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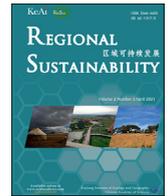
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Full Length Article

From theme park to cultural tourism town: Disneyization turning of tourism space in China

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ABSTRACT

Theme park development has become an important choice for tourism space development in Chinese cities, and the theming of space as well as the implied consumption symbols and cultural implications are usually viewed as examples for the development of other urban spaces, such as cultural tourism towns. The result is the Disneyization of urban tourism space. With the construction of characteristic towns being vigorously promoted throughout China, cultural tourism towns are springing up. They are typical of the “Wuzhen Town Mode” and represent the process of the Disneyization of tourism space in China. This research reflects on the evolution of the characteristics of tourism space in China. Taking the Wuzhen Town Mode as an example, this study reveals the characteristics and conversion mechanism of the Disneyization of tourism space in Chinese cities. According to this research, the Wuzhen Town Mode of the Disneyization is characterized by theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labor. Residential function is a unique characteristic of the Disneyization of cultural tourism towns in China. Moreover, the Wuzhen Town Mode of the Disneyization is jointly motivated by the driving force of local governments, the propulsive force of tourist demand, the attractive force of the social environment, and the driving force of capital. Finally, suggestions and policy proposals are provided for the Disneyization of tourism space in China.

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up policy started 40 years ago, Chinese citizens have witnessed radical changes from an emphasis on material values to an emphasis on symbolic values and the experience of consumption itself (Lu and Qian, 2020). People are no longer satisfied with standardized and large-scale functional consumption. They prefer symbolic consumption, which involves the pursuit of theming and experience (Roy and Gretzel, 2020). Tourism consumption has become an institutional culture and has shifted from a Fordist mass tourism consumption to a post-modern attitude towards travel (Zhang, 2007). In this context, urban tourism space design no longer focuses only on material space arrangements; rather, it is more concerned with themes and experiences (Yousaf and Fan, 2020; Lovell and Thurgill, 2021). The theme park is the best example. The movement from the amusement parks that were popular amid rapid industrialization to miniature parks occurred during a special historical period, and theme parks emerged in the course of rapid urbanization (Bao, 2015a). Thus, the exploration of theme park design in China has been progressing. Today, such space design of theme

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parks is highly regarded and is no longer limited to the theme park itself, but extends to theme hotels, theme pubs, theme restaurants, theme malls, and even theme cities (fantasy cities/theming cities) (Hannigan, 1998; Chang, 2000; Paradis, 2004). We call this social process “Disneyization”. It is a combined result of consumption culture and experience economy (Liu, 2012). Basically, it is difference, selectivity, and diversity highlighted by the post-Fordism era, aiming at providing exciting experiences by virtue of a customer-centered, surreal, and idealized mixed consumption environment.

Recently, the design of Disneyfied tourism space has been widely used in the development of characteristic towns such as Wuzhen Town (located in Tongxiang City, Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province and situated in the “Golden Triangle” of Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai City, 80 km from Hangzhou City and Suzhou City and 140 km from Shanghai City) and Beijing WTown (nestled in Gubeikou Town of Miyun District, Beijing City), China. Beijing WTown is situated against the magnificent and precipitous the Simatai Great Wall and is home to Yuanyang Lake Reservoir. These towns have attracted large numbers of tourists and generated favorable market effects. Since the completion of the Wuzhen Town West Scenic Zone in 2007, the tourist flow has increased from 2.0×10^6 to 9.0×10^6 , and the annual tourist income has also burgeoned from 0.158×10^9 to 1.905×10^9 CNY. In 2018, Wuzhen Town tourism ranked second in operational revenue and first in net profit among all tourism-based listed companies, which is quite impressive. Furthermore, in shaping local characteristics, authentic experience, and word of mouth by tourists (Zhang et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2011; Dong et al., 2018), Wuzhen Town has also obtained a favorable feedback from many experts and visitors. For Beijing WTown, which opened to tourists in 2014, the annual profit from visitors now exceeds 2.500×10^6 CNY. In 2018 alone, the tourist income totaled 1.000×10^9 CNY. Modelled after Wuzhen Town and Beijing WTown, a series of cultural tourism towns with distinct characteristics are under construction. Among them are Puyuan Ancient Town in Tongxiang City and Yanguan Ancient Town in Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province; Chikan Ancient Town in Kaiping City, Guangdong Province; Mingshui Ancient Town in Jinan City, Shandong Province; and Yaohu Town in Yixing City, Jiangsu Province (Zheng and Wang, 2019).

