8 Singaporeans Ingesting McDonald's

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Globalisation of capitalism elicits two contradictory responses from managers of the nation-state, especially those in the so-called periphery and semi-periphery. To prosper, indeed simply to survive, a nation must be able to insert itself as a node in the global network of capital flow. To this end, the arrival of capital is to be enthusiastically embraced. However, its effects on the culture of everyday life that attend the arrival of capital invariably gives rise to a 'dis-ease' —a lingering cultural reservation and conservatism—which reduces enthusiasm and renders the embrace of capital less than complete.

A most apparent and immediate cultural effect of successful capitalisation of the local economy is the expansion of material consumption. Global marketing of mass-produced objects, broadcast through advertisements and other popular culture media, like TV and movies, provides the images to be emulated by consumers worldwide. Consumption expansion thus tends to lead to some level of global homogenisation of culture among consumers; an effect that gives rise to negative responses to globalisation.

As consumer goods are always also cultural goods, expansion of consumption of imported products and services often gives rise to an exaggerated sense of 'panic', of cultural 'invasion' which, supposedly, if left unchecked will result in the demise of the local culture. Critics, including the state, thus inveigh against specific 'foreign' targets, such as 'Americanisation' or 'Japanisation', and take upon themselves to promote 'local' culture as ballast against the 'foreign' cultural invasions. The desire of the state to involve itself in such ideological critique is obvious. Homogenisation of culture globally is antithetical to the idea of the 'uniqueness' of nationalist sentiments and, therefore, is potentially threatening to the hold of the nation-state on its citizens. Emphasising the 'national' as 'local' differences is in the interests of the nation-

state as an act of self-preservation. Hence, existing alongside embracing the arrival of capital is a cultural/moral critique of both the commodification of social life and the 'cultural imperialism' of the countries from which the goods originate.

The conjoined material and cultural responses, always in tension, constitute a disjuncture at most, if not all, sites which respond positively to the penetration of globalised capital. This chapters examines one instance of how the disjuncture works itself out in a location which is highly successful in inserting itself into global capitalism—Singapore—a success which in turn transforms it into a modern consumer society.[1]

Singapore's economic success is overwhelmingly the result of doing everything that is necessary to achieve capitalist growth. The logic of capital operates unfettered, enshrined ideologically in a local version of pragmatism, to be discussed later. On the other hand, a critique of the culture of consumption is framed by a larger public discourse of contestation between so-called Eastern (Asian) and Western (European, Australian and American) values in the cultural spheres (Ho 1989). The local 'Asian culture' is discursively constituted by the state as a distilled composite of the three major cultures of Asia, namely, the Chinese, Malay, (Islamic) and Indian, the traditional cultures of the three ethnic groups that constitute the national population (Mahbubani 1994; Koh 1993). It is this 'Asian-ness' that is supposedly under siege, via consumption, by 'Westernisation/Americanisation'.[2] This deculturalisation/Westernisation is supposedly most inscribed on the youth, the most avid consumers of all things 'foreign', in a city of relative affluence and where the body has become the locus of consumption for all. The fear of this process greets the arrival of almost all new consumer goods.

Empirically, it is impossible to document, without extreme simplification, the whole array of phenomena which, in their totality, constitute the overall transformation of Singapore from a city of material privation to one of, as many would say, excessive consumption. This documentation can be done only in fragments, including the present chapter. The fragment analysed here is the reception and consumption of McDonald's hamburgers. McDonald's came to Singapore in the beginning of the 1980s. It had, by 1995, 65 outlets and Singaporeans are among the largest consumers of its burgers per capita in the world.[3] There is a McDonald's everywhere, sometimes two in larger public housing estates. This extensive reach of McDonald's is obviously indicative of its popularity with the population.

There are two reasons for the analytic interest in McDonald's. 'McDonaldisation' has come to represent two separate processes in the

discourse on late capitalism. First, from a production point of view, it stands for the continuing rationalisation, beginning with Taylorism, of the process of mass production. This involves progressive deskilling of workers through increasing simplification, standardisation and routinisation of job tasks (Ritzer 1993; Leidner 1993). Second, to cultural critics in both the US and locations invaded by McDonald's, the latter often stands as a US 'imperialist export' (Leidner 1993:47); reflecting the commonly held thesis that 'homogenisation' of cultures, which results from the globalisation of capitalism, is synonymous with 'Americanisation'. With this double representation, McDonald's as a consumption phenomenon contains within itself the analytic resource for the examination of issues at hand.

