



## Culture eats strategy for breakfast...

...and lunch and dinner

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# What did you have for breakfast?





**But, if your breakfast  
looked like this...**

The conversation probably  
takes a different turn





# Culture?





Living in Japan since the late 90's and  
leading an independent market research  
agency there since 2003



# But what does 'culture' really mean?



## Meet Marika

An Aussie working in  
Japan & APAC  
research



Brought up in Australian  
**culture**

Living in Singapore  
(a **multicultural** country)

Likes exploring and  
understanding new **cultures**

Enjoys **cultural** events

Loves Melbourne's food  
**culture**



# And what do you associate with the term 'culture'?



# Coming to a non-textbook definition

Dark matter?

It exists everywhere, and is the defining influence on human behaviour, but it is often hidden...







***“Culture hides more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants...”***

*Edward T. Hall (1959)*





**We are surrounded by  
culture...**

**In the same way fish are  
surrounded by water**





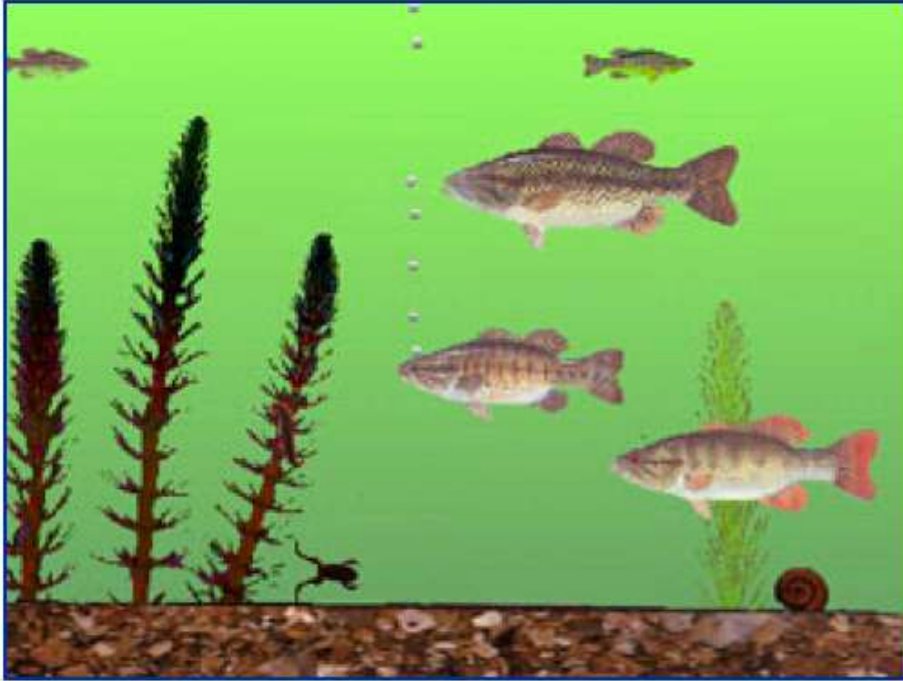


**As researchers, our questions and answers are always influenced by culture**

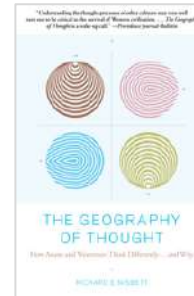
... And so is the fish



# The experiment: *'What do you see in this picture?'*



Can we even trust  
what we observe?





# We perfectly replicated the results with a similar picture in our own team in Tokyo

Australians plus Japanese who lived in Australia commented on the fish and what they were doing

Japanese colleagues described the field and/ or the relationships in that scene



# Thinking different?



Japanese tend more to:

Give more even weight to disparate sources of information – **gathering and integrating, rather than deducing and deleting**

Greater comfort with contradictions

Sometimes value the **‘reasonable’** or **‘received’** over what we might see as rational



# Different thoughts, different meanings



Japan provides a constant challenge to westerners' ability to observe and analyze

In quantitative research, we can't even assume that scales *mean* the same thing

Qualitative interpretation also has its challenges as people don't always say what they mean

