

franchise opened in 1935, and by 1941 the company had grown to 150 outlets serving an emerging market of middle-class motorists.⁷² McDonald's expansion can be traced to the post-World War Two boom in automobile traffic and the American infatuation with brand-name products that promised consistency, predictability, and safety.⁷³ Franchising began in 1955, and by 1963 McDonald's was selling one million hamburgers a day; the first drive-through operation started in 1975, an innovation that today accounts for approximately half of McDonald's sales in the United States.⁷⁴

Advances in automation have revolutionized the worldwide food industry. Even sushi is now becoming a fast food. For \$86,000 the Suzumo Machinery Company will provide a sushi robot that turns out 1,200 pieces per hour, four to six times the rate of the most accomplished sushi chef.⁷⁵ McDonald's was the first fast food company to use computers that automatically adjust cooking time and temperatures. French fries offer a case in point. In conjunction with researchers at the Argonne National Laboratory near Chicago, McDonald's devised a rapid frying system for frozen potatoes that reduced delivery time by 30 to 40 seconds.⁷⁶ Assuming that a high percentage of McDonald's 30 million daily customers order fries, the multiplier effect of 30 seconds more than covers the costs of automation.

Fast food operators in the United States report that their biggest problems are rising labor costs and shortages of reliable workers. The turnover rate for nonmanagerial employees now approaches 300 percent per year in many American cities.⁷⁷ Although comparable figures are not readily available for East Asia, management interviews conducted by the five anthropologists who worked on this project reveal a much lower turnover rate in the cities they studied. The cost of labor, how-

ever, continues to rise in East Asia, and local operators are quick to embrace new technology that promises to speed up production. The next step in automation is touch-screen computerized ordering systems that release workers from counter duty. A system pioneered by Arby's reduced ordering time from 100 seconds to 45, increasing sales per working hour from \$23 to \$32 for the average employee.⁷⁸

Consumer Discipline, Education, and Resistance

Does the increasing speed of production necessarily encourage an equally fast rate of consumption? Do customers always conform to management expectations? The fast food business is based on the assumption that customers will hold up their end of an implicit contract: The company promises to provide fast, reliable, inexpensive service if the consumer agrees to pay in advance, eat quickly, and leave without delay, thereby making room for others. The contract also assumes that fast food patrons know what is expected of them, that they have been educated, or disciplined, to behave like "proper" consumers in a modern economy. Scholars who support the cultural imperialism hypothesis would argue that the goal is to turn Russians, Chinese, and Saudis into Americans. As we shall see, however, corporate campaigns to modify consumer behavior do not always go according to plan.

Children in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Boston learn at a very early age how to place orders, find a table, and eat without embarrassing their friends. Such skills cannot, however, be taken for granted. During McDonald's first weeks of operation in Moscow, employees distributed information sheets to people standing in queues, telling them how to order and what to do after paying. During particularly busy periods, a young

woman stood outside the restaurant and spoke through a bullhorn: "The employees inside will smile at you. This does not mean that they are laughing at you. We smile because we are happy to serve you." The tray liners featured illustrations of Big Macs, fries, and shakes, with their component raw materials (cheese, pickles, potatoes, strawberries) in the background.⁷⁹ Many Muscovites needed such guidance because their previous experience of service personnel had left them unprepared to be smiled at and because they had no idea what was inside a hamburger, let alone how to eat one.⁸⁰ I observed a similar process of consumer education in 1994, outside McDonald's in Beijing. Chinese families frequently gathered around a large, pictorial menu and held lengthy discussions before venturing inside to place an order. In Hong Kong, by contrast, the restaurants have become such a routine feature of the urban landscape that pictorial menus are no longer necessary, although scaled-down versions are still provided for tourists (mostly from the Chinese countryside) who may not be familiar with the fare.

There can be little doubt that McDonald's excels at educating its customers. Convincing them to behave like orderly, disciplined consumers is another matter altogether. An essential feature of any industrialized food system is the queue, a remarkable social institution that is too often taken for granted. Standing in line is not a "natural" human reaction to bottlenecks resulting when one person serves many. In Hong Kong, for instance, queuing for services (at banks, ticket offices, restaurants) was largely unknown until the mid-1970s, when a new generation of locally born people began to transform the social environment. McDonald's is often credited with introducing the queue to Hong Kong consumers, although other innovations (restraining barriers at ferries and taxi ranks)

started the trend at least a decade before the company opened for business in 1975. The orderly queues that one sees in Hong Kong today are reflections of a dramatic shift from the immigrant-based culture of the 1950s-1970s ("Hong Kong is a borrowed place and we are living on borrowed time") to the self-confident, affluent culture of the 1980s and 1990s ("Hong Kong is our home and we are proud of it"). When free-for-alls do break out, often instigated by recent arrivals from China, Hong Kong residents stand back and glare their disapproval—a highly effective means of socializing, and thereby disciplining, newcomers.

