

# Exploration into the Localization Path of International High-end Boutique Hotels: A Case Study of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund

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**Abstract** Taking the Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund as an example, this paper explores the localization of international high-end boutique hotels in China by using the methods of literature research and case study. The results show that the localization of international high-end boutique hotels is embodied in brand building, spatial layout, service design and cultural activity planning, and that the perfect integration of international brand concept and local culture is an important factor for its success in the Chinese market. The research aims to provide reference for promoting the in-depth development and integration of international high-end boutique hotels in the Chinese market and the localization process of state-owned high-end boutique hotels in the future host country.

**Keywords** Boutique hotel; Localization; Hotel Indigo

**DOI** 10.16785/j.issn 1943-989x.2025.1.012

Originated in North America, the boutique hotel has a differentiated positioning from the standard five-star hotel with its private and exquisite hotel environment, unique and personalized accommodation experience. International high-end boutique hotels have won wide recognition for their unique brand culture, personalized service experience and exquisite design style. However, in the context of globalization, it is difficult to meet the diversified needs of consumers in different regions simply by relying on standardized service models<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, localization has become the key strategy for high-end boutique hotels to expand the market and enhance competitiveness.

As an internationally renowned fashion boutique hotel brand, Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund anchors its identity in the distinctive concept of “Neighborhood Culture”, and skillfully integrates international high-end quality with local history and culture, creating an immersive stay that balances contemporary flair with authentic cultural experience. Based on the case study of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund, this paper systematically analyzes its localization strategies in brand building, spatial layout, service design, and cultural activity planning, providing theoretical support and practical reference for the localization operation of international high-end boutique hotels in China and even the global market.

## 1 Research progress on localization of international hotels

In 1983, Levitt put forward the concept of localization and made a systematic study of

it, initially establishing the theoretical system of “localization”<sup>[2]</sup>. Whitelock and Pimblett, through in-depth research on the localization of multinational enterprises’ products, has found that localization was specifically manifested in changes to pricing strategies, alterations in the taste of the products themselves, and modifications to the physical characteristics of the products<sup>[3]</sup>. In recent years, the research on localization has garnered increasing attention from scholars in China. For example, Li Wen has investigated the localization strategies in the catering industry through the case study on KFC, while Zhao Zhichao has explored the retail practices exemplified by Costco<sup>[4-5]</sup>. Such academic inquiries have gradually expanded across various sectors, including the accommodation industry.

Hotel localization not only signifies respect for and integration with local culture, but also entails providing unique accommodation experience for guests through innovative design and service<sup>[6]</sup>. Liu Zhihui believes that the localization of foreign boutique hotels is inevitable and necessary<sup>[7]</sup>. Yao Dandan finds that the localization of international brand hotels in Sanya mainly highlights 3 aspects: localization of brand image, localization of hotel atmosphere and localization of hotel services<sup>[8]</sup>. Tian Wangjun has pointed out that international hotel groups should better implement the localization strategy in order to better develop the hotel market<sup>[9]</sup>. A comprehensive review of existing research on hotel localization indicates that the primary paths for the localization of international high-end boutique hotels are as

follows:

### 1.1 Localization of corporate image and brand

A good corporate image not only helps to enhance brand awareness, but also enhances consumer loyalty<sup>[10]</sup>. International high-end boutique hotels can effectively shape a unique corporate image through localization strategies, such as integrating local cultural elements and providing services with local characteristics, so as to stand out in the fierce market competition.

### 1.2 Localization of service design

Service design is one of the core competitiveness of high-end boutique hotels. The localization service design emphasizes taking consumers as the center and providing personalized and differentiated service experience according to the preferences and needs of local consumers.

### 1.3 Integration of spatial layout and culture

Spatial layout is an important part of high-end boutique hotel design. Unique atmosphere and experience can be created through sophisticated spatial layout and integration of local cultural elements.

## 2 Localization practice of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund

As a boutique hotel brand under IHG (InterContinental Hotels Group), Hotel Indigo lays emphasis on unique design and personalized service, “Just as no two neighborhoods are alike, no two Hotel Indigo hotels are designed alike”<sup>[11]</sup>. More than just a place to stay, each property serves as a curated portal to its local unique

history and cultural stories, presenting the most authentic local customs and unique boutique hotel experience in each city and community. Founded in 2010, Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund is the first Hotel Indigo property in the Asia Pacific region, located at the Shiliupu Wharf on the Huangpu River, Shanghai, China. The hotel boasts 184 rooms, 21 sets of river view rooms and 2 sets of Bund panoramic suites with luxury private terraces, 5 conference rooms which can hold seminars, product launches and fashion exhibitions for 10–100 people. Overlooking Pudong and Puxi, the hotel is a beautiful scenic spot in the bustling city.

