

## McDonald's in Hong Kong: Consumerism, Dietary Change, and the Rise of a Children's Culture

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On a cold winter afternoon in 1969 my neighbor, Man Tso-chuen, was happy to talk about something other than the weather. Over tea, Mr. Man continued the saga of his lineage ancestors who had settled in San Tin village, Hong Kong New Territories, over six centuries earlier. Local history was our regular topic of conversation that winter and the story had already filled several notebooks. Suddenly he stopped, leaned back in his chair, and began to describe a meal he had eaten. He recounted—in exacting detail—the flavor and texture of each dish, the sequence of spices, and the order of presentation:

Blue crab and bean curd soup, laced with ginger and served in porcelain steam pots; red snapper braised in soy sauce with green onions; crackling roast piglet; pop-eyed delta shrimp, scalded for 15 seconds in boiling water; *dim sam* (steamed dumplings) shaped and colored like goldfish; stuffed whole chicken plastered with star anise and baked for a full day in clay; newly harvested, first-crop Panyu county rice served with fresh *bak choi* (vegetable), stir-fried in chicken fat.

Food for the gods. Mr. Man's account was so vivid I assumed he was referring to a wedding banquet he had attended a few days earlier in the nearby town of Yuen Long. Only later did I learn from his wife that fifty years had elapsed since he had enjoyed that meal—as a 16-year-old—in the city of Guangzhou (Canton); his father had taken him along on a business trip, and they had been invited to a banquet in one of South China's premier restaurants.

My neighbor's preoccupation with food was by no means unusual. Meals like the one described above are signal experiences in the lives of nearly everyone I have encountered during my 28 years of fieldwork in Hong Kong and the adjoining province of Guangdong. Whatever their station in life, hawker or billionaire property developer, the people of this region are intensely proud of their cuisine, indisputably one of China's finest. "We are Cantonese," Mr. Man would proclaim whenever we sat down to eat together, "We have the best food in the world."

Given such strongly held views, how does one explain the phenomenal success of American-style fast food in Hong Kong and, increasingly, in Guangzhou—the two epicenters of Cantonese culture and cuisine? Seven of the world's ten busiest McDonald's restaurants are located in Hong Kong. When McDonald's first opened in 1975, few thought it would survive more than a few months. By January 1, 1997, Hong Kong had 125 outlets, which means that there was one McDonald's for every 51,200 residents, compared to one for every 30,000 people in the United States. Walking into these restaurants and looking at the layout, one could well be in Cleveland or Boston. The only obvious differences are the clientele, the major-

ity of whom are Cantonese-speakers, and the menu, which is in Chinese as well as English.

### *Transnationalism and the Fast Food Industry*

Does the roaring success of McDonald's and its rivals in the fast food industry mean that Hong Kong's local culture is under siege? Are food chains helping to create a homogenous, "global" culture better suited to the demands of a capitalist world order? Hong Kong would seem to be an excellent place to test the globalization hypothesis, given the central role that cuisine plays in the production and maintenance of a distinctive local identity. Man Tso-chuen's great-grandchildren are today avid consumers of Big Macs, pizza, and Coca-Cola; does this somehow make them less "Chinese" than their grandfather?

It is my contention that the cultural arena in places like Hong Kong is changing with such breathtaking speed that the fundamental assumptions underlining such questions are themselves questionable. Economic and social realities make it necessary to construct an entirely new approach to global issues, one that takes the consumers' own views into account. Analyses based on neomarxian and dependency (center/periphery) models that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s do not begin to capture the complexity of emerging transnational systems.

This chapter represents a conscious attempt to bring the discussion of globalism down to earth, focusing on one local culture. The people of Hong Kong have embraced American-style fast foods, and by so doing they might appear to be in the vanguard of a worldwide culinary revolution. But they have not been stripped of their cultural traditions, nor have they be-

come "Americanized" in any but the most superficial of ways. Hong Kong in the late 1990s constitutes one of the world's most heterogeneous cultural environments. Younger people, in particular, are fully conversant in transnational idioms, which include language, music, sports, clothing, satellite television, cybercommunications, global travel, and—of course—cuisine. It is no longer possible to distinguish what is local and what is not. In Hong Kong, as I hope to show in this chapter, the transnational is the local.

