From Symbol to Reality: Societal Decoding of Power Relations and Cultural Appropriation

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the influence of the state agenda on the transformation of cultural symbols, specifically focusing on the comedic skits and sketches of the Spring Festival and other similar cases. By analyzing these cultural phenomena, the research seeks to uncover the intricate and strategic ways in which the state agenda shapes and impacts societal dynamics, leading to significant and far-reaching consequences. Based on the empirical evidence presented, this article argues that the state not only participates in a basic process of selecting and modifying culture but also strategically appropriates it through its powerful apparatus, thereby establishing profound connections with the thoughts and emotions of the broader population. The presented analysis demonstrates that the interconnections between cultural symbols, cultural appropriation, and the state apparatus are indicative of more extensive sociological patterns, namely the intricate and multifaceted dynamics of power, culture, and society. The complex interaction described not only influences the production and evolution of cultural symbols but also has an indirect effect on the stability and modification of social structures, as well as the identities and conflicts among both people and groups. The investigation of this intricate interconnection and its significant impact on society will be a subject meriting additional examination in future scholarly inquiries.

Keywords: Cultural Symbol, Cultural Appropriation, Spring Festival

1. Introduction

Within the explorations of sociology, the relationship between cultural symbols and the underlying power structures, along with their shifts, has become a core topic of discussion. Cultural symbols include various entities, such as physical artifacts, visual depictions, or behavioral practices, which, when situated within a particular cultural milieu, assume the role of representing or signifying abstract notions, convictions, or sentiments that extend beyond their surface-level significance [1-3]. The symbols under consideration possess the potential for universality, since they are capable of being recognized by other cultures [4]. Alternatively, they may also be exclusive to a particular culture or society. Tangible entities, such as religious symbols or national flags, as well as intangible concepts, such as the symbol of peace or distinct musical melodies, exemplify the range of manifestations. Symbols have a crucial part in the communication of cultural identity, customs, and beliefs, and have the potential to acquire more depths of significance as time progresses. These cultural symbols, such as music, movies, and television programs, serve not only as reflections of culture but also as

significant carriers through which power influences and shapes public consciousness [5]. Particularly in the context of globalization, cultural appropriation has emerged as a pronounced strategy. Power institutions often redefine and reinterpret cultural symbols to guide and disseminate their ideological narratives. The state apparatus plays a crucial role in this process, acting not only as the dominant producer of culture but also as the chief practitioner of cultural appropriation, selecting, deconstructing, and reshaping cultural symbols to align with its policy and strategic needs. To delve deeper into this dynamic, this study aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the power-driven appropriation of cultural symbols and their strategic operations within the state apparatus.

Retreatism, as conceptualized by Robert K. Merton, refers to the mindset of individuals who choose to abandon or reevaluate their initial objectives and the means by which they strive to attain them when faced with obstacles or ethical quandaries [6]. Retreatism refers to the behaviors shown by people or collectives who, in response to experiences of oppression and exploitation, choose to disengage from conventional societal norms or the repressive frameworks within them. Such a withdrawal is not limited to physical distance but extends more to emotional, psychological, and cultural shifts. In the context of this research, retreatism sheds light on the strategies or emotional stances that some communities or individuals might adopt when confronted with power oppression or cultural deprivation, prompting them to retract from mainstream culture or political aims and to seek alternative avenues or means to satisfy their cultural or emotional needs. Within this shift, cultural symbols play a pivotal role. For those opting for retreatism, these cultural symbols are not just tools to convey identity or traditions but also act as a mode of rebellion, challenge, and critique against mainstream society. Against this backdrop, retreatism not only reveals the way in which cultural symbols are employed in resistance but also demonstrates how cultural symbols can acquire new and intensified meanings in contexts of oppression and exploitation. This implies that when power institutions attempt to appropriate these symbols, they confront not only the symbols themselves but also the underlying sentiments of retreatism and profound cultural dissent.

Having established the intricate link between retreatism and cultural symbols, it's essential to contemplate the potential reactions of power structures when they discern the subversive forces of these symbols. This is more than a cultural debate; it's about power, control, and belonging. Specific power entities, especially centralized authorities, may endeavor to eliminate, control, or assimilate these challenging cultural symbols to preserve their dominant status or expand their sphere of influence. Such efforts, often manifesting as cultural appropriation, aim to strip these symbols of their rebellious characteristics and integrate them into mainstream culture. The ensuing discussions will delve into the concept of cultural appropriation, especially in distinguishing its multiple meanings across various cultural and power contexts. This research will further emphasize cultural appropriation as the central power's co-optation of grassroots cultural symbols. This appropriation is more than mere imitation or adoption; it combines the interactions between power and marginal culture to mainstream and popularize original tools of resistance. Such a transfer and recreation of culture from the grassroots to the central epitomize power's dominion and reshaping of cultural symbols, signaling the formation and consolidation of cultural hegemony.

