



The face of Orientalism: The western appropriation and commodification of Asian culture

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Abstract

Contemporary society today is made up of the intricate fusion of cultural systems. Bound by diaspora, culture becomes a site of open dialogue, wherein its legitimacy is contextualized and positioned by geographical location and traditional accuracy. The construction of cultural identities reflects the cultural norms and codes from which its characterization originates. The construction of cultural identities is evident in a TikTok commentary video by Cantonese model and content creator Ka Laam Chan, where she presents a highly problematic representation of the Asian American identity and their experience. Despite being born and raised in Hong Kong for most of her life, Chan situates herself as the mouthpiece of all Asian persons in the Chinese diaspora. In situating Chan's TikTok video as an emerging site of racial ontology where academic dialogue can take place, we can attempt to understand the nuanced delineation of the heterogeneity in the Chinese diaspora.

Keywords

Asian identity, diaspora, cultural identity, racial ontology, TikTok



In the age of globalization, what were formerly considered unique cultural units belonging to distinct nations now transcend the globe linked by diaspora. The dispersion of cultural systems – the boundaries of which identities are formed, and senses of selves are realized – are blurred heavily by geographic and societal lines. Beyond racial classification, the degree to which one participates in cultural traditions and their alignment with ethnic origins and values holds prominence in one's construction of their identity. Contemporary Western society is littered with the intricate fusion of elements from various cultures from genres of music, hairstyles, cuisines, and fashion – stemming from the belief that the mixing of cultural components advertises the welcoming of the 'Other' into Western society while claiming the ideals of post-racial unity by extension. This paper aims to analyze and deconstruct the rationale of cultural appropriation and the geographical disconnect in distinguishing the perceptions of Asians overseas and Asian-Americans, along with the Western commodification of Asian culture through the TikTok commentary video made by the Cantonese model and content creator Ka Laam Chan. In referencing Christopher R. Campbell's three racial myths in media, Edward W. Said's notion of Orientalism, and Richard Dyer's sense of whiteness as a skin colour, I will critique Chan's video on her invalidation and dismissal of the Asian American experience in her dysfunctional presentation of the Western appropriation of Asian culture.

Firstly, there is a need to put into perspective Chan's racial and ethnic identity in contextualizing the significance of the issues of cultural appropriation and Asian representation presented in Chan's TikTok video. Chan (2021a) is a Cantonese, Hong Kong-born-and-raised model currently residing in the United States, as she made explicitly clear in her video, "I'm an Asian from Asia" (0:03 – 0:05). Chan's video is a commentary on the Western appropriation of Asian culture through the lenses of an overseas Chinese. Amongst the many things she touched on

in her video, the overarching theme seems to be the assertion of her ideals by acting as the mouthpiece of Asian-Americans in permitting the Western adoption of Chinese culture. She elaborates to express her distaste for Asian-Americans for 'gatekeeping' Asian culture from Western consumption. Additionally, her complete dismissal of racial struggles experienced by Asian-Americans breathes life into the harmful narrative that Asian-Americans are not considered rightful Asians due to the differing experiences between them. In an earlier video, Chan (2021b) explains that she moved to the United States to further her modelling career because her height of 5'10, weight of 155 lbs., and 41-inch hip size are considered obese in Asian beauty standards (0:00–0:11). Despite claiming her Asian authenticity and superiority over Asian-Americans, Chan's immigration to the United States is fueled by the desire to fit into Western beauty standards from which she can benefit and profit.

The ideological configuration of what comprises the practice of cultural appropriation is dichotomous and is ever-changing within its depending context. While cultural relics represent nuanced historical values to their ethnic origins, they are now often regarded as trendy garments and accessories in contemporary Western pop culture. In her video, Chan (2021a) states that "Culture is meant to be shared" (2:23 – 2:25). While reception to Western adoption of culture is frequently perceptible as a welcome protection of ethnic and racial identities, cultural borrowing into urban trends often dilutes their sacred significance and is often reduced to meaningless practices that undermine people of colour (Siems, 2019, p. 408). The dynamic of unity advertised through cultural borrowing is deeply rooted in post-racial rhetoric. According to Campbell (2017), the "myth of assimilation" argues that people of colour and their white counterparts are equal and that racial minorities have "overcome racism and (are) fully assimilated into the American mainstream" (p. 15). By normalizing Western appropriation of other cultures without credulity or

consideration of their historical importance, there is an assumption that the cultural components hold no significance and are, therefore, 'free for the taking.' Within this rationale, it is ironic that the notion of unity used to justify cultural appropriation is intentionally divisive; it assumes that race relations within contemporary Western society exist on a level playing field and that the unequal history of power dynamics is nonexistent.