McDonaldisation as rationalisation

In *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), Ritzer suggests that the extreme automation of production, serving and consumption of hamburgers at McDonald's stands as the exemplar, and discursively 'McDonaldisation' stands as the 'trope', for the inevitable outcome of the internal logic of the rationalisation of social life, which began in the nineteenth century in the West. This trajectory of rationalisation has two loci; one in the bureaucratic management of society and the other in the breaking down of work into standardised routines in the mass production of industrial goods. The two processes have the same motivation and result: the increasing efficient control of both people and production through standardisation and resulting predictability. Arguably, in broad outline, all contemporary capitalist nation-states must abide by the logic of these two subprocesses of rationalisation. Singapore is thus no exception.

From the very outset the single-party dominant government, which had governed the island for all of its slightly more than 30 years history of independence, decided that the only road to survival as an island-nation, without any natural resources except a good harbour and a growing population in need of immediate employment, was to embrace global capitalism through export-oriented industrialisation fuelled by transnational companies and state-owned corporations. The economic is thus privileged, indeed hegemonic, over all other aspects of social life. The single-minded pursuit of continuous economic growth became the sole criterion for initiating and assessing all public policies. This instrumental rationality is ideologically crystallised into a local version of 'pragmatism': that which aids economic development is deemed practical, all other arguments and criteria for or against any policy are not to be entertained. For example,

'in principle' arguments are often trivialised as mere form or useless academicism.

To make the nation attractive to global capital, not only must the necessary financial and physical infrastructure be developed, but social conditions must be disciplined. The once-militant labour movement was brought into the fold of government-sponsored National Trades Union Congress; the population is continuously developed by means of education into a valuable human resource; meritocracy is the basis of allocation of social and material rewards, merit itself being measured by standardised performance criteria. In principle no sector of social life, no matter how private, is exempt from state intervention to harness it for economic growth. All these translate into a generalised regime of social discipline under a highly centralised rational public administration under the political leadership of a single political party that possesses a high degree of continuity of both ideology and personnel.[4]

After more than 30 years of continuous economic expansion, the small labour force, women included, is fully employed. The economy suffers from chronic shortage of labour. To save labour, social organisation and everyday life need to be further rationalised. In business, the Economic Development Board has become a one-stop facility to co-ordinate all relevant government agencies responsible for attracting foreign investments. In public administration, an ambitious information technology plan which will wire up the entire island is being implemented with the aim of enabling all transactions with government agencies to be conducted via computers (Kuo 1988). In production, computerisation, automation and robotisation are promoted with very substantial grants-in-aid from the government (cf. Hing and Wong 1995). Finally, in the consumption sphere, not only is self-service implemented whenever possible, a 'cashless' society is being promoted, in which it is envisaged that all daily retail transactions will be conducted through 'smart' cards.

All the above processes fit, substantively and discursively, into the trajectory of the idea of the McDonaldisation of everyday life. Their institutionalisation in Singapore has transformed the island-nation into something of a model for many Third World nations. This is especially so for the Asian 'socialist' nations, such as China and Vietnam, in which their respective Communist Parties hope to achieve high levels of capitalist growth without having to share power with any other political rivals. The result is that Singapore, an insignificant geographical space, has commanded a disproportionate space in international discourse, not only on economic development but also on social and political development, in which it champions so-called Asian values and a version of 'Asian' democracy. It is at this level of values that the negative cultural response

to global capitalism, also going under the trope of 'McDonaldisation', raises its head.

The level of material consumption has expanded greatly across all class divisions. With the expansion of wealth, the island-nation became increasingly inundated by American-produced mass cultural products and services, along with those from other parts of the world, notably Japan. Ideologically, the arrival and rapid spread of McDonald's may be thus read as an instance of the increasing 'Americanisation' of Singaporeans and their ethnic-based cultures. McDonald's stand as a sign(ifier) of a concept of 'American-ness' (Barthes 1972), and Singapore instance stands as an example of the 'ineffable McDonaldisation of the world' (Appadurai 1990). The consumption of McDonald's burgers is not, therefore, solely a nutritional concern, nor an economic one, for with current Singaporean wages it is an inexpensive food. However, it may be of 'cultural' concern, seen contextually as part of the invasion and consumption of all 'icons' of America, such as blue jeans, sports shoes and other items of 'streetwear'. It is this cultural penetration of American-ness into the supposedly 'Asian' values of Singaporeans that is being thematised in a cultural/moral/political discourse of contestation between Asian and Western values; a discourse that is promoted by the Singaporean state itself. This Americanisation thesis will be examined, first, in terms of the 'meanings' of McDonald's, both its food and its spaces, to the most avid consumers, the Singaporean teenagers and, second, the way McDonald's advertises itself on local TV, the premier medium of popular culture and cultural penetration.

