CHAPTER 1

McDonald's in Beijing: The Localization of Americana

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On April 23, 1992, the largest McDonald's restaurant in the world opened in Beijing. With 700 seats and 29 cash registers, the Beijing McDonald's served 40,000 customers on its first day of business.[1] Built on the southern end of Wangfujing Street near Tiananmen Square—the center of all public politics in the People's Republic of China—this restaurant had become an important landmark in Beijing by the summer of 1994, and the image of the Golden Arches appeared frequently on national television programs. It also became an attraction for domestic tourists, as a place where ordinary people could literally taste a bit of American culture. New McDonald's restaurants appeared in Beijing one after another: two were opened in 1993, four in 1994, and ten more in 1995; by the end of 1996, there were 29 outlets in Beijing.[2] According to Tim Lai, the company's General Manager, the Beijing market is big enough to support 100 McDonald's restaurants, and McDonald's plans to open 600 outlets in China by century's end.[3]

The astonishing growth of the Beijing McDonald's has to be understood in the context of recent changes in Chinese society.

There is a new tendency to absorb foreign cultural influences and transform them into local institutions, a trend that the Chinese political system resisted during the Maoist era (1949–78). In the case reviewed here, both the McDonald's management and staff on the one hand and the Beijing customers on the other have been active participants in the localization process. To analyze this process, I first examine the image of McDonald's in the minds of ordinary Chinese people. Then I look at McDonald's efforts to fit into the Chinese market, as well as the ways in which Beijing consumers have appropriated McDonald's for their own use.

The Big Mac as a Symbol of Americana

In October 1, 1993, National Day in China, a couple in their early seventies had dinner at the McDonald's restaurant on Wangfujing Street. They had been invited to celebrate the holiday at McDonald's by their daughter and son-in-law, who spent almost 200 yuan for the dinner, an unimaginably large sum in the view of the elderly couple. The experience of eating in a foreign restaurant struck them as so significant they had their picture taken in front of the Golden Arches and sent it to their hometown newspaper, along with another photo they had had taken on October 1, 1949, in Tiananmen Square—celebrating the first National Day of the People's Republic of China. Their story was later published by the newspaper, with the two contrasting photographs. In the 1949 photo, the two young people appear in identical white shirts, standing slightly apart, their thin faces betraying undernourishment in hard times. In the 1993 photo, a portly woman proudly holds her husband's left arm, and the two are healthy looking and fashionably dressed. They took a taxi to McDonald's and, while

crossing Tiananmen Square, they remembered how poor they had been in 1949 and realized how much China has changed in the interim.[4]

At first glance, this news story reads like the typical propaganda skit that one still finds in official Chinese media, with its constant play on "recalling the bitterness of old China and thinking of the sweetness of the new society" (*yiku sitian*). However, in this case it is McDonald's—a capitalist, transnational enterprise—that symbolizes the "sweetness" of current life. What is even more interesting, the headline of the story reads: "Forty-Four years: From *Tu* to *Yang*." The terms *tu* and *yang* have been paired concepts in the everyday discourse of Chinese political culture since the nineteenth century. In common usage, *tu* means rustic, uncouth, and backward, whereas *yang* refers to anything foreign (particularly Western), fashionable, and quite often, progressive. The juxtaposition of these common terms demonstrates how McDonald's and its foreign (*yang*) food have become synonymous with progressive changes that make life more enjoyable in contemporary China.

In the eyes of Beijing residents, McDonald's represents Americana and the promise of modernization.[5] McDonald's highly efficient service and management, its spotless dining environment, and its fresh ingredients have been featured repeatedly by the Chinese media as exemplars of modernity.[6] McDonald's strict quality control, especially regarding potatoes, became a hot topic of discussion in many major newspapers, again with the emphasis on McDonald's scientific management as reflected in the company's unwavering standards.[7] According to one commentator who published a series of articles on McDonald's, the company's global success can be traced to its highly standardized procedures of food production, its scien-

tific recipes, and its modern management techniques. As the title of his article ("Seeing the World from McDonald's") suggests, each restaurant represents a microcosm of the transnational,[8] so much so that, according to another article by the same author, many American youths prefer to work at McDonald's before they leave home to seek work elsewhere. The experience of working at McDonald's, he continues, prepares American youth for any kind of job in a modern society.[9]

Other news items associate the success of transnational food chains with their atmosphere of equality and democracy. No matter who you are, according to one of these reports, you will be treated with warmth and friendliness in the fast food restaurants; hence many people patronize McDonald's to experience a moment of equality.[10] This argument may sound a bit odd to Western readers, but it makes sense in the context of Chinese culinary culture. When I asked my Beijing informants about the equality factor, they all pointed out that banquets in Chinese restaurants are highly competitive: people try to outdo one another by offering the most expensive dishes and alcoholic beverages. It is typical for the host at a banquet to worry that customers at neighboring tables might be enjoying better dishes, thus causing him or her to lose face. To avoid such embarrassment, many people prefer to pay the extra fees necessary to rent a private room within a restaurant. Such competition does not exist at McDonald's, where the menu is limited, the food is standardized, and every customer receives a set of items that are more or less equal in quality. There is no need to worry that one's food might be lower in status than a neighbor's. For people without a lot of money but who need to host a meal, McDonald's has become the best alternative.

During the autumn of 1994 I conducted an ethnographic

survey of consumer behavior in Beijing. I discovered that the stories commonly told about McDonald's have taken on a surreal, even mythic tone. For instance, it is believed among a number of Beijing residents that the potato used by McDonald's is a cube-shaped variety. A 20-year old woman working at McDonald's told me in all seriousness about McDonald's secret, cube-shaped potatoes, the key to the corporation's worldwide success. She was also fascinated by the foreign terms she had learned in the short time she had worked there, terms such as *weisi* (waste), *jishi* (cheese), and *delaisu* (drive-through). The first two are straight transliterations of the English terms, but the third is both a transliteration and a free translation: it means "to get it quickly." These half-Chinese, half-English terms are used by employees and customers alike, making their experiences at McDonald's restaurants exotic, American, and to a certain extent, modern.