2. Cultural Appropriation

In the realm of sociology, the concept of cultural appropriation is not just about cross-cultural imitation and adoption but is closely linked to power structures, cultural capital, and societal status. Cultural appropriation is defined as the unauthorized adoption or imitation of features, techniques, etc., from one cultural background, a mode that can misinterpret or dilute the original culture's significance and intent [7]. These cultural elements encompass symbols, genres, and traditional knowledge but also extend to cultural expressions, techniques, and artifacts. For instance, musical styles, clothing, food recipes, narratives, and specific hairstyles are common instances of cultural

appropriation. According to research by Lenard and Balint, the objects of cultural appropriation tend to be "reusable or non-exhaustible" [8]. For example, a hairstyle can be adopted by many without being "used up" by any single individual's imitation.

In the era of multicultural integration and globalization, cultural appropriation is often perceived as artistic innovation and a popular trend against the backdrop of consumerism. For instance, Chinese hip-hop culture, while borrowing from African-American hip-hop music, has removed elements of animosity and nationalism, infusing more local Chinese characteristics. However, it's crucial to note that cultural appropriation isn't merely an interaction between races but more pertinently involves the reconfiguration of power structures.

In recent years, sociological research on cultural appropriation has displayed a pronounced inclination towards an excessive focus on appropriation behaviors across cultures or races. While these studies, to some extent, indeed unveil the various dynamics of cross-cultural appropriation, they often overlook appropriation processes within a culture, especially between the centers of power and the periphery. In these processes, cultural symbols initially serve as instruments of resistance by marginalized groups against the central authority. However, they are subsequently co-opted, reshaped, and mainstreamed by this central power. Compared to cross-cultural appropriation, the power dynamics and shifts in cultural meaning underlying this internal cultural appropriation seem more intricate and nuanced.

Given this research gap, it becomes imperative to explore how central power appropriates and transforms marginal cultural symbols. This not only offers a more profound understanding of the relationship between power and culture but also helps illuminate how cultural symbols are reshaped and redefined under various power contexts. Moreover, such research can further elucidate how symbols initially used as tools of rebellion are re-integrated by power structures to solidify their foundational rule and strengthen social order.

Initially, cultural symbols emerged as tools of resistance within retreatist strategies, representing criticism and rejection of central authority. However, as these symbols gradually gain attention and are further co-opted by the central power, their rebellious essence is increasingly challenged. Leveraging its extensive resources and influence, the central authority appropriates these symbols, diminishing their original critical and disruptive nature, and adapting them for broader societal needs.

This process of cultural appropriation essentially embodies how power redefines, integrates, and even assimilates symbols originally opposed to its core, gradually transforming them into tools bolstering power structures. This transformation isn't merely about removing their rebelliousness but embedding deep-seated sentiments and meanings of rebellion into new cultural contexts, harmonizing them with mainstream culture and values.

However, this doesn't imply that the process of cultural appropriation is unidirectional or absolute. While cultural symbols might be redefined and assimilated, their core rebelliousness and resistance might still persist and manifest in different ways. Recognizing and understanding these changes, especially the intricate relationship between power and appropriated symbols, is this study's central theme. Herein, it will delve into how central power, through appropriation strategies, mainstreams and popularizes cultural symbols, initially tools of resistance in retreatist strategies, and whether this appropriation wholly dilutes their original rebelliousness or if it persists in some form.

3. Strategic View of Power-Culture Relationship

The relationship between power and culture has always been a central topic in this field, especially when considering how to understand the micro-mechanisms of power operations and how to interpret strategies of resistance against power from a cultural perspective. Behind the stage of power, interactions between the powerless and the powerful are fraught with deception and strategic maneuvering [9]. This strategic expression is manifested as collaboration and complicity in the public

transcripts, while the hidden transcripts reveal the real relationship and contestation between subordinated groups and rulers. This relationship of subordination and domination is not isolated; it is driven by an underlying force of culture. Delving deeper into the frameworks of power, discipline, and oppression, the role of culture and its influence in society undoubtedly takes center stage. It serves not only as a medium of expression or a representation of tradition but also as a vessel for power and resistance. Cultural symbols, in this context, become essential tools for social groups to critique, question, and resist authority and oppression.