Familiarising McDonald's

As elsewhere in the contemporary world, there are no self-respecting Singapore teenagers who have not spent time in a McDonald's. A recent minimal survey of 200 youths aged between 12 and 24 who regularly hang out in groups of various sizes at two McDonald's in Singapore—one in the prime shopping area and one in the town centre of a public housing new town—found:

- the majority meet at McDonald's, because of the convenient locations, before going out or going home;
- the mean length of time spent is about 24 minutes for all male groups, 27 minutes for all girl groups and 33 minutes for mixed groups (the larger groups tend to spend longer time); and

- about 70 per cent reported that they did not actually like the food (Ang, Low and Koo 1995).

It should be noted that the 'American-ness' of McDonald's, which makes it a place of 'cultural consumption', did not figure at all in the answers given for using the places, nor was it deemed significant for the teenage-researchers to pursue.[5] This is, perhaps, in contrast to the high level of awareness accorded to McDonald's 'American-ness' in other places outside the US.

To better document the reception and consumption of McDonald's in Singapore, it is instructive to examine ethnographic interpretations of how 'American/cultural' inscription of McDonald's is experienced in France and the Netherlands. On the opening day of a new McDonald's in a smaller city in France, it was observed that:

> queuing behaviour differed substantially from the way the fast food ritual is practised in the United States. Customers would tend to gather all along the counter, with little respect for the integrity of the cash registers as line markers…. Consequently, the workers at the counter, for whom it was presumably their first active day on the job, spent a good deal of effort trying to herd customers over to their particular cash register 'station'.
>
> (Fantasia 1995:222)

During the busier periods,

> an assistant manager placed herself about four or five yards in front of the counter to serve as a 'guide', answering occasional questions and directing traffic to available places at the counter. The fact that someone was assigned this task suggests that the company anticipated some initial difficulties for those unfamiliar with the ritual process, and indeed there were occasional moments of chaos on the first day of business.
>
> (Fantasia 1995:222)

The same 'pandemonium' at the serving counter has been noted in the Netherlands. Anthropologist Peter Stephenson recounts the experience of his search for a cup of hot coffee, on a cold Sunday morning, in Leiden, where nothing was open, except for the church and McDonald's:

> Approaching the 'service area' I notice that there is a considerable melee in front of the bank of cash registers where a swarm of

> children and a few lumbering adults are all trying to gain the recognition of a small group of green uniformed and harried looking adolescent McDonald's employees.
>
> [a] voice lifts me out of my brief surreal reverie with, 'Excuse me, but is this a queue?' directed at Ms Junior Management Trainee …[whose] robotic smile fades a bit and a giggle escapes with the answer…'Actually, I have never observed the Dutch to queue'. Several people in front of me begin to wave their order forms aloft, and when the 'service person' asks, 'Who is next?' they simultaneously yell, 'me!', 'me!'
>
> (Stephenson 1989:231, 232)

From this ethnographic account, Stephensen suggests that, 'there is a kind of instant emigration that occurs the moment one walks through the doors, where Dutch rules rather obviously don't apply and where there are few adults around to enforce any that might' (1989:237).

For Stephenson, the most unnerving behavioural demand that McDonald's imposes on the Dutch is queuing. It is a cultural practice that is in contrast to the type of loose ordering of Dutch customers awaiting service which is usually practised, in which one is responsible for noting one's position in the crowd and claiming the proper turn when it arrives. This difference in turn-taking 'marks' McDonald's as an 'American' space into which Dutch customers are transported and where an 'American form of presentation of self' is required. This reading was to be affirmed, for ethnographer Stephenson (1989:237), by the mid-Western American couple complaining about the 'rudeness' of the Dutch at the same restaurant. Similarly, 'difficulties' of getting the French customers into queues behind the cash registers is used by Fantasia to mark one feature of the American-ness of McDonald's.

Parenthetically, given that queuing is not a particular difficult exercise, one wonders whether the refusal of the Dutch to abide by McDonald's rules is not a form of cultural resistance in itself. As Leidner points out, in spite of McDonald's explicit scripting of the routines of interactions between staff and customers, it has 'to face some service-recipients who seemed intent on thwarting the routines or on interfering with the workers' preferences about how to proceed' (1993:7).

