Workers' View on Indigenization of Theme Park: A Case Study in Hong Kong

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Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) of People's Republic of China government and the Disney Company entered into a joint private-public (PPP) partnership to form HKDL: Hong Kong Disneyland in 2005. In pursuit of profit HKDL tried to "indigenize" or localize to the community by using a local workforce, consumption, language, and cultural space accommodations. There is much written about indigenization but not from the worker's perspective. Based on interview data of a small sample of Hong Kong Disneyland workers, this case study investigates the workers' assessment of whether "indigenization" practices are successful or not. Findings show that workers are ambivalent about indigenization citing negative public relations, and adverse mainland Chinese tourist interactions. The workers feel that true indigenization is complicated by various factors such as perceptions of ethnic and national superiority complexes, ambivalence, and continuing unequal treatment.

Keywords: Indigenization, Hong Kong, Theme parks, Labor, Disney

> *Disney asked for a lot of things and used the [Hong Kong resident] taxpayer's money to pay for them. Disney made Hong Kong pay for the entire infrastructure. Disney wanted specific trees throughout the park. They had to come from the United States or Southeast Asia, along with the soil mix they needed, which was very expensive! The taxes of Hong Kong people paid for all of that. Even though we all worked together, [US American] Disney workers gave the impression that they are superior to us [Hong Kong Disney Workers]* (Emily Liu, HKDL Engineer Interview, 2011).

INTRODUCTION

It was a hot and humid July day when I met Emily at a coffee house in Hong Kong, a city known to be a global financial center. Emily is a 32-year-old engineer who worked on the structural development of Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) theme park which opened on September 12, 2005. The Disney Company and Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) of Peoples Republic of China entered into a joint private-public (PPP) partnership to form Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) which opened on September 12, 2015 (Higgins and Hugue 2015). Emily was expressing her discontentment over the unequal treatment she was receiving as one of over 7,000 laborers that HKDL theme park. Although she referred to the Disneyland project as "a Rolls Royce construction" – good construction project physically, she went on to add, "Maybe we needed just a Honda Civic construction and the cost was too high (Liu Interview 2010).[1]

Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) of the People's Republic of China and The Disney Company entered into a joint private-public (PPP) partnership to form Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) located on Penny's Bay, Lantau Island. Initially, HKDL tried to "indigenize" or localize to the community by using a local workforce, local materials sourcing, language, and cultural space accommodations (Fung and Lee 2010). Although there are discourses in the literature about the effects of HKDL's localization and glocalization, there is not enough research on the perceptions and experiences of the local community and specifically the workers of HKDL regarding the theme park's localization attempts (Choi 2012, Lam 2010, Fung and Lee 2010, Matusitz 2011). This article seeks to fill this gap with an investigation of the views and experiences of HKDL workers on indigenization or cultural adaptations at their worksite. Using interview data from Hong Kong Disneyland workers, this case study examines whether workers affirm or not the success of the "indigenization" or localizing practices at the park. Findings show that workers are ambivalent about indigenization citing negative public relations and tourist interactions. The workers consider true indigenization a complicated process, referring to the influence of various factors such as perceptions of ethnic and national superiority complexes, ambivalence, and continuing unequal treatment. In other words, considering Arjun Appadurai's (1990) definition of *indigenization* as that which seeks to be accommodating to the local culture, this study evaluates whether the transnational theme park successfully accommodates the needs and interests of the local community. The perspectives of the workers of HKDL were important because they provide an important lens into what is happening at the site on a microlevel.

Three modes of inquiry were undertaken for this research. First, this article investigates the socioeconomic context that led to the existence of the Hong Kong theme park. For instance, the Walt Disney Company's first choice of locations was not Hong Kong but rather Shanghai, China, however talks fell through. It was a precarious time for both parties as the Paris Disney nee' Euro-Disney was losing a great deal of money amid rising local French protests (Raz 1999). Talks about the Asian-based theme park arose at a time when Hong Kong, a former British colony, was returning as city-state of Mainland China in 1997. Ming Chan and Alvin So (2002) assert that Hong Kong would be part of China's one country and 2 system of administration where Hong Kong would maintain its autonomous government for 50 years after 1997. Hong Kongers were not convinced that things would be the same after the 1997 British handover to China. In response, there was mass panic, political unrest, and out-migration (Chan and So 2002, Ong 1999, Sussman 1999). Additionally, in 1997 the Asian financial crisis was on the rise, and Hong Kongers dealing with a lot of financial insecurity in the region. "Between 1984 and 1997, nearly 800,000 Hong Kongers emigrated from the territory, a sixth of the total population" according to Sussman (1999: 6). Additionally, the majority of manufacturing jobs left Hong Kong to Mainland China which left many Hong Kong people unemployed (Lee and Chiu 1997).

Second this research goes over the labor history of Hong Kong and why Hong Kong Disneyland was developed. It will also go over labor abuse allegations. Hong Kong Disneyland (HKDL) was promoted to the public as a local employment opportunity that would employ 5000 local residents, but this pledge, as it turns out, was not the full story. Upon further inspection it is revealed that the entertainment positions, such as dancing and music, are mainly employed by Filipino nationals. The upper management of HKDL Managing directors have been primarily a rotation of Anglo Americans, and two western educated ethnic Chinese. The majority of workers at HKDL are Hong Kong residents. This research suggests that there will be a continuation of Filipino nationals in dance positions but they are treated unequally to their American and Chinese counterparts. One HKDL middle manager asserts that in the future many of the positions will increasingly go to Mainland Chinese not local Hong Kong groups because of the cheaper salary requirements. Hong Kong employers can hire imported workers from China only under specific circumstances and they need to get government approval.[2] It is harder to detect Mainland Chinese workers since they have the Han Chinese phenotype which overlaps with Hong Kong people. It is easier to see the large number of Filipino dancers as an example of foreign workers at the park.[3]

The third area of inquiry delves into what workers themselves think of the indigenization or localization process of space, labor, and materials sourcing. For example, the Walt Disney executives consulted a Feng Shui expert to tilt the entrance by 12 degrees to bring more luck into the site (Holson

2005). Feng Shui which translates to "wind-water" in English is a spatial arrangement of materials to promote a positive flow of qi or energy. This Chinese geomancy was employed in the opening day of the theme park on September 12, 2005 as it was considered an auspicious day. Local Hong Kong food was also offered at the park such as seasonally mooncakes, squid and fishballs. In surveys and interviews the HKDL workers said that those indigenization attempts had no effect on them and was not effective. The workers found that the indigenization practices were not fully successful and they described inequality in treatment based on nationality and ethnic group. The Filipino HKDL workers felt that they were also being treated unequally by being asked to dance more "runs" than U.S. or Hong Kong dancers.

