

Walt Disney World and its Global Theme Parks: A Globalization Perspective

Introduction

The Walt Disney Company is one of the most efficiently integrated entertainment companies on the planet. One cannot merely peek their head into the world of pop culture without knowing of Disney and its plethora of movies, shows, and products. From Mickey Mouse to Frozen, or their recent addition of Star Wars to their ever-growing empire, Disney is a household name, and reigns at the top of the entertainment food chain worldwide. It is almost guaranteed that anyone can name at least a few Disney characters, movies, or television shows. Even certain areas of entertainment that many don't realize are Disney, are in fact, owned by Disney. This includes ABC, ESPN, Marvel, and the recently acquired Fox Entertainment.

A few questions are raised about Disney's success, however, because of Disney explicitly representing the Western world, and more specifically the United States, in the context of the whole world. How was Disney able to integrate themselves and glocalize their American culture in their chosen international locations, while facing difficulties with anti-Americanism and strong cultural clashes? Have they always been the primary decision makers as symbols for the American entity, and what does this say about the direction that our current global culture is

heading in? But the fact is, Disney is such a huge entity and a representative of America and American culture, so is this a case of Americanization in global culture? There is a worry concerning this large grasp of power over the entertainment world is a sign of Disney acting as a hegemonic power, where it is argued that they are essentially homogenizing the global culture into a “Disnified American Utopia.” I use this term that I came up with as it relates to Disney’s goal, beginning with Walt Disney in the 1950’s, to create a singular, utopian world showcased as Tomorrowland. I however, argue that the Walt Disney company had little control over the success of their foreign theme parks though their globalization efforts. Each of the host countries had significant agency in the development of the parks. Disney had to adjust their usual Western-based hegemonic style of assimilating the American Disney culture according to the wants and needs of the locals. I am going against the previously stated argument that Disney is a hegemonic power that is homogenizing the global culture through their international theme park endeavors.

In this paper I will be discussing the Walt Disney company and the relationship to their global theme parks. I am first going to touch on a major counter-argument to my thesis, and examples of early theme parks, both Western and Eastern. Chronologically, I will look at Tokyo from 1983 to the present day, Paris from 1992 to the present, and Hong Kong from 2005 to the present. This order of subjects pertains to the order that each park was opened. I am including information and arguments on the Walt Disney Company’s initial successes and failures in their international theme park locations. I am looking at the decisions Disney made and were forced to make, the cultural processes that encapsulated the park projects, and the public response as it

relates to the overarching issue of cultural imperialism and the relationship between the US and the rest of the world.

Addressing Counter Arguments

For the most part, Disney works as a hegemonic power in the pop culture industry. I would define hegemony as having absolute authority, where others follow without force and are convinced by the hegemonic territory that their ideas rank supreme. Looking at the arguments that Disney has too much power, and that they are essentially melding the Disney culture into everything around it without resistance, does Disney really have that kind of control? In terms of where Disney is coming from in the larger context of the world historically, they are the poster for the Western world. This makes their sheer presence abroad somewhat of an alarm for many areas based upon the United States' colonial past, and their current overbearing political stance. Disney is essentially coming in and acting as a culturally "colonizing" foreign country, representing the United States and, in certain mindsets, perpetuating cultural imperialism. Thus, Disney company needs to be very reliant on the opinions of the countries they attempt to work with. I would argue in accordance to my evidence that I will provide later on with specific examples from each country, that Disney does not function as a neo-colonialist power in their globalization endeavors, (a colonial type interaction with another country without the actual colonization taking place.) This is because a neo-colonialist movement would have asymmetry in power from one of the sides in the transaction, and because of Disney's necessary subservience to their foreign partners, Disney actually has less power. Disney relies heavily on the globalization acceptance and further decisions of the host country to align the fate of their transnational theme park. Disney isn't taking advantage of anyone, rather, Disney is the one that

has to let itself be molded like clay for its own benefit. Instead, Disney acts successfully with the host country as a hybrid global structure, using a mix of global and local interactions.¹

Disney has to interact through hybridity in globalization, incorporating the usual dynamics of heterogenization vs homogenization. This is what one would call the essential practice of glocalization. Glocalization is absolutely necessary for relocation, where the idea is to integrate the local elements with the incoming global/foreign themes or products.

