West Meets East: The Evolution of McDonald’s Marketing in East Asia

Abstract: This paper discusses the evolution of McDonald’s marketing in East Asia, comparing advertisement campaigns in the early years of McDonald’s with the present campaign for 2003. Through this comparison, one finds that the emphasis of the advertisements has shifted away from traditional Asian values of the family, and today furthers the Westernization of Asian teenagers through promotion of American culture in the ads. The paper proceeds to discuss the implications of this trend, and raises the question of responsibility. Finally, it proposes a third possibility in between the extremes of tradition and Westernization, arguing that both the corporation and the consumer have crucial roles to play if Asian society is to thrive in the modern world, while simultaneously retaining its unique cultural heritage.

Biography: The writer has been a McDonald’s consumer for almost his entire life, and as an Asian himself, therefore takes a personal interest in questioning the roles and responsibilities of McDonald’s in Asia today. His interests may be found in all things to do with good food and its enjoyment, and he is looking forward to more such thought-provoking explorations in future. (For more information, please contact the writer at dexian@stanford.edu)
West Meets East: The Evolution of McDonald’s Marketing in East Asia

Funky hip-hop beats fill the viewer’s ears. Images of breakdancing, stunt-biking and surfing fill the screen in a flurry of colorful scenes. A humorous depiction of a cross-dressing performer adds a racy element to the advertisement. To cap it all, celebrity artiste Justin Timberlake makes a cameo appearance, looking debonair and charming. Ready to dismiss this as just the latest advertisement campaign for the American market? Think again. This 60-second clip was aired nation-wide in Hong Kong as part of McDonald’s 2003 campaign, titled “I’m Lovin’ It.” While ostensibly “Western,” what immediately strikes the viewer is the fact that the ad was intended specifically for an Asian audience. This contrast is all the more significant when one considers the difference between present-day McDonald’s advertising versus campaigns from the 1970s and 1980s, when the franchise was just entering the region. One finds upon analysis that McDonald’s advertising in East Asia has evolved significantly over

time as it adapts to trends and changes in Asian societal norms and values. This paper seeks to prove that McDonald’s both shapes and is shaped by these evolving trends, thus creating a dynamic relationship between the franchise and its consumers.

What makes this finding important is the fact that it has implications which reach far beyond the corporate world of marketing. The Golden Arches are symbols of so much more than just burgers and French-fries. In many ways, they represent American culture and all the associations linked with that mental image. As such, one must give serious thought to the significance of the evolving advertisement campaigns in East Asia. The effects of McDonald’s influence on Asian values and norms cannot go unquestioned, as they may challenge the very foundations of cultural identities and values. Having identified the trend in McDonald’s advertising strategies, this paper will proceed to unravel the significance of this finding. A key question to consider is whether accusations of cultural imperialism leveled against McDonald’s can be justified, and if so, is this merely the inevitable result of ever-increasing cultural integration and homogenization on a global scale? I argue that both McDonald’s and the consumer must bear responsibility for this trend, as the franchise builds upon and accelerates trends already in motion in these societies. I believe that these trends pose an undeniable threat to Asian culture and tradition, but I do not condemn these movements, for I believe that it is possible for tradition and modernity to coexist and balance each other. This balance is a key challenge for Asian societies, and its realization may well shape the world in which we live for generations to come.
Earning a Spot on the Map

McDonald’s entry into Asia was by no means a uniform continental push that happened all at once. The Golden Arches were brought to the individual nations largely through the work of dedicated and entrepreneurial individuals who saw potential in their home markets for expansion of the franchise. In Japan, for example, McDonald’s was introduced in 1971 by Den Fujita, then a student at the University of Tokyo (Watson 162). In other countries, the arrival of McDonald’s was a hugely symbolic event in itself, as locals equated the Golden Arches with modernization and the Westernization of their society. The case of China springs to mind, when one considers the fanfare and publicity that surrounded the franchise’s opening in 1992. As the sociologist Yunxiang Yan noted, “thousands lined up for hours in order to partake of the experience, along with the new cuisine offered by this famous restaurant” (qtd. in Watson 48). It is clear that McDonald’s will never simply be “just another” fast-food restaurant. The symbols carry too many weighty associations to be ignored by consumers, regardless of nationality or background. That said, it must be remembered that clumping distinct national entities under the broad header of “McDonald’s East Asian experience” is dangerously reductive. While there are common threads which run across the countries covered in this study, there are also many distinct points of contrast that make the “McDonald’s experience” of each singularly unique and fascinating. In particular, this paper will be centered upon McDonald’s in Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, China and Singapore as much for the similarities as for the differences.

