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The Development of Theme Parks in China

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEME PARKS IN CHINA

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science in Education Degree.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Tourism plays an important role in the world economy today. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2009) estimates that, from direct and indirect activities combined, the Travel and Tourism industry now accounts for 9.9 percent of the global GDP (Gross Domestic Product), 10.9 percent of the total quantity of the world exports, and 9.4 percent of the total quantity of the world investment. The economic importance of the Travel and Tourism industry should not be underestimated. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2008), international tourist arrivals reached 924 million in 2008, representing a growth of 2 percent compared with 2007 (tourism demand slowed in the second half of 2008, however, attributable to the deteriorating international economic situation) (Blanke, Chiesa, & Herrera, 2009).

International tourism in China has seen a rapid growth since China opened its door to western countries in 1978. The number of international tourists increased significantly from less than 2 million in 1978 to 62.5 million in 1998 (China Business Information Network, 1999). Nine years later from 1998, in 2007, the number of tourists visited in China has reached 130 million, with an annual growth rate of 11%. In 2009, China has seen the largest rank improvement of all countries, moving up by a remarkable 15 places from 62nd in 2008 to 47th in 2009. China has been building on a number of clear strengths: it is ranked 7th for its natural resources by the World Tourism Rankings, with many World Heritage natural sites and fauna that is among the richest in the world. It is ranked 15th for its cultural resources, with many World Heritage cultural sites, many international fairs and exhibitions held in the country, and creative industries that are

unsurpassed (Blanke, Chiesa, & Herrera, 2009). In 2010, from the international tourist arrivals by country of destinations, China was in the 3rd place, only behind United States as the 2nd and France as the 1st (World Tourism Rankings, 2010).

There were increasingly more theme parks built around the world and theme parks has become a major trend of world tourism development. Many countries and areas have paid close attention to develop the profitable theme park. The starting date of the theme park industry is usually put at 1955, the year in which Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California. This consideration, generally accepted in spite of being arbitrary (for example, Efteling, the Dutch theme park based on popular children's tales, opened its doors in 1952), is based on the fact that Disney was configured from the beginning as a recreational model and was enthusiastically emulated, imitated and envied by a great number of agents and corporations. No doubt, Disney has achieved great success by its remarkable initiatives, inspired concepts, excellent marketing strategies and distinctive theme parks around the world (Clavé, 2007).

According to Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang (2003), the first and most widely recognized theme park on the Chinese mainland was Splendid China which was built in 1989 by Overseas Chinese Town Group (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003). It contains miniature replicas of major national attractions of the country and it has obtained tremendous success. From 1988 to 2005, the visitation to Splendid China has surpassed 50 million people, the total revenue has reached 2.6 billion yuan and the gross profits has also reached 1 billion. After the success of Splendid China, the construction of theme parks in China has reached its peak. Despite the success of some parks and the rapid growth in the number of theme parks and amusement attractions in China since the mid-1980s, the

industry has been fraught with problems. Many parks have not been successful from a financial and operational viewpoint, with attendance much lower than projected, and by the mid to late 1990s the industry was facing crisis. The failure of many parks and attractions has damaged the image of the industry and tarnished its reputation. There were also many theme parks which have realized this and started to take action to reform and innovate. In addition, some newly developed theme parks have learned the lessons drawn from their predecessors, adjusted their strategies, and regained some successes (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the different stages of the development process of China's theme parks and to explore the experiences and problems during the process of their development so as to promote future development.

Research Questions

The proposed research will explore the following research questions:

1. What is the current image of theme parks in China in the perception of Chinese students who currently study at Southern Illinois University Carbondale?
2. What had they like the most about a typical visit about a typical visit to a theme park in China?
3. What had they liked least about a typical visit about a typical visit to a theme park in China?
4. What attributes or park characteristics are critical when evaluating a visit to a theme park in China (Milman, 2008)?

Delimitations

The following delimitations as set forth by the researcher:

1. The subjects for this study were delimited to 50 Chinese students who currently studied at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and have had experience in Chinese theme parks.
2. The study was delimited to be conducted online via email survey.
3. Respondents participating in research are all 18 years of age or older.

Limitations

The following limitations apply to the present study:

1. The accessibility of the resources about this topic may be limited by the difference of the policies in China. Due to the copyright, most of the academic resources on the internet need to be purchased in China.
2. The accessibility of the interviewees may be limited.
3. The data will be limited as it is collected in the form of self-reported questionnaires and the respondents may have a bias.
4. The validity and reliability of the data will be limited by the validity and reliability of the instruments used.

