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Transnationalism, Localization, and Fast Foods in East Asia

James L. Watson

Does the spread of fast food undermine the integrity of indigenous cuisines? Are food chains helping to create a homogenous, global ture better suited to the needs of a capitalist world order?

. . . We do not celebrate McDonald's as a paragon of capitalist virtue, nor we condemn the corporation as an evil empire. Our goal is to produce nographic accounts of McDonald's social, political, and economic impact five local cultures. These are not small-scale cultures under imminent at of extinction; we are dealing with economically resilient, technologi- advanced societies noted for their haute cuisines. If McDonald's can e inroads in these societies, one might be tempted to conclude, it may ed be an irresistible force for world culinary change. But isn't another ario possible? Have people in East Asia conspired to change McDonald's, lifying this seemingly monolithic institution to fit local conditions?

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In Hong Kong, for instance, it would be impossible to isolate what ically "local" about the cuisine, given the propensity of Hong Kong o adopt new foods. . . . Hong Kong's cuisine, and with it Hong ocal culture, is a moving target. Hong Kong is the quintessential post- environment, where the boundaries of status, style, and taste dissolve s fast as they are formed. What is "in" today is "out" tomorrow.

nationalism and ultilocal Corporation

ecome an academic cliché to argue that people are constantly rein- themselves. Nevertheless, the speed of that reinvention process in ke Hong Kong, Taipei, and Seoul is so rapid that it defies description. alm of popular culture, it is no longer possible to distinguish between "local" and what is "foreign." Who is to say that Mickey Mouse is nese, or that Ronald McDonald is not Chinese? To millions of who watch Chinese television, "Uncle McDonald" (alias Ronald) is more familiar than the mythical characters of Chinese folklore.

ve entered here the realm of the transnational, a new field of study that n the "deterritorialization" of popular culture. . . . The world econ- no longer be understood by assuming that the original producers of a ity necessarily control its consumption. A good example is the spread n" martial arts to North and South America, fostered by Hollywood Hong Kong film industry. Transnationalism describes a condition by eople, commodities, and ideas literally cross—transgress—national ies and are not identified with a single place of origin. One of the heorists of this new field argues that transnational phenomena are eived as the building blocks of "third cultures," which are "oriented national boundaries."

national corporations are popularly regarded as the clearest expres- this new adaptation, given that business operations, manufacturing, keting are often spread around the globe to dozens of societies.

st glance, McDonald's would appear to be the quintessential onal. On closer inspection, however, the company does not con- expectations; it resembles a federation of semiautonomous enter- mes Cantalupo, former President of McDonald's International, at the goal of McDonald's is to "become as much a part of the local s possible." He objects when "[p]eople call us a multinational. I like *multilocal,*" meaning that McDonald's goes to great lengths to find pliers and local partners whenever new branches are opened.

. . . McDonald's International retains at least a 50 percent s e in its East Asian enterprises; the other half is owned by local operators.

Modified Menus and Local Sensitivities: McDonald's Adapts

The key to McDonald's worldwide success is that people eve where know what to expect when they pass through the Golden Arches. is does not mean, however, that the corporation has resisted change or re sed to adapt when local customs require flexibility. . . . McDonald's resta nts in India serve Vegetable McNuggets and a mutton-based Maharaja M innovations that are necessary in a country where Hindus do not eat beef, M slims do not eat pork, and Jains (among others) do not eat meat of any typ In Malaysia and Singapore, McDonald's underwent rigorous inspections b Muslim cler- ics to ensure ritual cleanliness; the chain was rewarded with a *lal* ("clean," "acceptable") certificate, indicating the total absence of pork oducts.

Variations on McDonald's original, American-style menu ist in many parts of the world: chilled yogurt drinks (*ayran*) in Turkey, es sso and cold pasta in Italy, teriyaki burgers in Japan (also in Taiwan an Hong Kong), vegetarian burgers in the Netherlands, McSpagetti in t Philippines, McLaks (grilled salmon sandwich) in Norway, frankfurte and beer in Germany, McHuevo (poached egg hamburger) in Uruguay. .

Irrespective of local variations (espresso, McLaks) and r nt additions (carrot sticks), the structure of the McDonald's menu rem s essentially uniform the world over: main course burger/sandwich, fries, d a drink— overwhelmingly Coca-Cola. The keystone of this winning nbination is *not,* as most observers might assume, the Big Mac or even th generic ham- burger. It is the fries. The main course may vary widely (fish ndwiches in Hong Kong, vegetable burgers in Amsterdam), but the signa e innovation of McDonald's—thin, elongated fries cut from russet pot es—is ever- present and consumed with great gusto by Muslims, Je , Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, vegetarians (now that vegetable oil is use communists, Tories, marathoners, and armchair athletes. . . .