Examining the function of cultural symbols, it becomes evident that their real power extends far beyond superficial criticisms of oppression. From a retreatist perspective, cultural symbols offer oppressed groups an indirect, non-confrontational form of resistance. They provide these groups with a space to interact, communicate, and even negotiate with authoritative structures, allowing them to express their sentiments, stances, and consciousness of resistance without directly confronting authority.

This micro-resistance strategy based on cultural symbols, though possibly not leading to significant social changes in the short term, provides a valuable platform for everyday acts of subtle resistance. Scott's concept of "weapons of the weak" offers theoretical support for this strategy, emphasizing that in an unequal power structure, the oppressed or so-called "weak" also possess an implicit, indirect force of resistance.

Within the retreatist framework, this resistance is no longer direct confrontation but carried out through cultural symbols in daily life. These symbols, as vessels of emotional experience, provide individuals with a voice and platform, enabling them to articulate dissent, question dominant power, and even, in some contexts, enact subtle resistance in non-confrontational and ambiguous ways. Cultural symbols also play an intermediary role in emotional communication, ensuring that this emotion-based resistance is not merely superficial but deeply rooted in subtler, implicit interactions among people.

When individuals or social groups experience feelings of deprivation and oppression, they typically undergo emotional reactions like anger or fear. These emotions not only incite desires to resist but also propel them to explore indirect, more nuanced resistance strategies. Based on retreatist theoretical constructs, cultural symbols are seen not just as mere instruments for identity expression but more importantly, as strategic tools to subtly challenge the existing power structure without direct confrontation.

Upon further analysis, this retreatist strategy using cultural symbols serves a dual purpose: Firstly, they provide a voice and platform for the oppressed to respond to mainstream discourses in a covert, coded manner, thereby challenging or influencing authority to some extent. Secondly, due to the emotional resonance of cultural symbols, they can stir emotional solidarity in communities, thereby enhancing social cohesion and fostering collective action. This not only reflects the strategic nature of retreatism but also showcases how cultural symbols serve as bridges in social dynamics, linking individual emotional experiences with broader societal responses.

4.   The Power Dynamics Inherent in Cultural-Knowledge

Cultural symbols, owing to their unique dual value—as both carriers of emotion and reflections of ideology—often become focal points of public attention. When these symbols gain deep public recognition, they are likely to attract the notice of institutional power and subsequently be integrated. At this juncture, cherished cultural forms, with their inherent influence and diffusion capacity, are easily adopted and institutionalized by power structures. This integration process is not merely an official endorsement; it is a strategic appropriation and reshaping of cultural content by power, aiming to transform or dilute the original "resistant" nature of cultural symbols. Such a transformation might lead to the formation of cultural hegemony, representing a profound example of cultural appropriation.

5. Chinese Cases of Value-reshaping

This reshaping of values within the appropriation, especially when external values incongruent with the original cultural context are imposed, can threaten the authenticity and integrity of cultural symbols. This threat might cause originally resistant cultural symbols to face the risk of marginalization, often masked by more covert and nuanced strategies.

In a socio-cultural environment distinctively Chinese, it's common to strategically incorporate folk cultural symbols into broader political or societal agendas. Whether observing the historical evolution of Chinese rock music or the diverse artistic performances of the Spring Festival Gala, we can discern the indispensable role of cultural appropriation in the construction of power and ideology. This is more than just an institutional reshaping of cultural forms; it's a complex process involving the intertwining, competition, and collaboration of power and culture.

The Spring Festival Gala broadcasted live by China Central Television (CCTV) on the eve of the Lunar New Year (commonly referred to as "Chunwan") has evolved beyond a mere entertainment program. It now operates as a state apparatus and has become an indispensable part of China's Spring Festival celebrations [10]. The administration has identified an effective medium for disseminating social and ideological themes by using the distinct platform of the Spring Festival celebration [11]. As a representative of the state apparatus, the Chunwan is leveraged by the central authority as a medium to institutionally appropriate and reframe folk cultural symbols, particularly performance formats like sketches and cross-talks. These originally witty and spontaneous forms of folk entertainment, when absorbed and standardized by Chunwan, are diluted from their essence and re-woven to align more closely with the central authority's values and directions.

