

Theme Parks in Japan

By Kazunori Higashino

Theme parks arrived in Japan in 1983, when Tokyo Disneyland was opened. The significance of the opening of Tokyo Disneyland was not limited to the historical fact that the idea of a theme park was imported for the first time. Its impact was so strong as to almost shake the fabric of Japanese society. Its significance, it could be said, was as great as the impact of Commodore Perry's fleet which came to Japan nearly 150 years ago, in 1853, and demanded that isolationist Japan open its doors to foreign countries.

In Japan after World War II, "work" was regarded as a virtue and "play" as a vice because of the national mood that the country's economy must be expanded to reach the world level. It was the duty of every Japanese to work hard, and those who spent time in leisure pursuits were regarded as lazy. However, since the birth of Tokyo Disneyland, "play" has become almost a duty for the Japanese people. People began to think that they had to work diligently and also play energetically, and that unless they did so Japan would not be internationalized in the true sense of the word.

Learning to enjoy

Under these circumstances, "play," which used to be regarded as a vice, suddenly began to be encouraged. In Japan, therefore, people think that "play" is not a thing to enjoy but to learn. To the Japanese, a theme park is a place where people learn how to enjoy themselves. In other words, the theme park is a school to teach people how to enjoy play. This is a phenomenon that clearly reveals a Japanese national trait.

Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters) and *Nihonshoki* (Chronicles of Japan) are two ancient books which relate the mythology of Japan. These books describe a paradise named Takamagahara. In this paradise, gods engage in the cultivation of land together with farmers. In

Japan, work existed even in paradise.

It can be said that the establishment of Tokyo Disneyland was taken by the Japanese as indicating the need to put an end to the "exclusionist labor country" and to open the door to "play." Thus the curtain was raised on an age in which Japan developed a craze for theme parks. In fact, plans to construct as many as 100 theme parks were announced in 1989 despite the fact that Japan is a small country whose land area is less than that of California. Theme parks became a familiar topic of conversation.

Behind the theme park craze there was naturally a social phenomenon—the "money glut" which resulted from the rapid growth of the Japanese economy. There were plenty of people with money to spend. Another reason behind the theme park craze was the serious problem posed by the exodus of population from regional areas, which had become sparsely populated. Regional cities which had few people despite large areas of land were ideal places for constructing theme parks. Thinking that it would be like killing two birds with one stone by constructing a theme park on their idle land in regional areas, businesses, even steel companies which have no relationship with play at all, were prompted to rush to get in on the boom.

The results of this rush to build theme parks have become evident in 1991, two years after a myriad of theme park construction plans were announced.

One outstanding fact is that most of the theme park projects were given up at the planning stage and shelved. Why? Because there weren't enough experts who knew how to construct theme parks. This is the major reason for the failure of numerous theme park projects to come to fruition. Because Japan had never had a theme park before, it was only natural that there was a lack of people with the necessary know-how.

Next, some theme parks shut down shortly after they were opened, because

they failed to attract sufficient visitors. The reason was that the system of management of the parks following their completion was not worked out carefully enough at the planning stage. These parks were constructed hastily by companies riding on the crest of the theme park boom, but there was an absence of any detailed marketing plans.

The management failure is attributable to the attitude of theme park creators. Owing to their lack of knowledge of the kind of attractions needed, the parks failed to lure sufficient visitors. Their attitude was: "We have built a theme park for you. Now it's up to you to enjoy yourselves." The theme park designers who had participated in the exciting phase of creation for their own satisfaction left the project when it entered the less exciting phase of management.

Problems with visitors

As is evident from this, it is impossible for theme park creators who themselves do not know the essence of "play" to create a facility that will succeed in entertaining the public. As a result, what they created were theme parks equipped with excellent "rides," but without anything to arouse real enthusiasm from visitors. These parks have turned into grass-covered grounds littered with trash. There are problems regarding some of the visitors, too, who don't really know how to enjoy themselves in such places.