## 2.1 Brand building

**2.1.1 Design style.** Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund is designed by the world-renowned design company Hirsch Bedner Associates (HBA). Inclusive, friendly and harmonious, the innovative design of HBA embodies the urban spirit of Shanghai, which is characterized by East-West convergence, cosmopolitan inclusiveness, and future-oriented vision. Incorporates with the cultural essence of the South Bund, the design skillfully integrates elements such as river water, wharf, the Bund and Pudong's building complex. Whether manifested in the wave-like reception desk in the lobby or the gray brick walls, nostalgic gauze drapes and vintage-inspired palace lanterns, these features collectively evoke the distinctive charm of Old Shanghai. In addition, the hotel also emphasizes crafting dynamic and engaging environments through sophisticated integration of unconventional modern localized home decoration into the design. Such inclusive design style enables the hotel to maintain the international brand level and fully display the charm of local culture.

**2.1.2 Building appearance.** The hotel looks elegant and exquisite, showcasing a design style that harmoniously combines modern architecture with classical elements. The majestic architecture and exquisite details create a space that embodies both historical charm and contemporary vibrancy, transporting people into a realm of artistic grandeur (Fig.1).

The entrance of the hotel is a light gray brick wall symbolizing the Shanghai's traditional Shikumen architecture, with an anchor of the old cargo ship placed on the lawn, all of which records and reflects the charm of the old Shanghai and the old wharf.

## 2.2 Spatial layout

**2.2.1 Lobby.** The hotel lobby is an architectural ode to the Huangpu River and Shiliupu Wharf, where sweeping curves and fluid motifs cascade across surfaces like water currents.

Walls sculpted with undulating wave patterns echo with the reception desk's design (Fig.2). The rusty furnishings in the reception area, the rickshaws and old bicycles painted with bright colors, all reflect the characteristics of the old wharf, and make people feel as if they have been transported back to the old Shanghai.

The lounge area to the right of the lobby skillfully creates an atmosphere of neighborhood culture blending. The wall decoration is mainly composed of grass walls and simulation trees that imitate green plants, dotted with stones of different shapes, and several paintings showing Shanghai style are hung on the wall, making people feel as if they are in a community full of life and cultural heritage. Transitioning towards the elevator hall, the corridor transforms into a nautical archive. The designer used the hull and deck of a retired river ship, cut and reorganized it, and embedded the fragments of the ship into the wall as carving. At the same time, a pair of lion casts are placed on the uphill position, adding a touch of simple and elegant charm to the whole space.

Throughout hotel corridors, walls become storytelling canvases adorned with nostalgic vignettes of Shanghai's vanishing trades—from Qianshen (traditional tailoring) to Qianjiao (foot care artisans). These paintings are not only artistic, but also a vivid interpretation of Shanghai's history and culture. The carpet in the corridor is painted with a map pattern that symbolizes the structure of Shanghai's urban area. The detailed design makes the whole space full of strong historical and cultural atmosphere.

**2.2.2 Restaurant.** Perched on the 29<sup>th</sup> floor, the "CHAR" restaurant is mainly colored with traditional Chinese red and glazed yellow, which have a strong oriental flavor associating the traditional culture of Shanghai. At the same time, the decoration of the restaurant incorporates traditional Chinese elements, including exquisite porcelain wares, classical calligraphy and paintings, and traditional wood carvings. These components not only serve as spatial adornments, but function as cultural signifiers that materially articulate the profound historical and cultural heritage of Shanghai. In addition, the design of the restaurant also skillfully integrates the traditional architectural features of Shanghai. The ceiling design draws inspiration from Shanghai's heritage villa, reinterpreting traditional molding patterns through contemporary parametric techniques that balance historical essence with modern aesthetics. The doors and windows of the restaurant also employs the traditional Chinese

style, featuring smooth lines and elegant shapes.

The unique geographical location of "CHAR" restaurant makes it the most beautiful scenery in Shanghai. Standing on the bar terrace on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor (Fig.3), one can see the 400-year-old Yuyuan Garden to the west, the century-old Bund to the north, the 3-decade-old Pudong to the east, and the former Wold Expo site to the south, making it a commanding vantage point offering a panoramic journey through Shanghai's past, present and future.

