

WHAT'S IN A DUMPLING?

THE CHINESE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY AND THE SPREAD OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES UNDER GLOBALIZATION

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Critics of globalization who bemoan the corruptive effects of McDonald's and KFC on fragile local cuisines often overlook the interesting corollary that globalization also serves to export local cuisines, stimulating instead of stifling cultural diversity. Taking as her major example Chinese fast-food, Wong makes a strong case that, far from being subsumed, local cultures have thrived in today's globalized environment by benefiting from enlarged markets and modern business management.

The impact of globalization on indigenous cultures has been hotly debated in recent years. Proponents of globalization celebrate it as the ultimate order of humanity. David Rothkopf, an international trade scholar, for example, argues that the “homogenizing influences of globalization... [are] positive; globalization promotes integration and the removal not only of cultural barriers but of many of the negative dimensions of culture.” Being the primary sponsors of globalization, Americans should not hesitate to promote their culture worldwide because it is “fundamentally different” and provides “the best model for the future.”¹ On the other hand, critics condemn globalization as a new form of domination. The cultural imperialism thesis claims that “authentic, traditional and local culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, manly from the United States.”² Regardless of one's take on this debate, one common assumption prevails: Indigenous cultures, as Barber famously proclaims, are giving way to the uniform culture of “McWorld.”

Commentators have rightly observed that in China, as in other countries opening up to global exchanges, the entry of Western fast food (American in particular) has altered the dietary habits of many Chinese. However, it would be a grave oversight to conclude that Chinese culinary practices are in peril on the course towards cultural homogenization. In this article, I take a revisionist standpoint on the cultural effects of globalization. Using the culinary cultures of China as illustration, I refute the claim that globalization is simply cultural homogenization by highlighting that globalization has provided for the promotion and exportation of certain local cuisines; it can thus be understood as a means of propagating elements of traditional cultures in novel ways. The increasing awareness of Chinese culinary cultures worldwide offers a case in point: thanks to the proliferation of Chinese fast food establishments globally, Australians, Europeans and Americans can savor Chinese dumplings, Mongolian hotpots, Cantonese *dimsum* and northwestern Chinese noodles – cuisines that were mostly unheard of in the West before China lifted the “bamboo curtain” and resumed foreign contact in the 1970s – with

as much convenience as hamburgers and pizzas are found in China nowadays.

My arguments are presented in three sections. First, I provide an overview of past discussions on China's experience with cultural globalization. Second, I argue that the extant literature is flawed by a theoretical misconception about globalization. As the experience of other developing countries confirms, globalization allows indigenous cultures to grow through participation in one important institution of modernity – the global market. To conclude, I discuss the origin and evolution of China's fast food industry. I select several notable chains to illustrate how China is contributing to global cultural diversity by reviving and exporting its culinary cultures abroad.

The Advent of McWorld?

As recently as two to three decades ago, it was assumed that hamburgers, French fries, pizza and other fast food products would never succeed in China. When McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Hong Kong in 1975, "few thought it would survive more than a few months."³ American fast food chains brought products and services that bore little resemblance to the local culinary interests. In a region where rice is the traditional staple, fast food was largely perceived as a snack rather than a proper meal.⁴ Besides, fast food table manners typically oppose traditional eating etiquette. For example, in Japan, eating while standing or with one's bare hands were social taboos.⁵ Chinese societies shared similar attitudes, as formal meals are traditionally consumed with chopsticks and other utensils. How could Western companies such as KFC market its "finger-lickin'" chicken in such an adverse environment?

As a result, many were surprised when Western fast food became an enormous success in China. The

industry expanded into mainland China in 1987 when KFC set up its first franchise in downtown Beijing. At that time, the restaurant was the world's largest fast food outlet, drawing up to 3,000 customers daily during its first year of operation and subsequently setting numerous company records.⁶ The Golden Arches first appeared when McDonald's arrived at Shenzhen in 1990, and American fast food chains experienced a spectacular boom thereafter. When Beijing's first McDonald's opened in 1992, the restaurant – equipped with 700 seats and 29 cash registers – served 40,000 customers on its first day.⁷ Currently, there are approximately 700 McDonald's all over mainland China. Hong Kong alone boasts over 200 with more than 10,000 employees. The company proudly declares on its website that in 2003, "McDonald's Hong Kong cracked 32.5 million U.S.A. Grade A eggs, prepared over 25 million pounds of French fries, and grilled over 4.4 million pounds of beef patties to serve its customers." KFC has been even more ambitious. From 2001 to 2003, the number of KFC franchises in the mainland doubled from 400 to over 800. Today, it has 1,400 in more than 200 Chinese cities, with a presence in every province save Tibet.

