



# The Application of Painting in the Intervention of Children's Psychological Issues in China: A Narrative Review

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## Abstract

This article examines the practices, status, evolution and current challenges of painting therapy, in child psychological interventions in China. Empirical evidence shows that painting therapy significantly reduces symptoms of anxiety, anger, and schizophrenia, lowers depression scores, and enhances life satisfaction. Randomized controlled trials indicate improvements in emotional disorders, ADHD, and social adaptability. Qualitative research highlights enhanced emotional recognition and self-expression abilities in children with social disorders and ASD. Although painting therapy has made some progress in China, it faces challenges such as shortage of professional talents and lack of standardization. It is recommended to strengthen professional training, improve certification systems, interdisciplinary cooperation and the application of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality. This study underscores the potential for art therapy to become a more accessible and impactful tool in child psychology, benefiting not only China but also contributing to global mental health practices.

**Keywords:** Art therapy; Painting; Children; Psychological issues; China

## Introduction

Individuals often exhibit lower psychological defenses towards painting, inadvertently projecting their deep-seated motives, emotions, anxieties, conflicts, values, and desires into their artworks (1). Art therapy, especially painting, as a non-verbal form of psychological intervention, is increasingly recognized globally due to its intuitive, visual, and creative characteristics. Painting therapy, well-adapted across cultures and particularly accessible to children, has played a significant role in the intervention of child psychological issues (2-5).

Painting and other artistic activities in China since the beginning of its birth is not a pure pastime and entertainment, it is always associated with solving life problems. This connection is exemplified by ancient practices like cave paintings and ritual activities, the use of meditation for self-transcendence in the philosophical text "Zhuangzi", and Emperor Yang of Sui's therapeutic engagement with painting. These instances provide early evidence of art therapy's role in Chinese history (6). In times where medical knowledge was scarce, ancient Chinese individuals often turned to music,



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dance, and painting as forms of psychological therapy, instrumental in both maintaining wellness and treating ailments. In recent years, painting therapy has been extensively applied in the intervention of child psychological disorders in China, such as anxiety, depression, and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). This approach has been instrumental in uncovering the inner world of children and their underlying psychological issues (7, 8).

Despite these advancements, the current status, issues, and challenges of painting therapy in the realm of child psychological intervention in China warrant further exploration. This article review related research, focusing on empirical studies of painting therapy in the intervention of child psychological issues in China. It delves into the operational models, existing problems, challenges faced, and future prospects.

### *Practices, status and role in Addressing Child Psychological Issues in China*

#### *Examples of the application of painting*

Painting therapy, as a non-verbal tool for expression and communication, has played a significant role in addressing a variety of psychological issues in Chinese children, including anxiety, depression, autism, and post-traumatic psychological recovery. In interventions for childhood anxiety and depression, painting therapy has been proven to facilitate the expression of difficult-to-verbalize emotions and promote the development of emotional regulation capabilities. It enhances self-expression and a sense of inner strength, thereby improving conditions of anxiety or depression (9-11). In interventions for ASD, painting therapy is utilized as a communication tool to enhance the social interaction skills, emotional cognition, expressive abilities, and social engagement of affected children (12). In addressing the psychological recovery of children experienced trauma, the non-verbal nature of painting therapy serves as an effective means, helping children process traumatic memories, alleviate symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and foster the development of psychological resilience (13, 14). Painting therapy also shows practical value in resolving learning difficulties and behavioral issues

in children, enhancing self-efficacy, and aiding in the improvement of learning strategies and difficulties (15).

### *The status and role of painting therapy in China*

The role and status of painting therapy in the child psychological counseling and treatment system in China have been increasingly recognized. Numerous universities and professional institutions have started offering systematic training courses. Initiatives like the series of seminars and training classes organized by the China Art Therapy Association have further propelled the professional development and application level of painting therapy (16-18). Painting therapy also plays a pivotal role in group therapy and family system interventions. It transcends age and language barriers, allowing children to express their feelings more naturally, thereby deepening therapists' understanding and grasp of the children's inner worlds (19-21).

Furthermore, painting therapy is being effectively utilized in various domains and settings in China, such as schools, special education and rehabilitation institutions, medical facilities, and community mental health centers (12, 18). Painting therapy has become an integral part of school-based psychological counseling in China. An increasing number of mental health education professionals are integrating it into their routine counseling activities to meet the diverse psychological needs of children (15).

### *Empirical Research and Key Factor*

#### *Empirical Research on the Effects of Painting*

In quantitative research, clinical studies have found that after undergoing painting therapy, children exhibited a significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety, anger, and schizophrenia, with these improvements being statistically significant (20, 22). Quantitative studies also confirm that the application of painting therapy in depressed children effectively lowers depression scores and enhances life satisfaction (23). Randomized controlled trials and pre-post experimental results show that painting therapy significantly reduces the severity of symptoms in children with emotional disorders, depression, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD), while improving their social adaptability and learning efficiency (7, 23-27).