**2.2.3 Rooms.** The "Neighborhood Culture" emphasized by Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund aims to immerse guests in the authentic urban life of Shanghai. Even if their itinerary is too packed to explore between the lanes of Shikumen in person, guests can still enjoy the unique cultural charm of Shanghai through thoughtfully curated room experiences.

The rooms of the hotel feature thoughtfully crafted wall designs, with each room equipped with a gray brick wall—a signature element of the heritage Shikumen and colonial-era villas of Shanghai, imbued with historical and cultural resonance. Above the beds, monochrome Yuyuan Garden landscapes, representing the iconic classical garden beauty of Shanghai, have their timeless beauty shown here. Furnishings further deepen the local traditional characteristics of Shanghai: antique furniture, folk-patterned fabric cushions, crimson-and-indigo lanterns, and cloud pattern bedside cabinets jointly create a simple and elegant nostalgic elegance (Fig.4).

In front of the French window, there is a Republic-era writing desk, on which there is a tassel wooden box, filled with sharpened pencils and stationery. This thoughtful design makes guests feel warm. The furnishings at the table, such as blue and white porcelain wares and a carved rosewood brush holder (Bijia), represent the typical characteristics of traditional Chinese culture, while the classic Ming-style armchair shows the classic beauty (Fig.5).

The iconic White Rabbit milk candies of Shanghai are always available in the rooms, their creamy sweetness evoking guests' memories. The bath rituals become temporal journeys: Shanghai Tan toiletries show a nostalgic elegance, while the wet area tiles replicate the classic mosaic design of old Shanghai. The wide space and the unique walk-in "shell shower" bring guests a different bathing experience.

It is worth mentioning that the vision design of the room fully considers the urban characteristics of Shanghai. Most guest rooms can enjoy the magnificent scenery of the Huangpu River, so that guests can enjoy comfortable





Note: The picture is from the official website of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund (the same below).

**Fig.1 Hotel appearance**

accommodation and the charm of Shanghai at the same time.

**2.2.4 Public areas.** The public areas of the hotel are also full of localized atmosphere. On the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, a glass-encased swimming pool offers swimmers cinematic views of the Huangpu River through floor-to-ceiling windows (Fig.6).

The “Riverside” leisure area on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor is composed of different areas such as work area, entertainment corner, conference room and library. It is a good place for people to enjoy tea and reading. The “Cinema Capsules” allows guests to recall the image memory of old Shanghai in the film. The modern and fashionable coffee shop is integrated with antique carving decoration, showing the beauty of a combination of Chinese and western.

### 2.3 Service design

**2.3.1 Staff uniforms.** The staff uniforms of the hotel have distinctive characteristics, which not only reflects the brand concept of the hotel, but also integrates local cultural elements, showing a unique aesthetic feeling.

The colors of the hotel staff uniforms are in harmony with the overall decoration style of the hotel, mainly neutral colors, such as beige and gray, creating a low-key and luxurious atmosphere. This color matching is not only in line with modern aesthetics, but also highlights the quality of the hotel. In terms of style design, the hotel staff uniforms lay emphasis on the tailoring, fitting and smooth lines, which not only shows the staff's professional image, but also highlights the beautiful figure. At the same time, the staff uniforms also integrates traditional clothing elements, such as the stand collar and buckle design of cheongsam, as well as the decorative details of Chinese elements, which makes the staff uniforms present a combination of classical and modern beauty on the whole.

**2.3.2 Service mode.** The localization of the service mode of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the



**Fig.2 Hotel lobby**



**Fig.3 “CHAR” Bar**



**Fig.4 The rest area of guest room**



**Fig.5 The office area of guest room**



**Fig.6 Swimming pool**

Bund is reflected in many aspects. In terms of service language, the combination of Mandarin and Shanghai dialect makes guests feel a strong local cultural atmosphere during their stay. The staff will also flexibly adjust service terms according to the needs and preferences of guests to ensure smooth and cordial communication.

In terms of service content, the hotel explores Shanghai's traditional culture and provides guests with a series of services with local characteristics. For example, the hotel will arrange staff to introduce the history, culture and customs of Shanghai to guests, so that guests can have a deeper understanding of the city

during their stay. In addition, the hotel provides Shanghai specialty snacks and home dishes, sets up a senior gym and provides private Tai Chi and yoga courses to meet the diverse needs of different guests.

In terms of reception methods, traditional hospitality methods, such as bowing, smiling, etc., are adopted, so that guests can feel warm and thoughtful service. At the same time, according to the climate characteristics of Shanghai, the hotel provides personalized services for guests, such as providing cool drinks in summer and warm facilities in winter.

