “The global is not and of itself counterposed to the local. Rather, what is often referred to as the local is essentially included in the global.” (Robertson, 1995, p. 35). In this paper, the coin is the experience of Mickey and the parks, one side representing the American lens, the other the local lens, both lenses being a part of the Disney experience.

In this case, glocalization refers to Disney’s approach for marrying the global appeal of their IP and the local culture of the different countries that house their parks. Understanding that each locality is already connected to Disney as outlined in Robertson’s theory, however by using

each of the international parks as case studies to show that cultural balance is not a one size fits all, but rather must be individually tailored to each local market. In Roudometof's *Glocalization*, he summarizes Dr. Manfred Lange's take on glocalization as connecting "the global and the local to create awareness and enhance a rethinking of frame of action." (Roudometof, 2020, p.1).

Through the case studies this paper will show how this ability to reframe and adjust to the local market was a process to learn for The Walt Disney Company, and does not have a cookie cutter method of reproduction across markets.

Mickey Mouse: The Leader of the Club

As the foundation of The Walt Disney Company, none of the parks would be here without Mickey Mouse. Ken Potrock, president, consumer products commercialization, Disney Parks, Experiences and Consumer Products told License Global, "As our most iconic character and the face of Disney, Mickey sparks childhood nostalgia in adults and represents positive values to children while entertaining and delighting audiences wherever he goes." (License Global, 2018, para 2). At nearly 100 years old, Mickey's global appeal continues to draw in generations of fans around the world.

Mickey's groundbreaking use of synchronized animation and sound cemented both him and Disney into cultural history. The Associated Press from Today quotes Disney Imagineer Marty Sklar stating, "Mickey Mouse speaks an international language, when I go to Tokyo and see how kids react to Mickey Mouse the same way they do in Paris. It's reassuring that there are some things that cross international boundaries." (Today, 2003, international celebrity section). Disney capitalized on their beloved character leaning heavy into his branding and merchandising power. With the death of Walt, Mickey becomes further embalmed by the company. Essentially taking the role of Walt himself, Mickey forever becomes the brand ambassador for The Walt

Disney Company, appearing at any and every expansion the company makes, especially the parks.

Mickey Mouse Park: The Birth of Disneyland

In the 1940s there is an influx of visitors at the studio wanting to see the magic, and wanting to meet Mickey. On August 31, 1948 Walt sent a memo to Dick Kelcey (a Disney production designer) outlining his concept for a family amusement park which he named Mickey Mouse Park and sometimes referred to as Mickey Mouse Village. This original name shows the connection between Mickey and the parks. Walt knew Mickey's namesake would evoke a feeling of nostalgia and welcoming for families. Mickey Mouse would represent a standard that Walt required for his park(s).

Up until this point, amusement parks were a dirty and didn't target the whole family. Walt's Park would encompass the wholesomeness of the Mickey Mouse brand. While this original plan is not what came to fruition, it laid the foundation for Mickey being the greeter for the parks. By 1952 the Walt's ideas had outgrown the original proposed Burbank location, with the location change the plan was officially dubbed Disneyland.

The Mickey Approach: Synergistic Promotion

Disneyland would push Disney into cross-company branding, which many have branded as synergistic. In Janet Wasko's critical analysis of the company titled *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* she states, "Disney created strong brands and characters that were marketed in various forms (mostly through films and merchandise) throughout the world. However, the company's synergistic strategies accelerated dramatically in the 1950s, when the company opened Disneyland, the theme park that used previously created stories, characters, and images as the basis for its attractions." (Wasko, 2001, p. 71). Leading up to the opening of

Disneyland, Walt heavily utilized television, something many studios were afraid of at the time, to promote and show the country the creation of Disneyland. This connection between Mickey and television programs used to connect audiences to the opening of the park is a story that will be seen time and time again with opening of each international park.

Through shows like *Disneyland*, Walt showed the country all he was planning for the upcoming park. This program is what cemented Mickey as the face of the parks, as he was established as the park's official host. In 1955, the same year Disneyland opened, the *Mickey Mouse Club* premiered further promoting the park and other Disney properties, popularizing the Mickey Mouse ears, a product that can be purchased in every park to this day. (Jackson, 2011).

