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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The theme park industry in China: A research review

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**Abstract:** In China, visiting theme parks has become a popular urban leisure activity, and the theme park is frequently used to project a healthy image of urban tourism. The popularity of theme parks draws academic attention to examining various issues related to the theme park sector. This review classifies and analyses 145 articles published in key Chinese journals over the past twenty-five years to identify the areas of concentration and the gaps in the research related to this field. The journal articles are conceptualised into three general areas of interest, and each area contains several categories. The first area is coded as “theme park as product”, including categories of thematic identity, cultural heritage, and lifecycle. The second area is coded as “theme park as industry”, including categories of management, competitive strategies, the tourism industry and the creative industry. The third area is coded as “theme park as city infrastructure”, including categories of urban planning and the local economy. Discourse on the theme park within the Chinese context is twofold. On the one hand, the theme park is a complex result of modernisation by demonstrating progress in urbanisation. On the other hand, the theme park serves as a representation of postmodernism by contributing to the confusion between the arts and the everyday life. Although previous research on the theme park industry has addressed various topics, this article notes a need to more thoroughly examine the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of theme parks on host communities.

**Subjects:** Chinese Culture & Society; Cultural Studies; Culture; Leisure Studies; Sport & Leisure Industries; Tourism; Urban Cultures; Urban Landscape; Urban Studies

**Keywords:** theme park; urban tourism; leisure culture; China; literature review

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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This paper is related to the first author's PhD project ‘social production of contemporary urban cultural space’, and the second author's project ‘Research on social implications of the cultural industry in China’. The topic of this paper is related to the emergent industries and leisure activities in urban China.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In China, visiting theme parks has become a popular urban leisure activity. This study provides multiple perspectives to understand the theme park based on analysis of 145 Chinese journal articles. That is to say, we could view the theme park from the perspectives of thematic identity, cultural heritage, lifecycle, management, competitive strategies, the tourism industry, the creative industry, urban planning, and the local economy. Although previous research on the theme park industry has addressed various topics, this article calls for more attention on the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of theme parks on host communities. Issues such as the pollution and corresponding technical solutions, spatial implications, social cohesion, and local-global cultural controversies should be addressed in-depth.

## 1. Introduction

Whether we love them or loathe them, theme parks are appearing with increasing frequency throughout the world (Lukas, 2008). Globally, the theme park industry has continued its healthy rate of post-recession attendance growth in recent years. Attendance at the world's 25 leading theme parks, which are primarily located in the US, Japan, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Korea, Hong Kong and Mainland China, totalled approximately 223.5 million visitors in 2014, according to the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA). In the top 25 list, Song-Cheng Park in Hangzhou is ranked 18th, and Chime-Long Ocean Kingdom in Guangzhou is ranked 20th. Three of world's 10 highest-attendance theme park groups in 2014 were Chinese companies: OCT Parks China (4th), the Chime-Long Group (9th) and Song-Cheng Worldwide (10th). The latter two groups are new stars in the ranking list. Overall, China's theme park industry has established a strong global reputation.

The first modern Chinese theme park, Splendid China, was opened in Shenzhen in 1989. Since then, other theme parks have sprung up, with the year 2000 identified as a turning point regarding growth. In the early stages, the majority of theme parks are artificial miniature landscapes based on traditional cultural resources or unique natural landscapes. The American theme parks are places through which people can temporarily escape from the worries of their everyday lives (Clavé, 2007). However, the Chinese intent of the theme park is notably different. The initial purpose of theme parks in China is to express the politics of nationalism and to spread Chinese traditional culture (Li & Zhu, 2003; Stanley, 2002). Splendid China, Folk Culture Villages and Window of the World are three typical Chinese theme parks, which offer clear cases of Chinese-style tourism and urban leisure activities. They are subordinated to the Overseas Chinese Town Group in Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone close to Hong Kong. The picture of theme parks at Shenzhen is a sophisticated sense of nationalism combined with western models. Situated close to Hong Kong, Splendid China is designed as an introduction to China to provide for both local and foreign visitors a trip round China's topography and culture. The Folk Culture Village shows how a great variety of peoples share a landscape and contribute different cultural perspectives. The Window of the World brings the rest of the world to China to demonstrate that China is connected with the world tightly. Majority theme parks, particularly those in the early stage, are aimed to strengthen the Chinese identity by the display and architecture of parks.

With the course of China's reforming and opening, people, especially those in East China cities, are influenced by consumerism and western thoughts, and the industries are updating, the society is under the transformation from production-oriented to consumer-oriented. In this changing context, theme parks are now regarded as leisure places not only possible educational and propaganda places of national identity. The entertainment function of the theme park is more substantial and acceptable. The boom of theme parks since the 1990s in China occurred during a significant expansion in the leisure-oriented service economy (Lou, 2012). Theme parks are frequently used to project a healthy image of urban leisure and tourism. As a favorite modern tourism product, the theme park contributes to the service economy and urban development and serves as an important complementary product in cities with abundant tourism resource, and as a vigorous product to break the bottleneck in the cities lack of modern leisure activities (Wen, 2002).

Theme parks have become popular urban leisure destinations and tourist attractions, and this popularity is reflected in numerous studies that examine various issues related to theme parks. Given the increasing importance of the theme park sector and the large volume of research on the subject, a critical review of past and current research is required. The purpose of this article is three-fold: to analyse academic Chinese journal articles on the theme park industry since the 1990s; to highlight the areas of research concentration and research paucity; and to suggest critical issues for future research.

