

A Study on High School Students' Cognition of Cultural Appropriation: Taking Beijing No. 171 High School as an Example

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Abstract: Cultural appropriation refers to the use of one cultural group's elements by another. With increasing global cultural exchange, this phenomenon has drawn growing public attention. High school students, who are in a key stage of value formation, play an important role in future cultural development; understanding their cognition of cultural appropriation thus holds practical significance. Based on literature review, questionnaires, and interviews, this study finds that students can generally identify cultural appropriation and trace cultural origins. Their judgments mainly rely on commercial interests, historical authenticity, and cultural respect, with only slight differences in their tolerance toward domestic and foreign cases. Social media significantly shapes their attitudes. It is suggested that schools strengthen cultural knowledge education, develop cultural inquiry courses, and encourage students to create high-quality cultural content through social media platforms.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation; High school students; Cognitive situations; Cross-cultural issues

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

With the development of new media and the widespread use of the internet, cultural exchange across regions and nations has become increasingly frequent. As a result, cultural appropriation appears more often in everyday life, bringing both diverse cultural experiences and public controversy. In 2022, Dior released a skirt highly similar to the traditional Chinese *mǎmiàn qún* (horse-face skirt), yet described it in its promotion as a “signature Dior silhouette” without acknowledging its Chinese cultural origin. This sparked online criticism accusing the brand of plagiarism and disregard for cultural provenance and sovereignty. The incident exemplifies contemporary issues of cultural appropriation within a global context and heightened public attention to the protection and appropriate use of traditional culture.

At the national level, China increasingly emphasizes cultural confidence. Policy documents call for the

protection of cultural heritage, opposition to cultural hegemony, and the enhancement of China's international cultural influence. Against the backdrop of Chinese culture "going global," it is necessary to guide the public toward a rational understanding of cultural appropriation and to distinguish between legitimate cultural borrowing and inappropriate appropriation.

High school students are in a crucial stage of forming values and cultural identity. Their understanding of cultural appropriation not only shapes their individual cultural attitudes but also influences future cultural transmission and the safeguarding of cultural sovereignty. Examining high school students' cognition of cultural appropriation helps identify their strengths and gaps in conceptual understanding, value judgment, and media influence. It also provides guidance for schools to improve cultural education and cultivate a new generation with both cultural confidence and a global perspective. Therefore, research on cultural appropriation among high school students holds significant theoretical and practical importance.

1.2. Definition of cultural appropriation

This study adopts James O. Young's definition of cultural appropriation, which refers to a cultural group's adoption of elements or artifacts from another culture across cultural boundaries. Cultural appropriation is fundamentally a neutral concept; its evaluation depends on the manner and context of use. It differs from cultural exchange, cultural plagiarism, and cultural theft. Cultural exchange emphasizes equality and reciprocity, with both parties voluntarily sharing cultural resources. Cultural plagiarism refers to the unauthorized copying of another culture's elements without acknowledgment, often involving violations of intellectual property rights. Cultural theft occurs when cultural elements are claimed as original creations, thereby severing their historical connections and infringing upon cultural sovereignty.

1.3. Literature review

Using "cultural appropriation" as the keyword, this study searched academic journals and theses on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database without restricting publication years. A total of 227 articles related to cultural appropriation were found in core journals. After screening, 13 articles focusing on the forms and impacts of cultural appropriation were selected for review to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the topic. According to CNKI's trend analysis, research on cultural appropriation has increased steadily, indicating that it has become an emerging and widely discussed academic issue.

1.3.1. Studies on the connotation of cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation generally includes two major categories: tangible appropriation and intangible appropriation. Tangible appropriation refers to the appropriation of physical objects, such as stealing artifacts or removing cultural relics. Intangible appropriation includes content appropriation and theme appropriation, with content appropriation further divided into stylistic appropriation and motif appropriation^[1]. Richard A. Rogers classified cultural appropriation into four types: cultural exchange, cultural dominance, cultural exploitation, and cultural assimilation^[2]. Cultural exchange is equal and reciprocal; cultural dominance and exploitation are asymmetrical; and cultural assimilation involves joint creation among cultures. While the first three categories are morally more distinguishable, cultural assimilation challenges the essentialist assumptions implicit in conventional definitions of cultural appropriation.