**2.3.3 Catering services.** The hotel restaurant has

deeply explored the local ingredients and cooking skills in Shanghai, modernizing and improving the traditional local dishes, so that the dishes not only retain the traditional flavor characteristics, but also meet the taste needs of modern people. The Hong Kong style steamed flatfish with chopped peppers launched by the “CHAR” restaurant uses deep-sea flatfish, a common ingredient in Shanghai, with the cooking method of Hong Kong Style chopped peppers, which not only retains the fresh and tender taste of fish meat, but also adds the spicy flavor of chopped peppers, giving people endless aftertaste. The “CHAR” restaurant prioritizes innovative fusion by blending traditional Shanghainese cuisine with global culinary influences. Signature dishes like roasted grass-fed Beef Filet with seasonal vegetables and black pepper sauce showcase this philosophy, marrying Western techniques with locally sourced ingredients in Shanghai.

## 2.4 Activity planning

**2.4.1 Cultural salon.** The hotel regularly hosts curated cultural salon events that bridges its brand culture with the local characters of Shanghai, fostering a space for staff and guests to engage deeply with the local culture while exchanging cultural insights. The hotel's distinctive strategy unfolds as follows: First, it meticulously curates themes and content for cultural salons. Drawing from Shanghai's history, art, and folk traditions, customs and other characteristics, it select emblematic and engaging topics, such as “The Cultural Allure of Shanghai's Laoyangfang (Heritage Villas)”, “The Evolution of Haipai (Shanghai-Style) Art”. The hotel also invites relevant experts, scholars or cultural celebrities as guests to add authority and professionalism to the salon. Second, the hotel pays attention to the site layout and atmosphere creation of the salon. Every salon venue is meticulously selected according to the thematic focus, featuring curated layout and decorations, which transforms the gatherings into immersive cultural experiences. At the same time, the hotel provides high-quality refreshments and snacks, allowing participants to enjoy a cultural feast within an effortlessly elegant setting. The hotel elevates its salon experience through a multi-layered program: expert-led lectures, panel discussions and interactive engagement sections, so that participants can fully participate and experience. Speakers offer nuanced explorations of core topics, while attendees actively put forward their own questions and opinions and interact with the speakers. This intimate form

not only deepens participants' engagement with the salon's cultural themes, but also fosters connections among like-minded peers while expanding intellectual horizons. Finally, the hotel summarizes and propagandizes the cultural salon. The hotel posts wonderful moments and achievements of the salon through the official website and social channels, inviting broader public participation in its evolving cultural activities.

**2.4.2 Community activities.** Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund embodies its “Neighborhood Culture” ethos through active collaboration with local communities. The hotel showcases works by local artists, sources ingredients from nearby family-run farms, and hosts cultural events and seasonal festivals, so that guests can have a deeper understanding of Shanghai's cultural traditions and community customs.

## 3 Conclusion and Prospect

Building on the research results regarding the localization of multinational enterprises and international hotel brands, this study proposes a framework for international high-end boutique hotels to achieve localization through brand identity shaping, spatial configuration, service design and cultural programming, harmonizing their tangible and intangible product attributes. Based on these elements, this paper further analyzes the practice and exploration of the localization of Hotel Indigo Shanghai on the Bund. The study finds that as a typical case of localization of international high-end boutique hotels, the success of the hotel lies in the perfect integration of international brand concept and Shanghai's cultural identity. The hotel's design embodies Shanghai's spirit of blending East and West and cosmopolitan openness, while its curated decor and furnishings artfully balance nostalgic charm of Old Shanghai with the contemporary dynamism of the city. The hotel's interior design thoughtfully weaves in elements from the adjacent Huangpu River and Shiliupu Wharf, creating distinct spatial effects that resonate with guests' evolving emotional rhythms. In addition, the hotel crafts an authentic fusion of old and new Shanghai through easy-going and intimate service and personalized activity reflecting the local culture, which is the vivid practice of localization.

In conclusion, international high-end boutique hotels can provide guests with a unique accommodation experience through distinct brand image, strategic spatial layout, personalized

service design and rich cultural integration activities. In the future, with the continuous change of the tourism market and the increasing diversification of consumer demand, international high-end boutique hotels must refine localization strategies while pioneering service mode and design concept to meet the challenges and opportunities of the market. Further research can focus on the localization practices of hotels in market positioning, marketing strategies, and customer relationship management, so as to deeply understand the overall picture of hotel localization and build a more systematic and complete theoretical system.

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