## 2. Methods

The research approach for this study consists of a meta-analysis of published journal articles. Articles for analysis were gathered from key Chinese journals for the period 1990-2014. This time frame

included the high and low points of theme park development in Mainland China. The longitudinal perspective adopted in the study enables the identification of publication quantity trends, research patterns and the emergence of new themes, as well as gaps in the literature. An article's number of citations and the popularity of journals were significant publication-selection criteria used to determine eligibility for this study. The following four core Chinese journal databases served as the primary research sources:

- CSSCI: Chinese Social Science Citation Index, an authoritative directory of Chinese leading journals on social science and the humanities compiled by Nanjing University. The index includes about five hundred journals on management, Marxism, philosophy, religion, language, literature, arts, history, archaeology, economics, politics, laws, sociology, ethnology, journalism, pedagogy and psychology.
- GCCP: A Guide to Core Chinese Periodicals, a directory of Chinese journals with well impact factor on nature science, social science and the humanities compiled by Perking University. The listed journals overlap with CSSCI partly.
- CSCD: Chinese Science Citation Database, covers more one thousand kinds of excellent academic journals in areas of natural sciences, engineering and medical disciplines, including mathematics, physics, chemistry, earth science, agricultural science, and environmental sciences.
- CSTPC: Chinese Scientific and Technical Papers and Citations, a report of the evaluation of journals with many factors, particular impact factor, on nature science in both English and Chinese. The listed journals overlap with CSCD partly.

Only journals included in the core journal databases with high impact factors were considered. A journal included in two or more databases was considered as a single source.

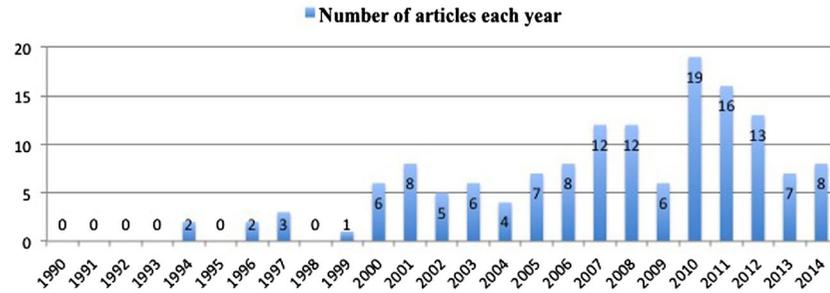
A keyword search was conducted as the first step in collecting articles from the core journal databases. The major keyword was “theme park” as a phrase. In Chinese, the term “theme park” can be expressed as both “zhuti gongyuan” and “zhuti leyuan”. Thus, both terms were used as keywords.

In the second step, a conceptual content analysis was conducted. Although the content analysis is usually considered as a quantitative method, according to Krippendorff (2004), the qualitative content analysis is valuable equally to make valid inferences from texts and to identify the emphasis of texts. In this study, the content analysis was conducted by a single researcher using NVivo 10, and verified by a second person. Firstly, all selected articles were full-text coded into first-level nodes, and the coding process was referred with a query of word frequency. And then, homogeneous nodes were combined. Secondly, the combined first-level nodes were inducted into second-level nodes (categories). In this step, mutual exclusion is significant. For example, whether the articles should be classified into a category of “management” or category of “competitive strategies” depends on the classification criterion that competitive strategies articles focus on innovation and competition. Thirdly, categories were inducted into three third-level nodes (conceptual categories). Once the classification categories were initially completed, the “second person” was involved in developing and refining the classification. In more details, the “second person” questioned the classification of some articles, and discussed with the first author and to finally make sure the classification is relevance and reasonable.

### 3. Results

In total, 145 academic articles from 65 journals published between 1990 and 2014 were examined. These scholarly journals cover numerous areas, including tourism, geography, finance, economics and design. The first theme park-focused article in the key journal was published in 1994, five years after the first modern theme park opened in 1989. The academic delay is understandable considering that China's social development and Chinese modern academic research systems were in the starting but immature step in the early 1990s. The number of articles remained below 3 per year during the 1990s. From 2000 to 2009, 74 articles were published—ten times the total of the

**Figure 1. Number of key Chinese journal articles on the theme park.**



preceding decade. The number of journal articles focused on the theme park peaked in 2010 at 19 articles. After 2010, the number of articles slightly decreased (Figure 1).

We have made many revisions of codes according to methods described previously. There are 26 first-level codes, which then are classified into 10 s-level codes. In more details, theme choice and design are classified into “thematic identity”. Traditional Chinese culture and the evaluation of landscape are classified as “cultural heritage”. Long-term vitality, protection and reconstruction are classified into the “lifecycle”. A general review of a city’s theme parks, project, operation, and market are classified as the “management”. Articles focused on innovation and competitions are classified as “competitive strategies”. Tourist satisfaction, perceived sense of crowding, psychological variation, experience values, seasonality of tourist flow and perception of residents are classified as “the tourism industry”. Technique application and creative application are classified as “the creative industry”. Spatial distribution, evaluation system, and land availability are classified as “urban planning”. The tourism-oriented real estate and the tourism-based employment are classified as “the local economy”. Only one literature review is coded as an independent category (Figure 2).