In this connection the ways Beijing McDonald's presents itself in public are also worth noting. By the autumn of 1994, McDonald's had not yet placed any advertisements on Beijing television. According to the General Manager, it was pointless to advertise McDonald's on television because Chinese commercials, unlike their counterparts in the West, appear only during the interval between programs. After watching one program, audiences tend to switch to another channel, which means that advertisements have little chance of being seen. Newspapers and popular magazines were regarded as a better way to present McDonald's public image. In the Beijing region, McDonald's relied on Berson-Marsteller, a transnational public relations company, to deal with the Chinese news media. The main source of information about McDonald's in China is a short booklet that sketches the history of the American-based

corporation and its famous business philosophy, QSC & V, or quality, service, cleanliness, and value. The absence of what might be called hard news has led Chinese reporters to repeat McDonald's corporate philosophy of QSC & V—which, incidentally, reinforces the Chinese government's promotion of upgrading and modernizing the local business environment.

McDonald's local management has also made efforts to promote the corporation's image as an exemplar of modernity. For instance, a five-minute tour of the kitchen is provided upon request at each of the Beijing restaurants. I went on three such tours at different locations, and all were identical. My guides—McDonald's employees responsible for public relations—showed me all the machines, stoves, and other special equipment and explained how they work. I was then shown the place where employees wash their hands (following strict procedures) and the wastebins that contained food that was no longer fresh enough to meet the McDonald's standards. Throughout the five-minute tour, one message was emphasized repeatedly: McDonald's foods are cooked in accordance with strict scientific methods and are guaranteed fresh and pure.

In addition to the freshness and purity of its food, McDonald's management also emphasizes its nutritional value. In a published interview, a high-level manager maintains that the recipes for McDonald's foods are designed to meet modern scientific specifications and thus differ from the recipes for Chinese foods, which are based on cultural expectations. A central feature of this "scientifically designed" food is that it includes the main nutritional elements a human being needs daily: water, starch, protein, sugar, vitamins, and fat. Thus when one spends 10 to 15 yuan to have a standardized meal at McDonald's, one is guaranteed enough nutrition for half a day.[11] 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. In Japan, too, until the mid-1980s, McDonald's food was believed to be nutritious and healthy; it is only in recent years that the Japanese public has begun to worry about the negative effects of fast food.[12]

Given the general eagerness for modernization, shared by both the government and ordinary people, and, in the realm of consumption, the growing appetite for all things foreign, or Western (*yang*), McDonald's has benefited greatly from the cultural symbolism it carries. Bolstering the "genuineness" of its food, the Beijing restaurant keeps its menu identical to that of its American counterpart. By 1994 the sale of Big Mac hamburgers accounted for 20 percent of local McDonald's sales, a figure higher than the comparable one for Taiwan.[13] This figure has been interpreted by McDonald's management as an indicator that Beijing customers have no problem accepting American-style cuisine.

But what is it that the Beijing customers have accepted—the hamburgers or the ambience? My ethnographic inquiry reveals that whereas children are great fans of the Big Mac and french fries, most adult customers appear to be attracted to McDonald's by its American "style" rather than its food. Many people commented to me that the food was not really delicious and that the flavor of cheese was too strange to taste good. The most common complaint from adult customers was *chi bu bao*, meaning that McDonald's hamburgers and fries did not make one feel full; they are more like snacks than meals. I conducted a survey among students at a major university in Beijing and collected 97 completed questionnaires.[14] Table 1 shows the in-

TABLE 1

Evaluation of McDonald's Food

	Male (N=29)		Female (N=68)		
Sensation after eating	"Filling"	"Unfilling"	"Filling"	"Unfilling"	Total
Perceived as formal meal	3	2	17	1	23
Perceived as snacks	3	21	20	30	74
Total	6	23	37	31	97

SOURCE: Survey carried out by the author at Beijing University on Oct. 11 and 14, 1994.

formants' response to two questions: (1) Is McDonald's food a formal meal or a snack? (2) Does McDonald's food make you feel full?

Only one-fourth of my informants regarded McDonald's food as a formal meal, and most of these respondents were women students (18 out of 23). Accordingly, 24 of the 29 men students (83 percent) perceived McDonald's food as snacks (*xiaochi*). Regarding the sensation of fullness, 54 informants (56 percent) did not feel they had had a "satisfying" meal at McDonald's, and, not surprisingly, this sentiment appeared most commonly among young men—23 of the 29 male students (79 percent)—while fewer than half the women respondents found McDonald's food unsatisfying. Those who treated McDonald's food as a formal meal were more likely to feel full: only 3 of 23 such informants complained of *chi bu bao* (not feeling full). One implication of the findings is that the perception of McDonald's as a provider of meals or of snacks is largely determined by the capacity of the food to make one feel full. It seems that women are more likely to feel full, and hence

a larger proportion of women are ready to accept McDonald's food as a formal meal.

The Chinese food system is based on a basic division of *fan* (grains and other starches) and *cai* (vegetable and/or meat dishes). "To prepare a balanced meal, it must have an appropriate amount of both *fan* and *ts'ai* [*cai*], and ingredients are readied along both tracks."[15] According to these principles, the McDonald's hamburger—a patty of meat between layers of bread—is not a properly prepared meal. As a Beijing worker commented, 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. In Chinese terms, foods like *xianbing* are classified as "small eats" (*xiaochi*), a term close to "snack." The logic is very clear: a McDonald's hamburger is reinterpreted as a foreign (*yang*) form of *xianbing* and thus as foreign "small eats" (*yang xiaochi*). No doubt this is why 75 percent of my informants classified McDonald's foods as snacks, and 55 percent of them did not feel full after eating at McDonald's restaurants.

It seems ironic that although people have reservations about the food at McDonald's, they are still keen on going there. Why? Most informants said that they liked the atmosphere of the restaurant, the style of eating, and the experience of being there. In other words, the attraction of McDonald's is that it offers, not filling food, but a fulfilling experience. Or, as a local writer says, it is the culture of fast food that draws Beijing consumers to these restaurants.[16]

In fact, before McDonald's entered the Beijing market, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), followed by Pizza Hut, had aroused considerable consumer interest in imported fast foods. According to an early report on KFC, people did not go to

KFC to eat the chicken; instead they enjoyed "eating" (consuming) the culture associated with KFC. Most customers spent hours talking to each other and gazing out the huge glass window that overlooks a busy commercial street—thereby demonstrating their sophistication to the people who passed by.[17] Some local observers have argued that the appeal of Chinese cuisine is the taste of the food itself, and that, by contrast, Western food relies on its presentation. The popularity of imported fast food is thus taken as a demonstration that consumers are interested in the spectacle, the show, that this new form of eating permits.[18] Prior to McDonald's opening in Beijing, the company's name was already popular among trendy consumers and it was only natural that, when the first restaurant was opened in Beijing in April 1992, thousands lined up for hours in order to partake of the experience, along with the new cuisine offered by this famous restaurant.

