

McDonald's in Hong Kong

James L. Watson

[...] How does one explain the phenomenal success of American-style fast food in Hong Kong and, increasingly, in Guangzhou – the two epicenters of Cantonese culture and cuisine? Seven of the world's ten busiest McDonald's restaurants are located in Hong Kong. When McDonald's first opened in 1975, few thought it would survive more than a few months. By January 1, 1997, Hong Kong had 125 outlets, which means that there was one McDonald's for every 51,200 residents, compared to one for every 30,000 people in the United States. Walking into these restaurants and looking at the layout, one could well be in Cleveland or Boston. The only obvious differences are the clientele, the majority of whom are Cantonese-speakers, and the menu, which is in Chinese as well as English.

Transnationalism and the Fast Food Industry

Does the roaring success of McDonald's and its rivals in the fast food industry mean that Hong Kong's local culture is under siege? Are food chains helping to create a homogeneous, "global" culture better suited to the demands of a capitalist world order? Hong Kong would seem to be an excellent place to test the globalization hypothesis, given the central role that cuisine plays in the production and maintenance of a distinctive local identity. Man Tso-chuen's great-grandchildren are today avid

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consumers of Big Macs, pizza, and Coca-Cola; does this somehow make them less "Chinese" than their grandfather?

It is my contention that the cultural arena in places like Hong Kong is changing with such breathtaking speed that the fundamental assumptions underlining such questions are themselves questionable. Economic and social realities make it necessary to construct an entirely new approach to global issues, one that takes the consumers' own views into account. Analyses based on neomarxian and dependency (center/periphery) models that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s do not begin to capture the complexity of emerging transnational systems.

This chapter represents a conscious attempt to bring the discussion of globalism down to earth, focusing on one local culture. The people of Hong Kong have embraced American-style fast foods, and by so doing they might appear to be in the vanguard of a worldwide culinary revolution. But they have not been stripped of their cultural traditions, nor have they become "Americanized" in any but the most superficial of ways. Hong Kong in the late 1990s constitutes one of the world's most heterogeneous cultural environments. Younger people, in particular, are fully conversant in transnational idioms, which include language, music, sports, clothing, satellite television, cybercommunications, global travel, and – of course – cuisine. It is no longer possible to distinguish what is local and what is not. In Hong Kong, as I hope to show in this chapter, the transnational is the local. [...]

Mental Categories: Snack versus Meal

As in other parts of East Asia, McDonald's faced a serious problem when it began operation in Hong Kong: Hamburgers, fries, and sandwiches were perceived as snacks (Cantonese *siu sihk*, literally "small eats"); in the local view these items did not constitute the elements of a proper meal. This perception is still prevalent among older, more conservative consumers who believe that hamburgers, hot dogs, and pizza can never be "filling." Many students stop at fast food outlets on their way home from school; they may share hamburgers and fries with their classmates and then eat a full meal with their families at home. This is not considered a problem by parents, who themselves are likely to have stopped for tea and snacks after work. Snacking with friends and colleagues provides a major opportunity for socializing (and transacting business) among southern Chinese. Teahouses, coffee shops, bakeries, and ice cream parlors are popular precisely because they provide a structured yet informal setting for social encounters. Furthermore, unlike Chinese restaurants and banquet halls, snack centers do not command a great deal of time or money from customers.

Contrary to corporate goals, therefore, McDonald's entered the Hong Kong market as a purveyor of snacks. Only since the late 1980s has its fare been treated as the foundation of "meals" by a generation of younger consumers who regularly eat non-Chinese food. Thanks largely to McDonald's, hamburgers and fries are now a recognized feature of Hong Kong's lunch scene. The evening hours remain, however, the weak link in McDonald's marketing plan; the real surprise was breakfast, which became a peak traffic period (more on this below).

From Exotic

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The mental universe of Hong Kong consumers is partially revealed in the everyday use of language. Hamburgers are referred to, in colloquial Cantonese, as *han bou bao* – *han* being a homophone for “ham” and *bao* the common term for stuffed buns or bread rolls. *Bao* are quintessential snacks, and however excellent or nutritious they might be, they do not constitute the basis of a satisfying (i.e., filling) meal. In South China that honor is reserved for culinary arrangements that rest, literally, on a bed of rice (*fan*). Foods that accompany rice are referred to as *sung*, probably best translated as “toppings” (including meat, fish, and vegetables). It is significant that hamburgers are rarely categorized as meat (*yuk*); Hong Kong consumers tend to perceive anything that is served between slices of bread (Big Macs, fish sandwiches, hot dogs) as *bao*. In American culture the hamburger is categorized first and foremost as a meat item (with all the attendant worries about fat and cholesterol content), whereas in Hong Kong the same item is thought of primarily as bread.

