

Western Decadence from an Eastern Perspective

by [Derek Hopper](#) (July 2018)



How to Wage a Cultural Cold War, Eugene Rodriguez, 2011

Early May saw the latest skirmish in the ongoing culture wars. The inevitable result of an endlessly documented and commentated-upon world, these battles seem always to occur in the Anglosphere, probably because the English-speaking world is ground-zero for the madness of ideas like microaggressions, cultural appropriation and 'healthy at every size'. Consider the furor surrounding a London Underground advert for protein shakes in 2015 which featured a bikini-clad woman sultrily exhorting the viewer to get 'beach body ready'. Looking svelte and fit, the model didn't appear remotely anorexic, and the

usual protestations about ultra-thin models encouraging eating disorders in young women didn't hold up. Instead, the ad's sin would transmogrify into the 'body-shaming' of women.

Body-shaming is an interestingly worded phrase because it explicitly acknowledges the wrongdoing of the person who feels it. If a man is falsely accused of a crime he will probably feel self-pity. He will likely be furious with his accusers. But one thing he won't feel is ashamed; you cannot shame an

innocent person. An extremely overweight person feels contrite at being defined by three of the seven deadly sins—greed, gluttony and sloth. This shame can be so overwhelming that the mere suggestion of a change to their lifestyle feels like an assault, and so their response is to



agitate for the removal of that which disgraces them. Ultimately the protein shake advertisement ended up banned in the UK, and in May 2018 a 'plus-size' fashion brand launched an aesthetically similar ad campaign featuring three morbidly obese women claiming to be 'beach body ready'. The objectively healthy woman was banned and the objectively unhealthy women were celebrated. Nothing illustrates the utter madness of the modern left better than that.

As a European who has been living in Asia for several years, and being someone who keeps abreast of the increasingly unhinged notions of the left by way of a Twitter account, I find myself in the position of being able to vividly perceive these insane ideas that have become so prevalent in western academia and media in recent years. That such fads are almost entirely absent in Asia makes their presence in the West all

the more conspicuous and obtrusive.

Take the case of the Utah teenager who, in May 2018, wore a Chinese dress (called a cheongsam or qipao) to her prom. She posted a few photographs of herself in the dress on social media and a Chinese-American man named Jeremy Lam retweeted the photographs, commenting that 'My culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress'.



By tweeting about his culture being reducible a Chinese dress, Lam revealed the schizophrenia at the heart of identity politics. He would presumably resent being told he is not 'truly' American, yet he views American culture as his (assuming he recognizes it as existing at all) in addition to the one his parents abandoned in order to bring him to the United States. Nor is Lam alone in this, as the petabytes of op-eds by embittered ethnic minorities testify.

Photos of Lam show him wearing a baseball cap and t-shirt (both American inventions), along with board shorts (Polynesian in origin, American in design, definitely not Chinese) and eye glasses (invented in Italy). That Lam could not recognize his own hypocrisy perhaps explains why so many Americans claim white people 'have no culture'—the problem is that the world is so overwhelmingly dominated by western culture that it's a case of not being able to see the forest for the trees. I had some experience of this in a classroom

last year when, in a discussion about global culture, one student said she preferred Japan's to America's because the Asian nation valued 'traditional dress' while the US didn't. She was wearing blue jeans and a pair of Chuck Taylor's at the time.

Western culture has become a global standard to the point where no Tokyo salaryman in a business suit (invented in England) will ever be accused of cultural appropriation, but there is no difference in principle between the salaryman in a suit and a Utah teenager wearing a Chinese dress. Newcomers to the West have spotted a weakness in their hosts. They know white people are terrified of being called racist and this has emboldened even groups that have been wildly successful in the country: Asian-Americans earn far more than their European-American compatriots yet increasingly view themselves as beleaguered 'people of colour'.

The response in China to the prom dress incident was one of bemusement. Several newspapers in the country got wind of the story and ran opinion pieces saying it was clearly complimentary of Chinese culture rather than offensive towards it. Even a small child would recognize this as being true: what kind of girl would ruin her own prom by wearing clothes she thinks are ugly or beneath her? Lam and his many supporters want to share in western culture as Americans, but they also want ownership over the one they left behind, and their diseased view of identity forbids white people from enjoying the fruits of modern globalization's cultural syncretism.

The story of the Chinese prom dress was of special interest to me for reasons beyond the drama of it all. I live in Bangkok

and married a Thai woman a few years ago. Thai wedding photographs are usually taken weeks in advance of the actual wedding, basically so the couple isn't bothered on the wedding day by having to spend time away from family and friends. This also provides an opportunity for Thais (who love taking photographs) to wear different outfits and pose in a multitude of settings. Our wedding preparations were no different and, during these pre-wedding photos, my wife selected to wear a cheongsam very similar to the one worn by the Utah teenager. I was given the male equivalent—a changshan—and expected to wear it before moving on to our 'normal' wedding clothes. I did as my wife asked.

Thailand has a substantial number of people who identify as Thai-Chinese, especially in Bangkok, and its Chinatown is one of the largest and most impressive in the world. Thailand is also one of the few Asian nations where Chinese immigrants have not been historically mistreated. Despite these cultural links my wife has no Chinese ancestry that she knows of. As someone living in Asia the idea of my wearing a changshan being offensive to people from China is beyond ridiculous, but for the sake of argument I'll bow to the zealots and accept that I was guilty of cultural appropriation. Was my wife also guilty of Chinese cultural appropriation that day? Was she guilty of American cultural appropriation last week when she wore a pair of Levi's? There seems to me no conclusive answer to these questions; furious debate over them is as pointless as arguing about what happened prior to the Big Bang.