Glocalization refers to the combination of the global and the local. Literally speaking, the words “local” + “global,” representing the dynamics of cultural homogenization, and highlighting the act of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies. I would define globalization as a process in which theme parks participate, through their use of brands and symbols of a transnational nature. Whereas globalization, in and of itself, “stresses the omnipresence of corporate or cultural processes worldwide, glocalization stresses particularism of a global idea, product, or service.”²

Disney, on the fast tracks of economic global spread, is the only conglomerate that effectively uses the concept of synergy, and the overall benefits of synergetic relationships. “They know how to squeeze ‘synergy’ until it screams for mercy.”³ When I mention this term, I am regarding the internal dialogic process; the combination of Disney exploiting their brand and every division in their company coming together to market something. An example of Disney using their synergistic process, during the 1997 Hercules movie release, the Disney team made sure to cover both sides of the United States for maximum advertising potential by hosting

¹Marwan M.Kraidy, *Hybridity in Cultural Globalization*, (University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 2.

²Jonathan Matusitz, *Disney's Successful Adaptation in Hong Kong: A Glocalization Perspective*, (Journal of Strategic Marketing 18, no. 3, 2010), 669.

³Janet Wasko, *The Magical-Market World of Disney*, (Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine 52, no. 1165), 2001.

release parties in both New York and California. Synergy, a dialogic process, and cultural context through understanding semiotics in globalization is fundamental to any kind of recontextualization efforts. This is important to understand in relation to my argument in detailing how the Walt Disney company works internally within their own country, (United States) and how these processes were initially recontextualized over to the international locations. Successful processes in America won't necessarily transfer nicely to the rest of the world. As spoken language differs from country to country and culture to culture, so do the many social cues that semiotics encompasses. I define semiotics as the use of signs and symbols, and their interpretations. The concept of semiotics and the overall comprehension in communication is inherent in our everyday interactions and is key for understanding cultural context, which doesn't always transfer well, if not at all.⁴ Because of this factor, semantic fit can make or break a global move for corporations like Disney in their attempts to successfully glocalize their brand into the chosen culture. "Glocalization is tantamount to relocalization."⁵ Internationalization can draw out a company's full potential of moving into the larger space of the world if done right. This means culture is taken into account, recontextualization is observed and put into action, and the company focuses on working with the host country to glocalize efficiently. Disney's issue is has been finding a balance between blindly applying rules developed at home to the new environment and obediently following the demands of each transnational location.⁶

The West as the Birthplace of Amusement

⁴Mary Yoko Brannen, *When Mickey Loses Face: Recontextualization, Semantic Fit, and the Semiotics of Foreignness*, (The Academy of Management Review 29, no. 4), 595.

⁵ Matusitz, *Disney's Successful Adaptation in Hong Kong*, 668.

⁶Brannen, *When Mickey Loses Face*, 613.

Globalization and the spread of ideas and technology acted as the precursor to eventually establishing what are today known as theme parks. Right from the beginning the Western world dominated the theme park culture, which reflects the United States and more specifically Disney's steady dominion over that market.

The precursors to modern day theme parks began with the European garden design, a typical Western characteristic. This included the creation of landscapes and stages that evoke the tradition concerning gardening and the domestication of nature. These were called "Pleasure Gardens" and were associated with kings and aristocracy.⁷ The Western expansion began around the time of the universal expositions, large-scale public events focused on the trade of ideas and technology. These and what led to the concept of fairs preceded amusement parks, due to the American tradition of "amusement" focusing on distinction and uniqueness in experiences. "Technology, illusion, and psychology come together to create a cultural product that bases its ability to attract on its alternative character to everyday life and its irreverence towards established culture theme parks [are], therefore, the juxtaposition of the concept of attraction and that of communication by means of the image and animation."⁸ We can see that the United States, coming out of a Western takeoff, was a leader in the forefronts of establishing theme parks with a direct connection to the entertainment industry. WDW is an icon of consumer popular culture, and plays a huge role in educating millions of people a year about itself. Essentially popular culture informs the public and how they make sense of the world around them.⁹ The birth of theme parks in the West parallels how we can look at Disney today:

