

Republican Perspective

30 May 2018

by John Littig

“It’s Just a Dress”

Keziah Daum, an 18-year-old high school senior in Salt Lake City, was looking for a dress for her prom. She wanted something attractive, unique, and modest. At a vintage clothing store she found a red and gold form-fitting, ankle-length, short-sleeved, Chinese-inspired dress with a high neckline. It’s called a “qipao.” She thought it was perfect and she bought it.

She and her friends had their pictures taken wearing their prom attire. So far, so good.

Then---oops---she posted the pictures on social media, where they came to the attention of members of the perpetually offended class.

Daum was accused (via Twitter) of “cultural appropriation,” the adoption or use of the elements of one culture by members of another culture. The offended believe that this should be a class-one felony, akin to an unwanted kiss or a mass murder. It is typically punished by public shaming, followed by groveling apologies, sensitivity training, and sometimes the establishment of programs benefitting members of the originating (offended) culture.

The first criticism of Daum’s wardrobe selection was an Apr. 27 Twitter posting: “My culture is NOT your goddamn prom dress.” A later post by the same person likened a white girl wearing a qipao “to colonial ideology.” That original posting got 42,000 re-tweets and 180,000 likes as of May 3. There was a typhoon of criticism, calling Daum, among other things, (you

guessed it, of course) a racist. (And yes, “typhoon” itself is culturally appropriated from the Chinese “tai fung.”)

Well, let’s see how the Chinese themselves reacted to the cultural appropriation of the qipao by the 18-year-old American girl.

The English language Chinese news outlet chinadaily.com reported that public reaction was favorable, and offered some examples: “It is not cultural appropriation, it’s cultural appreciation...Let the girl know that many Chinese people think she looks stunning in this beautiful dress.” And “As a Chinese, we all very proud and delighted to share our cultural fashions with anyone around the world. We all support her.”

An on-the-street youtube video featured an interviewer showing passers-by a photo of Daum and asking if it was OK for foreign women to wear the qipao. Again, reaction was favorable: “Totally OK. It has a retro sort of classic feel.” And “Looks really good.”

The Wenxue City News quoted an interview saying “Really don’t understand the people who are against [Daum], they are wrong! I suggest the Chinese government, state television or fashion company invite her to China to display her [qipao].”

The South China Morning Post reported social media posts: “It’s not cultural theft. It is cultural appreciation and cultural respect.” And “There is no problem as long as there is no malice or deliberate maligning. Chinese cultural treasures are worth spreading all over the world.”

Others posted to social media such as: “I am proud to have our culture recognized by people in other countries.”

Zhou Yijun, a Hong Kong-based cultural commentator, said “It’s ridiculous to criticize this as cultural appropriation...if a foreign woman wears a qipao and she thinks she looks pretty, then why shouldn’t she wear it?”

China-based Amy Qin, who covers culture, politics, and society across Asia in the New York Times reported that sentiment in Taiwan was similarly supportive of Daum.

According to Samantha Schmidt, writing in the Washington Post, feelings among many Chinese-Americans were also positive. She gave examples: “I am a collector of [qipao],..and I think it is ridiculous other people are judging you.” And “As Chinese, we are very proud and delighted to share our cultural fashions...I love how you wear the dress...You rock!” And “I am a Chinese woman. I support you. You rocked the dress!...people might be just jealous that you look awesome in that dress.”

The reported support for Daum by people in China and Taiwan, as well as by Chinese-Americans, doesn't constitute a scientific sampling of public opinion among those populations. But it does reveal that the politically correct position on cultural appropriation is not universally held. In fact, it shows that members of the allegedly exploited culture are not offended at all. Instead, they consider it cultural *appreciation*.

Daum emailed China Daily that she was “overwhelmed by the many people from China who have both reached out to me and have posted to social media their viewpoints. I thank them for the moral support regarding my decision to wear a qipao.”

As for the cultural appropriation warriors, Daum offered this: “There are people who are going to find something to offend them no matter what it is.”

Objective observers think Daum's choice of wardrobe was totally innocent. The perpetually offended should at least give her the benefit of the doubt--- assuming they are capable of doubt.

Daum summed it up: “I didn't intend for anyone to think I'm trying to be racist. It's just a dress.”