



**Qigong Healing Centre
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**Ethics of Cultural Appropriation
Within
Qigong Traditions**

Appropriation and Commodification of Cultural Heritage of East Asian Traditions

Qigong Healing Centre [™] of Michigan, is a Qigong Society which educates, advocates the “Traditions of East Asian Qigong, Kikou, and Indigenous beliefs and practices”. These are primarily taught by Mentor Teacher Gary W. Abersold, in which has chosen to state our/his position on “acknowledging cultural appropriation” of Qigong Traditions. This represents where our position is at this moment in time. Our aim here is that all who read this will understand our ethical position of Cultural Appropriation of Qigong Traditions. This paper introduces the issues raised by the appropriation and commodification of cultural heritage, outlining risks and benefits and how also to avoid the pitfalls of misappropriation within Qigong Traditions. While these issues are faced by all cultural groups, there is a long history of Indigenous cultural heritage being used by non-Indigenous people for commercial and other purposes.

Understanding What Appropriated Mean?

When people refer to appropriation or misappropriation of cultural heritage, they may be referring to tangible or intangible heritage. Heritage is understood differently in different cultural contexts, but broadly includes elements of a collective past that remain meaningful to a culture today. Tangible forms of cultural heritage are appropriated when an item is removed from the source tradition, community, teacher’s or even in physical art. This form of appropriation has for example resulted in the accumulation in museums of objects from all around the world.

Intangible heritage includes meaningful creative expressions such as designs, styles, songs, dances, stories, food, rituals, and artistic works.

These forms of heritage are appropriated when the practice, view teaching, design or style is copied by someone from a different culture and/or used for a different purpose than originally intended.

At its most basic level, appropriation means to take something for one's own. The appropriated object or idea is removed from its originating or source tradition, teachers or context and applied to another. Appropriation happens all the time as people borrow ideas from each other to create new forms of traditions, art and symbolic expressions of culturally meaningful concepts. In many cases where possible legal "ownership" has been established, there are protections in place to prevent or hinder appropriation. However, in the absence of this, appropriation becomes more complicated.

Understanding What Commodification?

Commodification means transforming something into a product for commercial purposes, an item to be bought and sold in the market. Intangible cultural heritage is frequently employed in the commercial sector, incorporated into company names, branding, logos, and products. Tangible cultural heritage may also be commodified, such as in the case of textbooks, media, art; intended to be sold commercially.

There is also a market for ancient artifacts and antiquities, which is governed by national and international regulations aimed at preventing illegal sale of these cultural heritage forms. In some countries, such as Canada, it is even forbidden to append a market value (i.e., to commodify) archaeological heritage. Unfortunately it is often largely non enforced and really is an ethical problem. Many traditions today violate this especially in East Asian practice systems. Unknowing to many in certain circumstances, appropriation may be deemed inappropriate, contrary to Indigenous customary tradition, which is offensive, and even harmful. This is

particularly the case when the appropriated form is spiritually significant, or its intended use is contraindicated or threatened. It may be exacerbated if it is then also commodified.

While misappropriation and/or commodification of cultural heritage by businesses and teachers is frequent because it is seen as trendy and potentially lucrative, it is also a unethical endeavour as it can result in negative attention. Many people's credibility will be called into question, and most of the time it's due to lack of understanding. We live in a very modern world but there still exist traditional values, customs with many traditions.

For the Indigenous groups whose heritage is being appropriated, the potential harms of appropriation are not just economic. Harm may be caused through misuse and distortion of source traditions, heritage, resulting in a feeling of losing quality and control over culture; harm may also be spiritual and physical through exposure to dangerous spirits or energies. This might seem far fetch to some, but these practices and traditions are extremely powerful. Proper transmission always ensures the proper passing on of culture.

