

Structuring for Acceptance: How Cultural Legitimacy Drives Organizational Innovation in Theme Parks

Ruijie Niu¹ and Qihuai Zhang^{2,*}

¹ School of Economics, Nankai University, Tianjin, China

² School of Artificial Intelligence, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
Email: 2120243742@mail.nankai.edu.cn (R.N.); zqhsai@mail.bnu.edu.cn (Q.Z.)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract—In the context of globalization, the cultural industries have continued to evolve, and research on transnational cultural corporations has accordingly attracted growing scholarly attention. However, current studies on the organizational frameworks of these corporations predominantly rely on theories developed for traditional industries, whose explanatory power is limited for the cultural industries. Taking theme parks, an emblematic and distinctive form of transnational cultural projects as its object of analysis, this paper examines organizational structure innovation under complex institutional and cultural environments. Anchored in the theory of organizational ambidexterity, we innovatively incorporate the factor of cultural legitimacy into the organizational ambidexterity framework to analyze organizational innovation in cultural projects. Using Shanghai Disney Resort as the focal case study, selecting Universal Beijing Resort and Tokyo Disney Resort as comparative cases, this research employs a comparative case study approach to identify three distinct organizational models. From the standpoint of organizational ambidexterity and the lens of cultural legitimacy, these three parks exhibit different configurations and strategic priorities. Our findings indicate that organizational innovation in transnational cultural projects is not merely a response to organizational ambidexterity but also a dynamic process of pursuing cultural legitimacy. Cultural legitimacy serves not only as a critical external condition for successful localization of multinational corporations but also as an internal driver for continuous organizational adaptation. This study provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the governance choices of transnational cultural corporations under varying degrees of institutional complexity.

Keywords—theme parks, organizational ambidexterity, cultural legitimacy, organizational structure innovation, transnational cultural projects

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context where globalization and localization intersect, Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have become central actors in global business. Their organizational structures constitute the core mechanism for dynamically balancing between global standardization and local cultural adaptation. Research on these structures helps deepen the understanding of MNCs' management and operational models, and has therefore remained a focal point of scholarship over the past decade.

Existing research on MNCs' organizational structures has primarily concentrated on cross-cultural management and localization strategies, emphasizing compromise and integration strategies in the face of cultural difference. From a cross-cultural management perspective, Bhagat et al. proposed that MNCs must confront multi-level cultural

differences during global operations (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002); these differences not only shape firms' strategic choices but also influence the effectiveness of organizational learning and knowledge transfer. Building on this, Meyer et al., based on research on emerging-market MNCs, indicated that localization strategy is a crucial pathway for MNCs to gain legitimacy within diverse institutional and cultural environments (Meyer, Mudambi, & Narula, 2011). Enterprises need to flexibly adjust between global standardization and local responsiveness to achieve effective cross-cultural integration.

Although current research has extensively analyzed the organizational structures of traditional MNCs, the dynamic balance between global standardization and local cultural adaptation is far more complex in cultural industries that are deeply reliant on symbols and meaning-making. Firms in cultural industries must maintain consistency in their global brand image through highly standardized operations, yet at the same time adapt to local cultural symbols, values, and consumption habits to gain cultural and market acceptance. Consequently, how to strike an effective balance between global standardization and local cultural adaptation has long been a critical consideration for organizational innovation in transnational cultural projects. For instance, Chalaby's research on the transnational circulation of TV formats found that successful transnational cultural projects often combine standardized production processes with localized adjustments at the levels of narrative, performance and symbolic elements while standardizing production processes, thereby achieving a dynamic balance between global expansion and local acceptance (Chalaby, 2012). Similarly, Lobato in the study of Netflix's global expansion, argues that for transnational streaming platforms to succeed in different markets, they must actively promote content localization while maintaining global brand and technological standards (Lobato, 2019).