Before we embark on the journey proper, it is worth mentioning a little about McDonald’s roots in the country with which the Golden Arches have now become
synonymous. From its beginnings as a small fast-food joint in Illinois, McDonald’s in the United States has stood for “low cost and fast service” (Watson 53). American consumers appreciate “its ordinariness, its predictability and, of course, its low prices” (Watson 60). The perceived value for money is what made the franchise such a popular venue to have a quick and casual meal. This popular notion of McDonald’s in America will become more significant when we contrast to the way in which McDonald’s is perceived in many parts of East Asia.

**From Homely to Hip: Evolving Strategies in East Asia**

East Asian civilization in modern times owes much to the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. One of the key principles he espoused was the importance of the nuclear family, and how the integrity of this unit was critical to the sustainability of any society. These lessons were well-learnt and had become a dominant feature of Asian societal values well into the 20th century. It is with this context in mind that we must analyze McDonald’s fledgling steps in East Asia. The franchise recognized that success hinged on its ability to package itself for the specific market in question. The market they encountered was wholly different from the individualistic, fast-paced setting in the US, and as such, advertising strategies had to be re-configured to satisfy a new set of tastes and norms. Time has shown that McDonald’s accomplished this task with astounding success, as their presence expanded at a phenomenal rate. After opening its first store in 1975 in Hong Kong, by 1997 there were 125 McDonald’s outlets in the territory (Watson 78).
What was it that made early McDonald’s marketing so incredibly effective for the Asian market? Simply put, McDonald’s capitalized on traditional Asian values to associate itself with all that was held in esteem by local people. The Golden Arches came to be mentioned in the same breath as such concepts as family, children and goodwill. This was a coordinated effort on multiple fronts, extending beyond mere advertisements to include store policies and promotions. In the Beijing McDonald’s, one of its main slogans reads, “Get together at McDonald’s; enjoy the happiness of family life.” In this classic example of rhetoric, McDonald’s utilizes all three appeals to affect its audience. The mention of McDonald’s in the same sentence as “family” is an appeal to logos. The sentence makes it simple for any reader to logically associate a meal at the restaurant as a pleasant experience to be shared by the entire family. In these early days, using ethos appeals to build a strong reputation as a family restaurant must have been foremost in the minds of McDonald’s marketers. They would undoubtedly have been interested in associating themselves firmly with traditional Asian values. With regard to pathos, emotions of warmth, comfort and a welcoming feeling are all evoked by the image of families gathered at the restaurant and having a good time together. By actively promoting its image as a family restaurant concerned with domestic unity and harmony, McDonald’s managed to reach out to a broad demographic, appealing not only to children fascinated by the franchise’s “Westernness,” but also to parents and elders from a more traditional background.
Consider this advertisement campaign in Figure 2. It ran in Singapore during the early 1990s. Aired on local television as a 30-second spot, the ad portrayed the “McDonald’s experience” as a distinctly familial activity, which 3 generations could simultaneously partake in. The image is of a Singaporean grandmother in traditional dress smiling benevolently as her entire family is seated at the restaurant enjoying a meal together. Prior to this still-shot, the children are shown skipping brightly towards the restaurant, with the older folk eagerly following. In the background stands the familiarly bright Golden Arches, embracing the family in its warmth and comfort. Once again, the rhetorical appeals are cleverly used here. The bright colors and sunshine permeating the ad appeal to the viewer’s emotions, creating a warm fuzzy feeling of warmth and comfort that one associates with the restaurant. In fact, the ad even appeals to the viewer on an aural level, as the chirpy sounds of children’s voices and a friendly staff-member’s greeting all add to the atmosphere of delight. On a rational level, the audience connects the restaurant with family values and the preservation of tradition, thereby building up McDonald’s image and reputation as a family restaurant. For example, the fact that the grandmother is dressed in traditional attire alludes to the franchise’s emphasis on upholding and respecting Asian traditions. In many instances,
the fact of the matter was that the elderly viewed McDonald’s as a threat to tradition and feared the erosion of Asian values in the face of the American hegemonic juggernaut. I recall my grandmother lamenting the demise of “good old Chinese food” whenever I asked her to bring me out for a meal at McDonald’s. As I grew up, that youthful acceptance of the Golden Arches gave way to a more skeptical, questioning stance, and I began to associate McDonald’s with the challenge to my culture and beliefs. This ad must therefore have been firmly ensconced as part of a marketing strategy by McDonald’s to sell itself as a family establishment, focusing on Asian values of inter-generational harmony and close-knit family units.

