Cultural-appropriation outrage is idiotic

Borrowing from a culture is not the same as denigrating it, says Jonah Goldberg

I am very critical of China’s government. It’s corrupt, authoritarian and in some respects totalitarian. I have deep reservations about Chinese culture as well. The Chinese government bans sex-selective abortions — i.e., killing females in utero — but Chinese people still do it in staggering numbers. China also practices ethnic discrimination that would be instantly recognizable as a kind of Jim Crow or apartheid if the majority Han Chinese were white and minorities such as the Uighurs were black. I could go on, but you get the point.

The reason I bring all of this up is that I want to be clear that my imminence praise for China is selective, even grudging. But you’ve got to hand it China. It has something we’re sorely missing today: civilizational confidence.

Exhibit A: The Chinese think we’re idiots when it comes to the absurd panic over “cultural appropriation.”

By now you’ve probably heard that a teenager in Utah wore a traditional Chinese dress to her prom. The young lady, Keziah Daum, is not ethnically Chinese or Asian. And this infuriated a lot of people on Twitter. And like Pavlov’s dogs responding to the dinner bell, thousands of Twitter hounds rained abuse on Daum for the great alleged sin of “cultural appropriation.”

Cultural appropriation was originally a sociological term to describe how a majority culture borrows or adapts from a minority culture some custom, fashion, cuisine or practice. At some point, alas, it went from being descriptive to prescriptive.

Proscriptive rules — the opposite of prescriptive rules — tell people what they cannot do. And while it’s not quite a law (yet), save on some college campuses, there’s an organized and passionate movement to pass a new social commandment: “Thou shalt not appropriate someone else’s culture.”

It must be noted that this is different from saying, “Thou shalt not mock or denigrate someone else’s culture.” That’s a valuable social norm. But this is a distinction the anti-cultural-appropriation forces want to obliterate. They argue that any form of cultural appropriation is essentially indistinguishable from attacking someone’s culture.

And that is idiotic. Without cultural appropriation, American blacks would never have picked up European musical instruments to create the blues and jazz. Without cultural appropriation, white and black artists alike would never have spun these wonderful creations into rock ‘n’ roll.

Nearly every meal you’ve ever eaten is the byproduct of centuries of cultural appropriation, to one extent or another. This column is written in English, a language that contains hundreds of thousands of words appropriated from other tongues. Just under two-thirds of our language derives from Latin or French. About a quarter is Germanic in origin. And about a sixth comes from Greek, Arabic and other languages.

Christianity was a Middle Eastern religion “appropriated” by Europeans.

Cultural appropriation manifested itself in every society and civilization since the concepts of society and civilization were born. We are living through the greatest period of poverty alleviation in all of human history right now because countries in Asia and Africa have appropriated many economic policies and practices — free markets, property rights, etc. — that began as quirky artifacts of English and Dutch culture.

But Western civilization is a bit different from other civilizations because, until very recently, it prided itself for its ability to embrace, and borrow from, other cultures. Some of that appropriation happened at the tip of a sword or gun, but show me a civilization that didn’t use violence against other groups at one point or another.

Alas, the Puritan tradition in America takes funny new forms. So today, people can appropriate a different gender, but don’t you dare wear a sombrero if you have the wrong DNA, never mind invent a Korean taco or wear a Chinese dress to the prom. I don’t take much pride in the fact that Chinese elites wear Western jackets and ties, but I don’t see why it should offend anyone either.

Which brings me back to China. The New York Times did a great journalistic service last week: It investigated whether the Chinese were offended by Daum’s alleged hate crime. The overwhelming response? No. Chinese social media and cultural commentators celebrated Daum’s decision as a compliment.

But in America, unfortunately, some people are so insecure in their identity and so desperate to be offended they have breathed new life into H.L. Mencken’s definition of puritanism: “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

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But I'm not cutting our phone bill increase. If T-Mobile and Sprint combine.