Research from communication scholars further corroborates this phenomenon. Huang and Zhan note that the national discourse within Chunwan is meticulously designed and constructed, encompassing the portrayal of a vibrant national image, strengthening the amalgamation of national goals with individual aspirations, and exploring profound societal issues via entertaining formats [12]. Documents from the General Office of the Communist Party of China emphasize the pivotal role of mass media in disseminating socialist core values. Within this context, Chunwan, as a quintessential state apparatus, is undeniably the most influential medium.

The content of Chunwan has shifted from entertainment to include political messages and values, with even humorous sketches now serving as vehicles for state-driven educational content. This change illustrates the transformation of cultural symbols into tools for promoting governmental ideologies.

This phenomenon isn't coincidental but a deliberate appropriation of culture by authority. It reflects the control and guidance exerted by power on culture and the inherent fragility and mutability of culture when faced with power. The reshaping of values within this appropriation, especially when external values incongruent with the original cultural background are imposed, might threaten the authenticity and integrity of cultural symbols. Such threats could potentially marginalize inherently subversive cultural symbols, with this marginalization often concealed by more subtle and covert strategies.

In 2010, a song titled "Kill That Shijiazhuang Man" surged within the Chinese rock scene, performed by the Shijiazhuang band "Omnipotent Youth Hotel." Not only acclaimed for its musical prowess, the song, from a sociological perspective, provided a vivid case study of the plight of the subordinate working class within shifting power dynamics against the backdrop of societal change. The narrative behind the song closely ties to the Chinese Communist Party's market reforms of the 1990s. These policies resulted in massive layoffs in numerous state-owned enterprises, with cities like Shijiazhuang, once economic powerhouses, seeing vast swathes of workers lose their jobs. Overnight, their lifelong beliefs and expectations of stable employment shattered, leading to the city's

decline. The protagonist of the song, a man who had worked in a pharmaceutical factory for decades, epitomizes the experiences of many families in Shijiazhuang. Confronted with the monotony of work, he immerses himself in a mechanical daily routine, while his wife attempts to hoard goods from the People's Store, albeit seemingly in vain, as a means to weather impending hardships. Their introverted son, facing academic challenges, further compounds their struggles. Utilizing symbolic cultural references such as the pharmaceutical factory and the People's Store, the song paints a specific cultural landscape of northern Chinese cities of that era. These elements not only depict the daily life of a city but also allude to the transitions of the era, societal apathy, and the uncertainties facing individuals. As the planned economy pivoted to a market economy, countless workers grappled with unemployment. The lyrics, "Only when the edifice collapses does it truly kill the people of Shijiazhuang," underscore the despair and disillusionment faced by the working class during this transition. Caught between aspiring for a better future and meeting basic life necessities, they encountered a collective psychological impasse.

The societal tremors instigated by this shift in rock music also provide us with a context to understand the intricate relationship between power and counter-culture. In his studies on power, Foucault posits that power is not solely an oppressive entity; it also functions as a productive force. When power seeks to control or appropriate a cultural symbol, it is indeed a manifestation of power. However, concurrently, the communities behind these cultural symbols might exploit this appropriation to further amplify their resistance sentiment and identity affiliation. In the process of appropriation and assimilation of these symbols by the state apparatus, the overt meaning of the cultural symbols might be rewritten, aligning them more closely with the values of the state machinery. Nonetheless, this is merely a superficial transformation. Embedded within every cultural symbol are arrays of emotions, experiences, and collective memories that cannot be easily stripped away or altered. When a cultural symbol is assimilated, its profound significance might temporarily be overshadowed, but this does not imply its complete erasure.

The potency of a cultural symbol is not just in its form but also in the content and emotions it carries. Though it might be superficially redefined by the state apparatus, its deep-seated feelings of resistance and experiences remain intact. In contemporary socio-cultural phenomena, the appropriation of cultural symbols is far from an isolated incident. Power institutions, while trying to promote their intentions through popular cultural symbols, often overlook the profound cultural structure underlying these symbols. When "The Indomitable People of Shijiazhuang" was utilized by the Hebei government to disseminate its perceived values, the song's intrinsic anger, defiance, and indignation were not obliterated. Contrarily, efforts to legitimize or orthodoxize a subversive culture through authoritative entities often ignite heightened sentiments of resistance.

