

Taiwan's Bubble Tea Drinking Culture: Extension of Parallel Trends of Homogenization and Heterogenization by Ke Yu

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In response to the widespread distribution of America's consumer goods over the globe, Ritzer, an American sociologist who is most notably known for his contribution towards the concept of McDonaldization, claims "there are powerful homogenizing trends in the world today" (Ritzer 1998: 89) in terms of means of consumption. Yet, he did not deny that there is a "parallel trend in the direction of heterogenization" (Ritzer 1998:89), shown by Beyer's quote that "the global system ... encourages the creation and revitalization of particular identities as a way of gaining control over systemic power" (Ritzer 1998:86). He further contends the possibility that these societies under Western influence can even "begin exporting their creations to other societies" (Ritzer 1998:90). However, Ritzer failed to provide sufficient elaboration to explain the mechanics of the two apparently conflicting trends. How can Westernization help in the heterogenization process with its alleged homogenising influence? Hence, this paper seeks to extend Ritzer's view on the possibility of such a parallel trend by exploring the interesting interplay of both homogenization and heterogenization processes in the case study on the tea drinking culture in Taiwan. This study aims to demonstrate how societies can achieve a balance between Western influence and local cultural identity construction against the general trend of Westernization. This paper argues that in the case of Taiwan, the heterogenization trend occurs in response to the homogenization trend. Taiwan is then able to leverage on the homogenizing Western influence that modifies means of consumption to facilitate the process of heterogenization in tea drinking culture, which includes creation and exportation of the representative cultural product, 'bubble tea', that serves to reinforce Taiwanese cultural identity.

It is first necessary to elucidate what the parallel trend of homogenization and heterogenization refers to. Ritzer suggests that this parallel trend can be conceived to be having "greater homogenization in some aspects of our lives along with greater heterogenization of other aspects" (Ritzer 1998:85). Particularly in the case of Taiwan, this paper reasons out that the parallel trend of heterogenization in tea drinking culture originates as a response to the trend of homogenization in means of consumption. Foremost, Taiwan experiences homogenization in the aspect of means of tea consumption that increasingly conforms to Western consumerism methods of convenience and individualization. Against a background of Taiwan's rapid economic development, the traditional means of consuming tea is incongruent with the locals' general fast-paced lifestyle because it is time-consuming and unable to cater to specific individual preferences. The import of Western consumer products like McDonalds brings about a means of consumption that coincides with the modern lifestyle, where demand tea consumption pattern characterized by convenience and individual-centeredness (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:45) increases. McDonald's large appeal to the locals is best reflected in how quickly the company expanded such that Taiwan was considered to be made "operating headquarters for the entire Asian-Pacific region" (Watson 2006:121). The impact of Western influence is most evident where "older forms of childhood socialization ... are gradually de-emphasized to accommodate practices that encourage consumerism" (Watson 2006:17-18) as a result of McDonald's influx, highlighting how traditional consumption methods lose its appeal with the emphasis and practice of Westernized means of consumption.

A unique tea beverage 'bubble tea' is then created to meet the demand of modern lifestyle consumerism methods which are homogenized by Western influence. Consequently, Taiwan experiences heterogenization in the aspect of tea drinking culture, where it diversifies from the traditional tea drinking methods to embrace this new creation. 'Bubble tea' is a specialty drink consisting of a mixture of tea leaves and milk. This combination is well mixed using a shaker to give it a foamy, bubbly appearance, and hence its name 'bubble tea'. It distinguishes itself from the traditional tea drinking culture in two striking ways, making it more compatible with a fast-paced lifestyle. First, contrary to the emphasis on the warmth of tea in traditional tea drinking, 'bubble tea' is drunk cold, allowing for shorter preparation time and an available takeaway option to enhance consumers' convenience (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:45). Second, 'bubble tea' creatively incorporates chewy tapioca balls, whereas traditional tea drinking is

particular about purity of tea and do not practise such a combination. This unprecedented combination provides room for individualization in terms of choice of tea, toppings and sugar level. Thus, the trend of heterogenization in Taiwan begins in response to homogenization trend with the creation of 'bubble tea' as a cultural product to reflect a new tea drinking culture.

So, how exactly can Taiwan leverage on Western influence to export and develop the cultural product, 'bubble tea,' as part of the heterogenization process? There is economic logic underlying this heterogenization process where 'bubble tea' producers are able to make good use of the Western method to produce their own local product instead of being imperialized by the process of McDonaldization. The institution of a successful economic model is transferred in the homogenizing McDonaldization process. This knowledge is useful for the recipient country, Taiwan, to establish their innovative product 'bubble tea' in the global market. McDonald's is the "first foreign food enterprise" to join the business landscape in Taiwan and is "recognized as such [achievement] by the local business community" (Watson 2006:121). McDonald's signifies a successful pathway to penetrate the global market, allowing Taiwan's local businesses to duplicate this success with the export of Taiwan's own creation of 'bubble tea'. From the consensus that "McDonald's is now treated like any other business in Taiwan" instead of "a symbol of oppression" (Watson 2006:123), McDonald's is perceived to be a successful business model which can be adapted to the context of 'bubble tea'.