The 10 s-level codes are conceptualised into three third-level codes. In more details, the second-level codes of thematic identity, cultural heritage, and lifecycle are conceptualised in one area as “theme park as product”. As any product has a theme, an outlook, and a lifecycle, there three codes contribute to both tangible and intangible elements of theme parks as manufactured goods and purpose-built attractions. The second-level codes of management, competitive strategies, the tourism industry and the creative industry are classified as a third-level “theme park as industry”. The industry focus differs from that of the product because industry implications are greater and more

**Figure 2. Major categories of journal articles on the theme park.**

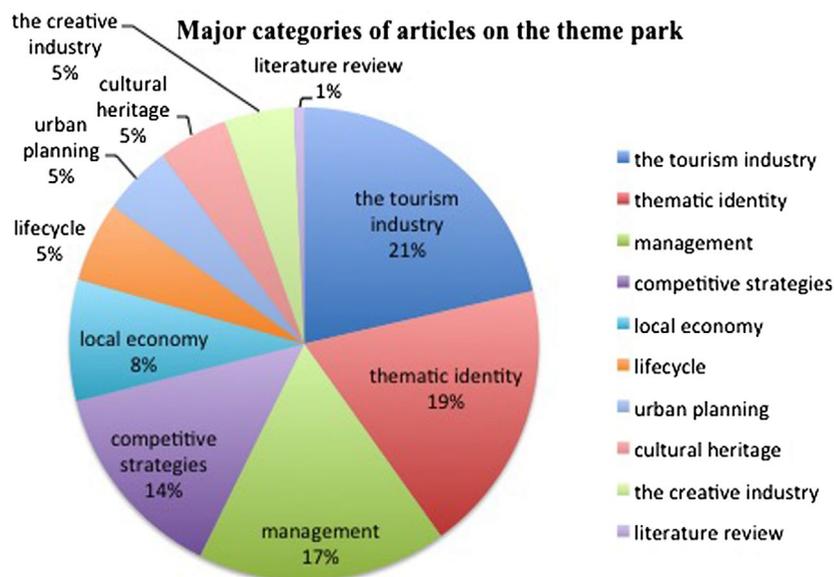
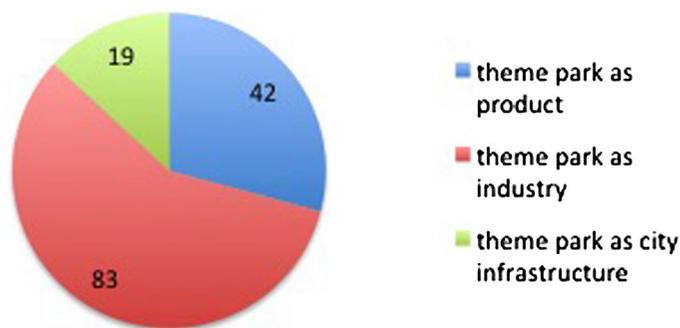


Figure 3. Conceptual analysis of journal articles on the theme park.

### Conceptual analysis of the research articles



strategic. Research from the industry perspective has devoted substantial attention to management and competitive strategies, which contribute to economic benefits and the comprehensive economic power of the theme park industry. The second-level codes of urban planning and the local economy are classified as “theme park as city infrastructure”. Theme parks do not exist in isolation; rather they are viewed as tools for executing strategies of renewed spatial equilibrium, productive diversification, and economic growth. The parks are not only complementary to city functions but are also components of city infrastructure (Figure 3).

The following section provides an overview of the literature on the theme park (Table 1). In particular, it describes some of the work being undertaken, the general trends and development of work, and the potential for the future research.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. Thematic identity

This category is concerned with an aspect of the theme park that should be considered in the first step. The choice of a theme for a park is of vital importance. Theming involves the use of story, spectacle and technology to create an atmosphere of entertainment that evokes a fantasy, a location or an idea (Clavé, 2007) to provide a park with distinction and attractiveness. Articles on theme choice have devoted substantial attention to how one type of theme is applied, such as aquatic projects in cities, ornamental fish, animation, movies/TV or classical literature. A number of articles discuss the feasibility of novel themes such as solar energy, marine life and air tours. An important point related to this topic overlooked in current Chinese research is that the thematic identify is not merely a subject or an architectural technology of the material world; it is a means of social interaction and a performative practice (Lukas, 2007).

Articles on physical design examine function design, sense design and symbolic construction. The articles discuss the design of functional objects including architecture, public facilities and guidance systems, particularly in the early stages of development. Regarding sense design, the majority of studies focus on visual design (Fang, 2014; Han & Duan, 2012; Li, Hao, & Zhou, 2014; Xu, Niu, & Liu, 2007). It is novel to examine the way in which natural and artificial acoustic sources affect the visitor's degree of comfort (Wang, Qiu, Sha, & Qi, 2013). One notable design trend is to emphasise the metaphor of material objects (Yu, 2010) because symbolic construction is a process used to furnish a park with meaningful and distinctive characters.

After several waves of theme park construction, repeated theme choice has become a challenge in Mainland China. Therefore, studies on theme choice and design are critical to the development of theme park industry research because developers are likely to ask fundamental questions such as how to choose the right theme and appropriate design.