One must not assume, however, that the queue is a universally accepted feature of modern consumerism. In Leiden, for instance, McDonald's customers regularly refuse to line up during busy periods and form tightly packed clumps in front of order takers. Under normal circumstances Dutch clumps are not disorderly because the local rules of behavior encourage people to negotiate politely among themselves and order in sequence of arrival. Peter Stephenson observed the clumps forming at Leiden's McDonald's and concluded that the local rules of courtesy do not apply in this setting. Dutch teenagers experience "a kind of instant emigration" and behave in a manner they perceive to be American: "Me! Me!" they shout as they struggle for attention at the counter.⁸¹ Rick Fantasia found a similar, although less boisterous, neglect of queuing in French McDonald's, and Melissa Caldwell notes that queues in Moscow tend to dissolve into scums during busy periods unless corralled by an employee.⁸²

On the whole, however, the vast majority of McDonald's customers around the world soon learn to accept the queue, and in some places (such as Hong Kong) they enforce their

own form of discipline on miscreants. The physical setting of fast food restaurants encourages this discipline. As Allen Sheldon notes, both customer and employee are standing, thereby establishing an egalitarian relationship, which in turn makes it seem reasonable for consumers to perform tasks that would otherwise be delegated to paid staff: drawing one's own drinks, distributing napkins and flatware, clearing the table. In Sheldon's view McDonald's is a "theater of equality,"⁸³ especially in contrast to conventional restaurants, where the customer sits and the employee stands, "waiting" for orders.

The egalitarian model does not apply to all McDonald's restaurants, however. Exceptions are made where local dining customs demand more formality. In Rio de Janeiro, for instance, waiters serve Big Macs with champagne in candle-lit restaurants; in Caracas hostesses seat customers, take orders, and deliver meals.⁸⁴ Expectations are exactly the opposite in Taipei, Hong Kong, and Beijing: Interviews revealed that consumers preferred the egalitarian model of fast food service. They were attracted to McDonald's precisely because of its lack of pomp and its unrelenting predictability. As Yan notes in Chapter 1, the alternatives to McDonald's are not only expensive, they can lead to embarrassing incidents: What does one do when the big spender at an adjoining table orders shark's fin soup and braised quail? Compete or lose face? At McDonald's the menu is comfortably limited and there is little opportunity for competition. Bak reports that the egalitarian model is also followed in Korea, but with one modification introduced by management: employees sometimes seat diners at tables occupied by others, a practice that maximizes the use of space and incidentally increases the speed of eating. Rather than seeing this practice as an imposition, however, Korean consumers generally

appreciate the intervention because it is considered impolite to seat oneself at an occupied table.

Service with a Smile?

To outsiders one of the most peculiar characteristics of American society is the indiscriminate display of goodwill toward perfect strangers, a quality referred to as "friendliness." In the United States customers expect a smile from the clerk, not just an acknowledgment of thanks. Many Americans judge businesses and bureaucracies by the "sincerity" of these smiles. Cities and regions are ranked on a scale of friendliness: Houston is high, Boston is most assuredly low.

Since its inception McDonald's has made friendliness a hallmark of its corporate image. It could be argued that American fast food chains, following McDonald's lead, have transformed a cultural expectation—smiling service—into a commodity. Prior to this intervention, friendly service may have been expected but, as all Americans know, was not always delivered. McDonald's and its imitators promote the cordiality associated with the smile as an integral part of their product: convenience, cleanliness, predictability, and friendliness.⁸⁵ Counter staff are trained to project the requisite standard of amiability and to vary their "Thank you" phrases so that customers receive what appear to be personalized messages.⁸⁶

It therefore comes as a shock to many Americans when they travel abroad for the first time and discover that public friendliness is not the universal norm. In fact, the human smile—a complex alignment of facial muscles—is not always interpreted as a symbol of congeniality, openness, or honesty; quite the opposite is often true. In Russia, a visible smile can be tantamount to a challenge.⁸⁷ Eye contact is another aspect of the

McDonald's service model that is taken for granted in the United States but has to be taught to new employees in many post-socialist societies. No more than a decade ago, service workers in Russia and China were ranked at the very bottom of the communist status hierarchy. Not surprisingly, they treated the general public with utter contempt. Getting the attention of a waiter or a clerk during the heyday of state socialism took considerable patience and skill.*

McDonald's campaign to make "smiling service" a mainstay of its business image in East Asia may be swimming against the tide of cultural expectations. In Hong Kong, for instance, consumers are automatically suspicious of clerks, hawkers, or service personnel who smile on the job. As outlined in Chapter 2, Hong Kong residents place a high value on public expressions of "seriousness"; workers are expected to assume a facial expression that reflects attention to detail and determination—the result may look more like a frown than a smile, but it projects the right message. Similar reactions are reported by contributors who worked in Taiwan and Korea. In fact, the longer McDonald's operates in an East Asian city, the less evident are the forced smiles.⁸⁸ Customers are far more concerned with efficiency, reliability, and hygiene.

