

Food for Thought: McDonald's Shows Its Local Face --- American Behemoth Doesn't Always Bigfoot Native Cultures, Cuisines

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In August alone, French farmers attacked branches in protest against American food tariffs, dumping manure and vegetables to block entrances. In Belgium, a McDonald's was burned to the ground, possibly by animal-rights activists. In the Australian town of Torquay, a group of surfers formed Scram -- Surf Coast Residents Against McDonald's -- saying, apparently without irony, that a planned McDonald's would "sully the town's surfing culture." Bombay authorities are taking McDonald's to court for putting tables in a public space outside a restaurant. The list goes on. Dozens of articles on globalization, obesity or environmental degradation have named the fast-food chain as a culprit.

Critics say the chain helps obliterate local cultures and cuisines. But a group of seven Asian and American anthropologists who studied the reactions of consumers in East Asia to McDonald's say the restaurant is more respectful of local cultures than it's sometimes given credit for. They also contend that the chain has in its own way made life a bit more pleasant for many Asian consumers.

McDonald's is a fairly recent addition to these countries -- Japan in 1971, Hong Kong in 1975, Taiwan in 1984, South Korea in 1988 and China in 1992. Abandoning the sniffy stance of so many critics, the anthropologists asked consumers what they thought about McDonald's and examined the way the company adapted to local demands. The results are published in the book "Golden Arches East."

FULL TEXT

Poor McDonald's. It must be tough being the whipping boy for critics of globalization and consumerism.

In August alone, French farmers attacked branches in protest against American food tariffs, dumping manure and vegetables to block entrances. In Belgium, a McDonald's was burned to the ground, possibly by animal-rights activists. In the Australian town of Torquay, a group of surfers formed Scram -- Surf Coast Residents Against McDonald's -- saying, apparently without irony, that a planned McDonald's would "sully the town's surfing culture." Bombay authorities are taking McDonald's to court for putting tables in a public space outside a restaurant. The list goes on. Dozens of articles on globalization, obesity or environmental degradation have named the fast-food chain as a culprit.

But also in August, McDonald's opened its 25,000th branch (in Chicago) and began operations in its 117th country (Gibraltar). Perhaps the chain can afford to ignore the waves of bad publicity. But what is it that makes McDonald's such a ripe target? The problem is that its food is loaded not just with fat and salt but also with meaning.

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McDonald's talent for playing to local tastebuds is widely cited, and these authors offer their own examples: MacChao (fried rice), tsukimibaga (moon-viewing burgers that contain a fried egg), shrimp burgers, rib burgers and chicken teriyaki sandwiches.

But the chain has had a deeper impact than menu choices, according to the authors of "Golden Arches East." In much of Asia, McDonald's has created a culture of children's birthday parties, which had rarely been celebrated; offered a much-needed public refuge for women; spread the techniques of mass production of fast food; and even launched the idea that restaurants should have clean toilets.

While most people in the West regard McDonald's as downscale, in Asia it's seen as more respectable, even for women who would be frowned on for entering a bar or a restaurant on their own. "East Asian consumers have quietly, and in some cases stubbornly, transformed their neighborhood McDonald's into local institutions," writes James Watson, Fairbank Professor of Chinese Society at Harvard and editor of the book.

McDonald's mix of global and local hasn't resonated in all Asian markets. Few Korean men eat there because it is seen as a place for children. And according to Bak Sangmee, an anthropologist at City University of New York, men felt awkward paying for their own food in advance, rather than competing to foot the bill for the entire group later, which is considered more polite.

Moreover, eating a Big Mac in Korea is almost treasonous in a political environment that encourages consumption based on the perceived interests of Koreans as a group rather than as individuals.

But much more common in this book are the stories of McDonald's successful interplay with local cultures. The immutability of its brand is the company's heart and soul, and some things about McDonald's, of course, never change. Through advertising and staff training, it teaches people how to line up for food, what they should order and how to eat it.

Nothing much can be taken for granted. According to the book, when McDonald's opened in Moscow, a staff member with a loud hailer was stationed outside the store telling people that the servers would smile to be polite, not because they were mocking customers. Muscovites, beaten down by years of socialist service with a snarl, were suspicious of anyone too friendly. The company has a similar problem in Hong Kong, where customers prize efficiency over warmth.

Customers, of course, don't always stay within the boundaries set by the company. In America the average customer stays in the restaurant for just 11 minutes, in Asia it is much longer. In Korea, the company has hostesses who try to move the laggards along by seating strangers at their tables.

Yet, Yan Yunxiang, one of the authors of "Golden Arches East" who studied the Beijing McDonald's, describes it as a "localized, Chinese version of Americana." The company presented itself as Chinese, reminding patrons that

Chinese investors own 50% of the business and that 95% of the food is locally grown. The company holds flag-raising ceremonies to which it has invited members of the People's Liberation Army. In 1994, only three of 1,400 employees in China held non-Chinese passports, and they were all ethnic Chinese.

The fast-food chain emphasized family life and local festivals and introduced "Aunt McDonald," a character played by women hired to entertain children at birthday parties. It also focused on children as the primary consumers, in a land where the one-child policy has created "little emperors." Children's names are listed in a "Book of Little Honorary Guests" who get letters from Ronald McDonald.

McDonald's has "gone to extraordinary lengths to fit into the local cultural setting," according to Dr. Yan, who credited this for its success, along with its arrival in Asia at a time when an emerging middle class was changing its consumption habits.

David Wu, professor of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, found that, far from destroying local cultures, the arrival of McDonald's in Taiwan coincided with the strong reassertion of Taiwanese identity after years of political and cultural dominance by mainland Chinese.

In fact, the chain may have contributed to the opening of new restaurants serving Taiwanese dishes. "The competition the company has engendered may have had the ironic and unintended effect of helping to revitalize indigenous foodways," Dr. Wu wrote.

Of course, some McDonald's adaptations, however warmly welcomed by locals, may be taking things a little far. Last month, McDonald's in Australia trumpeted its new "McOz" burger. Newspapers thundered their applause at this sensitivity to local tastes. Burger purists, however, may shudder when finding out the key ingredient of the McOz that makes it so uniquely Australian: beets.

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