The large-scale construction of theme-based cultural tourism towns demonstrates the current Disneyization of tourism space in China. In addition, the state has encouraged the establishment of cultural tourism consumption agglomeration areas and launched a series of brands, such as national cultural and tourism consumption demonstration cities, national tourism and leisure cities and districts, and night economy demonstration areas, to promote the comprehensive economic transformation and upgrading of cultural and tourism consumption. In this context, this study conducts a case study on the “Wuzhen Town Mode” to explore the characteristics of the Disneyization of the tourism space of Wuzhen Town. The goal is to summarize the general pattern and conversion mechanism of this trend in China and reflect on its potential influence on social space. The Wuzhen Town Mode is expected to play a realistic guiding role in the future development and construction of Chinese cultural tourism towns. At the same time, this mode, rooted in China, can correspondingly complement the theoretical framework of the Disneyization generated in the western background and make theoretical contributions.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Theme park and theming city

Theme park studies started long ago, both in China and internationally. They are centered mainly around available information about theme parks, including the theme park industry (Bramwell, 1991; Braun and Milman, 1994), theme park market (Milman, 1988; Moutinho, 1988), theme park location choice (Bao, 1994a, b), theme park development considerations (Bao, 1997; Zuo and Lu, 2018), theme park business strategies (Yang, 2002; Dong, 2005), theme park management (Dong, 2000), influence of theme parks on cities (Dong, 2010; Liang and Bao, 2012, 2014), and suggestions for theme park construction. With the continuous investigation of these parks, some scholars are no longer focusing only on the theme parks themselves; instead, they have started to probe theories and practices concerning the evolution of urban space towards the design idea of theme parks, especially in sociocultural geography studies, where theme parks have been extended to urban space or even an illustration of post-modern space (Duan et al., 2019; Shinde, 2021). In this sense, the proposal and development of the Disneyization framework has its own theoretical significance (Wang, 2005).

2.2. The Disneyization of urban space

“Disneyization” refers to social characteristics and philosophy similar to those associated with Disney theme parks (Wang, 2005). Disneyland is called “theory land” (Warren, 1999) because scholars tend to study Disneyland based on their own theories. Some scholars highlight the universality of Disney products and their global promotion of consumerism while emphasizing cultural homogenization (Wasko et al., 2001), the decline of citizens’ rights, and the simultaneous sway of democracy and undermining of national sovereignty (Zukin, 1993; Giroux and Pollock, 1999). When they discuss these practices, they use terms such as “Disney zone” (Sorkin, 1992), “Disneyfication” (Rojek, 1993), and “Disneyisation” (Bryman, 1999, 2003). They point out the near universality of Disney and its great influence on cultural and social landscapes. Others pay more attention to justice and the resistance faced by Disneyfied landscapes (Warren, 1994, 2005; Salcedo, 2003).

Bryman (2004) distinguishes the word “Disneyisation” from “Disneyfication”, believing that “Disneyisation” converts an object to something superficial or simple, and the use of this word will shift the focus of a discussion to cultural products such as fairy tales, novels, and historical scenarios rather than to broader fields such as culture, economy, and society. As a result, it is very difficult to conduct such a discussion neutrally. Bryman (2004) also puts forward a systematic framework of the Disneyization that includes four core factors: theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labor. Theming means ensuring overall consistency in the subject by shaping distinct theme narratives. Hybrid consumption indicates a combination of multiple forms of consumption. Merchandising

