I am back after two long journeys to India, regional and then remote Australia. I return with a question on my mind:

**What might Indian and Chinese designers learn about sustainability from Aboriginal natural dyers and weavers?**

This past June and July as part of the Swinburne’s Living Blue Oz project, I co-hosted 12 Chinese, three Indian, and five Melbourne-based designers, including myself, for a two-week cultural exchange focused on Aboriginal sustainability through natural dyeing and weaving.

We now have had the time to reflect on our experiences. Subrata Bhowmick, one of India’s most awarded designers, provide the answer to my question in a recent telephone discussion:

**Be rooted! It is the total experience of being rooted. And what was important is the rooted person, who was the medium. She gave us direction but not instruction. So then we could take our own paths.**

Being rooted is different from being connected or even grounded. As we know from our mobile phones, connectivity can be fleeting. Grounding is only at surface layers. Being rooted goes as deep in the earth as above in the sky, providing greater stability.

Thus when it comes to natural dyeing and weaving among Aboriginal communities on the Murray River in Albury-Wodonga and on the Waterhouse River in Beswick, being rooted is both literal and figurative. Each community provides important lessons on how both Indian and China designers can help their peoples better root themselves to land and culture, especially given the rapid urbanisation in both countries.

**Bark dyes, sweetgrass, and rootedness on the Murray River**
The central message of the Indigenous bush dyeing and weaving workshop held at the Albury City Council Library Museum is that one can re-root his or herself to culture and Country.

Artist Dr. Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta) showed the group a jar full of dark liquid and ironbark strips that she had prepared weeks before from the trees near her home on the river. The ironbark dye was the painting medium for the first two days of the workshop. Treahna guided us to paint from a sense of place. We drew inspiration from our walks along the Murray River.
The opportunity to walk in the fresh air was noted by the Chinese and Indian guests, whose cities of Beijing and Ahmedabad rank as some the highest in air pollution. As a Chinese student said:

"The air here is so pure."

So it is not just the rapid changes in society that creates a sense of uprootedness in China and India, but also the inability to walk outside because of pollution. The group drew strength from the stories of the rebuilding and reinterpretation of Indigenous cultural practices, represented through weavings made from materials along the Murray River.

Chinese and Indian guests along the Murray River in Albury, NSW. Elizabeth Tunstall

In his Welcome to Country, Wiradjuri Elder Darren Wighton explained the thousands of years Indigenous habitation on the Murray River, which in the local Wiradjuri language is called Millewa. He described the woven fish traps that according to Uncle Ken Murray, who worked with him on the Maya fish trap woven in steel, in a The Border Mail article:

"They were made so the little fish could escape while keeping the big ones to feed your family, so that way we still looked after the rivers."

Dr. Treahna Hamm’s weavings represented her journey to recover her ancestors and heritage as a member of the Stolen Generations. The smell of fresh sweetgrass that she had gathered from the River and steeped in water infused the workshop room.

Her weavings of the Murray cod, her long neck turtle totem, various containers and mats helped guide the Chinese and Australian participants, in particular, to consider how to reconnect with some of their cultural practices that have been lost due to rapid development and urbanisation.

We collectively wove contemporary inspired items such as bags and vases, but we also wove more traditional items such as snakes, baskets, and shading hats.
Root dyes, pandanus leaves, and rootedness on the Waterhouse River

If the lesson of the Murray River Indigenous experience was re-rooting oneself, the lesson of the Waterhouse River Indigenous experience in Beswick is how to maintain one’s rootedness. Organised by the Djilpin Arts Centre, the group was to learn a different type of Indigenous bush dyeing and weaving in Northern Territory.

Our caravan of five four-wheel drive vehicles followed the single tarmac road past the four empty whisky bottles on top of an old anthill. The bottles marked the area where the Aunties would find the tree roots to make the purple, black, and brown bush dyes for the pandanus weavings.

We walked easily through the grasslands because the community’s controlled burning kept the grass sparse and
The Australians in the group had read articles about Indigenous fire management practices for class, but to see the reality was striking. The historical depth of these practices was evident from the lack of large trees, except near the watering holes, and the ombre of black to red anthills.

The elders’ knowledge of the land runs deep. The Aunties only selected the pandanus leaves from trees that completed their six weeks regrowth. They decided to not get the roots for the yellow dyes because the best area was 40 km away. They pointed out the buffalo tracks and warned us about the crocodiles. Yet, this knowledge is not reflected in the market prices for the weavings that result from it.

![Professors Hang Hai and He Yang with pandanus nut. Elizabeth Tunstall](image)

The Beswick community is one rooted in Country, languages, and ceremony while accessing Telstra phone and internet, satellite TV, soft ice cream from a truck, a general store, and nursery. Here lies the Aboriginal lesson is for India, where old ways of knowing about the land still exist simultaneously with all the high technologies of contemporary life.

Maybe because the pace of life was slower in Beswick, we experienced more of the environment. Our weavings, well just us women’s weavings as the men were excluded from the activity, evoked the tall grasses and anthills from our bush walks.

The Indian and Chinese participants consider their experiences of the different Aboriginal models of rootedness life-changing, in terms of finding like-hearted people in Australia.

*The Living Blue Oz project was sponsored by a 2014 Australia China Council Grant and is part of the larger Living Blue project, for which I have travelled to India and, in two weeks, will travel to China to learn about*