There is a new tendency to absorb foreign cultural influences and transform them into local institutions, a trend that the Chinese political system resisted during the Maoist era (1949–78). In the case reviewed here, both the McDonald's management and staff on the one hand and the Beijing customers on the other have been active participants in the localization process. To analyze this process, I first examine the image of McDonald's in the minds of ordinary Chinese people. Then I look at McDonald's efforts to fit into the Chinese market, as well as the ways in which Beijing consumers have appropriated McDonald's for their own use.

The Big Mac as a Symbol of Americana

In October 1, 1993, National Day in China, a couple in their early seventies had dinner at the McDonald's restaurant on Wangfujing Street. They had been invited to celebrate the holiday at McDonald's by their daughter and son-in-law, who spent almost 200 yuan for the dinner, an unimaginably large sum in the view of the elderly couple. The experience of eating in a foreign restaurant struck them as so significant they had their picture taken in front of the Golden Arches and sent it to their hometown newspaper, along with another photo they had had taken on October 1, 1949, in Tiananmen Square—celebrating the first National Day of the People's Republic of China. Their story was later published by the newspaper, with the two contrasting photographs. In the 1949 photo, the two young people appear in identical white shirts, standing slightly apart, their thin faces betraying undernourishment in hard times. In the 1993 photo, a portly woman proudly holds her husband's left arm, and the two are healthy looking and fashionably dressed. They took a taxi to McDonald's and, while

crossing Tiananmen Square, they remembered how poor they had been in 1949 and realized how much China has changed in the interim.[4]

At first glance, this news story reads like the typical propaganda skit that one still finds in official Chinese media, with its constant play on "recalling the bitterness of old China and thinking of the sweetness of the new society" (*yiku sitian*). However, in this case it is McDonald's—a capitalist, transnational enterprise—that symbolizes the "sweetness" of current life. What is even more interesting, the headline of the story reads: "Forty-Four years: From *Tu* to *Yang*." The terms *tu* and *yang* have been paired concepts in the everyday discourse of Chinese political culture since the nineteenth century. In common usage, *tu* means rustic, uncouth, and backward, whereas *yang* refers to anything foreign (particularly Western), fashionable, and quite often, progressive. The juxtaposition of these common terms demonstrates how McDonald's and its foreign (*yang*) food have become synonymous with progressive changes that make life more enjoyable in contemporary China.

In the eyes of Beijing residents, McDonald's represents Americana and the promise of modernization.[5] McDonald's highly efficient service and management, its spotless dining environment, and its fresh ingredients have been featured repeatedly by the Chinese media as exemplars of modernity.[6] McDonald's strict quality control, especially regarding potatoes, became a hot topic of discussion in many major newspapers, again with the emphasis on McDonald's scientific management as reflected in the company's unwavering standards.[7] According to one commentator who published a series of articles on McDonald's, the company's global success can be traced to its highly standardized procedures of food production, its scien-

tific recipes, and its modern management techniques. As the title of his article ("Seeing the World from McDonald's") suggests, each restaurant represents a microcosm of the transnational,[8] so much so that, according to another article by the same author, many American youths prefer to work at McDonald's before they leave home to seek work elsewhere. The experience of working at McDonald's, he continues, prepares American youth for any kind of job in a modern society.[9]

Other news items associate the success of transnational food chains with their atmosphere of equality and democracy. No matter who you are, according to one of these reports, you will be treated with warmth and friendliness in the fast food restaurants; hence many people patronize McDonald's to experience a moment of equality.[10] This argument may sound a bit odd to Western readers, but it makes sense in the context of Chinese culinary culture. When I asked my Beijing informants about the equality factor, they all pointed out that banquets in Chinese restaurants are highly competitive: people try to outdo one another by offering the most expensive dishes and alcoholic beverages. It is typical for the host at a banquet to worry that customers at neighboring tables might be enjoying better dishes, thus causing him or her to lose face. To avoid such embarrassment, many people prefer to pay the extra fees necessary to rent a private room within a restaurant. Such competition does not exist at McDonald's, where the menu is limited, the food is standardized, and every customer receives a set of items that are more or less equal in quality. There is no need to worry that one's food might be lower in status than a neighbor's. For people without a lot of money but who need to host a meal, McDonald's has become the best alternative.