As one important form of transnational cultural project, theme parks have flourished rapidly in recent years, especially in East Asia, where a sizable consumer market has emerged. Theme parks, as a representative form of transnational cultural projects, are regarded as key nodes in the globalization of cultural industries. Unlike light-asset cultural products such as films or streaming media, theme parks are fixed, large-scale projects with characteristics of high investment and long-term operation. They possess the dual attributes of being both cultural products and business organizations, requiring not only the maintenance of global brand consistency but also deep alignment with the social culture and consumption habits of the host country.

Currently, research on theme parks remains at its preliminary stage. For example, based on interviews with managers in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, Pikkemaat and Schuckert identify a perception gap between practitioners and the literature regarding key success factors for theme parks (Schuckert, 2007). Cheng using The Walt Disney Company as a case, underscores the strategic steering role of organizational culture in transnational cultural projects (Cheng, 2023).

Notably, current research on theme parks lacks analysis from the point of organizational structure perspective. In recent years, organizational ambidexterity has become a prominent analytical approach to MNCs' organizational structures (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of cultural legitimacy has enriched perspectives on structural evolution (Chin, Caputo, Shi, Calabrese, Aouina-Mejri, & Papa, 2025; Blanco-González, Menchen-Atienza, Del-Castillo-Feito, & Rivero-Gutiérrez, 2025). Organizational ambidexterity theory emphasizes the enterprise's pursuit of a dynamic balance between exploration and exploitation, but has tended to focus on internal resources and strategic choices. Therefore, integrating the lens of cultural legitimacy within the theoretical framework of organizational ambidexterity can further explain how transnational cultural projects gain social recognition within pluralistic institutional and cultural environments, thereby catalyzing organizational innovation.

In summary, the proactive structural innovations undertaken by theme parks under complex conditions provide an ideal analytical perspective for examining the global diffusion and local embeddedness of cultural industries. Accordingly, this paper takes theme parks as its empirical setting to investigate how transnational cultural enterprises achieve organizational ambidexterity through structure innovation, and to explore the moderating role played by cultural legitimacy in this process.

With respect to theme parks, Shanghai Disney Resort (hereafter Shanghai Disney) under The Walt Disney Company, is one of the world's most popular theme parks. Its organizational structure reflects both the headquarters-led logic, while being situated in a complex context shaped by institutional transition and cultural differences, rendering it highly typical and analytically valuable. Consequently, this paper takes Shanghai Disney as the focal case and selects Universal Beijing Resort (hereafter Universal Beijing) and Tokyo Disney Resort (hereafter Tokyo Disney) as comparative cases, which are respectively located in the same host-country market and within the same brand system, to conduct a systematic comparative analysis regarding comparison of organizational structures and cultural adaptation. Theoretically, with organizational ambidexterity as the main thread, the paper innovatively introduces the perspective of cultural legitimacy to explore how transnational cultural projects, represented by theme parks, drive organizational innovation and how cultural legitimacy influences this process.

The paper proceeds as follows. Part II develops the theoretical framework of organizational ambidexterity and cultural legitimacy; Part III conducts a comparative analysis of Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing, and Tokyo Disney; Part IV summarizes and discusses the comparative results;

Part V presents the conclusions and implications.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Organizational Ambidexterity

The concept of organizational ambidexterity was first proposed by Duncan, who emphasized that organizations need to establish dual structures that balance the generation and utilization of innovation in order to cope with environmental uncertainty (Duncan, 1976). Subsequently, March further elaborated this concept by distinguishing between two types of organizational learning activities: exploration, which stresses knowledge creation, flexibility, and future opportunities, and exploitation, which emphasizes efficiency, control, and the optimization of existing resources (March, 1991). Within March's framework, exploration and exploitation constitute a fundamental tension in organizational learning, and how to achieve a dynamic balance between them has become a critical issue in organizational research.