Definitions of Terms

1. Tourism: Tourism is travel for predominantly recreational or leisure purposes or the provision of services to support this leisure travel. The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as people who "travel to and stay in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited" (The Travel Industry Dictionary, 2010).

2. International Tourism: Involves visitors staying at least 24 hours in a country whose motive for travel is for leisure (Vella, 1995).
3. Theme Park: An amusement park that follows a particular motif or which incorporates rides based on characters or situations proprietary to the owner of the park (The Travel Industry Dictionary, 2010).
4. Amusement park: A recreational attraction featuring mechanical rides and other forms of active entertainment. See also theme park (The Travel Industry Dictionary, 2010).
5. Marketing: Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (The American Marketing Association, 2004)
6. Overseas Chinese Town (OCT): A publicly listed company with interests in electronics, real estates, and tourism. The most famous business properties of them are the four major theme parks which locate in Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), a five- square-kilometer area of land in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone to the immediate north of Hongkong. The initial success has made them a model for theme park development throughout China (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003).
7. The Greater Pearl River Delta (GPRD): It includes the jurisdictions of Guangdong (also known as Canton), Shenzhen, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (1100 km²) and the Macau Special Administrative Region (26km²). The total population of the GPRD is 48 million, with 40.76 million on the Chinese Mainland, 6.8 million in Hong Kong and 440,000 in Macau (Clavé, 2007).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction. Tourism has become one of the world's largest and most profitable industries. China is rich in tourism resources—an incredible diversity of landscapes and cultures exists across the vastness of the country. Since 1978 when China issued a policy to embark on its economic reform program which was “open up to the outside world”, the development of the tourism industry in China has been boosted. During the process of the development, China has gained both positive experiences and hard lessons. But China is still searching for better ways of developing a strong travel and tourism industry that can compete successfully in regional and global markets. China's tourism has a bright future, although hard efforts will be required to develop it effectively.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the different stages of the development process of China's theme parks and to explore the experiences and problems during the process of their development so as to promote future development.

Theme parks play a significant role in the tourism industry in China. The theme park industry is relatively new in China, with some of the early parks such as the Shenzhen Splendid China funded by Overseas Chinese Town Group (OTC) developed only in the mid-1980s. Theme parks of China developed mainly from learning the developmental experiences of overseas theme parks. Later, the construction of theme parks has reached the peak, at the same time a lot of new problems have turned up by the mid to late 1990s. There were also many theme parks that have realized this and started to take action to reform and innovate. In addition, some newly developed theme parks

have learned the lessons drawn from their predecessors, adjusted their strategies, and regained some successes (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003).

I still remember when I was a little girl, there was no Disney or any large amusement park in China. But there was a small amusement park in my hometown. They offered some simple rides and entertainment such as the pirate ship which would swing back and forth and a medium sized ferris wheel which could overlook the landscape of the whole city. My childhood has become colorful and joyful, because of the existence of that small park. Nowadays I really can understand the meaning of these amusement parks to the children such as Disney which is like their paradise and something to look forward to in their life. As I was growing up, the small neighboring amusement park could not satisfy me anymore. As a teenager and a young adult, I needed something more exciting and stimulating, a big amusement park or theme park that would fulfill many needs for entertainment and China's development of theme parks did not disappoint me.

By 1998, however, there were an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 amusement or theme park attractions in China (Xu, 1998). Ten years later, the number has been doubled. In China, some of the early large scale parks were, in fact, amusement parks, offering rides and entertainment. Probably the first and most widely recognized theme park on the Chinese main land was Splendid China, containing miniature replicas of major national attractions of the country, which opened in 1989 at Shenzhen province. Despite the success of some parks and tremendous growth of theme parks in China since mid-1980s, the industry has been fraught with problems (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003). In 2010, a deadly accident happened on Space Journey, a ride at Ecoventure Valley of Overseas

Chinese Town in Shenzhen. On June 29th, something went horribly wrong, leading to the death of 6 people on the ride and injuries to 10 others. Although the chairman of the board of OCT group apologized to all the people involved and made a high compensation for all the families of the dead people, the accident had already happened and the hurt and pain would never be taken away (Carothers & Zhang, 2010). It has left many in China asking, “What happened?” “Why did so many theme parks and attractions fail?” “What can we learn from the failures of these theme parks in China?” “What’s the future of China’s theme park industry?” This paper briefly traces the development of theme parks in China and examines the reasons for the spectacular growth occurring during the 1990s and issues affecting the industry today. Besides looking at the elements of success for some parks, reasons why the industry experienced setbacks and why many of the theme parks failed in China are also examined. It is important to learn from the mistakes and to provide industry and government authorities with recommendations to ensure that future development are successfully developed and operated.

