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Martin Connelly
Colby College

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McDONALD'S IN BEIJING? I'M LOVIN' IT

By Martin Connelly '08

For foreigners living in Beijing, especially the younger student or post-grad set (of which I'm a member), McDonald's stands at the top of a grand double standard. We who are here in part to experience the culture, must look down upon McDonald's as a western export not to be part of the China Adventure. We should be eating cows' stomach and pigs' feet, or at the very least fried scorpions. But, on the other hand, McDonald's is so good, and sometimes, I admit it—we just need a hamburger and fries.

So we go, but with great shame, pulling our hats down to cover our faces and hiding behind dark sunglasses. The other foreigners in the restaurant (in a place like Beijing there are always other foreigners in the restaurant) we look down upon, saying, "Pah, what are they doing here? There's a great street-food vendor down the street selling delicious food at a fraction of the price. What lame-o's." They're probably thinking the same of us, unless they are travelers, in which case our presence can be seen almost as a sign that all is well and good. I can almost see them thinking, "Phew, if other people are here it must mean I'm not going to hell." And they aren't—or we all are.

People here talk of an embarrassing junior cheeseburger addiction, or the time they ate four apple pies because it just needed to happen. McDonald's, in the absence of home-cooked meatloaf and mashed potatoes, is comfort food. It reminds us of our life back home, even if we would never go to the local Golden Arches if we were living back stateside.

But there is something to be said for making an occasional trip to McDonald's as part of the great China Adventure. After all, China is one of the last expanding fast-food markets on the planet, and it's not as if McDonald's were still just for Chinese businessmen trying to impress their clients, like it was back in the early '90s. With more than 600 restaurants open across the country, McDonald's China has announced that it will have 1,000 locations by the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

These days the local McDonald's is just as much a place to experience real China as the park where the old folks exercise in the morning and dance in the evening. You can bet the company isn't thriving on the miniscule western demographic. It's a place for teenagers and young families; it's a place for grandparents watching their grandchildren in the afternoon; it's a place for everybody.

More than that, McDonald's restaurants in China are distinctly Chinese. They started the customer service revolution, to be sure, but they also morphed and adapted, making the space both western and Chinese at the same time. You'd never see two-person "lovers tables" in the U.S., but here in the middle kingdom, McDonald's isn't just a good place to take a date—it's great. Cool in the summer, warm in the winter, brightly lit and, unlike the rest of the city, completely free from smoking, spitting, and raucous drinking games. I wouldn't be caught dead taking a date to McDonald's back home, but here, it might be a nice change from the local family-style restaurant.

So, when all is said and done, what does this all mean? It means that I don't have to feel bad about grabbing the occasional burger (though if I do it too often the chances of that date diminish in kind), but when I do go I should look at it through ethnographer's eyes, seeing the whole process as a learning experience. Or maybe it's all one extensive rationalization, and this all comes down to the fact that, to paraphrase an old song, I want my Mickey D's.

Martin Connelly '08 spent his fall semester in Beijing working as a television copyeditor and an elementary school English teacher. He enjoys walking back alleys, talking to old folks, and eating the bagels and cream cheese that his mother brought for Thanksgiving.