Now when a child, or child at heart visits a Disney Park they cannot step more than a few feet without seeing three recognizable circles. Meeting Mickey is considered a childhood rite of passage. In discussing Disneyland in her article *Autographs for Tots*, Kathy Merlock Jackson states, "The number one concern of children of children, though, can be summed up in just two words: Mickey Mouse. As one little girl insisted, "I don't just want to see Mickey Mouse. I want to hug Mickey Mouse." (Bays, Service-Disney Style)." (Jackson, 2011, p. 207), emphasizing the importance Mickey holds in the Disney theme park experience.

This is because Mickey is often one's first introduction the Walt Disney Company period. Whether it is a child's first Mickey plush or a Mickey cartoon. Furthermore, internationally, he is what the company has used time and time again to introduce audiences to Disney and to create excitement for new theme parks. Media and Mickey have been utilized as a key component for connecting with audience to walk through the gates of the kingdoms.

Mickey's role in each of the four international parks is evident in the stories of their creation. However, the lesson of the international parks is the importance of glocalizing the

magic. Each park providing an understanding that each culture will have a unique set of unfixed needs that shifts with the local culture. In Sabrina Mittermeier's book, *A Cultural History of the Disneyland Theme Parks*, she states, "Glocalization means that a host culture never undermines the guest culture, but if something from one culture enters another, there is a process of transformation that results in a cultural item that contains elements of both host and guest culture." (Mittermeier, 2021, p. 97). Which echoes Robertson's view of glocalization being a push and pull of the two cultures. This will be seen through each of the parks through attempts and intent, missteps and misunderstandings, as well as modifications and amendments.

Tokyo Disneyland: An American in Japan and a Japanese view of America

The first of these Tokyo Disneyland is ultimately the tale of two companies desiring to build a new theme park, and how they came together to make that vision a reality. Tokyo's unique desire to maintain an American experience would have ramifications on all their international projects. Despite this, glocalization practices still occurred, though after the park opened, and continue to be a part of the evolution of Tokyo Disneyland, TDL.

Tokyo Disneyland, TDL, is situated in Urayasu an old fishing village only ten miles from the capital city of Tokyo. In July 1960, the president of Keisei Electric Rail Co., Ltd., Chihauru Kawasaki, and the president of Mitsui Fudosan Co., Ltd., Mitsui Fudōsan, formed a new company the Oriental Land Company (OLC) Ltd. Kawasaki had an interest in theme parks and felt that the current amusement park offerings in Japan could be better. At the time of the parks conception, The New York Times reported, "In 1962, Chiharu Kawasaki, the first president of a two-year-old development company called Oriental Land, visited Disneyland and told Roy Disney, Walt Disney's brother and a Disney official, that one day he wanted to bring Disneyland

to Japan.” (Trucco, 1983, para 1). Kawasaki envisioned a Disneyland in Japan far before any partnership was ever formed.

With the successes of the two American parks, Disney was looking to expand internationally. The Walt Disney Company had a long presence in Japan. The first Mickey Mouse cartoon in Japan, *The Opry House*, was released in 1929. The minimal dialogue and easy to follow stories made them easily translate for Japanese audiences, resulting in Mickey having the same impact in Japan. Through the 50’s and 60’s *Mickey Kids* among other broadcasts created a nostalgia of Disney among Japanese adults who wanted to share these memories with their children.

As the popularity of Disney shows and merchandise grew in Japan, Kawasaki organized a meeting with Walt and top executives about a Disney Park in Japan. Beginning initially with an OLC research team visiting Walt Disney World in May 1972. Noburu Kamisawa, who was on this trip and later would be the managing director of Tokyo Disneyland, recalled “It was like another world...the philosophy of heart...smiles...taught by Walt Disney himself- this is what we wanted to bring to Japan.” (Silvester, 2016, p. 11). At the same time, Disney was debating between Japan or Europe, they’re concerns being the receptiveness of the brand, economic stability, and cultural characteristics. Ultimately deciding Japan had the “highest potential for success” though acknowledged it would be more difficult to execute (Frank Staneck, WED enterprises’ director of research and planning).