By the end of 1994, although more foreign restaurants such as the Hard Rock Cafe and Pizza Hut had opened, McDonald's remained a fashionable, popular restaurant. Eating at McDonald's had become a meaningful social event for Beijing residents, though to be sure, different people came to the restaurant for different reasons. Many people, especially those constrained by their moderate income, visited McDonald's restaurants only once or twice, primarily to satisfy their curiosity about American food and culinary culture. A considerable proportion of customers were tourists from outlying provinces who had only heard about McDonald's or seen its Golden Arches in the movies. Tasting American food has recently become an important aspect of Chinese tourism in Beijing, and those who achieve this goal boast about it to their relatives and friends back home. There are also local customers, however, who frequent McDonald's regularly. A "Trade Area Survey" conducted by the management of Beijing McDonald's in one of its outlets shows that 10.2 percent of their customers frequented the restaurant at least four times a month in 1992, a figure that jumped to 38.3 percent in 1993.[19] Based on my observations and interviews, frequent customers fall into three groups: yuppies, young couples, and children (accompanied by their parents). Despite differences in social background, all except for the children mentioned McDonald's eating environment and good service as the primary reason they came, and most, if not all, of my informants emphasized that eating at McDonald's was a significant culinary and cultural experience.

For younger Beijing residents who have higher incomes and wish to be "connected" more closely to the outside world, eating at McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or Pizza Hut has become an integral part of their new lifestyle, a way for them to participate in the transnational cultural system. As one informant commented: "The Big Mac doesn't taste great; but the experience of eating in this place makes me feel good. Sometimes I even imagine that I am sitting in a restaurant in New York City or Paris." One late morning I talked with a young man, age 22, a graduate of the Beijing Institute of Foreign Languages, while we sat in a McDonald's restaurant. He ordered two Big Macs, one chicken sandwich, one Filet-o-Fish, one large Coke, and an ice cream sundae—all for himself. During our conversation, he told me that he was working for a Japanese company, earning a monthly salary of 3,500 yuan (more than $400), which in 1994 was ten times the average wage of an ordinary worker. When I asked how much he spent on fast food, he said he didn't know and didn't care: "I think I am better off than my friends who went to study abroad. Staying in

my hometown, I can enjoy all such foreign goods as long as I make money. You see, today I have to attend a formal banquet for a business lunch and I will only drink when I get there. Unlike those *tu* [rustic] guys, I prefer eating at McDonald's to a noisy Chinese restaurant."

Throughout my fieldwork I talked with more than a dozen yuppies like this young man, all of whom were proud of their newly attained habit of eating foreign fast food. Although some emphasized that they just wanted to save time, none finished their meals within 20 minutes. Like other customers, these young professionals arrive in small groups or come with girl- or boyfriends and enjoy themselves in the restaurant for an hour or more. Eating foreign food, and consuming other foreign goods, has become an important way for these Chinese yuppies to define themselves as middle-class professionals.

Young couples from all social strata are also frequenters of McDonald's because the eating environment is considered romantic and comfortable. The restaurants are brightly lit and clean and feature light Western music; except during busy periods they are relatively quiet. In addition to the exotica of hamburgers, the restaurant offers milk shakes, apple pie, and ice cream, all of which makes McDonald's one of the best places in Beijing to conduct courtship. As mentioned above, the variety of foods offered is, by Chinese standards, limited, and the expenditure is predictable, meaning that no one need fear being drawn into a competition of conspicuous consumption at McDonald's. This is particularly important for young men who need to take their girlfriends or wives out for a treat but have limited budgets: they know they will not lose face in this foreign cultural context. By 1994, McDonald's seven Beijing restaurants had all made efforts to create a relatively remote, private service area with tables for two only. In some of these restaurants, the area was nicknamed the "the lovers' corner."

There is another special enclosure in every Beijing McDonald's called "children's paradise." Unlike the quiet, romantic "lovers' corner," this area is always noisy, full of children who are running around and playing while they eat. As in other parts of East Asia (notably, as Chapters 2 and 3 show, Hong Kong and Taipei), Beijing children are loyal McDonald's fans. One employee told me that parents often asked her why their children liked McDonald's food so much. Some even suspected, she said, that the Big Mac contained a special, hidden ingredient; otherwise their children would not be so attracted to this exotic food. During my interviews with students in a primary school, one nine-year-old boy told me that his dream is to buy a huge box of hamburgers and eat them every day. Several youngsters expressed the desire to open a McDonald's restaurant of their own when they grow up. I will have more to say about how McDonald's appeals to children in the next section. Here I want to emphasize that children do not come alone: they are usually brought to McDonald's by their parents or grandparents.

I once interviewed a middle-aged woman whose daughter had just won an essay contest at McDonald's. She told me that she did not like the taste of hamburgers, and her husband simply hated them. But their daughter loved hamburgers and milk shakes so much that their family had to visit McDonald's nearly every week. Children's fondness for McDonald's, however, may present difficulties for parents with limited economic resources. As one man, a worker, noted, although his salary did not allow him to eat out, when his son asked him to go to

McDonald's, he never said "No." He would cut back his expenses in some other area so he could afford the meal.

It should be noted that eating at McDonald's is still a big treat for low-income people, and that as of 1994, a dinner at McDonald's for a family of three normally cost one-sixth of a worker's monthly salary. The price is definitely not considered a bargain and is not the reason why Beijing consumers come to McDonald's. As a young woman worker commented: "It's rather expensive to eat here at McDonald's. I have to work for two days in order to have a Big Mac set meal. But for a high-fashion restaurant the price is okay." Thus, working-class families have to save their money to eat at McDonald's. As noted in my opening vignette, many feel they should arrive by taxi, making the trip more luxurious and memorable. For such people, the McDonald's experience has less to do with food than it does with a chance to explore American culture or to give their children a special treat.