### *Eating Out: A Social History of Consumption*

By the time McDonald's opened its first Hong Kong restaurant in 1975, the idea of fast food was already well established among local consumers. Office workers, shop assistants, teachers, and transport workers had enjoyed various forms of take-out cuisine for well over a century; an entire industry had emerged to deliver mid-day meals direct to workplaces. In the 1960s and 1970s thousands of street vendors produced snacks and simple meals on demand, day or night. Time has always been money in Hong Kong; hence, the dual keys to success in the catering trade were speed and convenience. Another essential characteristic was that the food, based primarily on rice or noodles, had to be hot. Even the most cosmopolitan of local consumers did not (and many still do not) consider cold foods, such as sandwiches and salads, to be acceptable meals. Older people in South China associate cold food with offerings to the dead and are understandably hesitant to eat it.

The fast food industry in Hong Kong had to deliver hot items that could compete with traditional purveyors of convenience foods (noodle shops, dumpling stalls, soup carts, portable grills). The first modern chain to enter the fray was

Cafe de Coral, a local corporation that began operation in 1969 and is still a dominant player in the Hong Kong fast food market (with 109 outlets and a 25 percent market share, compared to McDonald's 20 percent market share in 1994)<sup>5</sup>. Cafe de Coral's strategy was simple: It moved Hong Kong's street foods indoors, to a clean, well-lighted cafeteria that offered instant service and moderate prices; popular Cantonese items were then combined with (sinicized) "Western" foods that had been popular in Hong Kong for decades. Cafe de Coral's menu reads like the *locus classicus* of Pacific Rim cuisine: deep-fried chicken wings, curry on rice, hot dogs, roast pork in soup noodles, spaghetti with meat balls, barbecued ribs, red bean sundaes, Ovaltine, Chinese tea, and Coca-Cola (with lemon, hot or cold). The formula was so successful it spawned dozens of imitators, including three full-scale chains.

American-style fast foods were, of course, familiar to many Hong Kong travelers, but it was not until McDonald's opened its first restaurant on January 8, 1975, that ordinary consumers had a chance to sample this cuisine. The three elements of McDonald's basic "set" (hamburger, fries, Coke) had all been available in Hong Kong since at least the mid-1950s. Hamburgers were offered, primarily as children's food, at Hong Kong's ubiquitous Russian restaurants (with names such as Cherikoffs and Chanteclair), run by immigrants who had fled Russia and then Shanghai in the wake of communist takeovers. It *was* in these establishments, and in the coffee shops of major hotels, that the Hong Kong middle classes learned to eat Western food. People who had a basis for comparison always avoided locally produced hamburgers. British-style "chips" (thick-cut, deep-fried potatoes) were similarly available in Hong Kong but never appealed to Chinese consumers. Coca-Cola, by contrast,

had since its introduction in the late 1940s become one of the colony's most popular beverages.

McDonald's mid-1970s entry also corresponded to an economic boom associated with Hong Kong's conversion from a low-wage, light-industrial outpost to a regional center for financial services and high-technology industries. McDonald's takeoff thus paralleled the rise of a new class of highly educated, affluent consumers who thrive in Hong Kong's ever-changing urban environment—one of the most stressful in the world. These new consumers eat out more often than their parents and have created a huge demand for fast, convenient foods of all types. In order to compete in this market, McDonald's had to offer something different. That critical difference, at least during the company's first decade of operation, was American culture packaged as all-American, middle-class food.

To understand how an American chain became a leading player in Hong Kong's culinary scene, one has to consider the role of management. Daniel Ng, Managing Director and charter franchise owner of McDonald's Hong Kong, turned what rivals had dismissed as a losing proposition ("Hamburgers in Hong Kong?") into one of the colony's most celebrated success stories. Mr. Ng, an American-educated engineer, made the fateful decision *not* to compete with local, Chinese-style cuisine. As he put it to me: "If I had hired the best chef in Hong Kong to make Chinese dumplings for us, no one would come because no one would believe an American restaurant can produce good dumplings. I wouldn't have come myself."

What would attract local consumers, he decided, was straightforward, uncompromising American food. During the first few years the chain's name, McDonald's, was not trans-

lated but was displayed—deliberately—in English, to emphasize its foreign character. Only after the company had established itself, and its identification as a producer of quality products was secure, did Mr. Ng decide to transliterate the name into Chinese characters.