I argue that indigenization or adapting to the local community has not been achieved because of the original unequal contract between the Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) and HKDL, bad publicity, and ongoing labor disputes. Hong Kong Disney workers expressed that there was a certain superiority that the USA Disney workers projected to them, as well as treating them unfairly. The workers interviews suggest cultural imperialistic attitudes on the part of the executives of Disney and within HKDL. Various workers commented that the so called *indigenized* (localized) food, space, and labor attempts had no effect on them or the customer. My labor interview subjects said that in reality they did not love the Disney ethos; rather, they thought of Disneyland as just another job.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on fieldwork carried out for over fourteen months in 2010 and 2011 and subsequent visits in 2013, 2015, and 2017 in Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) China. In this ethnographic study on HKDL worker reactions to indigenization, I used qualitative methods that are particularly applicable for business anthropology and labor studies (Bonacich 2001; Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Lee, 2001; Ngai 2005; Ong 2010). I also reviewed publicly available information, and case studies. Over the course of fourteen months, I spent at least 20 hours a week in the field to become familiar with the environment and population of the study (Bailey 2006). The data collection included: (a) participant observation, (b) ethnographic fieldnotes of 30 site visits, and (c) audio recorded in-depth interviews. A combination of chain sampling, and targeted methods were used to recruit respondents for the study (Bailey 2006). I went on all the theme park rides and informally talked to both the visitors and staff. I joined all the activities available to me in the theme park and chatted with many different staff members. I then formally interviewed and recorded six HKDL workers and I gained access to them by referrals from my US contacts. To access interviewees I approached community groups, stakeholders, gatekeepers, unions and public officials. The job positions of the all-male HKDL workers were one male HKDL dancers (aged 28), male HKDL middle manager (aged 47), male HKDL upper management (aged 57), and female HKDL engineer (aged 32). The rest of the interviews were with Hong Kong community members were long-time residents. The Hong Kong residents had a long range of jobs from librarians, academics to news reporters. I gained access to the HK residents through targeted, referral, and snowball contacts that I had from my previous research on US Disney workers in Irvine, California in 2008-2010 (Bailey 2006).

Indigenization Theory

Global interactions involving two poles of "global cultural integration or global cultural homogenization", according to Arjun Appadurai (1990, 32), often develop tensions in the attempt toward integration or "indigenization", especially at a local level. Appadurai uses indigenization as it can be applied to sports, fast food, music, terrorism, political institutions, and ideas. In other words, large transnational structures, products, places and designs are modified to *fit* local culture. Both local communities and transnational corporations try to "indigenize the global products to their [local community] tastes." Such indigenous modification is something that can be seen in HKDL's utilization of local food (Chinese), the placement of buildings (*feng shui*), and the variety of spoken languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese). I use Appadurai's indigenization theory in the sense of corporations, of which Disney is a prime example, who want to make the maximum profit through accommodating or

integrating local culture with the essence of their brand. Kimburley Choi, notes how through such indigenization "local people produce and circulate the changed meanings of 'Disney' and change certain Disney management policies" (Choi, 2010:1). In this study, I delve into the experience and perceptions of local workers at the park and how they feel about indigenization from behind the scenes and in relation to the local community.

In general, Hong Kong locals feel the foreign product is now "theirs" and is so-called *home-grown* without a foreign origin. That is to say local cultures assign their own meanings to products or places (Appadurai, 1990). For example, James Watson (2006) argues that McDonald's is viewed and utilized differently in different Asian countries. In Watson's anthology *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia,* Yunxiang Yan relays that in 1990 when McDonald's first opened in Beijing, China, it was viewed as a democratic and high-class place. Anthropologist David Wu adds that McDonald's in 1984 Taipei became a space for the elderly, daughters-in-law, and students to hang out for long stretches of time. Another local example are the American owned stores 7-11 which are ubiquitous and appreciated all over Hong Kong.

Corporations specifically want to cater to or indigenize local taste to make more money and retain customers. For example, at Tokyo Disneyland (TDL) Raz argues that the original American theme park is completely "Japanized "(i.e., indigenized/localized to Japanese culture) to fit local tastes by serving Japanese sushi and having a World Bazaar instead of the traditional Main street, USA. Opening in 1983, TDL was highly successful because it changed rides to fit cultural specifications, such as having a delightful and elaborate Winnie the Pooh ride not found in any United States based parks. The Japan-based theme park also has expansive Japanese style gardens while simultaneously touting themselves as purely American.

Disney knew that to get the local Hong Kong population to go to the park they had to cater to Cantonese Hong Kong culture, which is distinctive from Mainland Chinese culture, because of the one hundred years of British colonialization. One of the government aims was to employ Hong Kong workers in the park. The workers must be "indigenous" Hong Kong people. In the Hong Kong case, I define an indigenous worker as anyone who was born in Hong Kong, holds a permanent resident status or may have a different citizenship but is originally from Hong Kong. This is a drastic reworking of the concept of indigeneity which highlights the distinctiveness of Hong Kong as a node of globalization. Aiwha Ong, in her book *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), interviews elite Hong Kong residents who hold multiple citizenships; the interviews illustrate this point. Being a "Hong Konger" may entail holding another nation's passport. There is a fluidity involved in determining who can be called a Hong Konger.