While some people openly disregard requests not to appropriate or commodify, many people are unaware that appropriation may be harmful or offensive. In fact, people may claim to be attempting to “show respect” for Indigenous cultures, failing to see how their actions are disrespectful to the very people they mean to be “celebrating.” Such misappropriation of cultural expressions is often inadvertent: someone just thought the image was “cool” or “stylish,” or saw it as a business opportunity like any other. However, this lack of awareness does not make misappropriation any less serious; it only highlights the importance of education about acknowledgement, appropriation and commodification.

There are many benefits to cultural sharing, such as expanding diversity through the creation of new and innovative traditions and expressions, or blending and juxtaposing cultural ideas in compelling ways. The commodification of cultural heritage can also present interesting economic opportunities when done by, with the consent, and/or under the control of the originating source traditions and teachers. It isn't that cultural exchange and product marketing are inherently "bad"; rather, it is about respecting different values and traditions.

It is always important to ask who is benefiting, and whether this is at someone else's expense, especially when there are clear imbalances of power between those doing the appropriation, and those whose heritage is being appropriated. This is especially visible in the book and video business with Qigong traditions. Most often these are not original works or approved by source traditions and teachers. To ensure quality much needs to be done for future generation. It is always customary to work with source teachers and traditions to avoid mis information. This will make the tradition richer and stable.

Proper Handling of Cultural Treasures

We believe there should be guiding principles to avoid misappropriating which include acknowledgement, respect, reciprocity, and free prior and informed consent. Because peoples around the world have different legal institutions, protocols, and culturally-specific senses of what is appropriate and inappropriate, the only way to avoid misappropriation of cultural heritage is to build relationships with and within source traditions and communities. Communicating with each other is a necessary first step to ensure that those who are most closely affected have control over how their heritage is used. If the latter's interests are respected and protected, the appropriating group is also less likely to be targeted by allegations of misappropriation.

Acknowledging Cultural Appropriation Within Qigong Traditions

The following strategies are suggestions we have adopted, for addressing acknowledging cultural appropriation in Qigong Traditions. This is to insure our mission - does not get group together with “Qigong Marketers” or business people whom are trying to take advantage of this indigenous tradition.

1. Honor the Traditions: We acknowledge that even with our certificates and personal experience, there is so much about this indigenous tradition and culture that we do not know. There is so much for us to learn and continue practicing. Part of what drew us to this path was that we knew it would challenge us to learn and grow throughout our lives. We always remember those who brought us in.

2. Transmission & Source Tradition: We always recognize the indigenous teachers, communities and schools as the **de facto source**. We refer to these as the “Source Tradition” and “Source Tradition Masters”. For sharing of skills through media if there exist a reference video, book or booklet written by the “Source Tradition” Group or “Source Tradition Masters”, we always promote these first and foremost.

In certain cases if the teachers or teachers have passed on or disengaged, we then determine if it’s time to produce in community material. When this occurs it will only be passed on for review and educational uses.

3. Community & Posterity: We always put people before financial recompense. Our practices are rooted in solid Community Teaching

Groups, Workshops and Individual Classes. Classes are offered through a set fee based on facility cost, travel cost, materials and other factors.

When possible a certain percentage of the classes offered will be deemed either a “Dana Paramita” Donation Program Class; individuals give what the class is worth to them. Some classes will be at the reasonable set fee \$12.00-\$18.00; and some programs will be no recompense needed programs. This is to help and educate and promote the tradition and pass it on through posterity endeavors.

4. Source Tradition Teacher Intensives: Important to our Qigong Society is the promotion and acknowledgement of Source Tradition Teacher Trainings. When possible we will advocate of Special Retreats, Workshops and Classes with Source Tradition Teachers, that relate to our Qigong Lineage practices and overall goals.

5. Dignity, Respect and Equality: We recognize and ensure “Equality for all” policy. Gender, Race, disability and other orientations are all treated with dignity and respect. Students who don’t follow this policy are forever banned from the teachings.

We Thank You for reading and understanding our stance on acknowledging the Indigenous Traditions, ethics and, we welcome your feedback, questions, and ideas!