In qualitative research, content analysis methods have explored how painting therapy assists children with social disorders in expressing their internal emotional world, effectively promoting the development of emotional recognition and self-expression abilities (28). Methods of in-depth interviews and case analyses have documented the process of applying painting therapy to children with ASD, noting improvements not only in communication skills but also in emotional connections and social interaction desires (29, 30). Observation and diary methods recorded the therapeutic process of art therapy, revealing the unique value of painting as a non-verbal tool in addressing social disorders, autism, trauma memories, and emotional regulation (13, 31, 32).

A series of quantitative and qualitative empirical studies have verified the significant effect of painting therapy in the intervention of Chinese children with psychological problems.

### ***Key Factors Influencing the Efficacy of Painting Therapy***

The factors influencing the efficacy of painting therapy in intervening in child psychological issues in China are multifaceted and complex (18,20,31-33).

Firstly, the professional capability of the therapist is crucial. The qualifications, training level, professional background, and extensive clinical experience of the therapist directly impact the intervention's effectiveness. Therapists with higher professional expertise are more adept at sensitively capturing the psychological messages conveyed in children's artwork and, based on this, developing suitable intervention strategies, thereby enhancing the therapy's effectiveness (33).

Secondly, individual differences play a significant role in the therapy's success. Factors such as the child's age, gender, cognitive developmental stage, artistic talent, cultural background, and family environment affect their receptiveness to and response toward painting therapy. Younger children tend to adapt to and respond quicker in painting therapy compared to older children (31).

Additionally, the role of the family support system cannot be overlooked. Children who receive positive support and are involved in the therapy process within their family environment show faster progress and more sustained effects in painting therapy compared to those lacking family support (20).

Furthermore, the creation of a therapeutic environment and the personalization of therapy methods are also considered key determinants of the efficacy of painting therapy. Creating a safe and comfortable painting environment for children, along with designing personalized plans that cater to their interests and needs, can enhance their engagement and overall therapy outcomes (32).

Painting therapy has significant application value and efficacy in addressing child psychological issues in China. However, to further enhance its practical effectiveness, future research should focus more on strengthening therapist training, understanding the mechanisms behind individual differences, constructing comprehensive family collaboration models, and innovating personalized therapy approaches.

### ***General procedures and innovative therapies with Chinese cultural characteristics***

#### ***Current Mainstream painting Intervention Techniques and Procedures***

Painting therapy in China widely employs various internationally recognized intervention techniques in child psychological interventions, adapting and innovating them to align with local cultural characteristics. Firstly, the most common technique is free drawing, which allows children to create unrestrictedly, reflecting their inner world (3). Secondly, projective drawing tests such as the House-Tree-Person test are utilized to assess children's cognitive development and emotional states (10, 34).

In terms of operational procedures, the general approach follows stages of assessment, guidance, creation, interpretation, and feedback. For example, the process often begins with a basic psychological assessment of the child, followed by setting an appropriate drawing theme or task. Children

are encouraged to express freely. During this process, their behavioral responses and artwork details are observed and recorded. Finally, the content of the drawing is analyzed to provide intervention guidance (5, 35).

### *Innovative painting therapy with Chinese cultural characteristics*

Cultural factors in China play a significant role in painting therapy, with Chinese experts developing several painting therapy models tailored to the characteristics and needs of Chinese adolescents. Throughout history, from the transcendence of self through meditation in "Zhuangzi" to Emperor Yang of Sui's use of painting for healing, traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy, and the cultural environment have provided a rich foundation for the localization of art therapy (36-38). The integration of traditional Chinese aesthetic and philosophical concepts with painting therapy, such as the principles of "the intent precedes the brush" and "the unity of form and spirit," can guide the therapeutic process to focus on the wholeness and dynamic changes of adolescents (16, 38, 39). Chinese culture emphasizes the interaction between family, society, and the individual, impacting the practical application of painting therapy. Therapists need to understand the characteristics of Chinese culture to better comprehend the family and social backgrounds of adolescents, thereby offering more effective therapy (38, 40).

Moreover, China's education system and societal expectations also affect the psychological issues of adolescents. Adolescents may face pressures from both school and family, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues. Painting therapy can help adolescents cope with these pressures, find outlets for emotional expression, and enhance psychological resilience. By integrating painting therapy with traditional Chinese art forms such as ink painting and papercutting, and using these mediums to bear and transform negative emotions, a youth psychological intervention model with Chinese characteristics is formed. Additionally, the interaction between art therapy and

Chinese family education concepts emphasizes respecting and utilizing the strength of the family in implementing art therapy, aiming for the comprehensive growth of adolescent mental health (19, 37, 40).

