

✓ *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 sikh*, 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).

The mental universe of Hong Kong consumers is partially revealed in the everyday use of language. Hamburgers are re-

ferred 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).¹² 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.¹³

From Exotic to Ordinary: McDonald's Becomes Local

Following precedents in other international markets,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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, pre-occupied 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.

A comparative survey of prices, carried out in June 1994, demonstrates that McDonald's fare is equal in price to that of its competitors in the fast food sector or cheaper.¹⁸ Furthermore, when other categories of food purveyors are considered (Chinese restaurants, noodle shops, teahouses, dumpling stalls), the appeal of McDonald's is even more understandable: an average "value meal" is less than half the price of a simple lunch in one of Hong Kong's middle-ranking teahouses or noodle shops. Translated into U.S. dollar terms (see Table 1), McDonald's prices in Hong Kong were, until 1997, the cheapest in the world.¹⁹

The transformation from exotic to ordinary may be repeating itself just across the Hong Kong border in the Shenzhen

TABLE 1
Comparative Prices, June 1994
(US\$1 = HK\$7.8)

Item	Cambridge, Mass. (6/5/94) ^a	Hong Kong, Central Distr. (6/16/94) ^b	
	US\$	US\$	HK\$
Big Mac	2.09	1.19	9.20
Regular Hamburger	0.59	0.54	4.20
Medium Fries	1.09	0.71	5.50
Medium Coca-Cola	0.99	0.62	4.80
Apple Pie	0.85	0.51	4.00
Chicken Sandwich	2.29	1.06	8.20
Fish Sandwich	1.85	1.05	8.10
Coffee, regular	0.80	0.62	4.80
Egg McMuffin	1.57	0.93	7.20
Chicken McNuggets	1.89	1.15	8.90
Cheeseburger	0.69	0.61	4.70
Hash Browns	0.69	0.39	3.00

^aCollected by Bernadine Chee.

^bCollected by J. L. Watson.

Special Economic Zone, where Mr. Ng was the pioneer franchise holder for several McDonald's restaurants. Shenzhen was one of the first regions in the People's Republic to benefit from Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms (starting in the early 1980s) and has subsequently become a boom town characterized by a curious combination of socialist bureaucracy and bare-knuckled, frontier capitalism. The consumer scene in Shenzhen is similar, in some respects, to Beijing's as described by Yan in Chapter 1. In both cities McDonald's is perceived as an upmarket restaurant, offering American food (and culture) to a new class of entrepreneurs and professionals who can af-

ford the experience. The first Shenzhen outlet opened on October 8, 1990, and had 12,590 transactions that day—breaking the world record for McDonald's restaurants, set eight months earlier in Moscow.²⁰ By February 1997, there were 27 McDonald's in Shenzhen, serving nearly two million people, a small number of whom, including children of high-level communist cadres, are beginning to treat the Big Mac and fries as common features of their diet.

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.²¹ 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.²² Rivals

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?

As noted in the Introduction, 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. During McDonald's first decade in Hong Kong, the cost of hiring extra cleaners was offset by low wages. A pattern was thus established, and customers grew accustomed to leaving without at-

tending to their own rubbish. Later, as wages escalated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, McDonald's tried to introduce self-busing by posting announcements in restaurants and featuring the practice in its television advertisements. As of February 1997, however, little had changed. Hong Kong consumers, unlike the Beijing yuppies Yan describes in Chapter 1, have ignored this aspect of consumer discipline.

What about the critical issues of time and space? Local managers with whom I spoke estimated that the average eating time for most Hong Kong customers was between 20 and 25 minutes, compared to 11 minutes in the United States fast food industry.²⁶ This estimate confirms my own observations of McDonald's consumers in Hong Kong's central business districts (Victoria and Tsimshatsui). A survey conducted in the New Territories city of Yuen Long—an old market town that has grown into a modern urban center—revealed that local McDonald's consumers took just under 26 minutes to eat.²⁷

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 (see Introduction, pp. 27–30). 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.²⁸

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 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹ 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.

When the majority of Hong Kong consumers were growing up in the 1960s and 1970s self-provisioning was largely unknown and caterers rarely allowed customers to serve themselves. Expectations only began to change in the late 1970s, with the introduction of Western-style buffets in some of Hong Kong's larger hotels. The innovation was a smashing success and launched a culinary revolution: Buffets allowed the newly affluent middle classes to sample a wide range of Euro-

helped transform him into one of Hong Kong's most familiar cartoon figures.⁴⁷

During the course of this project I found myself being drawn ever more deeply into the world of children, paying close attention to the ways they judge themselves and their peers. Around the age of four, Hong Kong children begin to develop a fine-tuned sense of social distinction that is reflected in consumption patterns.⁴⁸ I soon discovered that the birthday cake is an infallible status marker among younger consumers; specifically, the type and quality of fruit used to decorate the cake is what matters most. Here, in capsule form, is the ranking system as seen by one nine-year-old in June 1994:

Top Rank: American blueberries and fresh raspberries.

Second Rank: Fresh strawberries and kiwi fruit.