Within this post-racial rhetoric, Chan's commentary on gatekeeping and culture appropriation lacks an understanding of the nature of Western consumption of Asian cultures. Chan (2021a) states, "If you love Asian culture, just go for it." (2:21 – 2:23). Following this line of reasoning, we can consider Western adaptations of Japanese culture that are often manifested in white women dressing up in Japanese schoolgirl uniforms and doll-like makeup to achieve a 'kawaii' or cute aesthetic to present a highly caricatured front of Japanese femininity (Pellitteri, 2018, p. 1). Often popularized by anime, this act, in itself, does not attempt to steal or claim a part of Japanese heritage – similarly, cosplaying has no cultural significance and is more so considered a commercial hobby. Although these acts are applied as a tribute to their general interest in Japanese culture, this practice propels a Western portrayal of historically sexualized stereotypes of Asian femininity as docile, innocent, cute, and pure (Pellitteri, 2018, p. 3). Campbell's (2017) idea of the "myth of difference" identifies how media constantly represent people of colour differently than white people to reinforce racial and historical stereotypes associated with skin colour (p. 15). In this example, white portrayals of Asian femininity are often misguided and therefore propagate historical stereotypes of Asian women, condensing their personhood to mere objects of fetishization. There is a blatant ignorance of how "stereotyped assumptions are difficult to overcome" (Campbell, 2017, p. 16), and the critical message Chan deploys is that inaccurate and demeaning depiction of Asian culture is not only acceptable but encouraged.

Much like media representations of people of colour, the "myth of marginality" illustrates how racial minorities are frequently ignored and underrepresented in the news, therefore exhibiting a sense of insignificance to their existence and the general invisibility of their voices (Campbell, 2017, p. 15). Cultural appropriation works similarly to minimize the realities of people of colour as if their cultural traditions no longer hold as much importance and their cultural significance is extinct. As a powerful socializing agent, the media is plagued by monolithic stereotypes of the ways in which people of colour live their lives. Cultural relics are often dubbed as "exotic" and treated as if the origins of a distant and faraway land stray from what is considered normal in Western civilization (Brown & Leledaki, 2010, p. 129). By completely disregarding the historical significance behind what is now considered "trendy" cultural accessories, Chan distorts the importance of the cultural systems that make up her Asian identity. Cultural appropriation allows the concurrent invisibility in media images to significantly impact how Asian-Americans develop the agency to realize and shape their own racial and cultural identities (Besana et al., 2019, p. 202). The general invisibility of the existence of people of colour is executed to justify the vicious cycle of cultural appropriation functioning as an extension of oppression (Mistry & Kiyama, 2021, p. 586). Since people of colour do not seem to exist, there is no longer a need to acknowledge cultural differences because the Other does not exist in the first place, which then circles back into the notion of post-racialism.

Some proponents of cultural appropriation are supposedly done under the farce of allyship and solidarity. However, equating appropriation with appreciation is a dangerous rhetoric that can further demoralize people of colour. The cultural landscape of Western society prides itself in multiculturalist acceptance but fails to acknowledge its own dysfunctional tendencies that disprove its claims of racial unity and progress. Chan (2021a) says, "If anyone ever needs permission...wear

your qipao, I love to see it” (00:58 – 1:09). When Western practices of cultural disrespect are enabled by an overseas Chinese like Chan, who grew up living in a completely different political and racial climate than Asian-Americans, it is relevant to refer to the power imbalance that favours the hegemonic systems of white power in Western society (Siems, 2019, p. 418). As an ethnic majority in Hong Kong, Chan does not experience the world the same way as an average Asian-American in the West – whose entire existence has been defined by the racial axes of their identity. While Asian-Americans perpetually experience the denial of their existential rights to be treated as equals to their white counterparts, Chan wields power and privilege as part of the dominant racial group in her home country (Mistry & Kiyama, 2021, p. 590). This geographical disconnect between overseas Asians and Asian-Americans ignites the conversation regarding the appropriative process of orientalism which stems from the imperialistic Western knowledge of Orientals.

The discourse surrounding Chan’s commentary video hints at the Western propensity of underplaying the historical and modern repercussions of colonial oppression. Chan (2021a) mentions how exhausted she is when hearing Asian-Americans’ discontent with the appropriative tendencies of non-Asian people, “we [overseas Asians] love when people share our culture, we love... when we see foreigners in qipao” (00:42 - 00:50). The problematic means to which this statement is uttered lies in the discursive setting in which ideologies are thus formed. Chan’s opinions manifest through an institutional understanding of the racial climate of Hong Kong. The keyword here is “foreigner” – pertaining to those other than one’s own, a stranger, an outsider. Ironically, this definition can accurately describe the lived experiences of Asian-Americans residing in Western societies today. As explained by Said (2014), the issues arising within Orientalism originate from where the Orientals are studied, “in what institutional or discursive

setting, for what audience, and with what ends in mind" (p. 129). By drawing parallels from the Orientalist relationship between Europe and Asia, the exact correlation can be derived from the disconnect occurring from Chan speaking for Asian-Americans through the lens of an overseas Asian. By categorizing herself as different from other Asian-Americans, Chan aims to draw a distinct line separating herself from Asian-Americans – similar to the hegemonic "line separating Occident from Orient" (Said, 2014, p. 128). This distinction is emboldened by the intellectual need to speak on issues about another region of the world, fueled by the belief in upholding her knowledge of Asian authenticity.