From Exotic to Ordinary: McDonald's Becomes Local

Following precedents in other international markets, the Hong Kong franchise promoted McDonald's basic menu and did not introduce items that would be more recognizable to Chinese consumers (such as rice dishes, tropical fruit, soup noodles). Until recently the food has been indistinguishable from that served in Mobile, Alabama, or Moline, Illinois. There are, however, local preferences: the best-selling items in many outlets are fish sandwiches and plain hamburgers; Big Macs tend to be the favorites of children and teenagers. Hot tea and hot chocolate outsell coffee, but Coca-Cola remains the most popular drink.

McDonald's conservative approach also applied to the breakfast menu. When morning service was introduced in the 1980s, American-style items such as eggs, muffins, pancakes, and hash brown potatoes were not featured. Instead, the local outlets served the standard fare of hamburgers and fries for breakfast. McDonald's initial venture into the early morning food market was so successful that Mr. Ng hesitated to introduce American-style breakfast items, fearing that an abrupt shift in menu might alienate consumers who were beginning to accept hamburgers and fries as a regular feature of their diet. The transition to eggs, muffins, and hash browns was a gradual one, and today most Hong Kong customers order breakfasts that are similar to those offered in American outlets. But once established, dietary preferences change slowly: McDonald's continues to feature plain hamburgers (but not the Big Mac) on its breakfast menu in most Hong Kong outlets.

Management decisions of the type outlined above helped establish McDonald's as an icon of popular culture in Hong Kong. From 1975 to approximately 1985, McDonald's became the “in” place for young people wishing to associate themselves with the laid-back, nonhierarchical dynamism they perceived American society to embody. The first generation of consumers patronized McDonald's precisely because it was *not* Chinese and was *not* associated with Hong Kong's past as a backward-looking colonial outpost where (in their view) nothing of consequence ever happened. Hong Kong was changing and, as noted earlier, a new consumer culture was

beginning to take shape. McDonald's caught the wave of this cultural movement and has been riding it ever since.

Anthropological conventions and methodologies do not allow one to deal very well with factors such as entrepreneurial flair or managerial creativity. Ethnographers are used to thinking in terms of group behavior, emphasizing coalitions and communities rather than personalities. In studies of corporate culture, however, the decisive role of management – or, more precisely, individual managers – must be dealt with in a direct way. This takes us into the realm of charisma, leadership, and personality.

Thanks largely to unrelenting efforts by Mr. Ng and his staff, McDonald's made the transition from an exotic, trendy establishment patronized by self-conscious status seekers to a competitively priced chain offering "value meals" to busy, preoccupied consumers. Today, McDonald's restaurants in Hong Kong are packed – wall-to-wall – with people of all ages, few of whom are seeking an American cultural experience. Twenty years after Mr. Ng opened his first restaurant, eating at McDonald's has become an ordinary, everyday experience for hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong residents. The chain has become a local institution in the sense that it has blended into the urban landscape; McDonald's outlets now serve as rendezvous points for young and old alike. [...]

Sanitation and the Invention of Cleanliness

Besides offering value for money, another key to McDonald's success was the provision of extra services, hitherto unavailable to Hong Kong consumers. Until the mid-1980s, a visit to any Hong Kong restaurant's toilet (save for those in fancy hotels) could best be described as an adventure. Today, restaurant toilets all over the territory are in good working order and, much to the surprise of visitors who remember the past, they are (relatively) clean. Based on conversations with people representing the full range of social strata in Hong Kong, McDonald's is widely perceived as the catalyst of this dramatic change. The corporation maintained clean facilities and did not waver as new outlets opened in neighborhoods where public sanitation had never been a high priority. Daniel Ng recalled how, during the early years of his business, he had to re-educate employees before they could even begin to comprehend what corporate standards of cleanliness entailed. Many workers, when asked to scrub out a toilet, would protest that it was already cleaner than the one in their own home, only to be told that it was not clean enough. McDonald's set what was perceived at the time to be an impossible standard and, in the process, raised consumers' expectations. Rivals had to meet these standards in order to compete. Hong Kong consumers began to draw a mental equation between the state of a restaurant's toilets and its kitchen. In pre-1980s public eateries (and in many private homes), the toilet was located inside the kitchen. One was not expected to see any contradiction in this arrangement; the operative factor was that both facilities had to be near the water supply. Younger people, in particular, have begun to grow wary of these arrangements and are refusing to eat at places they perceive to be "dirty."