In February 1974 Disney received a request to visit Japan, by December a basic agreement plan was drawn up. The design phase began in June of 1976, but were a slow painstakingly slow process, coming down to three issues:

1. Disney was not willing to invest as much as the OLC wanted them to

- a. This was primarily due to the ongoing project of EPCOT back in Florida which had been Walt's last project he conceived before his death and many at Disney wanted to complete
2. They could not agree on the percentage of fees that Disney would receive
3. The OLC was fearful of the eventual burden they would shoulder

Ultimately, Disney agreed to invest 2.5 million dollars for licensing and royalty fees, with ownership and operation staying with the OLC, and by September 1977 WED was ready with a presentation of the named Tokyo Disneyland.

In design concepts, Disney was trying to look through a Japanese lens to create a true cultural exchange and began studying the culture, history literature, and traditions. However, the OLC stressed "Don't Japanese it up" the thought being the Japanese know Japan, what they wanted them to experience was Disney. Mary Brannen's *Bwana Mickey* quotes public relations spokesperson for TDL, Toshitaru Akiba, saying, "We really tried to avoid creating a Japanese version of Disneyland. We wanted Japanese visitors to feel like they were taking a foreign vacation by coming here, and to us Disneyland represents the best that America has to offer." (Brannen, 1992, p. 216). For Japan, there was desire to experience Disney's America.

April 15, 1983 Tokyo Disneyland opened to the public. On opening day Disney executive Cardon Walker proclaimed, "May Tokyo Disneyland be an eternal source of joy, laughter, inspiration, and imagination to the people of the world, and may this magical kingdom be an enduring symbol of spirit of cooperation and friendship between the great nations of Japan and the United States of America." (6 Kingdoms, Tokyo Disneyland section). In its early years to meet OLC's desire for an American Disneyland, TDL had primarily American food options, signs had large English headings with Japanese translations beneath. Vending machines,

something that is big in Japan, were banned from the park from distracting from the “American” feel, and deemed too impersonal and trash concerns.

Tokyo Disneyland became a roaring success. By its tenth anniversary around 125 million visitors had greeted Mickey, almost the total population of Japan. Despite its success, TDL has made many adjustments throughout the years that have further glocalized the park. Construction did not take the Japanese’s smaller stature into account, with many phones and service counters placed too high (Hamby, 1983, p. 21). In addition, more traditional Japanese food options later opened to appeal to elderly guests. *Omiyage*, the custom of buying gifts for loved ones when traveling somewhere is an important practice. Part of this tradition is the item must be associated with where the person is traveling, so many TDL merchandise is marked “Tokyo Disneyland” or with park associations, something unique to this park.

The changes that have been made over time are a part of adjusting to the local market. But much like Robertson discusses that the local informs the global, the global informs the local as well. TDL has had impacts on Japanese customs. Where it was custom to visit one’s hometown during summer, TDL is now a popular summer destination (Toyoda, 2014, p. 209-210), and the traditionally considered solemn holiday of New Years in Japan has shifted as crowds are drawn to the celebrations the park offers. (Anthony, 1992, p. 7).

This park would be Disney’s first taste of international success, and while glocalization has become more apparent over time, its initial desire to remain an American park that would lead to future glocalization missteps by the company.

Euro Disney: The Tragic Kingdom

Disney films had always performed well in Europe, sometimes even out-performing the U.S. (Silvester, 2016, p. 123). Just like American audiences, the French were enamored with the

introduction of synchronized sound cartoons with the introduction of *le bateau à vapeur* (steamboat willie) in 1929. Much like in the States, Mickey became a sensation across Europe with merchandise both licensed and infringed flying off the shelves. It was in Paris where Disney's first postwar merchandising offices would be established, and Mickey Mouse magazine began being redistributed throughout Europe.

Disney had always known Europe would serve as a perfect location for one of its parks, which is why it had initially been considered in addition to Japan. At the time, two million Europeans visited the U.S parks every year and by the 1980's L.A and Orlando ranked as two of the top three American destinations for Europeans. (Silvester, 2016, p. 12-127). With the already popular tourist destination of Paris only 20 miles away, Marne-la-Vallée was chosen to home the next Disneyland.

