

## CHAPTER 12

# A NOTE ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

IT WOULD BE REMISS of me to write this book for a Western readership and not mention cultural appropriation, though if you are reading this book because you are a serious practitioner of metaphysical craft, then this chapter doesn't apply. Cultural appropriation happens when a person takes an artifact from a culture that he or she does not belong to and uses that artifact outside of its cultural context, with no understanding of the significance of the artifact. By taking it out of context, the cultural meaning of that artifact effectively changes, which results in an adverse impact on the native culture.<sup>1</sup> Crafting Fu sigils within the context of any serious magical tradition is not cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation happens if the Fu is treated as decorative ornamentation or if the practice is not regarded with the same veneration a practitioner would treat similar practices in his or her own tradition.

The swastika (卐) is a classic example of cultural appropriation by Westerners of sacred artifacts from the East. The word *swastika* comes from the Sanskrit root *su-asti*, which means good fortune and prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Archaeological records of the symbol from the Indus Valley date back to 2500 BC. For various indigenous cultures throughout human history, the swastika has been a symbol for the sun, the four directions, the four seasons, and almost universally across Asian culture, it is an auspicious symbol for well-being.

Buddhists associate the swastika with samsara, the cycle of birth and death, but also consider it a symbol of the infinite compassion of the Buddha. Taoists also associate the symbol with great fortune and luck. Hindus associ-

ate it with the god Vishnu.<sup>3</sup> For many cultures in the East, the swastika was a sacred, spiritual, and religious symbol that meant divine protection.

Then in the twentieth century, after Western colonization and imperialism had already left its stain on Asia, Nazi Germany appropriated the swastika symbol for its own use, taking the symbol outside the context it belonged in and, by using it in conjunction with anti-Semitism, effectively changed the cultural meaning of the Asian swastika.<sup>4</sup> That's cultural appropriation.

When I was a child, a Buddhist practitioner gifted me with a blessed and consecrated gold pendant that featured the swastika. Imagine the reactions I encountered when I wore that pendant to school in a small suburban all-white town in the United States. Western cultural appropriation of a sacred and religious Eastern symbol is why, to this day, so many from the marginalized Asian religious groups cannot wear a swastika without turning Western heads. That is the consequence of cultural appropriation.<sup>5</sup>

Another example is the hijacking of the deity name Shang Di (上帝), a deity found inscribed on oracle bones from as early as the Shang Dynasty.<sup>6</sup> Once, Shang Di referred to a Heavenly Emperor, a supreme deity in the skies who oversaw all other deities. But when Western Christian missionaries came to evangelize in China, they took the term Shang Di and decided it meant the Christian God. Now Shang Di refers to the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic faiths, and is no longer associated with its true heritage—the heavenly father of a polytheistic pantheon that predates Christianity by at least a thousand years.

When applied to Fu sigil crafting, the Western practitioner must take care that he or she values the Fu as sacred, and not as fanciful fun. Crafting a Fu sigil is not a Saturday afternoon art project. Do not reproduce a Chinese character simply because you like its aesthetic design. Do not carry around a Fu simply because it seems fashionable or different. Understand its meaning and symbolic associations. In appendix B, I have tried to provide a reference of commonly used characters found in Fu, but even so, do your due diligence. You should be able to articulate why exactly you have chosen to use a particular Chinese character or symbol in the crafting of your Fu sigil.

Understand the history and legacy of the Fu sigil so that if someone else sees the Fu you have crafted and asks about it, you're able to provide cultural

context, and you are able to sound informed. Craft every aspect of your Fu sigil in compliance with how you have sincerely interpreted the principles from the *Classics of the Esoteric Talisman*. You might find much common ground between *Classics of the Esoteric Talisman* and Western esoteric doctrines. After all, Truth is universal.

The Chinese and indigenous practitioners of Eastern esotericism are sensitive—and rightfully so—to Western appropriation of Asian spiritual or religious thought. There is a feeling of taking without permission, and that can trigger a visceral reaction from native practitioners, even when it's just a miniature statue of Kuan Yin sitting on the desk of someone who knows nothing about the bodhisattva, or layers of mala prayer beads around someone's neck because she thinks it's costume jewelry. While each of these instances alone might not warrant a visceral response, it's the history of Western imperialism that witnessing such instances brings up, and that's why the visceral responses are triggered.

There is over a century's worth of history that accounts for the Opium Wars, Western occupation in China, putting up signs that read "No dogs and Chinese allowed" in China,<sup>7</sup> or the British appropriation of 23,000 priceless ancient Chinese artifacts that were looted from Beijing in the 1800s.<sup>8</sup> The traumatic humiliation and racism that the Chinese experienced in their own country throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has left an indelible mark on their psyche. Marginalized races around the world are all too used to their cultures and cultural artifacts being loved by Westerners while the people of that culture are discriminated against, tossed aside, and treated like second-class citizens.