represents promoting merchandise by using copyrighted images and logos or anything else associated with copyright. Performative labor suggests that company management and employees behave at work in a manner similar to a theatrical performance that aims to provide excellent service (Bryman, 2004). This framework has since been widely applied to research on sociology, culturology, landscape science, urban planning, and other disciplines (Zhou, 2009; Yang and Liu, 2015; Zheng, 2016; Gao and Yin, 2018; Turner, 2018). Among these studies, there have been many critical discussions about the correlation between the Disneyization and globalization or between the Disneyization and localization (Choi, 2012; Matusitz and Palermo, 2014). At present, research on the Disneyization in China is still in its infancy, focusing mainly on the aspects of urban landscape culture, architecture, and business models (Yin et al., 2020). Among them, Tong (2001) proposes that the scenic city captures consumers' consumption psychology and carries out intensive mass production and cluster consumption. Scenic cities encourage people to live in a dreamlike world, and fictional scenery encroaches on people's real lives. Zheng (2009) seeks the reasons for the Disneyization of the landscape from the perspective of social culture and believes that the cultural factors affecting the landscape are reflected mainly in the manipulation of capital and the phenomenon of post-globalization and post-colonization in the context of consumer society. Zhu and Sheng (2013) analyzes how the Disneyization profoundly influences business modes and forms from the perspective of architecture. This paper analyzes four aspects of design and research theories of contemporary shopping complexes and summarizes the design methods of contemporary shopping complexes. Gao and Yin (2018) points out that in the production of Disneyfied consumer space, although the intensity and scope of capitalist discipline are expanding, resistance in daily life is still continuing. Daily life is full of foreign culture and capitalist discipline of consumers, as well as consumers' bottom-up resistance and adaptive activities; it is a process of continuous struggle and compromise, adaptation and creation. There are few studies on the Disneyization of tourism space, and there is still a lack of thinking on the Disneyization of tourism space in China. Thus, the Disneyization mode of typical cases needs to be analyzed in depth. This study also uses such a framework to explore the development of the Wuzhen Town Mode in relation to theme park concepts, so as to identify the conversion of the Disneyization in tourism space in China.

3. Characteristics of the Wuzhen Town mode of the Disneyization

3.1. General characteristics of the Disneyization of Wuzhen Town

With nearly 20 years of development experience, the Wuzhen Town Scenic Area, by virtue of its unified property rights, unified construction, unified operation, and unified management, has solved four major problems related to ancient town tourism development and operation in China: the loss of the spirit of ancient towns due to excessive commercialization, the vicious competition within a certain region caused by homogenization, the endangerment of tourism resources by destructive development, and the multiple conflicts between tourism development and the normal life of the residents in ancient towns (Wang and Zheng, 2010; Zheng and Wang, 2012). Therefore, the Wuzhen Town Scenic Area has become one of the models for the conservation and development of ancient towns in China, creating a unique Wuzhen Town Mode.

As a typical example of Disneyfied cultural tourism towns in China, the Wuzhen Town Mode has achieved success in the shaping of theming, hybrid consumption, merchandising, and performative labor. First, the Wuzhen Town Mode is demonstrated in the theming of local culture. Specifically, Wuzhen Town, epitomizing the southern China culture; Beijing WTown, illustrating the northern frontier culture; and Chikan Ancient Town, representing overseas Chinese culture, are all impressive with their distinct theming images deeply rooted in local culture. Second, the core of hybrid consumption involves persuading visitors to extend their stay in scenic areas. The Wuzhen Town Mode closely follows this rule by adopting the compound profit mode and promoting the night economy. As a result, visitors tend to stay longer and spend more money. In this sense, the Wuzhen Town Mode contravenes the current operational mode, in which ancient town scenic areas rely only on the "tickets economy". Instead, it manages to practice hybrid consumption by providing excellent tourism services, including distinctive accommodations, differentiated tourism products, high-quality tourism festivals, and fashionable art forms. Merchandising is closely focused on making Wuzhen Town a brand. Wuzhen Town Tourism Co. Ltd. was founded within the Wuzhen Town Scenic Area for unified administration and proper commercialization. In this way, high-quality commodification and supervision can be guaranteed. Finally, affective labor and staging truly describe the characteristics of performative labor in the Wuzhen Town Mode. The mode is embodied in the good service concept, together with authentic representation of the whole scenic area realized by staging.