Much of Euro Disneyland's tale is centered on media perception, one that would leave lasting marks on the park. As negotiation deals went underway there was an initial excitement. Much of the early media tone was that of approval. *Le Matin* featured Mickey dancing on their front page and *Libération* added Mickey ears to its logo for a day. A sentiment that would not last as negotiations continued. Disney was focused on getting the best deal possible as they felt they had settled for too little in Tokyo. In March of 1987, a deal was completed and their discussion would turn to financing. Gary Wilson, Disney's Vice President of Finances, Strategy, and Development came up with a plan to sell shares to the public but have Disney maintain 49% ownership.

With the French government seemingly giving up more and more during negotiations, the initial excitement faded. The once supportive stories turned sour. Fears that the park would be the demise of French culture and the invasion of American Imperialism ran rampant in media

reports. One writer, Ariane Mnouchkine, referring to it as “a cultural Chernobyl” (Novella, 2017). In Christian Renaut’s *Disneyland Paris a clash of cultures*, he explains how the average French person did not know what an American-style resort was and most were unsure what the park would entail. Despite the general questions and media rhetoric, 1987 opinion polls showed that 85% of France favored the park. (Cody, 1987). A big portion of this being because France was facing high unemployment rates and the resort was projected to drop these rates by 10% and increase tourist revenue by the same amount. (Lainsbury, 2000).

Tokyo’s initial lack of desire to glocalize would cause a disservice to its European counterpart. Contrary to the desires in Japan, France did not want a copy of the American parks. To the point where their agreement included a clause that required sensitivity to the culture of Western Europe, especially French culture. (Kurtti, 1990). Disney did in fact perform market research and made efforts to assimilate French and European culture, but misconstrued the message.

Disney imagineers are tasked with bringing the parks to life, and have been one of the strongest examples of Disney’s use of glocalization. They knew they would be competing with the great art and architecture of Europe, with 45,000 castles in France, this castle needed to be spectacular leaning into the fantasy design. Bringing in retired stained glass specialist Pual Chapman, who had worked on Notre Dame’s restoration and for the royal family to work on the stained-glass panels for the castle. (The Castles, Behind the Attraction, 2021). Hoping to bring the French aesthetic to the Disney castle. In addition, Tomorrowland was replaced with Discoveryland which focused on inventions and the visions of Jules Verne, Leonardo Davinci, and H.G. Wells (Mittermeier, 2021, p. 121). Despite imagineers’ efforts, then CEO Michael Eisner made decisions to adhere to the Disney family-friendly brand even if it conflicted with

cultural relevance for Europe. (Mittermeier, 2021, p. 111). This coupled with misconceptions of French culture would plague the initial opening of the park.

On April 12, 1992 Eisner, Roy Disney and other Disney executives along with Mickey Mouse welcome guests into their newest park. It quickly became apparent that Disney had missed the mark appealing to their European audience. There are layers of explanations of Euro Disneyland's initial missteps. One such argument is that Disney tried to cast their net too large, and appeal to all of Western Europe, and glocalizing to such a large audience gets muddled, Mittermeier arguing it is impossible. She argues that Disney likely fell into the "European Myth" that Europe was much more unified than it was, something that was strengthened by in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin wall. (Mittermeier, 2021, p. 139).

Disney's research had prepared them in the park's design, but not for the guest experience, a series of misconceptions resulted in an incorrect European, American balance. Some of the issues were, assuming guests would want quick breakfast selections of croissants and coffee and have a larger table-service meal later in the day which matched French culture. The opposite ended up being true, guests wanted the American style large breakfast to prepare for the park, and quick-service throughout the day to not interrupt the day. (Newell, 2013, p. 215). They also expected guests to want high-end merchandise when in reality they gravitated towards "unapologetically cartoonish" items showing a desire for the classic Disney experience. (Newell, 2013, p. 217). However, by and large the biggest complaint was the lack of alcohol in the park, something that Disney had been advised to include but ignored because of Walt's opinion for Disneyland that alcohol removed the family friendly atmosphere. However, for the French wine is enjoyed at each meal. Jacques Chirac, the future President of France called it, "barbaric American puritanism" and an "insensitivity" to French culture. (Silvester, 2016, p.