Lin sheds light on the exportation of 'bubble tea' as a radical tea drinking culture by analysing 'bubble tea' production according to the four dimensions of McDonalds that Ritzer discussed (Ritzer 2010: 12-15). First, efficiency is attained by the breakdown of tea preparation steps for workers to be specialized in a predesigned process. For instance, one worker will be responsible for ingredient's assembly, the other for mixing ingredients and another as cashier. Second, calculability is best represented by the shorter waiting time as the time taken to cook the tapioca balls can be estimated by following worker's manual for preparation formula. Third, predictability is offered in terms of standardization of preparation methods in all outlets, ensuring satisfactory service and product quality. Lastly, useful nonhuman technological equipment like shaker machine, cup sealer machine and sweetener measure can all aid in the production of beverage with consistent quality (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:46-48). With 'bubble tea' outlets found all over the world, including London (Greig) and Berlin (Hsiao et al 2014), McDonald's as an economic model successfully supports the export of 'bubble tea' to all over the world. This success indicates that nations under Western influence of can "export their creations to other societies" (Ritzer 1998:90), demonstrating how heterogenization process involves interaction with other societies as well.

The process of heterogenization continues further to promote 'bubble tea' as a cultural product which is representative of Taiwan's culture. In particular, the global success of 'bubble tea' amplifies its cultural significance and thus contributes to the reinforcement of Taiwanese cultural identity based on a new tea drinking culture. What exactly is this cultural identity that can be reinforced by the creation of new cultural product? Tomlinson's conceptualization of the notion of 'cultural identity' is useful to outline this abstract concept. Contrary to perceiving cultural identity as a victim of globalization, Tomlinson provided an alternative view of understanding cultural identity to be a product of globalization (Tomlinson 2003:269). In addition, Tomlinson also acknowledges the power of the state in "deliberate cultural construction and maintenance" of cultural identity, through "regulatory and the socializing institutions of the state" (Tomlinson 2003:271). Hence, government's role in aiding the heterogenization process of constructing cultural identity based on a cultural product is viewed to be pivotal. This role is exemplified through the institution of media with extensive media reports on 'bubble tea'. Taiwan Tourism Bureau even features 'bubble tea' as an important icon to represent Taiwan's unique culture in its tourism campaigns. One example would be the promotion of 'bubble tea' as part of distinct tea drinking culture of Taiwan in New York for the 2013 Summer Broadway event (Yan W.Z. 2013). This example clearly illustrates the state's intention to construct 'bubble tea' as an iconic cultural product of Taiwan that is relatable to its people and widely known globally.

Despite government's efforts to construct a cultural identity based on 'bubble tea', the heterogenization trend will not be complete without locals acknowledging the cultural product to be reflective of Taiwanese cultural identity. Taiwanese allowed 'bubble tea' drinking to be integrated to their lifestyle and 'Taiwanese Spirit' is then coined to represent their identification of 'bubble tea' as a product that can reflect their home and innovation spirit (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:55). The value of this innovation spirit can be

explained by Appiah's viewpoint that "hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas..." (Appiah 2006:112) is celebrated. Similarly, the innovative 'bubble tea' effectively embodies the "new and unexpected combination" of Chinese and Western cultural influences to synthesize a distinct "Taiwanese method" in the tea preparation. Specifically, with the mixture of Chinese tea leaves and Western milk, Taiwan's tapioca balls are added, and the drink is accompanied by cocktails shaking techniques (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:53). The cultural significance of 'bubble tea', as part of an innovative tea drinking culture, is then shaped by the global recognition of the originality and innovation embedded in the product. After 'bubble tea' is affirmed as the top 50 beverages in the world by CNN (CT News 2011), Taiwan has successfully differentiate their tea drinking culture from the general landscape of Chinese tea culture. In one example, a featured story of Taiwan tourism, the interviewed store manager exclaims proudly that highly popular 'bubble tea' is a unique beverage originated from Taiwan (KSCI 2013). Furthermore, 'bubble tea' as a Taiwanese iconic cultural product worldwide is very symbolic and representative. In a study done on Taiwanese abroad, they expressed their contentment from drinking 'bubble tea' overseas because it strikes a sense of familiarity and belonging to Taiwan that they identify with (Lin C.Y. et al 2010:55-56). All these affirmations of 'bubble tea' as an important and inseparable feature of Taiwanese cultural identity serve to demonstrate that Taiwan is successful in balancing Western influence with local identity construction.

