The Instrumental Consumption of Ethnic Culture: Assessing Two Economically Driven Ways of Consuming the Cheongsam in China

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Abstract
Under the contemporary circumstances of symbolic consumption, multiculturalism, and accelerated globalization, ethnic cultures have become more available and more attractive to consumers. A consequence is that the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture becomes much more common. This study’s first objective is to clarify it by analyzing the instrumental consumption of the cheongsam, a Chinese traditional dress. This study’s second objective is to illustrate that the normative implications of instrumental consumption of ethnic culture are more complex and open-ended than currently understood. I substantiate this argument by contrasting two economically driven ways of consuming the cheongsam: non-wealthy women wearing cheongsams for their affordability and fashion businesses using the cheongsam style to generate profits. I show that the former case is relatively benign while the latter is not. They show that even when instrumental consumption is driven by purposes irrelevant to ethnicity, some instances of it can yield ethnicity-relevant outcomes. Among these ethnicity-relevant outcomes, some of them empower ethnic cultures. This study’s data include formal and informal interviews, participant observation in several Chinese cities, and a variety of documentary sources.

Keywords
ethnic culture, sociology of consumption, cultural sociology, national dress, cheongsam

Introduction
The consumption of ethnic culture is increasingly common in contemporary societies. It has become more common now than in historical periods due to three social transformations. The first is the escalating significance of symbolic and cultural consumption in common people’s lives (Rössel & Schroedter, 2015). This matters not only to those living in economically developed countries but also to a significant portion of consumers of developing ones. The second is the cultural shift toward cultural omnivorism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism. For example, contemporary middle-class Americans increasingly consume low-status cultures including ethnic minority ones (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The third is the enhancement of global hyperconnectivity through travel, immigration, and information technologies. An unintended consequence of this hyperconnectivity is that ethnic cultural consumption no longer matters primarily to ethnic minorities and immigrants. They inevitably impact everyone including ethnic majority ones (Huntington, 1993; Kymlicka, 1991). Due to higher levels of symbolic consumption, multiculturalism, and globalization, a wide range of ethnic cultural products become more readily available to consumers.

This study aims at two contributions. Firstly, it clarifies how ethnic cultural consumption is driven by instrumental and ethnicity-irrelevant purposes. It demonstrates that ethnic cultural products are economically cost-effective and that they are desirable for consumers as cosmopolitan cultural capital. Additionally, both individuals and organizations can utilize ethnic culture for their instrumental purposes. Based on data on the instrumental consumption of the cheongsam, a Chinese traditional dress, I demonstrate that many consumers and institutions are involved in the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture and that its meanings can substantially vary across cases. As I will show, although some scholars already

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know that ethnic cultures are possibly consumed for purposes irrelevant to ethnicity, they have not clarified this kind of consumption. Additionally, due to the lack of communication between the numerous relevant fields, at least a significant minority of scholars are unaware of this possibility.

Secondly, this study challenges the current negative assessment of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture. Current studies of ethnic cultural consumption adopt the presupposition that ethnic cultures are inherently associated with the politics, meanings, and outcomes that empower minority ethnicities. I advocate an open-ended approach that does not make such a presupposition. Instead, it assumes that although negative outcomes are possible, neutral, positive, or mixed ones are possible as well. Furthermore, it does not assume that the politics, meanings, and outcomes are necessarily relevant to ethnicity. I substantiate these arguments by empirically comparing two major ways of instrumentally consuming the cheongsam style in China. Their different normative outcomes put into relief the need for more nuanced, contextualized, and open-ended assessments of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture.

**This Study’s Working Definition of “Ethnic Culture”**

The concept of “ethnic culture” is conventionally conceptualized as ethnic minority cultures in the US and other economically developed Western nations. Ethnic studies and sociologists of race and ethnicity have been the most authoritative definers of the term’s meaning. But the conventional conception is more problematic than it appears—it suffers from methodological nationalism. Like many other concepts of race and ethnicity, it was specifically formulated to investigate American society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 467; Christian, 2019, pp.170, 171; Suzuki, 2017). This methodological nationalism generates various problems. I briefly discuss two of the problems to explain why this study does not adopt the conventional conception.

The first is the dilemma of whether to count white Western cultures as ethnic minority cultures in non-Western developing societies. If one does, then one must heavily revise the conventional normative portrayal of ethnic culture as a marginalized minority culture. Otherwise, one risks equating the promotion of globally dominant (i.e., white Western) cultures with the support of domestically minority ethnic cultures in a non-Western society. White Western cultures are not exactly marginalized minority cultures in non-Western societies. Moreover, the promotion of white Western cultures in non-Western societies partly overlaps with colonialism, modernization, and cultural imperialism. Additionally, because colonialism, modernization, and cultural imperialism have already occurred in history, many (though not all) cultural fields of non-Western societies are already dominated by modern Western cultures. This is true for elite cultural fields such as the fine arts as much as popular ones such as dress. For example, most citizens in current East Asia and South America wear Western-style dress on daily occasions. In these societies, it does not make sense to count Western fashion as a minority ethnic sartorial culture and indigenous dresses as the mainstream sartorial culture.

The second problem is the indeterminacy—caused by mobility, migration, and deterritorialization—of what qualifies as ethnic culture. For example, it is unclear whether Japanese cuisine is an ethnic minority culture or an ethnic majority one to the white expatriate community in Tokyo. The same indeterminacy arises if a Japan-born person living in Japan thinks about Japanese cuisine. Does the ethnic minority status of Japanese cuisine depend on the individual who eats the food, the geographic location where the food is eaten, or the positionality of the social scientist who observes the eating? Transcultural mobility and deterritorialization make it difficult to answer this question. Each of the three choices can yield a different assessment of whether a given cultural product is truly ethnic culture. Because the methodological nationalist conception of ethnic culture pre-empirically assumes that the cultural consumer, the social scientist, and the cultural product are “white and Western,” answers yielded by these three questions seem to be necessarily consistent. But they are not necessarily consistent in the contemporary global context.