## Discussion

### *Challenges and Issues*

Despite the widespread application and positive reception of painting therapy in child psychological interventions, the practice currently faces significant challenges in China (9, 13, 16, 18, 33). Firstly, a shortage of professional talent is a major factor hindering the field's development. Art therapy education in China started relatively late, and a comprehensive training system for professional art therapists is yet to be established, leading to a pronounced supply-demand discrepancy. Secondly, the lack of adequate policy support and industry standards results in a low degree of standardization and regulation, leading to uneven training, certification, and practice levels among therapists. Additionally, public awareness and acceptance of art therapy are limited, often misunderstood as only being applicable to children or special groups. The recognition and acceptance of art therapy by parents and society need to be enhanced, especially under the traditional exam-oriented education system and conventional beliefs, which tend to affect the acceptance of non-traditional therapeutic methods. Moreover, research and empirical support for art therapy in China are limited, with a lack of in-depth localized case studies and theoretical development. Finally, the competitive education and examination system in China may expose children to more academic pressure from schools and families than in other countries, becoming a significant cause of psychological issues such as anxiety and depression among children. This is a challenge that requires attention and resolution from the entire society.

### *New technologies and new trends*

With the rapid advancements in technology, new technologies are gradually being integrated into

the field of art therapy, leading to new developmental trends (41-45).

### ***Digital tools***

Digital tools such as drawing software, interactive websites and social networks, and interactive tablets provide children with more convenient and diverse creative platforms. They also facilitate the collection and analysis of data, aiding in the design of personalized therapy plans (12, 42, 46-50).

### ***Virtual Reality (VR)***

VR technology demonstrates significant potential in child psychological therapy. By creating simulated environments, VR offers a safe and immersive experience for children, effectively addressing psychological issues like anxiety and fear. Additionally, VR can assist children with autism in improving their social skills and emotional management. However, the implementation of VR therapy still requires professional guidance, and attention must be paid to its long-term effects and potential impacts (41, 46, 51, 52).

### ***Artificial Intelligence (AI) Technology in Art Therapy***

AI painting technology enables children to generate artworks through text descriptions, simple brush strokes, and voice recognition, fostering emotional expression and transforming inexpressible emotions into visual images. This enhances self-esteem and achievement, promoting self-understanding and emotional release. AI painting also offers visual feedback and goal setting in therapy, aiding therapists and patients in tracking progress and unlocking potential (46, 53, 54).

AI virtual psychological counseling and therapy allow emotional expression through painting and music, with AI analyzing creations to provide insights for counseling, diagnosis, and treatment (55, 56). AI-assisted diagnostic systems employ deep learning to interpret symbols and colors in children's drawings, improving recognition accuracy and efficiency (48, 57).

AI chatbots are already being used in art therapy processes, assisting children in engaging in painting activities through human-machine interaction,

thereby promoting their mental health (46, 47, 58). Emerging technologies like ChatGPT and Gemini, alongside generative AIs like Pika and Runway, revolutionize painting and visual art therapy, facilitate a deeper understanding of patients' emotional and psychological states. This integration allows for a more nuanced and individualized approach to therapy, catering to the specific needs and conditions of each patient.

### ***Prospects for Future Research and Practice Development***

Art therapy in the United States and Europe, as a mature psychological treatment method, already possesses a well-established education system, professional certification, and ethical standards. Compared to the United States and Europe, art therapy in China exhibits gaps in several areas. In the face of these challenges and opportunities, future research and practice development should focus on the following aspects: intensifying the training of professional talent, accelerating the construction of certification systems and standard setting, encouraging the application of multidisciplinary approaches especially new technologies like AI, enhancing government and policy support, and increasing recognition and support from society and the public. A key emphasis should be on aligning certification and standards with international norms.

### ***Conclusion***

This review thoroughly examines the practices, situation and current challenges faced by painting therapy, in addressing child psychological issues in china. Art therapy, especially painting therapy, emerges as a promising child psychology intervention tool in China, despite facing professional shortages, training standardization, and ethical practice issues. Public and policy engagement is essential for raising awareness and implementing art therapy in educational and family contexts. By addressing these challenges and leveraging modern technologies such as AI and VR, art therapy will revolutionize child psychological intervention,

making it more accessible and impactful. The paper offers valuable insights that extend beyond the borders of China, making it highly relevant and beneficial for an international reader. And its findings and recommendations hold significant implications for global mental health practices.

## Journalism Ethics considerations

Ethical issues (Including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc.) have been completely observed by the authors.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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