**Table 1. Classification of journal articles on the theme park**

	<b>Thematic identity</b>	<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<b>Lifecycle</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Competitive strategies</b>	<b>Tourism</b>	<b>Creative industry</b>	<b>Urban planning</b>	<b>Local economy</b>
1	2000, Study on planning of modern theme parks	2005, Protection of intangible cultural heritage: A case study of Mo and Mohism	2001, Sustainable development of Kunming Expo Garden	1996, Successful marketing strategies: A case study of OCT cultural tourism	1994, Economic impacts and value orientation of theme park	1997, Development of modern theme park industry: A view from modern tourism	2002, Study on the first panorama stage in theme park: From technology perspective	1994, Distribution of theme parks in Shenzhen and Zhuhai	1996, Development of regional tourist real estate
2	2000, Thoughts about planning and design of theme parks	2006, General plan for cultural theme park of Cheng-He Boat as tourist attraction	2003, Sustainable development of OCT: A theoretical perspective	2000, Problems, causes and solutions of theme parks in Xiamen	1997, The tendency of gardens in contemporary world	1999, Quantitative study on distribution of tourists in OCT parks	2003, Analysis on OCT Group: From cultural industry perspective	2006, Site selection of theme park	2001, Reflections on situation of theme parks in China
3	2001, Planning and design of theme parks: An overview	2010, Epic-style theme park: Wu Cultural tourism landscape development strategy	2005, Reflection on operation and management of Yunnan Nationalities Village	2000, Theme park development in Wuhan	1997, Systematic analysis of influent factors to theme park development	2000, Theme park in Wuhan: from tourism perspective	2005, The production mode of tourism performance: From cultural industry perspective	2006, An approach to interaction of World Expo and the theme park	2003, Relationship between the construction of theme park and urban development
4	2001, Ponder on the theme park	2010, Value evaluation of historical theme park	2009, A new model of revitalising historical district: A case of the Three-Gorges	2000, Principles of theme park development	2004, Historical lessons from development of European Disneyland	2001, Tourism image design in the improvement of Kunming World Horticultural Garden	2008, Creativeness of American theme park	2011, Location index of global theme parks	2005, Economic impacts of the theme park on real estate
5	2003, Conception and design of theme park: A case of ornamental fish park	2010, Ponder on the Haisi cultural theme park in Quanzhou	2010, Sustainable vitality of theme park	2001, Problems and solution of theme parks in Hangzhou	2004, Competition focuses and counter measures of modern theme park	2001, An Analysis of tourists survey in OCT theme parks of 2000	2008, Impacts of new products on theme park based on liner model: A theoretical perspective	2012, An exploratory research on tourism complex	2005, Impacts of the theme park on regional economy and development
6	2004, On the present situation and trend of the development of China's movie and TV tourism	2011, Theme park and non-material cultural heritage protection: A case study of Tang Paradise	2010, Sustainable development of theme park based on brand building model	2001, Scientific analysis and development proposals on theme parks in Guangzhou	2005, Performance and trend of theme park: An analysis of competitive strategies	2002, Development of tourist-based theme park: A case of OCT parks in Shenzhen	2011, Artificiality, technology, consumption and super-realistic landscape of the theme park	2012, Value engineering-based location decision model of the theme park	2007, Situation and innovation of theme park in China
7	2007, Spatial-temporal factors of ocean theme park in China	2014, Spatial-temporal models of staged folk culture of the theme park	2011, Application of landscape design in geological environment control of abandoned opencast mines	2002, Analysis on development methodology of theme park	2005, Trends and stratagem of theme park	2003, Development of theme park in China: A view from tourism industry	2012, Complex effects of technology and culture in the development of theme park	2013, Development of theme parks in China: A view of spatial-temporal layout	2007, An analysis of economic impacts of theme park: A view of tourist flow
8	2007, Exploitation of marine right culture theme park of Liugong Island		2012, Suggestions to avoid theme park in ruin in the name of tourism	2002, Mistakes and counter measures of theme park	2006, Attractiveness on agriculture theme park	2006, Relationship between theme park and urban tourist destination			2008, Development model of tourism real estate in Beijing

(Continued)

**Table 1. (Continued)**

	<b>Thematic identity</b>	<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<b>Lifecycle</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Competitive strategies</b>	<b>Tourism</b>	<b>Creative industry</b>	<b>Urban planning</b>	<b>Local economy</b>
9	2007, A Primary discussion on plant landscape in folk theme park in central Shanxi			2002, Development model of theme park in China	2007, An analysis of lasting prosperity of theme park: A case of Disney	2006, Problems on urban theme park in China			2010, Urban commercial clusters: interpreting the strategic trends of theme park
10	2008, Landscape features of the theme park			2003, Management model of Chinese theme parks: From the perspective of systematic dynamic behaviour	2007, Double effects on development of theme park: A theoretical perspective	2008, On the creation of experiential value in theme park: A case of OCT theme parks in Shenzhen			2011, On the relationship between construction of theme park and regional economy
11	2008, Theme orientation towards the planning and design of Xi-quanjū Park			2004, Theme parks in China: A analysis of problems and counter measures	2008, Competitive pattern of theme park based on ecological niche: A case in the Pearl River Delta	2008, Discussion on oceanic disaster travelling development based on tourist experience			2012, Informal employment of theme park: A case study of Happy Valley in Beijing
12	2009, The cultural expression of theme park landscape design			2006, Marketing strategies of the theme park	2009, Cluster patterns and models of theme park	2008, Experiential consumption model of theme park			2014, An empirical study on employment of OCT theme parks
13	2010, City children's sports theme park construction			2007, Management innovation of Chinese theme park in information age	2010, Implications from American theme parks: A case of Polynesian Cultural Centre	2009, Evaluation of tourist flow stability of theme park			
14	2010, Design of guidance system in theme parks			2007, Measurement of managerial level of theme park based on analytic hierarchy process	2010, Cluster patterns of theme park industry in the Pearl River Delta	2009, Study on tourism landscape: From culture perspective			
15	2010, Landscape design of agricultural theme park: A case study of Yangling Park			2007, Preliminary study on theme park in China	2010, Co-operation strategies of theme park under hyper-competition	2009, Investigation on tourist intention of theme park and influential factors			
16	2011, Classical literature theme park of 'A dream of red mansions'			2007, An analysis of the construction of theme park in Kaifeng	2011, Co-opetition strategies of theme parks in Shenzhen	2010, Visitor's waiting psychological change: A case of Window of the World			

