EAA Interview with James L. Watson on

GOLDEN ARCHES EAST McDonald's in East Asia

Photo by Jon Chase

Editor's Introduction

McDonald's Restaurants, most certainly major symbols of American popular culture, are now a feature of the geographic and culinary landscape in 118 countries. In *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, (Stanford University Press, 1997) Editor James L. Watson and his colleagues produced an anthropological study of McDonald's that has proven highly accessible to a wide variety of audiences. The book is now used in secondary schools and universities in a number of different courses. Watson, who is Fairbank Professor of Chinese Society and Professor of Anthropology at Harvard, as well as the current President of the Association for Asian Studies, graciously agreed to discuss his book in the interview that follows. We are also pleased to include in this issue an essay by two educators on using *Golden Arches East* in the classroom.

Cover photo from the book by James L. Watson.

Lucien:

Professor Watson, please share with our readers how you initially became interested in studying McDonald's. I suspect love of Big Macs on your part was perhaps not the root cause of your work.

James Watson: The irony is that I did not choose to study McDonald's. My Cantonese godchildren made that choice for me—they literally dragged me to their local McDonald's and demanded that I buy them whatever they wanted. At the time, in the early 1990s, my godchildren were aged four and six. They live in a village located in Hong Kong's New Territories where I have been working for over thirty years. At first I tried to resist them because I wanted to take their whole family to a fancy teahouse that produces heavenly dim-sum treats that are not available in Boston. But these kids were smitten by McDonald's and I soon realized that their infatuation reflected something important: A child-centered culture was emerging before my very eyes. Children, even those as young as three or four, were becoming knowledgeable consumers. In the past, children ate whatever their grandparents poked into them. Today village kids have money in their pockets and they command serious attention from adults. Increasingly, children decide what and where the family eats.

I am somewhat embarrassed to say, therefore, that were it not for the demands of my Cantonese godchildren I might have missed a dramatic change in the local culture. I tell my graduate students that as anthropologists we live where people live, we do what people do, and we go where people go. Today, all over the world, people are going to McDonald's. They are also going to shopping malls, video stores, and cinemas. If we, as anthropologists, don't start going with them we are doomed to irrelevance. People change and anthropology must change along with them. Now, whenever I travel anywhere in the world, I always make it a point to visit a local McDonald's where I sit, eat, and watch.

Lucien:

A large number of educated people, and intellectuals in particular, have deep-seated negative biases against McDonald's. Many academics accept without question the notion that McDonald's constitutes a new form of American exploitation of other nations through the imposition of our popular culture on foreigners. What are your reactions to this whole notion of cultural imperialism in light of the work you and your colleagues have done?

James Watson: Yes, you are right. Intellectuals hate McDonald's. I suspect that the majority of American and European academics subscribe to the cultural imperialism hypothesis. The worldwide impact of McDonald's is the central theme of *Golden Arches East*. A Harvard graduate student summed up the cultural imperialism perspective during my 1999 seminar on Globalization and Culture: "Forget about the State Department and the U.S. Marine Corps," he said. "I want to know what kids in Moscow and Beijing are eating, wearing, and watching." This student went on to argue that, in the 1990s, the creators of popular culture mattered more than politicians and generals. He saw pop culture magnates as the true hegemons of the postmodern era. It is not likely that he would make the same argument today, in the aftermath of 9/11.

My research on McDonald's was specifically designed to examine one cornerstone of the cultural imperialism construct. Do multinational corporations create the conditions of a homogenized, global culture? Does McDonald's destroy local cuisines and impose new tastes, styles, and—by implication—new sensibilities? Somewhat to our own surprise, members of the *Golden Arches East* research team discovered that we could make the opposite argument: McDonald's changes as much, if not more, than the local cultures it "invades."

Globalization is a messy, unpredictable, and infuriating process. It is infuriating because the results rarely approximate what intellectuals insist should happen. We concluded that globalization is a two-way process and that localization was the key to commercial success. No matter how many bright, crafty advertisers a corporation might employ, they cannot create the conditions of culture change. Leaders of successful corporations learn to recognize the first signs of social change and act accordingly. A good example is the rise of a child-centered culture in Hong Kong. McDonald's certainly did not create this emergent cultural system, which was initiated by complex changes in demography, family structure, and consumer practices. In effect, McDonald's jumped aboard as the train of changing family culture pulled out of the station. Other corporations, by the way, were left on the platform and have never recovered. Theorists of cultural imperialism often confuse cause with effect—all they see is the caboose.