Theme Park Development. The origins of modern theme parks are often traced to Disneyland, which opened in 1955 in Anaheim, California (Wallace, 1985). There were, however, many amusement parks and entertaining equipment before Disney. The oldest amusement park in the world opened in 1583 is Bakken (“The Deer Park Hill”), at Klampenborg, north of Copenhagen, Denmark (Adams, 1991). But from the viewpoint of themes and experiences, “Disneyland” was the first theme park. From then on, the industry of theme parks has become a global industry. Until 1990, there were 225 large-scale theme parks in the world, attracting 300 million visitors with revenues of 7 billion.

Ten year later, the number of theme parks around the world has increased by 50 percent, the number of visitors has raised 80 percent, and the revenues have almost doubled.

In figure 1, the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) and the Economics practice at AECOM (formerly Economics Research Associates) listed the ten largest amusement park corporations in terms of annual attendance, we can see that the United States still was the biggest market and the leader of the industry with five corporations on the list and market share of more than 50% approximately. China was on the 8th place (TEA/AECOM, 2010).

Table 1

Top 10 largest amusement park corporations in order of annual Attendance

Rank	Amusement park corporations	Country	2008	2009
1	Walt Disney Parks and Resorts	U.S.	118,000,000	119,100,000
2	Merlin Entertainments Group	U.K.	35,200,000	38,500,000
3	Parques Reunidos	Spain	24,900,000	24,800,000
4	Six Flags Inc.	U.S.	25,300,000	23,800,000
5	Universal Studios Recreation Group	U.S.	25,700,000	23,700,000
6	SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment	U.S.	23,000,000	23,500,000
7	Cedar Fair Entertainment Company	U.S.	22,700,000	21,100,000
8	OCT Parks China	China	13,400,000	15,800,000
9	Compagnie des Alpes (Grévin & Compagnie SA)	France	9,500,000	10,000,000
10	Aspro Group	Spain	N/A	8,200,000

China gradually caught the global attention by its rapidly growing market and a large number of potential developing programs. The types of themes adopted in China included folk customs and legends (e.g., Journeys to the West Parks and Dai Garden), history and culture (e.g. sea worlds and wild life adventure parks), sports and competitions, science, technology, and fantasy/amusement (e.g. Happy Valley), Disneyland Resorts in Hong Kong and the upcoming one in Shanghai, and even a sex theme park called “Love Land” in Chongqing. Most theme park development in China has concentrated in the major populated areas around the Great Pearl River (Guangdong Province, Hongkong, Macau) and Yangzi River (Shanghai Province) delta areas, in the Beijing-Tianjin area and major regional cities such as Chengdu, Changsha. These theme parks had some things in common. First, they have a specific and understandable theme with facilities, operations, and the environment of the park conforming to that. Second, they enable guests to escape from the routine of everyday life. Third, they are usually large and involve high levels of investment. Forth, they have admission fees regarded as relatively high compared to the income level of most Chinese (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003).

As mentioned before, the first theme park opened in China was Splendid China. Soon, there were three more theme parks opened in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone to the immediate north of Hong Kong (including the opening of Disneyland Hong Kong in 2005) and they all gained a huge success. Then, there were a rapid growth of theme parks built all over China following the successful experiences of the four parks in Shenzhen. The number of theme parks in China has soared in the following twenty years. The initial success created false expectations and led to an oversupply of parks that often

replicated the successful ones. A visit to a theme park would be regarded as a relatively expensive experience for most mainland Chinese, even considered as a luxury adventure to people from the rural area. These parks were also characterized by a short life cycle, which lacked repeat visitation. Moreover, as more Chinese people visited first-class theme parks in Europe and the United States, they cultivated more refined taste, and many old parks in China gradually lost appeal due to reasons such as lack of new rides, invariable facilities and improper management and maintenance (Clavé, 2007).

Elements of Success of the Theme Parks in Shenzhen. The initial success of the theme parks in Shenzhen can be attributed to a number of factors. The first key to success is timing. These four theme parks were the first of their type to open in China as market leaders, and they enjoyed advantage compared to other theme parks that have since been developed elsewhere in the country. The second factor was their location in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, which lies with the Pearl River Delta region including Hong Kong, Macao and Guangdong Province. This is one of the richest areas in China with salaries in both Shenzhen and Guangdong among the highest in the country. In addition, Shenzhen is a “frontier town” that became nationally recognized following a visit by the former influential Premier Deng Xiaoping who praised its development. The third factor was proper market-oriented management approach (Ma, 1999).