Indexing and Dragging Theory Effects Indigenization

Chris Rojek's theory of indexing and dragging can help to explain the recent successes and failures of this tourist site. This directly connects with indigenization in that customers may already have a negative idea of your business before they even enter the premises. No more can we anthropologists and global citizens view a space as separate and mechanical, but we must accept the realities of interconnections, ironies, and contradictions that are brought on by how indexical and dragging knowledge impact the emerging image of any location. This may be due to how such knowledge not only affects the bottom line in business, but also because it influences the reception of incoming entities by local inhabitants. Rojek argues that when you come into a new space such as a tourist spot you "drag" knowledge of that place from your past. For example, even though you have never been to the Eiffel Tower, you have seen it countless times in movies and other media (Rojek and Urry 1997). So, when you finally go the Eiffel Tower it is not exactly the first time you have seen it which could shape your experience with it, either positively or negatively.

In regard to Hong Kong, HKDL, and the Disney Company overall, a lot of dragging is done by local and international guests because of the plethora of bad publicity that accrued to the city, theme park and company as a result of labor violations, protests, and riots. Hong Kong, as indicated earlier, also received negative publicity because of its link to global diseases. The image of Hong Kong is directly related to HKDL because it impacts its tourism numbers. In addition, from another perspective, many Hong Kong

people have gone to other Disney parks, such as the original Disneyland, but especially Tokyo Disneyland. They have a deep knowledge of other Disney parks and can easily compare services, prices, and amenities. This also relates to labor in that HKDL workers are readily able to compare their salaries and treatment to other Disney operations around the world. This impacts morale and how they feel they are being treated.

Hong Kong, itself, influenced indexical and dragging knowledge for HKDL workers and visitors. In the 1960s Hong Kong held the image of being a "gateway to China," which foreigners could more easily access due to British colonial control. Mainland China was restricted due to Socialist development in the 1960s and 70s. During colonial times Hong Kong was the first stop to encounter Asia. HK was one of the few places where foreigners could experience an "authentic" Chinese culture. Hong Kong was also an air transport hub to the greater East and Southeast Asian Region. In the 1980s it marketed itself as "East meets West" city and as a shopping paradise. Hong Kong, like other cities, has also tried to market itself as a site of play (Judd and Fainstein 1999). It was not unusual in the 1980s to see Hong Kong advertisements that highlighted scenes of kids playing at tourist sites. Hong Kong had frequently been depicted as an ideal vacation spot. This all abruptly changed in 2003 with the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Hong Kong was suddenly on daily television news as an important node in the transmission of deadly diseases. Hong Kong residents and visitors were depicted as being infected with and dying from SARS. Television viewers were inundated with nightly images of Hong Kong people wearing masks for protection. Hong Kong became a site of panic in the global imagination.

Does HKDL Reframe the Image of Hong Kong?

In 1995 Fortune Magazine ran a cover story that predicted the "Death of Hong Kong" in 1997 handover from Great Britain back to Mainland China (Kraar, 1997). After the handover of 1997, Hong Kong Disneyland was supposed to navigate this Asian crisis and overcome the "Hong Kong site of fear" image, but the theme park also had public relations mishaps. This worked against the amelioration of the Hong Kong image to the locals in that some felt they were not told the full truth. Hong Kong Disneyland did not respond swiftly to address its labor abuse allegations, which were very widely reported. So, when residents of Hong Kong come to the park, they may very well have this in the backs of their minds.

Dennis Judd (1999) argues that tourism has often been used by governments to create jobs when coreindustries, such as manufacturing, have left. Tourism is now a significant global employer and Hong Kong needed an entity that would employ its local population when labor capital left the island in the 1980s and went to Mainland China. The relationship between Hong Kong and global tourism is a matter of concern because of the economic, political, cultural, and social scale to which producers and consumers are placed into contact with each other. I argue that the Hong Kong theme park project was a development project that had local western educated elite and political support because of the previous economic and sociopolitical transitions in the late 1970s and 1990s. It was also built to reframe the image of Hong Kong as a deteriorating city-state because of the 1997 return to China to a progressive space because it now owns an American Disneyland touted as the "Happiest Place on Earth."

The local Hong Kong community who may have wanted to use the public HKDL funding for other projects such as more accessible low-income housing, occupational retrainings, or more local job creations. Ultimately, HKDL was envisioned to fill a massive labor gap because of the rapid deindustrialization. It should be noted that Hong Kong government has three primary branches: Executive, Legislative and Judicial. Hong Kong does not have Western style universal suffrage where everyone gets to vote. Hong Kong is run by a chief executive who is selected from 1,200 elected committee members which is subject to approval by the mainland Chinese government.

Many of these elected members are elite, western educated, and part of the transnational capital class. They are urbane and interact with global wealthy expatriates. Hong Kong wealth gap measured using the Gini coefficient is 0.539 with zero indicating equality is currently the highest in 45 years (Wong 2018). These wealthy elites may have different concerns and wants from the common Hong Kong working classes. Sklair (2001) suggests that malls and theme park spaces are key symbols of elite consumer

capitalism. If the surrounding area around the stadium or theme park is crumbling, no one cares because these spaces are for expatriate and local elites (Sklair, 2001).[4]

History of Two Embattled Entities: Hong Kong SAR and The Walt Disney Company

From the 1950s through the 1980s, Hong Kong was considered one of the world's sweatshops, producing everything from plastic flowers to transistor radios (Lee and Chui 1997). Much of this labor was performed by young women who sacrificed their vitality working in the factories, helping to make Hong Kong the economic "Tiger" it is now (Lee 2001). Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan were given this "Asian Tiger" nomenclature because of their rapid industrial economic growth in the 1960's and 1990's. By the 1980's, millions of the HK women who had worked in these sweatshops were middle-aged, jobless, and facing age employment discrimination. The government, instead of committing resources toward re-educating these women, invested in a global theme park to offer more jobs at the local level. Activist organizations such as SACOM (Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misbehavior) and individual anonymous anti-Disney activists called "Disney Hunters" have emerged to protest the unfair HKDL deal. They asserted that the money should have been used to help more of Hong Kong's indigent citizens.