The representation of McDonald's as a symbol of American culture not only has drawn Beijing customers to new forms of dining but also has led them to accept new patterns of behavior. For instance, in 1992 and 1993 customers in Beijing (as in Hong Kong and Taiwan) usually left their rubbish on the table, letting the restaurant employees do the clean-up work. The main reason for this kind of behavior was that people regarded McDonald's as a formal restaurant where they had paid for full service. However, during the summer of 1994 I observed that about a fifth of the customers, many of them fashionably dressed youth, carried their own trays to the wastebins. From subsequent interviews I discovered that most of these people were regular customers, and they had learned to clean up their tables by observing what foreigners did. 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 they knew the proper behavior. It was also obvious that McDonald's customers spoke in lower tones than customers in other, Chinese-style eateries. They were also more careful not to throw rubbish on the ground or to spit near McDonald's outlets. Similarly, a comparison of customer behavior in McDonald's and that in comparably priced or more expensive Chinese restaurants shows that people in McDonald's were, on the whole, more self-restrained and polite toward one another. One possible explanation for this difference is that the symbolic meanings of the new food, along with customers' willingness to accept the exotic culture associated with fast food, has affected people's table manners in particular and social behavior in general.[20]

Fast Food Slowing Down: Appropriation and Localization

A further question arises: Is the Beijing McDonald's genuinely American? In the United States it is commonplace to equate McDonald's food with low cost and fast service. Americans worry about the nutritional value and the fat content of McDonald's hamburgers, but the restaurants remain popular because of the savings they offer in money and time. Few Americans (of my acquaintance, at least) think of McDonald's as an elegant place to relax and "be seen." From a cultural point of view, McDonald's, like many other products of industrialization and modernization, is treated by most Americans as simply a necessity of modern life.[21] In Beijing, by contrast, the Big Mac was rapidly transformed into a form of haute cuisine, and McDonald's became a place where people could gain status simply by eating there. A scrutiny of social interactions

in Beijing's McDonald's reveals that what appears to be the same institution represents radically different things in the two societies. These differences are so profound that the presumed "American style" of the Beijing restaurants has itself been transformed; McDonald's has become a caricature of its intended symbolic association. It represents a localized, Chinese version of Americana, as reflected in the following five aspects.

First, Beijing McDonald's consciously presents itself as a Chinese company, on the grounds that the Chinese partner owns 50 percent of the business. The company also emphasizes that 95 percent of the food used by Beijing McDonald's, including potatoes and beef, is locally produced, and, of 1,400 staff members in 1994, only three held foreign passports, and all of them were ethnic Chinese.[22] Here the intriguing point is that localization was precisely the goal of McDonald's management in Beijing. A spokesman stated in 1993: "McDonald's wants to be here long term. The hedging strategy is localization and expansion."[23] During a 1994 interview, Tim Lai, General Manager of Beijing McDonald's, told me, "Ours is a company that provides millions of people with good service and high-quality fast food. In Beijing, McDonald's should be local rather than American or exotic. It should become China's McDonald's." He also emphasized that his goal was to make McDonald's food part of the everyday diet of ordinary Beijing residents. While McDonald's remains essentially American in terms of menu, services, and management, the company has made serious efforts to adapt to the Chinese cultural setting.

To present itself as a local company, all the McDonald's restaurants in Beijing actively participated in community affairs and established special relations with local schools and neighborhood committees. For instance, every year at the beginning

of the new school term, McDonald's presents small gifts, such as caps and stationery, to the first graders in the nearby schools, and offers Ronald McDonald Scholarships to those who excelled as students the previous year.[24] On Teachers' Day 1994, the staff members visited local schools and presented gifts to teachers.[25] McDonald's also delegated employees to help police officers direct traffic during rush hours and clean the street in front of its restaurants. More interestingly, the company hoists the Chinese national flag every morning in front of its major restaurant near Tiananmen Square, and a special flag-raising ceremony was organized on September 26, 1994, in anticipation of the Chinese National Day (October 1). People's Liberation Army soldiers who guard the national flag in Tiananmen Square were invited to participate in this ceremony, turning the event into an important news story.[26]

The second feature of the localization process is that McDonald's, with its climate-controlled environment and soft music, has become a place to "hang out"—a function that contradicts its original, American purpose. During off-peak hours it is common for people to walk into McDonald's just for a drink or a snack. Sitting with a milk shake or a packet of fries, customers often spend 30 minutes to an hour, and sometimes longer, chatting with one another, reading newspapers, or holding business meetings. I once observed two people seated in a McDonald's restaurant for over two hours, discussing handbag sales. As indicated earlier, young couples and teenagers are particularly fond of frequenting McDonald's because they consider the environment romantic. Women in all age groups tend to spend the longest time in McDonald's, irrespective of whether they are alone or with friends. By contrast, unaccompanied men rarely linger after finishing their meal. The

main reason for this gender difference, according to my informants, is the absence of alcoholic beverages at McDonald's.

My research confirmed the impression that most customers in Beijing claim their tables for longer periods of time than do their American counterparts. The average dining time in Beijing (autumn 1994) was 25 minutes during busy times and 51 minutes during slack periods. American-style fast food has obviously slowed down in Beijing. An interesting footnote to this phenomenon is that 32 percent of my informants in a survey of 97 college students regarded McDonald's as a symbol of leisure and emphasized that they go there to relax.

Similar views appear to be common among older people. In August 1994, I had an intensive interview with two retired women in their late fifties after I had seen them for the third time in less than two weeks at the same McDonald's restaurant. They were sisters who lived in different parts of the city, one in the south and the other in the north. When the elder sister read the news of McDonald's opening in April 1992, they decided to meet at the restaurant on Wangfujing Street, which is midway between their residences. It has become a routine for them to order a hamburger and a drink and then chat for one or two hours—sometimes even longer. They told me that they liked the setting; it is clean, bright, and air-conditioned, better than their memories of Beijing's old-style teahouses. They were quite knowledgeable about McDonald's; they knew about grand openings for restaurants in Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, and closely followed news about working conditions and management issues. When I asked if there were other regular older customers like themselves, they said "of course," and, smiling, told me they had made some new friends at McDonald's.

Beijing consumers have appropriated the restaurants not only as leisure centers but also as public arenas for various personal and family rituals. The most popular ritual (and also the one promoted by McDonald's) is, of course, the children's birthday party, about which I have more to say below. Although less formalized (and without the restaurant's active promotion), private ceremonies are also held in the restaurants for adult customers, particularly for young women in peer groups (the absence of alcohol makes the site attractive to them). Of the 97 college students in my survey, 33 (including nine men) have attended personal celebrations at McDonald's: birthday parties, farewell parties, celebrations for receiving a scholarship to an American university, and term-end parties. One academic couple in their early fifties told me that they have held family celebrations at McDonald's restaurants to mark three occasions: their youngest son's return after graduating from a university in another city, their thirtieth anniversary, and the wife's recent salary increase. They chose McDonald's as the site of these ceremonies for two reasons: (1) it is new and more stylish than what they perceive as the vulgar traditional Chinese restaurants; and (2) it is relatively inexpensive for a decent family banquet (they pointed out that it was difficult to spend more than 30 yuan at McDonald's, whereas a good Chinese banquet may cost 100 yuan a head).