(Continued)

**Table 1. (Continued)**

	<b>Thematic identity</b>	<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<b>Lifecycle</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Competitive strategies</b>	<b>Tourism</b>	<b>Creative industry</b>	<b>Urban planning</b>	<b>Local economy</b>
17	2011, Virtual expression and LOD model design for theme park based on semantic features			2007, Marketing strategies based on the relationship of tourist active cycle and destination	2011, Applying six interactive power model into management of theme park: From co-opetition perspective	2010, A study on tourist satisfaction curve in theme park			
18	2012, Feasibility of air tour theme park in Hainan			2008, The study of development model of Chinese theme park in experience economy era	2011, Brand promotion path of theme park based on value perception gap model	2010, Tourist satisfaction of amusement parks in Beijing			
19	2012, Cultural expression theme parks spatial design in the context of consumerism			2008, Potentiality of minority theme parks in Urumqi under new system of vacation	2011, Development and innovation of Shenzhen OCT theme parks	2010, Evaluation of recreational use value of Tang Paradise in Xi'an			
20	2012, On basic principles of the medivertification landscape construction in theme parks			2008, Operation model of urban theme parks: A case in Beijing	2014, Research on Chinese-style innovation of the theme park	2010, Fuzzy comprehensive evaluation of the theme park tourist satisfaction based on AHP			
21	2012, Landscape design of urban cultural theme park			2009, General development of theme park in China		2010, An empirical study on customer participation, emotion, perceived control and satisfaction			
22	2013, Exploitation and utilisation of solar energy			2010, A analysis of operational performance of Disneyland		2011, A study on tourism experience of movie theme park			
23	2013,Optimisation of soundscape in theme park based on sound-scape comfortable degree			2011, Multi-dimension management of theme park		2011, Tourism impacts on local resident's perceptions and attitude to theme park: A case study of Fantawild			
24	2014, Application of game theory in the city water theme park			2022, An initial probe on the theme park chain		2012, Research on satisfaction of theme park visitors based on fussy comprehensive evaluation			

(Continued)

**Table 1. (Continued)**

	<b>Thematic identity</b>	<b>Cultural heritage</b>	<b>Lifecycle</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Competitive strategies</b>	<b>Tourism</b>	<b>Creative industry</b>	<b>Urban planning</b>	<b>Local economy</b>
25	2014, Study on the visual environment of the theme park: A case of theme parks in Changzhou			2011, Strategies of promoting the construction of theme parks		2012, Study on seasonality of tourist flow in theme park: A case of OCT theme parks in Shenzhen			
26	2014, Study on ecological landscape design of folk custom culture theme park in Tibet					2012, Study on tourist capacity of Fantawild based on queuing theory			
27	2014, Guidance system design of theme park in Changzhou					2012, Spatial-temporal navigation management of visitor flow in theme park			
28						2013, Research on motivation, path and subject of integration of tourism industry			
29						2013, Positivism study on cultural theme park tourism optimisation by applying IPA methods in Kaifeng Millennium Park			
30						2013, Study on features of membership customers in theme parks: A case of Happy Valleys in four cities			
31						2014, Influential factors of perceived crowding in theme park			

**4.2. Cultural heritage**

Although cultural heritage is a theme discussed above, this choice deserves a category in its own right because it is distinct from other themes. Research in this category concerns traditional Chinese culture, including regional culture, historical events and philosophy. The topic of cultural heritage examines how to apply traditional resources in a modern way. Zhou, Wang, and Li (2006) construct

a general plan to elaborate how to lighten the site of historical events with contemporary characters, which concerns a how-to-do perspective. Another research point is landscape evaluation in quantitative studies using the methods of matrices and questionnaires (Zhou, Shen, Yu, & Sha, 2010).

One closely related topic is the transformation of folk arts and minority performances in urban theme parks. In the theme park, folk arts serve as creative products, experienced by visitors as spatial-temporal recombinants. Zhang and Xu (2014) discuss four types of spatial-temporal models (i.e., local collection, local representation, off-site transplantation, and off-site reconstruction) of staged folk arts in the theme park.

It is noteworthy that the majority of tangible and intangible cultural heritage developments are more like outdoor exhibition museums than theme parks. Researchers have noted that the theme park provides an opportunity to transform intangible cultural heritage, such as philosophy, into physical space (Du, 2005). However, the debate on spatial innovation has not been widely explored. From the perspective of space, theme parks are more than merely entertainment space; instead, these parks become the physical expression of intangible culture, commercial culture, and society's desires. One interesting avenue for future research would be the spatial implications of the theme park.

#### **4.3. Lifecycle**

Articles classified in the lifecycle category discuss the long-term vitality of the theme park and the rehabilitation of dilapidated or damaged theme parks. The brand is regarded as a responsible element for sustainable development of the theme park. Sun and Wang (2010) construct a brand-building model of the theme park, which includes concept level, main part level and basic level. Another article discusses the brand from the viewpoint of image. Li and Zhu (2003) focused on how to maintain a vivid image of the theme park, particularly concerning large groups in charge of numerous subsidiaries. For example, one market-oriented strategy of the OCT Group was the establishment of Window of the World in 1994 and Happy Valley in 1998 after Splendid China opened in 1989, thereby extending its corporate image as a pioneer in the theme park sector. The OCT Group has enriched its brand reputation using the unified image of "recreation in a garden."

