

Appropriated in the U. S. of A.

By [Mary Beth Mathews](#)

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The Sportsman Channel touts its newest series, *Amazing America with Sarah Palin*, in a three-minute video making the rounds on social media:

The video, a recording by “the most patriotic band in America,” [Madison Rising](#), contains rousing lyrics, while a variety of activities flash by in rapid succession: men fighting fires, men shooting guns, women shooting guns, men running with bulls, men riding down zip lines, cars racing, and Sarah Palin on a dogsled pulled by pink-booted sled dogs. Dave Bray, Madison Rising’s lead singer and a navy veteran, asks, “Who wouldn’t want to be an American?”

Such nationalism recurs often in the United States (see, for example, Josiah Strong’s 1885 book, [Our Country](#)), but the video’s visual content is far from predictable when the camera focuses on the band. Madison Rising performs its song at the “Guitar Annex.” Draped across the walls in the recording booth are various Asian and Islamic tapestries. While the Americans included in the video’s activities—likely scenes from the series—are largely white with a few African Americans present, these wall hangings and the rug upon which the band plays are the only Asian representatives in “Amazing America.” On one wall, a yin-yang symbol watches over the white men who sing of America’s virtues, while behind the yin-yang a pentagon reminds the viewer of the five elements of Chinese religions (earth, wind, fire, wood, and metal) labeled on the pentagon’s sides. Immediately adjacent to that hanging is a blue dragon, another [Asian](#) symbol, appropriated here to decorate a recording studio, and on the other side hangs what looks to be a Persian rug, a companion to the floor covering.

Therein lies the triumph. As Madison Rising’s website explains, the band “sends a message that American culture is alive and well.” American appropriation of Asian visual symbols is also very much alive and well in this video, even while Asians themselves (and Latinos and American Indians) are strikingly absent. Their contribution to the country, which the band describes as having been made “with

our own two hands,” occupies a background role—even though it was the Chinese immigrants who “forged the steel with their own two hands,” as Madison Rising proclaims, building transcontinental railroads [among other things](#).

While these wall treatments most likely serve a sound-dampening purpose, they stand as a stark counterbalance to the American flag hanging near the Persian rug—and the folded American flag sitting on the bass drum as the drummer, clad in a [Milifidel](#) shirt, pounds out the beat. The triumphalism of the red, white, and blue will trump, appropriate, and assimilate symbols of world cultures. The intricate paisley designs of the Islamic artists will not serve as a method to contemplate the infinite unity of God, nor will the Daoist symbol trouble the mind with its silent witness to something other than an Abrahamic religion. The other has been tamed in America, leaving Americans to construct a communal image of what their culture embodies: an image of white, middle-class, outdoor activities.

To be sure, neither the Sportsman Channel nor Madison Rising appears to rule out the participation of ethnic minorities in the enjoyment of “the dogs and the horses and the trucks and the guns.” Indeed the running of the bulls in the video evokes the running of the bulls in [Pamplona, Spain](#). But these bulls are American bulls, and are presumably, as the band explains about all things American, “bigger, louder, faster, and mean.” And the images of the America here are more cowboys and Indians than Asian immigrants and Latino barrios. The wonder of America derives from its ability to tame the land and to persuade ethnic minorities that their best chance is to throw in their lot with the majority, because “the red, white, and blue is our way of life and God gives the rights.” Take it or leave it, the video challenges the viewer, but inevitably you will be assimilated—if not as a person, then very likely as a set of material artifacts.

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