Anyone familiar with the current state of identity politics will know about the so-called microaggression of asking someone (usually a non-white person in a western country) where they are from. It may indeed be tiresome for a woman of Hmong or Somalian parentage born and raised in Iowa to be

asked weekly where she's 'really from', but this does not make it an act of aggression. Indeed, it is infuriating that the girl's parents—who presumably knew real hardship back in their homeland—produced offspring so ungrateful to their adopted country that curiosity is regarded as something malicious rather than a petty annoyance. White Americans are expected to be colourblind and incurious. Asking where a non-white person hails from is paranoiacally taken as a slight against that person's Americanness.

This American obsession with race and identity is unquestionably a result of the United States' fraught history of slavery. It seems ludicrous enough that after all this time blacks would still be suffering any consequences from a system that ended in the mid-19th century, and given the left's refusal to move beyond anti-capitalist, teleological explanations for the disparity of outcomes between racial groups, an honest discussion about agency is impossible. Meanwhile, now other races are getting in on the act. A problem that was once linear (that is to say, between black people and white people) has overnight become a nexus, an interconnected web of oppression with, for example, Chinese-American men claiming victimhood due to someone wearing a dress and Indian-Americans feigning offense over stereotyping in *The Simpsons*.

Modern leftists claim that white people cannot experience racism because they hold institutional power, but this reflects the worldview only of Americans who've never lived abroad. As a foreigner in Thailand I am forbidden from ever owning land, it is next to impossible for me to be granted Thai citizenship and I have to report to immigration every 90 days to let the authorities know where I live. It goes without question that if the roles were reversed, and it were a Thai

who had to live under such laws, the western government would be accused of racism and fascism. Witness the hysteria that surrounds the innocuous practice of referring to people illegally in the United States as 'illegal immigrants'. Leftwing activists claim that 'no human being is illegal,' in an attempt to shape reality, but as George Orwell pointed out in *1984*, the whole aim of Newspeak was to narrow the range of thought. Thai and Asian newspapers routinely discuss the problem of illegal immigration, and of illegal immigrants. Indeed, without the appropriate qualifications and paperwork I would become an illegal immigrant overnight. That status would be undeniable to me or to anyone who values linguistic clarity. But how can a person break immigration law and how can borders even exist if crossing them is not only not illegal, but encouraged?

Theodore Dalrymple, writing about communist propaganda, said that its purpose is to humiliate: 'When people are forced to remain silent when they are being told the most obvious lies, or even worse when they are forced to repeat the lies themselves, they lose once and for all their sense of probity. To assent to obvious lies is...in some small way to become evil oneself. One's standing to resist anything is thus eroded, and even destroyed. A society of emasculated liars is easy to control. I think if you examine political correctness, it has the same effect and is intended to'.

From the East one can observe a western civilisation that has become so decadent it denies reality in favour of postmodern relativism. Its universities increasingly treat education as an opportunity for political advocacy above all else. *Scientific American* reported recently that support for educational programmes for gifted children has declined as the focus has 'moved more towards inclusion'. England scrapped its

National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth in 2010. By contrast, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore screen children for intellectual giftedness, and the Chinese guide their best students into STEM. The West so desires the blank slate to be real it lowers the bar to allow the less capable to enter its universities. In Asia, China ruthlessly pursues meritocracy. The American economist David P. Goldman has written about this phenomenon:

If you're in the Chinese leadership you made it there by scoring high on a long series of exams, starting at age twelve—which means you haven't met a stupid person since you were in junior high school. The fact that democracies can frequently advance stupid people—we are entitled to do that if we wish—doesn't make sense to the Chinese. The one thing President Xi Jinping cannot do is get his child into Peking University unless that child scores high on his exams. Here in America, you can buy your way into Harvard. You can't do that in China.

After World War II the United States' competition was a devastated Europe, a Japan left in ashes, and a China that was to submit to the folly of communism for decades to come. But this new China is what the United States (and indeed all of the West) is up against; a China in which the number of science and engineering bachelor's degrees increased from 359,000 in 2000 to 1.65 million in 2014. (By comparison, in 2015 the United States conferred 650,000 S&E degrees.) When China's economy overtakes the United States' sometime in the next ten to fifteen years, all those degrees in Chicano and Gender Studies are going to be even less useful than they are today.

China (and the rest of northeast Asia) already have a substantial advantage over the West given their above average IQ; meanwhile, we live in a world increasingly dependent on technological innovation and it is they who are moving with the times. As Heather Mac Donald says:

The extraordinary accomplishments of Western science were achieved without regard to the complexions of its creators. Now, however, funders, industry leaders, and academic administrators maintain that scientific progress will stall unless we pay close attention to identity and try to engineer proportional representation in schools and laboratories. The truth is exactly the opposite: lowering standards and diverting scientists' energy into combating phantom sexism and racism is reckless in a highly competitive, ruthless, and unforgiving global marketplace. Driven by unapologetic meritocracy, China is catching up fast to the U.S. in science and technology. Identity politics in American science is a political self-indulgence that we cannot afford.

America may well have a tortured history with race and Europe its own demons with imperialism, but the world economy, like nature, is red in tooth and claw, and the West would do well to remember that.

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