⁷Anton Clave Salvador, *The Global Theme Park Industry*, (London, CAB International, 2007), 5-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

⁹ Adelaide H. Villmoare and Peter G. Stillman, *Pleasure and Politics in Disney's Utopia*, (Canadian Review of American Studies 32, no. 1, 2002), 82.

an American entity as a representative for the Western world. Disney initiated the process of the creation of new international markets with the opening of Tokyo in 1983 and Paris in 1992.

Because of all this, one could bring up the first mover argument in this case. Why hasn't Disney fallen victim to complacency? Being the first to pioneer a product or service certainly doesn't make one infinitely superior. Take for example, Myspace and Internet Explorer. In the wake of the world wide web, these two companies started what would become the social media empire and the modern necessity that are internet browsers, respectively. Although today, both are rarely used. I would argue that Disney avoided the mechanisms that plagued these companies, (among others like Panam and Howard Johnsons), through their act of adjustment based upon the pushback and needs of both their nationally-based consumers, and their international consumers. Disney may not have had the idea of such a large degree of adjustment in the forefront of their mind, but they are subject to the ebb and flow of the current that comes from the agency of these other locations that Disney chose and will continue to choose for their projects.

This brings up the first two specific examples of theme parks that I am going to talk about. As part of my thesis where I state that each country involved in Disney's global theme park endeavors had significant agency in the development and glocalization process, non-Western world representatives have historically found success in the usage of other cultures to expand their own and commodify foreignness for amusement.

New World was an amusement park in Singapore opened in 1923. Singapore at this time was under the British empire, and was therefore exposed to world fairs and trade exhibitions. New World introduced modern consumption and popular entertainment culture to the Eastern world. "The history of the New World amusement park offers a new route for understanding the

evolution of the modern leisure industry around the world in a colonial context. The park gives the opportunity to see the current development of entertainment facilities in Asia in the frame of a long-term process that interrelates urban planning and design, class niches, mass audience, cultural entertainment, popular practices and modernity.”¹⁰ Singapore took the influence from the British during their time of colonialism and spread it into something functional in their own Eastern creative cultural power, molding chosen pieces of Western culture into something made of their own agency. Japan also had a similar experience with Dutch World, their version of a European-themed park. Also called Huis Ten Bosch (House in the Woods), the park opened in 1992, reflected historical relations between Japan and the Netherlands that began in 1609, which mainly consisted of trading. The theme park features Dutch style buildings, shops, restaurants, as well as windmills, canals, and layers of seasonal flowers.¹¹ These two examples relate directly back to my argument in that they are non-Western, non-American countries that show agency by mirroring the original design and functionality of the Western commoditizing amusement using exotic elements of Asian culture for entertainment because of its foreignness. It seems as if Japan has also had its fun with using the exotic allure of European culture for entertainment, thus showcasing the evident ability for the non-Western world to have authority and control over picking and choosing global elements to use with its own culture.

Tokyo Disneyland

Looking at the first international theme park by the Walt Disney company, Tokyo Disneyland, the recontextualization process was an overall huge success. The park is the most visited in the world. In 1996, it had 12,390 employees, about 2,000 regulars, and 10,000 part

¹⁰Salvador, *The Global Theme Park Industry*, 20.

¹¹Ibid., 49.

timers. In the same year, Tokyo Disneyland was visited by slightly more than 16 million people, and continues to be the most successful theme park in the world.¹² The park was opened in April 15th, 1983 after a big decision by the Walt Disney company to move their brand into international territory. They partnered with the Oriental Land Company, a Japanese leisure and tourism company centralized in Urayasu, Chiba, Japan. They were Disney's preliminary partner, but today owns the whole park. Since this was Disney's first international park endeavor, the company took a cautious step with the preparations and shares, only claiming around 10% in admissions and 5% in food sales, and leaving most of the cultural integration process to the Oriental Land Company. Tokyo wanted to capitalize on Disney's inherent sense of foreignness, attempting to level itself alongside other luxury goods and well known name brands such as Coca Cola and McDonalds. "They proposed that the park be an exact copy of the original Disneyland in Anaheim, California, because 'we wanted the Japanese visitors to feel they were taking a foreign vacation by coming here, and to us Disneyland represents the best that America has to offer.'" (Toshiharu Akiba, Tokyo Disneyland spokesperson).¹³

