Disney Localizes Mickey to Boost Its Hong Kong Theme Park

By GEOFFREY A. FOWLER
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Hao Zhi met a character at Disneyland here Monday that might seem kind of odd for Main Street, U.S.A., but the civil servant from Inner Mongolia didn't find it Goofy at all.

"This is terrific," said Mr. Hao, as he posed for a picture with Cai Shen Ye, the bearded Chinese god of wealth, who was decked out in silk robes and an oversize belt. "It makes me so happy to see the god of wealth here."

That's just the reaction Walt Disney Co. is counting on following a marketing makeover designed to make a classic American theme park look a lot more Chinese. It is hoping to transform China's coming year of the rat into the "Year of the Mouse."

Since it opened in 2005, Disney's Hong Kong park, the media and entertainment company's flagship for the booming Chinese kids' market, has struggled to connect with consumers. The park, a joint venture with the Hong Kong government, missed public targets of 5.6 million visitors for its first year of operation, and attendance dropped nearly 30% in the second year, to about four million. The travel industry has criticized the park for being too small and not appealing to mainland Chinese audiences.

Now, Disney is going on the offensive by going local. Its first big opportunity on that front is a stroke of astrological fortune. In the traditional Chinese calendar, it will soon be the year of the rat. As the Feb. 7 New Year holiday approaches, Disney is suiting up its own house rodents, Mickey and Minnie, in special red Chinese New Year outfits for its self-proclaimed Year of the Mouse.

The Disneyland Chinese New Year campaign, which lasts until Feb. 24, features a logo with the kind of visual pun that only the Chinese might appreciate: the Chinese character for "luck" flipped upside-down (a New Year tradition), with mouse ears added on top. Inside the park, vendors hawk deep-fried dumplings and turnip cakes. The parade down Main Street, U.S.A., is being joined by the "Rhythm of Life Procession," featuring a dragon dance and puppets of birds, flowers and fish, set to traditional Chinese music. And of course there's the god of wealth, a relative newcomer to the regular Hong Kong Disneyland gang, joined by the gods of longevity and happiness, all major figures in Chinese New Year celebrations.

Disney's efforts to give its Hong Kong park a more Chinese character reflect a broader effort by the company to understand the China market. Last summer, executives conducted research in the homes of Chinese consumers, who were asked about their knowledge of the Disney brand and their lifestyle habits as busy families.

The company has brought in many new top executives in recent years, including a new managing director of Hong Kong Disneyland, and has hired more local executives for the park. Disney also expanded its China staff beyond the park to about 400 employees from a small team.

"We are working as the 'Chinese' Walt Disney Company -- ensuring that all the people who work in Disney understand the Chinese consumer to forge a deeper emotional connection with the brand," says Mr. Diaresco.
In the past, it was the Chinese consumer who was expected to understand Disney, or so it seemed. Chinese tourists unfamiliar with Disney's traditional stories were sometimes left bewildered by the Hong Kong park's attractions. Disney's marketing efforts also have sometimes misfired. A Hong Kong Disneyland ad in the summer of 2006 featured a family consisting of two kids and two parents. China's government, however, limits most couples to just one child.

A new TV commercial, which the company says was designed to "forge a stronger emotional connection with Mickey," features one child, two parents and two grandparents together sharing branded Disney activities, such as watching a movie and giving a plush version of the mouse as gifts. "Let's visit Mickey together!" says the father in the commercial, before scenes at the park set to traditional Chinese music.

"We have more history under our belt and have more guest feedback that we are able to learn from," says Jill Estorino, senior vice president of marketing at Hong Kong Disneyland. "We are just becoming more knowledgeable about the Chinese."

Adding locally produced and relevant content to its imported American fare has been a key initiative for the Burbank, Calif., company's international operations since Chief Executive Bob Iger took the reins in 2005. Disney has been aggressively expanding its TV, online and film business in China, last year even launching its first-ever movie made just for China, "The Secret of the Magic Gourd," which did well at the box office.

Disney is using the "Year of the Mouse" campaign to burnish its Chinese credentials across its different lines of business. It is running a series of programs on China Central Television over the Chinese New Year holiday and has teamed up with Chinese pop bands to produce two versions of a special "Year of the Mouse" song, called "Small, Small, VIP," complete with music videos featuring Disney characters.

Disney also is joining with Chinese-American designer Vivienne Tam to create special mouse-themed fashions, featuring a Mickey silhouette in hot pink and purple. The clothes will go on sale in Ms. Tam's stores in the spring.

The company's experience in China "is very much in line with a number of other multinationals," says Carol Potter, the China chief executive of Omnicom Group Inc.'s BBDO ad agency, which has been helping Disney to develop its new ads for China for nearly six months. "As people really begin to realize that China has a complexity and depth, the marketing becomes more sophisticated."

Ms. Potter thinks that certain parts of Mickey Mouse's personality, like his emphasis on family and friends, are a particularly good match for contemporary China. "Five years ago or six years ago, if you asked people in China -- particularly men -- what was most important to them, they would have talked about material success. Now, they say family and happiness," she says.

One aspect of Mr. Mouse's personality that's harder to make Chinese: his love of cheese, which isn't popular in Chinese cuisine. A showcase inside the kitchen of "Mickey's House," a new attraction at the Hong Kong park, displayed his favorite cheese from Europe and North America -- and a steamed rice-flour cake from China.

--Sky Canaves contributed to this article

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