Third Rank: Fresh peaches and melon.

Bottom Rank: Canned, mixed fruit ("fruit cocktail").

The cake-rating system is constantly changing as new types of fruit are introduced to the Hong Kong market. Not surprisingly, children usually learn about these consumer innovations long before their parents. McDonald's has formed an alliance with a local bakery chain to provide party cakes that reflect current fashions, notably in ranks two and three as outlined above. The top category is seen only at celebrations in Hong Kong's fanciest hotels, which compete among themselves to create new versions of expensively adorned cakes for wealthy clients. Such parties are, of course, private, but word soon filters out and within days children all over Hong Kong become aware (to cite a 1994 example) that raspberries are "in" and strawberries are "out"—even though most of my young informants had never actually seen a raspberry.

McDonald's as a Youth Center

Weekends may be devoted to family dining and birthday parties for younger children, but ~~on weekday afternoons, from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M., McDonald's restaurants are packed with teenagers stopping for a snack on their way home from school.~~ In many outlets 80 percent of the late afternoon clientele appear in school uniforms, turning the restaurants into a sea of white frocks, light blue shirts, and dark trousers. The students, aged between 10 and 17, stake out tables and buy snacks that are shared in groups. The noise level at this time of day is deafening; students shout to friends and dart from table to table. Few adults, other than restaurant staff, are in evidence. It is obvious that ~~McDonald's is treated as an informal youth center, a recreational extension of school where students can unwind after long hours of study.~~

Hong Kong schools place heavy demands on their students and enforce strict discipline on the premises. The interlude at McDonald's, by contrast, is not monitored by teachers or parents. McDonald's staff keep a sharp watch for possible fights or disruptions, but trouble of this nature rarely breaks out in fast food restaurants. Managers know by sight most of the gang members in their neighborhood and sometimes delegate a (large) male employee to shadow potential troublemakers—standing uncomfortably close to them, watching every move. Partly as a consequence McDonald's is commonly regarded as a safe haven where hard-working students can unwind without fear of crossing the Triads. ~~The image of safety is reinforced by a ban on smoking (since 1991) and the absence of alcohol.~~ Youths more inclined toward drinking, smoking, and gambling frequent traditional-style eateries (teahouses, noodle shops) and rarely appear at McDonald's in groups, although

they might steal in by themselves to eat quickly or purchase a take-out meal. It is the students, with their book bags and computers, who have claimed McDonald's as their own.

In contrast to their counterparts in the United States, where fast food chains have devised ways to discourage lingering, McDonald's in Hong Kong does not set a limit on table time. When I asked the managers of several Hong Kong outlets how they coped with so many young people chatting at tables that might otherwise be occupied by paying customers, they all replied that the students were "welcome." The obvious strategy is to turn a potential liability into an asset: "~~Students create a good atmosphere which is good for our business,~~" said one manager as he watched an army of teenagers—dressed in identical school uniforms—surge into his restaurant. Large numbers of students also use McDonald's as a place to do homework and prepare for exams, often in groups. Study space of any kind, public or private, is hard to find in overcrowded Hong Kong. During the 1970s and 1980s, the situation was so desperate that dozens of students would sometimes occupy the departure hall of Hong Kong's international airport, ignoring the loudspeakers and the general chaos for a few hours of study.

For Hong Kong's hard-pressed youth, McDonald's represents something more than a simple snack center: it is commercial space temporarily transformed into private space. Home is likely to be a tiny apartment in a thirty-story public housing block, with shared bedrooms and minimal privacy. Interviews with teenagers revealed that McDonald's is perceived as a place that offers more space, in the literal sense of distance between tables, than any other public eatery in Hong Kong (save for the more expensive restaurants). Competing chains are indeed more crowded, with barely enough room to squeeze

between tables. When young people enter their local McDonald's after school, many feel that they have come "home." This is carried to an extreme by a small number of teenagers, mostly girls, who try to avoid conflict with parents or siblings by staying in the restaurants until closing time (usually 10:00 P.M.). Treating McDonald's as a substitute home is common enough in Hong Kong ~~for social workers to treat it as a recognizable syndrome, signaling trouble in the family.~~⁴⁹

Conclusions: Whose Culture Is It?

In concluding this chapter, I would like to return to the questions raised in my opening remarks: In what sense, if any, is McDonald's involved in these cultural transformations (the creation of a child-centered consumer culture, for instance)? Has the company helped to create these trends, or merely followed the market? Is this an example of American-inspired, transnational culture crowding out indigenous cultures? For the children who flock to weekend birthday parties, McDonald's restaurants are associated with fun, familiarity, and friendship. ~~McDonald's is not perceived as an exotic or alien institution: the children of Hong Kong have made it their own.~~ And this, of course, is precisely the point that many critics would seize upon triumphantly, arguing that the Hong Kong case illustrates the power, the hegemony, of cultural imperialism—convincing consumers that the transnational *is* the local.

Personally, I do not believe that these issues are so easily resolved. The deeper I dig into the lives of consumers themselves, in Hong Kong and elsewhere, the more complex the picture becomes. 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*