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Without exception my informants cited the availability of clean and accessible toilets as an important reason for patronizing McDonald's. Women, in particular, appreciated this service; they noted that, without McDonald's, it would be difficult to find public facilities when they are away from home or office. A survey of one Hong Kong outlet in June 1994 revealed that 58 percent of the consumers present were women. For many Hong Kong residents, therefore, McDonald's is more than just a restaurant; it is an oasis, a familiar rest station, in what is perceived to be an inhospitable urban environment.

What's in a Smile? Friendliness and Public Service

American consumers expect to be served "with a smile" when they order fast food, but ... this is not true in all societies. In Hong Kong people are suspicious of anyone who displays what is perceived to be an excess of congeniality, solicitude, or familiarity. The human smile is not, therefore, a universal symbol of openness and honesty. "If you buy an apple from a hawker and he smiles at you," my Cantonese tutor once told me, "you know you're being cheated."

Given these cultural expectations, it was difficult for Hong Kong management to import a key element of the McDonald's formula – service with a smile – and make it work. Crew members were trained to treat customers in a manner that approximates the American notion of "friendliness." Prior to the 1970s, there was not even an indigenous Cantonese term to describe this form of behavior. The traditional notion of friendship is based on loyalty to close associates, which by definition cannot be extended to strangers. Today the concept of *public* friendliness is recognized – and verbalized – by younger people in Hong Kong, but the term many of them use to express this quality is "friendly," borrowed directly from English. McDonald's, through its television advertising, may be partly responsible for this innovation, but to date it has had little effect on workers in the catering industry.

During my interviews it became clear that the majority of Hong Kong consumers were uninterested in public displays of congeniality from service personnel. When shopping for fast food most people cited convenience, cleanliness, and table space as primary considerations; few even mentioned service except to note that the food should be delivered promptly. Counter staff in Hong Kong's fast food outlets (including McDonald's) rarely make great efforts to smile or to behave in a manner Americans would interpret as friendly. Instead, they project qualities that are admired in the local culture: competence, directness, and unflapability. In a North American setting the facial expression that Hong Kong employees use to convey these qualities would likely be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to be rude or indifferent. Workers who smile on the job are assumed to be enjoying themselves at the consumer's (and management's) expense: In the words of one diner I overheard while standing in a queue, "They must be playing around back there. What are they laughing about?"

Consumer Discipline?

[A] hallmark of the American fast food business is the displacement of labor costs from the corporation to the consumers. For the system to work, consumers must be educated – or “disciplined” – so that they voluntarily fulfill their side of an implicit bargain: We (the corporation) will provide cheap, fast service, if you (the customer) carry your own tray, seat yourself, and help clean up afterward. Time and space are also critical factors in the equation: Fast service is offered in exchange for speedy consumption and a prompt departure, thereby making room for others. This system has revolutionized the American food industry and has helped to shape consumer expectations in other sectors of the economy. How has it fared in Hong Kong? Are Chinese customers conforming to disciplinary models devised in Oak Brook, Illinois?

The answer is both yes and no. In general Hong Kong consumers have accepted the basic elements of the fast food formula, but with “localizing” adaptations. For instance, customers generally do not bus their own trays, nor do they depart immediately upon finishing. Clearing one’s own table has never been an accepted part of local culinary culture, owing in part to the low esteem attaching to this type of labor. [...]

Perhaps the most striking feature of the American-inspired model of consumer discipline is the queue. Researchers in many parts of the world have reported that customers refuse, despite “education” campaigns by the chains involved, to form neat lines in front of cashiers. Instead, customers pack themselves into disorderly scrums and jostle for a chance to place their orders. Scrums of this nature were common in Hong Kong when McDonald’s opened in 1975. Local managers discouraged this practice by stationing queue monitors near the registers during busy hours and, by the 1980s, orderly lines were the norm at McDonald’s. The disappearance of the scrum corresponds to a general change in Hong Kong’s public culture as a new generation of residents, the children of refugees, began to treat the territory as their home. Courtesy toward strangers was largely unknown in the 1960s: Boarding a bus during rush hour could be a nightmare and transacting business at a bank teller’s window required brute strength. Many people credit McDonald’s with being the first public institution in Hong Kong to enforce queuing, and thereby helping to create a more “civilized” social order. McDonald’s did not, in fact, introduce the queue to Hong Kong, but this belief is firmly lodged in the public imagination.