Reasons for Failure. According to the TEA/AECOM Report 2009 (2010), there were two thirds of the theme parks in China losing money. As a result, billions of yuan (Chinese currency) in investment have either been lost or put at serious risk. This unfortunate situation has damaged China’s investment image and placed a dark cloud over the prospects of the theme park industry.

Research indicates that there are several factors leading to the failure. First of all, the inappropriate location has made many theme parks hard to access. Take the theme parks in Shanghai as an example. Most of these were located in the suburbs of the city where land for large-scale development was available and relatively cheap. This created a problem of accessibility as it was not easy for guests to reach. Public transport was very limited and the travel time from Shanghai was at least one or two hours. According to Smith:

Amusement parks often fail because of mistaken assumptions of similarities between China and other countries. For instance, investors typically plan their ferris wheels and haunted house an hour or more outside major cities, as is customary in the West. But because of the enormous population in China, there are much fewer people who yet have cars. This forces parks to rely on group trips organized by companies, government offices and schools (1998, p. 45).

The second factor is the repetition and copying of parks. As mentioned previously, the misconception was that all one had to do was replicate a successful theme park and it would definitely make a profit. Little or no consideration was given those new facilities which made them repetitive (Clavé, 2007).

The third aspect of many failed theme parks was poor design and layout, with large distances between attractions. This created an unnecessary inconvenience for guests who had to walk some distance from one section of the park to another. During some bad weather, the inconvenience was worsened.

Poorly trained and unskilled management is the fourth problem. The management and staff were often unqualified or lacked experience in running a theme park business.

In some cases, accusations of nepotism were made as governmental officials used their influence to have unqualified friends or relatives appointed to management positions in exchange for expediting permits and reviews. The management corruptions were another important factor leading to the failure of many theme parks (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003).

Summary. As China's prosperity increases and its people become richer, domestic tourism will be further stimulated and the demand for theme park development will continue to grow and evolve. Despite the challenges and problems experienced, some parks have been successful. Mistakes have been made and, lessons have been learned. Future parks will be larger, more attractive, of higher quality, and developed to international standards. There will be fewer parks but they will be strategically located. The unprofitable parks will gradually close and the industry will become more efficient. The theme park industry is the business of fun and it is time for the fun to begin once again. The only limit to future theme park ventures is one's imagination.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction. The purpose of this study was to briefly analyze the different stages of the development process of China's theme parks and to explore the experience and problems during the process of their development so as to promote the development of them in the future. This chapter consists of four parts: participants, procedures, and instruments.

Participants. The subjects for this study will be 50 Chinese students who currently study at Southern Illinois University Carbondale and have had experience of theme parks in China within three years. The data will be collected through online surveys, distributed via emails by the researcher. The majority of survey subjects were in their 18s above.

Procedures. The survey will be conducted via emails distributed the researcher, from May to July, 2011. The participants were informed that participation will be voluntary and the response would remain confidential. Then, the survey will be collected by the researcher.

The survey will consist of three parts. The first part will aim at getting some demographic characteristics about the survey population, such as gender, age, nationality, the first and most recent visit to the theme parks in China. The second part will have four open-ended questions as follows: (i) Rate the overall satisfaction quality of theme parks in China, from "not satisfied at all" to "satisfied a lot". (ii) What do you like the most of the theme parks in China?; (iii) What do you like the least of the theme parks in China?; (iv) What attributes or park characteristics do you think is the most important when

evaluating a visit to a theme park in China? In part three, a structured questionnaire was developed. In the survey, respondents were asked to rate the importance of (number) theme park visit attributes in the following areas: general park facilities, value for money, entertainment, food services, market appeal, merchandise, staff and park's operations, and accessibility. Each attribute was evaluated on a 1–5 scale, where “1” indicated “not important at all” and “5” indicated “very important” (Milman, 2008). See Appendix A for the details of the survey.

Instruments. The survey will be conducted by qualitative research. Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings, such as "real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative research, broadly defined, means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 17) and instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived from real-world settings where the "phenomenon of interest unfold naturally" (Patton, 2001, p. 39). The purpose of qualitative research is to seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997).

All the data will be evaluated using qualitative content analysis. Ole Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages." The purpose of content analysis is to sort similar responses.

Each response will be examined and key words will be selected. The data will be collected starting by reading each survey all the way through by the researcher. Each

keyword will be recorded on a single slip of paper. Next, these slips will be sorted and items of the same category will be grouped together. Items that do not immediately fall into any category will be put in a separate pile. Then this separate pile will be resorted and some items will be grouped into the existing category, while others will form new categories. In the end, each category will be labeled and responses in each category will be counted (Boothby, Tungatt, & Townsend, 1981). The content analysis is aimed at finding out the development and recommendations about the theme park industry in China among young adults.