1.3.2. Studies on the impact of cultural appropriation

Lin argued that the continuation and innovation of culture inherently require forms of cultural appropriation^[3].

When appropriation accurately captures the characteristics and symbolic meanings of the source culture, Xu suggested that it can convey cultural value and evoke interest and resonance among foreign audiences^[4]. Mu posited that such appropriation helps bridge cultural gaps and promotes understanding of unfamiliar cultures, thereby expanding cultural dissemination^[5]. Huang further argued that positive appropriation can reshape previously misinterpreted cultural images^[6]. Cheng, through an analysis of parody appropriation, contended that parody serves as a symbolic resistance to mainstream ideology^[7].

Conversely, some studies highlight the negative effects of distorted or inaccurate representations. Huang, in analyzing cultural appropriation in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, argued that stereotyped portrayals designed to fit Western values reinforce fixed images of Third World women^[8]. Cao, examining the English lines in the film *Mulan*, stated that such misappropriation shows a lack of respect for the source culture, impeding its transmission and deepening foreign misconceptions^[9]. Yang noted, based on an analysis of Ezra Pound's translations of Confucian classics, that selectively misinterpreting another culture for one's own ideological ends constitutes a distortion of the original culture^[10]. Similarly, Yao and Yang observed that Western missionaries' translations and interpretations of *The Analects* exhibit comparable patterns of cultural misappropriation^[11]. He further argued that once elements of a weaker culture are misused, they may easily fall under the discursive dominance of Western centrism, leaving the original culture unable to defend itself^[12].

1.4. Research significance

Theoretical significance: Existing studies on the impacts of cultural appropriation—both in China and abroad—are largely concentrated in fields such as drama, film, and other artistic domains, and mainly focus on university students or adult groups. However, high school students are in a formative stage of cultural identity, and their perceptions are more malleable and open to educational intervention. By examining high school students' cognition of cultural appropriation, this study expands current research on the effects of cultural appropriation and contributes to the understanding of cultural attitudes among adolescents.

Practical significance: As future contributors to cultural development, students represent a potential core force in cultural heritage protection, cultural and creative industries, and international cultural exchange. A rational understanding of cultural appropriation enables them to develop a deeper awareness of world cultures, strengthen their appreciation of Chinese culture through comparison, and better promote Chinese culture within a globalized context. Conversely, insufficient understanding may lead to unintentional cultural infringement or passive acceptance of cultural hegemony in future cultural practices. The present study thus provides useful references for improving cultural education for secondary school students.

2. Research methods

2.1. Literature research

Before conducting the study, relevant scholarly works and research papers were collected through databases such as CNKI. These materials were organized, summarized, and analyzed to clarify key concepts and determine the theoretical foundation and background of the study.

2.2. Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire was designed to investigate students' perceptions, attitudes, and underlying reasons regarding cultural appropriation. Based on existing literature and everyday cultural scenarios, the survey targeted high school students from Beijing No.171 High School to ensure alignment with the research topic. Distributed

anonymously through the “Questionnaire Star” platform, the survey produced 104 valid responses. These data were screened and organized to support subsequent interviews.

2.3. Interviews

Drawing on the questionnaire results, 10 students with diverse interests were selected for semi-structured interviews to ensure sample diversity. The interviews focused on students’ understanding of cultural appropriation, guided by an interview outline while encouraging open expression. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed to provide qualitative support for the analysis.

2.4. Case analysis

Three cases—positive, negative, and neutral—were selected and analyzed from the perspectives of cultural respect, historical authenticity, and commercial interest.

