Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JAMES L. WATSON (Ed.) Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia. Second Edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, xviii + 246 p. + index.

"It has become an academic cliché," writes James L. Watson in his Introduction to Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia, "to argue that people are constantly reinventing themselves." Naturally, Watson goes on to argue just that in the pages which follow, but charitable readers will doubtless agree not to quibble. In tracing the "moving target" of postmodern Asian pop culture and cuisine, Watson and his collaborators face a subject with a truly protean capacity for change:

[The] speed of that reinvention process in places like Hong Kong, Taipei, and Seoul is so rapid that it defies description. In the realm of popular culture, it is no longer possible to distinguish between what is "local" and what is "foreign." . . . To millions of children who watch Chinese television, "Uncle McDonald" (alias Ronald) is probably more familiar than the mythical characters of Chinese folklore.

Or so at least matters stood when Golden Arches East was first published in 1997. But while it seems safe to assume that "Uncle McDonald" will remain imprinted on the minds of Chinese (and Japanese and Korean) children for as long as the McDonald's Corporation can advertise in Asian markets, one wonders how much else will have remained unchanged over ten years in the ethnography of such a rapidly evolving environment. A new edition of Golden Arches East provides an ideal opportunity to explore just such questions; unfortunately, the opportunity is largely missed.

Nonetheless, the core of the book itself remains excellent. A collection of five essays examining the reception of McDonald's restaurants in five Asian markets (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan), preceded by a theoretical and historical introduction by editor Watson, Golden Arches East has been widely admired since its initial publication for its readability, ethnographic interest and refreshingly "non-ideological" approach to such charged issues as identity, cultural assimilation and globalization.

Predictably, perhaps, it is for this last quality that the book seems to have gathered the most attention. The authors' generally positive assessment of

their subject – of globalization in general, and of its much-maligned poster child, McDonald's, in particular – makes the book an interesting foil to other more "orthodoxly" critical studies from the nineties such as Barber's Jihad vs. McWorld and Ritzer's The McDonaldization of Society. In effect, the authors refuse to make simplifying theoretical assumptions about "false consciousness" or "cultural hegemony," and instead attack the question of why McDonald's is thriving in East Asia by the charmingly old-fashioned expedient of talking to the customers who gather in its stores. Given the self-selecting nature of this target population, some might argue, of course, that it's little surprise that the authors see "McDonald's East" in such a positive light. Indeed, with the exception of Sangmee Bak's article on nationalist reaction in Korea, the collected papers present very little by way of dissenting voices from beyond the Golden Arches. (One wonders, for example, how Chinese traditionalists feel about the ascendancy of "Uncle McDonald" in their children's imaginations!) Those limitations granted, however, the book succeeds admirably as an ethnography of its chosen subject, East Asia's emerging urban middle class: affluent, youth-oriented, small-familied, self-consciously "cosmopolitan" – a generation of eager and conspicuous consumers of all things new and fashionable, including shakes, burgers and fries.

With five distinct, highly developed modern societies represented in the sample, naturally there is a great deal of diversity in this factitious "Asian" middle class; and here too Golden Arches East excels, its five "snapshot" studies together forming a composite picture that captures both the continuities and differences of social experience across the region. Language, culture, politics, and perhaps most importantly, the trajectory of development all play a role in determining this experience – issues far too complex to be dealt with in detail in the space of so short a book, but which emerge nonetheless, tellingly and engagingly, from its diverse collection of images.

Thus, for example, Yunxiang Yan's awestruck mainland Chinese, pausing to take a commemorative photo before entering McDonald's for their first-ever taste of American food, seem worlds apart from the blasé, "quintessential[ly] postmodern" Hong Kongers and Tokyoites that James Watson and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney describe; yet all three groups stand curiously united in their lingering sense that it's hard to take seriously a meal that doesn't include rice on the side. David Y. H. Wu and Sangmee Bak trace the powerful ties between food and national identity in Taiwan and South Korea respectively, but find strikingly opposed results: where Taiwanese happily embrace "cosmopolitan" Big Macs as an expression of their membership in the modern world – and independence from mainland China – large segments of South Korean society fiercely oppose the eating of "American" hamburgers as tantamount to cultural treason. And so on, throughout the book, details and insights from one essay subtly echoing, challenging and illuminating the others. The overall result is unsystematic, perhaps, but the book's variety of viewpoints is interesting in itself and serves as a fine starting point for further research or classroom debate. It comes as no surprise to learn (a quick Google search confirms it) that

Golden Arches East has enjoyed widespread success over the last decade as a teaching text at the undergraduate, and even senior high school levels.

With so much to recommend it, then, Golden Arches East is sure to find a continued place on readers' shelves in this updated second edition. As noted above, however, while the reissue certainly is welcome, it's hard not to feel some disappointment at the limited extent of the "update" that comes with it. Readers intrigued by the picture of frantic social change which Watson paints in his introduction may well want to know how the trends which he and his coauthors discussed in 1997 have developed in the years since. Unfortunately, while Watson's "update" contains much that is of interest, ranging over such topics as the McLibel trial in Britain, the rise of the global antiglobalization movement, the greying of Asian populations and the rise of "obesity politics," it is strangely silent on issues which are most important to the original book itself.