The problems of reliability and validity are the most important concerns in designing any research study. Clont (1992) and Seale (1999) endorse the concept of dependability with the concept of consistency or reliability in qualitative research. The consistency of data will be achieved when the steps of the research are verified through examination of such items as raw data, data reduction products, and process notes (Campbell, 1996).

To ensure reliability in qualitative research, examination of trustworthiness is crucial. Seale (1999), while establishing good quality studies through reliability and validity in qualitative research, states that the “trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability” (p. 266).

The concept of validity is described by a wide range of terms in qualitative studies. This concept is not a single, fixed or universal concept, but “rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects” (Winter, 2000, p.1). Many researchers have developed their own concepts of validity and have often generated or adopted what they consider to be

more appropriate terms, such as, quality, rigor and trustworthiness (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mishler, 2000; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001).

Guba and Lincoln (1985) proposed four criteria for judging the soundness of qualitative research and explicitly offered these as an alternative to more traditional quantitatively-oriented criteria. They felt that their four criteria better reflected the underlying assumptions involved in much qualitative research. Their proposed criteria and the "analogous" quantitative criteria are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Four Criteria for Judging Quantitative Research and Qualitative Research in Guba and Lincoln's theory (1985)

Traditional criteria for judging quantitative research	Alternative Criteria for Judging qualitative research
internal validity	credibility
external validity	transferability
reliability	dependability
objectivity	conformability

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Part One Demographic Characteristic of the Respondents. Part one of the survey aimed at getting the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The gender distribution of the respondents between males and females was 32% and 68% respectively. The respondents represented an array of age group and had a median age of 22-25 years. 49 out of 50, representing 98% of the respondents are from China, only one respondent (2%) are from outside of China (who also has had experience of theme parks in China). 96% of the respondents are single and the rest were married (4%). Over two thirds of the respondents (70%) were graduate students (included Masters and PHD) or visiting scholars (responsibilities of visiting scholars: teaching, doing research, and interacting with colleagues and students). Detailed demographic information is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

		Age group (Years; <i>n</i> = 50; median =				Nationality		Family status		Educational background	
(<i>n</i> = 50)	%	22-25 years)	%	<i>n</i> = 50	%	<i>n</i> = 50	%	<i>n</i> = 50	%	<i>n</i> = 50	%
Female	68.0	18-21	16.0	China	98.0	Single	96.0	Undergrad	30.0		
Male	32.0	22-25	74.0	Outside	2.0	Married	4.0	Graduate	60.0		
		26-29	10.0	of China				PHD	8.0		
		Above 30	0.0					Scholar	2.0		
Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100	Total	100.0		

98% of the respondents were Chinese students who currently study at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. 92% of the respondents had visited theme parks in China in the past 10 years and the rest had visited more than 10 years ago (8%). 80% of the respondents have visited 1-5 times, among them, 8% of the respondents have visited only one time, 16% have visited 6-10 times and the rest were above 16 times (4%).

There were also two open ended questions in part one. One asked about the most recent visit to Chinese theme parks. The researcher analyzed and divided all the answers into five groups according to the time frame. One third of the respondents have visited Chinese theme parks in the past year (34%). The most recent visit for more than one fifth of the respondents happened more than three years ago (22%). Due to the limitation of the passage of time and various English understanding abilities of Chinese students, there were 14% of the respondents answered “can not remember” and 8% had incoherent answers such as the exact locations or names of the theme parks they have visited.

Table 4

The most recent visit to a Chinese theme park

The most recent visit	%
Within 1 year	34.0
2 years ago	12.0
3 years ago	10.0
More than 3 years ago	22.0
Can not remember	14.0
Incoherent answers	8.0

40% reported that their first visit was within the past 10 years. There were 48% incoherent answers which 18% of the respondents answered “can not remember” and 30% of them were wrong answers.

Part Two. Respondents were asked to evaluate their satisfaction with the quality (e.g. program, accessibility, price, foods, rides, merchandise, staff & parks’ operation, etc.) of theme parks in China. 46% of the respondents stayed neutral, 30% satisfied, 10% satisfied a lot, 12% not satisfied and 2% not satisfied at all (see Table 5).