However, the use of 'queuing' as a representation of American-ness is intelligible only contextually. Its indexical significance as the 'Americanisation' of the French and the Dutch is only remarkable with reference to the behaviours of the latter two. Its representational or symbolic efficacy for marking American-ness fades, if not disappearing

completely, in situations where queuing is already the norm even before the arrival of McDonald's, as is the case in Singapore.

Queuing was a non-issue in Singapore by the time McDonald's arrived in this island-nation. Driven single-mindedly by the desire for economic success, every aspect of life is rationalised to increase orderliness; orderliness is a 'totalising' strategy of government. Queuing 'naturally' falls into this strategy; the unruly crowds at bus stations, ticketing outlets, department stores and supermarkets have all been disciplined into queues, defined by the space within guard-rails if necessary. That queuing has become a norm of everyday life is signalled by, first, the appreciation of its efficiency; second, the psychological relief of not having to pay attention to who was before or after you nor of having to fight for your turn; third, the avoidance of others' anger when one inadvertently jumped the queue; and finally the tinge of guilt one experienced in doing so purposely. Consequently, instead of being disoriented by or resisting the practice, Singaporean youth are undaunted by queues at McDonald's; thereby eliminating the indexical efficacy of queuing to signify 'American-ness'.

On the other hand, Singaporean youth appears to be appropriating its spaces for themselves.[6] The functional use of McDonald's as a 'meeting' place, mentioned above, may be explained contextually, in terms of the characteristics of the friendship pattern of the youth themselves and the planning and allocation of public spaces in Singapore.

In Singapore's education system, schools are assigned to secondary students not by place of residence, as in community schools. Rather, assignment is according to the students' respective academic achievements in national examinations. They are thus placed into a hierarchy of schools of descending 'quality', spread across the island. Consequently, school-based friendship networks are correspondingly drawn from the entire island. These school-based networks are of greater significance to the youth because residential neighbourhoods have lost much of their function in generating contacts among residents.

During pre-industrial days, the 'urban village' environment was a prime site for simple, inexpensive, even free, recreational activities, which often amounted to little more than idling together in open spaces and local coffee shops. Friendships were prevalent among those who idled together and often cut across age groups (Chua 1989). However, the complete transformation of the island's residential landscape from urban villages to high-rise, high-density public housing estates, has radically changed youth friendship patterns in Singapore. Living in relative isolation in the air and surrounded by too many strangers at ground level, a high-rise, high-density living environment

is a rather inhospitable site for establishing acquaintances. Furthermore, very significant improvement of comfort at home encourages individuals to stay at home rather than hang out in public spaces. These residential conditions combined with the increased affluence which enables them to purchase commercialised entertainment, and their desire to escape routine familial restraints and disciplines, drive youth away from the residential compound to seek entertainment in downtown areas; to stay out as long as permissible, once they are out of the house.

Given the various distances which students must traverse to and from homes and schools, a location which is convenient for everyone in a network must be found. McDonald's restaurants meet this need nicely. The business demand to capture the largest possible market slice dictates the spatial distribution of McDonald's outlets throughout the island: they are found in every public housing estate, where approximately 85 per cent of Singaporeans reside. This ubiquity among the people 'normalises' and reduces McDonald's presence to the quotidian. It is an important step towards the reduction of any sense of 'exclusivity' which may in turn impart to McDonald's a sense of the 'exotic', the 'foreign'/'American'. The same ubiquity also lends to McDonald's outlets convenience as meeting places: they are open for long hours, near mass rapid transit stations and in busy thorough-fares, which provide visual pleasures while waiting for each other.

McDonald's in Singapore is also particularly hospitable to upper-level secondary school students. At the outlets that are not within the central business district, local management tend to allow students to do their school-assignments on the premises during the non-peak business hours; in consideration of the fact that many of the students do not have the luxury of either study spaces and/or relative silence in the public house flats that are their homes. This is in sharp contrast with the policy, in the US itself, of minimising the chances of its outlets from becoming 'teenage hangouts' (Leidner 1993:50). This generosity of McDonald's is especially appreciated during the annual national examination periods. Psychologically and symbolically, this particular use of McDonald's as a study space 'familiarises' it, in both senses of being familiar and familial. Such familiarisation displaces the sense of the space as 'exotic', a feature that is a necessary ingredient for a reading of McDonald's as an 'American' space in Singapore.[7] However, this displacement does not erase the symbolic potential of representing McDonald's as an 'American' place, a point which I shall return to in the concluding section of this chapter.