In particular, McDonald’s targeted children as a key demographic in its quest to dominate Asian markets. The care and effort taken to capture this group was perhaps the cornerstone of McDonald’s efforts to market itself as a family restaurant. For example, many franchises in Asia, including Hong Kong and China, hosted private birthday parties at the restaurant for children and their friends. (Watson 61) The franchise distributed gifts and organized games, all done in the hope of creating a friendly and warm image which any child could easily relate to.

To turn a successful brand image on its head and sing a whole new tune requires courage and no small amount of skill. There is no doubt that McDonald’s early campaigns in Asia possessed both ingredients in substantial quantities. As the largest fast-food franchise in America, McDonald’s had built its reputation on value-for-money meals and quick convenience. To have left all that behind upon entering East Asia was surely a risk on the corporation’s part. However, one crucial element of its image was carried over and utilized to great effect in East Asia: its association with Americana.
Sociologist Joe Kincheloe argues that “McDonald’s deploys a sentimental Americana, a syrupy patriotism that drapes the flag around the Golden Arches” (64). While the truth of this accusation is debatable at home, there is no doubt that McDonald’s astutely capitalized on this association in marketing itself in East Asia. In particular, the franchise represented Americana seen through foreign lenses. To many people, it stood for modernization, as much for its streamlined operations as for the mere fact that it was a ubiquitous facet of American life. As Yunxiang Yan noted, “McDonald’s represents the unfamiliar, extraordinary, nonroutine and unhomelike.” (qtd. in Watson 60) The franchise rode on this fascination with the idea of Americana to package itself as an all-American enterprise. The exotic nature of the experience was therefore a huge draw for locals, as they were enticed by the alien-ness of the entire franchise. In Hong Kong, for example, the franchise owner deliberately decided not to translate the word “McDonald’s” into Chinese characters, in order to “emphasize its foreign character.” (Watson 83)

We therefore see that McDonald’s early days in East Asia were characterized by attempts to tailor the franchise’s image to the specific setting. This finding is significant because it proves that McDonald’s felt its best hope for success was to identify itself with the local market, rather than brand itself solely as an American restaurant. The elements of its success in America may not have worked at all in the Asian context, thus prompting the corporation to seek a new way to brand itself. Family values were emphasized, creating a favorable image of McDonald’s as a restaurant that genuinely cared. Also, children were particularly targeted as McDonald’s sought to paint itself as a kind friend who was always willing to give a good time. Arching above these Asian-specific elements was the constant reminder of McDonald’s American-ness. This last trait
appealed greatly to local populations simply because of all the connotations and mental impressions that were evoked by the word “America”. In those early days, the red, white and blue were as much a part of McDonald’s as were the red and gold.

