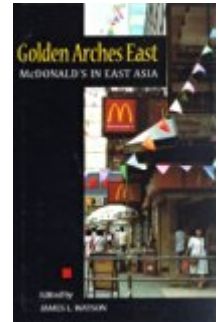**James L. Watson, ed..** *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xvi + 256 pp. $49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-3205-5.

Reviewed by Samuel Collins

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When I first moved to Korea, I was frequently confronted with occasionally egregious comparisons between "American" and "Korean" culture. "Koreans eat lunch quickly; Americans east slowly." "Koreans eat vegetables; Americans eat meat." "Koreans eat rice; Americans eat bread." During those first weeks, it was difficult to refrain from arguing. Didn't Koreans eat meat? What were all those bakeries doing in Korea if no one ate bread? And who, finally, eats faster than Americans? We invented McDonald's!

I know enough now not to challenge those suspect generalizations. In them, as in so many other discoursive locutions contrasting "self" and "other," "Korea" and "America" are less actual places than figural, rhetorical strategies for reflecting on Korea's contradictory modernities and tumultuous modernization. In a country where food is a national symbol (i.e., the infinitely varied, pickled vegetable, "kimchi"), incongruous discourse on foodways is a way to think about the whiplash changes wrought by capitalism's creative destruction: the mass migration to the city, the rise of a comparatively wealthy, consumer class, and, more recently, the unwelcome intrusion of international (read American) imports and capital under the aegis of IMF restructuring. Is "tradition" being squandered for a fitful, problematic "modernity"? Is Korea becoming "Westernized," or, worse yet, a vassal to foreign powers who would denude it of culture, language and history?

In Korea we can telescope all of this contentious debate on modernization into an argument over the merits of McDonald's. The *sine qua non* symbol of aggressive, American capitalism, McDonald's is the subject of endless peroration in newspapers, on television, and in the day-to-day conversations of Korean people. More than simply a question of market share, the effects of McDonald's and other fast food on Korea is a question of *identity*, the authenticity of the Korean self, culture and social life amidst the anomie of global "McDonaldization." Yet, whatever their fears of Western imperialism, Korean people flock to McDonald's, stuffing their faces with Big Macs and slurping down shakes, each consumer in hap-

py, geosynchronous concert with their counterparts in Russia, India, France and Canada.

Confronted by the near-ubiquity of McDonald's, a particularly viral example of what Sidney Mintz calls "a special number of foods, representative of a single, modern society," the contributors to *Golden Arches East* enjoin the fast food debate in Korea, Japan, Taipei, Beijing and Hong Kong, not to castigate "McDonaldization" or even to celebrate the promulgation of postmodernism a la Baudrillard, but to "produce ethnographic accounts of McDonald's social, political and economic impact on five local cultures" (p. 6). In a refrain now familiar to students of cultural studies, these anthropologists conclude, as James Watson writes in his introduction, that "consumers are not the automatons many analysts would have us believe" (p. 36) and that McDonald's is important enough to anthropology to be studied as part of the warp and weft of everyday life.

Throwing off the hypostatized opposition of "East" and "West," "authentic" and "mass produced," they follow the cultural studies made popular by the Richard Hoggart's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and its occasionally problematic progeny in the United States and treat the "trifling" consumption of mass culture with a rigor and gravity heretofore reserved for "canons" of literature, art and "high" culture.

Arising from a panel at the 1994 American Anthropological Association Meeting in Athens, Georgia, the book's five "local culture" studies display a similar scansion: 1) tracing the history of McDonald's in each country; 2) evoking the complexity of consumer behavior towards the franchise; and 3) suggesting ways in which McDonald's forms part of an inclusive discourse within what Watson terms "local culture." As Sidney Mintz sums up in a thoughtful afterward, "its patrons are 'buying' much more than food" (p. 195).

