

McDonald's in east asia

Business, Company



Globalization: A Give & Take Shortly after my 16th birthday, making me of legal working age in the United States, I reluctantly signed the papers to be an employee of the McDonald's Corporation. I used the term reluctantly because to work in a McDonald's holds deeply negative connotations in American society, especially amongst teenagers. For three years I cooked the food, worked the cash register, cleaned the restaurant, and upheld the highest of McDonald's standards.

Just before my departure to attend college in another city, I quit McDonald's, with quite a large smile, and did not consume a single product from the restaurant until, three years later, my arrival in Hong Kong. This anecdote is an excellent example of how societal connotations shape the practices of both the business and its customer. Why did I hate my job so intently? Why was I so easily able to avoid the chain in America, its home country, but succumbed to the pressure 8,000 miles away in a foreign land?

Globalization, as represented through the entry of McDonald's into East Asia, is a series of cultural 'give and take', as businesses change to local preferences and consumers adapt to the various new disciplines of foreign enterprises. This combats the idea of American imperialism, as the new product formed from this 'give and take' is often vastly different from the original, sometimes even harboring completely adapted missions. *Golden Arches East*, by James L.

Watson, chronicles how McDonald's and its customers have been affected by the American firm's entry into East Asia. The book includes five main excerpts from anthropologists that observed and reported the cultural changes surrounding McDonald's in five countries: China, Japan, South
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Korea, Hong Kong, and Taipei. Each chapter speaks of the effects on the varying countries, but several common themes immerge. Firstly, in all the countries, both the company and the consumer made subtle changes to either tastes or behavior.

Some of the best examples of this are McDonald's consistent target of children, leading to the popularity of children's birthday parties, the prolonged eating times, and the consumer belief of the hamburger and French fries as a snack, not a meal. Throughout the market entry, McDonald's introduced many behaviors that were once unknown or uncommon. The fast food culture is a precise science, calculating every action to the second. This leads to disciplines and practices becoming commonplace, in order to maintain a corporate culture and profits. Queuing in Hong Kong, standing while eating in Japan, and the popularization of children's birthday parties are prominent examples in the text of how McDonald's has impressed certain disciplines upon cultures, often reaching beyond the confines of the golden arches. The introduction of the queue in McDonald's, while often times done forcibly with markers, is often accredited with changing how people order throughout Hong Kong (Watson 93). However, there are exceptions as I find it terribly troublesome to order a pineapple bun on the streets, generally standing with a look of bewilderment until a native comes to my rescue.

Nonetheless, this is an example of how native culture adapts to the disciplines of a foreign firm. Another is in Japan, as people began to accept eating while standing. Here, the author outlines two important facets of table manners: don't eat while standing and don't touch the food with your hands.

However, with limited space, McDonald's opted to place standing counters in their restaurants and customers quickly adapted to this practice (Watson 178). A simple idea but it challenged a fundamental mannerism in the country.

This 'give' from the McDonald's company can be seen on a grander scale through the popularization of children's birthday parties throughout all of the countries studied. One of the major approaches of company was to target children because, as in places such as China, they receive exceptional treatment from the entire family, which lead to the promotion of birthday parties. As the company further targeted children, the kids would then request such parties to be held at McDonald's. Before long, the idea of having a birthday was now commonplace in the countries of South Korea, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Watson).

Again, this challenged a fundamental cultural tradition; in South Korea, birthday parties went from being held privately with family to publicly with friends (Watson 149). All of these examples illustrate how McDonald's managed to impress values of their own upon different cultures. Through their global penetration, they transferred cultural beliefs, which required a change in the traditional. However, for every 'give' the company gave, there was also a 'take'. While the company managed to change certain ideals, others held resolute and forced them to adapt the way in which they practice business.