The transliteration process was a delicate one, given the long history of disasters attending the rendition of foreign names in Chinese. Mr. Ng decided to capture the sound of "McDonald's," in three homophonic characters, rather than create a name that would convey meaning—thus making the company appear to be a Chinese enterprise. Many local people reacted badly when Kentucky Fried Chicken first entered the Hong Kong market and chose a Chinese name that meant, literally, "Hometown Chicken." "Kentucky is certainly not my hometown," one longtime resident exclaimed. {KFC later dropped this name and began using a transliterated title based on sound rather than literal meaning.}

Hong Kong McDonald's hoped to avoid confusion by adopting a version of the three-character phrase used to represent a well-known local street, MacDonnell Road. In the company's first attempt the last character was written as the common term for female slave (*nu*) and, after much discussion, it was dropped in favor of *lao*—the dictionary meaning of which is labor or work. The resulting name is pronounced *mak dong lou* in Cantonese, or *mat dang lao* in Mandarin. Taken together these characters convey no obvious meaning, but any speaker of Chinese will instantly recognize the construction as the transliteration of a foreign name. It thus captures the message that Mr. Ng and his staff hoped to impart to the Hong Kong consumer: This place offers something different.

*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 sihk*, 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 *baa* 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). 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.

*From Exotic to Ordinary: McDonald's Becomes Local*

Following precedents in other international markets, 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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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

Collected by Bernadine Chee.  
Collected 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. ' 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. 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. Rivals

had to meet these standards in order to compete. Hong Kong consumers began to draw a mental equation between the state of a restaurant's toilets and its kitchen. In pre-1980s public eateries (and in many private homes), the toilet was located inside the kitchen. One was not expected to see any contradiction in this arrangement; the operative factor was that both facilities had to be near the water supply. Younger people, in particular, have begun to grow wary of these arrangements and are refusing to eat at places they perceive to be "dirty."

Without exception my informants cited the availability of clean and accessible toilets as an important reason for patronizing McDonald's. Women, in particular, appreciated this service; they noted that, without McDonald's, it would be difficult to find public facilities when they are away from home or office. A survey of one Hong Kong outlet in June 1994 revealed that 58 percent of the consumers present were women, a sex ratio similar to the Korean figures cited by Sangmee Bak (see Chapter 4). For many Hong Kong residents, therefore, McDonald's is more than just a restaurant; it is an oasis, a familiar rest station, in what is perceived to be an inhospitable urban environment.

#### *What's in a Smile? Friendliness and Public Service*

American consumers expect to be served "with a smile" when they order fast food, but as noted in the Introduction, this is not true in all societies. In Hong Kong people are suspicious of anyone who displays what is perceived to be an excess of congeniality, solicitude, or familiarity. The human smile is not, therefore, a universal symbol of openness and honesty. "If you buy an apple from a hawker and he smiles at you," my

Cantonese tutor once told me, "you know you're being cheated."

Given these cultural expectations, it was difficult for Hong Kong management to import a key element of the McDonald's formula—service with a smile—and make it work. Crew members were trained to treat customers in a manner that approximates the American notion of "friendliness." Prior to the 1970s, there was not even an indigenous Cantonese term to describe this form of behavior. The traditional notion of friendship is based on loyalty to close associates, which by definition cannot be extended to strangers. Today the concept of *public* friendliness is recognized—and verbalized—by younger people in Hong Kong, but the term many of them use to express this quality is "friendly," borrowed directly from English. McDonald's, through its television advertising, may be partly responsible for this innovation, but to date it has had little effect on workers in the catering industry.

During my interviews it became clear that the majority of Hong Kong consumers were uninterested in public displays of congeniality from service personnel. When shopping for fast food most people cited convenience, cleanliness, and table space as primary considerations; few even mentioned service except to note that the food should be delivered promptly. Counter staff in Hong Kong's fast food outlets (including McDonald's) rarely make great efforts to smile or to behave in a manner Americans would interpret as friendly. Instead, they project qualities that are admired in the local culture: competence, directness, and unflappability. In a North American setting the facial expression that Hong Kong employees use to convey these qualities would likely be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to be rude or indifferent. Workers who smile on

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. 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.

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.

### *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. 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. 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. 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-

pean, Thai, Indian, Mexican, and Japanese foods without reference to indecipherable menus and strange forms of etiquette that might embarrass novice diners. Owing largely to buffets, local diners (especially young adults) tend to be far more adventurous than their counterparts in Taipei and Beijing.

Buffets, like fast food outlets, depend upon consumers to perform much of their own labor in return for reduced prices. Abuse of the system—wasting food or taking it home—is taken for granted and is factored into the price of buffet meals. Fast food chains, by contrast, operate at lower price thresholds where consumer abuse can seriously affect profits.