As scholarship has advanced, the organizational ambidexterity lens has been applied to explain how manufacturing, high-tech sectors, and traditional MNCs coordinate resource allocation between mature and emerging businesses. Based on case studies of high-tech firms like IBM, O'Reilly and Tushman argue that organizational ambidexterity is a dynamic capability, which is also a core competence of innovation management and a key source of sustained competitive advantage for MNCs (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Ambos et al., focusing on the initiative-taking of multinational subsidiary, reveal the pivotal moderating role of organizational ambidexterity between global integration and local responsiveness (Ambos, Andersson, & Birkinshaw, 2010). At the same time, research on organizational ambidexterity emphasizes its interaction with the external environment. Birkinshaw and Gupta point out that in multinational enterprise research, organizational ambidexterity involves not only internal resource trade-offs but is also closely related to external institutional and cultural pressures (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013). Roth examines how MNCs integrate Research Integration into global research and development strategies to achieve ambidexterity, thereby enhancing overall innovation and adaptability (Roth, 2024).

In cultural industries research, organizational ambidexterity likewise offers distinctive analytical leverage. Specifically, the dual dimensions of exploration and exploitation provide a useful lens for analyzing how cultural projects seek balance between global standardization and local cultural adaptation. This process exhibits tensions that differ from those in traditional industries. Organizational ambidexterity has been gradually applied in cultural industries research. For instance, Kuipers in a study on the transnational diffusion of television programs, argues that exploration and exploitation in cultural industries not confined to technology or markets; they also involve tensions between the localization of transnational cultural content and the maintenance of global brand consistency (Kuipers, 2019). Cross-national variation in the acceptance and adaptation of the same cultural products highlight the dynamic balance of legitimacy, identification, and market success in transnational cultural projects.

B. Cultural Legitimacy

The issue of legitimacy was first raised by Meyer and Rowan, who argued that organizations often secure legitimacy through institutionalized structures and practices to ensure survival and development within their social environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Subsequently, Suchman systematized the concept of legitimacy, proposing three types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. He emphasized that legitimacy concerns not only an organization’s utilitarian exchanges of interests but also the social alignment of its values and cognitive frameworks (Suchman, 1995).

Within the framework of institutional theory, Scott clearly distinguished between regulatory, normative, and cognitive legitimacy, providing a basis for classification in subsequent research (Scott, 2014). Building on this, Geels and Verhees introduced the concept of cultural legitimacy into innovation studies, defining it as the broad social recognition obtained when new technologies or practices align with societal mainstream values, norms, and cognitive frameworks (Geels & Verhees, 2011). They emphasized that when innovations resonate with existing cultural narratives, they are more likely to gain public support and institutional embeddedness. This definition is highly consistent with Suchman’s classic definition of legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” (Suchman, 1995)

Cultural legitimacy has been gradually incorporated into the analytical framework of cultural industries. Compared to traditional perspectives such as localization strategies, it prioritizes social recognition over mere market adaptation, and foregrounds the dynamic and process orientation. For example, Reynolds et al., in a systematic review of innovation framing, emphasize that cultural legitimacy is constructed through macro-level cultural-cognitive frameworks (Reynolds, O’Dochartaigh, Secchi, Marshall & Prothero, 2025). When an innovation is framed as aligning with social values and norms, it is more likely to gain legitimacy and social acceptance; Conversely, it faces resistance. Through an analysis of AI media discourse, Korneeva et al. pointed out that the cultural legitimacy of AI is dynamically generated through ongoing framing struggles. The media shapes public perception by emphasizing opportunities or risks, thereby determining its social acceptance in different periods (Korneeva, Salge, Teubner, & Antons, 2023). These findings indicate that cultural legitimacy is not a static attribute but a dynamic process contingent upon discourse and framing practices.