Central to the argument of Golden Arches East – deployed most prominently in Watson's introduction and essay on Hong Kong, but touched upon to greater or lesser extent by the other contributors as well – is the notion of "localization," the process by which a culture adapts – and adapts to – a foreign firm or product after their "initial 'intrusive' encounter." The key to this process, according to Watson, is that it "is a two-way street: It implies changes in the local culture as well as modifications in the [foreign] company's standard operating procedures." Thus, the argument goes, while consumer behaviour may be affected by the arrival of a powerful multinational corporation in the neighbourhood, the locals soon get their own back as they force reciprocal changes in the intruder's business model. To those who worry that "McDonald's may indeed have been an intrusive force, undermining the integrity of East Asian cuisines," Watson counters that "it is clear that consumers are not the automatons that many analysts would have us believe."

As astute reviewers of the first edition have pointed out, however, to call localization a "two-way street" is to obscure the extent to which real initiative in the process remains on the "intrusive" multinational's side. After all, global corporations are interested first and foremost in money, not hegemony; while understandably reluctant to tamper with formulas that have worked in the past, they have no reason to oppose the "localization" of their business models where doing so will facilitate the conquest of new markets. "Have people in East Asia conspired to change McDonald's, modifying this seemingly monolithic institution to fit local customs?" Watson asks. The point is debatable – the appropriation of restaurant space for socialization and study which Watson adduces as his prime evidence, while no doubt annoying to franchise owners, is hardly revolutionary. Still, even if consumers have forced some small changes in company policy in the region, to the extent that this has led to greater acceptance – and spread – of the chain, it's no skin off Ronald McDonald's red nose.

Either way, by failing to follow up on the first edition's claims about localization in his "update," Watson misses a golden opportunity to put his

theories to renewed test. At the time of the book's original publication in 1997, McDonald's had been established for fewer than ten years in two of the societies studied (South Korea 1988, China 1992), and fifteen in another (Taiwan 1984). How has the process of localization played out in these economies during the intervening decade? Have consumers succeeded in "modifying the monolith" in any permanent, nontrivial ways? If so, to what extent do the changes observed reflect "local customs"? Do China and Taiwan, for example, have their own, recognizably local "McDonald's cultures," or does the Big Mac experience feel much the same in Beijing and Taipei? And how do these, in turn, compare with Tokyo and Hong Kong? Are any differences exclusively cultural in nature, or can they be explained by the various economies' differing developmental trajectories? For its part, how has the McDonald's Corporation fared in its ongoing efforts to "educate" consumers? To what extent has the company succeeded in correcting undesirable behaviours like loitering, napkin pilfering and littering? How have the expectations acquired by consumers at McDonald's affected interactions in other kinds of businesses or social environments? Each of these questions is touched upon in the original text, in some cases at length; certainly it would be asking too much (and require another whole volume!) to expect the authors to revisit them all. By sidestepping them so completely, however, Watson's "update" leaves unconsidered the one question which really does deserve examination, a question which doubtless will occur to every thoughtful reader of the book: given ten more years of "localization," has the cultural, social and economic impact of McDonald's in East Asia continued to be as benign as the authors seem to believe it was circa 1997?

At the heart of Golden Arches East is a paradox. As anyone who has recently lived in one of the great urban centres of East Asia will know, Watson is quite right about the dizzying pace of change in these societies. While it is debatable that it is "no longer possible to distinguish between what is 'local' and what is 'foreign'" in their popular culture (here Watson assumes what he needs to prove!), the extraordinary ferment of "creative destruction" which he describes is real, and accounts for much of the fascination of life in today's Asian Pacific Rim. Needless to say, however, a culture where "boundaries of status, style, and taste dissolve almost as fast as they are formed" – where "[what] is 'in' today is 'out' tomorrow" – is anathema to a multinational restaurant chain looking to invest millions in the opening of new markets. If people really were "constantly reinventing themselves" in anything like a literal sense of the expression, no business like McDonald's could ever hope to survive, let alone prosper.

Instead, for a transnational fast-food chain to succeed in a given market over the long term it needs, above all, to inculcate the habit of eating in its restaurants among local consumers. In other words, it needs to slow, or arrest, any trend toward rapid turnover in tastes and consumption patterns – at least as far as its own market niche is concerned. As part of that process, it may indeed be in the chain's interest to "localize" some of its procedures; but ultimately it is changes in consumer, not corporate, behaviour that will determine the final outcome. Naturally, not all such changes need be negative; much of Golden Arches East is dedicated to

showing just that in the case of McDonald's in East Asia. To the extent that McDonald's does enjoy lasting success in Asian markets, however, it will be because the company has persuaded a substantial population of consumers to adopt its own special brand of high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar, high-sodium cuisine – and then stick with it, at the expense of competing alternatives.

Looked at in the light of that single overriding imperative, all the fascinating ethnographic details of "localization" – birthday parties in China, and clean bathrooms in Hong Kong, and learning to queue at the counter – pale in significance. But whatever individual readers may conclude about the localization argument of Golden Arches East, no doubt they will agree on one thing. We all should indeed "stay tuned," as Watson puts it at the end of his update to the book: "The big show – obesity politics – has just begun."

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