188). As stated in *The Fretful Euro Disneyland*, “It failed to recognize that alcohol is viewed as a regular beverage with meals and a part of daily life.” (Yue, 2009, p. 88). A policy that had worked for the past three parks, was too much a cultural departure for the French. With a slew of blunders, the media steamroll ramped up again with the term “Tragic Kingdom” splashed across newspapers throughout France.

The cultural disconnect extended to employees too. Disney is known for strict standards and policies that align with their family-friendly atmosphere. In the light of France’s recession, Disney was offering a wage 15% above the minimum wage at the time, but cast members felt Disney’s standards went against France’s *code du travail* (employment code), which promoted individuality that Disney did not. Grooming standards and restrictions, not being able to smoke, eat, or drink publicly nor argue with guests or use profanity was a far cultural departure for many cast members. (Newell, 2013, p. 209). Cast members took their frustrations out on guest experiences through various means. The media swept in on the conflict referring to it as the “Mauschwitz Scandal”. (Lainsbury, 2000, p. 97).

Between the glocalized blunders and France’s recession, the park was financial trouble. In 1993 Philippe Bourguignon replaced Fitzpatrick as the new chairman and was tasked with overcoming the cultural disconnect. (Newell, 2013, p. 216). By June of 1993 beer and wine were sold at table-service restaurants, the first Disney Park to do so. Euro Disneyland was drawing huge crowds despite the fact that the park continued to lose money. One of the biggest things to change for EDL was its name. In September 1994 Euro Disney was renamed Disneyland Paris, in his autobiography Michael Eisner states, “As Americans, we had believed that the word ‘Euro’ in front of Disney was glamorous and exciting. For Europeans, it turned out to be a term they

associated with business, currency, and commerce.” (Eisner, 1998, p. 292). Yet another example of how the company failed to remove their American lenses.

The name change would be tangible mark for a new beginning for Disneyland Paris. Despite remaining somewhat tainted by the treacherous path, by 2006 Paris Disneyland was the most visited tourist site in Europe with over 12 million annual visitors. (Maznevski and Jonsen, 2006). To keep Disneyland Paris afloat Disney overtime bought more and more of the shares now having full ownership of the park. While it took some time to find its footing, Disneyland Paris shows the incredible importance glocalization involves finding the correct balance of the local and the global, and how simple assumptions can make the biggest blunders.

Hong Kong Disneyland: Feng-Shui with Disney Roots

Just one year after the opening of Euro Disneyland, Disney executives were already on the hunt for the location for their next theme park. Searching East Asia, South East Asia, and Australia for possible locations. By the mid to late 1990’s they had settled between Shanghai or Hong Kong. Hong Kong seemed to be favored for their more open foreign trade policy, but this also meant that visitors from mainland China needed a certain permit to travel there limiting potential guests. (Silvester, 2016, p. 240). In 1996, it had seemed that Disney was leaning towards Shanghai until negotiations ceased due to the release of *Kundun*, a Martin Scorsese film which Disney had backed that detailed the life of the 14th Dalai Lama and China’s invasion of Tibet. (Groves, 2011, p. 138). The release of *Mulan* soon after is speculated to have been an amends. While not well received by Chinese audience due to its deviation from the original lore, it seemed to have placated the Chinese government. In 1997 however, when China regained sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain, Disney decided to go ahead with negotiations there, and formally announced their plans in August 1999.

Once a deal was formed, it wasn't long before Disney executives and the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR or SAR) had finalized funding and share percentages. By November of 1999 Disney had agreed to invest \$316 million for 43% ownership of the park, while the HKSAR invested \$419 million for 57%. In addition, they loaned Disney \$178 million over the next 25 years. They spent \$1.18 billion on building the park, and \$1.75 billion on associated infrastructure works. (Groves, 2011, p. 139). This included a new rail link that stopped at HDL. Capable of carrying 7,000 passengers per hour, it had bronze statues of beloved characters in some of the carriages with Mickey shaped windows and grab handles. (Groves, 2011, p. 139). This deal was met with some controversy in part because the negotiations had been done in secret (Choi, 2007, p. 578), and because many felt the deal was unfair. However, in the late 1990s due to the East Asian economic crisis, unemployment rates were up and Hong Kong was in a recession that the government felt tourism could counteract. (On, 2006).