Disney, as the international transfer, had no real previous internationalization experience in terms of building an entire park outside of the United States, but had its key strength of being a global powerhouse that dominates media culture well beyond other big Western companies. At this point in time they had the knowledge and experience built up to be able to enter other market areas, and the willingness to put their foot forward. This sense of initiative is what propels Disney ahead of their contenders time after time. Both distance-wise and culturally the United States and Japan are far from each other. Fortunately for both parts, the transfer of Disney's

¹²Aviad E. Raz, *The Hybridization of Organizational Culture in Tokyo Disneyland*, (Studies in Cultures, Organizations & Societies 5, no. 2, 1999), 235.

¹³Ibid., 593.

American context was mostly positive, and fit surprisingly well with the Japanese culture. The “Disney Way” or the organizational culture that Disney brands itself with, shares many similarities with Japan’s work culture. “Disney is considered the Sistine Chapel of service culture. . . . This culture is dominated by the Disney way and the Disney manuals. It represents America.”¹⁴ This includes similarities in work techniques, the souvenir culture, and part-time vs full-time worker culture. The “American” and the “Japanese” were combined in Tokyo Disneyland in a manner that maintained their boundaries. The Disney Way became the hallmark of part-timers and frontline employees, while the socialization of regular workers looking for promotion remained typically Japanese. Combining these two well fitting elements, Tokyo Disneyland made the American service techniques popular in Japan. Before Tokyo Disneyland, these techniques were accepted mainly by the food service industry.

The success of the Disney Way, the Disney organizational culture in Tokyo Disneyland, is mainly due to two reasons. First, the cultural fit between the Disney Way and the strong Japanese organizational culture developed alongside the routine normalities of regular workers. Japanese organizational practices such as the company as family, docile company unions, in-house training, on-the-job training, and behavior protocols were the ground into which Oriental Land Company cultivated the Disney practices. The synergetic relation between the two also changed things in the process, taking out what Oriental Land Company managers thought was “unrequired training” for Japanese workers. What was instead put into play was Tokyo Disneyland University, essentially a play off of American-based Disney training where employees would be known as “cast members” and name tags would be printed with Roman letters; a hold on control that Disney was able to keep.

¹⁴Raz., *The Hybridization of Organizational Culture in Tokyo Disneyland*, 236.

Secondly, the appropriation of the Disney Way into the Japanese work culture followed the dynamics of the Japanese labor market in the 80's.¹⁵ This mainly consisted of their shift into a post-industrialized economy and labor force between the 1980's and 1990's. Disney's work manuals were hailed by many Japanese commentators as "the secret of Tokyo Disneyland's success."¹⁶ Disney was thus able to glocalize their training methods by creating this hybrid system catering to familiar parts of Japanese work culture that also worked with the normalities of the company's standard manual-based training. Appearance management, or *midashinami*, is an integral part of the Japanese socialization and work environment, and parallels greatly with Disney's strict dress code. While the Disney Way is not as strict as Japan, both enforce tidiness in uniforms, facial hair, and age and body type to an extent.

To pair with Disney's abundant variety of merchandise, Japan has a huge gift giving culture called "senbetsu." Because of piece of Japanese commonality, Tokyo Disneyland has the highest per capita revenues from souvenir merchandise out of all Disney theme parks. Disney took into account the gift giving culture and made a financially smart recontextualization. They glocalized the ticket purchasing structure by creating a ticket option where Japanese visitors could simply come to the park, not go on any rides, and just shop.¹⁷

Success through cultural recontextualization is usually stated as being based on the economic differences between countries. Common foreign goods are received better when the recipient has a lower economic status than that of the country bearing the good.¹⁸ But Japan is

¹⁵ Ibid., 256.

