Pollution in Inner and Outer Spaces: Masami Teraoka's McDonald's Hamburgers Invading Japan, 1974–5

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Abstract

Japanese-born artist Masami Teraoka arrived in the United States in the 1960s, in the midst of a burgeoning post-war mass consumer society. During a visit to Vancouver, Teraoka was struck by McDonald's Golden Arches looming over the city as a portent of a global takeover by the company. This awareness prompted his series, *McDonald’s Hamburgers Invading Japan* (1974-5), which depicts a traditional Japanese culture coming into contact with a modern American one with results that are at times humorous, and at others, chaotic. He shows the impact of the American multinational corporation on a post-World War II Japan through such imagery as crumpled hamburger wrappers in otherwise pristine Japanese scenes and, in the process, implicates both cultures in the resulting mess—the American culture that is all-devouring and the Japanese one that is too willing to be devoured. Completed in watercolor to resemble *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, Teraoka masterfully fuses Eastern and Western artistic techniques, a reflection of Teraoka's new identity as an Asian American, as well as a commentary on the permeable borders between East and West. In analyzing the series, this paper builds on concepts of food and pollution established by Mary Douglas’s seminal work, *Purity and Danger* (1966)—specifically, her commentary on external boundaries, where she explores the body as a stand-in for any bounded system. In light of the refuse present in the series, McDonald’s presence in Japan is considered a pollutant, both in terms of changes in etiquette and eating habits brought about by the introduction of fast food in Japan, and also in terms of the physical presence of McDonald’s outlets on Japanese soil.

Keywords: Masami Teraoka, Pollution, Art History

1. Introduction

In 1974, Masami Teraoka began his series of watercolor paintings entitled, *McDonald's Hamburgers Invading Japan*. These paintings show the intersection of Japanese and American cultures—a timely theme, considering the entrance of American multinational corporations in post-World War II Japan, as well as Teraoka's own arrival in the United States thirteen years earlier. The series, rendered in a style from the *ukiyo-e* prints of nineteenth century Japan, reflects changes in Japan following the introduction of American fast food and throwaway culture, epitomized by the entrance of McDonald's in 1972. In doing so, Teraoka grapples with issues of pollution and nationality in a framework established by the *ukiyo-e* woodblock print artisans of nineteenth century Edo (present day Tokyo).

In this paper, I look at concepts of pollution inherent in the series, not only in the physical sense of refuse, but through societal changes in Japan following the introduction of McDonald's as well. Indeed, McDonald's invasion is both physical (with the actual opening of McDonald's restaurants on Japanese soil) and ideological (in the changing attitudes towards eating habits in Japan). My analysis of the pollution in the series will draw on the writings of anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas, and her discussion of pollution, boundaries and the body, to illustrate how Teraoka's choice of theme reflects his status of "in-betweenness." Existing between and within American and Japanese cultures, the refuse and chaos in the series reflects concerns about the collision of Japanese
and American cultures at large. Teraoka’s status as a liminal artist provides him with the ability to act as a translator of cultures, producing a new site of modernity that combines elements of East and West, without damaging either.

2. McDonald’s As Pollutant

In the 1970s, McDonalds represented a relatively new brand name—dating back only to 1954, its creation spurred by the mechanization of food production. It is a brand that celebrates overconsumption and represents throwaway culture. As Sidra Stich notes, "McDonalds exploited the appeal of quantity consumption. Advertisements and signs at every outlet publicized a running tally of the number of hamburgers sold, and the figure rapidly reached mind-boggling heights." Chinese social critic Mandy Kwan recalls taking her young cousin to an outlet in Hong Kong, "She may perhaps be learning the Western ways and cultures of eating, but definitely she is consuming the American idea of waste and overconsumption of materials. One can imagine the papers that go to waste in a typical fast food meal." After a meal is eaten, no plates or utensils need to be cleaned, only disposed of: Wrappers, boxes, trays and straws fill trashcans and, as Teraoka illustrates, clutter the pristine Japanese environment.

![Figure 1. Masami Teraoka, *McDonald's Hamburgers Invading Japan/Hamburger and Chopsticks*, 1976.](image)

*Hamburger and Chopsticks*, 1976 [Figure 1], illustrates the introduction of overconsumption and throwaway ideologies. In this work, Teraoka places a hamburger in wrapper alongside red lacquered chopsticks, beneath a branch filled with cherry blossoms. The hamburger, cropped by the right edge of the painting, can be read as encroaching on the otherwise idyllic scene. It stands in direct contrast to the pair of chopsticks beside it, a symbol of traditional Japanese cuisine. Being lacquered, the chopsticks stand on a different level than the hamburgers, belonging to a more refined dining setting; in other words, lacquered chopsticks are permanent, to be cleansed for reuse. The chopsticks one would expect to find in a Japanese McDonald's would be manufactured in cheap bamboo, to be disposed of after use.