Another aspect of lifecycle is protection and reconstruction. Motivated by the economic benefits of the tourism industry, the theme park model was adopted in several natural preservation zones, including the Three Gorges Dam (TGD) blocks. Huang (2009) suggests that funding pressure was relieved to a certain extent by developing the TGD blocks as a theme park. However, the damage to historic, cultural and ecological continuity was severe. One suggested means of partially addressing the problem is to reintegrate the TGD blocks into the natural spatial-temporal pattern.

The sustainable vitality of the theme park involves a comprehensive capability to maintain long-term vigour, which can be measured by the inherent energy, the reciprocal relationship with the local economy, and the adaptation to ecological environment (Li, 2010a). However, researchers have only focused on the cultivation of inherent elements, overlooking the external implications on economy and environment. Theme parks' economic contribution to the local economy and environmental impacts on local ecology vary according to the life stage of the individual park. For example, potential environment impacts including air quality, water quality, noise impact, light pollution, etc., associated with the construction phase and operation phase are quite different. There has been little research on this type of change. Thus, longitudinal analyses on the contribution of theme parks to host communities with regard to both economy and ecology are expected to continue.

#### **4.4. Management**

This category includes research on how companies project, operate and market theme parks to achieve satisfactory financial performance. The majority of articles focus on theme parks in a city to analyse management problems and offer suggestions for improvement. The analyses include cities in the Pearl River Delta region (Chen, 2000; Zhang, 2001), the Yangtze River Delta region (Sun, 2001), and cities separately located in Central China (Bao & Liu, 2000; Li, 2007).

Certain articles focus on the project of theme parks discussed models, principles and mistakes. In the early stage, Yang (2002) assessed five major development models, including vernacular representation, minority characters, corporate identity system (CIS) image, activity participation, and project extension. With the arrival of the concept of experience economy, Wang (2007) illustrated the optimisation of development models to address the new situation in another stage.

The articles addressing operations management were separated into two areas. One area is the discussion of operation model. The models of high investment and high ticket prices were adopted by the majority of theme parks; however, the new trend is to reduce ticket prices while expanding additional consumption in parks to improve the revisit rate (Huang & Li, 2003). Dong and Wu (2011) introduce the approach of chain operation in the theme park sector in Mainland China, where the development of the theme park industry is growing substantially. The other area is a measurement of managerial level. Researchers have measured the managerial level of Tang Paradise, a well-known theme park in northwest China. The results indicate that it is urgent to optimise facilities and improve service levels (Chen, Ren, Wen & Li, 2007). According to Swarbrooke (2002), operation management is the key to customer satisfaction and the optimisation of financial performance. The aims and functions of operations management seen from the organisation perspective are quite different from those of visitors. The majority of current research is conducted from the standpoint of the organisation; thus, it would be interesting and necessary to discuss this topic from the customer's point of view.

Marketing is a crucial aspect of management. Early research examined the application of the 4P theory (i.e., product, place, promotion and price) (Luo, 1996). Later studies expand the research scope by applying the ideas of experience values (Chen & Yu, 2006) and customer relationship lifetime (Shao, 2007). Shao (2007) constructed a new model called Dynamic-Attention-Transaction-Experience-Evaluation (DATEE) to create marketing strategies from the tourist relationship lifetime perspective, which provides a scientific model for developers.

Overall, these general articles establish a regional distribution map of theme parks in mainland China. However, these problem-solution essays tend to offer broad reviews without profound insights into local theme parks. In recent years, an increasing number of foreign theme parks have been introduced, such as Shanghai Ocean Aquarium (a joint investment with a Singapore-based corporation) and the incoming Disneyland in Shanghai. The performances of current joint-investment theme parks are barely satisfactory, for example, the Hello Kitty Theme Park in Zhejiang. It would be worthwhile to examine and improve the methods of joint-investment management. As for the marketing, it is clear that research on marketing has been neglected despite its importance. Only three articles mentioned above appeared in the past two decades. Marketing deserves additional attention in academic research because it represents a key element of theme park management, particularly in the context of the extensive application of mobile Internet and social media.

#### **4.5. Competitive strategies**

The theme park industry development in Mainland China occurred substantially later than in Western countries. It is helpful to discuss the successes and failures of the theme park industry in other countries (Li, 2004; Wang, 1997, 2007; Wang & Ma, 2010). Although these articles concentrated on history, types and the operation of the foreign theme parks, they lose sight of some critical issues, such as environment-related issues, including rich experiences on assessment and the evaluation of the environment.

Numerous concepts and models have been introduced and improved in research on competitive strategies. The model of customer value was introduced to the improvement of service brand (Wan & Li, 2011). Using a six-power interactive model, which is complementary to the five-power interactive model created by Michael Porter, Li (2011) elaborates on how to apply co-opetition in China's theme parks. It is encouraged to adopt concepts and models from related fields to examine the competitive strategies of the theme park industry.

