

Book review

Art therapy in Asia: To the bone or wrapped in silk

Edited by Debra Kalmanowitz, Jordan S. Potash and Siu Mei Chan

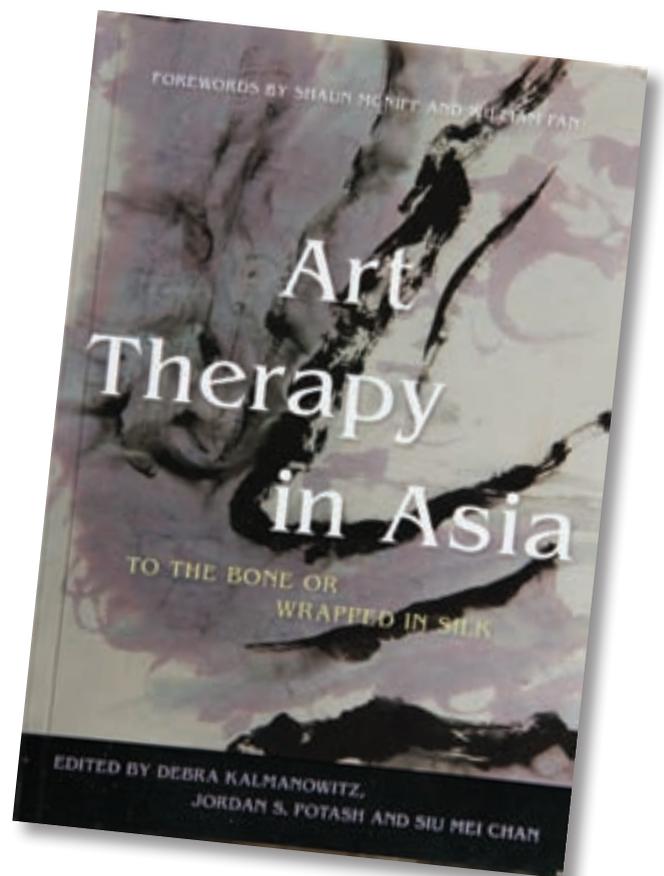
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Reviewed by Annette Coulter

This book challenges Western understandings of art therapy by examining how ideas from Eastern medicine, philosophy, spirituality and art are being integrated with Western ideas in Asian art therapy practice. The 22 chapters are edited by three art therapists North American-trained Jordan Potash, and British-trained Debra Kalmanowitz and Siu Mei Chan, the latter an art therapist from Hong Kong. For Australian, New Zealand and Singaporean arts therapists, the book offers an expanded view of the arts therapy profession in the Asian region.

The book's merits are celebrated by statements from prominent British and North American (Western) art therapists: Bobbi Stoll, Professor Diane Waller, Catherine Hyland Moon, Val Huet, Judith A. Rubin and Chris Wood. Two Forewords, written by Shaun McNiff and William Fan, representing the West and the East, discuss the ways in which Western notions of art therapy are translated into the Asian context. Fan, a Hong Kong psychiatrist, recalls a dream about three gurus and their personal influence on him in a creative interaction with symbolic fragments of paintings. The dream suggests references to the three editors and the book's creative potential. Fan questions the extent to which Asian tradition should be integrated into art therapy and appreciates that the book breaks new ground in Asian academic literature. McNiff's six-page Foreword is written from an informed position about art therapy's worldwide growth and development. McNiff challenges Western art therapy to consider the implications for



therapy of the domination of English language, values and beliefs, including individualism, versus more holistic Eastern notions. McNiff emphasises that cross-cultural considerations are important if art therapy is to expand as a discipline with global recognition.

In two introductory chapters, the editors provide an impressive literature review, offer a response to Ivy Fung's question "Is art therapy practice Chinese to the bone or is it just wrapped in silk?" (p.29) and provide an explanation for the themes found in the following six sections, thus preparing the

reader, particularly Western art therapists, for the theoretical, cultural and historic challenges that follow.