This study does not carry out a full critique of the conventional conception of “ethnic culture.” These would be theoretically involved tasks that deserve a separate study. Avoiding a methodological nationalist conception of ethnic culture, this study pragmatically defines ethnic culture as whatever cultural products that consumers think are ethnic. For example, when a consumer thinks a product is culturally alternative, outlandish, and/or exotic, she is likely framing it as an ethnic culture. This study also takes “ethnic culture” as an inclusive shorthand to denote a set of overlapping concepts including “local culture,” “national culture,” “racial culture,” and “indigenous culture.”

This pragmatic and inclusive conception of “ethnic culture” is driven by the theoretical purpose of examining the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture in contemporary societies. In this consumption, local cultures, national cultures, ethnic minority cultures, and indigenous cultures are often treated by consumers in equally instrumental ways. Distinctions such as whether the culture under analysis is authentically indigenous or whether it qualifies as a minority culture do not matter for most instrumental consumers. Instrumental consumers, and especially institutional ones such as capitalist businesses, are most concerned with whether cultural consumption serves their instrumental goals.

**“Presupposed” Ways of Consuming Ethnic Culture Versus Instrumental Ways of Doing So**

Ethnic cultures’ “presupposed” politics, meanings, and outcomes are to enhance minority ethnicities—this is a longstanding presupposition constructed by critical scholars. An analogous presupposition can be found in studies that adopt the concept of “subcultures.” The “subculture” concept was
initially formulated to refer to class-based non-mainstream cultures (Hebdige, 1983). Subcultures were thought to have a set of “presupposed” politics, meanings, and outcomes; they contest mainstream, upper-class, and/or high-status cultures (Emmison, 2003; Thornton, 1996). But it became gradually clear that subcultures could well be consumed for instrumental purposes irrelevant to class. For example, the prices of branded punk and hip-hop fashion products rival those of haute couture and global luxury products. Consequently, scholars strongly criticize this presupposition (Bennett, 2011; Hodkinson, 2016; Sweetman, 2013). Some of these critics reject the concept of “subculture.” Others revise the concept in major ways. By now, most scholars of subcultures no longer presuppose that subcultures are necessarily and simply class-based cultures.

“Ethnic culture” was initially formulated to refer to ethnic minority-based cultures in the US or other Western societies. From then on, many scholars of ethnic culture presuppose that ethnic cultures are inherently associated with politics, meanings, and outcomes that empower minority ethnicities. Some of these scholars are theoretically oriented social scientists such as sociologists of race and ethnicity. Others are empirically oriented specialists in various subfields of ethnic culture research (such as the subfields of ethnic fashion brands or Korean cuisine). This presupposition is influential for three reasons. Firstly, the mainstream fields of scholarship on ethnic culture tend to conceive ethnic culture in substantalist or essentialist ways.

Few authors today dare to argue for the givenness, situational stability, and deep-rooted character of ethnic culture and identities, [. . .but] such notions are still widespread in the ethnic studies departments of American universities and among non-specialized researchers. [. . .] Assimilation theory, multiculturality, and ethnic studies all take it for granted that [. . .c]ach ethnic group is supposed to be characterized by a specific culture (Wimmer, 2013: 2, 10).

Substantalist and essentialist conceptions encourage the idea that the politics, meanings, and outcomes of any given ethnic culture are stably determined. But obviously, ethnic cultures can be investigated in performative, relational-processual, and contextualist ways instead of substantalist and essentialist ways. I do not aim at critique the existing scholarship; my purpose is to trace the origins of this presupposition.

Secondly, scholars who choose ethnic culture as their major investigative focus likely adopt a critical race and ethnicity perspective. Namely, when these scholars investigate ethnic culture, they likely have critically motivated research agendas that concern the ethnicity-relevant politics, meanings, and outcomes of this ethnic culture. Hence, even though they may perfectly understand that ethnic culture is sometimes consumed in instrumental ways, their research interest compels them to exclusively investigate the non-instrumental (and “presupposed”) ways of consuming ethnic culture. When most scholars in the field have collectively acted this way for several decades, the presupposition becomes widely accepted. Not everyone embraces the presupposition. There are exceptions inside and outside the major fields of racial and ethnic studies. For example, business scholars who study the “country of origin” problematic exclusively explore the instrumental aspect of ethnic cultural consumption. But business scholarship hardly dialogues with critical fields of racial and ethnic studies.

Thirdly, ethnic culture has not become highly susceptible to instrumental kinds of consumption until the recent few decades. The presupposition was not very untenable a few decades ago when ethnic cultural consumption was smaller in scale, less celebrated, less accessible, and less affordable. Ethnic cultures were consumed by either the corresponding minority groups or dedicated appreciators. These historical circumstances prevented large-scale participation in the instrumental consumption of ethnic cultures. This is why the fixation on ethnicity-relevant politics, meanings, and outcomes was not seriously problematic for earlier studies. This fixation only led scholars to miss a small portion of consumption phenomena.

The circumstances are drastically changing in the symbolic consumerist, multiculturalist, and globally hyperconnected world during the past few decades. Ethnic cultural consumption increasingly involves ethnicity-irrelevant kinds of politics, meanings, and outcomes. This claim is not new. Many studies have already empirically identified ethnicity-irrelevant kinds of politics, meanings, and outcomes. Therefore, this study does not aim at proving that ethnic culture can be consumed in instrumental ways. This is a gratuitous task. However, it is urgent to assess the instrumental politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic cultural consumption. As ethnicity-irrelevant kinds of politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic cultural consumption proliferate, they could undermine the critical purpose of ethnic cultural consumption.