*I must confess that I still miss this challenge when traveling in China today; rudeness among hotel and restaurant staff had become a high art form in the 1970s. Following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the 1980s, standards of service began to improve, along with salaries and working conditions.

Cleanliness, Hygiene, and the Public Toilet

Phil Donahue, the original television talk show host, once asked Ray Kroc if he really had cleaned toilets when McDonald's was still a start-up company: "You're damn right I did," Kroc shot back, "and I'd clean one today if it needed it."⁸⁹ Cleanliness, in contrast to smiling service, is one feature of the McDonald's corporate system that needs no explanation: clean toilets are universally appreciated. McDonald's is widely credited with starting a revolution of rising expectations among East Asian consumers who had never experienced high standards of public hygiene in the catering trade. In Taipei, Beijing, Seoul, and Hong Kong, local restaurateurs had to match this new standard or watch their customers go elsewhere. Young people, in particular, began to draw an equation between the condition of a restaurant's toilet and the state of its kitchen. Earlier generations of diners had little choice but to ignore unsanitary conditions; there were no alternatives, unless one was prepared to eat at expensive restaurants in major hotels.

~~One consequence of rising affluence in East Asian cities has been a rejection of traditional street cuisine and a preoccupation with food hygiene.~~ Parents now worry about what their children consume outside the home. There is considerable fear of food poisoning, adulteration, and unsanitary packaging—witness the mass hysteria that erupted over the 1996 outbreak of *e. coli* food poisoning in Japan.⁹⁰ In 1994 and 1995 rumors swept through Beijing that dozens of people had died after eating contaminated *youtiar* (deep-fried dough sticks) at roadside stalls. The local press ignored the rumors, but given the high level of cynicism regarding the enforcement of sanitation regulations, this only served to confirm suspicions.⁹¹

McDonald's appeals to the busy, upwardly mobile middle

classes in East Asian cities precisely because it promises—and delivers—predictability and cleanliness. The Golden Arches brook no surprises. Competing chains, many of which are small operations, try to capitalize on McDonald's reputation with varying degrees of success: In Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi'an a large number of imitators have emerged, with names like McDuck's, Mcdonald's, and Modornal; in Seoul, restaurants called McKiver's (written in Korean) and McDonny's (in English) are common.⁹² (Other notable clones are Macdonalds in Durban, South Africa; MacFastFood in Bangalore; McAllan in Copenhagen; and McDharma's in Santa Cruz, California.)⁹³ Nor are the Golden Arches safe: Winner's Burger, a South Korean chain, featured two upside-down arches as their logo; in Shanghai, a local restaurant called Nancy's Express used a sign with one leg of the double arches missing, thus forming an N; and in Beijing a chain of noodle shops called Honggaoliang ("Red Sorghum") advertises itself with a large H which bears an uncanny resemblance to the Golden Arches.⁹⁴

The equation between McDonald's and reliability is especially strong in China, where competitors not only dress their staff in McDonald's-style uniforms but also engage in what are perhaps best described as public exhibitions of cleanliness. In Beijing, local fast food chains regularly employ one or more workers to mop floors and polish windows—all day long, every day. The cleaners usually restrict their efforts to the entryway, where their performance can best be observed by prospective customers. Beijing residents often watch for such signs before they choose a place to eat.⁹⁵ McDonald's is one of the few chains that carries this preoccupation with cleanliness into the kitchens, which are also on display. Yan notes that company officials were happy to conduct tours of their restaurants

for the edification of customers, government officials, and even potential rivals.

Conclusion: McDonaldization versus Localization

McDonald's has become such a powerful symbol of the standardization and routinization of modern life that it has inspired a new vocabulary: McThink, McMyth, McJobs, McSpirituality, and, of course, McDonaldization.⁹⁶ George Ritzer, author of a popular book entitled *The McDonaldization of Society*, uses the term to describe "the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of . . . society."⁹⁷ Ritzer 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."⁹⁸

Is McDonald's in fact the revolutionary, disruptive institution that theorists of cultural imperialism deem it to be? Evidence from this book 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 all five cases surveyed in this book, 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. As Bak notes

in Chapter 4, 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" McDonald's; it does not come to the consumer, nor is it taken home (in most parts of the world, that is). Unlike packaged products, McDonald's items are sold hot and ready-to-eat, thereby separating the buyer from the acts of cooking and preparation. One consumes a completed set of products, not the component parts of a home-cooked meal.

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 automaton many analysts would have us believe. 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.

The case studies in this book also make it clear that 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 for-