The literature also examines methods to increase competitiveness, such as clusters development and innovation. One article examined the pioneering example of the theme park industry in the Pearl River Delta region, and concluded the patterns of cluster development as bottom-up and up-bottom models (Li, 2010b). The latter model is strongly supported by the government, which is preferred in many cities because it enables theme park operators to concentrate resources on pursuing large projects, which is known as a Chinese political and economic characteristic (Zhong, Zhang, Li, & Zhong, 2015). Liu and He (2014) suggest that “Chinese-style self-dependent innovation” plays a key role in improving the competitiveness of theme parks, and present a basic framework of Chinese-style innovation in the theme park industry. Although the title is remarkable, the framework is to some extent disappointing without any notable breakthrough.

#### **4.6. The tourism industry**

The tourism industry is the most frequently adopted perspective in research on theme parks. Theme parks are human-made and purpose-built tourist attractions, and the theme park sector is increasingly competitive and attractive. It represents a major component of the modern tourism industry in China and simultaneously offers a new research field. The articles in this category can be divided into three areas as follows: tourist-oriented issues including tourist satisfaction and experience values, operator-based issues such as the seasonality of tourist flow, and the perception of local residents.

The majority of journal articles that adopt the tourism industry perspective examine tourist satisfaction. Tourist satisfaction is as popular a research field globally as it is among Chinese researchers. Numerous English academic theories and models have been introduced into review Chinese practices include, for example, fuzzy comprehensive evaluation (Lian, Yu, Bao, & Lu, 2012; Tian, Zhu, & Huang, 2010), importance-performance analysis (Xin & Chen, 2013), and the linear structure model (Zhang & Guan, 2010). Dong, Liu, and Liang (2010) suggest that tourist satisfaction is manifested as an inverted U-shaped curve. Other tourist-oriented articles address the perceived sense of crowding and psychological variation among waiting visitors.

One topic related to tourist satisfaction is experience values (Wang, 2008; Xiao & Xia, 2008). It is important for theme parks to provide a fuller sense of visitor engagement in the experience age. Xiao and Xia (2008) present the following six methods to create experience values: refining themes, designing programs, updating projects, decorating layouts, optimising service, and representing memory.

Articles on tourist flow, which is regarded as an operator-based issue, represent another research interest (Wang, Dong, & Zhang, 2009; Zhang, Su, Hu, & Lu, 2012; Zheng, 2012). The volume, structure, fluctuation and distribution of tourist flow have direct effects on the operational performance and economic benefits of theme park companies. Wang et al. (2009) constructed a model, which consists of four interactive father-factors and twelve child-factors, to evaluate the stability of tourist flow from operational and organisational perspectives, without considering social background and the natural environment. Seasonality is a factor of visitor flow in tourism. Research has demonstrated that time concentration in the theme park sector differs significantly from that of other tourist activities. Generally, the majority of people depart on a long-distance vacation during the three “golden weeks” in China: Spring Festival week (usually in January or February), May Day week (1st–7th, May) and National Day week (1st–7th, October). Therefore, passenger flow peaks during these three weeks. However, according to Liang and Bao (2012a), the time concentration of the theme park sector is low, substantially lower than that of garden scenic spots, mountainous scenic areas, and historic villages. It provides a critical and valuable empirical analysis of tourist flow that challenges preconceived ideas.

Compared to the tourist-oriented and operator-based research, research on the impact of the theme park as a tourist attraction from the resident’s perspective is less prevalent. Only one of the collected articles, which focused on Fantawild Adventure World in Wuhu, examined the impacts of tourism from the perspective of resident perception and attitude (Lu, Yang, & Tang, 2011). Theme parks have made substantial changes in areas such as landscape and lifestyle. To examine these

changes, studies should examine not only the visitor's point of view but also the views of local residents in host communities. Therefore, additional research in this area is required.

#### **4.7. The creative industry**

The articles in this category were published after 2000 following the increasing prosperity of the cultural industry, the creative economy and similar fields. The creative industry is a novel type of industry that is being developed in China and globally. Recent articles have analysed the way in which technology is applied in the design of stage and cultural tourism performance (Li, Zhang, Lu, Wen, & Wang, 2005; Yang & Shi, 2011; Zhao & Hou, 2002). Although the number of articles in this category is small, it is a new trend to discuss the theme park from the creative industry perspective.

#### **4.8. Urban planning**

Theme parks occupy real physical space. The spatial distribution has a direct relationship with urban planning and public space. One 2012 empirical study based on 300 theme parks in Mainland China was conducted to map the spatial distribution of the theme park sector, which is characterised by strong coherent distribution and low equitability. Such distribution contributes to an irrational regional layout (Liu, 2013).

Research on the evaluation system of the theme park industry in the English-language literature has produced useful results. However, these results are not always suitable for theme parks in China because China's economic and political systems are substantially different. Influencing factors such as the role of government are quite different from practices overseas. Land development of theme parks in China resembles a game of tactics between theme park operators and local government (Li, 2005; Xiong, Wei, He, Dong, & Dong, 2012).

Since the large-scale development of real estate and tourism-oriented properties in the context of China urbanisation, land prices have become a new but critical factor in the location decision. When discussing land, current research devotes attention to the land price. However, the development of the theme park is the direct occupation of land. Although the impacts of theme parks on the ecosystem should be considered, this concept is frequently overlooked in current research.

Because theme parks typically feature a land setting, parks are generally located in peri-urban areas (Wu, Xu, & Xu, 2012). Most concerns focus on land availability, but few studies further explore spatial implications. Theme parks are novel urban leisure space, which implies a new concept of the urban structure. It would be interesting to discuss the spatial implication of theme parks in the entertainment and postmodern context.