3.2. General characteristics of the Disneyization of cultural tourism towns: residential function

Compared with theme parks, theme-based cultural tourism towns have more spatial and functional advantages. Through the case study of cultural tourism towns typical of the Wuzhen Town Mode, we find that accommodations are the most important aspect in which theme-based cultural tourism towns differ from theme parks. Cultural tourism towns are better designed for accommodations because they can provide living spaces and experiences for visitors. Accommodations here perfectly integrate "tour" and "residence" and add much vitality to scenic areas. They enable scenic areas to provide one-stop service for tourism, leisure, and residential life. This aspect solves the problem of separate tourism and residential spaces in theme parks. At the same time, accommodations are the key to the success of cultural tourism towns in China. The foundation for the success of the Wuzhen Town Mode is the all-around definition and precise management of accommodations in scenic areas. Moreover, accommodations are a theoretical extension of hybrid consumption, which is part of the Disneyization theoretical framework. The positive influence of accommodations on the temporal, spatial, social, consumption, and perceptual dimensions is shown in Fig. 1.

Temporal dimension: the presence and improvement of accommodations in cultural tourism towns can attract more tourists for

overnight stays. Accommodations help to extend business hours and the average daily stay of tourists and drive the secondary consumption of other products in the towns. In particular, they help boost the night economy. In addition, accommodations increase the number of days that tourists spend in scenic areas, so that they can better enjoy the local tourism products and services. The result will be an increase in the total consumption of tourists.

Spatial dimension: the introduction of the residential function to cultural tourism towns enriches their spatial capabilities and extends their scope for the spatial distribution of tourism products. Accordingly, the actual area available for visitors is also expanded. At the same time, upgrading the residential function of these towns blurs the spatial boundary between accommodations and leisure, and integrates the activity spaces within the towns.

Social dimension: in order to create authentic scenes of town life, theme-based cultural tourism towns following the Wuzhen Town Mode have absorbed an array of local citizens and original landlords to operate accommodations within scenic areas. This not only improves the participation of local residents, promotes employment in the local community, and increases residents’ per capita income, but also enhances their sense of identity and pride in local culture.

Consumption dimension: with the rise of the tourist expenditure level, accommodations no longer mean only a space for overnight stays; they can also be high-end leisure options for travelers. Travelers are paying increasing attention to tourist accommodation consumption. Boutique homestays and idea hotels have even become important attractions of tourism towns, and some visitors pay dedicated visits to such places.

Perceptual dimension: Cultural tourism towns typical of the Wuzhen Town Mode try to guide travelers from sightseeing tours to leisure vacations by improving their residential function. A strong residential function together with attractive residential design can satisfy visitors’ need for relaxation and enhance their degree of satisfaction with the whole scenic area.

4. Conversion mechanism of the Disneyization of cultural tourism towns in China

4.1. Capital market boost: reshaping of mass leisure by capital power during consumption transition

The consumer market in China has witnessed a shift from “no budget” consumption to “budget” consumption (Bao, 2015b; Hu and Bao, 2018) and entered a consumption phase featuring “make ends meet” (Hu and Bao, 2018). In this context, travel destinations are exposed to a certain level of imbalance between supply and demand, which has led to a new round of restructuring (Bao, 2015b). Most