With the increased popularity of 'bubble tea' due to the heterogenization trend, some may argue that this phenomenon demonstrates a loss in culture since the traditional way of tea drinking is replaced and compromised by the more convenient 'bubble tea'. The characteristics of traditional tea drinking culture that critiques refer to warrants clarification. While traditional tea drinking culture is usually perceived to be referring to the sophisticated processes and equipment used to prepare and appreciate tea, it proves to be much more for Taiwanese because they regard traditional tea drinking as a social function. In a study of tea drinking as a social activity, it identified tea drinking to be always "thought of in relation to interpersonal relationships and social contract" and has a social role to "create a cohesiveness in families" (Huang K.H. et al 2008:85). Hence, the cultural significance of traditional tea drinking in Taiwan lies in the social interaction that tea drinking facilitates. After the clarification of the characteristics of traditional tea drinking culture, it can be further argued that local can still retain the valuable social function even with the consumption of 'bubble tea'. Since the practice of traditional tea culture is usually informal "without any elaborate rituals" (Huang K.H. et al 2008:85), simplification of tea drinking with 'bubble tea' will most probably not have a significant effect on suppressing the social values of traditional tea drinking culture. Furthermore, careful maintenance of tea houses that are characterized by "combination and improvisation of traditional tea house, the English tea house and other innovations" (Jolliffe 2007:60) provides a convenient setting for the locals to have social gatherings and practice the traditional tea drinking methods. Hence, the existence of these tea houses can mitigate any perceived negative impact of 'bubble tea' on traditional tea drinking culture.

In conclusion, the case study of the tea drinking culture in Taiwan sheds light on how Western homogenizing impact in terms of means of consumption helps to drive the creation of a cultural product 'bubble tea', which is central to the heterogenization trend in diversification of tea drinking culture. In this case study, Taiwan balances Western influence with local cultural identity construction, most evidently portrayed by the "Taiwanese Spirit" widely identified. With the uprisings of other societies, similar heterogenization trends against Westernization may become more relevant, and hence more deserving of examination in the future.

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Process Notes

I recalled myself feeling stressed out by WCT Paper 3 due to the extensive research demanded and the limited time permitted for it. The most difficult part of the writing process for me was the initial conceptualization of a topic and the definition of a satisfactory scope to allow for the sufficient analysis. Instead of looking further at literary works which was leading me nowhere, I began drawing ideas from daily experiences and interests. Coincidentally, I was drinking a cup of Taiwan bubble-tea during the brainstorming period. Compounded with my interest in Taiwan culture, I grew curious of how bubble-tea was able to preserve its association with Taiwan despite its global availability. Therefore, I focused my research to examine the relationship between bubble-tea and Taiwan culture in relation to the pertinent concepts of globalization.

Interestingly, the research process seemed much more manageable after having a definite topic in mind. I enjoyed reading the relevant papers as they supplied multiple perspectives to view bubble-tea as a cultural product that served purposes beyond just thirst quenching. As such, personal interests are definitely valuable sources of inspiration to kick-start the writing process, as well as to sustain the motivation required to finish the paper. Furthermore, a good range of research materials is important in providing a robust set of evidence to support one's argument. Besides engaging with scholarly articles and academic papers, I explored interview transcripts and news video clips to trace the construction of Taiwanese identity embodied in bubble-tea; and the role that government played in validating this embodiment at both national and international levels.

While the search for an appealing topic is important, this approach requires one to have a thorough understanding of the theoretical texts used. Without adequate knowledge, it will be difficult to establish links and formulate a satisfactory scope. On the development of thesis, I started with several sketchy and patchy ideas before hypothesizing about their possible relationships to stitch them together. Also, I found it useful to conscientiously refer back to the thesis and research question whenever I start on a new paragraph to ensure that my arguments remained coherent and logical.

The writing centre was a beneficial resource to facilitate the exchange of ideas or argumentative points with the writing assistant. The consultations were particularly helpful in checking whether the written paper was accessible and understandable by a third party. Also, some of the explanation and elucidation of claims may appear to be too intuitive to the writer, and are thus taken for granted. Consequently, the lack of these details constituted gaps in argumentation which can only be identified by another reader. From the comments or clarifications, I was then able to fine-tune my writing and minimize these logic gaps.

Lastly, my greatest takeaway from WCT is the constant reminder to write clearly with high specificity. The establishment of a convincing argument underscores the need for clarity in writing to deliver ideas systematically so that the target audience or readers can follow them easily. As I strive to be more specific in stating my claims, the chances of making generalized and unfounded claims are reduced. Moreover, the ability to contextualize ideas reflects and validates the level of my own understanding on the subject matter. Hence, I have subconsciously followed this useful guideline closely for the papers in my subsequent inquiry modules.