Table 5

The satisfaction with the quality of theme parks in China

Level of satisfaction	%
Neutral	46.0
Satisfied	30.0
Not satisfied	12.0
Satisfied a lot	10.0
Not satisfied at all	2.0

There were three open-ended questions in this part. The first question asked about the characteristics the respondents like the most of the theme parks in China. After examining and selecting key words, all the answers were grouping into six categories/factors by the researcher. 38% of the respondents like the “Quality of theming and design”, 20% like the “Quality and variety of rides and attractions”, 8% like the “Entertainment variety and quality”, 6% like the “pricing and value for money”, 4% like the “Food variety and value for money”, 2% like the “Quality and variety of family-oriented activities”, and 18% answered “None” (see Table 6).

Table 6

The characteristics the respondents like the most of the theme parks in China

Factors	%
Factor #1: Quality of theming and design	38.0
Layout of the park	14.0
Creativity exhibited in the park or attraction	10.0
Level of theming of the park's attraction and rides	8.0
Quality of landscaping	6.0
Factor #2: Quality and variety of rides and attractions	20.0
Quality of rides or attractions	12.0
Overall number of attractions in the park	8.0
Factor #3: Entertainment variety and quality	8.0
Number of entertainment options	4.0
Variety of entertainment options	2.0
Quality of entertainment and shows	2.0
Factor #4: Pricing and value for money	6.0
Factor #5: Food variety and value for money	2.0
Factor #6: Quality and variety of family-oriented activities	2.0
None	18.0

The second question asked about the characteristics the respondents like the least of the theme parks in China. All the answers were sorted into six categories/factors by selecting key words. 50% of their responses were the "Quality of theming and design" which includes "too crowded" (30%), "long queuing time (12%)", "lack of creativity

(6%)”, and “bad environment (2%)”. 18% of their responses were the safety issue; 14% were the “Food variety and value for money”; 4% were the “accessibility to the parks”; 2% were the “entertainment variety and quality”; 2% were the “Pricing and value for money” and 10% answered “None” (see Table 7).

Table 7

The characteristics the respondents like the least of the theme parks in China

Factors	%
Factor #1: Quality of theming and design	50.0
Too crowded	30.0
Long queuing time	12.0
Lack of creativity	6.0
Bad environment	2.0
Factor #2: Courteous and safety	18.0
Quality of management and staff	10.0
Ride safety	8.0
Factor #3: Food variety and value for money	14.0
Factor #4: Accessibility to the parks	4.0
Factor #5: Entertainment variety and quality	2.0
Factor #6: Pricing and value for money	2.0
None	10.0

The third question asked about the key attribute for evaluating a visit to Chinese theme parks. The ranking of these theme park attributes are summarized into 6 main factors in Table 8. 30% of the respondents said that they think the key attribute for a

theme park experience is whether it is a unique, fun experience or not. Moreover, ride safety (16%) and the quality and variety of rides and attractions (14%) are also very important. The key attributes will be further discussed in part three of the survey.

Table 8

The key attribute for evaluating a visit to Chinese theme parks

Factors	%
Factor #1: Quality of theming and design	44.0
Unique experience	18.0
Fun experience	12.0
Quality of landscaping	8.0
Queuing time	6.0
Factor #2: Operation and management (e.g. courtesy, safety and security)	30.0
Friendly and courteous staff	12.0
Ride Safety	16.0
Security	2.0
Factor #3: Quality and variety of rides and attractions	14.0
Factor #4: Entertainment variety and quality	4.0
Factor #5: Pricing and value for money	2.0
Factor #6: Accessibility to the parks	2.0
None	2.0

Part Three Questionnaire. Respondents were asked to evaluate theme park attributes and characteristics that were important to them when visiting a theme park. Each attribute was evaluated on a 1–5 likert-type scale, where “1” indicated “not

important at all” and “5” indicated “very important”. Responses are summarized in Table 9 in a descending order, where the attributes that received the highest rating are listed on the top of the list.

Table 9

Importance of attributes when evaluating the guest experience at theme parks in China (n = 50)

Attributes	Mean	Standard Deviation
Security/Safety	4.30	1.067
Convenience of public transportation	4.25	0.830
Friendly and courteous staff	4.19	1.110
Creativity exhibited in the park	4.11	0.954
Level of theming of the park’s attraction	4.09	0.883
Quality of landscaping	4.08	0.891
Cleanliness of the park or attraction	4.08	1.141
Overall quality of the accessibility of the parks	4.08	0.917
Layout of the park	4.06	0.864
Number of entertainment variety and quality	4.02	1.047
Quality of rides or attractions	4.02	0.909
Variety of entertainment option offered to guest	3.98	1.028
Quality of entertainment options (shows, parades and music)	3.96	0.960
Overall perceived value for money	3.96	0.980
Staff knowledge about the park’s feature	3.91	0.883