**Current Studies Marginalize the Investigation of Instrumental Ethnic Cultural Consumption**

The number of studies that investigate “ethnic culture,” overlapping concepts such as “local culture,” and derivative terms such as “ethnic music,” “Japanese national dress,” or “Thai cuisine” is extremely large. They are also widely scattered across many disparate fields. Most of them do not engage one another or integrate into a coherent research field. Due to the unorganized state of the field and the huge number of studies involved, it is almost impossible to comprehensively review the current state of theoretical thinking on how ethnic culture is consumed.

In a separate review essay, I take an initial step toward this difficult task by examining several research fields relevant to ethnic cultural consumption. I briefly summarize its findings here. My review is broad-stroke and it concerns ethnic
cultural consumption. It discusses six bodies of scholarship. The first is the most influential field on ethnic culture: studies of migrant ethnic culture in the sociology of race and ethnicity. The second is the most influential field on local culture: studies of cultural globalization, localization, and hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Brubaker, 2007; Gabaccia, 1998; Hannerz, 1996; Nagel, 1994; Robertson, 1994). Then I review three small but theoretically influential subfields: the research on racial and ethnic performance, studies of ethnic boundary-making and ethnic boundary processes, and cultural sociological studies of omnivorosity (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959. Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Pachucki et al., 2007; Warde et al., 2007). The sixth body of scholarship is composed of many small-scale research subfields that analyze the inauthenticity and commodification of ethnic cultural consumption (Bankston & Henry, 2000; Cole, 2007; MacCannell, 1973). Aside from these six bodies of scholarship, I briefly review some research fields that investigate the instrumental politics of ethnic cultural consumption. They are either small or theoretically unimportant. For example, some studies utilize a feminist intersectional framework to interpret ethnic cultural consumption (Anthias, 2012; Chew & Mo, 2019; Crockett et al., 2011).

I make two observations based on my review. Firstly, the current scholarship on ethnic culture does not even investigate a wide variety of politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic cultural consumption. The most authoritative and long-standing fields—that on ethnic culture and that on local culture—prioritize the ethnicity-relevant politics of ethnic culture. These fields’ intellectual impact remains very strong at present. Secondly, fields equipped with sophisticated and nuanced theoretical frameworks marginalize the investigation of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture. These fields are in principle favorable to the open-ended approach. They perfectly understand that ethnic culture may generate ethnicity-irrelevant politics. But because these scholars are primarily interested in critical issues of ethnicity, globalization, local dynamics, cultural pluralism, and/or nationalism, they tend to only explore the ethnicity-relevant politics of ethnic culture.

My review focuses on theoretical research fields on ethnic culture. But aside from them, there are many empirically oriented research subfields on ethnic culture. Studies on food, fashion, popular music, and other popular cultural genres increasingly constitute visible research fields. In each of these fields, studies on ethnic culture are present and they to some extent form research subfields. In each of these subfields, scholarship on each ethnic group’s culture forms a sub-subfield. These fields, subfields, and sub-subfields are numerous. They also tend to marginalize the investigation of instrumental ethnic cultural consumption. For example, early studies of ethnic food focus on the ethnicity-relevant (i.e., the “presupposed”) politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic culture (Van den Berghe, 1984). This focus is still adopted by some of the most recent publications on ethnic food (Ayyub, 2015; Flowers & Swan, 2017).

Located in fashion studies, feminist studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, the scholarship on ethnic dress endorses an open-ended approach since the 1990s (Eicher, 1995; Hansen, 2004; Maxwell, 2019; Niessen et al., 2003). Many studies find that ethnic dresses are appropriated by capitalism, patriarchy, the state, and/or religious elites for furthering their respective instrumental interests. The recent international feminist debate on the hijab, for example, showcases how an open-ended approach can enable nuanced analyses of ethnic cultural consumption (Gökärkikel & Secor, 2009). But a significant minority of studies still focus on the ethnicity-relevant politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic dress (Gardetti & Muthu, 2016). These studies include, for example, those that eagerly promote indigenous styles against the global dominance of Western fashion. (I understand that some scholars are doing this in a strategic essentialist way.)

Public discourse is an additional source through which one understands the current assessment of instrumental ethnic cultural consumption. The most relevant among them is the discussion on “cultural appropriation” (Banks, 2020, pp. 38–53). It emerged in the mid-2010s and remains influential at present (Monroy, 2018). Although the concept of “cultural appropriation” was not entirely newly coined, the contemporary public imbues it with critical social significance and propels it to popularity (Green & Kaiser, 2017). Since 2016, academics are driven by the vigorous public debate on “cultural appropriation” to theorize the concept (Pham, 2017). The public discourse very negatively assesses the instrumental consumption of ethnic cultures. It depicts it as exploitation, harm, injustice, and/or theft (Lalonde, 2019). Its normative evaluation is based on American political correctness, identity politics, and multiculturalism. Although some scholarly critiques of the concept of “cultural appropriation” are made, most scholarly publications on the topic support the public discourse’s negative assessment of cultural appropriation (Matthes, 2019; Nguyen & Strohl, 2019).

This study does not refute the negative assessment of instrumental consumption of ethnic culture. It claims that different instances of instrumental consumption of ethnic culture can have different politics, meanings, and outcomes. Namely, although negative outcomes are possible, neutral, positive, or mixed ones are possible as well. It empirically substantiates this claim by contrasting two major ways of instrumentally consuming the cheongsam in China. Their different outcomes put into relief the need for more nuanced, contextualized, and open-ended assessments of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture.

