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**Kaitlin Edin**

Acupuncturist | Eastern Herbal Medicine  
Chinese Medicine Practitioner  
ANTA National Acupuncture Branch Chair

# The Terrain of the Body in Wonderland

At the age of 21, I met death for the first time. An accident injured my pelvis. After lengthy investigations, I was told that the damage to my reproductive capacity wasn't resolvable. The once clear path into adulthood and the rites of career, partnering and children took a sudden and profound turn into uncharted and unwelcomed territory. The colour drained out of things, life seemed more shadowy, beset with anguish and anxiety.

Feeling like Alice, I tried to find my way back onto the path I had been on, but I was so altered, and the way back swallowed up, that I started to believe I would never get out of Wonderland. Then, at 24, I came to a crossroads. I could continue raging against the loss of a dream due to fate and injury, or I could embrace life with a different set of expectations.

My choice sent me, with a backpack as big as my torso and heavy with burdens I didn't yet understand, into another country.

I went to live in Japan.

Strangely, Japan seemed like its own kind of Wonderland. I had barely been across state borders in Australia let alone overseas. Never before had I navigated international customs or handled foreign currency. I couldn't speak the language, and the only in-country contact was two degrees of separation away.

I was plunged into the high-density crush of cities that never sleep. Through a landscape of people, bicycles, concrete, steel, noise, incense, humidity and filth, I was propelled by the shock of the new. The postcard-perfect fragments of old Japan, with its pottery roofs, bamboo and paper windows, cherry blossoms and prayer trees, mixed, in the slippery, surreal ways of a dream, with the modern conveniences of plastic model food, alcohol vending machines, Elvis impersonators, talking elevators and squat toilets. Train timetables ran to the second, guards with white gloves stood ready to push you into overpacked cabins like one might squeeze an unruly handful of worms into a sock. There were different kinds of trains too, that looped night and day presenting rice and fish in ways that looked more like race-day fascinators than food



to an ever-hungry and relentlessly moving citizenry. For the first several years, I couldn't process what was happening to me at any level. My body was on autopilot and my head took over. It's only now I understand the mad Queen of Hearts' penchant for taking off heads. The head can really get in the way of the body's experience, mostly because we tend to value what they tell us over other ways of knowing and being. Sometimes it takes the shock of the new to restart the heart to a different reality, and a shifted alignment to wake us up to our bodies and ourselves.

For many, the experience of our national culture is as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. It's only when we step into the wash of another nation's way of living and doing and being that we get an inkling of what cultural expectations, practices and norms we have absorbed from our home places or families of origin without even knowing it. It is a hidden dimension in our lives. For First Nations people, migrants or refugees, the experience of 'being at home' in a national culture foreign to their own can be fraught, because the very idea of home is so contested. But most of us can relate to the curious and exciting experience of being foreign in a foreign land, how it might allow us to see ourselves in a new way, as though we are looking down the wrong end of a kaleidoscope. It doesn't only happen when we travel to different countries, it can happen when we are invited into a gathering of people whose rituals, language and values are ones we don't immediately recognise. In these moments we experience ourselves differently (often anxiously) and may begin to see ourselves as others see us, and this can be both fascinating and unsettling.

James Spradley, an American Professor of Anthropology, posited that every individual is a carrier of the culture. While it doesn't sound that radical now, given that we live in the era of social media influencers and technology which suggests a democratisation of cultural access, there are still those

who would argue from the more classical position that it is *only* the work and output of the great artists (or dynasties) of any particular time that determine, shape or illustrate the culture. But this suggests work that survives its time does so because it is inherently better or representative. And there may be many reasons for why this is not the case. The culture of the everyday might be something we value or recognise today, but it wasn't always the case. Interestingly in Japan there is a deep reverence for the work of the unnamed artisan who made everyday objects. These items made by hand for daily use without artifice, by artisans who are unknown, are spoken about as 'objects born, not made'. It is an aesthetic about valuing the craft of folk; 'everyday' people and the beauty in functional design. But I also like to think of it as valuing the individual in the most abstract of ways. It is a subtle way of resisting an imperial monopoly on beauty and cultural ownership, by recognising labours of those who have no 'brand'. It is a nod to that concept of Spradley's that all individuals carry culture, whether they are named, remembered or not, for 'culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour'. The individual experience and choices, conscious and unconscious knowledge acquired over generations and across time shapes the way families and kinship systems, peer groups, gender groups, neighbourhoods and nations story themselves.