> *I think it was the financial crisis in 1997. It was not something from the people, the ordinary people. [The Government needs to] generate more work opportunities… In 1997 many Hong Kong people desperately wanted to improve the economic situation. We must have a lot of land restoration. It was an unfair agreement with the Hong Kong government. The Hong Kong government must invest a lot of money, but we do not have a lot of sovereignty. We think the agreement is unfair. Disney has no transparency about what they earn …in these processes Hong Kong citizens cannot voice their concern (SACOM representative Interview 12-8-09).*

In response to the economic flight from Hong Kong, many policies were put in place to support and generate labor opportunities for locals who panicked. HKDL was advertised as a venue to promote jobs. HKDL was predicted to generate profits of $19 billion in 40 years and bring in more than 5.6 million visitors. Neither of these predictions came to fruition, although many jobs were, in fact, created. "With a huge amount of investment and multitudes of support, the HKSAR government estimated the creation of 16,000 jobs during construction of the park and 18,400 jobs for the routine operation of the park" (Tsang 2012). Disney did not want another huge cultural mishap and, therefore, sought to indigenize or acclimate to the local community.

In anticipation of the Great Britain's Hong Kong handover to Mainland China, many Hong Kong locals immigrated out while at the same time the area was experiencing an increasing unemployment rate. The conflation of these events was economically devastating to the Hong Kong government and its indigenous population. In the late 1990's, while Hong Kong was looking for an opportunity to turn itself around economically, The Walt Disney Company was working to rectify its own setbacks.

Euro Disneyland, now called Paris Disney, was a political, cultural, and economic disappointment both to The Walt Disney Company and the French, in that the projected attendance and profits levels were not met (Lainsbury 2000). French movie director Ariane Mnouchkine famously called the site a "Cultural Chernobyl" because it encouraged excessive U.S. commercialism and served alcohol-free mocktails. Disneyland Paris was also a disappointment in that it teetered close to bankruptcy several times, provoking protests by several groups. Tokyo Disneyland was also a missed financial opportunity for The Walt Disney Company. Although it can boast a very high local Japanese and Asian regional attendance, Disney does not get the full profit from Tokyo Disneyland because it is fully owned by the Japanese Oriental Company (Raz 1999). When Disney entered Hong Kong, it was determined not to repeat its cultural, labor and economic mistakes. Suffice to say both HK and Disney were looking to reinvigorate themselves.

Unequal Deal Between Hong Kong and Disney

The Hong Kong Disneyland theme park and economic partnership was touted as a potential savior of both Hong Kong and The Walt Disney Company. But the deal was inequitable from the start. As a major point of controversy between the partners, Hong Kong SAR paid 90% of the cost of infrastructure construction for the new park, but secured only a slight majority (57%) of shares in the project, with no executive privileges and no copyrights to merchandise (HKDL Annual Business Review Report 2011). The original contract was that the Hong Kong government invested US$2.9 billion (HK$23 billion) for a 57% equity stake. Disney invested US$316 million (HK$2.45 billion) for a 43% equity stake in the project (Hills and Welford 2006). This is only around 10% of the total cost and is an equal monetary commitment from both parties. "Disney laughingly told its Anaheim, California, shareholders they got a free theme park!" (HKDL worker Interview 2010).

Many Hong Kong students, scholars, activist groups, and local community members felt Disney had finagled the deal; they questioned whether Hong Kong would reap real economic benefits from its partnership. HKDL finally opened in Penny's Bay on Lantau Island in 2005. Shanghai Disneyland opened years later on June 16, 2016, to become a direct competitor, raising the ire of many Hong Kong people, for reasons that include the fact that it is cheaper and four times as large as the HKDL. Local criticism argues that that Hong Kong politicians were boondoggled by Disney. The French made the same argument when Disneyland opened in Paris in 1992. They called the park "cultural imperialism" and criticized the park for serving mocktails. It was also a financial venue that lost a lot of revenue.[5]

Accusations of Neocolonialism and Cultural Imperialism

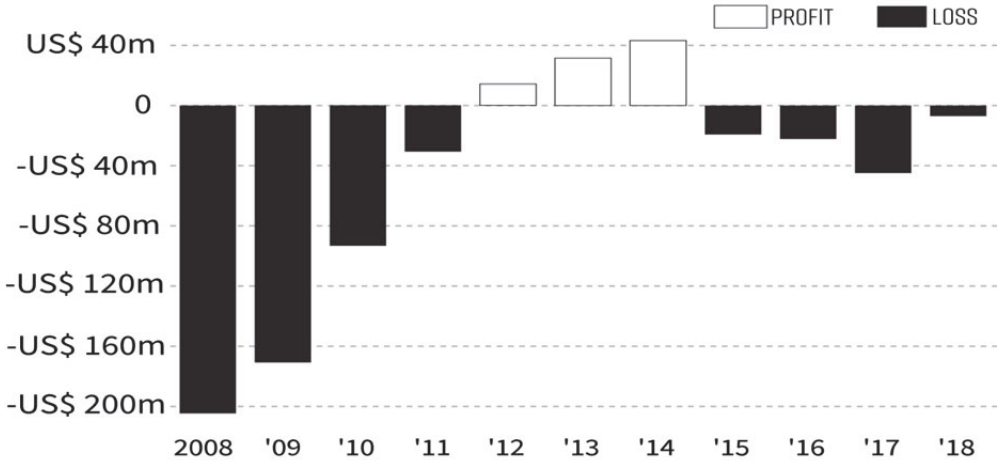
Some HK labor leaders thought of Disney as a neo-colonizer and culturally imperialistic. "They are trying to make Hong Kong a colony of Disney," says Labor Leader and legislator Lee Cheuk-yan." (Wiseman 2005). Edward Said's, book *Orientalism* (1978) goes over the patronizing way that the West has treated and depicted the Orient and its inhabitants for centuries. He defines the Orient as the Middle East, Asia and North Africa which are the source of the Occident's oldest colonies. Orientalism refers to ideas of the Orients inferiority as an 1) academic field 2) world view, and 3) political justification for domination (Said 1978).