Conclusion: McDonaldization Versus Localization

McDonald's has become such a powerful symbol of the stan dization and routinization of modern life that it has inspired a new vocabu y: McThink,

McMyth, McJobs, McSpiritually, and, of course, McDonaldization. George Ritzer, author of a popular book titled *The McDonaldization of Society* . . . treats McDonald's as the "paradigm case" of social regimentation and argues that "McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process as it sweeps through seemingly impervious institutions and parts of the world."

Is McDonald's in fact the revolutionary, disruptive institution that theorists of cultural imperialism deem it to be? Evidence . . . could be marshaled in support of such a view but only at the risk of ignoring historical process. There is indeed an initial, "intrusive" encounter when McDonald's enters a new market—especially in an environment where American-style fast food is largely unknown to the ordinary consumer. In five cases, . . . McDonald's was treated as an exotic import—a taste of Americana—during its first few years of operation. Indeed, the company drew on this association to establish itself in foreign markets. But this initial euphoria cannot sustain a mature business.

Unlike Coca-Cola and Spam, for instance, McDonald's standard fare (the burger-and-fries combo) could not be absorbed into the preexisting cuisines of East Asia. . . . Spam quickly became an integral feature of Korean cooking in the aftermath of the Korean War; it was a recognizable form of meat that required no special preparation. Coca-Cola, too, was a relatively neutral import when first introduced to Chinese consumers. During the 1960s, villagers in rural Hong Kong treated Coke as a special beverage, reserved primarily for medicinal use. It was served most frequently as *bo ho la,* Cantonese for "boiled Cola," a tangy blend of fresh ginger and herbs served in piping hot Coke—an excellent remedy for colds. Only later was the beverage consumed by itself, first at banquets (mixed with brandy) and later for special events such as a visit by relatives. There was nothing particularly revolutionary about Coca-Cola or Spam; both products were quickly adapted to suit local needs and did not require any radical adjustments on the part of consumers.

McDonald's is something altogether different. Eating at the Golden Arches is a total experience, one that takes people out of their ordinary routines. One "goes to" a McDonald's; it does not come to the consumer, nor is it taken home . . .

From this vantage point it would appear that McDonald's may indeed have been an intrusive force, undermining the integrity of East Asian cuisines. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that consumers are not the automatons many analysts would have us believe they are. The initial encounter soon begins to fade as McDonald's loses its exotic appeal and gradually gains

acceptance (or rejection) as ordinary food for busy consumers. The hamburger-fries combo becomes simply another alternative among many types of ready-made food.

The process of localization is a two-way street: It implies changes in the local culture as well as modifications in the company's standard operating procedures. Key elements of McDonald's industrialized system—queuing, self-provisioning, self-seating—have been accepted by consumers throughout East Asia. Other aspects of the industrial model have been rejected, notably those relating to time and space. In many parts of East Asia, consumers have turned their local McDonald's into leisure centers and after school clubs. The meaning of "fast" has been subverted in these settings: It refers to the *delivery* of food, not to its consumption. Resident managers have had little choice but to embrace these consumer trends and make virtues of them: "Students create a good atmosphere which is good for our business," one Hong Kong manager told me as he surveyed a sea of young people chatting, studying, and snacking in his restaurant.

The process of localization correlates closely with the maturation of a generation of local people who grew up eating at the Golden Arches. By the time the children of these original consumers enter the scene, McDonald's is no longer perceived as a foreign enterprise. Parents see it as a haven of cleanliness and predictability. For children, McDonald's represents fun, familiarity, and a place where they can choose their own food—something that may not be permitted at home.

. . . Localization is not a unilinear process that ends the same everywhere. McDonald's has become a routine, unremarkable feature of the urban landscape in Japan and Hong Kong. It is so local that many younger consumers do not know of the company's foreign origins. The process of localization has hardly begun in China, where McDonald's outlets are still treated as exotic outposts, selling a cultural experience rather than food. At this writing, it is unclear what will happen to expansion efforts in Korea; the political environment there is such that many citizens will continue to treat the Golden Arches as a symbol of American imperialism. In Taiwan, the confused, and exhilarating, pace of identity politics may well rebound on American corporations in ways as yet unseen. Irrespective of these imponderables, McDonald's is no longer dependent on the United States market for its future development. . . .

As McDonald's enters the 21st century, its multilocal strategy, like its famous double-arches logo, is being pirated by a vast array of corporations eager to emulate its success. In the end, however, McDonald's is likely to prove difficult to clone.

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of the ways in which n Russia. On one level, ding birthday parties in Donald's into their inti- prepare foods at home ell sees this as evidence t McDonald's brings to ion in her view, not hybridization than cul- largely on the food and lization.