To understand this notion of carrying culture, we also need to appreciate 'the way the autonomic nervous system takes in information without involving the thinking part of the brain. It responds to the cues of safety and danger inside ourselves and around us in the environment and between people'. What Deb Dana calls neuroception, means we are incredibly good at adapting to the milieu we find ourselves in without thinking about it, whether we recognise it as dangerous or not.

When we are no longer located in our place of cultural safety, the dominant (sometimes hostile) cultural response is to 'other' those it deems as different and 'not from here'. As individuals we adapt in a myriad of ways (not always well) and this affects every part of our physical and emotional body, our mind and psyche.

In the late 1970s George Engel conceptualised the biopsychosocial model of health and wellbeing, which suggested that you couldn't consider *only* the biological factors involved in a person's illness or disease. The psychological, emotional, social, gendered, cultural and economic factors must also be considered. It's a modern attempt, after Descartes

broke the egg, to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Noel Hershfield, a clinical professor of medicine in Canada, tells us that this field of study now called 'psychoneuroimmunology ... gives us compelling evidence, advanced by scientists from many fields, that an intimate relationship exists between the brain and the immune system ... An individual's emotional makeup, and the response to continued stress, may indeed be causative in the many diseases that medicine treats but whose [origin] is not yet known ...'.

Dr Gabor Mate reminds us that 'disabling the immune system with chronic emotional stress can have as much impact on our bodies as the ravages of radiation, drugs or viral infections like untreated HIV ... our immune system does not exist in isolation from daily experience'.

Emotions are part of and shape our stress responses, emotions are as necessary for survival as the immune and nervous systems, and yet they are subject to the greatest cultural repression and interpersonal judgement.

It is a relief that the modern leaders and healers in medicine, as well as some of their institutions now at least have some language to identify and recognise the interactions of the mind-body-psyche. That adaptation by the human body to the imprint and currents of culture is as significant a factor as the biological causes of disease. For despite the clarifying benefits of reductionism, and the cultural and historical assertion that the practice of 'good science' is to strip away context and objectify the subject, the insistence on it as the *only scientific way* of knowing has disenfranchised so many from their embodied experiences and healing, and ignored the language of connection. Indeed, it is something that Mate astutely points out with particular regard to health and medical science; "medicine is not simply a science, it is much more than that, it is an ideology. It's a way of looking at human beings. So, when we look at human beings as individuals without understanding the importance of the social relationships and their emotional, psychological interactions with others – that is actually a manifestation of the entrepreneur, who says that 'only I matter, what I control and what I gain matters, and we're all in competition with one another'. So, you see the economic perspective also shows up in its own particular way in the practice of medicine".

Kevin Bridges the Scottish comedian, had this to say recently through his strong Scottish brogue, on the connection of his previously heavy physique, and the

culture and economics of his childhood, "As soon as I made a few quid... I lost weight, simple as that.... I hear the politicians, I hear the health minister say... uhh is there a link between poverty and obesity, we're not really sure? ...We're not really sure... Aye there's a f\*cking link, you don't get avocados (or quinoa) in a foodbank...". In the same stand-up routine, he goes on to describe how most days as a child he would eat hot chips and then ice cream, both sold from a van. The picture it paints of his early life, despite the laughs it gets, is depressingly relevant to those working within lower socioeconomic environments. Live with the powerlessness that a lack of money, agency and recognition give you for long enough and the stress of disadvantage, disenfranchisement and poverty play out on the body and then across the generations and the broader cultural expectations.