Accommodating McDonald's

As an externally introduced food, McDonald's is unavoidably inserted into local gastronomic practices of every location in which it sets up business. Marketing and consumption of McDonald's must, therefore, work within existing terrain in order to achieve desired results. Here again, its reception in France is instructive to understanding its reception in Singapore.

Tobin, quoting various French writers, points out that cuisine is an arena of French cultural imperialism:

> Phileas Gilbert, writing in 1884, envisioned a French school of professional cookery…'The products of our French restaurants and foodshops, which are exported all over Europe, would be represented on a vast scale, and the alimentary riches of the entire world would flood into the school, just as they once did into Rome. Our national culinary experts would, in their turn, imprint the seal of their genius upon these products, as they do with everything that passes through their hands, and redistribute them to the greater happiness of our modern gastronome'.
>
> (Tobin 1992:162)

Against this totalising French culinary claim and ambition, American food has but a place in the extreme periphery. The insertion of McDonald's into France was, not surprisingly, met with cultural hostility. French sociologist, Michel Crozier asserted, 'for many French people there is an association that good food is French and fast food is American and foreign and bad' (quoted in Fantasia 1995:202). However, such scepticism did not prevent the subsequent penetration of McDonald's to become the largest fast food chain in France. Indeed, Fantasia suggests that the popularity of McDonald's and other American fast-foods was one cause of the formation, in 1989, of the 'National Council of Culinary Art', by the French Ministry of Culture, charged with the duty of 'protecting the culinary patrimony'. For according to the then Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, 'France has developed the art of living which we all need to discover and safeguard' (quoted in Fantasia 1995:203).

It is against this proud French heritage that McDonald's defines itself. French cuisine requires for itself a certain decorum about how it is to be consumed; one has to have time for long meals with proper tableware and appropriate, if not exacting, manners. These cultural entailments have apparently driven a segment of the French urban population to

fast foods. One example is the new breed of managers who are in a hurry and only stop long enough for 'disconcertingly simple lunches, consisting of a sandwich or an airline-style meal on a tray' (Fantasia 1995:214).

'Old bourgeois' manners with their formal demands also turn away, and turn off, youth. It is here that the consumption of McDonald's as consuming 'American-ness' is most clearly expressed as a form of 'resistance by ritual'. Self-served fast food is preferred by the young: 'you can choose your own place to sit'; 'each person orders direct from the cook'; 'you simply pay individually, so you don't have to bother dividing up the check among everyone'; 'the tables are not set, they are clear'; 'there are no utensils and you can eat by hand'; 'you can choose to eat one thing, one doesn't have to order several courses'. In sum, 'there are no rules'.

The informality of McDonald's gets culturally 'essentialised' as essentially American: 'You really feel the American atmosphere—the noise, the bright colours, the dress of the staff'. This informality, 'loud' and 'gaudy' and 'disorderly', is marked as the difference against the 'sedate', 'subtle' and 'sophisticated' practices of the French. Hence, the French adolescents' distinction between a 'cafe' and a fast food outlet: 'you just wouldn't linger for a long time in a fast food restaurant like you would a cafe' and, 'No—its different, the cafe is more human—you can feel the presence of people; there's a warmer atmosphere there, people are not in a hurry'. Significantly and ironically, the consumed 'American' Other is not a valorised but a degenerate Other with reference to the French cultural self.[8]

The antipathy between French culinary establishments and practices and McDonald's, which is use as the basis of the 'hyper-real' representation of McDonald's as 'America(n)', is in turn appropriated by the latter in positioning itself in French society through advertisements:

> For example, an ad running in 1994 consisted of a child's voice reciting proper table manners ('Don't put your elbows on the table'; 'Don't play with your food'; 'Don't eat with your fingers'; 'Don't act like a clown'; 'Don't make noise at the table'; etc.), with different images of people eating at a McDonald's corresponding to each edict (i.e., people eating with their elbows on the table; playing with their french fries; with their hands; joking around; etc.) The child's voice concludes the ad by announcing 'that's how it goes at McDonald's'.
>
> (Fantasia 1995:224)

This intentional marking of differences between French gastronomic practices and those of McDonald's serves to intensify the symbolic representation of McDonald's as 'American' and the behaviours contained within as 'American' culture.