During the autumn of 1994 I conducted an ethnographic

survey of consumer behavior in Beijing. I discovered that the stories commonly told about McDonald's have taken on a surreal, even mythic tone. For instance, it is believed among a number of Beijing residents that the potato used by McDonald's is a cube-shaped variety. A 20-year old woman working at McDonald's told me in all seriousness about McDonald's secret, cube-shaped potatoes, the key to the corporation's worldwide success. She was also fascinated by the foreign terms she had learned in the short time she had worked there, terms such as *weisi* (waste), *jishi* (cheese), and *delaisu* (drive-through). The first two are straight transliterations of the English terms, but the third is both a transliteration and a free translation: it means "to get it quickly." These half-Chinese, half-English terms are used by employees and customers alike, making their experiences at McDonald's restaurants exotic, American, and to a certain extent, modern.

In this connection the ways Beijing McDonald's presents itself in public are also worth noting. By the autumn of 1994, McDonald's had not yet placed any advertisements on Beijing television. According to the General Manager, it was pointless to advertise McDonald's on television because Chinese commercials, unlike their counterparts in the West, appear only during the interval between programs. After watching one program, audiences tend to switch to another channel, which means that advertisements have little chance of being seen. Newspapers and popular magazines were regarded as a better way to present McDonald's public image. In the Beijing region, McDonald's relied on Berson-Marsteller, a transnational public relations company, to deal with the Chinese news media. The main source of information about McDonald's in China is a short booklet that sketches the history of the American-based

corporation and its famous business philosophy, QSC & V, or quality, service, cleanliness, and value. The absence of what might be called hard news has led Chinese reporters to repeat McDonald's corporate philosophy of QSC & V—which, incidentally, reinforces the Chinese government's promotion of upgrading and modernizing the local business environment.

McDonald's local management has also made efforts to promote the corporation's image as an exemplar of modernity. For instance, a five-minute tour of the kitchen is provided upon request at each of the Beijing restaurants. I went on three such tours at different locations, and all were identical. My guides—McDonald's employees responsible for public relations—showed me all the machines, stoves, and other special equipment and explained how they work. I was then shown the place where employees wash their hands (following strict procedures) and the wastebins that contained food that was no longer fresh enough to meet the McDonald's standards. Throughout the five-minute tour, one message was emphasized repeatedly: McDonald's foods are cooked in accordance with strict scientific methods and are guaranteed fresh and pure.

In addition to the freshness and purity of its food, McDonald's management also emphasizes its nutritional value. In a published interview, a high-level manager maintains that the recipes for McDonald's foods are designed to meet modern scientific specifications and thus differ from the recipes for Chinese foods, which are based on cultural expectations. A central feature of this "scientifically designed" food is that it includes the main nutritional elements a human being needs daily: water, starch, protein, sugar, vitamins, and fat. Thus when one spends 10 to 15 yuan to have a standardized meal at McDonald's, one is guaranteed enough nutrition for half a day.[11] The

idea that McDonald's provides healthy food based on nutritional ingredients and scientific cooking methods has been widely accepted by both the Chinese media and the general public. In Japan, too, until the mid-1980s, McDonald's food was believed to be nutritious and healthy; it is only in recent years that the Japanese public has begun to worry about the negative effects of fast food.[12]

Given the general eagerness for modernization, shared by both the government and ordinary people, and, in the realm of consumption, the growing appetite for all things foreign, or Western (*yang*), McDonald's has benefited greatly from the cultural symbolism it carries. Bolstering the "genuineness" of its food, the Beijing restaurant keeps its menu identical to that of its American counterpart. By 1994 the sale of Big Mac hamburgers accounted for 20 percent of local McDonald's sales, a figure higher than the comparable one for Taiwan.[13] This figure has been interpreted by McDonald's management as an indicator that Beijing customers have no problem accepting American-style cuisine.