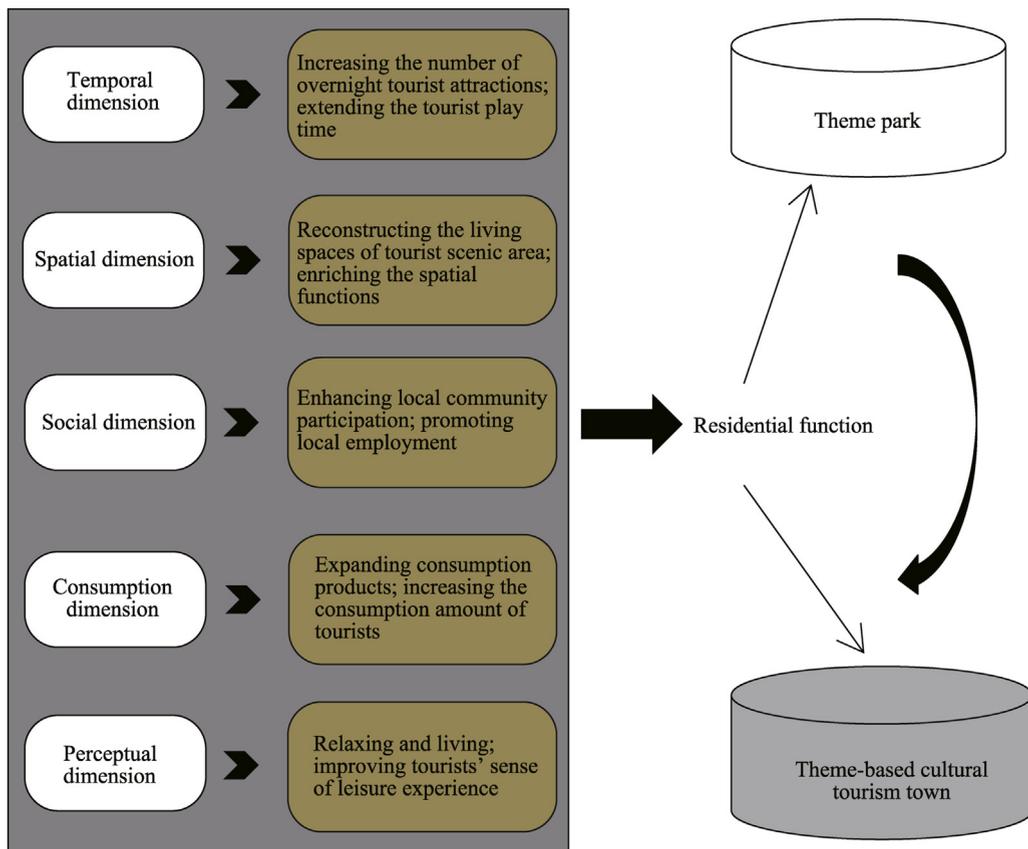


Fig. 1. Difference of residential function between theme park and theme-based cultural tourism town and its influence dimensions.

notably, the demand for luxury hotels in travel destinations has experienced a sharp decline, and tourism real estate development has also been discouraged. At present, tourism capital has begun to return to tourism products themselves, especially premium tourism (destination) products. The goal is to create a new tourism mode in which capital redefines tourism by reshaping mass leisure and reviving tourism real estate amid the consumption transition. The development of Disneyfied tourism space not only provides product advantages through the differentiation and theming of tourism products but also integrates accommodations and real estate development by virtue of Disneyfied hybrid consumption to cater to current capital preferences (Fig. 2).

4.2. Tourist demand change: post-modern conversion of tourism consumption

During the recent decades of the tourism boom, tourism itself has evolved into an institutional culture, from Fordist mass tourism consumption to a post-modern attitude towards travel (Zhang, 2007). There is an obvious post-modern trend in tourists’ consumption behavior (Qi, 2014). We call it the post-modern transformation of tourism consumption, while some scholars define the subjects of such tourism as “new tourists” (Ma, 2014). In this reality, the aesthetic focus of tourists has shifted from the demand for functionalized space to the return to real life and the aesthetics of life itself (Niu, 2014). The philosophy of the Disneyization rooted in post-modernism is essentially a differentiation strategy that emphasizes the pursuit of individuality. The Disneyization opposes standardized and single-business modes while embracing thematic narration, immersive experience, hybrid consumption, and goods-oriented services to meet the individual needs of tourists today. The Disneyization of cultural tourism towns is a violation of the monotonous design concept adopted by classical cultural tourism towns. Instead, it provides a brand-new tourism space narration in response to current changes in tourists’ consumption needs.

4.3. Social environmental drive: the sudden boom of national leisure in the era of mass tourism

With the implementation of paid vacation systems, China has entered an era of mass leisure. Leisure vacations are taking place on a large scale. Spending on leisure consumption and leisure time are continuously increasing in the proportion of national spending. Tourism and leisure have become new highlights in people’s lives. The mode of tourism has also changed from traditional sightseeing tours to leisure tours, cultural tours, etc. This change has obliged classical tourism destinations to transform themselves into integrated leisure tourism destinations. From the perspectives of spatial volume and tourism product integration, it is wise to convert small (ancient) towns into leisure tourism destinations. This is one of the reasons why cultural tourism towns have experienced such rapid development in recent years. Designing cultural tourism towns on the basis of the philosophy of the Disneyization not only allows the chance to introduce leisure elements into the theme but also creates leisure functions of tourism destinations. As a result, the culture of small (ancient) towns can be perfectly combined with leisure tours to generate social, economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