Hovering and the Napkin Wars

Purchasing one’s food is no longer a physical challenge in Hong Kong’s McDonald’s but finding a place to sit is quite another matter. The traditional practice of “hovering” is one solution: Choose a group of diners who appear to be on the verge of leaving and stake a claim to their table by hovering nearby, sometimes only inches away. Seated customers routinely ignore the intrusion; it would, in fact, entail a loss of face to notice. Hovering was the norm in Hong Kong’s lower- to middle-range

restaurants during the 1970s and 1980s. Restaurants no longer allowed into the

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restaurants during the 1960s and 1970s, but the practice has disappeared in recent years. Restaurants now take names or hand out tickets at the entrance; warning signs, in Chinese and English, are posted: "Please wait to be seated." Customers are no longer allowed into the dining area until a table is ready.

Fast food outlets are the only dining establishments in Hong Kong where hovering is still tolerated, largely because it would be nearly impossible to regulate. Customer traffic in McDonald's is so heavy that the standard restaurant design has failed to reproduce American-style dining routines: Rather than ordering first and finding a place to sit afterward, Hong Kong consumers usually arrive in groups and delegate one or two people to claim a table while someone else joins the counter queues. Children make ideal hoverers and learn to scoot through packed restaurants, zeroing in on diners who are about to finish. It is one of the wonders of comparative ethnography to witness the speed with which Hong Kong children perform this reconnaissance duty. Foreign visitors are sometimes unnerved by hovering, but residents accept it as part of everyday life in one of the world's most densely populated cities. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hong Kong's fast food chains have made few efforts to curtail the practice.

Management is less tolerant of behavior that affects profit margins. In the United States fast food companies save money by allowing (or requiring) customers to collect their own napkins, straws, plastic flatware, and condiments. Self-provisioning is an essential feature of consumer discipline, but it only works if the system is not abused. In Hong Kong napkins are dispensed, one at a time, by McDonald's crew members who work behind the counter; customers who do not ask for napkins do not receive any. This is a deviation from the corporation's standard operating procedure and adds a few seconds to each transaction, which in turn slows down the queues. Why alter a well-tested routine? The reason is simple: napkins placed in public dispensers disappear faster than they can be replaced. [...]

Children as Consumers

[...] McDonald's has become so popular in Hong Kong that parents often use visits to their neighborhood outlet as a reward for good behavior or academic achievement. Conversely, children who misbehave might lose their after-school snacking privileges or be left at home while their siblings are taken out for a McDonald's brunch on Sunday. During interviews parents reported that sanctions of this type worked better than anything they could think of to straighten out a wayward child: "It is my nuclear deterrent," one father told me, in English.

Many Hong Kong children of my acquaintance are so fond of McDonald's that they refuse to eat with their parents or grandparents in Chinese-style restaurants or *dim sam* teahouses. This has caused intergenerational distress in some of Hong Kong's more conservative communities. In 1994, a nine-year-old boy, the descendant of illustrious ancestors who settled in the New Territories eight centuries ago, talked about his concerns as we consumed Big Macs, fries, and shakes at McDonald's: "A-bak [uncle], I like it here better than any place in the world. I want to come here every

day." His father takes him to McDonald's at least twice a week, but his grandfather, who accompanied them a few times in the late 1980s, will no longer do so. "I prefer to eat *dim sam*," the older man told me later. "That place [McDonald's] is for kids." Many grandparents have resigned themselves to the new consumer trends and take their preschool grandchildren to McDonald's for midmorning snacks – precisely the time of day that local teahouses were once packed with retired people. Cantonese grandparents have always played a prominent role in child minding, but until recently the children had to accommodate to the proclivities of their elders. By the 1990s grandchildren were more assertive and the midmorning *dim sam* snack was giving way to hamburgers and Cokes.