Said asserts that the West uses the Orient as an imaginary to juxtapose and define itself. For example, the Occident defines itself as rational and forward thinking while it relegates the Orient as irrational and backwards. You can see egregious example of Orientalism or western superiority over the east in western art, literature and governing. HKDL directly intersects here in that one wonders why didn't the Hong Kong colonial government invest the money into a local venture instead of a Western behemoth. Did they not have confidence in developing their own cultural products. There is also an affordable housing crisis in Hong Kong that the government could have put the money they used to build HKDL.

Disney theorist, David Koenig (1995) and Janet Wasko (2011) assert that Disney is primarily a Capitalistic entity and it travels not only the world but also within its national borders to make profit. It is not necessarily loyal to any one country, but its executives tend to be American. The neocolonialism argument does not fit exactly as Hong Kong is an unique space that does not fit the strict definition of being neocolonialized by Disney as many of its residents accuse Mainland China of neocolonializing them.

Indeed, currently HKDL has not made a net profit for the majority of years it has been in operation. HKDL would not release the total net profit or loss for the years of 2006 and 2007 when it first opened to the ire of the Hong Kong local community who paid for the majority of the park. It was reported that the first two years were unprofitable. In 2008 there was an over 200 million profit loss followed by a 2009 over 160-million-dollar profit loss. These losses continued until 2011. In 2012 to 2014 there was a net profit from a range of 10 to 40 million. From 2015 onward there has been a net profit loss.

FIGURE 1
HONG KONG DISNEYLAND'S NET PROFIT/LOSS



Source: HKDL Annual Business Review for Fiscal Years 2009-2018

HKDL has been plagued by well-publicized public-relations issues, including multimillion-dollar revenue losses, low attendance, and labor abuse allegations. This article contends that the "Happiest Place on Earth**,**" Hong Kong Disneyland, is an important locus for the broader cultural conflict between Disney, Mainland China and the Hong Kong SAR. This conflict cannot be understood solely in the binary terms of East versus West; it also requires a nuanced understanding of the longstanding and deep intercultural conflict between Hong Kong locals and the Mainland Chinese. The Main Street USA simulacrum located in Hong Kong, China, is not the idyllic Walt Disney dream; rather, it is riddled with such everyday occurrences on the streets as random public urination, yelling, queue (or line) cutting, and — according to interviews with workers and my own observations — employment inequality.

Since Hong Kong Disneyland was conceived, there has been a revolving door of Hong Kong Disneyland Managing Directors. At the 2001 inception Steve Tight was the managing director. That position transitioned to long-term Disney executives Don Robinson (2001-2005) and William Ernest (2006-2008). After that, the managing director became Andrew Kam (2008-2016), a former Coca Cola executive in China who was able to turn the HKDL park into a profitable venture in 2010, but who resigned in 2016 for "personal reasons" (Sun 2016). His departure was stunning enough, but his next step sent shockwaves through the tourism community: he was hired and has since become president of Disney's chief rival, Wanda Group theme parks Mainland China. Dailan's Wanda founder Wang Jianlin, China's richest man, has publicly stated that he will "squash" Shanghai Disneyland and will make it non-profitable within 10-20 years (Cendrowski 2016). *Fortune Magazine* continues: "They [Disney] shouldn't have entered China. We have a [saying]: one tiger is no match for a pack of wolves. Shanghai has one Disney, while Wanda, across the nation, will open 15 to 20."

TABLE 1
MANAGING DIRECTORS OF HONG KONG DISNEYLAND

Name	Country of Origin	Time in Position	Previous Position	Current Position
Steven Tight[6]	USA	N/A	Disney Co. 17+years	Pres. Cesar Ent. Corp
Don Robinson	USA	2001 – 2006	Disney Co. 34+years	Pres. Baha Mar Ld.
William Ernest	USA	2006 – 2008	Disney Co. 24+years	CEO Saudi Ent. Ventures Co.
Andrew Kam	Hong Kong*[7]	2008-2016	Coca Cola, China	Pres. Wanda Themed Ent.
Samuel Lau	Hong Kong *[8]	2016-2018	Epcot VP	Walt Disney, FL
Stephanie Young	USA	2018 - Present	Disney Co. 24+years CFO HKDL 2006-09	Current HKDL Managing Dir.

Source: LinkedIn and *South China Morning Post*, (March 7, 2016) [9]

Hong Kong Labor History Related to Disney

All global Disney workers including HKDL workers are influenced by capitalism's race to the bottom in search of the cheapest labor. Globalization has enabled corporations to pit different regions against one another, which forces individual countries to lower their environmental and labor standards (Bonacich 2001). After 1978, when China opened its so-called "bamboo curtain" to the West, many of those Hong Kong factories began to transfer to Guangdong, China (Lee, 2003). This represents one of the fastest deindustrialization cases in the world. In a very short time period, countless Hong Kong middle-aged factory workers were left unemployed when their jobs transferred to Mainland China. These factory workers, who were not formally educated, felt abandoned; high-paying work for them was simply non-existent (Chiu and Lee 1997). Some of the former workers retreated back to homes or were forced to settle on much lower-paying jobs.

The project of HKDL was promoted by the political and business elite as a panacea for the high Hong Kong unemployment rate in the 1980s and '90s. The Hong Kong government said the park would provide thousands of jobs for indigenous Hong Kong workers. The word "indigenous" apparently did not apply to the executive level, because four of the six top executives of Hong Kong Disneyland were of Anglo-American descent. This is a continuation of the race to the bottom argument in global labor (Bonacich 2001). This international, intra-national, and transnational labor force complicates the ability of Disney to achieve the hiring of a true indigenized labor force in Hong Kong. For example, the Hong Kong labor culture is distinct from the Disney work culture in its sense of space, time, and treatment. In addition, international laborers come with their own culturally appropriate notions of proper work behavior.[10]

Labor Violation Prior to the HKDL Opening

Complaints about labor violations preceded the official 2005 opening of the park. Disney could not control the major initial negative publicity about labor improprieties that these construction workers brought to light. Disney spokespersons have said they are aware of the disagreements between workers and the company. The builders of the park, which composed of some Hong Kong indigenous local workers, complained that they were being underpaid for their work. The construction workers reported that Disney did not pay them for some of their work, which resulted in a protest outside the Disney gates. It should be noted that the construction workers were not hired by Disney. HKDL outsourced the construction work to contract companies, which then hired the workers. HKDL paid the subcontracted company, but the latter did not pay the workers. I would argue that HKDL still has some responsibility toward the workers and many multinational corporations do this type of subcontracting to say they are not involved in the process.