3. Research results and discussion

3.1. Cognitive foundations

3.1.1. Students generally recognize the presence of cultural appropriation in daily life

In the questionnaire survey, more than 85% of students believed that cultural appropriation exists in everyday life, while only a small number were unsure or believed it did not occur. In interviews, when asked whether they had observed instances of one country’s or region’s culture being used in another cultural context, most students responded immediately and affirmed that such examples are common. This indicates that students generally acknowledge the prevalence of cultural appropriation.

When asked to provide concrete examples, some students were able to respond quickly. For instance, several students mentioned the taste of American Chinese food and fortune cookies as products of cultural blending between Chinese cuisine and American culture. These students consciously observe and reflect on cultural appropriation in daily life. Others could not recall specific examples instantly, but still believed that many such phenomena exist. This suggests differences in students’ levels of attention—some actively reflect on these issues, while others passively recognize them.

3.1.2. Students generally possess the ability to identify cultural origins

More than half of the students reported that they can distinguish the origins of cultural elements, while about 25% felt they could not, and another 25% were unsure (Figure 1). This indicates that most students believe they have some ability in identifying cultural sources.

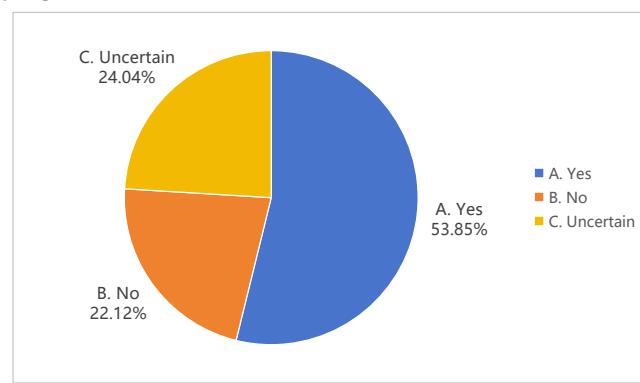


Figure 1. Students’ self-assessed ability to identify cultural origins

During interviews, when asked whether they could distinguish cultural origins, most students stated that they are accustomed to living in a culturally blended environment and do not intentionally differentiate origins in daily life. However, they can generally tell whether something belongs to Chinese culture and can roughly identify its regional source, especially in areas they are familiar with. As one student noted, “I subconsciously feel that something is foreign and has an exotic vibe, but I can’t always tell exactly where it comes from.” These responses suggest that students’ understanding of cultural origins contains a degree of ambiguity and is easily influenced by external context.

3.2. Students’ attitudes toward cultural appropriation

3.2.1. Specific attitudes toward cultural appropriation

Interview results show that students’ attitudes vary according to the form and degree of appropriation. Most students are particularly sensitive to inaccurate or distorted cultural representations, believing that misinterpreting core cultural values or national spirit can trigger discomfort and opposition. Many worry that stereotypical appropriation may lead to overly simplified cultural perceptions, though some argue that moderate symbolization can help broaden cultural dissemination.

Students generally disapprove of cultural appropriation that merely copies original elements without adaptation, considering it unappealing. However, some view “borrowing—copying—innovating” as a natural developmental path of culture and therefore show a certain degree of tolerance. A few students noted that incorporating one’s own cultural perspective into appropriated material may generate new forms of expression, though this can simultaneously result in the passive deconstruction of the original culture.

Overall, students emphasize respect and accuracy when evaluating cultural appropriation, while also maintaining openness by considering communicative effectiveness and creative intent.

3.2.2. Characteristics of students’ attitudes toward cultural appropriation

3.2.2.1. Students’ attitudes are relatively consistent and accurate

In the questionnaire, the first two items involved negative appropriation, the third positive appropriation, and the fourth a controversial case. Each item showed a dominant choice (around 50%), indicating high consistency among students’ attitudes toward the same situation. For negative cases, over 80% expressed criticism; for positive cases, over 80% expressed approval; for controversial cases, supportive and opposing views were more balanced. This suggests that students are generally able to distinguish between positive and negative effects of cultural appropriation.