What does this phenomenal success of Western fast food reveal about cultural globalization? As anthropologist James Watson points out, Chinese cuisines "are not small-scale cultures under imminent threat of extinction; we are dealing with... societies noted for their haute cuisines. If McDonald's can make inroads in these societies... it may indeed be an irresistible force for world culinary change."⁸ Indeed, at first glance, the introduction of American-style fast food in China may suggest that indigenous cultures will soon be tossed into the trash heap of history. In Beijing, people reacted with a mixture of surprise and anxiety. Some Chinese restaurants, including

ones that have been local favorites for generations, were soon driven out of business as customers opted for Western food. The “invasion” was seen as “an alarming threat to both the local food industry and the national pride of Chinese culinary culture.”⁹

This viewpoint is echoed by other academics: humanity, as some suggest, is on an irreversible track towards cultural homogenization. Benjamin Barber, for instance, foresees the future as “a busy portrait of onrushing economic, technological, and economic forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize peoples everywhere with fast music, fast computers, and fast food – MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald’s – pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce.”¹⁰ In his international bestseller, *Fast Food Nation*, journalist Eric Schlosser claims that the end of the Cold War “has led to an unprecedented ‘Americanization’ of the world, expressed in the growing popularity of movies, CDs, music videos, television shows, and clothing from the United States.”¹¹

The Western media has also sided with academic wisdom. According to the *Washington Post*, “China’s cuisine is increasingly being altered by the growing consumption of fast food, with Chinese now more likely than Americans to eat takeout meals.” Ironically, as China strives to assert its stature as an autonomous and distinctive power, it finds itself being integrated into the “Filet-O-Fish-eating, Pepsi-drinking cosmos.”¹² Globalization has made the country susceptible to foreign ideas, and culinary preferences have shifted accordingly. For example, cheese traditionally had been too pungent to be palatable for many Chinese. But in recent years, aggressive marketing by multinational suppliers of dairy products – along with their allies

in the supermarket and fast food industries – are gradually recasting Chinese tastes. The demand for cheese is growing.¹³

Chinese lifestyle has changed so dramatically that some even call into question the meaning of being Chinese. The *New York Times* notes that “ordinary people in China’s cities have found much common ground with Americans, with the way they live converging rapidly in the marketplace... Europeans may be wont to view every Big Mac as a terrifying sign of American cultural imperialism, but Chinese have mostly welcomed the invasion – indeed they have internalized it.”¹⁴ Studies show that receptiveness to American fast food has little to do with the taste of the food itself. Rather, most Chinese visit the Golden Arches or KFC because the experience satisfies their curiosity about, if not yearning for, American culture. The Big Mac, in the words of Yunxiang Yan, is “a Symbol of Americana.” Especially to the younger generations, eating fast food is “an integral part of their new lifestyle, a way for them to participate in the transnational cultural system.”¹⁵

Globalization and the Spread of Indigenous Cultures

Has the extant literature aptly described and explained the dynamics of globalization and its impact on the culinary cultures of China?¹⁶ Those who lament the end of cultural diversity base their reasoning on two assumptions. The first is that globalization on the one hand and the persistence of indigenous cultures on the other are inherently antithetical; as Barber puts it, their relationship constitutes the “dialectic of McWorld”.¹⁷ The second assumption is that local identities exist *a priori*. A culture must already be recognized by both members within and without a community before being brought under the impact

of globalization. For instance, to make the case that KFC is uprooting Beijing's native identity by ousting the city's famed roast duck from its restaurant menus, one must argue that people were conscious of a Beijing identity in the first place, and that Beijing delicacies are an essential component of this identity. Identity erosion would not be an issue if this identity never existed.

