



## Footnotes

## The Newsletter of FPRI's [Wachman Center](#) The Big Mac and Teaching About Japan

by Lucien Ellington

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Lucien Ellington, a senior fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's [Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education](#), is UC Foundation Professor of Education and Co-Director of the Asia Program at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is also editor of "Education about Asia." This newsletter is part of a series on ["Teaching about Japan."](#)

The Big Mac can be effective tool in helping students achieve a better understanding of Japan. It can defeat Orientalist stereotypes about the Japanese—and also challenge young people who might have oversimplified notions of what exactly occurs when U.S. fast food chains take root in another culture.

McDonald's is popular in Japan and other parts of Asia. Pointing this out to students is a great way to dispel a deep-rooted American stereotype of the exotic East. A large number of Americans unconsciously think of "Eastern" and "exotic" as synonyms. Japanese sleep on the floor, do origami, and are more contemplative than materialistic Americans, right? But McDonald's has the greatest annual sales volume of any restaurant chain in Japan. This should disabuse students of some of their notions of Japanese exoticism. And there is much more to be learned by seriously thinking about McDonald's in Japan.

In James L. Watson, ed., *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford University Press, 1997, 256 pps, paperback), Watson, a Harvard anthropologist, and colleagues from his discipline examine the influence of this American fast-food institution in China (both Beijing and Hong Kong), Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Many deride McDonald's as a villain representing cultural imperialism, a company that destroys traditional practices in foreign countries and supplants them with American fast food. In this lucid and thought-provoking book, Watson et al. put to rest this myth.

Japan was the first East Asian country to host the company. In 1971 Den Fujita, then a Tokyo University student, introduced McDonald's there, where it has been immensely popular from the beginning, even spawning Japanese competitors. By the mid 1990s there were over 1,000 outlets in Japan. Although all cultures borrow, the Japanese have a special reputation of easily blending traditional practices with cultural imports. On New Year's Day, the biggest holiday in Japan, millions of people visit Shinto Shrines. The Japanese also have no compunction about juxtaposing this religious observance with a Big Mac. On January 1, 1985, a McDonald's near the Tsurugaoka Shrine in Kamakura set what was then the single-day, single-outlet world sales record of \$48,871.

While the Golden Arches may change East Asians, East Asians, by their preferences and free choices as consumers similarly change McDonald's. Japanese rejected some aspects of the McDonald's-imported culture. Different generations of Japanese also view and use the Golden Arches in different ways.

A McDonald's menu in Japan includes most of the standard American fare. However, one can also buy Chinese fried rice (MacChao), fried egg burger, and teriyaki burgers. In addition, iced coffee, iced and hot oolong tea, corn soup, cafe au lait, and bacon-potato pie are available to Japanese who frequent the Golden Arches. Japanese tastes changed McDonald's in that country.

American and Japanese notions of mealtime behavior are distinctly different. Japanese, with the exception of rice balls

and ice cream cones, almost never directly touch food with their hands. This practice continues despite the significant presence of Western-style fast food. Many Japanese either keep the wrapper around their burgers, or, if they are with friends, even sometimes cut sandwiches into small pieces with toothpicks for handling and communal eating.

Many Japanese adults don't think of McDonald's as a place for a meal so much as they consider it a place for a snack, since to older Japanese a meal must include rice. While adults rush in and out of McDonald's, many Japanese young people will remain for hours, sharing several orders of French fries and doing homework. Fast food or a place to congregate? All Japanese aren't alike and don't use McDonald's the same way.

Teenagers often need to be motivated by the familiar. This book provides examples you can use in teaching students about Japan and East Asia as well as helping them to think more deeply about globalization and international business. The spring issue of EAA includes my interview with Prof. Watson, which provides additional background.

The New York-based Asia Society is a great resource for teachers. Its website ([www.asiasociety.org](http://www.asiasociety.org)) includes a wealth of information on Japan as well as other Asian countries. The Education page includes three sections, AskAsia, AsiaInteractive, and TeachAsia, from which you can read translated articles from Japanese newspapers, find lesson plans, and learn about videos and periodicals on Japan and professional development opportunities and grant money for Asia and Japan-related projects.

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