Building on the above, this paper develops an analytical model that incorporates cultural legitimacy into organizational structural innovation in transnational theme parks. The Fig. 1 presents the theoretical analytical framework developed in this study. Read from left to right, when transnational cultural corporations advance theme parks and other transnational cultural projects in a host country. Organizational ambidexterity constitutes the core mechanism: by balancing the exploitation of established brand assets and operational routines with the exploration of local markets and cultural resources, firms pursue a dynamic equilibrium between global standardization and local cultural adaptation. The lower dimension highlights cultural legitimacy, indicating that host-society cultural expectations provide the primary evaluative basis for project cultural legitimacy. Over the course of implementation, firms continuously perceive cultural legitimacy gaps and, in response, undertake structural and governance adjustments and self-constraint, while also meeting social expectations through localization managerial innovation. Consequently, cultural legitimacy functions both as an external condition for the local embeddedness of transnational cultural projects and as a feedback mechanism—operating through adjustment and constraint—that reshapes project structures and drives ongoing organizational structural innovation by transnational cultural corporations within plural institutional and cultural environments.

III. ANALYSIS

Disney and Universal, as two global entertainment giants, have achieved remarkable success with their theme park businesses in East Asia, solidifying their leading and exemplary positions within the global theme park industry. According to the 2023 Global Attractions Attendance Report jointly released by AECOM and the Themed Entertainment Association, the total attendance for the world’s top 25 theme parks in 2023 reached 244.6 million visits, a year-on-year increase of 23.5% (Themed Entertainment Association (TEA), & AECOM, 2024). Among these, Disney’s parks attracted over 140 million visitors, accounting for approximately 34% of the global market and maintaining its industry intellectual property. Universal Studios’ parks received approximately 57 million visitors, representing nearly 14% of the, ranking second (TEA & AECOM, 2024). These two brands not only lead significantly in terms of visitor volume and market share but are also highly representative in their cross-border expansion and cultural localization practices. Disney demonstrates the integration of global standards and local culture through narrative-driven experiences and cultural fusion, while Universal Studios emphasizes standardized operations and transnational synergy through intellectual property integration and technological expertise. The two are not only competitors but also embody distinct operational logics for transnational cultural projects. Therefore, a comparative study of their organizational structures can better illuminate the dynamic balance that multinational cultural enterprises strike between global standardization and local cultural adaptation.

This paper employs a comparative case study method (Yin, 2009), conducting horizontal and vertical comparisons through three cases —Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing,



Fig. 1. Theoretical analytical framework.

and Tokyo Disney. Horizontally, this study compares different theme park brands located in the same host country, namely Shanghai Disney and Universal Beijing, with a focus on their distinct management models within the Chinese market. While vertically, this study compares the same brand situated in different countries, Shanghai Disney and Tokyo Disney, to analyze how their organizational structures adapt to the differing institutional and cultural environments of China and Japan.

To ensure diversity and credibility, data sources for this study include policy documents, corporate annual reports, and industry reports.

A. Shanghai Disney: Headquarters-Led Structure

Currently, Disney theme parks operate under three models: wholly-owned investment and management, licensing, and joint venture. Shanghai Disney, which opened in 2016 as Disney’s first theme park project in mainland China, adopts a joint-venture model. In 2023, it received about 14 million visitors, ranking fifth worldwide and second in Asia among theme parks, thereby making it one of the most popular parks in China (TEA & AECOM, 2024). Negotiations for the project began in the early 2000s and spanned over a decade, ultimately resulting in a joint venture between The Walt Disney Company and Shanghai Shendi Group. Although the Chinese side holds a majority stake of about 57%, within the actual governance structure, Disney headquarters retains dominant control over key areas, thereby constituting a headquarters-led structure under a joint venture form. Structure and Governance of Shanghai Disney is shown in Fig. 2.

In organizational terms, strategic planning, creative design, and brand management are directly led by the headquarters team, while marketing and daily operations rely more on the local team. This arrangement ensures global consistency for the Disney brand in the Chinese market but limits the autonomy of local management.