Let us now take a leap forward in time to the present day. From the outset, it is clear that McDonald’s today is a much more centralized, uniform entity. The main slogan for the franchise’s 2003 campaign worldwide is “I’m Lovin’ It”. For the first time, McDonald’s standardized its advertising thrust across the world, thereby presenting a consistent, clear image for the franchise. Gone are the area-specific, uniquely Asian campaigns of the past. They have been replaced by advertisements more in line with the standard template. These new advertisements are unabashedly American in their attitude and style. The main thrust of the present campaign seems to be presenting McDonald’s as a lifestyle choice for teenagers, rather than a mere eatery. Through the depiction of casual scenes with people engaged in leisure activities, the focus here is on teenagers and young adults, with the choice of colorful images and catchy tunes consciously catering to the particular demographic. What is significant is the way in which these advertisements have been adapted to cater to Asian audiences: These youths are now treated almost as if they were American youths straight out of high school. The image in Figure 3 below is a screen-shot from the Korean McDonald’s 2003 television campaign. The advertisement depicts Korean youths having fun in the streets and playing in a BMW. Their attire and, more importantly, their attitudes, are distinctly Western, as they are dressed in the latest street fashion popular among American teens. The music which accompanies the ad seems to be a Korean translation of the American original, thus retaining the funky beat of the initial campaign. This image of fun and relaxation is interspersed
with images of McDonald’s food. The contrast between the ads of 2003 versus those in the “formative years” is striking. There are no longer any grandmothers or families, and the music has been jazzed up tremendously to reflect modern youth listening patterns. Using youth to drive the campaign is a clear signal of the target audience, and the aim of creating a “cool” and “hip” image for the franchise. In some ways, one might argue that the advertisement encapsulates the McDonald’s brand as a simultaneously local and global one. While local settings are filmed, the actors are dressed in American teenage fashion, and the use of a BMW is a clear indication of the global nature of the fast-food chain and its target clientele. When one considers the rhetorical appeals at work here, one cannot help but be impressed by McDonald’s astute marketing ability. By showcasing its products alongside trendily-attired youths, McDonald’s is sending a clear message that it is a franchise in touch with the latest and hippest in youth culture, creating a strong appeal to ethos and logos. Youths draw the logical connection between the advertisements and McDonald’s “hip-ness”, concluding that the franchise understands their tastes and values. This connection builds a rapport and understanding between producer and consumer. Pathos is evoked when the audience listens to the hip-hop music and sees the colorful
scenes. These sensory appeals create a sense of identity and association between youths and McDonald’s, as they can easily relate the image to scenes from their own daily lives. The franchise is therefore building up credibility with youths as a restaurant that is in touch with their attitudes and values.

Elsewhere in Asia, we may identify similar aspects in McDonald’s advertisement strategies. Figure 4 is a website frontpage as part of the 2003 Taiwan campaign. The portrayal of a skateboarding youth demonstrates once again McDonald’s target demographic. The franchise is trying to promote itself as one in line with trends, at the forefront of “in-ness” in society. Again, the cross-cultural references are strong. While the person depicted is a Taiwanese, his attire makes strong reference to American teenage culture. The baggy clothing, sneakers and skateboard add an ethos appeal to the teenager, as he is immediately identified and associated with a Western youth. Also, the image is set against a background of a huge glass building, perhaps a corporate office or business hub. This image alludes to the global nature of the McDonald’s chain and its strength and power as a key player in corporate America. More importantly for the audience, the imposing glass structure alludes to the modernizing influence of McDonald’s, implying that its presence brings technological advancement and change. Even the youth’s stance and body language is telling. He is high in the air, soaring above the ground. This may evoke a
pathos appeal among the audience, who see in the figure an image of someone breaking free from the restrictions of society, and perhaps even tradition. The image of flight and liberation may evoke emotions of admiration, awe and a desire to emulate it. Teenagers may view this advertisement as a symbol of McDonald’s the “liberator,” as the franchise links itself with a break from traditional norms and represents all that is modern and non-traditional. This subversive message may work in subliminal ways. While not making the link too explicit, the advertisement nevertheless alludes to the symbolic meanings of McDonald’s and modernity. When one focuses on language, some valuable insight may also be drawn. The entire ad is in English, and explicitly so. Clearly, McDonald’s feels confident enough in the maturity of the Taiwanese market that it will accept and respond well to an all-English ad.