Both of these assumptions are flawed, as cultural identities are more a modern creation than a primordial conception. "Globalization," according to Tomlinson,

is really the globalization of modernity, and modernity is the harbinger of identity... Modernity... means, above all, the *abstraction* of social and cultural practices from contexts of local particularity... [It] institutionalizes and regulates cultural practices, including those by which we imagine attachment and belonging to a place or a community. The *mode* of such imagination it promotes is what we have come to know as 'cultural identity'. (italics in original)¹⁸

Contrary to popular belief, globalization is not a unilateral process in which a "McWorld" culture spreads, erodes and ultimately supplants indigenous cultures. Globalization produces – rather than victimizes – people's consciousness of their cultural environment. As in the case of Chinese culinary cultures, by successfully incorporating an important institution of modernity – a market economy – "globalizing" societies are empowered to repackage and promote their cultures beyond their geographical confines.

The experiences of Japan and India are instructive. According to Tulasi Srinivas, while the

forces of "cultural globalization... do enter India, cultural models are also increasingly emitted *from* India." The most prominent example is the rise of New Age culture, as reflected by the widespread practice of meditation, yoga and spiritual healing, and by the consumption of Indian cultural artifacts all over the world.¹⁹ Furthermore, the "entry of multinational food companies has been widely reported... but the concurrent boom in local foods and indigenous cuisine has been ignored." Inspired by the efficiency of Western management, the Indian catering sector "takes Indian recipes, simplifies them for quick production, and decreases time and cost to the consumer."²⁰ Indian society, as Srinivas succinctly posits, is experiencing "a restructuring of cultural concepts and institutions, incorporating the global and modern with the traditional and local."²¹

In addition, a culture's influence abroad has less to do with its inherent "strength" – a notion Huntington adopts in his famous analysis of civilization conflict – than with a society's level of economic development and integration with the global order. According to Tamotsu Aoki, the success of American fast food in Japan since the 1960s only in part reflected a dietary revolution that transformed Japanese society. As the number of foreign restaurants grew exponentially, "a simultaneous process of fast-foodization of traditional Japanese food was occurring."²² Nowadays, hamburgers have to compete with sushi in many Western countries.

Economic development also enabled Japanese corporations to promote their native cultures internationally. Suntory, for instance, pioneered "the penetration of Japanese mass culture and Japan's image in Asia" through the aggressive marketing of its beverages. Shiseido managed to infiltrate the saturated European market and compete on par with the European cosmetic giants because the company

highlighted its Japanese origin. The exoticism associated with Japanese aesthetics bolstered Shiseido's popularity among European consumers. The case of Japan shows that globalization "progresses in accordance with the degree of development in each society, and the traditions and culture of each country and society are reflected in the process."²³

Similar observations can be made for other Asian societies. For example, economic prosperity has provided the material foundation for Hong Kong and Taiwan to develop their entertainment sectors. Combining traditional Chinese with modern elements, Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular cultures have been enormously influential in mainland China²⁴ and also globally. Despite its history as a British colony and its cosmopolitan outlook, Hong Kong retained its Chinese roots. The city became an exemplar of Chinese culture as it became the chief producer and exporter of products ranging from Chinese *qipao* (cheongsams) to movies glorifying Shaolin martial arts.

Noodles vs. Sesame Seed Buns

Considering the omnipresence of McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut, American fast food has been a revolutionary force in China's everyday culture. They have yet to become the most popular dining locations, however. Indigenous cultures, including culinary traditions, are on the rise in China. Paradoxically, globalization is responsible for their revival.

The evolution of Hong Kong's culinary scene offers an ideal starting point for discussion, since the city has been on the forefront of global integration for a much longer time than mainland China. As American fast food chains have boomed in Hong Kong over the last three decades, the demand for fast food – American or otherwise – has grown

even faster. Currently, Hong Kong ranks first in the world for frequency of fast food consumption. Over 60 percent of the city's denizens eat at take-way restaurants at least once a week, compared to only 41 percent and 35 percent in mainland China and the United States respectively.²⁵ Hong Kong's fast food industry, nevertheless, is dominated by Chinese companies such as Café de Coral, Fairwood and Maxim. Chinese dishes accounted for over 70 percent of fast food supplied in Hong Kong in 2002.