But what is it that the Beijing customers have accepted—the hamburgers or the ambience? My ethnographic inquiry reveals that whereas children are great fans of the Big Mac and french fries, most adult customers appear to be attracted to McDonald's by its American "style" rather than its food. Many people commented to me that the food was not really delicious and that the flavor of cheese was too strange to taste good. The most common complaint from adult customers was *chi bu bao*, meaning that McDonald's hamburgers and fries did not make one feel full; they are more like snacks than meals. I conducted a survey among students at a major university in Beijing and collected 97 completed questionnaires.[14] Table 1 shows the in-

my hometown, I can enjoy all such foreign goods as long as I make money. You see, today I have to attend a formal banquet for a business lunch and I will only drink when I get there. Unlike those *tu* [rustic] guys, I prefer eating at McDonald's to a noisy Chinese restaurant."

Throughout my fieldwork I talked with more than a dozen yuppies like this young man, all of whom were proud of their newly attained habit of eating foreign fast food. Although some emphasized that they just wanted to save time, none finished their meals within 20 minutes. Like other customers, these young professionals arrive in small groups or come with girl- or boyfriends and enjoy themselves in the restaurant for an hour or more. Eating foreign food, and consuming other foreign goods, has become an important way for these Chinese yuppies to define themselves as middle-class professionals.

Young couples from all social strata are also frequenters of McDonald's because the eating environment is considered romantic and comfortable. The restaurants are brightly lit and clean and feature light Western music; except during busy periods they are relatively quiet. In addition to the exotica of hamburgers, the restaurant offers milk shakes, apple pie, and ice cream, all of which makes McDonald's one of the best places in Beijing to conduct courtship. As mentioned above, the variety of foods offered is, by Chinese standards, limited, and the expenditure is predictable, meaning that no one need fear being drawn into a competition of conspicuous consumption at McDonald's. This is particularly important for young men who need to take their girlfriends or wives out for a treat but have limited budgets: they know they will not lose face in this foreign cultural context. By 1994, McDonald's seven Beijing restaurants had all made efforts to create a relatively remote, private service area with tables for two only. In some of these restaurants, the area was nicknamed the "the lovers' corner."

There is another special enclosure in every Beijing McDonald's called "children's paradise." Unlike the quiet, romantic "lovers' corner," this area is always noisy, full of children who are running around and playing while they eat. As in other parts of East Asia (notably, as Chapters 2 and 3 show, Hong Kong and Taipei), Beijing children are loyal McDonald's fans. One employee told me that parents often asked her why their children liked McDonald's food so much. Some even suspected, she said, that the Big Mac contained a special, hidden ingredient; otherwise their children would not be so attracted to this exotic food. During my interviews with students in a primary school, one nine-year-old boy told me that his dream is to buy a huge box of hamburgers and eat them every day. Several youngsters expressed the desire to open a McDonald's restaurant of their own when they grow up. I will have more to say about how McDonald's appeals to children in the next section. Here I want to emphasize that children do not come alone: they are usually brought to McDonald's by their parents or grandparents.

I once interviewed a middle-aged woman whose daughter had just won an essay contest at McDonald's. She told me that she did not like the taste of hamburgers, and her husband simply hated them. But their daughter loved hamburgers and milk shakes so much that their family had to visit McDonald's nearly every week. Children's fondness for McDonald's, however, may present difficulties for parents with limited economic resources. As one man, a worker, noted, although his salary did not allow him to eat out, when his son asked him to go to

McDonald's, he never said "No." He would cut back his expenses in some other area so he could afford the meal.