Until its recent relocation,[27] McDonald's flagship restaurant near Tiananmen Square remained the most popular site for personal rituals and group activities. In May 1993, a group of young contemporary artists organized an exhibit to be held in this McDonald's restaurant, displaying trendy art and fashionable clothes. Some items were politically charged, including a cowboy jacket with the former USSR national flag upside

down on the back. This exhibit was sponsored by two research institutes in Beijing and, through personal connections, the organizers were able to mobilize some high-ranking officials and famous scholars to attend the show. At the last minute, Beijing public security closed the exhibit, on the grounds that it would cause a traffic jam. The real reason for police interference, according to several people involved, was the exhibit's timing (close to the June 4th anniversary of the 1989 democracy demonstration) and the location (three blocks from Tiananmen Square). To date this is the only event with political implications involving a McDonald's restaurant, but it does illustrate the ritual function that the fast food chain has assumed in the public perception of Beijing consumers.

The multifunctional use of McDonald's is due in part to the lack of cafes, teahouses, or ice cream shops in Beijing; it is also a consequence of the management's effort to attract as many customers as possible by creating an inviting environment. It is clear that the local management has accepted their customers' perceptions of McDonald's as a special place which does not fit preexisting categories of public eateries. They have not tried to educate Beijing consumers to accept the American view that "fast food" means that one must eat fast and leave quickly. How does the management solve problems of space during busy hours? I was told that the problem was often self-resolved, because a huge crowd of customers naturally creates pressure on those who have finished their meal and, more important, during busy hours the environment is no longer relaxing.

The emphasis on creating a Chinese-style family atmosphere constitutes the third feature of the localization process. The interior walls of local restaurants are covered by posters and slo-

gans emphasizing family values. To enhance the family atmosphere, McDonald's has deliberately hired employees from different age groups and assigned some older employees to work in the dining area as receptionists (more on this below). It has become increasingly common for people of multiple generations in a family to have their Sunday lunch or dinner at McDonald's. Given that many parents do not live with their married children in Beijing and that eating out is an important family event, such a meal embodies the harmony and solidarity of an extended family—the ideal of private life in Chinese culture. Understandably, Beijing McDonald's has made its leading slogan, "Get together at McDonald's; enjoy the happiness of family life" (*huanju meidanglao; gong xiang jiating le*). During holidays, such as Chinese New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival, the restaurants extend their hours, offer small gifts, and host various activities, such as performances by volunteers. The idea behind these activities, according to the General Manager, is to make McDonald's seem like a real home for those customers who are unwilling or unable to go home for holidays. This family atmosphere has been repeatedly featured in local newspapers, which has in turn brought more customers into the restaurants.[28] As a result, people coming alone to McDonald's to save money and time, common in the United States, are rare in Beijing's restaurants.

It is well known that McDonald's in the United States also presents itself as a family restaurant, and this image has been widely accepted by American consumers. According to Conrad Kottak, McDonald's popularity partly rests on the fact that the restaurant offers a sanctuary, a home away from home, to Americans who are traveling or at home. "In this familiar setting, we do not have to consider the experience. We know

what we will see, say, eat, and pay."[29] In other words, what makes McDonald's a family restaurant in American society is its ordinariness, its predictability, and, of course, its low prices. Americans therefore frequent McDonald's for a casual lunch rather than a formal dinner. For the same reason, Americans usually do not go to McDonald's to celebrate a personal or family event, nor do they visit McDonald's on holidays. In Beijing, by contrast, it is precisely the experience of eating foreign food that draws people to McDonald's; in every respect (including the absence of chopsticks), McDonald's represents the unfamiliar, extraordinary, nonroutine, and unhomelike. Thus, people frequent McDonald's not for a casual lunch but for a formal meal or even a celebration. Consequently, Sundays and holidays are the busiest time for McDonald's restaurants in Beijing. What makes McDonald's a family restaurant is the restaurant's effort to provide a pleasant and fashionable place for people to celebrate their family harmony and solidarity in public.

The fourth feature of the localization of McDonald's in Beijing is that, in contrast to the American practice of substituting technology for human workers,[30] the Beijing McDonald's relies heavily on personal interactions with customers. In everyday operations, one or two public relations staff in each outlet are always available to answer customers' questions. Each restaurant assigns five to ten female receptionists to take care of children and talk with parents. These receptionists are referred to by the kinship title "Aunt McDonald," following the common term for Ronald McDonald, known as "Uncle McDonald" in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Beijing. One task of these receptionists is to establish long-term friendships with children and other customers who frequent the restaurant, in the attempt to personalize what might otherwise be a purely business transaction.[31] Ms. Chen, a 21-year old "Aunt McDonald," told me that after working in the restaurant for seven months, she had made more than 100 young friends, ranging in age from three to twelve. Children ran into the restaurant every day, she said, and greeted her: "Aunt McDonald, how are you?" (or, "Aunt Chen" if they know her last name). She usually talked with the children and their parents before they went to the counter to order food. Although admitting that making friends was her duty, she added: "This also makes me feel good, as if I am in a big family. I feel particularly happy and proud of myself when I walk down the street and children recognize me." The feeling is obviously mutual: as several parents told me, their children come to McDonald's not only for the food, but also for fun and the special attention they receive from the receptionists. A mother said: "The best part is the feeling that there is some *renqing* [goodwill, concern, sentiment] at McDonald's." In a sense, therefore, McDonald's management has responded to a local expectation of social interactions—namely, the need to build good personal feelings (*renqing*) between staff and customers—to secure a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship.[32]

Interestingly enough, Aunt and Uncle McDonald do not confine their activities to the restaurant. After making friends with the youngest customers, the staff members who play Aunt or Uncle McDonald record the children's names, addresses, and birthdates on a special list called "Book of Little Honorary Guests." Later they visit the children's families and their kindergarten and primary schools. Congratulatory letters are sent to the children prior to their birthdays, with warm greetings from Uncle McDonald.[33]

Finally, McDonald's localization strategies have centered on children as primary customers. Because of the Chinese government's single-child policy,[34] in most families children are the object of attention and affection from up to half a dozen adults: their parents and their paternal and maternal grandparents. The demands of such children are always met by one or all of these relatives, earning them the title "Little Emperors" or "Empresses." When a Little Emperor says, "I want to eat at McDonald's," this means that the entire family must go along. It is no wonder that McDonald's management knows that "Children are our future." The above-mentioned "Book of Little Honorary Guests" is only one of the strategies that Beijing McDonald's has devised to introduce its product into the heart of Chinese families via the fantasy world of children. Birthday parties are a central feature of this strategy. Arriving with five or more guests, a child can expect an elaborate ritual performed, free of charge, in a special enclosure called "Children's Paradise." The ritual begins with an announcement over the restaurant's loudspeakers—in both Chinese and English—giving the child's name and age, together with Uncle McDonald's congratulations. This is followed by the recorded song "Happy Birthday," again in two languages. Aunt McDonald then entertains the children with games and presents each of them with small gifts from Uncle McDonald. During the ceremony all food and drinks are served by Aunt McDonald, making the children feel important.