My analysis will be relevant to interpreting a well-known incident of cultural appropriation in the US. The appropriation of ethnic fashion has drawn a large share of the public attention on cultural appropriation (Green & Kaiser, 2017). In 2018, the 18-year-old Keziah Daum, a high school senior-year
student in Utah, wore a cheongsam to the prom and posted her prom-night pictures on Twitter. Many netizens and especially Asian-Americans condemned Daum’s wearing of the cheongsam as an instance of cultural appropriation and racism. The war cry, constructed by the Twitter user Jeremy Lam, was “My culture is not your goddamn prom dress.” Instead of apologizing, Daum defended herself. A heated debate ensued. My analysis will show that an open-ended perspective on the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture provides a more adequate frame than “cultural appropriation” for assessing Daum’s prom-night cheongsam.

### Research on the Contemporary Consumption of Cheongsams

The cheongsam (or the qipao) is a form-fitting one-piece dress for women. The modern cheongsam was developed in the period between the 1910s and 1960s in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong-based on the historical qipao. The historical qipao was a dress worn by the Manchus, a non-Han ethnic group that ruled China during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The modern cheongsam style is composed of Manchu, Mongolian, and Han Chinese stylistic influences and modern European sartorial elements. For detailed discussions on the stylistic development of the cheongsam, please refer to Clark (2000), Finanne (2008), and Ling (2007). In the mid-20th-century, the cheongsam had become the most globally known dress in China. By the 1970s, it ceased to be worn as a daily dress in all Chinese societies.

Although the cheongsam has not managed to return as a daily dress in contemporary China, its national symbolic meanings were globally reinforced in the late 1990s. Chinese and global fashion designers, celebrities, artists, and fashion aficionados skillfully repackaged the modern cheongsam in stylish and glamorous ways (Chew, 2007). The economic rise of China since the early 2000s further supported the cheongsam’s symbolic reemergence. Others in China were inspired. They promoted a few other traditional Chinese styles to vie for the status of national dress (Chew, 2010). These traditional styles include the Mao suit, the “New Tang dynasty style dress” (xintangzhuang), and the “Han dress” (hanfu; Carrico, 2017). But they lag behind the cheongsam in terms of global exposure, fashionability, and popular cultural endorsement. Given the cheongsam’s complicated history, it is not entirely clear whether it qualifies as an ethnic cultural product according to the conventional conception. This study sees it as ethnic culture in the sense it is generally regarded by the Chinese public and Chinese consumers as a non-mainstream dress for daily occasions (Chew, 2007).

This study explores two common ways of instrumentally consuming the cheongsam style and cheongsams. The first way features non-wealthy women appropriating ethnic culture for economic savings and/or fashionability. Most of them achieve these goals by using cheongsams as affordable “cosmopolitan cultural capital.” The second way concerns fashion businesses that capitalize on the cheongsam style by commodifying and branding it. They are producers of cheongsams as well as consumers of the cheongsam style. Although some current studies already link cheongsams to socio-economic inequality and exploitation, these two ways of consuming cheongsams are never analyzed. Their neglect of them represents a glaring research gap. The cheongsam is one of the world’s most successfully commodified national dress styles. Additionally, I found in my fieldwork that economic savings was and still is one of the most common reasons for wearing cheongsams in mainland China.

### Methods and Data

This study utilizes data collected for a larger project of mine on the consumption of cheongsams in China. The larger project’s data were collected in three phases. The first two lasted between 2003 and 2008. The first phase started as pilot research and subsequently turned into a process of abductive analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). I began with the general objective of exploring whether there were ways of consuming cheongsams that did not stress ethnicity or nationalism. This objective was inspired by my pilot observation of cheongsam-wearers in Chinese societies in the early-2000s. I did not preemptively limit my data source to a particular city or restrict my informants to a particular cheongsam-wearer group.

Much time and effort were spent on the first phase. There was not a narrowly geographically defined ethnographic field on which I focused my efforts. I made frequent trips to several Chinese cities. I consulted dozens of individuals who had updated information on fashion and dress in China, most of whom were in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan. They included professors of textile departments, fashion retailing consultants, fashion merchandizers, fashion designers, fashionistas, modeling agent managers, elite hairstylists, fashion media editors, party people, college students, and actresses. I asked them about how Chinese women were consuming cheongsams and urged them to consult others in their circles. They introduced me to some cheongsam-wearers and I conducted some pilot interviews. I visited places and events where cheongsam wearers could be observed, including parties organized by fashion marketers, dance clubs, university campuses, central retail districts, and major shopping malls. I have published an article that is largely based on data collected in the first phase (Chew, 2007).

The second phase of data collection began in late-2005. This phase focused on three groups that consumed cheongsams in different ways. They included wearers who stressed personal economic savings, middle-aged and older women who wore cheongsams in formal social contexts, and sex workers wearing cheongsam style-based uniforms in hostess clubs. This study exclusively utilizes my data on the first group. My analyses of the other two groups will be presented in separate studies. Methods for the second phase of
data collection included participation observation, in-depth formal interviewing, informal interviewing, and documentary data collection. The formal interviews were semi-structured; they lasted around 2 hours. I conducted formal interviews with 20 main informants and informal interviews with 36 secondary informants. Ten main informants and seven secondary ones let me conduct participation observation sessions with them on occasions that they wore cheongsams, shopped for cheongsams, and/or carried out other relevant activities. To obtain a thicker understanding of the informants’ practices, I interviewed each of them multiple times and also chatted with their friends when possible. My secondary informants included cheongsam-wearers unavailable for formal interviewing, individuals working in ethnic fashion retailers, women who have cosplayed with cheongsams, and others who were knowledgeable about cheongsams.