¹⁶ Ibid., 256-257.

¹⁷ Brannen, *When Mickey Loses Face*, 608.

¹⁸ Ibid., 596.

economically similar to the United States, and technologically superior. This brings up Japan's attitude toward "foreignness," and particularly how they interact with the world around them.

The world famous Japanese animation company Studio Ghibli which has influenced and grappled on to American culture, started by Hayao Miyazaki, is a powerful example for a Japanese global function that has carved its own legacy into the world.¹⁹ Movies like *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, and *My Neighbor Totoro* have burned their presence into American culture, and amplified the Western world into absorbing everything anime and "Japanese." Globalization is not just the dominance of the West over the rest of the world, the US is affected just as much as other countries and cultures.

Historically the U.S and Japan have had their quarrels politically. Take into account World War II where the two countries were fighting against each other as enemies. This was coming from a time when Japan was an undeveloped country dependant on the United States, where today they have grown into their own autonomous economic, technologically huge powerhouse that resides as its own independent authority. Seeing this fact, it is clearer that Japan has a more lenient view on the United States and Americanization compared to what France or China would think of as imperialism, as Tokyo Disneyland informed its own success with taking control with socially selective cultural consumption.²⁰

Although Disney ultimately attained success in Tokyo Disneyland, can we really say that Disney had all the control of the outcome? I would argue that in fact they had very little. The Disney way simply clicked with the Japanese organizational/workplace culture through pre-existing similarities and continued to drive forward the agency of the Japanese entity with

¹⁹Takao Hagiwara, *Globalism and Localism in Hayao Miyazaki's Anime*, (International Journal of the Humanities 3, no. 9, 2006), 7.

²⁰Allen Chun, *The Americanization of Pop Culture in Asia?*, (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 13, no. 4, 2012), 503.

Disney latched on to the side as the creative barnacle. They were lucky for their first international move to have been with Japan and turn out the way it did, due to the host country being so accepting of taking in and accommodating Disney, as well as the convenient work culture similarities that masked itself as something that Disney had control of. Japan made Tokyo Disneyland a success through their own constructive agency, picking and choosing the “exotic” American pieces of culture that they wanted while normalizing the other parts that Japanese citizens were more open to accepting, and that fit contextually with their own culture. Disney doesn’t have nearly as much control in their globalization processes as originally thought, using Japan as an example, that other cultures have just as much agency and independent decision-making ability to become centers for successful global cultural spread. Relating directly back to my argument, Tokyo Disneyland was successful because of the close similarities between Disney and Japan’s organizational cultures, their distance from the planning and cultural recontextualization, and Japan’s current security and independence in their world identity.

Disneyland Paris

The Walt Disney Company’s cultural recontextualization into France was rough, and involved mostly negative feedback from the start. France’s response to Disney’s training and integration methods were not liked, and were seen as totalitarianism. This is interesting because, in Disney’s move into Japan, these methods instantly clicked and registered well with the Japanese due to their own organizational similarities, causing little conflict among the workers and general visiting public. One would think that because of the closeness in both culture and distance compared to Japan, Disney would have the upper hand there.

France, historically, has been in a world mindset of harsh cultural protectionism, Nationalism among the Gaulois, and increasing Xenophobia. These worldviews are essentially how France sees itself; how they place themselves as an individual navigating the world around them. This concept, for each country, plays a massive role in how they will interact with outside forces trying to come in, or rather, to bring in aspects of their foreign culture. Today's French Nationalism goes hand-in hand with their anti-Americanism views. For them, it's the idea that globalization is branded with the United States' face and all they want and plan to do is imperialistically force their culture onto others. There is a dreading sense that America has all-powerful hegemonic power and wants to crush everything and everyone in their way like a train. To the French, this is an extraordinary threat to both the European and French identity. Historically, this idea of anti-Americanism has been rooted not only in the citizens, but the government as well. 20th Century minister Hubert Vedrine was quoted as saying, "America's role in 20th-century European history did not give it the rights of a sixteenth member of the European Union. Only the French government explicitly presented the birth of the Euro as an antidote to the strength of the dollar."²¹ This quote accentuates the historical U.S - France rivalry. The general view is that no country should be able to control the media of the whole world, and that every country has the right to their own cultural identity without fear of losing it entirely. This insecurity about their identity can be looked at as an internal debate, or "Franco-French" debate. Essentially, this makes sense because of the very real cultural power imbalance between the U.S and France, due to technological and social changes perpetuated in the 1920's. Today France is still trying to fathom globalization, and juggle cultural identity with