Many university students of my acquaintance reported that they had frequently observed older people pocketing wads of paper napkins, three to four inches thick, in restaurants that permit self-provisioning. Management efforts to stop this behavior are referred to, in the Cantonese-English slang of Hong Kong youth, as the "Napkin Wars." Younger people were appalled by what they saw as the waste of natural resources by a handful of customers. As they talked about the issue, however, it became obvious that the Napkin Wars represented more—in their eyes—than a campaign to conserve paper. The sight of diners abusing public facilities reminded these young people of the bad old days of their parents and grandparents, when Hong Kong's social life was dominated by refugees who had little stake in the local community. During the 1960s and 1970s, economic insecurities were heightened by the very real prospect that Red Guards might take over the colony at any moment. The game plan was simple during those decades: Make money as quickly as possible and move on. In the 1980s a new generation of local-born youth began treating Hong Kong as home and proceeded to build a public culture better suited to

their vision of life in a cosmopolitan city. In this new Hong Kong, consumers are expected to be sophisticated and financially secure, which means that it would be beneath their dignity to abuse public facilities. Still, McDonald's retains control of its napkins.

#### *Resistance, Environmental Protests, and Charity*

Some readers might be tempted to interpret the Napkin Wars, together with other departures from McDonald's standard model of operation (prolonged dining and hovering), as evidence that local people are actively resisting efforts by the corporation to turn them into disciplined, compliant consumers. An argument to support such claims could be constructed, but it would not, in my opinion, be an accurate reflection of social life in Hong Kong. Throughout my research I gave respondents ample scope to make critical comments about McDonald's or to express hostility toward transnational corporations. In Chapter 4, Sangmee Bak demonstrates convincingly that South Korean consumers are hyperconscious of the political implications of eating at McDonald's. Concern about the activities of transnational corporations and their efforts to establish beachheads in the local economy is never far from the surface in Korean public discourse; the rhetoric of resistance is evident in the speech of ordinary citizens, and is not restricted to elite groups of intellectuals and students.

In Hong Kong, by contrast, denunciations of transnational corporations do not figure prominently in public or private conversations. The reason, no doubt, is that Hong Kong is by its very nature a creation of the world capitalist economy; it could not have survived as a quasi-independent entity since World War Two without the active involvement of interna-

tional banks, foreign corporations, and outside investors. In this setting McDonald's does not stand out as an obvious target of politically inspired debate. It is but one of literally hundreds of transnational corporations that operate in Hong Kong's complex economy.

McDonald's imports nearly everything it uses in Hong Kong: beef, eggs, potatoes, lettuce, cooking oil, apple pies, paper containers. The corporation has made efforts to buy more materials in China, but many items were still being imported from the United States as late as 1993—including Idaho potatoes. In other parts of East Asia, an imbalance of this magnitude would be seized upon by the local media as evidence of American economic imperialism. McDonald's makes special efforts to use local suppliers for its operations in China and Korea, just as it does in England, Brazil, and Russia. Hong Kong is perhaps a unique case: The local economy no longer produces any of the basic ingredients that constitute McDonald's fare. It would be pointless to single out this corporation, among the hundreds that operate in Hong Kong, for not relying on local products.

This is not to suggest that McDonald's has escaped criticism. On October 15, 1992, and again on the same date in 1993, university students organized public demonstrations outside one of Hong Kong's busiest McDonald's (at the Star Ferry concourse, Tsimshatsui). The date was chosen to correspond to similar protests held in other parts of the world, aimed at drawing public attention to McDonald's alleged abuse of the environment. Student protesters distributed a broadsheet accusing the corporation of purchasing beef that had been raised in rain forest zones. McDonald's has made it a firm international policy to avoid buying beef from such sources, but,

like urban legends in the United States, the rumor continues to circulate. The broadsheet also denounced McDonald's for transplanting an American-style "junk culture" (*laji wenhua*), paraphrasing materials first published by activists in England,

One might assume that accusations like this would draw considerable attention in Hong Kong where the media are quick to capitalize on public demonstrations. Footage of the protest was broadcast on that evening's television news, but it did not lead to further activities and most students with whom I spoke considered the affair to have been a nonstarter. Ripples of protest continue to surface in Hong Kong, but McDonald's has not been the target of regular demonstrations or hypercritical media coverage, as it has in Mexico, England, and France.<sup>37</sup>