The insertion of McDonald's as fast food into the gastronomic terrain of Singapore is much less dramatic. 'Fast food' is a common phenomenon in Singapore, *avant the lettre*. Until the recently acquired wealth, with extremely few exceptions, all food consumed outside the Singaporean home was 'hawker' food, purchased in a number of locations and modes: from itinerant hawkers, from stationary hawkers in markets in the morning or all day in local coffee-shops; from hawkers who gathered at open-air parking lots in downtown locations in the evening, when the cars of office workers had cleared. These varied locations and modes were 'rationalised' by the government in its drive for orderliness and efficiency. Hawkers were herded, by the mid-1970s, into purpose-built, 'hawker centres', which are little more than wide-open shelters without walls.

In such centres, food is ordered individually and directly from the stalls. Consumers sit wherever there is a free table and the tables are numbered for ease of identification by hawker-assistants when they are delivering the food ordered. When hawkers are particularly busy, customers often serve themselves. These practices are hardly any different from those of McDonald's. Furthermore, McDonald's familiarity has been enhanced recently by the employment of middle-aged or older Singaporean workers, including as frontline service staff, because of labour shortage and the reluctance of Singaporean youth to work during the school term. This removes the 'smiling' youthful service that is trade-mark of McDonald's in America.

Even the once significant exception of McDonald's being an air-conditioned, hence a more comfortable space is of decreasing relevance with the emergence of 'food courts', which are air-conditioned hawker centres in large commercial buildings. In sum, the practices which can be indexically identified as McDonald's essential 'American-ness' within and against French practices are, again, unremarkable in Singapore. They are devoid of the possibility of cultural thematisation and valorisation, and cannot, correspondingly be marketed as the Other to Singaporeans.

It should be noted, however, that hawker food in Singapore reflect the ethnic composition of the population, and are ethnically marked. One can get Chinese, Malay or Muslim and Indian food in every hawker centre; the same type of noodle may be cooked differently by different ethnic hawkers. While the hamburger has always been known to the English-educated Singaporeans, McDonald's contribution is to make it an 'everyday food', just another possible item of hawker food, available

to everyone. Like all the other hawker foods, the hamburger is ethnically marked, in this case as 'Western' food, along with pork-chops, 'chicken-chops', hot-dogs and fish-and-chips, which together constitute the offerings of local hawkers who sell 'Western' food. However, it bears no additional cultural significance to the rest of the equally ethnically marked food; the consumption of the Western food materially is not tantamount to consuming the West culturally, it is merely a change of taste.[9]

Significantly, McDonald's further inserts itself into the local palate with deeper indigenisation of its offerings. Chicken McNuggets are served with curry or sweet-and-sour sauce. Chili sauce, an essential ingredient for all hawker food in Singapore, is served with burgers along with ketchup. Finally, at the level of cultural signification, it introduces local emotive signs in the naming of some of its food items. For example, a chicken burger was marketed as *'kampong'* burger; *kampong* refers to the villages in which most Singaporeans lived prior to being resettled into high-rise public housing estates, a time which is remembered nostalgically as the 'good old days' when life was much more relaxed and community more organic than today's high-stress living in a globalised economy (Chua 1995b). This level of use of local cultural signs is carried further into McDonald's advertising campaigns.

Inserting McDonald's into Singaporean-ness

In the absence of possibilities of marking behavioural differences, the selling of McDonald's in Singapore takes a completely opposite track from that which it takes in France. Instead of marketing itself against local culture, McDonald's seeks to insert itself into the latter. Furthermore, given the relatively short history of Singapore as a nation, and the fact that its national 'identity' and 'culture' remain a matter of active state promotion, McDonald's advertisements seek actively to partake in this constitution of a national identity and culture.

One of the repeatedly used TV advertisements, especially during the run-up to national day (August 9), begins with a morning assembly of primary school boys in a flag-raising ceremony with the boys choir singing, 'when the sun shines over our land'; this is followed by a frame of two eggs frying and piping hot coffee, suggesting that it is breakfast time; it then cuts to a Chinese old lady in a shophouse, symbol of old Singapore architecture, opening a window to let the sunshine in; it next moves into a primary school classroom, with children sitting on the floor learning the alphabet, 'b for boy', 'g for girl' and 'm for McDonald's'; the scene switches to a group of

clean and fresh boys in a McDonald's, one of them was attracted to a girl who flashes him a smile, and he says 'I will have whatever it is that she is having'; he is followed by a frame of pouring of freshly cooked french fries onto a metal tray and a fishburger oozing with white creamy sauce; the next frame is of a young man driving a red convertible sports car— a very coveted possession in a land where cars can costs as much as public housing flats—singing to himself the McDonald's song in Mandarin, driving by to pick up his hamburger; he is awakened from his self-contentedness, blushing slightly, by the applause and laughter of two McDonald's waitresses; the scene then cuts to the clock tower at the Victoria Memorial Hall, a monument to Singapore's colonial past, the time is 7 o'clock in the evening; the final shot is of an old Chinese gentleman in traditional clothes, no longer in use by anyone, sitting stiffly in a rose-wood chair, in a very traditionally appointed sitting room, playing the McDonald's refrain, 'at McDonald's', on a Chinese string musical instrument, the 'erhu'.