This has tended to be the pattern so far. The way these questions are addressed will determine whether or not "theme parks" will really take root in Japan. The most important thing about a theme park is to imbue it with a really attractive theme. In fact, most of the theme parks so far constructed lack a clearly defined concept. They are little more than ordinary amusement parks.

On the other hand, Japan does have some theme parks which possess distinctive features.



Sanrio Puroland (left) and Dr. Jeekahn's are examples of a new type of theme park.

Sanrio Puroland, which was opened last December, is one of them. Constructed by Sanrio Co. Ltd., which manufactures and markets character goods, Sanrio Puroland is Japan's first indoor theme park where visitors can enjoy the attractions without having to worry about the weather. Admission tickets are sold in advance so that the park can limit the number of each day's visitors, and this also means that visitors avoid having to wait in long queues.

Dr. Jeekahn's, which was completed and opened on February 8 in Shibuya, one of the subcenters of Tokyo, is worthy of being called a theme park with a strik-

ing personality. Located in the midst of a busy city center, the whole building housing Dr. Jeekahn's itself is a theme park. Its selling point is to enable visitors to experience a different world and give them a sensation of virtual reality thanks to the use of high technology. Dr. Jeekahn's is like an enlarged, highly evolved electronic game center, rather than an amusement park. Having its origin in an electronic game center, this theme park's atmosphere is quite Japanese and it can be accepted by the general public.

One thing that Japanese tend to do when they go to a theme park is to take pictures and buy souvenirs. Judging from this tendency, it is believed that enclosed "festival marketplaces" modeled after shopping centers will increase in the future.

As is evident from these examples, theme parks better suited to Japanese tastes are about to be created at long last. Certainly, Tokyo Disneyland is a wonderful theme park. But though splendid, it is a playground tailor-made for those with an "American" outlook. To use a clothing metaphor, Tokyo Disneyland is a highly attractive dress but it is too big for the Japanese. A well-designed dress made of fine material looks nice and gives the wearer a good feeling. However, if it is worn for a long time, it becomes uncomfortable. In other words, it would be self-defeating for other theme parks to blindly imitate Tokyo Disneyland. It is wiser to create a theme park best suited to the

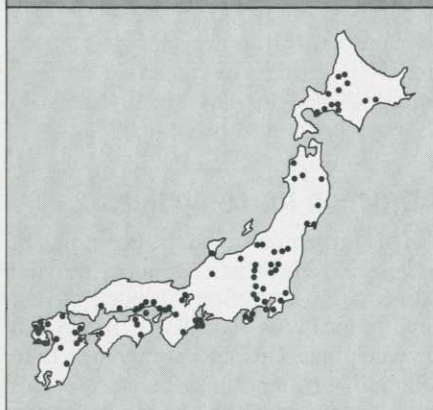
tastes of the Japanese—one that is on a rather smaller scale.

Take Nagasaki Holland Village in Nakagasaki City in Kyushu, for example. It is a theme park of Japanese origin, and is one of the most successful amusement parks in Japan.

The way the founder of the Holland Village, Yoshikuni Kamichika, raised the money to build the park is interesting. To borrow ¥250 million from a bank for operating funds, he got a friend to guarantee the loan by insuring his own life for ¥300 million with his friend named as the beneficiary. He literally staked his life on the construction of the Holland Village. Hopefully this dedication and passion will be reflected in the enjoyment of visitors to the Holland Village. Will the day ever come when the Japanese village-concept theme park outperforms the "continent-type" theme park as represented by Tokyo Disneyland?

About 30 years ago, the United States boasted a 73% share of the global automobile market. Similarly, the U.S. theme park industry boasts a 73% share of the global theme park market today. Will Japan become able to produce world-class theme parks one of these days, just as it has attained spectacular growth in its automobile industry?

Map of Development of Theme Parks



Note: The map shows the locations of theme park resort area projects being planned or studied, mostly those reported by newspapers and magazines. Some projects may be subject to change.

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