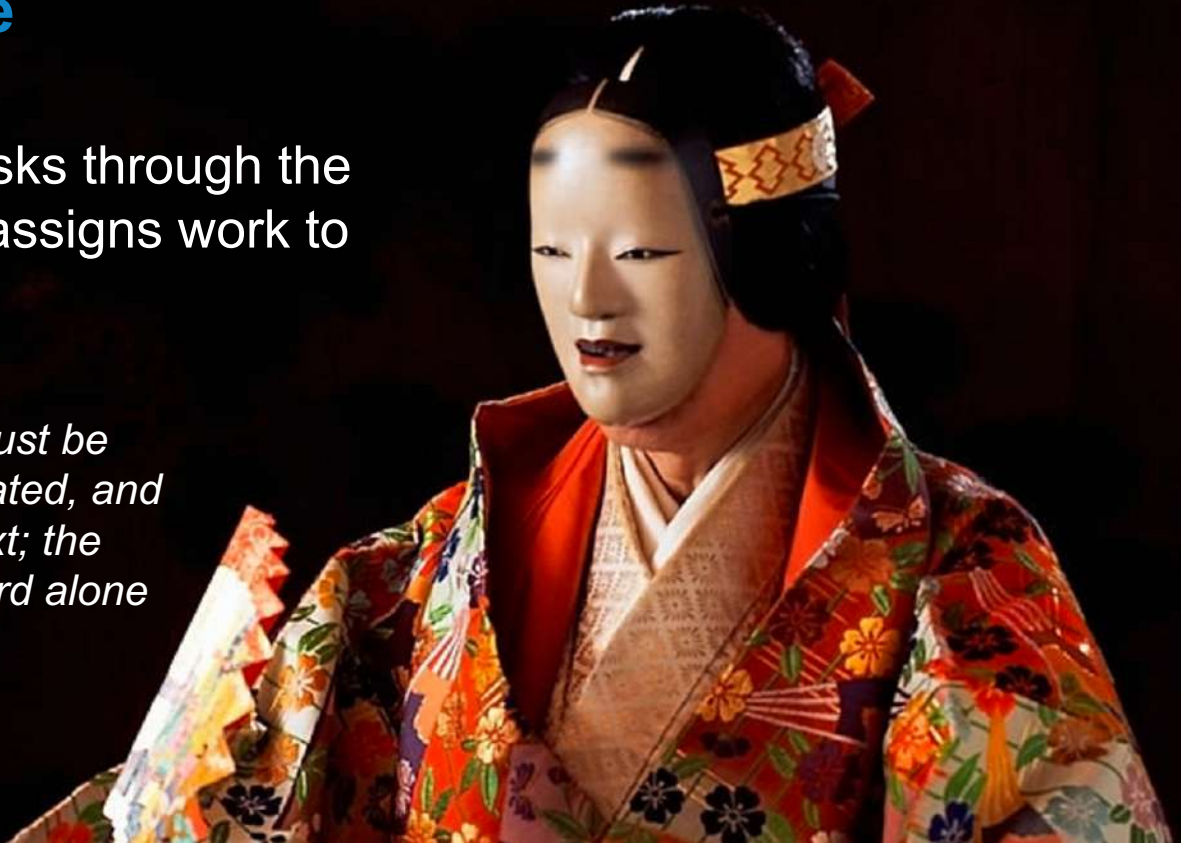


# The Noh Theatre

The actors wear masks through the performance which assigns work to the audience

*“Each note, each word must be savored, weighed, calculated, and then put again into context; the context and never the word alone creating the image.”*

Donald Richie





# We have built our agency approach on the idea of 'unmasking'



Giving the respondent a voice

'Unmask' where we need to

Team from within and without  
the culture



A photograph of two young men on a city street at night. The man on the left is wearing a black hoodie and a white mask with gold horns and a wide, toothy grin. He is looking down at a smartphone. The man on the right is wearing a grey hoodie and a white mask with a more subtle, smiling expression. He is looking towards the camera. In the background, there are blurred city lights and a sign that says "UTAYA".

**How we unmask**



# Stepping back



Recognizing the inherent worth and value in the conflicts and paradoxes that come when working across cultures

- Seeing, not judging
- Forget about what you *think* is important
- Refraining from persuasion