No snowballing was involved; none of the main informants knew each other. Most of my informants were in Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. Interviewing was mostly conducted in the cities where the informants lived. Some of the informants were in other cities including Shenzhen, Changsha, Chongqing, Chengdu, Dongguan, and Xi’an. I conducted four interviews in the Cantonese language and the rest in the Chinese language (putonghua).

The data collected in the first two phases do not reflect the most recent state of cheongsam consumption in China. Nonetheless, the historical nature of these data in no way undermines this study’s objective. Furthermore, I conducted a third round of data collection in 2017. Numerous studies on cheongsams were published in China in the 2010s. I collected a lot of secondary data from this source. I also conducted formal interviews with 12 main informants and 20 secondary ones in Beijing, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong. Among them, 11 were economically driven wearers of cheongsams and 20 belonged to the other two groups I identified in the second phase. I enrolled them through my personal networks. It was much easier to find suitable informants in 2017 than in the mid-2000s. There were many more cheongsam-wearers in the late 2010s than in the mid-2000s. Other scholars and observers of the cheongsam also testify to this change (Sartor, 2015; Sun, 2013). This is a manifestation of the continual resurgence of the cheongsam in the past 15 years.

Non-Wealthy Young Women: Wearing Cheongsams for Economic Savings

This section analyses non-wealthy young women who wear cheongsams for economic savings. Namely, they purchase cheongsams as affordable fashion products. As one of China’s internationally acclaimed traditional dance performers in the late-1990s, my informant Emily (a 30-year-old Shanghainese) used to routinely attend parties with international VIPs. As a fashion-conscious person, what to wear on these occasions became a serious issue for her.

Emily admitted that she “didn’t particularly intend the cheongsam to represent her ethnicity, though [she] didn’t mind that.” She did not think highly of the cheongsam as a fashion style in the 1990s and she still did not think so when I interviewed her in 2005. She thought “they looked somewhat cute but not truly fashionable; they resembled dance costumes.” She no longer wore cheongsams after 2003. Her dance career peaked and she no longer frequented international parties. Receiving hefty allowances from her newly-rich parents, she spent more than US $2,500 each month on global luxury fashion in 2005.

According to my informant Ann, a 22-year-old athlete living in Beijing, many female athletes including her were motivated by economic savings to wear cheongsams. She informed me that because elite Chinese athletes regularly attended international social occasions, they reasoned that “cheongsams were affordable and could rival the nice formal outfits that Western athletes, socialites, and businesspersons wore in these parties.” She contrasted female Chinese athletes with male ones, who were “disgruntled for having to spend money renting tuxedos” whenever they attended international parties (Ann).

Every Saturday in the early-2000s, I spotted a few women wearing cheongsams in upper-market dance clubs in Shanghai. One of these clubbers was my informant Gloria. She was 26 years old and moved to Shanghai after college. Earning around US $1,100 each month from her white-collar job, Gloria belonged to the middle class. Nonetheless, her salary was not enough for luxury fashion items. She needed “cost-effective alternatives such as cheongsams.”

I don’t want to spend that much on fashion. [. . .] But there are snobs in here who can remember what I wore three nights ago. To deal with them, I rotate among alternative styles and outfits. I’m already doing a lot of mixing and matching but there’s a limit to that. [. . .] That’s how I started experimenting with cheongsams. They look pretty and attract ample attention [. . .] As regards cost-effectiveness, they totally beat brand-name dresses that stay trendy for only a season! (Gloria).

Few clubbers were as bold as Gloria. Wearing cheongsams risked being seen as weird or overdressed in the 2000s. Organizers of events, hosts of parties, and owners and managers of restaurants were less susceptible to these risks because they were licensed by their formal roles to over-dress. As the floor manager of a dance club, Tammy’s occupational role led her to cheongsams. A 25-year-old who moved to Shanghai from Anhui in her teens, Tammy...
explained that she was required to “dress stylishly every night and yet the job only paid US $400 each month.” She needed cost-effective fashion wear and thought that “cheongsams were no-brainers—they’re affordable yet made her shine even when compared against the lavishly dressed women in the club.”

I observed that both Gloria and Tammy made do-it-yourself alterations to their cheongsams and creatively mix-and-match their cheongsams with unconventional accessories. This kind of creativity was shared by many non-wealthy cheongsam-wearers including cosplayers. It was not unexpected—cosplayers and others consumed cheongsams for fashion-esthetic purposes rather than ethnic empowerment or nationalism. At the same time, their fashion creativity had an unexpected and normatively relevant implication. These instrumental cheongsam-wearers likely contributed as much or even more to reviving the cheongsam than the “seriously patriotic” cheongsam-wearers. I observed that individuals who wore cheongsams mainly for patriotism seldom cared to esthetically wear their cheongsams with contemporary fashion sense. I had informally interviewed such patriotic cheongsam-wearers and read discussions of them in online forums and Chinese-language articles.

The cost savings of cheongsams appealed to non-Chinese women in China as much as Chinese ones. It was not difficult to find foreign students in China wearing cheongsams in social functions then and now. Helen, an exchange student from the US who attended a university in Beijing, was not unaware of the ethnic symbolism of the cheongsam. But she mainly wore it for cost-effectiveness.

At around US $40 apiece, Helen’s cheongsams were low-priced ones made with flimsy synthetic materials. It was not unreasonable to think they looked cheap. Yet she was seldom criticized because onlookers tended to charitably interpret her as “experimenting with a souvenir” or “showing respect to her host culture” (Helen).

My informants’ cases show that the social recognition of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism is an important context that facilitated the instrumental consumption of cheongsams. These informants reported that even wealthy and high-status people recognize their consumption of non-Western cultures as legitimate, cool, or high-status. This reflected the omnivorousness of contemporary cultural consumption. Cheongsams have become increasingly fashionable simply by appearing ethnic and multicultural.