From its inception, rock music has embodied a challenge to authority and mainstream culture. When it is sought to be assimilated by the power establishment for certain positive propaganda purposes, the rebellious essence of rock remains. Although the Hebei government attempted to utilize the song to portray Shijiazhuang as a rock metropolis, the immediate reaction was not as anticipated. This appropriation led many who understood the original intent of the song to feel disillusioned, witnessing the authoritative manipulation and misinterpretation of culture.

With the expansive dissemination of social media, this dissatisfaction spread rapidly. A multitude of adapted works, from classical to contemporary, universally unveil public sarcasm and discontent toward the actions of power entities. The appropriation of classical literary works such as A Thatched Hut Torn Down by the Autumn Wind and Spring View to counteract the authoritative cultural appropriation underscores that resistance and discontent in collective memory, be it modern or ancient, cannot be thoroughly eliminated.

This further corroborates Foucault's description of the fluidity of power. As power strives to consolidate its position by controlling and rewriting culture, the deep structure and implications of

such culture don't simply vanish. People's emotions, experiences, and collective memories will find alternative outlets, challenging this authority in various forms and modalities.

Changes in comedic skits from the Spring Festival Gala illustrate how the state agenda influences the metamorphosis of cultural symbols and the societal repercussions that ensue. This reveals how the state uses cultural platforms, an apparatus of the nation, to appropriate culture and guide ideology. From the adaptation incident of Kill That Man from Shijiazhuang, the concrete phenomenon of cultural appropriation and the underlying societal reactions are vividly evident. It shows that the rebellious essence and emotions of cultural symbols born out of a spirit of defiance won't be erased by central power's appropriation but will instead continue to resonate widely with the public.

6.   dual-faceted process of cultural appropriation

As underscored in this study, cultural appropriation is a dual-faceted process. On one hand, it exhibits efforts of power attempting to control cultural symbols through rewriting and redefinition; on the other, it also mirrors how the broader public responds to, challenges, and even re-infuses these symbols with new significance. This process, both a reinterpretation of the past and a direct response and challenge to the present societal and power structures, carries an inherent duality. Even if cultural symbols are assimilated by mainstream culture, their profound implications of defiance may not have been completely extinguished. While certain demographics might accept the legitimacy propagated by the state apparatus, cultural symbols and the emotions, experiences, and collective memories they bear are not static but are in a constant state of dynamic evolution. Even in the face of co-optation by authoritative entities, where parts of the meaning of cultural symbols might be diminished or rewritten, the emotions and experiences they represent still persist, potentially finding expression and release in other forms and contexts. This suggests that cultural appropriation is not always a triumph of power but can be a challenge and redefinition of it.

Building on the dichotomous nature of cultural appropriation, this article posits that even if appropriated cultural symbols are possibly assimilated by mainstream culture or redefined by power institutions, their intrinsic defiance and resistance emotions cannot be overlooked. The essence of resistance might not always be overtly perceptible, yet as long as memory exists, it will persistently influence various societal strata. In fact, over time, the appropriation of cultural symbols might spark deeper-seated discontent and sentiments of rebellion. Foucault once emphasized the fluidity of power; when power seeks to reshape or assimilate a given cultural symbol, people's emotions and collective memories not only endure but might rejuvenate and rebel in even more diverse ways. Thus, the defiance and resilience of culture are not merely reactions to history but also ongoing challenges to the ever-evolving power dynamics in reality.

7.   Conclusion

Originating from a profound dimension of cultural symbols, this research delves into the intricate mechanisms of cultural appropriation and the pivotal role the state apparatus plays therein. With a research framework centered on the comedic skits and sketches of the Spring Festival Gala, this study strives to unveil how the state agenda intricately and strategically influences the transformation of cultural symbols, thereby eliciting a cascade of profound societal reverberations. Drawing upon this empirical evidence, this article posits that the state not only engages in a rudimentary selection and reshaping of culture but, against the backdrop of culture, it strategically appropriates through its formidable apparatus, thus forging deep connections with the thoughts and emotions of the general public. The relationships among cultural symbols, cultural appropriation, and the state machinery revealed here actually reflect broader sociological themes, namely the multi-layered, multi-dimensional interactions of power, culture, and society. This intricate interplay not only determines

the shaping and transformation of cultural symbols but also indirectly impacts societal structural stability and change, as well as the identities and contradictions between individuals and collectives. In future research, deciphering this complex entanglement and its profound influence on society will be a domain worthy of further exploration.

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