#### **4.9. The local economy**

This category examines how the theme park industry contributes economic benefits to the host communities. Theme parks are perceived as machinery for economic development, and the economic impacts occur on two levels. On the one hand, it is the progress of land commercialisation. The theme park has become an important element in what Henri Lefebvre terms "the second circuit of capital" in the urbanisation. On the other hand, the theme park industry could act as a catalyst for the building industry, tourism industry, labour market and numerous related areas.

One popular research topic is the relationship between theme parks and real estate. Ideally, the tourism-oriented property is regarded as an advantageous investment for both theme park companies and estate agents (Pi, 2005). However, in practice, few theme parks are sustainable from a tourism industry perspective, whereas most are regarded as successful projects when evaluated based on land and housing prices (Zhong et al., 2015).

Another strand of research in the local economy category examines employment provided by the theme park industry. Tourism-based employment is the primary justification for urban tourism

projects, including theme parks, that are under construction in modern China. Large-scale theme parks have been shown to provide livelihoods for local residents and to help them improve the quality of life. Liang and Bao (2012b, 2014) have conducted several empirical studies of theme parks in Beijing and Shenzhen, which are Chinese first-tier large cities. According to the empirical studies of Liang and Bao (2014), the employment opportunities provided by theme parks primarily benefit migrant workers, not local citizens. Except for senior managers, most employees in the theme park sector earn less money than those employed in other jobs. The income of ordinary theme park employees is comparatively low, and they live in low-income neighbourhoods. With respect to employment, the vision that theme parks will improve the quality of life of local citizens has not been realised in China's first-tier large cities. The discussions of research are detailed and the outcomes are significant. It is very useful for us to understand the types and characteristics of the employment situation in Chinese theme parks.

The role of government is mentioned in the discussion about the economic impacts of the theme park industry on the local economy. However, the analysis of policy has room for further research. Given that theme parks often receive incentives or restraints from the authorities concerning their development, the debate of public policy should not be neglected. During the past decades of development in the theme park industry, a number of important policies and regulations have been introduced and issued. Notably, it is a Chinese characteristic to govern by policy. Policy questions such as the process of policy-making, the meaning of policy rhetoric and the effects of policies on the industry and host communities require additional and detailed study.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

The aim of this paper is to take stock of journal articles on theme park industry in mainland China by meta-analysis and conceptual content analysis. The meta-analysis gives us a brief picture of the research map in statistics. What is more important in this study is that conceptual content analysis provides a more specific framework and interpretation on the topic, since using classification structures from other studies might limit the potential to identify new insights. This study has found a number of interesting patterns in the publishing landscape over a 25-year period. These 145 journal articles are conceptualised into three general areas of interest, and each area contains several categories. The first area is coded as "theme park as product", including categories of thematic identity, cultural heritage, and lifecycle. The second area is coded as "theme park as industry", including categories of management, competitive strategies, the tourism industry and the creative industry. The third area is coded as "theme park as city infrastructure", including categories of urban planning and the local economy.

Discourse on the theme park within the Chinese context is twofold. On the one hand, the theme park is a complex result of modernisation. The construction of theme parks demonstrates progress in land commercialisation and urbanisation. On the other hand, the theme park serves as a representation of postmodernism by contributing to the confusion between the arts and the everyday life.

Although the journal articles cover various fields, they concentrate on the economic impacts of the theme park. Over eighty percent of journal articles analyses the theme park from the economic and industrial perspective, such as operational costs, tourism income and land commercialisation. This study thus calls for additional academic attention on the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of the theme park sector.

The term "environmental impact" refers to the positive or negative changes suffered by the environment when a project or activity is carried out (Clavé, 2007). Swarbrooke (2002) notes that in contrast to their economic impact, theme parks generally have an overall negative impact on the environment. The scarcity of Chinese research on the environmental impact of theme parks reflects on many categories described previously, including "lifecycle", "competitive strategies" and "urban planning". The scarcity might be attributed to the general principle that economic development has taken priority in the past decades. However, as environmental awareness increases, it is necessary

to focus on the environmental impacts of theme parks, including the physical and human environment and the relationship between the two. Future research can examine issues such as the consumption of local resources; pollution from noise, atmosphere and light in host communities; land usage in case of closure; and environment protection measures during redevelopment.

The discussion of the theme park industry from a cultural perspective has not sufficiently been examined. This point of view is analysed in the context of consumerism when discussing the physical design of theme parks (Zhou & Cai, 2012). However, more interesting and critical points of view, such as the convergence between traditional and contemporary, and between the public and the private require further study. The debate on confusion between the arts and everyday life to some extent is the extension of the tension between simulation and authenticity. Another area of research not examined by current studies is the role played by the theme park in the Chinese social construction of space. As mentioned in the discussion section, articles on “cultural heritage” and “urban planning” overlook the spatial implication of the theme park. Theme parks are not merely spaces for entertainment; rather, they are moving toward the redefinition of social space. From the standpoint of social cohesion, it is not sufficient to describe how theme parks gain the support of local enterprise and authorities. Instead, researchers should observe the accessibility of theme parks to local people and residents’ attitude toward visitors. In fact, the theme park in China is an imported good. The quintessential participant, carnival and imagery are substantially different from the leisure philosophy of Chinese cultural psychology, which is a quiet pursuit of seeing and meditating. One interesting analysis might involve the application of theme parks in China as leisure activities from the standpoint of cultural psychology. From this perspective, the debate regarding the relationship between the local and the global cannot remain at the practice level, and more in-depth examination is needed in future research.

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