Just as India underwent a trend of "fast-foodization" as it joined the global economy, the success of Café de Coral in Hong Kong epitomized the mass commoditization of Chinese cuisines. Before the company was established in 1969, Hong Kong already had a long history of eating out. Café de Coral, however, was among the first to put Chinese food into large-scale production and consumption. Its initial strategy was simple: "It moved Hong Kong's street foods indoors, to a clean, well-lighted cafeteria that offered instant services and moderate prices..."²⁶ and business expanded steadily thereafter. Ironically, the real boost for Café de Coral came when the Golden Arches arrived in 1975. According to Michael Chan, the company's current chairman, "McDonald's landing... inspired [Café de Coral's] confidence in self-service catering."²⁷ In the late-1970s, Café de Coral started using television commercials for mass advertising, and learning from McDonald's production model, established its first central food processing plant. Café de Coral is now Hong Kong's largest supplier of fast food.

Recently, Café de Coral extended its ambition beyond Hong Kong. The company's mission is to become "a distinguished corporation in the food and catering industry as the world's largest Chinese quick service restaurant group..."²⁸ In 2000, it

acquired Manchu Wok, Canada's largest Chinese fast food supplier and second largest in the United States. With over 200 restaurants throughout North America and the number rising constantly, Café de Coral prides itself "as a menu innovator specializing in fast and fresh Chinese cuisine, ranging in style from Cantonese to Szechwan." Chan boasts that eventually, "Chinese [food] will displace the burger and the pizza". The future of fast food, as *The Economist* predicts, "may be congee, tofu and roast duck."²⁹

The recent flourish of local fast food restaurants in mainland China is reminiscent of Hong Kong's experience, as challenges posed by American fast food since the late-1980s have compelled many Chinese restaurateurs to react and innovate. It was against this backdrop of foreign competition that the genesis of Chinese fast food occurred. The industry's nascent phase – which lasted until the early-1990s – was marked by constant attempts by local entrepreneurs to imitate their foreign challengers. Numerous copycat restaurants, with names such as "McDuck's," "McDonald's" and "Modormal's", appeared in the major cities. Most of them have posed little threat to the Western fast food giants. One outstanding exception, however, is Ronghuaji, or "Glorious China Chicken".

Ronghuaji was founded in 1989 after two Shanghai entrepreneurs were inspired by KFC's business model. Since its inception, emulating KFC has been Ronghuaji's *modus operandi*. Franchises were set up in downtown Beijing and Shanghai, usually right next to existing KFC restaurants, selling chicken products prepared with a wide variety of Chinese recipes. Although all of its Beijing outlets failed to be consistently profitable and eventually went out of business, Ronghuaji's moment of success "demonstrated that Chinese entrepreneurs could

employ Western technology and create an industry with 'Chinese characteristics.'"³⁰

Throughout the 1990s, Chinese entrepreneurs learned that reinvention of Chinese cuisine in the form of fast food – rather than blind imitation of foreign recipes – provided a better path to business success. Alarmed by the popularity of the American chains, the Chinese government promulgated state policy in 1996 to foster a local fast food industry.³¹ As Yan observes, the "fast-food fever" jumpstarted by the Western restaurants in Beijing "has given restaurant frequenters a stronger consumer consciousness and has created a Chinese notion of fast food and an associated culture."³² By the end of 1996, over 800 local fast food companies were doing business in China, operating over 4,000 restaurants. The annual revenue was over RMB40 billion, accounting for one-fifth of the catering industry's total revenue. By 1999, annual revenue surged to RMB75 billion, 20 percent higher than the previous year, and accounted for one-third of the industry's total. The growth rate for fast food was 7 percent higher than the average growth rate of the catering industry as a whole. Furthermore, contrary to the myth of foreign domination, Chinese-style fast food occupied a much larger portion of the market. As of 2002, four out of five fast food operators are Chinese restaurants. Business turnover of fast food restaurants serving Western dishes in 2000 accounted for only one-third of the industry's total volume.³³

The extraordinary growth of the Chinese fast food market is the direct result of rising consumerism. As in Café de Coral's success in Hong Kong, however, the real impetus to growth was the introduction of fast food management to aspiring Chinese entrepreneurs. Several of the industry's leading figures were former employees of McDonald's and KFC – an experience which equipped them with