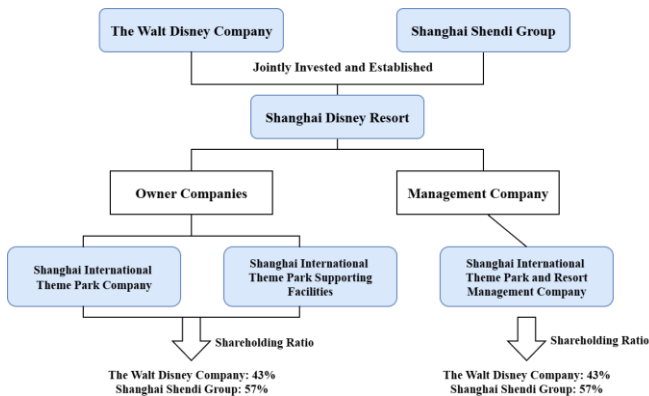


Fig. 2. Shareholding and governance structure of Shanghai Disney resort.

Regarding organizational ambidexterity performance, Shanghai Disney emphasizes the exploitation of global brand standards. Its strategic objective is to ensure that the consumer experience in China is consistent with other Disney parks through standardization, thereby reducing operational risks. However, its adaptation to cultural legitimacy has been relatively limited. Although initiatives such as *the Garden of the Twelve Friends*, featuring the twelve zodiac animals or Chinese New Year-themed shows reflect cultural integration, overall, these represent partial adjustments rather than

systematic innovation.

This structural arrangement presents a double-edged effect in the market. Leveraging its international brand advantage, Shanghai Disney quickly attracted large numbers of visitors upon opening, becoming an iconic project for international brands entering China. However, its high ticket prices, food costs, and consumption practices sparked controversy and were criticized for being out of step with local consumption habits (Li, 2015). Over time, through seasonal events, merchandise localization, targeted marketing, Shanghai Disney has gradually improved consumer relations and enhanced its cultural legitimacy. Nonetheless, it overall still leans towards a global standardization path.

B. Universal Beijing: Joint Matrix Structure

Universal Studios currently utilizes three operational models: self-operated, joint venture, and licensed. The two Universal parks in the US are self-operated, Singapore’s Universal Studios follows a licensing model, while both Universal Studios Japan at its inception, and Universal Beijing adopted the joint venture model, with NBCUniversal holding a relatively low equity share. Joint ventures or licensing arrangements reduce the risks associated with capital-intensive overseas operations and facilitate local support in terms of finance, land, and cultural resources.

Universal Beijing officially opened in 2021, with its project initiation dating back to 2001. After over a decade of regulatory approvals and market feasibility studies, the project was approved in 2014 and developed through a collaboration between a Chinese consortium led by Beijing Tourism Group and NBCUniversal. The Chinese side holds a 70% stake, and the foreign side holds 30%, reflecting both local Intellectual property and Sino-foreign collaboration in equity and governance. NBCUniversal primarily licenses the name and certain intellectual property rights and holds no equity stake. Universal Beijing employs an innovative joint matrix structure. Shareholding and Governance Structure of Universal Beijing are shown in Fig. 3. SASAC represents State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission.

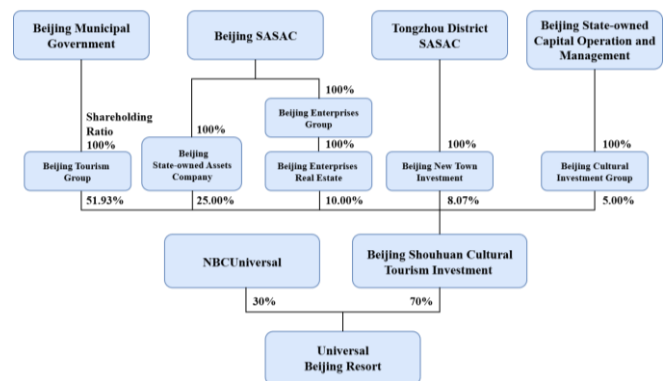


Fig. 3. Shareholding structure and governance of Universal Beijing resort.