In 2017, I found many more women wearing cheongsams for economic savings than in the mid-2000s. The prices of affordable cheongsams have dropped compared to the mid-2000s. By browsing the e-commerce platform Taobao in 2017, I found many decent-quality cheongsams priced between US $10 and $30 and silk ones for around US $60. These price ranges resembled those of lower-market fast fashion products in China. The improved variety and quality of affordable cheongsams motivated more women to instrumentally wear cheongsams since the late 2010s.

My informant, Judy, was a 27-year-old white-collar office worker in Shenzhen in 2017. She told me that she wore cheongsams around twice each month. She had five cheongsams and intended to buy more. She was initially attracted to cheongsams by advertisements on Taobao. She was amazed by their “low prices, uniqueness, and a decent level of fashionability.” She thought “cheongsams were a great substitution of the usual Western-style dresses.” In the age of fast fashion, one is forced to keep up with the latest fads. She “got headaches from chasing after these fads.” She noticed that “cheongsams were much more convenient,” because people did not expect her to keep buying new cheongsams for the next season. Judy not only wore cheongsams in cosmopolitan settings. She wore them to her workplace, which was a local enterprise and did not locate in an uptown area. However, she admitted that she would have met resistance against wearing cheongsams to the workplace if she were in a smaller and less globalized city.

Adele was a 23-year-old middle-class woman who worked in the marketing business in Hong Kong in 2017. She could afford quite expensive fashion products and she purchased them. But she thought cheongsams were special because “they saved [her] a lot of money and efforts.” Like many youths around the world, she often took selfies and put them on social media. She accidentally discovered through friends that cheongsams were good at attracting attention on social media. She tried it and it worked. Her selfies in cheongsams received many “likes.” Although this trick could not be frequently repeated, she tried it twice in the past year and it attracted much attention both times. She bought four cheongsams from Taobao. Her successful social media display of the cheongsam led her to experiment with wearing cheongsam on daily occasions. She wore her real-silk cheongsam to social gatherings and parties a few times. Her assessment was similar to Emily and others I interviewed in the mid-2000s. She was amazed to find that “all her friends positively reacted” and that a “luxury brand dress could not have done better in attracting attention.” I particularly asked her whether she associated the dress with ethnicity and nationalism. She said:

Definitely not! I do not feel any more nationalistic or Chinese when I wear this dress. [...] The cheongsam is also a local Hong Kong dress. [...] Moreover, China is threatening my society [i.e., Hong Kong] (Adele).
I found that except for Adele, my informants in 2017 were, in general, less resistant to the idea that their cheongsams represented nationalism than those in the mid-2000s. Chinese society became much more heavily influenced by the ideology of ethnonationalism in the late 2000s. Although this change has had some impacts, the cheongsam also became more accepted as a daily dress beginning in the late 2000s. Women currently felt freer to wear the cheongsam in different contexts including completely ethnicity-irrelevant ones.

**Fashion Businesses: Commodifying and Branding the Cheongsam Style for Profit**

The capitalistic contemporary fashion system has encroached on subcultural styles such as punk and hip-hop. Its encroachment on ethnic styles can be vividly observed in the case of cheongsam. New fashion brands have been built to capitalize on the symbolic value of the cheongsam style in the context of increasing recognition of cosmopolitan cultural capital. Unlike global designers in the late-1990s who merely appropriated the cheongsam style for a single season of ethnic chic, these Chinese businesses heavily based their brand images on the cheongsam style (Chew, 2007). The commodification of ethnic styles in self-Orientalizing ways is not unique to the cheongsam. It has been noticed in different ethnic dresses, local traditional styles, and non-Western fashion designers (Kondo, 2014; Leshkowich and Jones, 2003). But none of these cases were as commercially successful as the cheongsam style-based brands.

The most notable business that commodified the cheongsam style was the Shanghai Tang. Current studies, adopting design and business perspectives, strongly praise this corporation (Clark, 2009; Z. Wu et al., 2013). It started as an upper-market tailor shop that custom-made traditionally styled and high-quality cheongsams in 1994. But by the late-2000s, it became securely established as a globally recognized luxury brand. It is the world’s only ethnic style-based luxury brand. The company was founded by a Hong Kong businessman without any background in fashion. The founder often said that he wished to promote Chinese culture. But in the early-2000s, he sold the company to Richemont, the second-largest corporate group of global luxury brands (Harilela, 2013).

Shanghai Tang’s strategic transformation between 2001 and 2005 illustrated how the cheongsams style was commodified. The Richemont group hired Joanne Ooi, a Singapore-born Chinese-American corporate lawyer with no experience in fashion design, to become the new marketing and creative director of Shanghai Tang in 2001. The choice of an ethnic Chinese to lead Shanghai Tang contributed to retaining the image of authentic Chineseness as ownership of the brand shifted to Richemont (Lai, 2007). Ooi complained that the original Shanghai Tang “had no depth, no sincerity” (Tischler, 2006). She pressed for a new creative direction, which was to maximally exploit Chinese ethnic symbols. Ooi said

> it was imperative to create cultural roots for every single product. [...]. Every item should transport the wearers’ mentally to someplace exotic in terms of time and region (Tischler, 2006).

Ooi’s strategy proved to be successful. Since 2005, global sales volume has increased steadily and significantly. This strategic creative direction was kept as the brand’s stylistic signature; cheongsam dresses were featured in every seasonal collection from Ooi’s reign to the present. Shanghai Tang’s appropriation of the cheongsam and other traditional Chinese styles has been scorned by China’s fashionistas, designers, and fashion critics (Skov, 2003; Tsui, 2013). In informal interviews, one of these critical observers told me that the brand “deprioritized originality” and “debased traditional culture.” Nonetheless, Shanghai Tang successfully turned itself into a luxury brand and stood side-by-side with other established designer-founded brands. This is an amazing and puzzling success—the brand has not been subjected to the strict and critical fashion-esthetic scrutiny typically confronted by up-and-coming designer brands. A Hong Kong-born designer based in New York analyzed this puzzle in my informal interview with him.