Many Hong Kong residents, including all of my interviewees, became aware of these types of labor violations because they heard and saw a constant barrage of negative publicity. Further complicating reports of labor difficulties after the opening of Hong Kong Disneyland is this claim by the workers that they were underpaid even before the park was officially opened. There was even talk that the fireworks would add more toxic pollution to HK already very polluted environment. Like Disney, the Hong Kong government was not forthcoming in its response to local construction worker claims. These on-going social and labor protests primed Hong Kong residents to be very wary of the promises of the HKDL project.

Choi argued (2012) that Hong Kong labor laws are not especially powerful because the government tried to be "non-interventionist," which insinuated that workers at Hong Kong Disneyland lacked a strong legal footing for their complaints due to a lack of governmental support. Disney already had a long history of being anti-union and anti-labor in its United States theme parks and housing developments.[11] This connects directly to HKDL workers who have historically been discouraged from unionizing. For example, Disneyland has its own official Disney human resource group where workers can report complaints. However, workers often do not feel comfortable with complaining to a Disney human resource group that is part of Disneyland. Hong Kong Disneyland has a union that is outside of Disneyland calledHong Kong Disneyland Cast Members Union. In 2006, this union reported many new staff complaints, including lower pay, ill treatment, and injuries.

TABLE 2
HKDL LABOR GRIEVANCES

Labor Abuse Claims
Superior attitude of Disney
Builders of HKDL underpaid
Food and Health Inspectors forced to remove badges
Hot costumed characters and less break time
Unequal pay between
Overwork: Forcing staff to work 11- and 13-hour days
Rewriting daily work schedules without notice
Dozens of employees leaving jobs

Source: Shenzhen Daily12 and SACOM13

Ongoing Labor Issues

Before Hong Kong Disneyland opened to the public on September 12, 2005, Food and Environmental Department health inspectors were forced to remove their badges when they came into the park because of worries they would alarm the guests. This is an unheard-of affront to Hong Kong governmental agency

workers and would not be tolerated in other parts of Hong Kong. Disney has many policies of maintaining the "magic" illusion that one is away from the real world. One such regulation is that police, governmental and other public agency worker's identities must be concealed. Disney also has a large grooming and dress policy. For example, standard employee Disney regulations insist on no beards, colored hair, long hair, or cell phone use. Costumed Disney employees are given a standard period of time for rest; however, Hong Kong Disneyland employees were not given the same amount of time as Disney's costumed employees in Florida and California. The temperatures are hotter and more humid at HKDL than the US Disney's. A major issue for some Hong Kong Disney workers was that they were "given only 15 minutes rest time every four hours, whereas their U.S. counterparts rest after two" (Dembina 2005). The weather in Hong Kong can be extremely hot and humid and the costumes get even hotter. Labor activists charge Disney with forcing staff to work 11- and 13-hour days, providing inadequate breaks and rewriting daily work schedules without notice. "'Their management is very backward,' says Elaine Hui of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, which is trying to organize Disney workers into a union," (Wiseman, 2005). Many of the local Hong Kong people interviewed stated that they were aware of these infractions because they had been well publicized. Local community members have also expressed dismay at the common knowledge of the amount of bad publicity the park has received in the media. According to Choi, dozens of employees have left their jobs because they felt they were mistreated and not being properly promoted (2011). The original marketing team was given word that they were dismissed in the morning and had to clear out by the afternoon (HKDL Marketer Interview, 2010).

Workers themselves have rarely been asked if indigenization or accommodating the local community has been successful. I asked HKDL workers if they thought the indigenization of food, labor, or space (*feng shui*) was successful. My respondents quickly agreed that the food was not as good as local food that was cheaper and better tasting. One engineer said the actual construction of the park was high quality but *feng shui* had no effect on him. They also commented that the labor indigenization was problematic and changing. The workers cited the unequal treatment between the different ethnic HKDL workers as a reason.

Participants

TABLE 3
PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonyms	Gender	HKDL Position	Nationality	Age
Reyes	Male	Dancer	Filipino	28
Lam	Male	Middle Manager	Hong Kong	47
Liu	Female	Engineer	Hong Kong	32
Smith	Male	Executive	British	57

Source: Author Semi-formal Interviews 2010-2014

Hong Kong Disneyland is very notorious for being very secretive about its practices especially in the realm of its labor force hirings and firings. The Hong Kong Disneyland site was created to give employment opportunities to *local* residents of Hong Kong which I define as labor indigenization. According the *South China Morning Post* "the Hong Kong government holds 53 per cent of shares in the

park, which employs more than 5,300 full-time and 2,500 part-time staff."[14] In this section I highlight the sentiments of HKDL workers who reflected on whether or not the indigenization of the park was effective for them. The employees were HKDL Middle Manager Mr. Lam, HKDL Engineer Mr. Liu, and HKDL Dancer Mr. Reyes. The first two were Hong Kong locals, third was Filipino and the fourth was British.