In terms of organizational ambidexterity, Universal Beijing Resort achieves a relative balance between exploration and exploitation. On one hand, internationally renowned intellectual property such as Harry Potter and Jurassic Park; On the other hand, it places particular emphasis on integrating local cultural elements. For instance, the *Kung Fu Panda Land of Awesomeness* not only

showcases Chinese cultural symbols but also aligns with local consumer demand. This global intellectual property and local elements model has garnered higher recognition in terms of cultural legitimacy.

Despite opening during the pandemic, Universal Beijing attracted substantial numbers of visitors in a short time and received widespread positive reviews. Compared to Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing exhibits more pronounced adaptation in cultural legitimacy. Its governance model stands as a representative case of Sino-foreign joint governance and represents a classic example of structural innovation in transnational cultural projects.

C. Tokyo Disney: Locally Led Structure

Opened in 1983, Tokyo Disney was Disney's first overseas park outside the United States. Out of prudence, The Walt Disney Company adopted a lower-risk licensing model, whereby Disney provided technology and licensing, while the Japanese partner was responsible for investment and management.

The Walt Disney Company licenses relevant intellectual property to Oriental Land Company (OLC), which is responsible for daily operations. Under the licensing framework, The Walt Disney Company does not directly participate in the project's operational management; rather, it manages and coordinates its brand through The Walt Disney Attractions Japan, established in Japan, requiring OLC to uphold Disney's global standards and ensure the project's proper development direction. In this model, The Walt Disney Company holds no equity and therefore does not participate in profit sharing, instead charging an annual licensing fee of 10% of ticket revenue and 5% of in-park merchandise sales. Tokyo Disney was largely funded by the Japanese side, with the majority of equity and control held by OLC (Reckard, 1999). This locally led licensing model is unique within the global Disney system. Shareholding Structure and Governance of Tokyo Disney is shown in Fig. 4. As the host-country operator, OLC completely controls operations and strategy. Decision-making is highly localized, allowing it to deeply align with Japanese consumer culture, resulting in thorough adaptation in cultural legitimacy. For example, Tokyo Disney emphasizes service quality details and crowd management, reflecting Japanese society's preference for meticulous experiences and public order. In terms of ambidexterity, Tokyo Disney exhibits a clear tendency towards exploration, prioritizing local adaptation and cultural legitimacy, while maintaining global standardization at a minimal level.

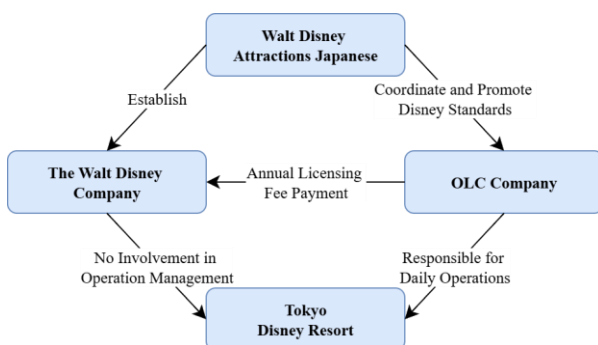


Fig. 4. Shareholding and governance structure of Tokyo Disney resort.

IV. COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION

By comparing Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing, and Tokyo Disney, this study extends the applicability of organizational ambidexterity theory to the cultural industries. It reveals that theme parks have undertaken significant organizational innovations in their transnational operations and adopted diverse approaches to secure cultural legitimacy. These different organizational models represent the varied pathways through which MNCs seek to balance.

On the one hand, exploration and exploitation in transnational cultural projects extend beyond technology and market considerations to address issues of cultural legitimacy. On the other hand, cultural legitimacy should not be regarded merely as an external constraint; it also constitutes a key driving force behind organizational structural innovation.

In a horizontal comparison of different brands within the same country, Shanghai Disney and Universal Beijing, both adopting joint venture models, exhibit distinct organizational structures characterized by headquarters-led and joint governance, respectively. Shanghai Disney emphasizes the uniformity of global standards to ensure operational standardization and brand consistency. In contrast, Universal Beijing has achieved a better balance between global standards and cultural legitimacy, retaining flagship Universal Studios IP while incorporating zones with distinctive Chinese characteristics.