A feature of the "Little Emperor" phenomenon in contemporary China is that most parents want their one child to become an important personage in the future and thus make various investments in his or her education. It is common, for instance, for working-class parents who know little about music or computers to attend a weekly piano lesson or computer class with their child. During the class they work even harder than their child does, because they want to be able to help with homework. Taking parents' great expectations of their children into consideration, the McDonald's management decided to promote learning in their restaurants. Paper and pens are provided so children can draw pictures; essay contests are held for primary and secondary school students; and children's programs, with parents acting as the audience, are hosted in some restaurants. For instance, in September 1994, eight McDonald's outlets in Beijing and Tianjin sponsored a "My Teacher" essay contest, to celebrate Teachers' Day (September 10); the 160 winners of this contest received gifts and a Certificate of Merit from the restaurants.[35] Every evening in a McDonald's located in east Beijing, two "Aunt McDonald" receptionists lead children in dance for twenty minutes and then give the participants small gifts. The manager of this restaurant told me that, in order to make sure every child can participate in dancing, staff members create new kinds of dance for the children. "We want the parents to know," she explained, "that children are attracted to our restaurant not only by food—there are a lot of things children can learn here."

In August 1994, the first McDonald's "theme restaurant" was opened, inspired by famous theme parks such as Disneyland. The interior of the restaurant was decorated like a large ship, and staff members wore blue-and-white sailor uniforms instead of traditional McDonald's uniforms. The restaurant has developed a program called Uncle McDonald's Adventure, which encourages children to imagine that they are traveling around the world on a big ship guided by Uncle McDonald. The basic idea, according to the manager, is to increase chil-

dren's knowledge of world geography and encourage them to create an imagined world by and for themselves.

During my interviews with pupils in a primary school, I discovered that Ronald McDonald is a very popular figure among children. Not one of the 68 youngsters (from the third to sixth grade) I spoke with failed to recognize the image of Ronald McDonald; most students appeared very excited when I asked about him. All the children said they liked Ronald because he was funny, gentle, kind, and—several added—he understood children's hearts. About one-third believed that Ronald McDonald came from America; the majority insisted that he came from the McDonald's headquarters in Beijing. When I asked these children to tell me the most interesting experience they had had at McDonald's, a sixth grader said it was the time he went to McDonald's with four friends to celebrate his birthday, unaccompanied by adults. They made a reservation so that Aunt McDonald had prepared a table for them in advance and helped them recite poems, sing songs, and play games. A third-grader said she was very happy when she heard her own name announced over the loudspeakers at McDonald's, accompanied by "Happy birthday to you." When I was about to leave after finishing my group interview, a third grade boy ran up to me and asked: "Are you Uncle McDonald?" "No, I'm not. Why?" "You have his eyes." Assuming a serious demeanor, the boy then showed me a pen with a small hamburger on it—a gift he had received from Ronald McDonald. It became clear to me that for this little boy and many of his friends, Uncle McDonald is real, and, as such, he is also an important influence on these children's lives.

It should be noted that McDonald's special appeal to children is partially and indirectly due to its association with

Americana and modernity—a theme I explored in the preceding section. As mentioned above, a large number of adult customers were brought into McDonald's restaurants by their children or grandchildren, and continue to go there even though in many cases they dislike or cannot afford the foreign food. The question arises, Why is children's demand for McDonald's food such a powerful motivator for parents? It is true that parental affection, particularly in families with only one child, has led many parents and grandparents to surrender to their children's demands. However, my interview with a mother who frequently accompanies her daughter to McDonald's provides a clue to another kind of answer.

This woman told me that after almost a year of "adapting" to the foreign food, she had begun to enjoy it and now takes her daughter to McDonald's at least twice a week. When I asked whether the price was high, she said it was acceptable for a foreign restaurant and added, "I want my daughter to learn more about American culture. She is taking an English typing class now, and I will buy her a computer next year." It is clear that eating a Big Mac and fries, like learning typing and computer skills, is part of the mother's plan to expose her daughter to American culture. In other words, she wants her daughter to learn not only the skills needed in a modern society, but also to eat modern food so she will grow up to be a successful person who knows how to enjoy a modern way of life. If the daughter was fond of some "low food," such as the corn gruel commonly consumed by villagers in North China, would the mother have been so willing to meet her child's demand? It is very unlikely.

This woman's case is by no means unique in contemporary China. Rational considerations play as important a role as af-

fection in most parents' responses to their children. Particularly for those middle-aged parents who missed the opportunity for social mobility during the chaotic Cultural Revolution period (1966–76), their children's achievements give them a vicarious way to realize the lost dreams of their own youth. Thus parents make every effort to encourage their children to learn all kinds of skills (including computer and piano) that are supposedly necessary in the modern world, and will save money to meet their children's demand for food, clothes, and toys that are considered modern. Parental efforts of this type can even follow the child across the Pacific Ocean. Several Chinese students who have recently come to the United States to attend college told me that their parents always remind them from home to eat cheese, because the parents believe it is cheese that makes Americans so physically strong and energetic. Here food is directly related not only to its nutritional value but also to its symbolic power. Children's influence on their parents, then, is directly related to the parents' hope that their children's lives will be better than their own. As Jack Goody notes in his study of dietary changes in an African society, one reason for the shift in food-consumption patterns is the idea that children are their parents' investment in the future, part of "an effort to maintain and advance the standards of attainment."[36]

The Rise of Consumerism and McDonald's Instant Success

In the early 1980s, McDonald's started to negotiate with Chinese authorities, in the hope that the Golden Arches might eventually enter the largest consumer market in the world. Beginning in 1983, apples from China were bought for apple pies sold by McDonald's in Japan, and later, food distribution and

processing facilities were developed in China.[37] The actual opening of McDonald's restaurants in Beijing, however, did not occur until 1992. In the interim, there were revolutionary changes in Chinese consumption patterns. After fifteen years of economic reform and improvements in living standards, a large number of people in Beijing began to buy things simply out of the desire to possess things and the joy of shopping, instead of restricting their purchases to basic needs (as during the Maoist era). The reflection of this trend in the food culture is that people are now interested in different cuisines, and dining out has become a popular form of entertainment among those who have a little extra spending money. For these people, cleanliness and nutrition have superseded low prices as the main criteria for selecting a restaurant, because they can now afford to worry about their health. It is in this social context of mass consumption and consumerism that McDonald's appeals to so many Chinese customers.