²¹David Ellwood, *French Anti-Americanism and McDonald's*, (History Today 51, no. 2), 1.

the push through modernism. They remain the country that is most worried about the American globalization power. One major example of this French reluctance to accept American culture is the issue of McDonalds. Like Disneyland Paris, the McDonalds company was met with harsh blowback after their move into France. The outrage was mainly over the fear that American food, in this case mass-produced hamburgers, would take the place of traditional, local French cuisine in day to day life, and essentially systematically wipe out the French culture that they hold on to so dearly.²² This parallels the reception locals had to the American theme park, looking upon it as both a symbol for the U.S and cultural imperialism.

France is wracked by cultural identity insecurity. In culture and politics, the French elites look to be scandalized and overtaken by the appeal of American clothing styles and fast food to their youth, and of Hollywood and subsequently, Disney, to their media viewing audiences. On this topic, Alain Franchon, an editorial writer for *Le Monde*, was quoted as saying, “The government, and the elites, realize that culture, writ large, is a battle that they're losing. They're very jealous of America's power to seduce. When faced with that you have to fight, even if you risk looking ridiculous.”²³ While France and the United States are both under the category of the Western world, the U.S represents and initiates more in terms of international political and cultural identity, which tears deep into the insecurities of the French who wish to remain solely French, and close themselves off to many outside influences; those of which are mainly American just by sheer amount. To the French, Eurodisney was just the latest case of American cultural imperialism; a homogenization of culture.

²²Ellwood, *French Anti-Americanism and McDonald's*, 3-6.

²³*Ibid.*, 1-2.

There are some immediate cultural differences between the United States and France that, while the former translates well with Japan, doesn't with France. They don't appreciate the cuteness factor like Japan does, named Kawaii Culture, while most kids in France grew up reading detective Mickey comics "Le journal Mickey" that show a harder side to Mickey. Mickey has a low profile in Disneyland Paris where Minnie, reminiscent of Moulin Rouge and the chanteuses, has a more realistic, adult profile complete with dresses and garters. Senbetsu, Japan's loved souvenir culture, has quite the opposite holding in France. The Paris resulted in the lowest sales of souvenirs of all Disney's theme parks. When interviewed, Parisian parents explained that such items are considered "tacky and a waste of money."²⁴ Despite French anti-Americanism, the prospect of having a local deal with Disney was alluring, as it would surely bolster their economy. To attract the Disney company and the estimated 30,000 jobs that the park would bring in, the French government offered land at below market value, and agreed to low interest loans, lowering taxes on admissions from 18.5 percent to 7 percent, and investing 2.7 billion francs in improving local infrastructure, such as new railroads, highways, and roads.²⁵

Many French citizens in Marne la Vallee protested the park, referring to "La culture Disney" as damaging to both the local farmland and their history. "Townspople in one village decried the violent upheaval to the life of their town, a sacred place in which Joan of Arc was reported to have performed a miracle, the resurrection of a small child who had been dead for three days."²⁶ Adding to the idea of erasing their history, French citizens were unhappy with the way Disney seemed to glorify America in its message, along with the celebration of its history and power, blurring distinctions between European fantasy and cultural history along its path.

²⁴Brannen, *When Mickey Loses Face*, 608.

²⁵Wasko, *The Magical-Market World of Disney*, 68.

²⁶Janis Forman, *Corporate image and the establishment of Euro Disney: Mickey Mouse*, (1998), 251.