The Japanese still don't prefer to touch food with their hands. All of the five countries have taken the fast out of fast food. Also, these cultures believe it to be a snack, rather than a meal, and most refuse to clean the table

themselves. McDonald's provides quite a standard menu, typically consisting of a hamburger, French fries, and a drink. This meal essentially requires eating with the hands. As previously mentioned, this goes against one of the traditional Japanese table manners. The author observed people still largely use the wrappings to eat, thus avoid the use of their hands (Watson 178).

This example of a rigid aspect of culture not adapting to foreign disciplines can also be seen in how the food is consistently viewed as a snack. Generally, throughout these Asian countries, eating at McDonald's is not considered to be a meal. In Japan, it is said that a meal must have rice, and the same is true of Korea (Watson 164, 156). For McDonald's to build their brand as a popular dinner destination, which is essential for profits, they had to adapt. Thus, they added items to the menu that fit the local flare, such as fried rice (Watson). One of the major changes made was within the bedrock of the company.

As a fast food firm, they placed great value on people obtaining good quickly, and consuming it just as fast. However, in all of the five studied countries, people spend significantly longer amounts of time dining at McDonald's. For Beijing and Hong Kong, the average dining times are 25 minutes, and can reach 51 minutes during non-peak hours in Beijing (Watson 56, 93). This can be compared to Americans whom only spend on average 11 minutes in the restaurant (Watson 93). People have made eating at McDonald's a leisure activity, going directly against the nature of the company to be fast.

As the company targeted youth in each country, this gave life to a culture of young people spending many long afternoons at the restaurant. Again, the

company had to adapt their typical thought to accommodate this. Lastly, a major change was the company's policy of having customers bus their own tables. In Hong Kong, people refused to take their trash to the bins themselves, as it was considered to be beneath them (Watson 92). Due to this, the company had to employ extra workers to ensure cleanliness in the lobby.

Upon my original arrival to Hong Kong, I entered a McDonald's, just to see what different offerings they had. I was shocked to see people leaving their tables with the trash remaining. As I have since learned this is common in the culture here, I still get a slight sensation of taboo when I leave my things on the table at a low-end restaurant. Out of context, these adaptations can seem minimal, but from somebody who has gone through the rigorous training of McDonald's, every step of the dining experience is exact and calculated. To change any of this is near blasphemy.

However, the company heeded the call and adapted to fit local tastes. As the international attitudes toward globalization are increasingly becoming more negative, McDonald's became a scapegoat for American imperialism. Watson argues this is due to two things: the importance of food in culture and the idea that everybody has a McDonald's near them with which stands as a reminder and vent for frustrations (Watson 189). However, when looking back at their original entry into East Asia, one can see how the aspects that make McDonald's American are often times not found in their Asian counterparts.

As mentioned in the introduction, McDonald's often comes with a negative connotation. Whereas in Asia, it was known to be of high standards in both

cleanliness and quality. Another main tenet of the American McDonald's experience is the quickness of the meal. One does not spend leisure time there, and beyond that most order food through the drive through and never enter the store at all. However, the Asian countries have made it at home away from home, finding comfort in spending long hours there.

These two examples describe fundamental differences in the restaurants across the globe. In an industry where little change can make a big difference, this shows how what Asians view as the American experience often isn't that. For one to consider McDonald's globalization an act of American imperialism, they must first establish that is truly is American culture being transposed. Through the readings and my personal experiences, there is very little American culture to be found in Asian McDonald's, as even the food is quite different.

The notion of globalization being a cultural 'give and take' is a metaphor in lament terms for how globalization, as seen through the case of McDonald's international expansion, is truly a combining of several cultures, often forming something altogether new. It is not an act of imperialism, as corporations that choose to move into foreign countries make many fundamental changes. At the same time, the customers who purchase from the foreign enterprises make their own mark and shape it to fit their needs.

While globalization can be seen as one country doing business in another, it is really about the two parties doing business with each other. I was so proud of having taken such a long hiatus from the restaurant. However, when I entered it again in Hong Kong, I felt the strange combination of being in a comfortable home environment and belonging in this new, foreign land. Works

Cited Watson, James L.. Golden arches east: McDonald's in East Asia. Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1997. Print.