That this ad aims to insert McDonald's into the daily life of Singaporeans, rather than taking them out of it and into an 'American' space, is obvious; it takes us through a twelve hour day of Singaporeans of all ages in less than a minute. In addition, any Singaporean will readily recognise that the ad touches on the various values and their attendant activities that are actively promoted by the government, as constitutive elements of a 'national' culture. Among these thematised values are: first, the restoration of the historic landscape of Chinatown and national monuments, such as the Victoria Memorial Hall. Restoration began in earnest around mid-1980s, when there was a serious decline of tourist arrivals because Singapore was becoming too much like any other big city and losing its 'exotic' Asian elements. Now, four historic districts, namely, the civic district of colonial administrative buildings, Chinatown, Little India and the historical Muslim area of Kampong Glam (Kong and Yeoh 1994), and individual buildings of significant architectural heritage, are being conserved.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the emphasis on education as human capital investment for individual social and economic mobility and national economic growth. This emphasis is also being ideologically transformed from its instrumental function into an 'Asian' essentialism. It is being promoted as part of the 'traditional' commitment of all three Asian ethnic groups that constitute the population to education, as signified by high level of private financial investment on children's education and by the keen competition among students for scarce spaces in the universities. With reference to the US, the high achievement of Asian

students in American academia is used as evidence of the 'Asian commitment', relative to the others in multiracial America.

Another 'Asian' value that is being promoted is the veneration of the aged as part of the idea of 'family as the basic unit of society', which is legislatively enshrined as part of the national ideological system, known as the 'Shared Values' (Lee 1989). This veneration of the aged has also led to the promotion of three-generation families through public housing policies. Such families are entitled to greater concessions in cash grants, reduction of waiting time and preferential locations for a flat. Pro-family advertisements which encourage marriage, childbirth and living in extended family are constantly broadcasts by different ministries that are responsible for different aspects of the overall pro-family policy. In public discourse, the preservation of the 'Asian' family is ideologically contrasted with high divorce rates and ubiquitous 'senior citizen' homes in the United States and elsewhere in the developed West.

Finally, the promotion of Mandarin as the language of all Chinese through an annual, month-long 'Speak Mandarin' campaign has been ongoing for more than a decade. This was initiated by the then prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, as a means to bridge the communication gaps within the Chinese population itself, which was divided by often mutually incomprehensible 'dialects'. Since then, all Chinese students must obtain at least passing grades in Mandarin, in order to secure a place in local universities; all dialect programmes on TV were abolished, and imported Cantonese or Hokkien programmes from Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively, are dubbed into Mandarin. The result is that Mandarin has become the common language among Chinese, at the cost to cross-generational communication, especially between grandparents and grandchildren. However, the emotional appeal of dialects remains high among older and less-educated individuals (up to 50 per cent of the Singapore work-force has less than primary education). This has resurfaced politically. For example, in the 1991 General Election, an opposition party member who won the parliamentary seat, made his mass rally speeches in the predominant dialect of that particular constituency. Furthermore, with the recent economic opening up of the southern coastal areas of China, from whence most Singaporean Chinese came, dialects are being rehabilitated in a limited manner and use of dialects is less frowned upon.

The above set of values, actively sponsored by the state, are recurring themes of annual national campaigns and of the speeches of politicians and cabinet ministers, widely covered by the national newspapers. They

constitute the ideological diet of Singaporeans. They are promoted as 'cultural ballast' against the excessive individualism of America/West. Against this ideological background, any heavy selling of McDonald's as a sign(ifier) of 'American-ism' would be counter-hegemonic, selling it as 'resistance culture' as in the case of France but on a more political plane. What would be the government's response to a counter-hegemonic marketing of McDonald's will never be known. However, it would not be wrong to say that the response would undoubtedly be negative from a government which polices and censors images, including advertisements, that enter the national ideological space.

Conclusion

The motivation behind this analysis of McDonald's in Singapore is to argue against any simplistic equation of product consumption with imaginary consumption of a culturally desired Other. Whereas all imported products may be potentially imprinted with the cultures of their respective origins, the consumption of the products is not automatically tantamount to the consumption of the cultures of the origins themselves. Specific to the marketing and consumption of McDonald's in Singapore, it is apparent that the level of cultural consumption of a desired Other, of 'American-ness', in fantasy is very low, if not completely absent.