While we are on this subject, let's take a closer look at the subculture of American intellectuals. How many regularly eat at McDonald's, or at any of its competitors? What do intellectuals really know about the economic and social factors that account for the widespread consumption of fast foods? I have colleagues who swear that they have never crossed the threshold of a McDonald's, and they are proud of it. Nonetheless, many of these same people will hold forth, with great conviction, about the cultural dangers inherent to McDonald's.

To answer your question, my own view is that we can only understand the attraction of institutions like McDonald's by taking them seriously—and by studying them, not from a distance, but up close and personal. I don't want anyone to tell me what to think about McDonald's. I insist on finding out for myself and that means I have to take the time to enter the life worlds of people who regularly consume fast foods. Ethnography of this type requires radical adjustments to the methodological practices that were standard when I studied Cantonese lineage organization and ancestral rites in the late 1960s. Believe me, it is a lot harder, and more complex, to do this new style of ethnography than "traditional," village-based research. Happily, the enterprise of ethnography is being reinvented by a generation of younger anthropologists who are not burdened with baggage from the past.

Lucien:

On a somewhat related note, this is speculation on my part, but probably most Americans assume McDonald's is changing certain aspects of East Asian cultures but don't consider how East Asian cultures are changing the McDonald's franchises that open in these locales. Would you please share with our readers what you consider to be a couple of the more significant examples of this latter phenomenon that you and your colleagues describe?

James Watson: The book, *Golden Arches East*, outlines in detail how McDonald's has been transformed to fit the local cultural systems it has encountered in East Asia. This is a process that I choose to call "localization," which to my mind is a force as transformative as globalization itself. During the mid–1990s, for instance, high school students were responsible for transforming many of Hong Kong's McDonald restaurants into after-school social clubs. Late every afternoon hundreds of kids descended on their local McDonald's; groups bought packets of fries and cokes. They packed themselves into booths, poured the fries out on a tray and enjoyed a communal snack while gossiping and, supposedly, doing their homework. They stayed for approximately two hours, effectively closing down the ordinary business of the restaurant. Adults who were silly enough to arrive during this period were made to feel uncomfortable. The message was clear: "This is our place now, and we don't want to see any adults while we are here."

At first the local McDonald's management tried to make the students eat faster and leave sooner, but they just sat there. Soon, however, management decided that this was an excellent development because it created the image of McDonald's as a safe, and therefore family-friendly, institution: No alcohol, no smoking, no profanity, and most important in a place like Hong Kong, no triad gangsters. Management hired demobilized Gurkha troops, recently retired from the British Army, to stand at the entrance and follow any triad tough who tried to infiltrate the restaurant. No one messes with Gurkhas; this was much more effective than hiring off-duty police officers. Local management began to promote their restaurants as after-school clubs, even in their television ads. Business boomed as parents gave their kids extra money to eat in a safe place.

Meanwhile, during the mid-morning, post-breakfast period (9:30–11:00AM), another demographic group has taken over their local McDonald's restaurants. Retired people, predominantly older women who live alone, sit in clumps eating pancake breakfasts, talking, and reading newspapers provided free by the company. These older people, like the students, are welcomed by McDonald's managers. In both cases consumers have appropriated corporate property and converted it into public space. There are very few alternatives in an overcrowded place like Hong Kong. Older people increasingly live on their own and enjoy congregating in elder-friendly settings. McDonald's has become a welcoming substitute for the disappearing parks, temples, and ancestral halls that once sheltered Hong Kong's older citizens. In this cultural environment, therefore, the American corporate model of fast food has been subverted and transformed to suit local needs:

***HOW TO EAT A BIG MAC:** Bring the whole thing up to your mouth, holding it with both hands. Eat it in progressive chomps, making certain your teeth make it through all of the layers with each bite. Do not disassemble the Big Mac and eat it layer by layer (this is a sure sign of the novice eater). Eat a couple of fries between each bite of the Big Mac. Do not eat all of your fries at once—and tell your grandfather to stop doing this before he embarrasses you in front of your friends. INSTRUCTIONS COURTESY OF MY HONG KONG GODCHILDREN.

Fast delivery does not translate into fast consumption. The book, *Golden Arches East*, explores other examples of localization, but Hong Kong's experience is the one I know best because I lived through it myself.