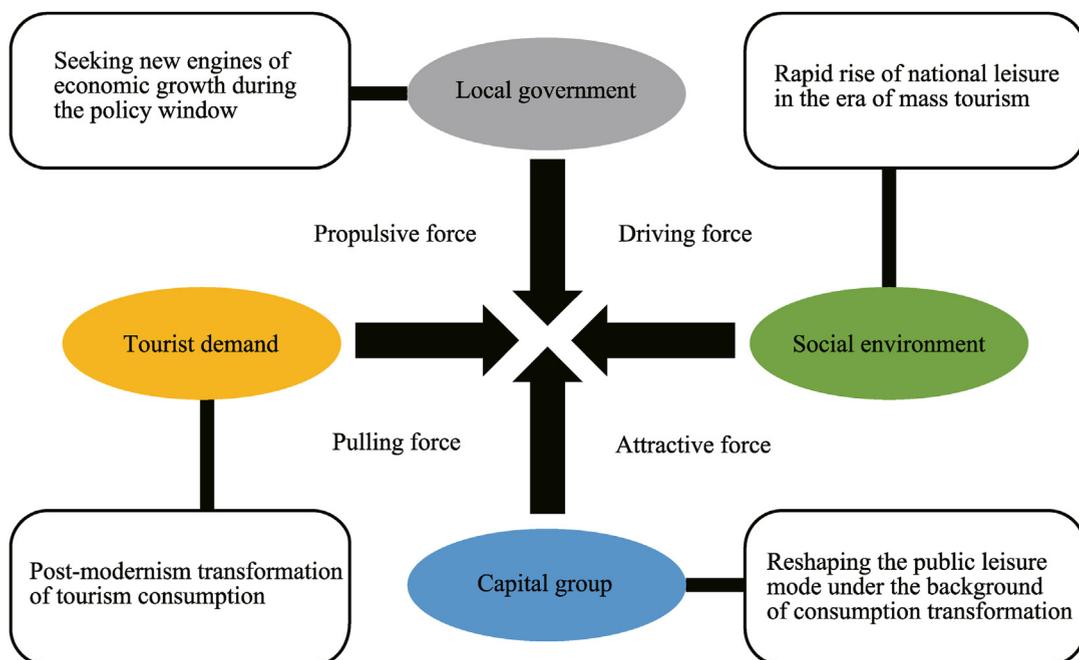


Fig. 2. Turning mechanism of the Disneyization in theme-based cultural tourism towns of China.

4.4. Local government policy: new drivers of economic growth in the policy window

While China is advancing new-type urbanization and actively building characteristic towns, local governments are taking advantage of policy platforms to explore new growth points. Theme-based cultural tourism towns are undoubtedly important cultural growth machines that play a vital role in urban (town) growth (Wu et al., 2017; Cao and Wu, 2020); they show an endophytic action mechanism. In small towns far from cities, continuous self-dependent growth can be achieved by realizing the cultural tourism function as well as improving supporting facilities. Such changes will exert a bottom-up radiation effect on spatial units such as the towns, counties, cities, and regions. They can be a powerful driver for local governments to seek breakthroughs in economic, cultural, and ecological effects. If a top-down radiative theme park is one path to city-driven district and county growth in the post-industrial era, a bottom-up endophytic theme-based cultural tourism town is one way to realize new-type urbanization driven by tourism, and this approach can play a key part in the comprehensive development of towns.

5. Development of cultural tourism towns: inspirations of the Disneyization

Certainly, not all cultural tourism towns have to follow the theme park mode, but the theoretical framework of the Disneyization can still provide some practical and theoretical inspirations. Town theming itself is an important illustration of eliminating the homogenization of scenic areas. The theme can be derived from location, time, sport, music, movie, fashion, commodity, architecture, natural world, literature, morality/philosophy, enterprise/logo, and so on. In addition, theme updating costs can be very high, and travelers will have increasing expectations of the theme, so the choice of theme should be in line with market preferences. The point is to create hybrid consumption scenarios. On the one hand, expanding the scale of consuming places and providing a proper volume of tourism products can help extend visitors' stay in scenic areas; on the other hand, innovatively combining varying types of consumption is a good way to attract visitors and stimulate their desire to purchase. It is also wise to build online sensational complexes featuring hybrid consumption to promote accommodations, catering, shopping, and other functions of the town. In fact, disused places can also be renovated through proper theming to allow for new expenditure patterns. Regarding merchandising, it is important to take advantage of brand images to produce derivative commodities and to co-brand with other trademarks to generate a synergistic effect. It is also feasible to combine merchandising with the cultural industry to create derivative products by way of the jointly authorized commercialization of representative figures, places, plots, and food from movies, TV shows, books, animation, and so on. Establishing mainstream values related to the commodification of culture is of great significance, especially for the adolescent market segment. In addition, copyright issues are also essential. Respect should be paid to intellectual copyrights as well as portrait rights of celebrities. Regarding performative labor, improving employees' service quality, especially their service mood, is quite important. Smiling when interacting with customers should become a common practice. Finally, the total quality management should also be stressed, particularly in the customer care program.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