Having considered McDonald’s East Asian campaigns from both the past and present, it becomes clear that McDonald’s marketing strategy has evolved to embrace East Asia as an “assimilated market,” as the campaign and slogan is standardized the world over. There is no longer any uniquely Asian campaign; instead it is replaced by the homogeneous set of American ads. While previously McDonald’s marketers tailored strategies for local tastes, today they have decided that local tastes are no longer sufficiently unique to warrant a distinct campaign. Today, images of fun and relaxation are interspersed with images of McDonald’s products. Using youth to drive the campaign is a clear signal of McDonald’s target audience, and the franchise’s aim of creating a “hip” and “cool” image for itself. This firmly contrasts the familial tone of the ads from the “early days”, where one could detect a unique and distinct flavor about them. Today,
it is hard, if not impossible, to tell a McDonald’s Hong Kong campaign from a
McDonald’s America one.

Getting Behind the Arches

Beyond the aesthetic changes to McDonald’s marketing over time, there are
important questions that must be considered: What has brought about this evolution in
advertising strategies in East Asia? Why the shift in image from family-oriented to
trendy-youth-focused advertising? Many people pin the blame solely on McDonald’s
shoulders, arguing that it is a cultural hegemon bent on converting the world’s tastes to
suit its purposes. I will take a more balanced approach in this paper, as I argue that the
dynamics of cause and effect are mutual and interactive. While it is true that McDonald’s
seeks to influence attitudes and sell its version of “cool,” it also largely responds to
perceived societal trends, particularly among Asian youth.

As abovementioned, McDonald’s in the early days marketed itself with a strong
flavor of Americana and as a distinctly American enterprise. Today, however, the sense is
that McDonald’s has integrated itself into everyday life, so much so that it is perceived as
a local rather than foreign institution. To quote James Watson, McDonald’s has “blended
into the landscape” (87). With this in mind, we may consider the latest advertisement
campaigns as attempts to mold mature markets in the American image. McDonald’s,
seeing that East Asian consumers have been sufficiently saturated with Asian-themed
advertising, aim to steer tastes towards the genuinely American model in order to boost
sales and profits. They therefore portray local youth in “Americanized” settings, with
Western clothes and even habits borrowed from the West, such as break-dancing and hip-
hop music. This wholesale transferal of cultures is striking, as the franchise seems to be imposing its desired image of Asian youth directly onto the target market. Interestingly enough, this is not the first instance of McDonald’s attempted “cultural pedagogy” (Kincheloe). In the early 1990s, local management in Korean McDonald’s attempted to promote a take-out culture by featuring this option heavily in their television ads. The goal of this campaign was to alleviate space constraints in the restaurants, and get the Korean market more in line with the American one, in which fast-food literally meant eating quickly and leaving, rather than enjoying a leisurely meal as many Koreans were apt to do. Clearly then, if precedent is anything to go by, it would not come as too large a surprise to find McDonald’s doing the same with Asian youths today.

However, this perhaps misses the dynamic nature of cause and effect in this instance. To argue that McDonald’s creates these artificial tastes and markets them through its ads sounds highly implausible and untenable. Instead, it is more likely that McDonald’s works on the basis of existing trends and observable features of the Asian youth market. Asian youth are undeniably getting increased exposure to different cultural forces, chief among these being that of America and the West. Youths in Korea began dressing hip-hop style long before McDonald’s shot its television spot. The ad must have had a foundation in reality, not created out of thin air. Corporations base their marketing campaigns and strategies upon what they perceive to be prevailing trends of “cool” in the youth market. Thus we see how McDonald’s, while responding to trends and societal shifts, also plays a role in conveying these trends on a mass scale, with its advertisements viewed by millions of impressionable youths. If McDonald’s can seize upon a “hot” trend and associate the franchise with it, this may have a significant impact on a large number
of Asian youth, hence a dynamic relationship of cause and effect. McDonald’s identifies trends, which it then magnifies through the mass-media to turn these trends into mainstream culture. One might therefore view the franchise as a catalyst of sorts, as it speeds up an existing process on a large scale.