Overall number of attractions in the park	3.89	0.891
Appropriate display of show and entertainment times/location	3.87	1.038
Price of admission	3.85	0.988
Number of thrill rides in the park	3.75	1.017
Rides or activities that appeal to people of all ages	3.70	1.085
Rides or activities that appeal to families	3.67	0.923
Quality of food	3.58	1.151
Variety of food prices	3.57	1.169
Value for money for food purchase	3.55	1.186
Availability of spectacular stage revues	3.49	0.973

The respondents perceived that security/safety, convenience to the public transportation, friendly and courteous staff, creativity exhibited in the park or attention, and level of theming of the park's attraction to be the most important attributes when evaluating theme parks in China. The respondents also perceived that the availability of spectacular stage revues, values for money for food purchase, variety of food prices, quality of food, and rides and activities that appeal to families to be the less important attributes.

Discussion

The respondents perceived that safety/security to be the most important attribute to a theme park visit in China. The second question in part two asked about the characteristics the respondents like the least of the theme parks in China, 18% of their responses to this question were the safety/security of theme parks rides. Safety issues have always been the basic and biggest concern for theme park customers (Milman,

2010). In recent years, the emerging of safety accidents has become the biggest problem in Chinese theme parks (Blanke & Herrera, 2009). The one that drew many people's attention was the deadly accident that happened on Space Journey, a ride at Ecoventure Valley of Overseas Chinese Town in Shenzhen in June, 2010 (Carothers & Zhang, 2010). Due to the problem of the facility, four people died and ten were injured. Also, in June 2011, another accident happened in Zhejiang province. The ride called "Pirate ship" was swinging back and forth in the sky and could not stop. Thirty-five people were on that ship, 2 people passed out and 4 people were injured after hanging and swinging in the sky for more than 2 hours (Wang, 2011). All these accidents have damaged the park's reputation and hurt people's trustworthiness to the whole Chinese theme park industry. Additionally, when asked about the characteristics the respondents like the least of the theme parks in China, 18% of the respondent complained about the ride's safety/security. The findings suggested that some people are unsatisfied about the current situation on rides' safety and it has become crucial to the industry. People would enjoy leisure only if their safety needs were fulfilled.

It is evident from the data that consumers have become more demanding in the park experience when visiting theme parks in China. In response of the open-ended question of the most important attribute to theme parks, "experience" became a key word for 40% of the respondents. Most of them wanted unique, fun experiences. They paid more attention on the atmosphere of theme parks. Moreover, from part three, the findings suggested that the respondents paid close attention on the users' experience rather than exclusively measurable attributes such as "price of admission", "number of thrill rides in the park", and "number of attractions in the park". Nowadays, the competition between

theme parks in China is based not only on the products and services, but also on offering a leisure experience, along with a pleasant atmosphere. In this contemporary theme park environment, employees have become actors, where their responsibility is to create a themed environment. These findings support the findings of Milman (2009), who described that goods and services are no longer enough for consumers, and now they want an experience to supplement and substitute for traditional commodity. Therefore, when evaluating theme parks, customers attributed a high level of importance to memorable sensations associated with rides safety, convenient transportation, or food services. Respondents in the current study similarly reported that compared with the infrastructure and configuration of the facilities, the customer experience was perceived as more memorable.

The respondents ranked transportation as the second important concern of a theme park visit. China has its special condition. Most people in the country of 1.3 billion people still do not own a car. There are about 76 million cars in China at the end of 2009 which means there were 6 car owners per 100 people. Compare with 90% car ownership in the U.S. and 80% in the U.K., China has a much lower car ownership (Schiffers, 2010). Most theme parks in China were built in the rural area, therefore, most Chinese people would take public transportations such as subway and buses to the theme parks. But the public transportation was not always as convenient as taking private cars which limited Chinese people's accessibility to the theme parks to a large extent.

Furthermore, there was one response under "Factor #8: Accessibility to the parks" in part three suggested that Chinese theme parks should improve the traffics within the parks, such as shuttles and sightseeing buses. The operators should offer customers an

extraordinary experience, enhanced with easy access for both to the parks and within the parks.

Finally, although pricing and value for money may be perceived by guests and operators as a major evaluation attribute, data showed that people began to pay less attention to the traditional important measurable attributes such as “price of admission”, “variety of food prices”, and “value for money for food purchase” which were ranked on the less important factors. It seems that, while the cost of the experience is an important consideration of most visitors, the opportunity to have a memorable experience is of higher priority and more memorable experiences will result in a greater willingness to pay among park visitors.