The issue is not whether the potential of such imaginary or fantasy consumption of foreign products exists, indeed it does; rather, the realisation of this potential is not a simple process. Thus, in spite of the relative ease with which McDonald's can be inserted materially into the Singaporean hawker food milieu, its potential for selling 'American-ness' is not absent. However, its realisation is dependent on the cultural terrain in which the consumer item is inserted and against which it must act.

Within the political/ideological space of Singapore, arguably the space for the consumption of 'American-ness' is already provided by the state itself as it is precisely against a concept of 'Americanisation' that the current 'Asianisation' and 'communitarianisation' of Singaporeans is being undertaken by the state. Against a reductionist version of 'individualism' as a proxy of liberal democracy in America is juxtaposed the reinvented 'communitarianism' of 'Asian' traditions, to be inscribed on the Singaporean social and politic body (Chua 1995a). Thus, any version of 'American-ness' would constitute automatically in itself a powerful counter-discourse within contemporary ideological space in Singapore (cf. Lee Kuan Yew 1995). It would be attractive to those who are critical of the constraints placed on the political, cultural and

social spaces by the communitarian ideology, with its emphasis on the 'collective' over the individual. For them, 'America' symbolises the space where individual rights and differences are valorised. For them, the consumption of any representation of 'America', through whatever medium—TV, movies, music and fashion—would constitute the imaginary inhabiting of that desired Other space.

That the possibility of inserting McDonald's as a sign(ifier) of Americanness is not taken by the enterprise must be attributed to profit motivation which seeks not to contest the ideological sphere lest it incurs the wrath of the managers of the state and be constrained in the market. Therefore, in the selling of McDonald's, as in any imported goods, economic interest is strategic while its cultural representation to achieve this interest is always simply tactical.

Notes

1 The economic success of Singapore in the new international division of labour and global capitalism is by now well documented (cf. Drysdale 1984; Rodan 1989), and there is little need to recite its litany.

2 As Appadurai suggests, the relative 'homogenisation' of culture as a result of the global reach of capitalist production and consumption 'often subspeciates into either an argument about Americanisation, or an argument about commoditisation, and very often the two arguments are closely linked' (1990:5). Significantly, there are more consumer goods from Japan than from the US in Singapore. However, in contrast to Taiwan (cf. Ching 1994), there is no concern with the possible 'Japanisation' of Singaporean culture in Singapore. This is largely because Japan is read positively as a model of an 'Asian' nation that is able to successfully preserve its culture while modernising its economy (Wee 1995).

3 McDonald's in Singapore apparently also serves as a regional supply centre to outlets in neighbouring countries. Its bakery reportedly supplied 32 million buns to McDonald's Singapore, in 1994 (*Straits Times* 10 October, 1995).

4 Detailed discussion on pragmatism as national ideology in Singapore can be found in Chua (1995a:57–78). For a discussion of the very intrusive reach of the 'survival' ideology see Devan and Heng (1992).

5 The researchers for this project were three secondary school students in the gifted education programme under the mentorship of a lecturer at the National University of Singapore.

6 Given the generalised 'rationalisation' of social life in Singapore, both the idea that McDonaldisation stands as a trope for the 'rationalisation' — namely, efficiency, calculability, predictability and control—of society (Ritzer 1993) and that fast-food production and service stand as exemplar for the standardisation of service work in late capitalist societies (Leidner

1993) would readily apply to this very successful bastion of multinational capitalism. It should be noted, however, that these processes of production rationalisation are the consequences of the logic of capital, which in being globalised has its own homogenising effects on cultures of different locations. This homogenisation of cultures should not be read simplistically as 'Americanisation'; indeed, Ritzer could be said to implicitly disavow such a culturalist reading of the process.

7 Secondary school students are particularly inventive in their search for places to study, and everything else besides, in groups. One of the favourite sites is the Changi International Airport, especially Terminal II which is yet to be fully utilised. It has large, secluded but well-lit spaces which are available to all 24 hours a day.

8 All quotations from French youth are to be found in Fantasia (1995:222–5).

9 In his analysis of the penetration of Japanese mass consumer goods in Taiwan, an ex-Japanese colony, Leo Ching (1994) has raised similar reservations regarding any simple attempt to equate popular material consumption, even technological consumption, with simultaneous consumption of culture of the Other.

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