**Ameri-Asia? A Peek at the Future of Asia**

This dynamic marketing principle may not just be applicable to McDonald’s in East Asia. Perhaps it is reflective of McDonald’s international strategy as a whole. What then are the moral implications of this? If the franchise is indeed responsible for influencing tastes and youth attitudes, are the trends we see today healthy? Increasingly, Asian youth are leaving the values of their ancestors behind. The Confucian teachings of filial piety and family cohesion do not seem to hold as much sway over the young any more. Individualism and the challenging of authority seem more and more prevalent among Asian youth today, as a new generation begins to grow up. While one cannot possibly attribute sole responsibility to any single corporation, it is clear that the Golden Arches have had some part to play in this “Westernizing” trend. With ads that seem to extol the virtues of hanging out with friends and break-dancing, it would be hard indeed for McDonald’s to escape some form of culpability in this matter. Coupled with the impressionability of youth, it is not difficult to realize that these advertisements can have a significant impact on values-formation and one’s outlook on the world.

As a universally-recognized symbol, McDonald’s has a significant influence in shaping teen attitudes and values. Our society is one filled with a gamut of information. Discerning the relevant from the worthless requires great effort. Oftentimes, people cling
to recognizable symbols as a signpost to guide them through the labyrinth. Clearly, it is not difficult to see how important a role McDonald’s plays as a norm-former and value-shaper, particularly among the young. And yet, perhaps McDonald’s is merely a mirror reflecting a trend well under way. Perhaps the ads are just a reflection of reality. I believe this is untrue. While the ads are fundamentally based upon trends in the real world, it is all too possible that they exacerbate and quicken trends already in motion. The Americanization of Asian youth may not have begun with a McDonald’s ad campaign, but it probably got accelerated as a result of it.

If indeed the “culture” of McDonald’s and Americana does consume the world and create a homogeneous global society, is this a trend to be feared and guarded against? Some proponents of the franchise argue that it has brought modernization and international standards to methods of production, particularly in developing countries. (Watson, 89) This must of course be balanced against the opponents of McDonald’s who criticize the decline and loss of traditional societal values.

Interestingly enough, two key sources debate the issue from opposing points of view. In his book “Golden Arches East”, Watson argues that McDonald’s is really a local institution largely shaped and influenced by domestic consumer tastes and traditions. On the other hand, Joe Kincheloe in “The Sign of the Burger” believes that McDonald’s is a powerful corporate hegemon whose goal is to influence and educate the world through its cultural pedagogy. Combining the two perspectives is crucial to a holistic understanding of the issue.

Perhaps what is required here is balance. Asia does not have to make a stark choice between modernization and assimilation, as a third alternative is very viable if
only societies choose to take it up. To remain isolated from external influences would
make any society unsustainable in the long run. It is only correct that cultures adopt more
efficient and effective ways of conducting themselves. Hence, franchises like
McDonald’s should be emulated and cited as examples of truly advanced businesses,
which entrepreneurs in these Asian societies can use as a yardstick against which they
measure their own progress. However, this need not be at the expense of losing a distinct
identity and getting “assimilated”. If countries in Asia can learn from McDonald’s
business acumen and corporate savvy, while retaining values like family cohesion and
filial piety that make these societies strong, perhaps that would be the best of both worlds.

Corporations like McDonald’s cannot and should not run away from their duty to
society. With great power must necessarily come great responsibility. McDonald’s and its
advertisements has a significant impact on the way our youths view the world, by the
subtle labeling of certain things as “cool” and others as not. If McDonald’s does not
shoulder the burden of responsible instruction and sensitivity to local traditions and
values, Asian culture and tradition will have to fight for its very survival. This worry,
however, should not obscure an important responsibility on the part of Asian youths.
Individuals are not passive receptacles of information and messages. Rather, thought and
careful consideration must go into any decision when we choose to accept or reject an
idea. The same must hold when we are faced with a rising trend of Americanization.
Asian youths must be skeptical enough to question and challenge these trends, while
simultaneously regarding their own traditions with pride. As the torch-bearers of a new
generation, they must shoulder the burden of upholding their cultural and social legacy.
Only then can the Asian heritage be preserved in a world of rapid change.
Works Cited and Consulted


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

Web Resources

http://www.mcs spotlight.com