Postcolonialism is the study of the aftermath of imperialism and colonization, and the social and psychological consequences shouldered by those who have inherited a legacy of imperialized or colonized experience.<sup>9</sup> Basically, postcolonialism is why a Chinese American might feel offended when he sees a white Midwestern housewife referring to herself as Celestial Master and teaching a course on feng shui. On its own, it shouldn't seem like such a big deal, but it is enough to trigger deeply embedded sentiments of humiliation and discrimination. So, justified or not, there is an unspoken feeling of, "You've taken so much already, and now you want feng shui, too?"

Yes, at the other end of the spectrum, minority groups often become hypersensitive to any use of their culture by a privileged or dominant group. I confess I've heard people cry "cultural appropriation" the way one might cry wolf. Not every Western practitioner's adoption of Eastern spiritual practice is cultural appropriation. Such hypersensitivity can lead to unnecessary tensions and conflict, when the very heart of Eastern spiritual practice is about harmony. Still, a rudimentary understanding of social history and Western imperialism in Asia will shed clear light on where that hypersensitivity comes from. Thus, even when the minority group is being hypersensitive, the privileged group should respond in a respectful and compassionate manner. Ultimately, you should respect cultural practices, but you do not need to obey the demands of individuals who are being unreasonable.

Also, what is cultural appropriation and what is globalization? Globalization is a process of interacting cultures and people who then integrate artifacts from the other culture into their own.<sup>10</sup> Such a process advances knowledge and technology, and in the matter of Fu sigils, advances the development of craft, a practice that transcends culture and religion because it strikes at a universal Truth. Cosmic energy does not belong to any one social group.

We live in a time when Western practitioners of craft can interact with Eastern practitioners of craft, and through that intellectual exchange and East-West syncretism, both sides mutually advance their wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Esoteric Taoism itself is a classic example of how a magical lineage can integrate artifacts from different religions (and often religions that are at odds with each other) to further that magical lineage.<sup>12</sup>

Authenticity is probably another concern that this book and its teaching of the Fu craft may raise. As an Asian American raised predominantly in the Western culture, not Eastern, I worry about authenticity. Am I "Asian enough" to be writing this book? Why is that a standard? What does being "Asian enough" mean? What exactly are the metrics for determining authenticity?

There were times I struggled with Chinese literacy in reading some of the texts I was researching and asked for help from native speakers. I found that in spite of someone being born ethnically Chinese in China with full fluency and literacy, esoteric texts are simply that—esoteric. Full literacy didn't help much if you weren't coming from a background rooted in craft. Non-Asian West-

ern scholars with a background in ceremonial magic who also happen to read Chinese, to my great nationalistic chagrin, understood these same texts with insightful perspicacity. The issue that should be presented is not authenticity of culture, but authenticity of craft.

When it comes to culture, people tend to think that being authentic means mimicking the native ways as closely as possible. In the case of craft, that is the opposite of authentic. To be authentic is to not copy the Fu sigil design of another lineage or practitioner. Worry less about cultural authenticity and worry more about how you will apply metaphysical principles and laws to best manifest your intentions. Invest your mental energy in thinking about what truths you can uncover through your study of the Fu and how that study will advance your own craft.

My study of Western esotericism has deepened my understanding and appreciation for Eastern esotericism, and so I hope your study of Eastern esotericism can deepen your understanding and appreciation for what you practice now. Integrating Eastern metaphysics and Fu sigils into your craft isn't cultural appropriation. It's the advancement of craft. It's growth.

Taoist or not, unequivocally, a Western practitioner can craft Fu sigils, and I invite you to do so, freely and in an organic way that makes sense with your own culture and practices. Take the secular principles of craft and practice it in a way that remains aligned with your religion or spirituality. I have seen Fu sigil crafting blended with Christianity, with the use of psalms and invocations for God, the Holy Trinity, and Jesus, and it was lovely. The craft itself is a sacred process that will deepen your connection to deity, the Divine, and to a sense of higher purpose and design. There may be beliefs tied with how practitioners approach craft, but craft itself is not about beliefs; it is about connection.

The key to blending traditions is respect. Be respectful. No one will ever fault you for mispronouncing a Chinese word, but don't pronounce it with intentional affectation in an attempt to be funny. That is not respectful and will be construed as mocking. To be respectful, the Western practitioner must also be proactive about educating him- or herself on the cultural context of Fu sigil crafting. Know that esoteric Taoist practice is guided by Taoist philosophy, but deviates from it in significant ways. Know that your craft must answer to Heaven and Earth, however you define Heaven and Earth through your

personal gnosis. There must be reverence for divinity and to the natural world around you. Your craft need not answer to social constructs. And yet, also know that there are social constructs that still hold on to the belief that only an ordained priest or priestess of a recognized Taoist lineage can craft a Fu sigil. Be respectful of those social constructs. Respect does not mean acquiescence.

I hope you will be using the basic principles found in this book to design your own Fu sigils in your own style and by your own methods. I hope you will be guided by your intuition, informed by a respect and reverence for a culture that is different from your own, and from there, craft sigils that blend East and West. Encouraging such blending and advancement of craft is the whole point of this book.