Consumption has been an important feature of the political agenda underlying the government's promotion of economic reforms. In an effort to revitalize Chinese market forces, reformers encouraged consumer spending during the early 1980s. A famous slogan at that time was *nengzheng huihua*, which means "being able to make money and knowing how to spend it." This slogan was in direct conflict with the official ideology of Maoist socialism, which emphasized "hard work and simple living." Not surprisingly the Chinese mass media were filled with debates about the new consumerism. At the theoretical level, critiques of "premature consumption" (*chaoqian xiaofei*) and "hyperconsumption" (*gao xiaofei*) dominated these discussions. In practice, however, the rise of consumerism appears to be an irreversible trend. According to 1994 statistics released

by the Chinese Consumers Society, the average expenditure per capita had increased fourfold in the previous decade. The ratio of "hard consumption" (of food, clothing, and other necessities of daily life) to "soft consumption" (of entertainment, tourism, fashion, and socializing) has changed from 3:1 in 1984 to 1:1.2 in 1994.[38] A new wave of mass consumption began in 1990, concentrating on interior decoration, private telephones and pagers, air conditioners, body building machines, and tourism.[39] Stories of the conspicuous consumption of luxury items among the new rich and increasing demands for imported goods have become a dominant feature of Chinese popular culture.[40] Some Chinese scholars have argued that the growth of a luxury commodity market is the hallmark of a modern way of life and a phenomenon characteristic of postindustrial societies.[41]

A good indicator of the escalating demands for consumption is the changing concept of the "three big items" (*san dajian*), by which is meant the three luxury items that confer the most status on their owner. During the 1960s and 1970s the "three bigs" were wristwatches, bicycles, and sewing machines. Families saved for years to buy these expensive items (an average of 200 yuan each). In the 1980s, color television sets, refrigerators, and washing machines, each costing at least 1,000 yuan, had become the new "three bigs." By the early 1990s, the "three bigs" were a telephone, an air conditioner, and a VCR. For the new entrepreneurial class the stakes have become so high that the three bigs are a flat, a private car, and modern communication devices such as mobile phones and fax machines. According to a 1994 survey, 2 percent of Chinese qualified as members of the new rich and were spending their money to acquire these "three super bigs."[42]

TABLE 2
Monthly Spending Money Claimed by Beijing Youth

Money available (yuan)[a]	Number of informants	Percentage
1 to 499	347	34.7
500 to 999	469	46.9
1,000 to 1,499	94	9.4
1,500 to 1,999	48	4.8
2,000 to 2,499	20	2
2,500 to 2,999	6	0.6
Above 3,000	16	1.6
Total	1,000	100

SOURCE: Survey results quoted in Pian Ming, "Beijing qingnian rexing gaodang shangpin" (Beijing Youth Keen on Luxury Commodities), *China Industrial and Commercial Times*, July 16, 1994.

[a]At the time of this survey, 1 yuan equals about $0.12 in U.S. currency.

The purchasing power of young people in Beijing has increased dramatically over the past decade; they have played a leading role in the trend toward consumerism. In early 1994 a Japanese consulting company conducted a survey among 1,000 Beijing youths between the ages of 16 and 30. The results are astonishing. Table 2 shows the amount of money controlled by these young people.

Two thirds of the informants had 500 yuan or more to spend per month. With so much money available to them, what are the most desirable commodities for these youths? The survey shows that 53 percent hope to buy a flat, and 57 percent would like to have a car.[43] It is no wonder that driving schools have done a booming business in recent years.[44]

For ordinary citizens, shopping has become an increasingly important part of everyday life; as noted earlier, people have

begun to purchase goods that they want but do not necessarily need.[45] The most impressive evidence of this change is that children are very knowledgeable about Beijing's modern shopping malls and the commodities available there. A primary school teacher told me that children in her class know much more about brand names than do many of the teachers. Every Monday, these children talk about their experiences in shopping malls over the past weekend. To test children's knowledge of commodities, I asked my two nephews, both aged nine, to identify the cars in a newly published auto magazine. To my surprise, they quickly recognized the names and manufacturers of more than half the cars depicted.

With regard to food, an important feature of this emerging consumerism is a growing interest in eating out. According to a report in a Chinese consumer magazine, nearly 75 percent of Beijing residents who are on fixed work schedules no longer have breakfast at home: they eat at food stalls on the streets or in restaurants that provide breakfast, including foreign eateries such as Vie de France or Uncle Sam's. Frequent restaurant dining has become a popular form of entertainment among virtually all social groups.[46] According to a survey conducted by the Beijing Statistics Bureau in early 1993, nutritional value and convenience are the top concerns for most Beijing residents when choosing a restaurant. The most interesting discovery of this survey is that consumers showed a strong interest in sampling non-Chinese cuisines. Nearly half the informants (49.7 percent) had eaten at Western-style restaurants, including McDonald's or KFC.[47]

In response to increasing consumer demand, thousands of restaurants and eateries have opened in recent years. By early 1993, there were more than 19,000 eating establishments in

Beijing, ranging from five-star hotel restaurants to street stalls. More than 5,000 were state-owned, 55 were joint ventures or foreign-owned, and the remainder, 14,000, were owned by private entrepreneurs or independent vendors (*getihu*). The turnover rate was equally impressive: for every two restaurants that opened in 1993, one went out of business.[48]

In spite of this boom, Beijing residents still complain that it is difficult, and sometimes even hazardous, to eat out. A public panic of sorts swept through Beijing in the early 1990s. Rumors circulated of people dying after eating at street stalls or in unlicensed diners run by recent immigrants from the countryside. According to one set of stories, vendors of *youbing* (fried pancakes), a staple of the traditional Beijing breakfast, were said to have used laundry detergent as a fermentation agent—poisoning an untold number of people.[49] Many of my Beijing informants complained that they had two choices when eating Chinese-style food: to pay a lot for a fancy restaurant where the food is clean and safe, or to risk their life in a place where they have no idea what went on in the kitchen.