# Questioning everything

**Create space  
for doubt**



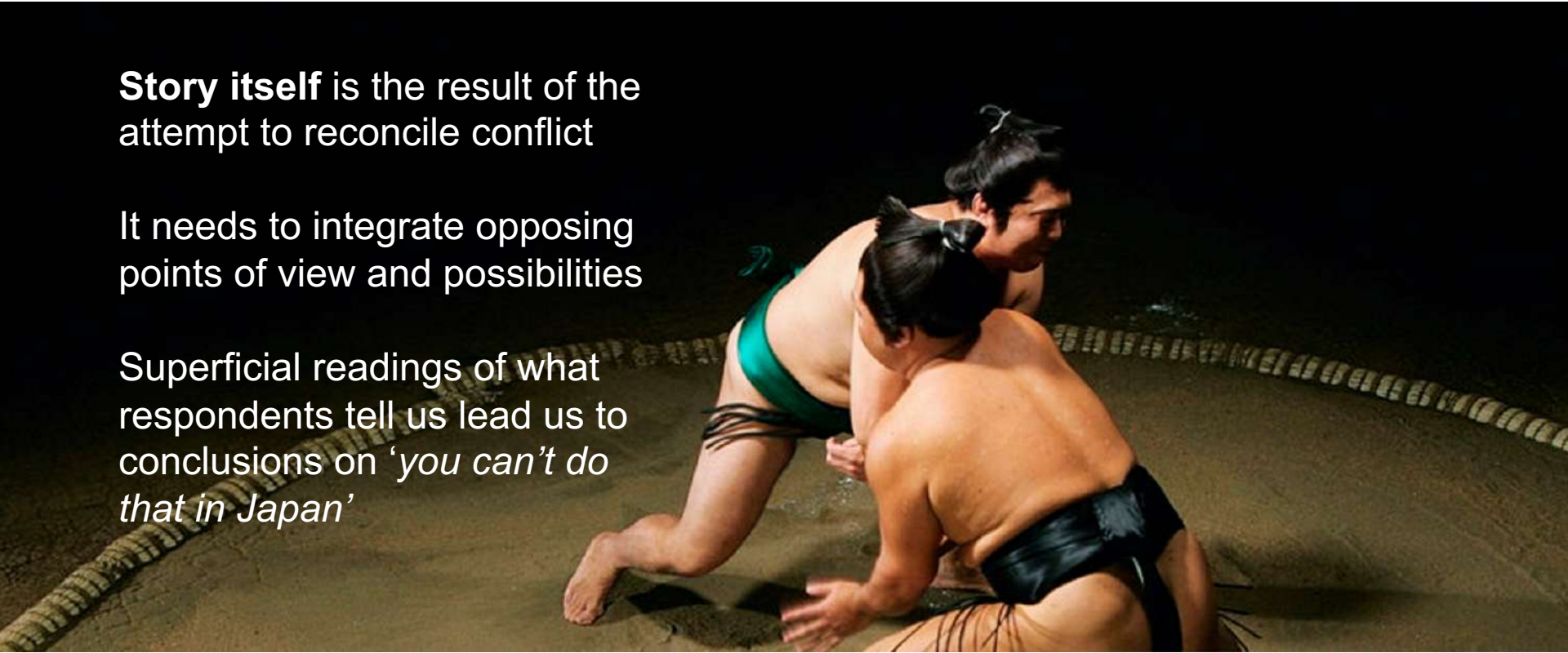


# Using conflict to tell the story

**Story itself** is the result of the attempt to reconcile conflict

It needs to integrate opposing points of view and possibilities

Superficial readings of what respondents tell us lead us to conclusions on *'you can't do that in Japan'*





# A story from the field



# Market entry for international brands



The world's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest consumer market by value for most categories, with a rapidly aging population

Skincare is well positioned to take advantage of the mega-trends in Japan

Culturally complicated category



# Our client, a quickly growing skincare brand from the US

... wanted to develop a winning strategy for entering the Japanese anti-ageing market





## But Japan's skincare consumers have strong biases



# A strongly developed “Japanese-ness” is fundamental to the culture and thinking of the Japanese



- Incomparably different from other people
- State of being is preferable to any other
- Non-verbal communication
- Language is inscrutable to foreigners
- Physiologically unique compared to foreigners



# So... Japanese skin is different



# Japan's sacred cow in skincare

*Foreigners can't understand Japanese skin*

Is it true?

True enough for our concept and brand platform to be rejected





# There appears to be a physical basis for the belief



- First skin layer is 1/3 thinner and following skin layers are deeper compared to Caucasian skin
- 20% higher oil content
- 'Foreign' products tend to be perceived to be stronger/ harsher

But what about the cultural perception, indeed the *responsibility*...?