With the rapid development of cultural tourism towns, the success of the Wuzhen Town Mode of the Disneyization indicates the Disneyization of tourism space in China. However, not all Disneyfied cultural tourism towns will succeed. In fact, a large number of theme-based cultural tourism towns, such as the Longtan Watertown in Chengdu City, Hexianfang Folk Culture Village in Weinan City, Bailuyuan Culture Scenic in Xi'an City, German Village in Changde City, and Yangqiao Ancient Town in Changzhou City, have been phased out. There are several reasons for this, one of which is that these towns, while showing the influence of the Disneyization, fail to apply the concept of the Disneyization to their own circumstances. In addition to the classic success story of the Wuzhen Town Mode, the practice of the Disneyization in the design of cities, architecture, and landscapes can be a source of inspiration. For example, it can stimulate critical thinking on the loss of local cultures, distorted aesthetics of construction landscapes, and manipulation of capital consciousness (Zhou, 2009; Yang and Liu, 2015; Zheng, 2016; Gao and Yin, 2018) and can serve as a reference for in-depth reflection. However, there are also some bottlenecks for the replication of the Wuzhen Town Mode. Actually, many old villages and towns in China do not have suitable conditions for the Wuzhen Town Mode, especially those with titles featuring "Heritage". There are strict rules for maintaining "authenticity" and ecological red lines (an important institutional innovation in China's environmental protection; it refers to the strict protection of spatial boundaries and management limits in terms of natural ecological service functions, environmental quality and safety, and utilization of natural resources, so as to maintain national and regional ecological security, sustain economic and social development, and protect the health of the people for spatial arrangement. The issue of property rights in scenic areas is also a constraint on the popularization of the Wuzhen Town Mode.

At present, the construction of cultural tourism towns is an important way to promote regional sustainable development. It is of great significance to regional and local industrial upgrading and strategic transformation. Some scholars call building a growth machine of a cultural tourism town with local characteristics as "entertainment growth machine", which promotes the sustainable development of the region or place by focusing on different areas (Wu et al., 2017). However, repeated construction, non-differentiated buildings, neglect of market rules, and lack of scientific market research may all lead to the failure of the development of cultural tourism towns. We believe that the benign development of Chinese cultural tourism towns should follow several principles. The first is the principle of macro-control. State and local governments should carry out macro-control, introduce appropriate encouraging policies, and design appropriate elimination mechanisms. The second is the principle of spatial difference. Operators should follow market rules, study tourists' travel behaviors, and prevent the spatial agglomeration of similar products. The third is the principle of differential rent. The construction of cultural tourism towns often involves the government and enterprises. All parties should follow the project input-output ratio, control the project land reasonably, and invest rationally in construction. The last is the principle of consumption cycle. The

project should timely maintain content innovation, appropriately lead tourists' aesthetic and tourism experiences, and maintain a positive consumption cycle, which is also the development direction of Chinese cultural tourism towns.

In summary, the theoretical framework of the Disneyization holds great theoretical and practical significance for the evolution of cultural tourism towns in China. Many cultural tourism towns have already started to demonstrate characteristics of the Disneyization, which means that tourism space has embarked on the Disneyization conversion in China. However, such a theoretical framework is highly extendible, and flexible application is necessary in practice. In other words, it should always be connected to reality. The Wuzhen Town Mode is a successful example of the Disneyization, and we hope that there will be increasingly successful modes of Disneyfied tourism space in the future.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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