Every Culture Appropriates

The question is less whether a dress or an idea is borrowed, than the uses to which it's then put.

A woman walks with her two daughters at a busy street in downtown Shanghai July 11, 2013.

Carlos Barria / Reuters

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Meet the Death Metal Cowboys of Botswana. In black leather decorated with

metal studs, they play a pounding style of music that people who know more than me trace to the British band "Venom" and its 1981 album *Welcome to Hell*. Question: Is this cultural appropriation? Why or why not?

The question is inspired by a spasm of social-media cruelty that caught wide attention last week. A young woman in Utah bought a Chinese-style dress to wear to her high school formal. She posted some photographs of herself on her personal Instagram page—and suddenly found herself the target of virulent online abuse.

For once, the story has a happy ending. Good sense and kindness prevailed, and instead of her prom being ruined, the young woman exited the dance buoyed by worldwide support and affirmation, most of all from within China.

Yet the idea persists that there is something wrong and oppressive about people of one background adopting and adapting the artifacts of another. Sadly often, these stories end as successful power plays enforced by local bullies.

At Oberlin in 2015, a Vietnamese student shamed the dining hall into ceasing to serve its version of Banh Mi sandwiches.*

> Instead of a crispy baguette with grilled pork, pate, pickled vegetables and fresh herbs, the sandwich used ciabatta bread, pulled pork and coleslaw. "It was ridiculous .... How could they just throw out something completely different and label it as another country's traditional food?"

The references to "baguette" and "pâté" in a food product of a former French colony might have tipped off the angry Oberlin student that the banh mi is not quite as traditional a Vietnamese food as she imagined. When this exotic remake

of a classic *pate en baguette* was first sold in the streets of Hanoi, the vendors called it “banh tay”: literally "Western-style bread.”

A Canadian university cancelled its yoga classes as culturally appropriating—notwithstanding that most of the strenuous moves taught in a modern class actually originate in Danish gymnastics and British army calisthenics, which were in turn appropriated by Indian entrepreneurs seeking to update yoga from a meditative to an active practice for the body-conscious modern age.

The cultural appropriation police answer the yoga and banh mi objections with a familiar counter-argument: it’s about power. It’s fine for colonized Indians to incorporate European fitness regimes into their yoga; wrong for Canadians of European origin to incorporate yoga into their fitness regimes.

But the trouble with that argument is that—like culture—power also ebbs and flows. Customs we may think of as immemorially inherent in one culture very often originated in that culture’s own history of empire and domination. The Han Chinese learned to drink tea for pleasure from peoples to their south. The green flag of Islam was adapted from the pre-Islamic religions of Iran. The great west African kingdom of Benin acquired the metal for some of its famous bronze artworks by selling thousands of people as slaves to Portuguese traders.

All cultures have histories. Young people born in North America may imagine that their grandmother’s recipes or wardrobe emerged autochthonously in a timeless ancestral homeland. But that only reflects how thoroughly they have Americanized themselves, reducing other countries’ complexities to folklores to be fetishized rather than understood and evaluated on their own terms.

The Chinese dress young Kezia Daum wanted to wear to prom originated in a brutal act of imperialism, but not by any western people. It originated in the Manchurian conquest of China in 1648, an event comparable to Europe's Thirty Years War in its society-shattering murderousness. Millions of people, perhaps

tens of millions, lost their lives in the upheaval.

The new rulers of Beijing required Chinese men to adopt Manchurian styles of dress and hair, including the notorious pigtail. When the Manchu dynasty was finally overthrown in 1911, Chinese people found themselves free for the first time in 250 years to dress as they pleased. In the decade afterward, creative personalities in the great commercial metropolis of Shanghai devised a new kind of garment for women. They called it the cheongsam.

The new garment was a fusion of old and new, east and west. Manchurian-style fabrics were tailored to a European-style pattern. In the past, upper-class women's clothing had conveyed status and restricted movement. The cheongsam was equally available to women from a wide range of statuses—and enabled Chinese women to move as their western counterparts did.

The history of fashion is a notoriously contentious topic. The amateur is well-advised to keep a low profile and avoid strong declarative statements. But here's what one can say: For whatever reason it happened, the idea that clothing styles should change regularly and often for no very compelling reason is one of Europe's most distinctive contributions to world culture. Before their encounter with European culture, nobody else saw the point of it. Chinese costume was particularly conservative: Upper-class dress would change with the dynasties and hardly at all within them.

With the cheongsam, fashion in the European sense came to China. In the decades from 1915 to 1950, the cheongsam changed more than women's costume did in the previous 250 years.