McDonald's now has a firm hold on Asian markets, from its first restaurant in Japan in 1971 to its first restaurant in Beijing in 1992. Anti-U.S. imperialism notwithstanding, McDonald's is devastatingly popular and, together with other fast food franchises that make up what has been called the "first industrialization of eating," has changed the foodways of a nation. This involves much more than the industrialization of food--the hamburger Taylorism for which McDonald's is famous--but also the industrialization of the consumer. As James Watson explains in his chapter on McDonald's in Hong Kong:

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. (p. 92)

"Queuing" and "self-service," for example, are neither a natural nor inevitable response to crowds and congestion, yet McDonald's had to discipline its customers into orderly lines. This has meant adapting the rigor of McDonald's factory-dining to the exigencies of local culture. In Hong Kong, the "queue" and "self-bussing" separate the cosmopolitan from the country yokel. In Japan, customers' long relationship with McDonald's has introduced a host of eating practices heretofore antithetical to polite society. While an older generation of Japanese has long equated "eating while standing" with the behavior of animals, the practice has been institutionalized in restaurants too small to accommodate seated diners. In Beijing, customers bus their own tables to signify their middle-class respectability (and middle-class aspirations): "Interestingly enough, several informants told me that when they threw out their own rubbish, they felt they were more "civilized" ("wenming") than other customers because thy knew the proper behavior" (p. 53).

McDonald's has also introduced a new concern for public hygiene in restaurant kitchens and bathrooms, an innovation that has transformed consumer expectations in all of the countries

studied. In Beijing, the newly emergent, professional middle-class worries over foods served from street stalls by recent migrants. These middle-class consumers look to McDonald's for its beneficent "health food." As Youngxiang Yan finds, "The idea that McDonald's provides healthy food based on nutritional ingredients and scientific cooking methods has been widely accepted by both the Chinese media and the general public" (p. 45). In Hong Kong, McDonald's has changed perceptions of "clean" and "dirty": bathrooms once considered acceptable are now suspect and customers have become, in general, more careful about the restaurants they patronize. "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" (p. 90). And in Taipei, McDonald's hamburgers are considered a fitting--even nutritious--school lunch. As one school principal told David Y.H. Yu, "They learn hygiene behavior and proper etiquette by eating hamburgers. What is bad about fast food?" (p. 133).

But while McDonald's insistence on clean kitchens and bathrooms makes it a symbol of purity, to others the restaurant can represent, a la Mary Douglas, danger. In Korea, where McDonald's has been relatively slow to spread, the restaurant is seen as an economic and cultural affront to Korean autonomy. As in Japan, the foreign, unhealthy hamburger stands in contrast to healthful, locally grown rice. As Sangmee Bak reports:

In 1992, when trade negotiations were under way, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing and NACF jointly produced a poster to promote the consumption of local agricultural produce. The slogan read "Healthy eating = Eating our Rice," and the poster depicted a large grain of rice trampling a greasy hamburger. (p. 137)

This all suggests that McDonald's, despite legendary standardization insuring that your Big

Mac will taste exactly the same in Moscow, Tokyo and New York, does not have complete control over its *meaning* to its varied consumers. In the "local cultures" analyzed in *Golden Arches East*, hamburgers do not constitute a meal; at most, they can be a sort of hyperbolically caloric snack. In one interview with a college student, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney finds that, "Any food with bread is not considered "filling," and so for lunch he and his university friends look for *donburi teishoku*--a large bowl of rice topped with various ingredients" (p. 164). And in Beijing, "at best a hamburger is the equivalent of *xianbing,* a type of Chinese pancake with meat inside, which no one would treat as a daily meal" (p. 47).

Additionally, consumers in Korea, Japan, China and Taiwan have a distinctly different idea of "fast food." While "fast food" may mean *fast service*, it need not, as the contributors to *Golden Arches East* show, mean *fast consumption*. While the "table time" at U.S. fast food restaurants averages 11 minutes, customers in East Asia tend to dawdle, with groups of women averaging 33 minutes in Korea and Hong Kong customers (men and women) averages 20-25 minutes. On the margins of those averages lie students, elderly people and courting couples, all of whom might spend hours over a cup of tea, transforming McDonald's in an inexpensive version of a more traditional tea shop. In Korea, where coffee is 800 Won at McDonald's but between 2000-3000 Won at a coffee shop, this practice seems to have only intensified in the "IMF era." As more of a center of social life than a stopover, McDonald's is a place to hold children's birthdays (Beijing, Hong Kong, Korea), do homework (Taipei), or even conduct study groups (Korea). One woman in David Y.H. Yu's study spent every day at McDonald's, from 7:00 am to 3:30 pm, in order to meet her grandson.