FINDINGS

Ms. Liu, 32 years old, had been one of the many American and Hong Kong engineers who was involved in the park's construction. She felt the American engineers looked down on the Hong Kong engineers. She witnessed the many stages of the park's development. She learned about Disney as a child and had visited all the Disney parks throughout the world. Ms. Liu did not believe HKDL had fair labor practices. Ms. Liu said she was aware, for example, that the costumed workers did not get breaks and were not treated well. She also mentioned the environmental controversy about the building of the park. I asked about her feelings of Disney and his employment with Disney. She said that Disney had a lot of "wants." They wanted Hong Kong to create the exact infrastructure and design Disney planned. All the landscape design was by Disney. The Hong Kong government selected the environmentally controversial Penny Bay for the site of the park, and gave it to Disney free of charge. Ms. Liu stated that building the park was a huge job with a tight time frame. The job was made more difficult because Penny Bay had no roads or infrastructure. It was also controversial because many fish were destroyed in the process. "I won't give any more money to Disneyland," said Ms. Liu. On the several occasions that her job has taken her to HKDL, she has refused to eat anything while there. She was very disappointed in the HKDL Halloween party. She said that Ocean Park's and Tokyo Disney's Halloween were much better in execution. She is adamant that the Hong Kong taxpayer has already given enough to Disney. I asked her why she felt taxpayers had been duped. "The partnership is not even!" she said with strong feeling.

Mr. Lam pointed out the Intra-Chinese tension at the park between local Hong Kong people and Mainland Chinese tourists. Mr. Lam, 38 years old at the time of the interview, was born in Hong Kong and has been working in the entertainment industry for more than fifteen years. He knew nothing of Disney until age 12. As a manager at HKDL, he stated that the majority of worker hires were locals and were treated well. Mr. Lam asserted that visitors to HKDL were mostly from Mainland China,and tensions existed between local Hong Kong residents and Mainland Chinese. "Mainland Chinese tourists are different from Hong Kong tourists in terms of culture, attitude, and manners" said Mr. Lam. He continued, "Maybe HK tourists are cleaner and neater; Mainland tourists are the opposite of Hong Kong tourists." Here one might be able to tie in British colonialization as Hong Kong was colonialized for over 100 years and that has had a great effect on the public behavior of the populace.

The kinds of problems Mr Lam alludes to is that there is a cultural conflict between Mainland Chinese and Hong Konger; Hong Kongers have adopted many western norms such queuing and sanitation culture. There is no queuing culture in Mainland China and thus Mainland Chinese will "cut lines" at HKDL to the anger of local Hong Kongers who are patiently waiting in lines. There are many observed disputes between these two groups over queuing at the park and often the HKDL staff must intercede.

Labor Indigenization: It is just another Job.

Mr. Lam stated that people of all ages worked for HKDL. Some worked because it was Disney, preferring to work there because of the company's Western American branding. Mr. Lam stated that, for him, working at HKDL was simply an opportunity for advancement. "The offer was good and not the same as my other Hong Kong jobs." He said that Disney work culture is quite different from Hong Kong work culture. Disney has multiple guidelines and a strong commitment to its work culture. Although he stated Disney had a different work culture than his previous jobs, he had no opinion if it was better or worse. Most HKDL workers just saw it as another job which contrasts with US Disney workers who often say they are massive Disneyphiles.

Mr. Lam maintained that the majority of the workers were Chinese from Hong Kong and very few were American employees. He spoke of the Filipino and Mainland Chinese dancers and singers as the exception. “Filipino workers are employed in the area of entertainment, they can dance and sing better than locals,” said Mr. Lam. In the future he believed there would be a tendency to get more workers from Mainland China, which provides cheaper laborers than the Hong Kong residents. Because the Mainland workers can cross the Mainland Chinese border to go home, a housing provision was unnecessary. Filipino workers, on the other hand, were more expensive to hire, as their pay rate was higher than that of Mainland Chinese workers. They also had to fly to Hong Kong from the Philippines. Mr. Lam also communicated some of the negatives of working at Disney, specifically what he calls a superiority complex exhibited by some members of Anglo-American management. He also stated that he knows of some workers who feel they are treated unfairly by management.

Mr. Reyes, 28 years old, had not become interested in Disney cartoons until he was eleven years old. In his early twenties, he applied to HKDL because he wanted to perform. He knew many types of dance, including hip hop, ballet, and jazz. His two-day audition and interview with Disney took place at The Music School of Ryan Cayabyab in the Philippines, where he was told to "Help bring the magic to life!" The age requirement for dance auditions was at least 18 years old. Disney representatives taught the performers a routine to be used in the audition. Mr. Reyes’s audition took two hours, during which he was asked to perform several routines. In a two-day period, 200 to 400 people tried out with perhaps 50 to 200 people hired for each show. The ethnic composition of the Hong Kong Disney labor force was primarily Chinese, Filipino, and American. After a successful audition, Reyes danced in the Lion King and the Golden Mickey shows at Hong Kong Disneyland. Although he loved performing, he was also aware that workers were not treated equally. Americans received a housing allowance and sometimes free housing which the Filipinos did not receive. He felt management was not fair. He admitted freely, I “disliked the system -- there is some discrimination in treatment. It is not fair! There is more attention [given] to the Chinese. For example, Filipino dancers [must give] more “runs” [performances] than Chinese dancers. Filipinos sometimes have to dance four or five runs when the Chinese [dance] only two runs.” Mr Reyes continued that he did not care for Disney indigenization attempts in spatial arrangement, language, and food.

Mr. Smith, 57 years old is a HKDL executive and has been a fan of Disney since a child. When asked what he thought of the indigenization of space, labor, and consumption he seemed positive and vague. He mentioned that he thought that Hong Kong and Asian people in general had a very strong work ethic. “Their work ethic is better than western workers. Westerners will never work as hard as these Asian workers.” He commented that when HKDL first opened it sold “garish sequined HKDL tops” because that is what the Mainland Chinese preferred to but over the years, he has observed that the Mainland Chinese are dressing more in line with the global norms. The park still sells HKDL sequin tops and hats but not as many. He said that he has heard complaints of unequal treatment and salary disputes by the workers. Mr. Smith thought the food was fine and the three languages that the park catered too was a good indigenization to the local and international visitors. Smith was especially complimentary toward the two HKDL hotels. He noted they were staffed well and run efficiently. It also employed the space indigenization of *feng shui*.

