

Spiderman may swing over Beijing in new theme park

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Tom Williams, chairman and chief executive officer of the Universal Parks and Resorts, speaks at a ceremony to announce plans for the Universal Beijing theme park in Beijing Monday, Oct. 13, 2014. China has approved the development of a \$3.3 billion Universal theme park in Beijing, marking the first major foreign-owned theme park in the Chinese capital. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP)—Spiderman could soon swing over Beijing, chasing Optimus Prime and despicable minions through a \$3.3 billion Universal theme park aimed at capitalizing on China's rising middle class and growing

demand for all things animated.

China has been a major booster of animated movies such as "Transformers: Age of Extinction"—which was partly filmed in China—and "The Amazing Spider-Man 2." Brand is becoming more important to Chinese market as its middle class pours cash into entertainment, and malls and parks across China are installing animation and cartoon-themed attractions to woo visitors, says global architecture firm AECOM.

The 1,000-acre Beijing park will include attractions from other Universal parks, rides that reflect China's cultural heritage, a Universal CityWalk entertainment zone and a Universal-themed resort hotel. It will be the third Universal park in Asia, joining others in Singapore and Osaka, Japan.

Comcast NBCUniversal is building the property with four Chinese state-owned partners. An opening date wasn't announced.

China is home to 11 of the top 20 amusement parks in Asia with about 166 million visits in 2013. There are 59 more parks in the pipeline, and by 2020, theme park attendance in China could overtake the U.S. market's 220 million visits last year, according to AECOM. As U.S. and European amusement parks see flatter or declining attendance, theme park companies are betting on China to drive expansion.

After years of losses, Hong Kong Disneyland said in February that it was profitable for the second year in a row, partly due to new attractions that drew more visitors from the mainland. It plans to build a third hotel and new ride based on the "Iron Man" movie franchise which is wildly popular in mainland China. Disney's \$5.5 billion Shanghai Disneyland resort is slated to open next year. In June, Six Flags announced plans to build six parks in China over the next decade.

Developers will increasingly use international brands in [theme parks](#), say Chris Yoshii and Beth Chang, economic analysts for AECOM, in a 2013 leisure report. "We're already seeing major (intellectual property) groups active in the market in Asia: Fox, Paramount, Warner Bros. and Dreamworks all very much so," they wrote. Some of the new parks also are trying to promote Chinese culture, stories and themes.

"Unlike the U.S. where there was a push to create a standard, in Asia there's a lot of variety and experimentation," they added.

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