Praising the Western adoption of Asian culture while condemning the Asian-American community for attempting to protect their cultural identity from possible disrespect indicates the erroneous epistemological contexts in which Chan is being studied. It is crucial to discuss the "subject doing the studying as well as the object or realm being studied" (Said, 2014, p. 128) when examining Orientalism. Chan's immediate environment overseas is surrounded by the cultural ideologies of her political origin, which is later contaminated to integrate herself into Western civilization as she moved to the United States; this is evident in her partaking in the modelling industry and aligning herself with the Western beauty standard. On the other hand, the acceptance of Chan's American counterparts into Western society has always been contingent on them taking the position of the oppressed. Discursive reductions of Asian societies enveloping the transcendental appeal of Eastern culture persist prevalently in Western modernity through Orientalist perceptions (Brown & Leledaki, 2010, p. 129). By immigrating to the United States to pursue her modelling career, Chan is negotiating her definition of beauty through the Western psyche that perpetuates the continuous search for the commercial appeal of the exotic 'other.' This connection is fascinating as Chan's livelihood depends on her assimilation into the Western beauty

standard – one that can only be preserved by the denial of the backward exotification of her Chinese origins, thereby misconstruing the true meaning of cultural appreciation. Ironically, her video commentary primarily reflects her disassociation from her own cultural heritage, despite her claims to be the righteous Asian over Asian-Americans.

In conjunction with Chan's understanding of cultural appropriation due to her social environment, it becomes increasingly clear that her rhetoric truly endorses the merchandising of diasporic Asian culture. In referencing the sexualization of the traditional Chinese dress, qipao, Chan (2021a) says, "It's fashion. It's not just a traditional dress anymore." (2:09 – 2:12). Admittedly, there has been some documented usage of traditional garments worn to accentuate the alluring charms of Asian femininity, such as the Oiran kimono style traditionally worn by high-ranking courtesans of the Edo period in Japanese history (Hughes, 1995, p. 187). However, to water down the historical significance of its usage as a traditional garment into urban fashion blatantly displays the ideologies of cultural commodification and erasure. The commercialization of cultural heritage is a violent act of extracting sacred values from their origins. This social phenomenon can be understood by a framework of categorizing whiteness as a particular skin colour. Richard Dyer (2017) claims that whiteness is "internally variable and unclear at the edges" (p. 48). Verifiably, the Western capitalist system has profited and thrived off of treating people of colour and their cultural artifacts as public domain – with elements that can be adapted into whiteness whenever deemed convenient for the dominant group (Hassan, 2009, p. 338). By overlooking the cultural importance behind what the traditional Chinese dress signifies, Chan permits the theft of her culture and disallows the historical uniqueness of Asia to exist in Western society.

Cultural commodification and appropriation are profitable because it warrants the narrative of stripping away cultural identities of the Other to appease the Western gaze. "In China, we sexualize ourselves," Chan (2021) says (1:27 - 1:30), in support of Western-produced sexualized versions of the qipao. Unbeknownst to her, the evolving styles of qipao symbolize liberation and progressive modernity for traditional Chinese women (Ng, 2015, p. 56). Western modifications of cultural commodities, such as the embellishments and sexualized reproduction of the qipao, are attempts to westernize China's cultural entities because they are made specifically for white people. With respect to the practice of tanning, Dyer argues how "it displays white people's right to be various literally to incorporate into themselves features of other peoples" (Dyer, 2017, p. 49). Applying this rationale similarly to cultural appropriation demonstrates how the diverse cultural markers that hold significance in Asian culture are borrowed by Western adoption and, therefore, translated and folded into whiteness. White people are allowed the privilege to pick and choose elements from different cultures to integrate themselves into while retaining the status and power of being white. In reality, the dilution of cultural differences and the importance of people of colour primarily function at white people's disposition; ultimately, people of colour will have nothing left to identify with other than the capitalist culture of Western society.

Thus far, this paper has encompassed the theoretical frameworks of the racial myths in media, Orientalism, and the sense of whiteness as skin colour to highlight the geographical tension between Chan and her American counterparts and understand the adversity that appropriative practices have on their rightful owners. Dissecting Chan's TikTok commentary through these different cultural frameworks concedes a profound underlying rationale behind cultural appropriation in the West – that the nature of every cultural exchange is and has always been unequal. When opening the floor to Chan's dialogue in speaking for her American counterparts,

there is a sense of danger felt by Asian-Americans who may not wish to see their cultural identity disintegrate in the avalanche of globalization. Culture is a precious fragment of one's identity, so it becomes a secret to be kept, a hoard to be guarded. The spatial relationship between this geographical disconnect also paves the way to understand how cultural appropriation functions to establish hegemonic dominance over those deemed as Other, sustained by cultural commodification in a capitalist society. The fluidity of culture makes sharing its elements inevitable and a potentially constructive agent to achieve a harmonious society. However, deep-seated systemic issues must be dismantled and unraveled long before the gaps in the cultural bridge can be built between people of colour and Western society. On a more cautionary note, it might momentarily suffice to leave the onus on Western society to take a step toward reconciliation.

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