In summary, the significance of these voices is that all felt or heard of HKDL workers who were not being treated equally in some way except for executive. Mr. Lam felt the upper management did not treat the staff as well as they should. He also predicted more and more of the staff may be replaced by cheaper Mainland Chinese workers. While Ms. Liu stated the park was foundationally sound, she did not like her American engineer counterparts who she felt projected a superior attitude. Liu felt the demands of Disney upper management were too lavish and unnecessary. Mr Reyes, a Filipino dancer at the park affirmed that the American and Chinese dancers had fewer dance “runs” than he was required to perform and were given housing allowances. He felt the difference in treatment was very unfair and he disliked management to the point that he quit HKDL. Mr. Smith, and executive was the most positive about HKDL indigenization in that he thought the language and food were good accommodations. He did mention that

he heard of the labor complaints by the workers. All the HKDL employees, except for Mr. Smith did not care for Disney's attempts at indigenization through use of food and space.

CONCLUSION

In his policy speeches of 1997 to 2000 Hong Kong executive Chief Tung Chee-Hwa promoted HKDL to the Hong Kong people as an opportunity for employment of indigenous or local labor (SACOM, 2013). As discussed, several factors attributed laying the groundwork for the Disney/Hong Kong partnership, such as the 1997 return to Mainland China, Bird Flu and Asian financial crisis, all of which took a negative toll on the workers of Hong Kong by severely reducing job opportunities. Later the 2003 SARS outbreak, September 11, 2001 further decimated international travel to Hong Kong. The gap left by these happenings was thought to be filled by HKDL, the hope also was that the theme park would fill the economic void created by the departure of small industries. HKDL did provide some needed labor to Hong Kong residents which was positive. My research shows, however, that some HKDL workers have different worker experiences based upon their positions, class, and ethnic background. Labor violations claims were filed even before the park opened and a steady stream of Mainland Chinese sweatshop labor injustice claims have been publicized (SACOM 2013).

My interviews illustrate that some of the HKDL workers felt they were treated unequally because of their nationality and ethnicity. One could argue that this was because of the cultural imperialistic attitudes of the other nationalities. The Hong Kong engineer believed the Americans engineers felt superior to the Hong Kong engineers. This contrasts with the middle manager who acknowledged he was treated well but he knew of both happy and unhappy employee situations. The Filipino dancers I spoke with complained they were forced to dance more shows than dancers of other nationalities such as American and Hong Konger. The HKDL executive was the most positive about indigenization attempts of food and space but he stated he has heard of labor complaints. HKDL workers also showed resistance by not employing emotional labor such as constant smiling and saying "*Have a Magical Day*" to all guests. They also resisted by quitting, and not financially supporting the theme park.

I argue that full indigenization may not work in a place like Hong Kong, and its microcosm, HKDL where so much of its identity is formed by the transience of groups residing from other countries. HKDL labor indigenization is complicated with the inclusion of an international, intra-national, and transnational HKDL workforce. This study affirms this point of the unique character of the Hong Kong worker's indigeneity. Based on the information that I have collected; future studies should explore what HKDL workers think about the increasing number of inexpensive Mainland Chinese workers who work at HKDL. A future study to look at what HKDL workers and the local community feel the opening of Shanghai Disneyland would be welcomed.

ENDNOTES

1. Pseudonyms are used for all employee names. These were semi-formal interviews that were taken outside the park.
2. It is not easy to be hired as a skilled foreign worker in Hong Kong. You have to fulfill a certain requirement and you need to get governmental approval. The worker has to have expert knowledge that local Hong Konger do not have. Something that I see a lot is Filipino dancers and singers in which there are not enough of in Hong Kong.See https://www.guidemehongkong.com/business-guides/staffing-your-business/work-visa/hong-kong-visa-for-employees
3. Disney is very secretive about their attendance numbers and labor force. They do not release all the information and it took a public outcry to get them to reveal their attendance.
4. It should be noted that expatriate overseas Chinese belong to the TCC in other countries. For example, the SM Company is operated by ethnic Chinese who own shopping malls in the Philippines. Ethnic Chinese in SE Asia are very prominent in Asian international trading. See Aiwha Ong, 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* Durham: Duke University Press.

5. See Lainsbury, Andrew. (2000). *Once Upon an American Dream: The Story of Euro Disneyland.* University Press of Kansas.
6. See Steven Tight biography at https://investor.caesars.com/management/steven-tight. Retrieved on June 28, 2016. Accessed at May 29, 2019
7. *Educated in Canada
8. *Educated in USA
9. Sun, Nikki, 2016. "Hong Kong Disneyland drops bombshell as it announces sudden resignation of managing director for 'personal reasons." *South China Morning Post*, March 7, 2016. Accessed at https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/economy/article/1921963/hong-kong-disneyland-drops-bombshell-it-announces-sudden
10. This is particularly important if HKDL is seeking acceptance in HK. Without *full* local input, they cannot be fully successful.
11. While China is a socialist economy based on Marxist thought it actually has many "Chinese characteristics" that diverges drastically from orthodoxy. The Socialist Chinese government was founded in 1949 and everyone was put in a commune which had mixed results. Some argued that since there was no incentive people chose not to work as hard. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping opened up China and let farmers sell products to make an individualized profit. China created "Special Economic Zones" (SARS) where Capitalism was allowed and encouraged. Hong Kong has a very different past as a British colony but it now termed a SAR. See *Is China Socialist?* By Alan Wong and Viola Zhou. Retrieved on June 28, 2016. Accessed at May 26, 2019 at https://www.inkstonenews.com/china-translated/china-translated-china-socialist/article/2161467).
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14. Sun, Nikki. 2016. "First large-scale lay-offs at Hong Kong Disneyland strike fear in city's tourism industry." *South China Morning Post*. April 15, 2016. Retrieved on June 28, 2016. Accessed at May 27, 2019 at https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/economy/article/1936263/first-large-scale-lay-offs-hong-kong-disneyland-strike-fear).

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