Western fashion critics are simply not approaching Shanghai Tang as they would normally critique other brands and designers. [...] The critics don’t want to deal with the political incorrectness issues implicated in a critique of ethnic styles.

I interviewed two Chinese consumers of Shanghai Tang’s fashion products. They did not have anything negative to say about the brand’s exploitation of the cheongsam style and other traditional Chinese sartorial elements. This shows that even though the self-orientalization critique of Kondo (2014) and the disdain for cheongsam style-based brands may already be well-understood among scholars and fashionistas, they were not known to most consumers. If they were widely known, Shanghai Tang products would have only appealed to consumers who did not know anything about China and Chinese styles.

My informant, Lin, was a 43-year-old wealthy investor located in Shenzhen in 2007. She owned four Shanghai Tang products, which included a rather plain-looking cheongsam. She told me that she “treated these products exactly like global luxury brand ones.” Like most other consumers in China, she treated global luxury products as self-evidently stylish. Namely, the brand-name conferred esthetic value to her cheongsam, rather than the other way around. She thought that the Shanghai Tang cheongsam looked good. She had purchased lower-priced cheongsams. But she paid a premium to enjoy the Shanghai Tang brand-name. She was not buying it for economic savings. She recognized the nationalist symbolism of the cheongsam and accepted it. She was proud of China. But she did not think she was driven by
patriotism to buy Shanghai Tang products. She considered it more as “an extension of the variety of luxury brands she endorsed.”

After Shanghai Tang’s great success, numerous Chinese entrepreneurs scrambled to imitate its strategy. Fashion startup brands in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China tried to self-Orientalize the cheongsam style in various market segments. The brand Anniewho, for example, was founded in 2005 and aimed to become the counterpart of Shanghai Tang in the upper-middle market segment. The brand’s founder, Annie Lin, was a Hong Kong-born Australian-Chinese. Although she had no background in design, she marketed herself as a global up-and-coming designer with cheongsam-like dresses and a so-called “East and West” style (Lai, 2007). The trend of building brands with the cheongsam style has not waned since the mid-2000s. Instead, it has grown. There were over 50 cheongsam-style-based brands in China by the early-2010s (Cha, 2013). Many more similar brands in lower and middle-market segments were founded in the mid-2010s on e-commerce platforms (Zhang, 2017). “Cheongsam-branding” has become a research subfield in China.

Jess owned 18 cheongsams bought from the upper-middle-market brands in 2017. This middle-class and 48-year-old informant was a manager of a cultural business in Shenzhen. She wore cheongsams to work once or twice a week. They cost around US $160 apiece. She treated them as “formal workwear” (zhengzhuang). Like Lin, she thought that patriotism and nationalism played a minor role in her purchase decisions, but she gladly accepted the nationalist symbolism of her cheongsams. Her main purpose for picking the cheongsam was that it helped reinforce her “authoritative role over others in the company.” In a separate paper, I argue that the case of Jess illustrates a non-economic instrumental reason that older women in China wear cheongsams: the use of them as women’s power suits.

Discussion
The previous analysis shows that both non-wealthy young women and fashion businesses consume the cheongsam style for a similar instrumental reason: economic benefits. This section normatively assesses these two ways of consuming the cheongsam. The assessment is made with the criterion of whether this consumption helps empower marginalized ethnic groups and their cultures, which is the conventionally presupposed politics of ethnic culture.

My previous analysis amply demonstrates that the two ways of consuming the cheongsam deserve different normative assessments. One clearly would assess non-wealthy women’s consumption of the cheongsam more positively than fashion businesses’ consumption. But it is unclear which of the following three options is correct: to assess both groups’ consumption negatively, to assess both groups’ consumption positively, or to positively assess non-wealthy women’s consumption and negatively assess businesses’ consumption. My previous analysis seems to support the third assessment. But the second option is also plausible.

I find two arguments that support the second assessment and three arguments that support the third assessment. The first argument is that because the exploitation of the cheongsam is carried out by ethnic Chinese, the accusation of cultural appropriation is rendered inappropriate. The second argument is that regardless of the wearer’s intent, a cheongsam that is worn in public enhances the cheongsam style and helps its revival.

The first argument that supports the third assessment is that the self-Orientalization of fashion businesses is severe and damaging. As previously shown, Shanghai Tang and its imitators appropriate the cheongsam style in exploitive, bland, and essentialist ways. Their business strategy is to sell ethnic symbols rather than truly creative products. They target consumers who demand products that are ostensibly and superficially exotic. The lower-market sellers of cheongsams on Chinese e-commerce platforms are different. They do not build brands; they aim to supply the most cost-effective products.

The second argument that supports the third assessment is that non-wealthy women’s wearing of cheongsams involves bottom-up fashion processes that leave room for innovation and do-it-yourself esthetic practices. I observed that Gloria, Tammy, and many others put effort into altering their low-priced cheongsams so that they looked more stylish than the originally bought pieces. This do-it-yourself engagement has likely increased their proactive and esthetic (instead of instrumental) appreciation of ethnic culture. In contrast, I observed that customers of branded cheongsams including Lin and Jess tended to passively wear their cheongsams in exactly the form they were bought.