# When culturally confronted, suspend judgement



Japanese believing themselves to be unique does not mean that the foreign brand cannot be accepted

You need to understand their beliefs

And you need to understand your own beliefs



# Compare our beliefs with the consumer's beliefs

## WESTERN



We're all waging  
a fight against  
ageing

Science as  
authority



Transformation

## JAPAN



Aging is  
something you  
work with

Tradition as  
authority

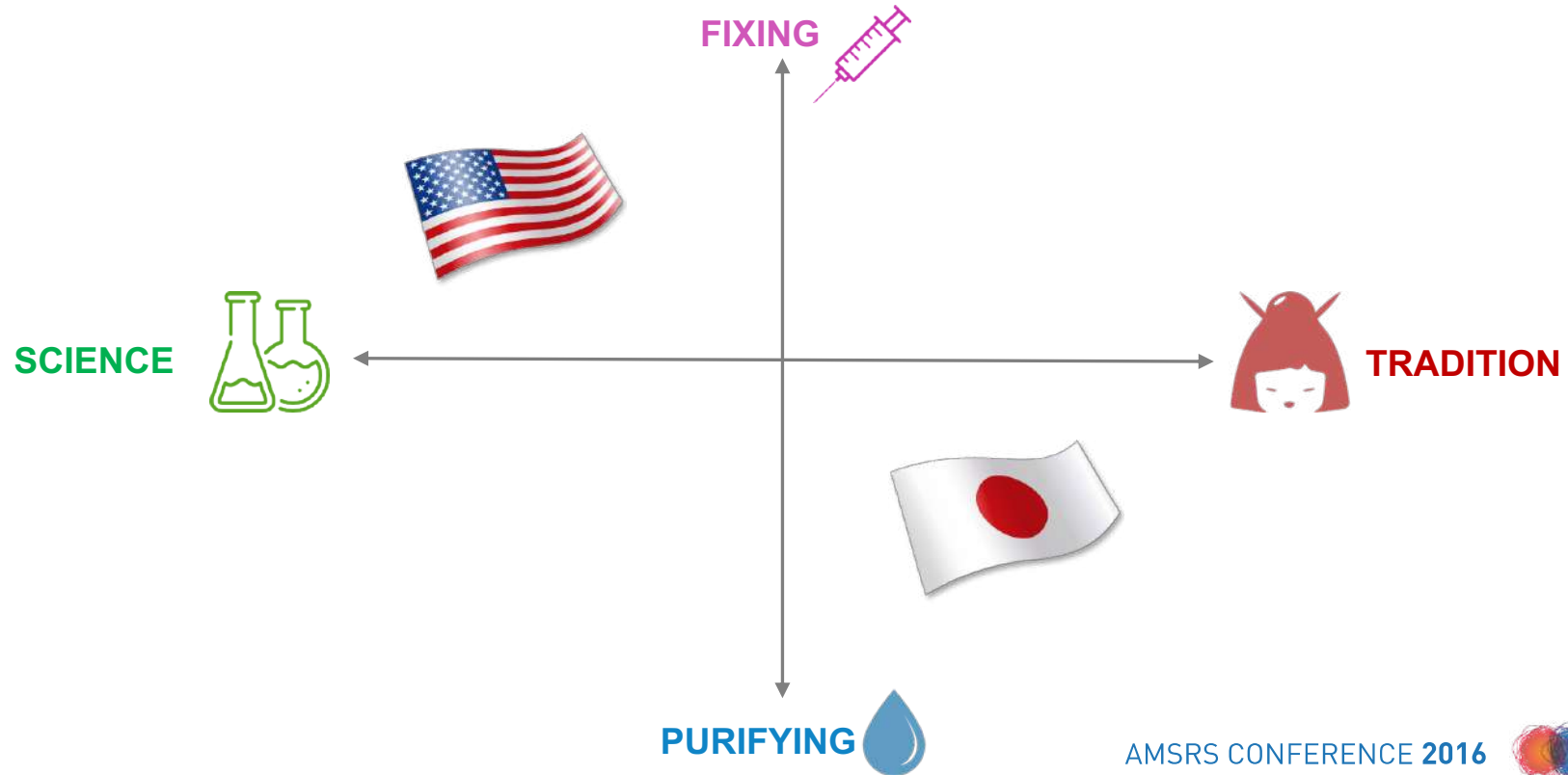


Purification



# We all want to look better

But we have different ideas on common sense in achieving that objective



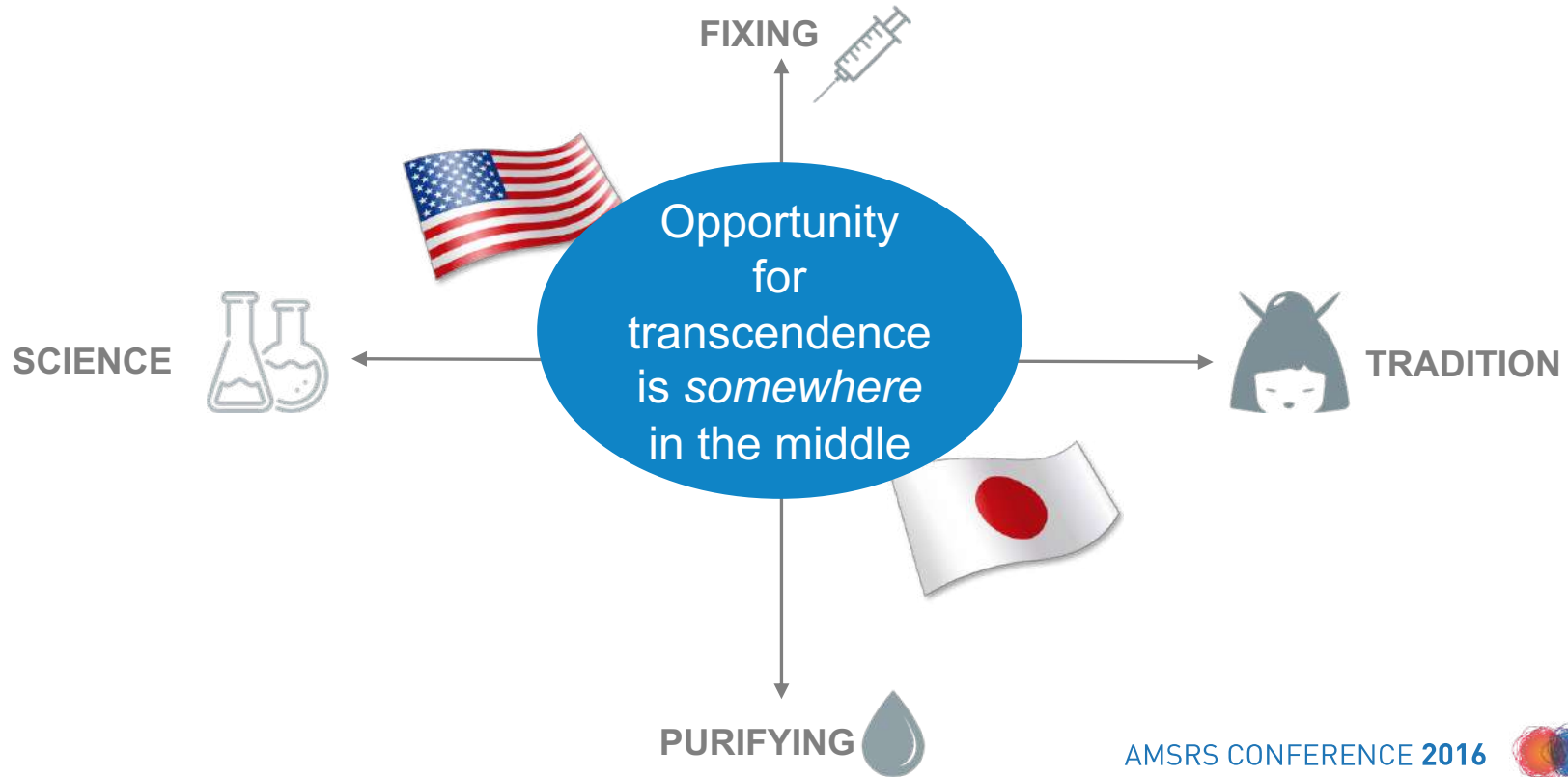


# Your differences define your opportunities

The opportunity lies in  
**transcending** the fact that  
our client is different and  
Japanese skin is different



# We all want to look younger



## Learning from success – SK-II



Japanese brand (owned by P&G)

Based on a scientific **discovery** of the anti-ageing benefits of an ingredient 'pitera' in sake yeast (brewery workers' hands always looked young)

'Fixes' but it does within a solid Japanese context of purity (rice)

A brand that travels well outside Japan

What would an American SK-II look like?





## The job of the researchers

We **can't** instantly fix a profound case of cultural misfit, or an inability to adapt

We **can** map the oppositions and identify the *productive* paradoxes

Workshop the resolution

Looking for innovative, disruptive opportunities that appreciate we are the same, but we are different







どうもありがとうございました！

Do-mo arigato - gozaimashita!





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