Conclusion

According to the World Tourism Organization (2009), by 2020, China will become the world's largest tourist destination, and will attract 140 million international tourists every year. With China's economic rise and the accelerated process of urbanization, theme park, this type of tourism and leisure products will gradually become a major resource of leisure, recreation places.

As visits to theme parks in China continue to increase in popularity, efforts should not only be put in the construction of infrastructure and accommodation facilities, but also in creating fantastic atmosphere and environment. The theme park operators and marketing executives should carefully consider the customer needs when developing entertainment products and services, such as looking carefully to safety and security, and providing easy access to and within the parks.

The findings of the current study provide important insight into the user experience at Chinese theme parks, but findings should be interpreted with caution. Certain limitations may impact the validity of the findings of this study. Most of the participants were Chinese college students, the age ranges and educational background may not be broad enough, they may have reflected exclusively on their theme park experience, and this may not necessarily represent a typical theme park visit for all the Chinese people.

China's domestic theme park development has entered into a new era (Wang, 2011). The repetitive, inconsiderate duplications of the early successful theme parks such as Happy Valley have become overloaded (Lew, Yu, Ap, & Zhang, 2003). Therefore, in order to stand on the fierce competition, the operators in the theme park industry should look carefully at the user experience associated with fundamental park operational aspects like staff courtesy and park cleanliness, theming, and landscaping. They should also consider providing guests with high-quality experiences and service in entertainment, dining, shopping, line management and all the activities that would meet the market needs. In addition, safety issue and accessibility have become major concerns that the contemporary operators should take into consideration.

The future developer's in China should proceed from China's current condition, providing customers with a comprehensive, safe product which contains entertainment, rides, dining, shopping and most importantly, a memorable experience.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Survey of the Development of Theme Parks in China

The purpose of this survey is to analyze the different stages of the development process of China's theme parks and to explore the experiences and problems during the process of their development so as to promote future development. Completion of the survey is voluntarily and the result will be kept confidential. Please take several minutes to finish this survey. Thank you for your participation.

PART 1 Demographic Characteristics

1. Gender: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Nationality: _____
4. Family Status: Single Married
5. Education: Undergraduate Graduate PHD Scholar
6. Have you ever visited any theme parks in China in the past ten years?

7. How many times have you visited theme parks? _____
8. When was your most recent visit to a Chinese theme park? _____
9. When did you first visit a theme park? _____

PART 2 Open-ended Questions

1. How much, overall, are you satisfied with the quality (e.g. program, accessibility, price, foods, rides, merchandise, staff & parks' operation, etc.) of theme parks in

China?

1 Not satisfied at all 2 Not satisfied 3 Neutral 4 Satisfied

5 Satisfied a lot

2. What do you like the most of the theme parks in China?

3. What do you like the least of the theme parks in China?

4. What attributes or park characteristics do you think is the most important when evaluating a visit to a theme park in China?

Part 3 Questionnaire

Note: Please evaluate each attribute on a 1-5 scale, where “1” indicates “not important at all” and “5” indicates “very important”. Circle the number of your choice.

Factor #1: Entertainment variety and quality

Number of entertainment variety and quality	1	2	3	4	5
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Variety of entertainment options offered to guest	1	2	3	4	5
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Quality of entertainment options (shows, parades and music)	1	2	3	4	5
Appropriate display of show and entertainment times/location	1	2	3	4	5
Factors #2: Courtesy, cleanliness, safety and security (fundamental operational issues)					
Friendly and courteous staff	1	2	3	4	5
Staff's knowledge about the park's feature	1	2	3	4	5
Cleanliness of the park or attraction	1	2	3	4	5
Security	1	2	3	4	5
Factors #3: Food variety and value for money					
Variety of food prices	1	2	3	4	5
Value for money for food purchase	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of food	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of spectacular stage revues	1	2	3	4	5
Factor #4: Quality of theming and design					
Layout of the park	1	2	3	4	5
Creativity exhibited in the park or attention	1	2	3	4	5
Level of theming of the park's attraction	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of landscaping	1	2	3	4	5
Factor #5: Availability and variety of family-oriented activity					
Rides or activities that appeal to families	1	2	3	4	5
Rides or activities that appeal to people of all ages	1	2	3	4	5
Factors #6: Quality and variety of rides and attractions					
Number of thrill rides in the park	1	2	3	4	5
Overall number of attractions in the park	1	2	3	4	5

Quality of rides or attractions	1	2	3	4	5
Factors #7: Pricing and value for money					
Price of admission	1	2	3	4	5
Overall perceived value for money	1	2	3	4	5
Factors #8: Accessibility to the parks					
Convenience of public transportation	1	2	3	4	5
Overall quality of accessibility of the parks	1	2	3	4	5

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