The emergence of children as full-scale consumers has had other consequences for the balance of domestic power in Hong Kong homes. Grade school children often possess detailed knowledge of fast foods and foreign (non-Chinese) cuisines. Unlike members of the older generation, children know what, and how, to eat in a wide variety of restaurants. Specialized information is shared with classmates: Which chain has the best pizza? What is ravioli? How do you eat a croissant? Food, especially fast food, is one of the leading topics of conversation among Hong Kong school children. Grandchildren frequently assume the role of tutors, showing their elders the proper way to eat fast food. Without guidance, older people are likely to disassemble the Big Mac, layer by layer, and eat only those parts that appeal to them. Hong Kong adults also find it uncomfortable to eat with their hands and devise makeshift finger guards with wrappers. Children, by contrast, are usually expert in the finer points of fast food etiquette and pay close attention to television ads that feature young people eating a variety of foods. It is embarrassing, I was told by an 11-year-old acquaintance, to be seen at McDonald's with a grandfather who does not know how to eat "properly."

Many Hong Kong kindergartens and primary schools teach culinary skills, utilizing the lunch period for lessons in flatware etiquette, menu reading, and food awareness (taste-testing various cuisines, including Thai, European, and Indian). Partly as a consequence, Hong Kong's youth are among the world's most knowledgeable and adventurous eaters. One can find a wide range of cuisines in today's Hong Kong, rivaling New York City for variety. South Asian, Mexican, and Spanish restaurants are crowded with groups of young people, ages 16 to 25, sharing dishes as they graze their way through the menu. Culinary adventures of this nature are avoided by older residents (people over 50), who, in general, have a more restricted range of food tolerance.

Ronald McDonald and the Invention of Birthday Parties

Until recently most people in Hong Kong did not even know, let alone celebrate, their birthdates in the Western calendrical sense; dates of birth according to the lunar calendar were recorded for divinatory purposes but were not noted in annual rites. By the late 1980s, however, birthday parties, complete with cakes and candles, were the rage in Hong Kong. Any child who was anyone had to have a party, and the most popular venue

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was a fast food restaurant, with McDonald's ranked above all competitors. The majority of Hong Kong people live in overcrowded flats, which means that parties are rarely held in private homes.

Except for the outlets in central business districts, McDonald's restaurants are packed every Saturday and Sunday with birthday parties, cycled through at the rate of one every hour. A party hostess, provided by the restaurant, leads the children in games while the parents sit on the sidelines, talking quietly among themselves. For a small fee celebrants receive printed invitation cards, photographs, a gift box containing toys and a discount coupon for future trips to McDonald's. Parties are held in a special enclosure, called the Ronald Room, which is equipped with low tables and tiny stools – suitable only for children. Television commercials portray Ronald McDonald leading birthday celebrants on exciting safaris and expeditions. The clown's Cantonese name, Mak Dong Lou Suk-Suk ("Uncle McDonald"), plays on the intimacy of kinship and has helped transform him into one of Hong Kong's most familiar cartoon figures. [...]

Conclusions: Whose Culture Is It?

[...] Having watched the processes of culture change unfold for nearly thirty years, it is apparent to me that the ordinary people of Hong Kong have most assuredly *not* been stripped of their cultural heritage, nor have they become the uncomprehending dupes of transnational corporations. Younger people – including many of the grandchildren of my former neighbors in the New Territories – are avid consumers of transnational culture in all of its most obvious manifestations: music, fashion, television, and cuisine. At the same time, however, Hong Kong has itself become a major center for the *production* of transnational culture, not just a sinkhole for its *consumption*. Witness, for example, the expansion of Hong Kong popular culture into China, Southeast Asia, and beyond: "Cantopop" music is heard on radio stations in North China, Vietnam, and Japan; the Hong Kong fashion industry influences clothing styles in Los Angeles, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur; and, perhaps most significant of all, Hong Kong is emerging as a center for the production and dissemination of satellite television programs throughout East, Southeast, and South Asia.

A lifestyle is emerging in Hong Kong that can best be described as postmodern, postnationalist, and flamboyantly transnational. The wholesale acceptance and appropriation of Big Macs, Ronald McDonald, and birthday parties are small, but significant aspects of this redefinition of Chinese cultural identity. In closing, therefore, it seems appropriate to pose an entirely new set of questions: Where does the transnational end and the local begin? Whose culture is it, anyway? In places like Hong Kong the postcolonial periphery is fast becoming the metropolitan center, where local people are consuming and simultaneously producing new cultural systems. [...]

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