

April 25, 2005

The Feng Shui Kingdom

By [LAURA M. HOLSON](#)

When building the new entrance to Hong Kong Disneyland, Walt Disney executives decided to shift the angle of the front gate by 12 degrees. They did so after consulting a feng shui specialist, who said the change would ensure prosperity for the park. Disney also put a bend in the walkway from the train station to the gate, to make sure the flow of positive energy, or chi, did not slip past the entrance and out to the China Sea.

Heeding the advice of a feng shui consultant is one of many steps Disney executives have taken at the park to reflect the local culture - and to make sure they do not repeat some mistakes of the past.

When Disney opened Disneyland Paris in a former sugar beet field outside Paris in 1992, the company was roundly criticized for being culturally insensitive to its European guests. Now Disney burns incense ritually as each building is finished in Hong Kong, and has picked a lucky day (Sept. 12) for the opening.

The financial stakes are high: international growth is a critical part of Disney's expansion efforts. In Asia, Mickey Mouse, Buzz Lightyear and Winnie-the-Pooh are hardly household names, and Disney wants to change that. Mainland China is expected to become one of the world's largest tourist destinations in the next 15 years, according to the World Tourism Organization, an international group that oversees policy issues. That trend bodes well for Disney, as Hong Kong itself is already in the top 15.

"It used to be Disney was exported on its own terms," said Robert Thompson, a professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "But in the late 20th and early 21st century, America's cultural imperialism was tested. Now, instead of being the ugly Americans, which some foreigners used to find charming, we have to take off our shoes or belch after a meal."

Plans for Hong Kong Disneyland, Disney's 11th theme park and a replica of the original Disneyland, began in 1999 for the undeveloped Lantau Island, a 30-minute train ride from downtown Hong Kong. Built on Penny's Bay and flanked by mountains, the park is a venture with the Hong Kong government and the first of the parks that Disney wants to build in China, including one in Shanghai. Disney invested \$316 million for a 43 percent equity stake in Hong Kong Disneyland; the rest is owned by the Hong Kong government, which contributed \$419 million. (The park has \$1.1 billion in debt.)

Some of the dazzling visual effects and nods to cultural differences at Hong Kong Disneyland may seem like so much marketing. One of the park's main ballrooms, which will surely be used for Disney's popular wedding services, measures 888 square meters, because 8 is thought to be a number of fortune, said Wing Chao, who is the master planner of architecture and design at Walt Disney Imagineering. In Chinese, the number four is considered bad luck so there are no fourth-floor buttons in the elevators at the Hollywood Hotel or other hotels in the park.

Cash registers are close to corners or along walls, where such placement is believed to increase prosperity. And in the park's upscale restaurant, Crystal Lotus, Disney installed a virtual koi pond where computer-animated fish dart away from guests who walk on a glass screen. The pond is one of five feng shui elements in the restaurant; the others are wood, earth, metal and fire, which glows on a screen behind bottles in the bar. "We could not have real fire because of the fire code," said Mr. Chao.

After the mishaps at Euro Disney and, closer to home, problems with attendance at its California Adventure park in Anaheim, it is easy to understand why the company would take such pains. "I don't know anything about fire and kitchens and where fire belongs and what doesn't," said Jay Rasulo, president of Disney's theme parks and resorts division. "But I certainly have learned that you need to respect people."

Tourists sniffed at California Adventure when it opened in 2001, saying it looked more like a shopping mall than a theme park. In recent years, Disney added, at considerable expense, the Tower of Terror thrill ride and an attraction based on the animated film "A Bug's Life."

The French government recently helped bail out Euro Disney, the parent company of Disneyland Paris, offering loan concessions and investments to save it from bankruptcy. Though its finances have been restructured, Euro Disney is still about \$2 billion in debt. And many in the entertainment industry considered the opening of Disneyland Paris a study in how not to open a theme park.

Mr. Rasulo, who was president of Euro Disney from 1998 to 2000, said Disneyland Paris grew quickly as a tourist attraction in Europe, with 10 million visitors its first year. But he conceded the park was initially larger than it should have been, and was financed using too much debt.

Profits at Euro Disney in recent years have been slim to nonexistent; the park has shown a net loss for the last three fiscal years, according

to Disney. By contrast, Hong Kong Disneyland is being built in two smaller phases, and is carrying half the debt of its French sibling.

Disneyland Paris got off to a bad start by not offering wine when it opened, a culinary faux pas among the French. After wine was later introduced, Disney hoped to placate parkgoers by offering more French food. "Our guests told us, 'Guess what? That's not what we want,' " Mr. Rasulo said. What they wanted, he said, was distinctly American corn bread and barbecued chicken.

Disney also misunderstood how Europeans plan vacations. Unlike Americans, who often book their trips directly with Disney, Europeans rely more on travel agents. In 1992, Disney did not adequately train travel agents, leading to fewer bookings, said Mr. Rasulo. By contrast, Disney marketing executives in Asia have been training travel agents for months, mostly in China, where the company expects one-third of the park's business to come from.

Teaching the Chinese about Disney may be critical to the park's success there. Disney merchandise and characters are little known in Asia outside of Japan, where the company has had a successful theme park for 22 years. China, in particular, has resisted the spread of Western culture. For Disney, analysts say, Hong Kong Disneyland is an opportunity to introduce new generations to princess costumes, Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animals and Mickey Mouse T-shirts.

Last year Disney hired the Chinese pop singer Jacky Cheung to host the "Magical World of Disneyland," a television show where classic animated films like "Tarzan," "Dumbo" and "Alice in Wonderland" are introduced to the Chinese. Based on the format developed and made popular by Walt Disney, Mr. Cheung gives a brief introduction of Disney and the theme park before the movie starts.

Because of the diverse cultures in Asia, said Mr. Rasulo, Disney had to be flexible. Park employees will speak three languages: English, Cantonese and Mandarin. At a recent tasting of dishes to be served in the park's eight restaurants - everything from curry to noodles to sushi - Disney executives considered a hamburger prepared by a local chef.

"I've had curry before and I've had sushi before, but this was a hamburger that didn't taste like a hamburger that I knew," said Tom Fitzgerald, a senior creative executive at Imagineering. (He said it tasted like pork meat loaf.) "You don't want to say, 'Well, this is the way we make a hamburger in the States and so that's the way we're going to make a hamburger here.' " Disney went with the proposed burger.

The park has a topiary garden where Minnie and Mickey Mouse and other characters will pose for photographs with guests, a favorite pastime with international parkgoers. One of the most anticipated attractions is the Jungle River Cruise. Unlike other parks with a similar attraction, Disney has created Cambodian ruins for guests to float past, and an unruly pack of hippos. "Instead of the guns that scare off the hippos, we actually have our hippos in Hong Kong have bad breath and then they belch," said Mr. Fitzgerald.

While talk of feng shui may seem like overkill to those with Western sensibilities, Mr. Rasulo said that as a practice it was just common sense. Mr. Rasulo said Mr. Chao came to his office recently and suggested putting a mirror on the wall behind his computer. "Now if my secretary wants to get my attention I can see her in the mirror," said Mr. Rasulo, with a laugh. "So it actually is an incredibly practical thing."