The original castle and Main Street was dominated by Disney's planning with no input by the locals, twisting the traditional fairy tales known by the Europeans into a blank, "Disnified" version. Attendance was a lot lower than expected, based on the Japanese reception to their park's opening. Disney tried to grasp more control for this project, attempting to cash in on higher shares of the park due to the success of Tokyo Disneyland, where they had a very small fraction of the revenue. The dialogic process between France and Disney still continues on today, through Disney's efforts to create a more acceptable Disneyland for the locals and pull in more visitors. The amount of visitors to Disneyland Paris is slowly going up each year, but the progress is truly coming at a snail's pace. Disney has been opening up more hotels to grab the overnight guests, as well as issuing discounts for multiple night ticket packages. The castle got a complete makeover to look more like those in traditional European fairy tales. Main Street U.S.A, originally designed to look like the city center of Walt Disney's hometown, was met with cold reception; just another gaudy American thing the local French didn't care about. Disney was forced to remodel that to a more neutral park space. The Walt Disney company, because of the criticism and backlash, was forced to adjust greatly according to the wants and needs of the French locals.

Hong Kong Disneyland

There are 1.3 billion people in China. It is only natural that transnational corporations would want to cash in on this fact. Disney, of course, was a premier player in diving into the Chinese market, difficulties and all. Disney in their early days of Chinese marketing ran a television program similar to the American "Mickey Mouse Club" that catered to the communist youth, taught kids about the beloved Disney characters through a recontextualization of them all,

and attempted to alleviate copyright issues with China creating knock-off versions of Disney characters and products. This attempt to move into China's media market didn't work out the way Disney intended, as China is a powerful, authoritative country with its own negative ideas about Western powers and Western imperialism. The CCP cut relations with Disney in the 1990's after an offense to the communist government, as well as a video release that supported Tibet. This act was labeled by the Chinese in an act of global agency, "killing the mouse to scare the monkey," aka the rest of the Western powers.²⁷ In order to move back into Chinese waters for future projects, Disney had to submit to Chinese productive forces and let go of a lot of their inherently American image.

A 2013 annual report tells that a quarter of of Disney's revenue, 45 billion, comes from the international market. China is another leading powerhouse in this sector. Like stated before, Disney's choice to let go of some inherently "American image" control and allow for glocalization that would pull in Chinese audiences was ultimately an act for the eventual building of the Hong Kong park, and later the Shanghai park in 2016.

When Disney first opened Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005, it was met with many critical responses, similar to the Paris park opening. Disney experienced unanticipated success in Japan but an equally unanticipated lack of success in Hong Kong, even though both places are in East Asia.²⁸ The general idea going in was that if they were successful in Japan, which is both distance and culturally far apart, then the same should happen in Hong Kong. Unlike Japan and similar to Paris, however, there were no initial organizational similarities and Disney became to involved in the development processes. Their assumption was wrong, as the theme park only

²⁷Zena Olijnyk, *The Mickey Mao Club?* (Canadian Business 77, no. 20, 2004), 14.

²⁸Matusitz, *Disney's Successful Adaptation in Hong Kong*, 670.

drew 5.6 million visitors during the first season. One of the main critiques was that Disney's normal method of transferring its very American products and Californian culturalities into the local Chinese context did not work. Many locals complained that Disney's food, labor practices, and other methods were not "Chinese enough" and therefore were unappealing to Chinese guests.²⁹ In fact, Disney's initial grasp of all the cultural structure planning power demonstrated quite a bit of Western cultural imperialism to the Chinese locals. This is significant because, looking at Hong Kong from a historical worldview, the territory had dealt with its fair share of actual cultural imperialism from the British. Hong Kong is currently in a state of post-independence from from Britain, and is now an autonomous territory. Hong Kong built itself up quite both economically and literally, beginning as a rocky island. They came from a history of Western imperialism and is a territory of a country that is against Western powers and imperialism. Hong Kong currently has a strong cultural autonomy and independence.