Meaning gives us purpose, and identity often gives us power, or at least a perception of citizenship to the terrain we embody. Power, or the lack of it, is the primary engine that creates and defines the context within which stress is created or soothed. And yet power has many faces and the lack of it is not uniformly experienced.

Young women in the United States and elsewhere, now know this trespass to their individual sovereignty all too well in the rolling back of their rights to reproductive choice. And yet other women are actively supporting this trespass upon the gendered body for their own claim at power. The bloated corporate wealth structures that value automation, nonstop productivity, expanding technological surveillance and fragmented, casualised working conditions render a different transactional trespass on the human bodies they employ. And yet without consumer power, we have the disenfranchisement and disadvantage that Bridges' illustrates in his comedy.

So what happens to the body (and our health) when we engage with broader cultural environments so different from our own, over long periods of time? What might it mean for how we recognise and manage stress and its impacts when we feel foreign, or worse still, alienated? How might it feel to have to adapt to a culture rapidly changed by occupation, colonisation or war?

Our answers to those questions are both personal and societal, drawn from the human ecologies of personality, family, work and community, and determined in small and broad ways by available resources including money, class and influence. But they all impact the nervous and immune systems of the human. Eastern medicine practitioners understand

these resources within the body as an individual's jing, ying and hun/shen.

It wasn't until I lived, worked and studied in Japan that I understood what it meant to be culturally Australian and a woman. The experience of being foreign placed demands on my identity and cast me into such embodied difference that it revealed to me not only my cultural lenses, but the ways in which my individual cultural responses to perceived threats were undermining my ability to adapt.

On the broad brushstrokes of understanding, Japan is not a culturally diverse place, and by that, I mean it is not multicultural. Difference is tolerated within narrow bands, and oneness, not diversity, is collectively valued. Colonisation is not a defining part of its identity, although a response to occupation, war and nuclear holocaust is etched into the national character. Perhaps because of its history, the Japanese present to outsiders a very coherent national identity. There is a kind of extraordinary tidiness, order and 'safety', expressed in their social arrangements. From the outside, it seems to be contained, elegant, and unreachable. As you get further in, this perception changes, but initially, in the face of such a well-developed sense of national self, I felt that much of my own national cultural identity was an array of tropes and immature stereotypes.

Australia is a nation of occupation and colonisation and I had absorbed a level of cultural shame and polarisation around my national identity. I was not Indigenous but I also did not identify with the

colonising 'white bread' attitude of the mainstream, no matter how much being white facilitated my opportunities. At that time, the stain of our nation's trespass on the Indigenous population hadn't even been formally acknowledged. Even now, when the national character is more nuanced, the national stereotype of Australian identity is still tightly bound within the masculine ANZAC legacy. This is seen and glorified in that 'Australian' (male) sense of mateship and egalitarianism. As a cultural currency it has been used (not always convincingly) to smooth over the very real fracture lines of class and privilege. And it is not *because* it is primarily a white male template of identity that it is problematic, it is because it often seems to be the only one that is referenced, remembered and exalted. War traumas as we know, deeply seal the bonds of connection between people and place. But so does empathy.

In my twenties, I couldn't fully appreciate that my confusion about what it meant to be Australian was partly because I didn't fit the defining norms of my own nationality. I felt proud when I reflected that the Australia I *knew* embraced (if awkwardly) plurality, fairness and multiculturalism, and that before the scar of colonisation and cultural tyrannies, we were also a country of many nations and languages. But it seemed a jumble in comparison to the streamlined and sleek Japanese profile so readily presented.

