

# GOLDEN ARCHES EAST

## McDonald's in East Asia

### FOOD AND CULTURE IN THE CLASSROOM

By John Carroll and Sheila Onuska

Not all scholarly resources, no matter how compellingly argued or well researched, work in the classroom. Finding good resources for undergraduates is difficult enough, but finding good resources for teachers in professional development programs is even more of a challenge. Works that have the proper credentials plus the appropriate appeal are not always easy to come by. *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* is a resource that fills these needs: it works with teachers and with students. After reading and discussing the essays, students of any age can come to a better understanding of the cultures of East Asia as well as the role of what James Watson calls “transnationalism.” Besides, almost everyone has some basic understanding of McDonald's and what it stands for to contribute to the discussion—even those who swear they have never stepped under the Golden Arches or tasted a Big Mac, either here or in Beijing.

For the last several years, we have assigned *Golden Arches East* to undergraduate classes at Saint Louis University and to the participants in the teacher education programs of the International Education Consortium in St. Louis, Missouri. We have found that a wide range of students and teachers respond positively and enthusiastically to the themes in the book and to the questions it raises about the meaning of the McDonald's phenomenon in East Asia.

*Golden Arches East* is particularly suited for use in teacher education programs because concern for teachers' time in after-school and summer programs is always a necessity and the authors' engaging writing styles (and conciseness) make the material both accessible and informative. Moreover, the book allows teachers to double dip: after they have read and discussed it, they will have few problems turning around and assigning it, or portions of it, to their high school students.

*Golden Arches East* was assigned in two undergraduate courses: “Origins of the Modern World,” a freshman seminar that focuses on historical encounters among Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas since the 1500s, and “East Asia Since 1600,” a survey of modern Chinese, Japanese, and Korean history. Students in the courses also viewed “The Japanese Version,” a film that looks at the way the Japanese have appropriated pretty much everything under the American sun.

Together we assigned the book to groups of middle and high school social studies and literature teachers taking part in long-term professional development programs on East Asia. One group of teachers had completed a thirty-hour seminar on the history of China and Japan, and was meeting in a follow-up session to discuss how the new material they had been exposed to would be integrated into their classrooms. Of the teachers in the group, several had some previous class work on Asia but most had not. A summer workshop for twenty world history teachers, who were working under the rubric of the new Advanced Placement world history course, where the emphasis is on global connections and the world since 1000, also featured the book as part of the teachers' reading assignment. The emphasis there was on what the McDonald's experience in East Asia could say about globalism and cultural diffusion. Later, the book was distributed to a third group of teachers from various backgrounds who had shared a seminar on China plus a three-week study tour of China in the summer of 2002. While not all twenty of this group had necessarily eaten at McDonald's in China, most had and all had seen the restaurants throughout the cities they visited. The comments that follow are drawn from these experiences.

To a large extent, the reactions to the book from teachers and students were similar: they did not pay much attention to how Watson explains the difference between globalism (“an essential-

ly impossible condition that is said to prevail when people the world over share a homogeneous, mutually intelligible culture”) and transnationalism (“a condition by which people, commodities, and ideas literally cross—transgress—national boundaries and are not identifiable with a single place of origin”). Nor were they much impressed by the way the president of McDonald’s International prefers that the company be called “multilocal” rather than “multinational.”

Also, when using the book in the classroom, we found the need to make students and teachers aware of what we consider one of the strongest points of *Golden Arches East*: there is no singular East Asian experience, legacy, or heritage, etc. The result is that in each locale, the McDonald’s experience is somewhat different for customers as well as franchise owners. Similarly, in our experience, discussions of the book did not always lead teachers and students to question an equally global question: whether Western expansion and Westernization were ultimately benign processes that did not necessarily undermine existing cultural values.

Looking at how McDonald’s has adapted its menu and its manner of operating to each of the cultures of East Asia enabled teachers and students to identify characteristics of each culture. Similarly, the presence of McDonald’s has helped change certain cultural values. In Japan, eating alone has become more acceptable and some Japanese now eat with their hands and eat standing up. In Hong Kong, people queue up, and the restaurants set standards for clean restrooms. Birthday parties have become important celebrations in Hong Kong, where in the past many young Chinese did not know their birth dates. In-classroom discussions of these changes highlight the Asian experiences and the U. S. experience. Of course, the ever-present availability of fast food has changed many Americans’ cultural values as well.

Why do people visit McDonald’s? In Asia, the food itself is rarely the answer. Many Asians surveyed looked on the McDonald’s menu as snack food. They were there for the experience. And, the experience is not inexpensive. McDonald’s success in East Asia has paralleled the growth of local economies and the rise of a group of affluent consumers with money to spend. Many of these consumers are young people, whether they visit McDonald’s as an exotic foreign place to take a date as some do in Beijing, or whether they insist on holding their birthday parties there, or use the space as a place to meet friends and do homework.

Even though the food at McDonald’s is seemingly not the main attraction, the reaction to the menu varies from culture to culture. Investigating these differences brings out historical questions related to the history of food and eating as a political and cultural act. Why is eating at McDonald’s part of Taiwan’s new cosmopolitanism, and chewing betel nut a sign of connection with the traditional past? Why do so many more women than men eat at McDonald’s in South Korea, and why does it matter that McDonald’s is considered a threat to Korean



rice? Why is McDonald’s in Hong Kong no longer considered foreign? Developing answers to these questions and using some of their own everyday experiences as a guide helps students and teachers think about some of the “big picture” questions that underlie present-day curricula in world history.

Teachers are known for adapting resources they become familiar with to their own ends. George Frissell, a high school teacher in Columbia, Missouri, assigns *Golden Arches East* to his students as a complement to *Brave New World* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neal Postman. He asks his students to consider if the presence of McDonald’s all over the world is an example of a creeping phenomenon that can ultimately create a “utopia” such as Postman warns about

and Huxley envisions. He is certainly asking students to think about big questions.

The group of St. Louis teachers who visited China last summer generated a list of questions based on their experience. Chinese food can be found throughout the U. S.: is that different from finding McDonald’s in China? Is there a parallel between the fact that the Chinese do not find McDonald’s filling and that many in the U. S. say the same thing about Chinese food? Is *dim sum* a Sunday brunch item in East Asia? Is there a cultural reason why so much of the Chinese restaurant business in the U. S. is takeout food? What about the so-called Chinese food items you find in the U. S. that don’t exist in China? And so on.

In the end, the overwhelming familiarity of McDonald’s in students’ and teachers’ daily experience gives everyone in the classroom a common platform from which to begin talking about and thinking about bigger questions. The authors of *Golden Arches East* have used scholarly techniques usually applied to exotic practices and faraway places to investigate some of the choices of ordinary people around the world. In so doing they have provided teachers and students with an engaging resource for building on their knowledge and experience to come to a fuller understanding of East Asian cultures. ■

Watson, James L., ed., 1997. *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

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