Lucien:

Still, I learned from reading Golden Arches East *that McDonald's has certainly changed the lives of some East Asians in numerous and perhaps significant ways. I think our readers will be interested in examples of this form of cultural change that strike you as important.*

James Watson: Yes, you are right. Institutions like McDonald's do change local cultures, and there is more involved than localization. Let's take another example from Hong Kong: In the late 1960s when Rubie Watson (also an anthropologist) and I first lived in Hong Kong, preparations for a day in the city involved careful planning. During those years, visits to public restrooms, even in relatively upmarket restaurants, were best avoided. This was especially true for women. When McDonald's began to expand in Hong Kong in the late 1970s and early 1980s it sparked a consumer revolution by providing relatively clean restrooms open to all customers. People began to treat McDonald's restaurants as welcoming outposts in an otherwise hostile urban environment. Business picked up accordingly. Meanwhile, other restaurants had to improve their facilities or face extinction. Similar transformations occurred in Taiwan and South Korea after McDonald's instituted the radical idea of clean public toilets.

One could say, therefore, that McDonald's has changed local cultures in East Asia, but not always in ways that theorists of cultural imperialism would predict. To be fair, however, one can also cite examples of changes that may not have had such positive outcomes. It could be argued, for instance, that McDonald's is largely responsible for the disappearance of teahouses and street corner eateries that once served cheap breakfasts to busy Hong Kong residents. Today, McDonald's serves breakfast to more office workers than any other company or category of independent restaurants in Hong Kong. This was accomplished, according to some critics, by undercutting prices and eliminating competition. The argument implies that independent teahouses would have survived in postmodern Hong Kong if McDonald's had never arrived on the scene—an assumption that is very doubtful. But your point is well taken: By its very nature, localization implies globalizing changes, not all of which necessarily improve the lives of ordinary people.

Lucien:

One common complaint of many high school and undergraduate instructors whom I know is that their students literally think of Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans as all alike. Are there specific ways, in your opinion, Golden Arches East *might be useful to instructors who grapple with how to disabuse students of this stereotype?*

James Watson: The chapter on Seoul shows how anti-American and protectionist sentiments largely condition Korean responses to McDonald's. In Hong Kong, by contrast, the politics of decolonization have not affected McDonald's business for reasons that have to do with Hong Kong's unique history as a global city. In Taiwan, McDonald's finds itself smack in the middle of identity politics—pro versus anti independence. Business people who hold dinner meetings in Taiwanese-style restaurants, as opposed to Chinese-style establishments, are making a political statement. McDonald's, perceived as an outsider institution, is politically neutral—at least in respect to this aspect of Taiwan's convoluted politics. The message of the book is that the people of Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, Taipei, and Hong Kong all react differently to McDonald's.

Lucien:

When I read your work, I was quite struck how the food itself played only a minor part in why many East Asian adults patronize McDonalds. I think our readers will be as interested as I am in this aspect of you and your colleagues' research. Please elaborate a bit upon this point. What are some examples of the McDonald's experience that don't relate to food that are attractive to adults in Beijing, Taipei, or Hong Kong?

James Watson: Yes, good point. First, consider the climate. In Hong Kong, Taipei, Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo, the summers are literally hot as hell. Taipei and Hong Kong are sauna baths during the summer. McDonald's restaurants offer air conditioned retreats, with the added bonus of good lighting, clean toilets, and lots of space by East Asian commercial standards. This package itself helps explain some of McDonald's success.

There is also the attraction of what might be called "global connectedness," at least during the early phases of McDonald's expansion into East Asian markets. My colleague Yunxiang Yan shows how McDonald's in Beijing is sometimes treated as an outpost of American culture. Parents scrimp and save to take their kids to McDonald's. I saw this myself when Yan took me to a Beijing McDonald's in 1995. Parents and/or grandparents would buy their "Little Emperor" or "Little Empress"—the result of China's single child family policy—a Big Mac, Coke, and fries. The adults would hover over the kid while she or he ate. Later the parents would decamp to a cheaper, Chinese-style restaurant to eat their own lunch. Yan discovered that these parents believe that learning to eat at McDonald's is as important to their child's future success as are English tutorials, computer sessions, and piano lessons. These are skills that "connect" children to the world outside. Knowing the proper way to eat a Big Mac* may come in handy some time in the future when decisions are made about who gains admission to Stanford's medical school or Harvard's business school. Yan's work teaches us that many Beijingers treat eating as an educational act. The nutritional content of the food is, he concludes, essentially irrelevant. What matters is the experience of eating.

Lucien:

Thank you very much for doing this interview.

James Watson: You are quite welcome! ■