These examples and others serve to sufficiently differentiate the East Asian McDonald's experience from its occidental counterparts and throw the "McDonaldization" thesis into serious ques-

tion. In a by-now familiar cultural studies coda, consumers are shown to exert a sort of plucky, subterranean control over otherwise monolithic corporations. Faced with a uniformity of production, consumers are nevertheless free to creatively appropriate apparently homogeneous product into the Geertzean webs of local culture and localized experience. To borrow a metaphor from *Re-Made in Japan*, a collections of essays on Japanese consumption edited by Jeffrey Tobin, the West is less borrowed than "domesticated" into East Asia (Tobin 1992). That is, for "the foreign" to have meaning in Japan, Korea, China or Taiwan, it must first be incorporated into a context of cultural practice, nationalism and identity uniquely Korean, Japanese, Chinese or Taiwanese. In other words, the contributors to *Golden Arches East* argue that the *global* becomes *local*: "Who is to say that Mickey Mouse is not Japanese, or that Ronald McDonald is not Chinese?" (p. 10).

But is this really the most useful way to think about McDonald's? In the 1980s, there was a tendency to conflate such acts of quotidian appropriation with bonafide "resistance," or, even more egregiously, "counterhegemony." But these variegated fanfares for the common consumer missed one of the more insidious features of modern marketing: consumers are *encouraged* to "appropriate" product into their lives. Advertisers are well versed in a version of cultural studies concerned with "heterologies" of "dominant" discourse. The notion that consumers exert some control over their purchases and "create emergent, personalized consumption meanings" is, of course, of great interest to a multinational world of corporations marketing product to in different countries to different demographics (Cf. Thompson and Haytko 1997). From this perspective, the "McDonaldization" thesis is a bit of a straw man. Do corporations imbricated in global capitalism want the "McDonaldization" of the world or just more profits? I would submit that corporations are more than happy in a postmodern world of proliferating alterity: it's an advertiser's dream,

endlessly fecund, endlessly generative of new equations of culture, identity and *consumption*: "James Cantalupo, President of McDonald's International, claims that the goal of McDonald's is to 'become as much a part of the local culture as possible.' He objects when '[p]eople call us a multinational. I like to call us a *multilocal*, meaning that McDonald's goes to great lengths to find local suppliers and local partners whenever new branches are opened" (p. 12). I would suggest that multinationals, far from advocating homogeneous "global cultures," are comfortable with a notion of culture similar to James Watson's "local culture." In business schools across the nation, MBA students are cracking open books on "international marketing" that advocate the sensitive understanding of cultural difference, not for altruistic, anthropological understanding, but for *increased profits*.

The question, then, dogging this collection of essays is not, in my mind, whether or not to take McDonald's seriously as an object of inquiry, but the usefulness of Watson *et al* in delineating consumer behavior already well developed in countless marketing and consumer behavior journals, e.g., *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing* and so on. What special insights can anthropology bring to the study of consumer behavior, when marketing departments routinely use qualitative research methodologies (focus groups, interviews, participant observation) to "customize" their strategies to the interstices of local culture and niche marketing? That is, much of *Golden Arches East* seems to trail in the path of research McDonald's has already done; the job of the anthropologist in this collection seems less to generate new understandings of culture and social life than to graciously concede that McDonald's has done its cultural homework.

In other words, to build on their initial success, McDonald's restaurants must localize their foods (and some of their cultural associations as well), converting them into something that is routine and ordinary for Beijing residents, while

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somehow maintain their image as the symbol of the American way of life. That is why McDonald's has gone to such extraordinary lengths to fit into the local cultural setting. (p. 73)

The wily corporate head is *like an anthropologist*; does that mean we should become more like corporate executives? Why theorize McDonald's when we can just ask the experts?

Without charging that Watson *et al* are in league with McDonald's (as some participants at the 1994 American Anthropological Association Meeting did), we can still question the efficacy of an anthropology that resembles the evaluative stage of longitudinal, marketing research. Is the task of a "post-fordist" anthropology merely to confirm the "cultural fit" of product and consumer? If McDonald's is important in our understanding of people and culture, then how should it be studied? Part of the problem here lies in Watson's decision to concentrate on "consumption."