It should be noted that eating at McDonald's is still a big treat for low-income people, and that as of 1994, a dinner at McDonald's for a family of three normally cost one-sixth of a worker's monthly salary. The price is definitely not considered a bargain and is not the reason why Beijing consumers come to McDonald's. As a young woman worker commented: "It's rather expensive to eat here at McDonald's. I have to work for two days in order to have a Big Mac set meal. But for a high-fashion restaurant the price is okay." Thus, working-class families have to save their money to eat at McDonald's. As noted in my opening vignette, many feel they should arrive by taxi, making the trip more luxurious and memorable. For such people, the McDonald's experience has less to do with food than it does with a chance to explore American culture or to give their children a special treat.

The representation of McDonald's as a symbol of American culture not only has drawn Beijing customers to new forms of dining but also has led them to accept new patterns of behavior. For instance, in 1992 and 1993 customers in Beijing (as in Hong Kong and Taiwan) usually left their rubbish on the table, letting the restaurant employees do the clean-up work. The main reason for this kind of behavior was that people regarded McDonald's as a formal restaurant where they had paid for full service. However, during the summer of 1994 I observed that about a fifth of the customers, many of them fashionably dressed youth, carried their own trays to the waste-bins. From subsequent interviews I discovered that most of these people were regular customers, and they had learned to clean up their tables by observing what foreigners did. Interestingly enough, several informants told me that when they threw out their own rubbish, they felt they were more "civilized" (*wenming*) than other customers because they knew the proper behavior. It was also obvious that McDonald's customers spoke in lower tones than customers in other, Chinese-style eateries. They were also more careful not to throw rubbish on the ground or to spit near McDonald's outlets. Similarly, a comparison of customer behavior in McDonald's and that in comparably priced or more expensive Chinese restaurants shows that people in McDonald's were, on the whole, more self-restrained and polite toward one another. One possible explanation for this difference is that the symbolic meanings of the new food, along with customers' willingness to accept the exotic culture associated with fast food, has affected people's table manners in particular and social behavior in general.[20]

Fast Food Slowing Down: Appropriation and Localization

A further question arises: Is the Beijing McDonald's genuinely American? In the United States it is commonplace to equate McDonald's food with low cost and fast service. Americans worry about the nutritional value and the fat content of McDonald's hamburgers, but the restaurants remain popular because of the savings they offer in money and time. Few Americans (of my acquaintance, at least) think of McDonald's as an elegant place to relax and "be seen." From a cultural point of view, McDonald's, like many other products of industrialization and modernization, is treated by most Americans as simply a necessity of modern life.[21] In Beijing, by contrast, the Big Mac was rapidly transformed into a form of haute cuisine, and McDonald's became a place where people could gain status simply by eating there. A scrutiny of social interactions

Finally, McDonald's localization strategies have centered on children as primary customers. Because of the Chinese government's single-child policy,[34] in most families children are the object of attention and affection from up to half a dozen adults: their parents and their paternal and maternal grandparents. The demands of such children are always met by one or all of these relatives, earning them the title "Little Emperors" or "Empresses." When a Little Emperor says, "I want to eat at McDonald's," this means that the entire family must go along. It is no wonder that McDonald's management knows that "Children are our future." The above-mentioned "Book of Little Honorary Guests" is only one of the strategies that Beijing McDonald's has devised to introduce its product into the heart of Chinese families via the fantasy world of children. Birthday parties are a central feature of this strategy. Arriving with five or more guests, a child can expect an elaborate ritual performed, free of charge, in a special enclosure called "Children's Paradise." The ritual begins with an announcement over the restaurant's loudspeakers—in both Chinese and English—giving the child's name and age, together with Uncle McDonald's congratulations. This is followed by the recorded song "Happy Birthday," again in two languages. Aunt McDonald then entertains the children with games and presents each of them with small gifts from Uncle McDonald. During the ceremony all food and drinks are served by Aunt McDonald, making the children feel important.