The contrast between the permanent chopsticks and disposable hamburger wrapper is indicative of the ways the introduction of fast food in Japan has affected traditional eating habits. The defeat of Japan in World War II opened the door for the Americanization of Japanese culture. Alison Bing, in her discussion of Teraoka’s work, writes, “Through the Marshall Plan in Europe and Japan, children in countries decimated by World War II had developed a taste for American foods.” Enumerating the traditional rules of eating in Japan, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney writes, “One must not touch food with one’s hands when eating, and one must not eat while standing.” The food served at McDonald’s however, is meant to be eaten with the hands. Additionally, the layout of many McDonald’s outlets in Japan is conducive to eating while standing containing only counter space, with no seats and tables—ideal for a quick bite on the way to work. The changes in Japanese etiquette and custom, as well as the general Americanization of Japanese society, represents the social pollution brought about by McDonald’s.
The physical pollution brought by McDonald’s manifests in two forms—the presence of McDonald’s outlets on Japanese soil and, as Teraoka illustrates, the potential for hamburger wrappers to litter the landscape. This is illustrated in several works in the series, such as *Tokyo Ginza Shuffle*, 1974 [Figure 2]. In this work, women clad in kimono and zori—traditional Japanese slippers—move across the page. A fallen hamburger, placed on the left side of the painting, poses a threat to the women. Although the painting is graceful and lyrical, one can imagine a woman slipping on the hamburger bun and falling, as disheveled hamburger and rumpled napkins interrupts the pattern created by zori-donned feet. This tension is especially true for the woman in the front of the procession—she appears to be a mere step away from a disastrous encounter with the hamburger. Because these women are shuffling, they are surely not lifting their feet high enough to prevent disaster.

In addition to the pollution accrued by the hamburger wrapper and bamboo chopsticks, the quality of the hamburgers served by McDonald’s is also suspect. Indian social critic Vandana Shiva suggests, “[The Golden Arches suggest that] when you walk into McDonalds, you are entering heaven, that the corporation wants people around the world to view ‘the McDonald’s experience’ as an immersion in celestial bliss—while they are actually eating junk.” In Japan, numerous urban legends have circulated regarding the origin of McDonald’s hamburger meat. The stories, *nyan-bagadensetsu* (the lore of the catburger), imply that the meat comes from domestic animals. Hamburger buns have also been linked to earthworms. Teraoka himself lamented the quality of McDonald’s’ hamburgers, saying, “I mean, I’ve had great hamburgers in the States, and I wished someone would bring better hamburgers to Japan.” It is quite possible for one to regard the mass-produced food McDonald’s serves as trash, in addition to the packaging they serve it in, reinforcing the theme of physical pollution.

3. McDonald’s as Societal Threat

In her seminal work, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, Mary Douglas states, “The idea of society is a powerful image. […] This image has form, it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure.” Society and nationality are defined by borders—questions of what is native and what is alien and polluting, arise when these boundaries are compromised. The scenes Teraoka depicts in *McDonald’s Hamburgers Invading Japan* depict a threatened Japanese society in two ways. Firstly, as discussed earlier, the threat is illustrated through the introduction of polluting elements (Douglas writes, “As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder”). This pollution, taking the form of stray fries, hamburger wrappers and the like, as well as in shifting attitudes towards food and eating, signifies the dangers to Japanese tradition imposed by the American multinational corporation.

The second way the threat can be understood is through the positionality of the artist himself. His status as a liminal being, existing between and within both American and Japanese cultures, grants him a position of agency. Returning to Douglas’s image of society, she writes, “There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas.” Teraoka acknowledges the impact his state of in-betweenness has on his works. In depicting traditional Japanese *ukiyo-e* scenes interspersed with American consumer icons, presented through the western watercolor medium, Teraoka is actively translating Japanese culture through a pop art lens and American consumer culture with an *ukiyo-e* one. As postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha posits, “The anxiety of enjoining the global and the local, the dilemma of projecting an international space on the trace of a decentred, fragmented subject, cultural globality is figured in the in-between spaces of double frames.” Masami Teraoka is in the process of creating cultural globality—caught in between the international space of the American multinational corporation and consumer society and the decentered, fragmented subject that is at once both American and Japanese and neither at the same time.
The concerns addressed in this paper—social and physical pollution, translation and heterogeneity—come to a head in *Geisha and Tattooed Woman*, 1975 [Figure 3]. In this painting, the kimono-clad courtesan, representing traditional Japan, stands at the left edge of the painting, peering out from behind a screen door. She tentatively grasps a hamburger and its wrapper in her hands, with the calligraphic script in the paint in the painting’s background inscribing her thoughts. It reads, as translated by Howard Link, curator emeritus of the Honolulu Academy of Arts:

> The tattooed woman opens, ‘Well, I’m going to start eating now.’ She is countered with a query from the envious courtesan. ‘Are you really going to eat that Japanese noodle soup?’ The tattooed woman replies, ‘Yes, I’m starved. I hope you don’t mind my slurping.’ The courtesan, unable to contain herself any longer, demands, ‘How am I supposed to eat this? Should I just bite into it?’

The geisha reflects Teraoka himself who, when offered his first hamburger, was confused as to how to eat it. Meanwhile, the tattooed woman hunches over a bowl of noodles—tonguing a single noodle dangling from her chopsticks. The characters, like Teraoka, are in the process of translating cultures. The tattooed woman, bearing an allover kimono-patterned tattoo, displaying her ability to maneuver chopsticks and slurping her noodles (the traditional Japanese way to do so), is well into the process of cultural translation—similar to the multinational corporation who has done thorough market research. The geisha, on the other hand, is tentative about consuming the food of the other—having it thrust upon her. The placement of the characters also betrays the power dynamic between the two women. The tattooed woman leans forward, with her elbows spread out. The geisha, on the other hand, hunches in the corner, almost pushed off frame. This, again, speaks to the ability of American modernity to overwhelm Japanese tradition.

This scene certainly nears the chaotic residing in Douglas’ unstructured areas of society. The tattooed woman is sloppy in her consumption of the noodles—they slip from her chopsticks, through her hands, onto the table below. Her bowl tilts forward precariously, noodles and soup ready to pour out. In light of Mary Douglas’ statements regarding the body—“The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system,” and “We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise the specially vulnerable points,” we can see the appropriateness of Teraoka’s selection of food and eating as themes for his depiction of cultural collision. Like the placement of the characters, Teraoka’s focus on the tattooed woman’s mouth is especially symbolic—it symbolizes the ability of Japanese to consume American culture and the potentiality of the American corporation to devour Japanese tradition.

4. Aestheticized Hybridity
Teraoka’s depiction of pollution is not completely negative—he does offer a possibility of redemption. Although pollution encroaches on Teraoka’s scenes, it is aestheticized. Indeed, finding the hamburger in Burger and Bamboo Broom, 1980 [Figure 4] may take some viewers a second glance. A tension exists between the broom and the hamburger: the broom, a handcrafted product of Japanese tradition, and the hamburger, a mass-produced American food item. Despite the tension, both icons are presented in the same fashion, part of the same work of art. Also, the broom is poised to sweep the offending hamburger off the page—eliminating the polluting elements of American culture, while maintaining a Western presence through the use of the watercolor medium. This leaves the work of art as evidence of the cultural collision.

In McDonald’s Hamburgers Invading Japan, Teraoka challenges the binary oppositions that are often used to define societies. Blending elements from Japanese and American cultures and tradition, from Pop Art and ukiyo-e, and creating an iconography that is at once Japanese and American, Teraoka’s work exists outside of the binary categories Eastern/Western, native/foreign, modern/traditional.\(^{17}\) Whereas pollution and the loss of tradition may be one result of a cultural collision, in depicting these results, Teraoka presents another. An aestheticized mixture of East and West, Teraoka has sought, and found, a balance between Japan and America and tradition and modernity.

5. Endnotes

5 Kincheloe, 30.
6 Ohnuki-Tierney, 174.
7 It is interesting to see a reversal of the American myth that Asians eat dogs, cats and rats. In both cases, the food of another culture is viewed as a polluting substance. A discussion of American perceptions of Asian eating habits can be found in Frank H. Wu, Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
8 Bing, 58.
10 Ibid, 2.
11 Ibid, 141.
14 The order present in the scene completely disintegrates in Teraoka’s 1988 work, AIDS Series/Tattooed Woman and Flying Saucers. Here, the building collapses on the two women and the tattooed woman’s noodles pour out of her bowl. Now the geisha has completely adopted the American characteristics of overconsumption and throwaway culture—she stands with hamburger in one hand and Coca Cola bottle in the other.
15 Douglas, 142.
16 Ibid, 150.

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7. Bibliography