From the perspective of organizational ambidexterity, these two resorts demonstrate significant differences. Shanghai Disney adopts a headquarters-led structure, prioritizing global standardization and brand consistency. While it excels in exploitation, its localized exploration is limited, resulting in relatively lower adaptation to cultural legitimacy. Universal Beijing, by contrast, operates under an innovative joint matrix structure that facilitates Sino-foreign collaboration. By maintaining global intellectual property standards while actively incorporating local cultural elements, Universal Beijing demonstrates a better balance between exploration and exploitation and achieves stronger cultural legitimacy.

Cultural legitimacy stands as a critical guide for the ongoing exploration and integration of these two theme parks into the host market. In its early stages, Shanghai Disney faced social criticism due to high pricing, mismatched consumer habits, and cultural insensitivity. Similarly, Universal Beijing encountered challenges during its construction phase due to questions of cultural legitimacy. In 2009, the Chinese government required further in-depth research and evaluation of the Universal Beijing project from the perspective of cultural strategic security. In 2011, relevant Chinese national authorities suspended the construction boom of large-scale theme parks in the country, leading to another temporary halt of the Universal Beijing project. It was not until three years later, in 2014, that the project was formally resumed.

The horizontal comparison between Shanghai Disney and Universal Beijing suggests that an excessive emphasis on global standardization at the expense of cultural legitimacy can lead to a lack of local adaptability, potentially resulting in a cultural misfit. Conversely, over-reliance on localization that undermines global standardization risks eroding brand consistency and reduces international competitiveness. This

reflects the tension and challenges faced by theme parks in balancing global standardization and localized innovation.

In a vertical comparison of the same brand across different host countries, the contrast between Shanghai Disney and Tokyo Disney illustrates the profound impact of cultural legitimacy on organizational structure and operational models. As an emerging market, MNCs tend to prefer headquarters-led models to mitigate investment risks in China. In contrast, Japan, as a mature market, favors a locally led model that more readily secures cultural legitimacy and societal acceptance.

When Tokyo Disney opened in 1983, the repeat visitor rate was low, leading to a lack of confidence from Disney headquarters and resulting in their decision to relinquish equity. After Japanese companies took over operations, the repeat visitor rate increased, with both attendance and revenue achieving growth for many years, making it arguably the most profitable Disneyland worldwide. This model has made Tokyo Disney one of Japan's most popular theme parks, deeply embedded in Japanese socio-cultural identity. Although it diverges from global standardization compared to Disney's worldwide norm, its high level of cultural legitimacy has ensured long-term stable development.

From the perspective of organizational ambidexterity and adaptation to cultural legitimacy, Shanghai Disney and Tokyo Disney present a stark contrast. Shanghai Disney adopts a headquarters-led joint venture structure, with headquarters retaining control over core decisions and brand management. It emphasizes the advantages of exploitation to ensure global standardization consistency but shows limited localized exploration and insufficient adaptation to cultural legitimacy. By contrast, Tokyo Disney operates under a locally led licensing model, managed entirely by OLC.

This structure prioritizes localized management and cultural alignment, excelling in exploration by deeply integrating into Japan's consumer culture. Overall, Shanghai Disney leans towards reinforcing exploitation through global standardization, while Tokyo Disney emphasizes exploration through localized management. The two represent differentiated pathways taken by transnational cultural projects operating in distinct institutional and cultural environments.

The vertical comparison between Shanghai Disney and Tokyo Disney indicates that actively advancing exploration within organizational ambidexterity, through bold structural innovation and heightened attention to cultural legitimacy, is a critical factor in the success of transnational cultural projects.

Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing and Tokyo Disney represent three distinct organizational models: headquarters-led, joint matrix and locally led structure. Their performances in organizational ambidexterity and cultural legitimacy present a clear contrast. Shanghai Disney heavily relies on headquarters control, prioritizing the exploitation of global brand standards but demonstrating limited localized exploration, thereby achieving weaker cultural legitimacy. Universal Beijing achieves a better balance between global standardization and local cultural adaptation through a joint matrix structure. It strengthens exploitation via standardized intellectual property while enhancing exploration through the incorporation of Chinese cultural elements, thereby gaining

higher social recognition in terms of cultural legitimacy. Tokyo Disney, centered on local leadership, emphasizes exploration-driven localized innovation and integrates deeply into Japanese society, resulting in a high degree of cultural legitimacy. Balance of Organizational Ambidexterity in the Three Theme Parks is shown in Fig. 5. These positions in Fig. 5. are illustrative and not scale-based.

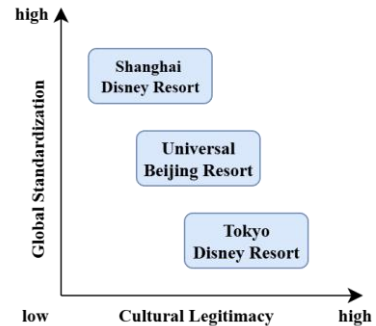


Fig. 5. Balance of organizational ambidexterity in the three theme parks.

It is evident that organizational structural innovations in transnational cultural projects are not only a response to the tension of organizational ambidexterity but also a dynamic choice in the pursuit of cultural legitimacy across diverse institutional and cultural environments. Cultural legitimacy thus serves as a critical driving force that compels MNCs to continuously recalibrate their organizational design in order to strike a balance between global standardization and local cultural adaptation.

At the theoretical level, this study shows that cultural legitimacy functions not merely as an external condition for the localization of transnational cultural projects but, more importantly, as an internal driver of organizational structural innovation. In doing so, it augments organizational ambidexterity theory's account of the exploration-exploitation nexus. For multinational cultural enterprises, this implies the need for dynamically adaptive organizational designs that leverage global brand and standardization advantages while simultaneously securing local cultural legitimacy, thereby supporting sustained performance.

From a field-level perspective on the transnational cultural industry, the case studies further indicate that the global diffusion of cultural products cannot rely solely on capital and technological capabilities. Rather, deep embeddedness in diverse cultural environments must be achieved through organizational structural innovation. This offers both a theoretical lens and practical guidance for emerging transnational cultural industries, such as esports events, immersive exhibitions, and digital entertainment platforms, underscoring the strategic imperative to balance global standardization with local legitimacy across their globalization trajectories.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we examine organizational structure innovation in transnational cultural projects through a comparative case analysis of theme parks. Anchored in the theory of organizational ambidexterity, we innovatively introduce cultural legitimacy as an analytical lens to analyze its role in organizational innovation. As capital-intensive,

immobile, and long-term operating systems, theme parks offer an ideal empirical setting for observing how transnational cultural projects balance global standardization with local cultural legitimacy.

By incorporating the perspective of cultural legitimacy, this research extends the application of organizational ambidexterity theory in transnational cultural projects. Focusing on Shanghai Disney, Universal Beijing, and Tokyo Disney, we identify three organizational models: headquarters-led, jointly governed, and locally led. Shanghai Disney, following a headquarters-led model, prioritizes maintaining global standards; Tokyo Disney, under a locally led model, emphasizes cultural legitimacy; and Universal Beijing, operating under a joint governance framework, strikes a balance between the two. Together, these cases reveal differentiated pathways to balancing global standardization and cultural legitimacy. Our study concludes that cultural legitimacy is not only an external condition for the implementation of transnational cultural projects but also an endogenous driver of organizational structure innovation, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of organizational ambidexterity theory in understanding the interplay between exploration and exploitation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RN conducted the research, performed the experiments, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. QZ proposed the research topic, supervised the work, and reviewed and revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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