With a plan in place Disney needed to address one major issue, Walt Disney Studios had always had a complicated history with China. While some shorts were dubbed in mandarin for China pre-WWII, Mao had banned Disney films during his reign. This meant that many of Hong Kong Disneyland's visitors would not have grown up with Disney animation nor have the same nostalgia compared to Japan and France. This led to the company launching a large-scale marketing campaign in China to drum up excitement for the park. Much like what Walt did during the creation of Disneyland, in 2003 (the same year construction began) *The Magical World of Hong Kong Disneyland* came to the home screens of families throughout large cities in China where visitors were expected to come from. (Groves, 2011, p. 141). Hosted by a popular Chinese actor and pop singer, the show gave insight to Disney films that inspired the park's

rides. Additionally, they needed to amplify their shining star, Mickey Mouse. Enlisting the Communist Youth League of China, the company held Mickey drawing contests, product promotions, and story readings. (Groves, 2011, p. 141). Utilizing their tried-and-true marketing plans of television and park symbiotic promotion. With excitement and admiration for Mickey and the park building, China was prepped to meet the mouse on his turf.

Hong Kong Disneyland, HKDL, is an interesting case because while Disney enlisted cultural representatives that would aid in much of the local lore, beliefs, superstitions, and traditions that would be recognized by their Chinese audience, they also pulled from their design plan for TDL and significantly replicated the Anaheim Park in the original iteration of the park. Likely to avoid the high cost and low returns that Euro Disney experienced, HKDL was scaled back in comparison to other parks. This is not to say there were not glocalization practices in HKDL, but that Disney leaned into its roots.

From the start, HKDL included many Asian restaurants and fast-service shops. Additionally, green hats are considered unlucky in China, so they wouldn't be sold in the park. Water represents wealth and prosperity, and fish represent abundance, so both are used throughout the park including koi ponds at the hotels for good luck.

Most impressive of all was Disney consulting with feng-shui masters for the construction of the park. (Groves, 2011, p. 142). Wing Chao was appointed to oversee the master design of the park. The Hollywood Hotel was repositioned a few degrees to “bring positive *chi*, which means energy” Chao explained. (Silvester, 2016, p. 245). Furthermore, it and Hong Kong Disneyland Hotel both lack a fourth floor due to it being an unlucky number. Contrarily, the number eight is a lucky number so the Hollywood Hotel's ballroom is 888 square feet. Another

lucky number is 2,238 because in Cantonese it sounds like “easily generate wealth” which is why the crystal lotus restaurant is decorated with 2,238 crystal lotus flowers.

One of the most notable adhering’s to fengshui was the orientation of the park. Making sure that each land was positioned that aligned with the practice. For example, the castle at Hong Kong does not face South like the other parks, which is ideal for photos, instead it faces East which ensures that ocean (water) is in the front and mountains in the back which is prosperous in feng-shui. (Castles, Behind the Attraction, 2021). While all of these small details were added to the park, Groves points out how many feng-shui practices already align with Disney design practices, so the shifts are not outright noticed. That the cooperation was more out of respect of the local culture. (Groves, 2011, p. 144). While glocalization practices were in place, there were still some cast member complaints that it was not Chinese enough both in attractions and labor practices. (Matusitz, 2010, p. 667).

In September 2005, the park was opened to the public, and despite complaints many flocked to the park. As states in Groves *Hong Kong Disneyland: Feng-Shui Inside the Magic Kingdom*, “This can be evidenced by the fact that in February 2006 the crowds were so overwhelming that the park had to be temporarily closed- a Disney first.” (Groves, 2011, p. 149). Disney had found a way to appeal to their audience. For example, Park performances were in three language Mandarin, the primary language in mainland China; Cantonese, commonly spoken in Hong Kong; and English the most common second language. The thought being that visitors would come from three main locations: Hong Kong, mainland China, and other Asian countries. (Silvester, 2016, p. 253). While there were some cultural confusions, particularly with older mainland guests, overall Disney had found synergistic practices and the park was generally well received.