A feature of the "Little Emperor" phenomenon in contemporary China is that most parents want their one child to become an important personage in the future and thus make various investments in his or her education. It is common, for instance, for working-class parents who know little about music or computers to attend a weekly piano lesson or computer class with their child. During the class they work even harder than their child does, because they want to be able to help with homework. Taking parents' great expectations of their children into consideration, the McDonald's management decided to promote learning in their restaurants. Paper and pens are provided so children can draw pictures; essay contests are held for primary and secondary school students; and children's programs, with parents acting as the audience, are hosted in some restaurants. For instance, in September 1994, eight McDonald's outlets in Beijing and Tianjin sponsored a "My Teacher" essay contest, to celebrate Teachers' Day (September 10); the 160 winners of this contest received gifts and a Certificate of Merit from the restaurants.[35] Every evening in a McDonald's located in east Beijing, two "Aunt McDonald" receptionists lead children in dance for twenty minutes and then give the participants small gifts. The manager of this restaurant told me that, in order to make sure every child can participate in dancing, staff members create new kinds of dance for the children. "We want the parents to know," she explained, "that children are attracted to our restaurant not only by food—there are a lot of things children can learn here."

In August 1994, the first McDonald's "theme restaurant" was opened, inspired by famous theme parks such as Disneyland. The interior of the restaurant was decorated like a large ship, and staff members wore blue-and-white sailor uniforms instead of traditional McDonald's uniforms. The restaurant has developed a program called Uncle McDonald's Adventure, which encourages children to imagine that they are traveling around the world on a big ship guided by Uncle McDonald. The basic idea, according to the manager, is to increase chil-

dren's knowledge of world geography and encourage them to create an imagined world by and for themselves.

During my interviews with pupils in a primary school, I discovered that Ronald McDonald is a very popular figure among children. Not one of the 68 youngsters (from the third to sixth grade) I spoke with failed to recognize the image of Ronald McDonald; most students appeared very excited when I asked about him. All the children said they liked Ronald because he was funny, gentle, kind, and—several added—he understood children's hearts. About one-third believed that Ronald McDonald came from America; the majority insisted that he came from the McDonald's headquarters in Beijing. When I asked these children to tell me the most interesting experience they had had at McDonald's, a sixth grader said it was the time he went to McDonald's with four friends to celebrate his birthday, unaccompanied by adults. They made a reservation so that Aunt McDonald had prepared a table for them in advance and helped them recite poems, sing songs, and play games. A third-grader said she was very happy when she heard her own name announced over the loudspeakers at McDonald's, accompanied by "Happy birthday to you." When I was about to leave after finishing my group interview, a third grade boy ran up to me and asked: "Are you Uncle McDonald?" "No, I'm not. Why?" "You have his eyes." Assuming a serious demeanor, the boy then showed me a pen with a small hamburger on it—a gift he had received from Ronald McDonald. It became clear to me that for this little boy and many of his friends, Uncle McDonald is real, and, as such, he is also an important influence on these children's lives.

It should be noted that McDonald's special appeal to children is partially and indirectly due to its association with

Americana and modernity—a theme I explored in the preceding section. As mentioned above, a large number of adult customers were brought into McDonald's restaurants by their children or grandchildren, and continue to go there even though in many cases they dislike or cannot afford the foreign food. The question arises, Why is children's demand for McDonald's food such a powerful motivator for parents? It is true that parental affection, particularly in families with only one child, has led many parents and grandparents to surrender to their children's demands. However, my interview with a mother who frequently accompanies her daughter to McDonald's provides a clue to another kind of answer.

This woman told me that after almost a year of "adapting" to the foreign food, she had begun to enjoy it and now takes her daughter to McDonald's at least twice a week. When I asked whether the price was high, she said it was acceptable for a foreign restaurant and added, "I want my daughter to learn more about American culture. She is taking an English typing class now, and I will buy her a computer next year." It is clear that eating a Big Mac and fries, like learning typing and computer skills, is part of the mother's plan to expose her daughter to American culture. In other words, she wants her daughter to learn not only the skills needed in a modern society, but also to eat modern food so she will grow up to be a successful person who knows how to enjoy a modern way of life. If the daughter was fond of some "low food," such as the corn gruel commonly consumed by villagers in North China, would the mother have been so willing to meet her child's demand? It is very unlikely.

This woman's case is by no means unique in contemporary China. Rational considerations play as important a role as af-