Western management concepts and techniques. The success of their business owed much to their ability to combine “modern methods of preparation and hygiene with traditional Chinese cuisine...” Beijing’s most famous restaurant, Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant, even sent its management team to McDonald’s in 1993. A year later, it introduced its own roast duck fast food.³⁴

An important business concept that helped Chinese chains to proliferate is franchising. Today, nearly all fast food restaurants in China publicize telephone hotlines for franchise information. With the friendly denomination of *jiameng rexian* (literally, “the hotline to join the league”) these numbers are usually posted in prominent places, such as restaurant entrances. For instance, in 1996, Daniang Dumplings was merely a community restaurant in Changzhou in Jiangsu province with only six employees selling arguably the most prototypical of northern Chinese food – *shuijiao* (boiled dumplings). Within the next nine years, it expanded into an empire of over 150 franchises throughout the country and as far as Indonesia and Australia.

The phenomenal success of Café de Coral, Daniang Dumplings and others is of great significance not only to the preservation of Chinese culinary cultures at home, but also their influence abroad. When a new restaurant is established in a foreign territory, not only is its food consumed, but its associated culture is also propagated among the host community. The case of Mongolian hotpot illustrates how a culture that was once found in a restricted geographical region can spread through market expansion. In the past, Mongolian hotpot was found mostly in northern China; it was considered an exotic cuisine even to Chinese of other regions. In the past six years, however, Xiaofei yang – a chain enterprise started at the turn of the century with

just one outlet in Inner Mongolia – transformed hotpot into a regular repast throughout the country. Today, the chain owns franchises in as far south as Guangdong and Hong Kong – the geographical opposite of the cuisine’s origin in China. It has an aggressive plan to expand overseas, with outlets already set up in North America.

Another remarkable example is Malan Hand-Pulled Noodles. The company opened its first restaurant in 1993, serving traditional dishes from northwestern China in a fast food setting. By the end of 2002 it had multiplied into 436 outlets nationwide. By 2004, it had expanded outside of China, into Singapore, Western Europe, and California.³⁵ On the opening day of its first restaurant in the United States, company manager Frank Wang declared that by “inheriting the essence of traditional beef noodles, and maintaining the original taste of Chinese food culture, Malan Noodle achieves further development by applying the modern fast food concept, thus making the national snack flourish.”³⁶

Conclusion

The primary lesson one can learn from the thriving Chinese fast food sector is that globalization is facilitating the spread of cultural diversity, rather than – as the word “globalization” so misleadingly suggests – a tendency towards cultural homogeneity. The opening up of Chinese society cultivated a population curious about outside ideas, values and cultures. A taste for foreign lifestyle, however, is not the same as cultural submission. As the Chinese learned to become “modern,” globalization also nurtured a class of outward-looking entrepreneurs who extracted elements of Chinese culture and combined them with modern business management to compete in the global economy.

The arguments presented in this article serve to rectify the misconception of cultural homogenization that underpinned intellectual exchanges in the past. The case of Chinese culinary cultures, however, represents only the tip of the iceberg of China's contribution to global cultural trends. Other areas of Chinese traditions are also experiencing a revival. The production, research and development of Chinese medicine, for example, have been modernized; its

practice is gaining wide acceptance in many Western countries. Various types of *qigong* – the Chinese art of self-healing that combines meditation and body movements – are also proliferating. To truly understand the fate of indigenous cultures under globalization, analysts should pay more attention to China as a cultural emitter, rather than simply labeling it a passive follower of a purported global culture.



ENDNOTES

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- 3 James L. Watson, "McDonald's in Hong Kong: Consumerism, Dietary Change, and the Rise of a Children's Culture," in James L. Watson, ed., *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 78.
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- 11 Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 239-240.
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- 18 John Tomlinson, "Globalization and Cultural Identity," in David Held and Anthony McGrew, eds., *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 60.
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- 21 *Ibid.*, 106.
- 22 Tamotsu Aoki, "Aspects of Globalization in Contemporary Japan," in Peter L. Berger and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 68-80.
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- 32 *Ibid.*, 201.
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