The third argument is that where the economic benefits of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture go is a key to this normative assessment. Non-wealthy women’s consumption and fashion businesses’ consumption fundamentally differ in this aspect. Capitalists who own the cheongsam brands extract a large share of profit derived from the instrumental consumption of the cheongsam style. Non-wealthy women do not extract any capitalistic profits. They only earned economic savings and fashionability. I also interpret these women’s consumption as a resistance against the capitalistic global fashion system. As my analysis shows, non-wealthy women gladly quit when their instrumental needs no longer exist. But business organizations have no reason to quit as long as the self-Orientalizing appropriation remains profitable. Consequently, their capitalistic self-Orientalization of ethnic culture is likely to escalate and last. Based on these three arguments, I reach the verdict that fashion businesses’ consumption of the cheongsam style yields mixed normative implications, while non-wealthy women’s consumption is relatively positive. Because my sample of non-wealthy women was not randomized, quantitative surveys in the future may help ascertain whether this verdict is accurate.
But this study’s objective is not simply to assess two ways that the cheongsam is instrumentally consumed. It is to theoretically understand the normative implications of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture. My important finding is that these normative implications are complex and mixed. The motivation of non-wealthy women and fashion businesses are similarly economic. Their purpose is equally instrumental. But the politics, meanings, and outcome of their consumption significantly differ. Additionally, my analysis puts into relief the importance of making separate assessments for different kinds of instrumental consumption. The normative implications of non-wealthy women’s consumption of cheongsams substantially differ from the more familiar types of instrumental consumption of cheongsams. These types are instrumentally driven by reasons such as the male gaze, the labor process, and political ideology (Chan, 2000; Otis & Wu, 2018; K. M. Wu, 2018). The negative assessments of these cases contrast with the relatively positive assessment of this study’s case, non-wealthy women’s economically driven consumption.

My analysis also helps clarify some of the characteristics of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture. I find that non-wealthy women’s cheongsams are very positively received on cosmopolitan occasions and in public spaces. In these cosmopolitan settings, one finds many cultural omnivores and multiculturalists supporting ethnic minority cultures. This illustrates that even when instrumental consumption is driven by purposes completely irrelevant to ethnicity, some instances can yield outcomes that are indirectly related to ethnicity. Among these indirectly ethnicity-relevant outcomes, some of them empower ethnic cultures and some undermine them.

I also find that the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture is quite common. At least, this is true in the case of cheongsams. Only quantitative surveys can accurately find out the exact percentage of cheongsam-wearers who are driven by instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. But, likely, only a minority of women are centrally driven by nationalism to wear cheongsams. It was very difficult for me in the 2000s to find cheongsam-wearers who claimed to have been mainly driven by nationalism, patriotism, or ethnicity reasons. It is known that a significant portion of Chinese wearers of the Han dress, for example, are indeed mainly driven by ethnonationalism (Carrico, 2017; Chew, 2018). I found no cheongsam-wearer groups that are similarly nationalist. Given the ideological contexts of contemporary China and under the state’s pressure, Chinese scholarly and public discourses often claim that cheongsams are resurging because of national pride. This study meaningfully clarifies that cheongsams are often consumed for instrumental reasons rather than national pride.

Although my analysis is exclusively conducted with Chinese data, it is very relevant to understanding ethnic cultural consumption in the West. For example, my analysis is directly relevant to the public debate on the cheongsam prom dress incident in the US in 2018. The cheongsam-wearer of this incident, Daum, largely resembles the non-wealthy women in my analysis. She is non-wealthy. She instrumentally picks the cheongsam style because it offers fashionability at a discounted price tag. She finds that the cheongsam style is a good substitute for the usual Western-style prom dress. The major difference between her and my non-wealthy Chinese informants is that she is white and American. Does this racial difference overwhelm all the reasons that support a relatively positive assessment of Chinese non-wealthy women’s consumption of cheongsams? The proponents of cultural appropriation must supply good evidence or arguments if they insist on an affirmative answer.

My analysis of Chinese fashion businesses represents a piece of counterevidence against an affirmative answer. Despite being ethnic Chinese, the capitalists who own these businesses are largely susceptible to the accusation of cultural appropriation. They exploit the cheongsam style without giving back to Chinese culture and society. The owner of Shanghai Tang has sold the business to a European corporation. Joanne Ooi is American-Chinese and Annie Lin is Australian-Chinese. These three instrumental consumers of the cheongsam are ethnically Chinese. Are they not more culpable than Daum for cultural appropriation? Ethnoracial identity should not be the only or sufficient factor that determines whether one is culpable for cultural appropriation.

**Conclusion**

My previous analysis has shown that the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture is widespread, variegated, and normatively complex. Such consumption is neither theoretically simple nor well-researched in the relevant fields. Serious treatment of it will require open-ended analyses and contextualized normative assessments. These findings enrich our understanding of the politics, meanings, and outcomes of ethnic cultural consumption in contemporary society. My analysis explicates two economically driven ways of consuming the cheongsam. One of them is very exploitive while the other is relatively benign. The benign way of consumption contributes to the bottom-up renewal of traditional culture and the exposure of ethnic culture on public occasions. The exploitive way facilitates capitalism in the fashion industry. Although it also contributes to ethnic cultural exposure on public occasions, it does so in a commercialized, top-down, and heavily self-Orientalizing way.

Complicating our theoretical understanding of the instrumental consumption of ethnic culture will not threaten the concept of “ethnic culture” or terminate research on it. The concept of “subculture” has undergone a comparable complication; it has been theoretically improved by it as a result (Jensen, 2018). Subcultural theorists have abandoned the reified conception of subculture as strictly class-based. In the 2010s, the theorization of subculture became more adequate and empirical analyses of subcultures became more
open-ended. The research on ethnic culture can expect similar benefits if it seriously investigates how ethnic culture is consumed in instrumental and other ethnicity-irrelevant ways.

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