Quite the opposite, in fact, is true. The corporation has made great efforts to present itself as a champion of environmental awareness and public welfare in Hong Kong. McDonald's sponsors a series of ecology camps for Hong Kong school children and Green Power workshops at local universities. The company is also responsible for Asia's first Ronald McDonald House for Sick Children, a charitable institution paralleling American models. Advertisements promote McDonald's as a *local* institution, with a clear stake in the overall health of the community: "We live here too," declares a leaflet (published in Chinese and English) distributed to customers in 1994. Compared to its rivals in the Hong Kong fast food industry, McDonald's stands out as a company that has made efforts to involve itself in community activities; detractors have had a difficult time portraying it as a corporate villain.

*Children as Consumers*

During the summer of 1994, while attending a business lunch in one of Hong Kong's fanciest hotels, I watched a waiter lean down to consult with a customer at an adjoining table. The object of his attention was a six-year-old child who studied the menu with practiced skill. His parents beamed as their prodigy performed; meanwhile, sitting across the table, a pair of grandparents sat bolt upright, scowling in obvious disapproval. Twenty years ago the sight of a child commanding such attention would have shocked the entire restaurant into silence. No one, save the immediate party (and this observer), even noticed in 1994.

Hong Kong children rarely ate outside their home until the late 1970s, and when they did, they were expected to eat what was put in front of them. The idea that children might actually order their own food or speak to a waiter would have outraged most adults; only foreign youngsters (notably the offspring of British and American expatriates) were permitted to make their preferences known in public. Today, Hong Kong children as young as two or three participate in the local economy as full-fledged consumers, with their own tastes and brand loyalties. Children now have money in their pockets and they spend it on personal consumption, which usually means snacks. In response, new industries and a specialized service sector has emerged to "feed" these discerning consumers. McDonald's was one of the first corporations to recognize the potential of the children's market; in effect, the company started a revolution by making it possible for even the youngest consumers to *choose* their own food.

McDonald's has become so popular in Hong Kong that parents often use visits to their neighborhood outlet as a reward

for good behavior or academic achievement. Conversely, children who misbehave might lose their after-school snacking privileges or be left at home while their siblings are taken out for a McDonald's brunch on Sunday. During interviews parents reported that sanctions of this type worked better than anything they could think of to straighten out a wayward child: "It is my nuclear deterrent," one father told me, in English.

Many Hong Kong children of my acquaintance are so fond of McDonald's that they refuse to eat with their parents or grandparents in Chinese-style restaurants or *dim sam* teahouses. This has caused intergenerational distress in some of Hong Kong's more conservative communities. In 1994, a nine-year-old boy, the descendant of illustrious ancestors who settled in the New Territories eight centuries ago, talked about his concerns as we consumed Big Macs, fries, and shakes at McDonald's: "A-bak [uncle], I like it here better than any place in the world. I want to come here every day." His father takes him to McDonald's at least twice a week, but his grandfather, who accompanied them a few times in the late 1980s, will no longer do so. "I prefer to eat *dim sam*," the older man told me later. "That place [McDonald's] is for kids." Many grandparents have resigned themselves to the new consumer trends and take their preschool grandchildren to McDonald's for mid-morning snacks—precisely the time of day that local teahouses were once packed with retired people. Cantonese grandparents have always played a prominent role in child minding, but until recently the children had to accommodate to the proclivities of their elders. By the 1990s grandchildren were more assertive and the mid-morning *dim sam* snack was giving way to hamburgers and Cokes.

The emergence of children as full-scale consumers has had other consequences for the balance of domestic power in Hong Kong homes. Grade school children often possess detailed knowledge of fast foods and foreign (non-Chinese) cuisines. Unlike members of the older generation, children know what, and how, to eat in a wide variety of restaurants. Specialized information is shared with classmates: Which chain has the best pizza? What is ravioli? How do you eat a croissant? Food, especially fast food, is one of the leading topics of conversation among Hong Kong school children. Grandchildren frequently assume the role of tutors, showing their elders the proper way to eat fast food. Without guidance, older people are likely to disassemble the Big Mac, layer by layer, and eat only those parts that appeal to them. Hong Kong adults also find it uncomfortable to eat with their hands and devise makeshift finger guards with wrappers. Children, by contrast, are usually expert in the finer points of fast food etiquette and pay close attention to television ads that feature young people eating a variety of foods. It is embarrassing, I was told by an 11-year-old acquaintance, to be seen at McDonald's with a grandfather who does not know how to eat "properly."