It is obvious that there is an urgent need for clean, reliable, medium-priced family restaurants in the Beijing market. Western fast food restaurants meet this need. It is precisely in the domain of hygiene that the local fast food restaurants, imitators of KFC and McDonald's, have failed to meet consumer expectations. As one observer points out, it is easy to build the "hardware" of a fast food industry, namely, the restaurants; but the "software" (service and management) cannot be adopted overnight. One of the most important features of McDonald's software is a high standard of hygiene, including the cleanliness of the eating environment and the freshness of the food.[50] The Beijing media constantly cite McDonald's for its attention to

hygiene, in contrast to the dismal standards maintained by its local competitors.[51] As recent investigations show, the increasing demand for good hygiene derives from Beijing residents' awareness of the relationship between food preparation and health,[52] an awareness that parallels improved living standards and the rise of consumerism over the past fifteen years. Given the continued growth of the Chinese economy during the 1990s, the demand for clean and reliable food is likely to make transnational food chains increasingly popular among Beijing consumers.

Conclusion: The Golden Arches in the Local-Global Nexus

McDonald's experience in Beijing is a classic case of the "localization" of transnational systems. Efficiency and economic value—the two most important features of McDonald's in the United States—appear to be far less significant in Beijing's cultural setting. When Chinese workers load their families into a taxi and take them to McDonald's, spending one-sixth of their monthly income in the process, efficiency and economy are the least of their concerns. When customers linger in McDonald's for hours, relaxing, chatting, reading, enjoying the music, or celebrating birthdays, they are taking the "fast" out of fast food. It is clear that McDonald's restaurants in Beijing have been transformed into middle-class family establishments, where people can enjoy their leisure time and experience a Chinese version of American culture.

This Chinese version of American culture, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, is a result of the interactions between the McDonald's management and staff, on the one hand, and Beijing customers on the other hand. As a symbol of Americana and modernity, McDonald's food became popular

among the newly emerging middle class and also among ordinary citizens who were curious about American food. A consequence of the powerful appeal of representing Americana is the conversion of McDonald's hamburgers and fries, ordinary daily fare in America, into precious and stylish foreign cuisine in Beijing. Such a transformation, however, is not to the company's long-term advantage. Like other leading transnational corporations, McDonald's development relies on its capability to increase consumer demand and expand the fast food market. McDonald's foods are intended for large numbers of ordinary consumers and thus must be, as Sidney Mintz has noted, "transformed into the ritual of daily necessity and even into images of daily decency."[53] 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 somehow maintaining their image as the symbol of the American way of life. This is why McDonald's management has gone to such extraordinary lengths to fit into the local cultural setting.

The other side of the localization process has two dimensions: (1) Beijing consumers' appropriation of McDonald's food and culture; and (2) the responses of local catering businesses and the rise of Chinese-style fast foods. The first dimension has been examined earlier in this chapter (one of the most obvious results of appropriation is the multifunctional use of McDonald's outlets). The notion of fast food (*kuaican*) itself is not new in Chinese culinary culture, which also has something to do with the way consumers have appropriated McDonald's food. I discovered that many informants regarded McDonald's, together with KFC and Pizza Hut, as but one of many cuisines

available in the national capital. The real fast food, they said, is *hefan* (which literally means "boxed rice"), the various foods in styrofoam boxes sold at street stalls. When people sit at a table in a comfortable restaurant like McDonald's, they treat it as a formal event, and consequently spend as much time as possible over their food.

The success of foreign fast food chains posed a challenge to the local catering industry and, starting in 1990, many local restaurants met this challenge by creating their own versions of fast food. They started by imitating KFC, and several kinds of fried chicken soon appeared on the market, with names like Ronghua Chicken and Xiangfei Roast Chicken. The competition between local imitators and foreign fast food chains peaked in 1992 and early 1993. Beijing media termed it the "fast food war."[54] Since then, most local competitors have turned to Chinese-style fast food, such as noodles, rice dishes, and Chinese pancakes. The best known example is the Beijing Fast Food Company, a corporation established in 1993 and comprising nearly a thousand local restaurants and street stalls. The company offered more than 50 varieties of food, including five set meals: roast duck, stir-fried rice, dumplings, noodles, and meat pancakes, all served with soup and an appetizer.[55] Several of the leading figures in this business, former employees of KFC or McDonald's who had learned management techniques on the job, claimed that, by combining modern methods of preparation and hygiene with traditional Chinese cuisine, they could recapture Beijing's fast food market from the control of foreign chains.[56] Interestingly enough, a key feature of this indigenization process is that McDonald's has been taken as a model of management and food hygiene by local imitators as well as by government officials. I was told by a

public relations officer that every month McDonald's conducts several dozen tours of its restaurants for the benefit of local government officials or catering companies.[57] The most famous restaurant in Beijing—Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant—sent its management staff to McDonald's in 1993, and then introduced its own "roast duck fast food" in early 1994.[58]

This study demonstrates that analysts would be well advised to pay more attention to the responses of local people before drawing grand conclusions about the impact of transnational corporations. The emerging global culture is marked by diversity rather than uniformity, because local cultures, as Richard Adams notes, "continue to yield new emergent social entities, new adaptive forms brought into being in order to pursue survival and reproduction both through and in spite of the specific work of capitalism."[59] Daniel Miller's analysis of an American soap opera in Trinidad reveals, for instance, that Trinidadian audiences have positively appropriated this foreign product into their social life. The geographic origin of imported culture has become increasingly less relevant; what really matters is its local consequence.[60]

In my view, the most significant contribution made by transnational institutions like McDonald's is that people can use them as bridges to other cultures. In the present case, it is American culture that makes the Beijing McDonald's ultimately attractive to Chinese consumers. The customers want a "taste" of America, and the outcome of their pursuit is the creation of a Chinese version of American fast food culture. McDonald's success in Beijing can therefore be understood only in the context of this localization process. Given the centuries-long development of Chinese cuisine, it is only natural that foreign foods have undergone the transformative process

of localization. It is also tempting to predict that, twenty years from now, the "American" associations that McDonald's carries today will become but dim memories for older residents. A new generation of Beijing consumers may treat the Big Mac, fries, and shakes simply as local products.