That moment of creativity did not endure. The communist takeover of 1949 restored the ancient practice: a new emperor imposes a new costume. Mao Zedong required his subjects all to wear the same unisex blue suit—and he so desperately impoverished China that few could have chosen otherwise even had

they dared. Not until after his death would Chinese women recover any freedom of dress, and not until the 1990s could they afford to exercise that freedom. Today China has overtaken the United States, the European Union, and Japan as the world's single largest market for luxury goods.

The cheongsam has come rocketing back, too, in a dizzying array of lengths and styles. But the freedom Chinese people have recovered is only a very partial one. The post-Mao rulers of China minutely police any flicker of regional resentment of rule from Beijing. They have by law insisted that the language of the North, known in the West as Mandarin, be recognized as the nation's sole official language. "Cheongsam" is a Cantonese word for a South Chinese thing—but in almost every media report on the cyberbullying of Kezia Daum, the garment is given its Mandarin name, "qipao."

It's important to have these details in order to understand what is so deeply sinister about the claims now being made about the prom dress.

Like the idea that audiences should refrain from talking while music is performed, the idea that women should be able to move about as freely and easily as men is a cultural product—popularized by the North Atlantic world in the period after the First World War. If it's wrong for one culture to borrow from another, then it was wrong to invent the cheongsam in the first place—because not only did the garment's shape originate outside China, but so, too, did the garment's purposes. It was precisely *because* they appreciated that they were importing Western ideas about women that the inventors of the cheongsam adapted a Western shape. They took something foreign and made it something domestic, in a pattern that has repeated itself in endless variations since the Neolithic period.

The policemen of cultural appropriation do not think that way. They have a morality tale to tell, one of Western victimization of non-Western peoples—a victimization so extreme that it is triggered by a Western girl's purchase of a

Chinese dress designed precisely so that Chinese girls could live more like Western girls.

In order to tell that story, the policemen of cultural appropriation must crush and deform much of the truth of cultural history—and in the process demean and infantilize the people they supposedly champion.

Consider, again, the Death Metal Cowboys. Despite their enthusiastic, wholesale adoption of costume and music imported into Botswana, they are unlikely to be accused of cultural appropriation. Why not? The would-be culture police build their whole philosophy on a single assumption of extreme chauvinism: that Western culture is universal—indeed the only universal culture. Western technology, the Western emphasis on individual autonomy and equal human dignity, and even such oddly specific Western practices as death-metal music—the cultural police take all this for granted as thoroughly as a fish takes for granted the water in its fishbowl.

You see this parochialism most clearly when someone living in a Western cultural context seeks to valorize a non-Western practice that might seem oppressive to other Western people. It is then, precisely when they imagine they are departing from Western ways, that they must rely on the Western intellectual tradition to justify their action. One random example out of hundreds that might be chosen, from an op-ed in *The New York Times*: "I see hijab as the freedom to regard my body as my own concern and as a way to secure personal liberty in a world that objectifies women ... an assertive mode of individual feministic expression and rights."

Of course, Islamic covering was not invented as a mode of individual feministic expression. Very much the opposite. The various coverings voluntarily adopted by some women in North America and Western Europe evolved in societies where 90 percent of the population still agrees that women must obey their husbands at all times.

Happily, the Western defenders of covering do not live in such societies. They live in a culture of autonomy and choice. Their individual decision to wear (or cease to wear) a traditional garment has already changed that garment's cultural context and put it to a new and very Western use.

Which is fine! It's a free society, do what you like! But please remember, as you do so, that this "freedom" you use is itself a cultural product, with its own origins in precisely the culture you traduce.

The Western culture of personal autonomy and equal dignity is a precious thing precisely because it is not universal. Those who participate in that culture and enjoy its benefits may hope—do hope—that it may someday become universal. They may hope that their culture will shape the shared future of all humanity. But it is not a universal inheritance, and it is not the universal contemporary practice. If anything, that culture is at present in retreat, challenged and assailed both at home and abroad. It needs defending, and to be defended effectively it is vital to understand precisely how non-universal it is.

To the extent that the cultural-appropriation police are urging their targets to respect others who are different, they are saying something that everyone needs to hear. But beyond that, they can plunge into doomed tangles. American popular culture is a mishmash of influences: British Isles, Eastern European, West African, and who knows what else. Cole Porter committed no wrong by borrowing from Jewish music; Elvis Presley enriched the world when he fused country-and-western with rhythm-and-blues.

How to draw the line between that and America's ugly tradition of minstrelsy, in which subordinated peoples are both mimicked and mocked—as Al Jolson mimicked and mocked black music in his notorious blackface career? There is no clear rule, but there is an open way: the values of respect and tolerance that draw precisely on the rationalist Enlightenment traditions both rejected and relied upon by the cultural-appropriation police. Those traditions are the spiritual core

of American culture at its highest. And those values we should all hope to see appropriated by all this planet's peoples and cultures.

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* *This article originally stated that the student was Vietnamese American. We regret the error.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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