Finding Appreciation in Appropriation:
Asian Subgroup Assessments of Cross-Cultural Adoption

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Introduction

In recent years, student activists have made headlines by accusing peers, institutions and celebrities of engaging in cultural appropriation - the selective taking of a culture other than one's own.
I investigate the views of group members whose cultures are often appropriated, by examining how Chinese and Vietnamese students decide whether a potential act of cultural appropriation is harmful or helpful.

Katy Perry in a Japanese Kimono
(courtesy of NME)

Research Questions

- Under what conditions is an action interpreted as cultural appropriation and does it always carry a negative connotation?
- How do interpretations of cultural appropriation differ across Asian subgroups?

Methodology

Vignette Survey
- Primary Vignettes
  - 3 x 3 design – three levels of two dimensions, race of the appropriator and culture appropriated

Figure 1 | Example of Primary Vignette

V3.W.C: Hannah is a white restaurateur who has opened a new restaurant in New York City that serves Chinese cuisine. Hannah is not of Chinese descent, but the items on the menu include traditional dishes.

- Secondary Vignettes
  - Additional information about appropriator's relationship with culture

Dependent Variable
- Interpretations of cultural appropriation

Figure 2 | Five-point Likert scale measuring dependent variable

A positive instance of appreciating another culture (1)	(2)	A neutral instance of engaging with another culture (3)	(4)	A negative instance of exploiting another culture (5)

Open-Response
- Two question - conceptual and definitional - were used to further inform the regression

Results

- Table 1 displays the coefficient estimates predicting interpretations of cultural appropriation after participants have read the primary vignette (Model 1) and the secondary vignette (Model 2)

Table 1 | Selected coefficients from multivariate ordinal regressions for predicting interpretations of cultural appropriation

| Predictors		Model 1	Model 2
Appropriator's race	Asian	0.18	0.00
	White	0.11	-0.10
	Black	reference	
Culture appropriated	Chinese	-0.49	-1.47
	Vietnamese	-0.68	-1.92
	Mexican	reference	
Participant's racial-ethnic identification	Chinese/Chinese-American	12.30*	20.80*
	Vietnamese/ Vietnamese-American	10.13*	18.77*
	Asian-American (Chinese/Vietnamese)	reference	
Type of cultural product appropriated	Art	-3.06*	--
	Food	-1.95*	--
	Clothing	reference	--
Appropriator's relationship with culture	Disrespectful	--	9.26*
	Ignorant	--	6.69*
	Culturally aware	--	reference

Note: Values are net of control variables. *p < 0.01.

Open-Response

"It is okay to engage with cultures when you are informed, you genuinely APPRECIATE the culture."

"It's never okay to adopt something from a culture for trends or because you think it's aesthetic."

Conclusions

- Any race/ethnicity, even minorities, can appropriate
- History may play in how members perceive the taking of their cultural products by non-members
  - Chinese have a longer discriminatory history than the Vietnamese in the USA
- Some mediums are appropriative in nature
- Respect is a necessary condition for avoiding accusations of cultural appropriation
- There are ways to engage with a culture in which everyone benefits
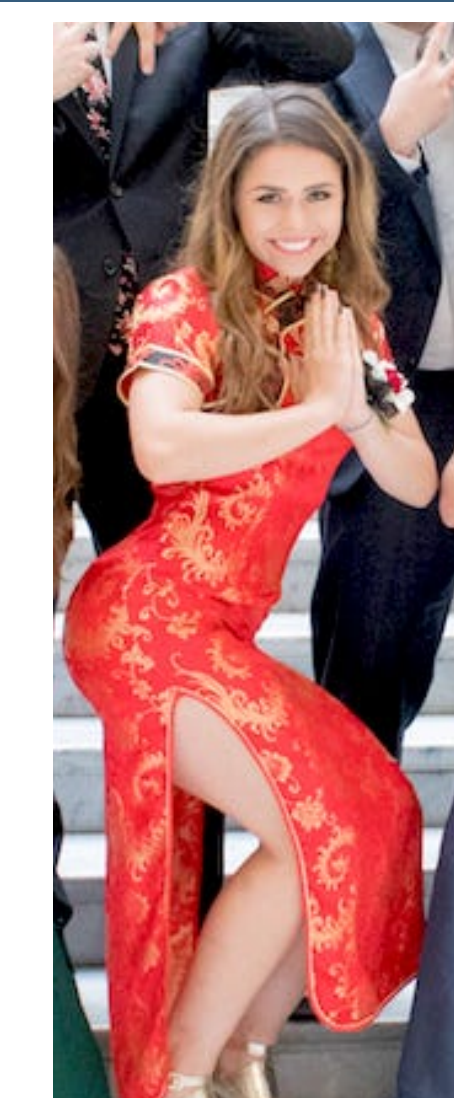
Keziah Daum at Prom
(courtesy of Buzzfeed News)

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Melania Trump at State Dinner
(Courtesy of Vanity Fair; Thomas Peter)

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