The six sections each contain three to four chapters. 'Part 1: Views of health' raises considerations about art therapy in relation to traditional medicines; 'Part 2: Influence of collectivism' examines how collectivist values inform art therapy practice. 'Part 3: Integration of spirituality' recognises the role of spirituality in Asian culture, focusing on art therapy practice; 'Part 4: Role of art traditions' shows how traditional art processes and history have the potential to inform contemporary therapeutic uses of art; 'Part 5: Models of art therapy' examines art therapy as a discipline in an Asian context; and 'Part 6: Looking at contemporary Asia' is about the application of art therapy in disaster relief, psychological survival and professional identity.

It is hard to convey the depth and richness, wide variety and high quality of all the various chapters, but some impress because they are emotionally inspiring or professionally challenging. Chua's 'Art therapy inspired by Buddhism and Pappaport', Ikemi and Miyake's 'Focusing-oriented art therapy and experiential collage work: History and development in Japan' takes art therapy into a consideration of the spiritual and healing aspects of a therapist's personal belief system. Kan's 'Landscapes of the mind' poetically describes the impact of working with Chinese brush strokes throughout her life as an artist and bringing this into a personal expressive mode of work. In the same section, Herbert's account of 'The integration of arts therapy and traditional Cambodian arts and rituals in recovery from political-societal trauma' is well-researched, challenging and thought-provoking. In 'Models of art therapy', Lu presents extensive research on 'Affective color symbolism and markers cosplay: standardized procedure for clinical assessment', inspiring interest in her earlier research. Three of the four references that Lu lists from her previous research are written in Chinese and one in English, allowing a wide range of readers access to her work and also raising questions

about the sourcing and cross-translation of texts from different countries, as art therapy becomes increasingly globalised. In the same section, Chang's chapter on 'Integrating person-centered expressive arts with Chinese metaphor' describes how, in Chinese metaphor, the five elements of nature, water, wood, fire, earth and metal are linked to an emotion, which in turn affects a particular part of the body. With this in mind, the symbolic healing aspects of the mandala are integrated into a person-centred approach that has a quite different emphasis from Western texts on the same subject. This is relevant to the question that Fan raises in his Foreword, "How much should the native Asian cultures be integrated into art therapy"? (p.23).

Toward the end of the book, two chapters are particularly emotionally challenging. Alfonso and Byers' 'Art therapy and disaster relief in the Philippines' describes the humanitarian application of therapeutic art activity when extremely distressing circumstances occur on a large scale. Tan's 'Surviving shame: Engaging art therapy with trafficked survivors in South East Asia', about the illegal trafficking of human beings, touches on similar issues to those raised for me when, as an art therapy educator working in Singapore, I was involved in establishing a difficult clinical student placement in a Singaporean maid's refuge.

Although it is disappointing that the establishment of the first two Masters in Art Therapy training courses in Asia and Southeast Asia (Coulter, 2006; Lu, 2006) are not discussed in this book, much of the content is relevant to future considerations about art therapy education in Asia and the world outside Europe and North America (Potash, Bardot & Ho, 2012). The editors acknowledge the limited availability of translated texts as well as a number of potential contributors for future texts. There is an implied hope that this is the first of a number of such publications that look at the discipline of art therapy in new and diverse contexts.

The book will be useful for any art therapist practicing in countries where art therapy is

not well known or where it is being applied with related disciplines. The discussion of the potential diversity of clinical applications of art therapy should be of interest to agencies or organisations that are considering establishing an art therapy service in their geographic locality, particularly where it was previously thought that art therapy might not be feasible.

This text generates a fresh aliveness and an exciting vitality, as art therapy steps outside what has been known and understood within the current field of practice and explores applications and practices in areas and fields that are not so well known, defined or precisely understood. In this way, the book challenges what is known of art therapy up until now and emphasises the need for cross-cultural considerations, if art therapy is to expand into a worldwide discipline with global recognition and appreciation. As William Fan concludes, “this book should be on the shelves of everyone interested in art and/or healing” (p.23). It is a book of impressive merit and an important publication for Australian and New Zealand art therapy where, as in Asia, the clinical applications of the arts therapies are currently being integrated into the unique cultures of ‘down under’.

References

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