3.2.2.2. Criteria for judgment: Commercial interests, historical authenticity, and cultural respect

Students’ evaluations of cultural appropriation primarily rely on three criteria: Commercial interests (e.g., profit, benefit-sharing with the source culture); Historical authenticity (e.g., whether elements have clear origins and accurate historical context); Cultural respect (e.g., permission, distortion, misrepresentation).

Questionnaire responses indicate that students focus on different criteria depending on the case, but all three dimensions are important in shaping their attitudes. Students tend to adopt a multidimensional perspective rather than judging appropriation from a single angle.

3.2.2.3. Small differences in tolerance levels

In the survey, 55.77% of students disagreed with the statement that “Western brands should face stricter constraints than Chinese media when using Chinese cultural elements,” 32.69% were neutral, and only

11.54% agreed. This suggests that students generally believe the same standard should apply to both Chinese appropriation of foreign culture and foreign appropriation of Chinese culture.

Interview data support this finding. When presented with cases of Western brands using Chinese cultural elements and Chinese productions using foreign cultural elements, students showed only small differences in tolerance. Some expressed approval, viewing such practices as learning from or spreading culture; others expressed concern about cultural hegemony or excessive admiration of foreign cultures. Overall, their tolerance levels across different contexts remained relatively consistent.

3.3. Reasons behind students' attitudes

According to the questionnaire and interview results, students' attitudes toward cultural appropriation mainly stem from four factors: their cultural knowledge base, value orientations, a China-centered cultural perspective, and the influence of online media.

Students generally possess a relatively rich reservoir of cultural knowledge. In the digital era, they have diverse channels for learning about different cultures. Textbooks introduce cultural phenomena from various countries; travel experiences broaden their horizons; and social media enables people from different cultural backgrounds to share their traditions. This broad exposure provides the cognitive foundation for students to form opinions about cultural appropriation.

Students also share value orientations that emphasize respect for and protection of cultural diversity, believing that global cultural integration is an inevitable trend. In the questionnaire, over half of the respondents (52.88%) agreed that cross-regional use of cultural elements is a natural phenomenon under globalization, while 30.77% remained neutral. This indicates that students tend to evaluate cultural appropriation based on whether it promotes cultural diversity, facilitates cross-cultural communication, and opposes cultural hegemony.

Moreover, students tend to view cultural issues from a China-centered perspective. During interviews, they frequently used "we" to refer to Chinese people and Chinese culture, suggesting that their attitudes toward cultural appropriation are shaped by considering its impact on Chinese culture and national interests.

Finally, online media strongly influences students' views. The questionnaire shows that social media is the primary source through which most students learn about cultural appropriation incidents. Interviews further reveal that students often rely on prevailing online opinions when assessing such events. Even when uncertain, they are inclined to follow dominant narratives rather than verify information independently. While this reflects their trust in online discourse, it may also lead to uncritical acceptance of biased viewpoints.

3.4. How attitudes influence actions

The questionnaire results show that when encountering inappropriate cultural appropriation, about half of the students choose to express dissatisfaction through private conversations, 25% post on social media, and about 23% remain indifferent, while only a few would take offline action. Overall, students tend to adopt moderate, low-risk forms of expression.

"Indifference" does not mean complete disregard. Interviews reveal that these students often feel that cultural appropriation is not closely related to their personal lives, so they do not speak out, though they still possess basic awareness of the issue. Students who voice their opinions on social media hope to influence public discourse or promote cultural respect, yet their views often align with mainstream online narratives, making them susceptible to shifts in public opinion.

Students who prefer private discussions believe online debates have a limited impact. They are more

inclined to talk with peers or parents or practice personal resistance (such as avoiding problematic content) rather than engage in public disputes. They generally trust that most people can make rational judgments on cultural appropriation and therefore see no need to challenge others aggressively.