Previous studies of fast food have focused on *production*, emphasizing either management or labor [. . .] But we are primarily concerned with another dimension of that fast food system, namely *consumption*. What do consumers have to say about McDonald's? (p. ix)

While it's unclear why Watson thinks his research novel at a time when the anthropological study of commodities (and consumption) has blossomed into a subfield in its own right (Cf. Miller 1994; Appadurai 1986), I have to wonder about the utility of the parsimonious reduction of culture to instances of *production* or *consumption*. If the contributors to *Golden Arches East* are correct and "patrons are *buying* much more than food," than perhaps analysis privileging the *consumption of commodities* is self-limiting. While the "postmodern" has given us increasingly lively commodities (and less lively selves), to undertake a study of *consumption* is to be part, rather than an analyst, of capitalism's culture. While I want to avoid the inevitably circular ontologies of what

might constitute "inside" or "outside," we might nevertheless take Stuart Hall's comments to heart:

The "culture" is those patterns of organization, those characteristic forms of human energy which can be discovered as revealing themselves--in "unexpected identities and correspondences" as well as in "discontinuities of an unexpected kind" (p. 63)--within or underlying *all* social practices. (Hall 1994: 523)

We should see this as less a shallow valuation of novelty (the "surprise" of the unexpected correspondence, a la Joseph Campbell) than a warning against following well-worn paths of disciplinarity. By considering the question of McDonald's relative success in selling its product to new generations of East Asian consumers, *Golden Arches East* is limited at the outset to what might be called highly descriptive consumer research. This would explain, perhaps, the book's enthusiastic reception in *The New York Times* and *The Economist*.

Perhaps taking the wider approach would force Watson *et al* to consider possibly unpleasant realities contrary to their initial goals, i.e., to describe the "impact" of McDonald's without judging it "a paragon of capitalist virtue" or an "evil empire" (p. 6). "Neutrally" evaluating McDonald's evidently requires them to dismiss a political economic approach grounded in an understanding of global capital and to embrace a localized appreciation for identity and consumption. "Economic and social realities make it necessary to construct an entirely new approach to global issues, one that takes consumers' own views into account" (p. 79). But why are these mutually exclusive? Is it possible to both critique McDonald's and understand its importance in the lives of people in East Asia? Why not? Without repeating the fusillade of carefully argued critiques available on the McSpotlight website (http://www.mcspotlight.org), it is fair to say that McDonald's impacts environments, economies and health in deleterious ways that deserve to be taken seriously by anthropologists. Where in these essays is there mention of

the alarming increase in childhood obesity in Hong Kong, Korea and Japan? In Korea, at least, this is a puissant topic in newspapers, magazines and television. And what about the low pay of McDonald's employees and the ways it reinforces or even exacerbates gender inequalities in labor? To dismiss these as extraneous to a "consumer study" is to privilege an analytical (and highly ideological) artefact. To study them would require contributors to wander far afield from McDonald's narrowly considered, to culture change centered around fast food, e.g., increased mobility and the challenges modernity and modernization pose to culture and identity.

Yet, there are tantalizing glimpses of other possibilities. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, for example, seems quite aware of the pitfalls of Watson's approach: "I think we must shift our attention from the obsession with consumer behavior and focus instead on how new commodities become *embedded* in culture" (p. 161). In her study, McDonald's is an example of "Japanese Americana," a concatenation of cultural alterity drawn on by Japanese people as an alternative to "tradition." Sangmee Bak, too, looks at how McDonald's is central to a circle of debates on what might constitute "the Korean" and what makes up "the foreign." "These controversies are closely linked to a Korean dilemma: people wish to be, simultaneously, nationalistic and global" (p. 137). And in Taipei, David Y.H. Yu convincingly explains the apparent contradiction of a coeval growth in both hypertraditionalism (betel nut chewing, traditional Taiwanese cuisine) and hyper-modernism (McDonald's).

Even more interesting is the place McDonald's holds in emergent lifestyles centered around middle-class neolocality. With the fractionation of multi-generational residence into smaller households, children have become more powerful, the focus of family consumption: "Many grandparents have resigned themselves to the new consumer trends and take their preschool children to Mc-

Donald's for mid-morning snacks--precisely the time of day that local teahouses were once packed with retired people" (p. 101). McDonald's has become a part of the arrangement of kind and sociality in middle-class life: a place to take children for birthdays, to meet grandparents, to talk to friends.

But studying these aspects of social life would take the contributors to *Golden Arches East* far away from the "golden arches" into the homes, schools and workplaces of informants. But that would be better, I think, than staying planted in the Formica perfection of a world of "consumption."

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