Comparison is a lazy marker, but it helped me gain a clearer picture of what I valued about being Australian: the deep sense of irony that imbues the cultural narrative, the way we 'act the goat' and laugh at ourselves, (honestly could Celeste Barber be anything but Australian?) the physical space and freedom, the



way physical and everyday competency is understood to minimise the ways an individual might otherwise be othered, and how when the surface is scratched, we can be a rowdy defiant mob. And while this is poorly represented by the power structures that see it as a challenge to their mandates, it is this irrepressible energy that has at its heart, resistance.

I found, like the Japanese, that Australians have a strange grasp of both resistance and obedience, and that we strive to equalise. The Japanese say that the 'nail that sticks up gets hammered down', while in Australia there is a strong dislike for 'tall poppies'.

The more I listened to my friends, the more I heard them telling me that they weren't 'good' Japanese citizens. They knew what it meant and what was expected of them, but somehow they believed they didn't or couldn't measure up to the ideal, even though to my eyes they were exemplary national citizens. While the cultural expectations didn't seem to fit them, they couldn't openly challenge those requirements without getting 'hammered down' somehow; so they simply tried to work with them as best they could. Perhaps as a result of this strategic way of navigating the currents, some of the most interesting, creative and unusual subcultures are found in Japan, where the significant repression and the consequential leakage of individualism is met with a kind of half-in half-out ambivalence. In this way, where Australians can be a little bit punk the Japanese are cool.

What kind of stress must it play out on the body though? And what does this sense of incapacity do to the psyche? Suicide rates are high in Japan, and not only among the young. Mate tells us, along with a wealth of scientific research, that the stress predisposes us to certain kinds of illnesses and addictions.

Unsurprisingly, I had never been more acutely or routinely sick in my life than when I lived in Japan. My second meeting with death wouldn't happen there, but I know now that the constant levels of stress caused by my sense of foreignness, isolation and alienation were working against my immune system in such a way that I was susceptible to pathogens and illness that I had never been at home. How I managed those layers of stresses probably didn't help, I worked too hard and drank too much, which were all culturally acceptable in my place of foreign residence, and I found little time for the self-restorative practices of mindfulness, journaling, art and music. When I did, they always helped.

During my years in Japan, my digestive system was simply unable to metabolise what I ate, both physically and metaphorically. My gut and bowels were constantly inflamed. It wasn't the food or bacteria of the local environment; it was the stress with which I swallowed everything down. My eyes always seemed full of grit and my ears would become congested, as though what I was seeing, hearing and sensing just couldn't adapt into the right kind of balance. My vagus nerve probably couldn't keep up with information it was trying to process, like muscles and the immune system, the nervous system stores memory at its cellular level too.

The creepy misogyny of exotic otherness was another particular current of my experience there. What is so interesting about this kind of othering is that it occupies a space, that is not location or nation specific. I was a young woman with blue eyes, blonde hair and yet my only relationship with the dominant culture, was as an insignificant foreign resident. Yet Japanese women friends who had relationships with foreign men were othered in this way too. This particular way of othering was the same two-dimensional flattening that comes from what I now recognise as the pornographic male gaze.

My lower back was constantly sore, partly due to old injuries and sleeping on the floor, but also because the experience was threatening to overwhelm my capacity to take it in my stride. When we are standing on our own two feet, the strength of our back is paramount. Much like shouldering a burden, the spine and lower back represent our ability to carry ourselves and the weight of our head. It was the physical burden of stress that was playing out.

This is, of course, true for us all, so while the stories we tell and the kinds of impacts on the body may change with the cultural location, the underlying theme is universal. Stress unravels us all.

Having said that, I have only love for Japan, my friends and my experiences there. Wisdom and the gift of hardship were an invitation into another way of seeing, which I did my best to heed, and I wouldn't want to lose those insights or have it any other way.

Once you have been down the rabbit hole and met the mad, bad, peculiar and brilliant aspects of another version of the world, and your Self in it, it is virtually impossible to lose the curiosity, creativity, rage, wonder and friends that helped you survive it all.

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