Overall, students' actions tend to focus on individual expression and self-regulation. This measured and restrained approach reflects, to some extent, a judgment shaped by cultural confidence.

4. Case studies

4.1. Negative case

Using the example of a historical Chinese drama that portrays an Edo-period ninja as a “Tang-dynasty warrior from Tōei,” this case demonstrates a typical instance of negative cultural appropriation.

In terms of cultural respect, the drama transplants a ninja character across time and space into the Tang dynasty, resulting in misplaced cultural symbols and weakening the historical background and spiritual connotations associated with ninjas.

From the perspective of commercial interest, although ninja elements may enhance dramatic tension and attract online traffic, the controversy may trigger resistance in overseas markets, damaging the production's long-term dissemination and brand credibility.

Regarding historical origins, the portrayal clearly contradicts historical fact: in the Tang dynasty, Japan was referred to as “Woguo,” there were no “samurai,” and ninjas did not emerge until several centuries later. Such confusion can mislead viewers—especially students who rely on media for historical knowledge.

Survey data indicate that students were most concerned about the risk of misunderstanding cultural origins (46.15%), suggesting that historical accuracy is a key criterion in their evaluation of negative cultural appropriation.

4.2. Positive case

The animated film *Kung Fu Panda* illustrates a typical positive example of cultural appropriation.

In terms of cultural respect, the film introduces Chinese elements—such as pandas, kung fu, and ink-wash aesthetics—through an accessible global animation format. It also integrates Daoist philosophy, such as “living in the present,” enhancing international understanding of Chinese culture. However, certain elements are stylistically simplified, potentially reinforcing stereotypes.

From the perspective of commercial interest, the *Kung Fu Panda* series achieved tremendous global success, generating substantial revenue through box office sales and derivative products, such as theme park attractions. Its high production quality also prompted reflection and improvement within China's domestic animation industry, contributing positively to its development.

In terms of historical origins, the film references authentic martial arts traditions—such as taiji concepts and animal-style boxing—but its narrative structure follows the Hollywood hero's journey model, differing from the collectivist ethos common in Chinese wuxia culture.

According to the survey, 49.04% of students believed the film successfully presented Chinese cultural elements, showing that cultural respect was the most influential factor in their positive evaluation.

4.3. Neutral/controversial case

A U.S. variety show segment that uses incorrect Chinese pronunciation and exaggerated gestures for comedic effect serves as a representative controversial case.

In terms of cultural respect, the show employs stereotypes to construct an instant “Chinese persona,” but turning mispronounced Chinese into a punchline—combined with exaggerated body language—reinforces the notion that “Asian accents are funny,” undermining linguistic and cultural dignity. However, the ensuing public criticism may also raise awareness of cultural sensitivity and implicit bias.

From the standpoint of commercial interest, such simplified performances require little cultural research and can quickly attract attention, generating short-term popularity. Yet they risk backlash from Asian communities, potential removal of the content, and long-term reputational harm.

Regarding historical origins, the segment inadvertently echoes stereotypes rooted in early anti-Chinese sentiment during the exclusion era. Although presented as entertainment, it reproduces historical prejudices; at the same time, it may stimulate public discussion about racial discrimination and related historical contexts.

Survey data show that 49.04% of students were most concerned that such portrayals reinforce the stereotype of the “funny Asian accent,” indicating that cultural respect is the primary dimension shaping their evaluation of controversial cultural appropriation.

5. Recommendations

5.1. Strengthening cultural knowledge education in schools

The findings indicate that students express their views more confidently in areas where they possess greater cultural knowledge, suggesting that cultural literacy is the foundation for rational judgment. To help students correctly understand cultural appropriation and enhance cultural confidence, schools should systematically integrate multicultural education into daily teaching.