Many Hong Kong kindergartens and primary schools teach culinary skills, utilizing the lunch period for lessons in flatware etiquette, menu reading, and food awareness (taste-testing various cuisines, including Thai, European, and Indian). Partly as a consequence, Hong Kong's youth are among the world's most knowledgeable and adventurous eaters. One can find a wide range of cuisines in today's Hong Kong, rivaling New York City for variety. South Asian, Mexican, and Spanish restaurants are crowded with groups of young people, ages 16 to 25, sharing dishes as they graze their way through the menu.

Culinary adventures of this nature are avoided by older residents (people over 50), who, in general, have a more restricted range of food tolerance.

#### *Ronald McDonald and the Invention of Birthday Parties*

Until recently most people in Hong Kong did not even know, let alone celebrate, their birthdates in the Western calendrical sense; dates of birth according to the lunar calendar were recorded for divinatory purposes but were not noted in annual rites. By the late 1980s, however, birthday parties, complete with cakes and candles, were the rage in Hong Kong. Any child who was anyone had to have a party, and the most popular venue was a fast food restaurant, with McDonald's ranked above all competitors. The majority of Hong Kong people live in overcrowded flats, which means that parties are rarely held in private homes.

Except for the outlets in central business districts, McDonald's restaurants are packed every Saturday and Sunday with birthday parties, cycled through at the rate of one every hour. A party hostess, provided by the restaurant, leads the children in games while the parents sit on the sidelines, talking quietly among themselves. For a small fee celebrants receive printed invitation cards, photographs, a gift box containing toys and a discount coupon for future trips to McDonald's. Parties are held in a special enclosure, called the Ronald Room, which is equipped with low tables and tiny stools—suitable only for children. Television commercials portray Ronald McDonald leading birthday celebrants on exciting safaris and expeditions. The clown's Cantonese name, Mak Dong Lou Suk-Suk ("Uncle McDonald"), plays on the intimacy of kinship and has

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

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. 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.

#### *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*

been stripped of their cultural heritage, nor have they become the uncomprehending dupes of transnational corporations. Younger people—including many of the grandchildren of my former neighbors in the New Territories—are avid consumers of transnational culture in all of its most obvious manifestations: music, fashion, television, and cuisine. At the same time, however, Hong Kong has itself become a major center for the *production* of transnational culture, not just a sinkhole for its *consumption*. Witness, for example, the expansion of Hong Kong popular culture into China, Southeast Asia, and beyond: "Cantopop" music is heard on radio stations in North China, Vietnam, and Japan; the Hong Kong fashion industry influences clothing styles in Los Angeles, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur; and, perhaps most significant of all, Hong Kong is emerging as a center for the production and dissemination of satellite television programs throughout East, Southeast, and South Asia.

A lifestyle is emerging in Hong Kong that can best be described as postmodern, postnationalist, and flamboyantly transnational. The wholesale acceptance and appropriation of Big Macs, Ronald McDonald, and birthday parties are small, but significant aspects of this redefinition of Chinese cultural identity. In closing, therefore, it seems appropriate to pose an entirely new set of questions: Where does the transnational end and the local begin? Whose culture is it, anyway? In places like Hong Kong the postcolonial periphery is fast becoming the metropolitan center, where local people are consuming and simultaneously producing new cultural systems.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong has become a Special Administrative Region under the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China. In the years leading up to the 1997 transition, Hong

Kong government officials had to deal with an increasing number of immigrants from China, many of whom had little experience of life in an ultramodern city. In 1995 the Department of Education started an "induction" program to acquaint mainland children with Hong Kong's public amenities before they entered local schools. The program included visits to a sports center, a library, a shopping mall, a subway station, and—the last stop—a McDonald's restaurant, where the new immigrants enjoyed Big Macs, fries, and Cokes at government expense.

McDonald's has become such a routine feature of Hong Kong's urban environment that most young people cannot imagine life without it. In 1995 local newspapers followed the plight of a seven-year-old who had grown up in Hong Kong but, because of immigration irregularities, had been deported to live with relatives in China. Months later, when he was allowed back across the border to rejoin parents and siblings in Hong Kong, reporters asked him what he most wanted to do. Without hesitation he replied: "Take me to McDonald's."<sup>52</sup>