Part of what makes Hong Kong unique is its positioning between mainland China and the rest of the world. Despite returning under the PRC (People's Republic of China), it continues to operate under a separate system of governance. The ending of Mao's China opened curiosity of global pop culture for mainland Chinese people. Ho Chun On (2006) claims that HKDL is considered a "gateway to China" both for foreigners and mainland Chinese. Therefore, Disney's plan to closely follow Anaheim's Disneyland while adjusting to feng-shui and local customs was the correct balance for this park.

Shanghai Disneyland: "Authentically Disney and Distinctly Chinese"

Hong Kong had won over Shanghai as Disney's first theme park in China, but that did not mean that the mouse was ready to give up on the location all together. Pudong, the eastern district of Shanghai homed over 5 million people according to a 2010 census, a quarter of Shanghai's population and a popular immigration destination. (Silvester, 2016, p. 300). All this made it an ideal location for Disney's most recent theme park.

As mentioned, when the PRC was established in 1949, Disney was banned in China. While some fifteen years later Disney comics made their return to China, there was still little being distributed in China. In 1972, when Nixon and Mao met to ease tensions things eased, though not by much. In 1984, Reagan also visited China to meet with then president Li Xiannian to discuss the status of Taiwan.

A year later Xiannan and his wife visited the U.S where on July 28, 1985 they were ushered into Disneyland by Mickey and Minnie. Utilizing the American park as a place of diplomacy, a tactic not uncommonly used throughout history. The visit seemingly paying off with the Walt Disney Company being permitted back onto television screens in 1986. (Silvester, 2016, p. 303). Beginning of course with a Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck cartoon series. In

1988 it was reported by UPI, “Every Sunday night at 6:30 p.m. an estimated 210 million Chinese - about a fifth of the population of the world's most populous nation - tune in to watch the animated adventures of Mi Laoshu and Tang Laoya: Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.” (Del Vecchio, 1988, para3). In the same article, Vecchio quotes Bette Bao Lord, wife of U.S Ambassador Winston Lord, saying “He's {Mickey Mouse} the best ambassador to China we've ever had.” (Del Vecchio, 1988, para 2). Mickey and the parks were opening a line of communication for not only the Walt Disney Company to build not one but two parks there, but also to the U.S as a whole. By 1996 the film ban was lifted with the release of *The Lion King* in China.

Failed negotiations for Shanghai Disneyland, SDL, put the park's future on hold. In 2008, new CEO Bob Iger met with Yu Zhengsheng for renegotiations and was willing to concede on certain items that Disney had not before, including giving up the idea of a television channel which they hoped to use for park promotion, instead opening the world's largest Disney store in Shanghai. (Barboza and Barnes, 2016). These shifts in negotiations would be beneficial to both sides as the Chinese market proved invaluable and the tourism boost would cement Shanghai as Chinese destination. In addition, working with Disney for the communist party served as a symbol of willingness to open up to the world. (Du, 2016, p. 213). A glocalized approach before negotiations finalized.

A deal was sealed in 2009 with Disney again claiming 43% stake in the park, leaving the rest to a municipal joint venture holding company. Working with a state-owned venture company, Shanghai Shendi. The creation, development, and operation being 70% owned by Disney and 30% owned by Shanghai Shendi. (Silvester, 2016, p. 310). The government would

provide the land, finance construction, and own majority stake while Disney would handle management and get a percentage of operational income and royalties.

Disney's teams did extensive research for SDL, understanding the political climate meant that glocalization was of the utmost importance. Several research trips to China were made to study architecture, visit schools and homes, as well as conduct surveys both online and in person. (Makinen, 2015). Chinese architects and designers were hired, and teams were created with the purpose of researching ways to incorporate Chinese elements in the park. (Martin and Makinen, 2016).