Integration of cultural knowledge into subject teaching: In English classes, teachers may introduce texts that reflect cultural characteristics of different countries—such as festivals, historical narratives, and social values—and guide students to analyze cultural meanings (e.g., English readings on Diwali or the Day of the Dead).

In Chinese language classes, comparative literature modules may be added—for example, comparing family values in Dream of the Red Chamber and Pride and Prejudice, or contrasting emotional expression in Li Bai’s poetry with Shakespeare’s sonnets.

Improving teachers’ cultural competence and providing resource support: Schools may offer teacher workshops on intercultural education, including strategies for avoiding stereotypes and cultivating students’ critical cultural awareness.

A unified resource bank can be built to include high-quality multicultural case studies, documentaries, and academic articles for teachers’ flexible use.

Creating a culturally rich campus atmosphere: Activities such as “World Culture Week,” featuring cultural booths, lectures, and hands-on experiences, can expand students’ global perspectives.

5.2. Developing cultural inquiry courses

Survey results show that students often rely on online opinions without verifying accuracy, indicating a lack of inquiry skills and independent thinking—abilities essential for critically understanding cultural appropriation. To address this, schools may design cultural inquiry courses that cultivate information-gathering, verification, and analytical skills. A possible course structure is as follows:

Step 1: Introduce a case to spark inquiry

Select culturally controversial or multi-dimensional appropriation cases to ensure adequate discussion value.

Present cases through videos, news clips, or mock trials, and pose guiding questions (e.g., “Is this cultural fusion or cultural misappropriation?”).

Step 2: Information collection and verification

Guide students to gather information from academic papers, news reports, social media, and statements from original cultural communities. Encourage cross-verification of sources and provide access to libraries or online databases.

Step 3: Multi-perspective analysis

Students examine the case from historical, ethical, legal, and commercial angles. Role-play debates may be held in which students act as “brand PR,” “indigenous representatives,” “consumers,” or “cultural scholars,” simulating real-world discourse. Students then complete written reports to consolidate their critical reflections.

5.3. Encouraging social media platforms to promote high-quality content creation

At present, students primarily learn about cultural appropriation through social media, but fragmented and oversimplified content often leads to misunderstanding or polarized views. To improve content ecology, platforms should implement incentive mechanisms that encourage rigorous, well-researched, and multi-perspective cultural content, thereby enhancing public literacy and fostering rational discussion.

Economic incentives: Platforms may establish a “Cultural Science Communication Fund” to reward high-quality long-form articles, videos, and podcasts. Enhanced copyright protection and monetization options—such as fast copyright registration, anti-plagiarism mechanisms, subscriptions, and tipping—can support sustainable content creation.

Traffic and algorithmic support: Platforms may integrate a “content quality score” into recommendation algorithms, assessing factors such as the use of authoritative sources, logical rigor, diversity of perspectives, and the proportion of rational user interaction. High-scoring content would receive preferential exposure on homepages and in search results.

6. Conclusion

This study examines high school students’ cognition of cultural appropriation through questionnaires, interviews, and case analyses. Results show that students generally recognize the prevalence of cultural appropriation and can distinguish cultural origins to some degree. Their judgments rely primarily on three criteria: commercial interests, historical authenticity, and cultural respect. While students strongly oppose distorted or disrespectful appropriation, they remain open to culturally respectful borrowing and creative innovation. Differences in their tolerance toward domestic and foreign cases are minimal, reflecting an inclination toward consistent evaluative standards.

Students’ cognition is shaped by cultural knowledge, value orientations, a China-centered cultural perspective, and significant influence from online media. Their responses to cultural appropriation tend to be moderate, with most choosing private discussion or low-risk online expression.

Overall, high school students demonstrate emerging cultural awareness but still require enhanced cultural literacy, critical thinking, and media evaluation skills. Strengthening cultural education and guiding responsible cultural communication—especially through social media—will help cultivate a generation capable of engaging with global cultural exchange confidently and rationally.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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