Because of this push back by the locals, the company had no choice but to cater to the wants of their Chinese audience if they were to achieve any sort of success. Executives at Hong Kong Disneyland were forced to make the necessary changes including dropping ticket prices to fit the nation's lower income levels and holiday schedule, as well as price reductions for seniors to cater to the nation's family-oriented culture. Disney started holding fireworks extravaganzas in Hong Kong Disneyland to relate to China's history of gunpowder and fireworks themselves. The park also includes the world's only Fantasy Gardens, where children can meet famous characters with a communist makeover. While Mickey was put in a bright red Mao suit, Minnie sported a cherry-blossom red dress, in an attempt to appeal to Chinese tourists.³⁰ Restaurants

²⁹Ibid., 673-676.

³⁰Ibid., 673.

started serving localized meals, employees were directed to speak English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, and the park was re-designed according to the rules of Feng Shui. Some specific park decorating that followed the rules of Feng Shui includes the main entrance being moved so that it is facing right, along with shifting it by just 12 degrees. Disney also added a curved walkway from the train station so that “chi” wouldn’t be able to flow into the South China Sea. “Feng Shui consultants keep saying that these changes ensure prosperity for the park.”³¹ Ever since Disney made the effort in glocalizing their brand to Hong Kong, the park has become fairly successful, and attendance and revenues from growth have increased. Chinese mainlanders find themselves constantly travelling to Hong Kong Disneyland for trips as well, which played into formulating the eventual build of Shanghai Disney with the aim to grab the mainland visitors.³² This move can also be seen as Disney constructing a whole new park based upon the demands of the mainland Chinese citizens, which connects directly to my original argument. Looking back to said argument, Disney had to make great adjustments based on the wants and needs of the local Hong Kong citizens. Disney once again had little control over the success of the theme park.

Conclusion

Americanization is in its essence a sort of standardized pop culturization, but at what point is something still “American” if it has been a part of another culture for a certain amount of time? The future of globalization points to not a homogenous culture, or one that negates elements of individual countries’ cultures and washes them out with the presence of “American” or standard culture, but one of hybridity. By looking at Disney’s foreign endeavors as case

³¹ Ibid., 668 - 669.

³² Chun, *The Americanization of Pop Culture in Asia*, 504.

studies for this, we can see that cultural hybridity, or that of bringing together elements of cultures so that they can cohabitate and flourish together, spreading knowledge and understanding, is what is key for a functional global society. This kind of globalization allows people from all over the world to “gather in extremely efficient think tanks discovering new ways to improve human lives, which, in turn, improves the lives of people left home in the mother-country which in turn gives rise to more and more scientifically astute individuals and thus increasing more and more the development of humanity.”³³ The dialogic process between Disney and the world continues to develop and improve over time, as they learn from their past mistakes more and more and continue to modify and accommodate, and loosen their Western grip on the world around them. The Walt Disney company had little control over the success of their foreign theme parks though their glocalization efforts. Each of the host countries had significant agency in the development of the parks. Disney had to adjust their usual Western-based hegemonic style of assimilating the American Disney culture according to the wants and needs of the host country citizens as a Western entity navigating through the world around it and its relational historical implications. I went against the argument that Disney is a hegemonic power that is homogenizing the global culture into a “Disnified American Utopia.” To reiterate my points that reject this argument: Japan, Paris, and Hong Kong each retained a majority of their local cultural elements through the glocalization process. In none of these instances did Disney act hegemonically or culturally imperialistic and get away with it. This goes far beyond all things economic and rests, fundamentally, on all things cultural.³⁴ There is extreme importance in standing back and enabling those who stand to be most impacted by the

³³ Adrian-Gabriel Dinescu, *The Future of Globalization*, (Romanian Review of Social Sciences 7, no. 12, 2017), 30.

³⁴ Salvador, *The Global Theme Park Industry*, 261.

process, the local people with their local cultural background, to participate directly in the development decision making. Disney can become successful in their global theme park endeavors through interpreting and recognizing each desired location's identity organized in belonging to the world around it, releasing the tight grip of Western presence by allowing the host culture's agency to work in the forefront of development and decision making, and careful consumption of the host culture and recontextualization of American culture without a lack of understanding or appreciation of the former. Disney can remain at the top of the global entertainment food chain without being a cultural tyrant, and can benefit greatly in the future from opening even more doors to the wonderful cultural aspects of the world around it, to work alongside each other in synergistic success.

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