In his opening day speech Iger is quoted say, "Shanghai Disneyland is authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese." (The Walt Disney Company, 2016). A sentiment that refers to the balance of Disney's Americana with Chinese influence and culture. In an interview with USA Today Iger is asked to expand on what he meant by that phrase. He responded by saying he didn't want to simply put Disneyland in China, but rather build China's Disneyland, a distinct difference. Describing Disney as being the guests of China, and that it was important to respect local culture. Sharing how many of the shows within this park were conceived by local people. Giving this example, "The Tarzan show, for example, was developed and directed by a woman named Lee Xining who envisions and tells the Tarzan story with Chinese acrobats." (Iger via Levine, 2016, Interview section).

SDL has deviated furthest from the "Disney template" with two primary agendas in mind. The first being to differentiate it from HKDL. The second to market Disney characters and brands to the Chinese rather than the Americana that has been seen in previous parks. (Mittermeier, 2021, p. 170). The latter was done in part by removing many classic lands and attractions that are overtly American. These include Main Street, USA, Frontierland,

Adventureland, It's a small world, and space mountain among others. Main Street USA, the entrance area to every Disney Park was renamed to Mickey Avenue at SDL. A move that served the dual purpose of removing any hints of American nationalism, and because Chinese audiences were already familiar with Mickey from the 1986 cartoons which served their new focus to their characters. (Sung, 66). Disneytown, the shopping district that Mickey Avenue leads to architectural design is inspired by *shikumen* (Schoolfield, 2016, p. 56) a traditional Shanghainese style of blending western and Chinese elements dating back to the 1860s.

One new land to SDL is the Gardens of Imagination, inspired by traditional Chinese gardens. This land is home to both a traditional Chinese tea house and a twelve-mosaic mural was built using Disney characters to represent the Chinese zodiac showcasing the blending of the two cultures. The castle at Shanghai is the largest of all the castles, fusing Chinese design patterns such as traditional cloud, lotuses, and peonies, and is also the first to represent every Disney princess. Like the other parks, research found younger guests to want to experience American cuisine, while older guests wanted more traditional food offerings.

SDL was announced to open on June 16, 2016. When Tickets went on sale in March they sold out within hours. The park over a decade in the making was a roaring success. Disney understood the importance of showcasing Disney magic through the lens of the local culture and customs. What easily could have been their hardest location is successful due to the lessons they learned throughout their international ventures.

Conclusion

Bringing a park to a new country is a cultural exchange. Only half of the experience is bringing Mickey and the "Disney Magic" to these countries, the other half is learning and adapting to that country's culture. Former Disney Imagineer Joe Rhode is quoted saying, "It is

not uncommon for local people to be very skeptical and suspicious of a big company coming into their space, but if you're open to collaborating, then we will find something together that will express our common values together." (Rhode, 2025). This needs to begin before construction starts. Understanding the needs and desires of the local market. As Robertson's theory suggest, globalization cannot exist without the local. International Disney Parks therefore cannot exist without adapting to their local.

A Disney Park needs to understand when and where to implement cultural adjustments and when to maintain a sense of Americana. As seen in these case studies, this differs depending on the local. Tokyo had a strong desire to maintain the American experience, whereas Paris insisted on including and respecting French and European culture. All the parks showed a desire for the American-Disney experience, but at varying levels. In Hong Kong this meant a fairly balanced mix, allowing it to become this cultural gateway in China. Compared to Shanghai, which being in mainland China meant pulling back on American ideals. In addition, this balance is not stagnant, but everchanging as new expansions of the parks and needs of the local change over time. This is ever important as Disney released a statement on May 7, 2025 the plans for a new park in Abu Dhabi, a never before traversed local for Disney.

Walt dreamed of a place where families of all ages could venture together and meet Mickey Mouse. Believing that Disneyland would never be finished, a sentiment that is true for all the parks as they continue to expand and further glocalize to balance Disney and their home country. Every piece of The Walt Disney Company has built off something that came before it creating a vast magical world. But if you rewind the Disney clock to October 27, 1954, only a few months from the opening of the original Disneyland, Walt famously said, "I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing – that it all started with a mouse." (Walt Disney, 1954).

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