



Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura
and Elly Yazdanpanah

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

JAPAN

CULTIVATING CHILDREN'S SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH SELF-PORTRAITS BASED ON DEWEY'S THEORY OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In Chinese education, students are sometimes expected to care more about group honor and considering everyone's feelings than about expressing themselves, making expressing and exploring themselves difficult. Goal 4 of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, 'Quality Education for All', aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations 2015). Getting to know oneself should be an integral part of lifelong learning. This study developed a new educational approach using Chinese painting for children's self-expression based on Dewey's educational ideas to advance the goal of 'Quality Education for All'. This development was carried out through a self-portrait project with fifth-grade children in China. Through creating a self-portrait, the children re-examined and generated a new understanding of themselves.

KEYWORDS

elementary school art education, self-expression, Chinese painting, self-portrait, diversity, Chinese art education

THE NEED FOR SELF-EXPRESSION FOR 'QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL' AND CHINESE PAINTING IN ART EDUCATION

Self-expression is a way of knowing oneself and a way of learning that fosters self-expression. It has a lifelong impact and it is an approach I believe should be provided in elementary schools. The materials for Chinese painting are highly accessible to all children, and Chinese painting has potential for advancing Goal 4 of the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 'Quality Education for All'.

A comparison of the qualities of painting in the East and those of painting the West shows that Western painting uses more bright and powerful colors, while Eastern painting uses lighter and quieter colors. Historically, many Western painters spent their lives painting a large number of self-portraits to express themselves, whereas in China, few painters painted self-portraits. For example, the self-portraits of Rembrandt documented the state of his life from his teenage years until his death. Other prominent Western painters, such as da Vinci, Van Gogh, and Munch, also created self-portraits, and regarded doing so as an important part of their artistic work. However, as the records of self-portraits in Chinese art history indicate, a self-portrait was treated as a type of gift from painters to emperors, to powerful people, and to religious figures. Many philosophical thoughts are represented in Chinese painting, which is not precisely bound by appearance, but rather, is more focused on the resemblance of objects and landscapes created through only a small number of strokes. Because of this, each stroke is focused on reflection and self-examination.

This stylistic difference may be due to the influence of a patriarchal society dominated by Confucianism for the past 5,000 years, a society in which, for a long time, people of lower seniority were expected to be unconditionally subservient to those of higher seniority. Because of this, in ancient China, people repressed their emotions and personalities.

Self-expression is the expression of one's feelings, thoughts, or ideas, particularly through writing, art, music, or dance. It refers to externalizing what is inside oneself in an outer form. Self-expression values are part of a

core dimension in the modernization process (Inglehart 1997), and include social toleration, life satisfaction, public expression, and aspiration for liberty. While painting, people subconsciously incorporate emotions and perceptions of the world into their artwork; therefore, the artwork unconsciously reflects their understandings and expectations.

I believe that Chinese painting of a self-portrait has educational value that is rarely found in Western painting. One element of this value is that it contains many implicit thoughts. It is often said in retrospect that Westerners, with their maritime civilizations, were passionate and extroverted, seeking excitement and adventure and persistently entering unexplored territory. Similar to the spires in Gothic architecture, they strove to reach upward and thus bring themselves closer to heaven. In contrast, the Orientals, with their agrarian civilizations, were more introverted, pursuing a stable life, examining their relationship with their surroundings, and striving to reach a state of 'Golden Mean'. A close examination of the Forbidden City reveals a massive courtyard, square, symmetrical, and balanced, constantly maintaining its own stable structure. By extension, mediums such as oil painting focuses on the rational expression of an object, while Chinese painting focuses more on the expression of mood and emotion. Moreover, in Chinese paintings, it is highly important to consider the amount of blank space to leave, which contributes to the aesthetics of such paintings. This is not simply blank space; it reflects the concept of balancing a painting. It is a composition method that expresses the mood of the image in a way that has no actual physical appearance and expresses the imagery as if 'there is an end to the words but not to their message', as depicted in a poem by the Chinese poet Yu Yan of the Southern Song Dynasty. Although Chinese painting uses black ink, exceptional care is taken regarding the whitespace, and the 'black and white' in such paintings embodies the meaning of illusion and reality, light and shade, and complexity and simplicity. This is true of leaving blank space while painting, but it is also the case when one interacts with people. An ancient saying, 'The moon waxes only to wane, water brims only to overflow', reflects this, and the Analects of Confucius include a similar saying, 'Too far is as bad as not enough'. This concept is similar to leaving blank space, that is, there are things that do not require further pursuit; just the right amount is ideal.

These implicit thoughts are difficult to express in oil paintings. In my view, we can derive the essence of such thoughts and transform it into lines, ink, and colors only in Chinese paintings. These thoughts are also suitable for transformation into reflection on oneself: 'What kind of a person I am? What do I aspire to become? How am I related to others?' However, in current Chinese art education, Chinese painting is used for the purpose of observing nature, recording life, or dedicating one's art to one's teachers or parents but never for self-expression.

Self-expression that is a way of knowing oneself is essential to the advancement of Goal 4 of the SDGs, 'Quality Education for All'. The quality of Chinese art education can be improved by transforming the approach to teaching and learning Chinese painting in schools. From this perspective, I designed a self-portrait project for fifth graders using Chinese painting in which Chinese children can focus more on the inner self and reflect on themselves in the process of creating a self-portrait.

SELF-PORTRAIT PROJECT BASED ON DEWEY'S THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION

Considering the current situation in China, this study aimed to develop a new educational approach of Chinese painting for children's self-expression. I developed this approach based on the educational thoughts of an American philosopher, John Dewey. My approach is carried out through a self-portrait project in which children can discover and examine themselves while being instructed in Chinese painting.

Dewey argued that rather than providing children something to learn, they should 'learn from experience' (Dewey 1916: 140). At the same time, he pointed out that both bodily activity and the perception of meaning should be included in the experience, which should not be forcibly divided. He also advocated the importance of cultivating sensitivity, observation, and aesthetic ability, which are generated and formed from children's experiences. He emphasized the importance of learning in connection with daily life activities and with self-expression through problem-solving rather than memory-based learning.

The self-portrait project I designed was composed of three-hour classes for fifth graders in China. Forty-one children in D Elementary School in Z City (location names are masked) participated in the project in June 2021. In this project, the primary importance was placed on the children's self-expression based on their own thinking and judgments developed through their own experiences rather than on the teacher's presentation of ideas. The second important aspect was that the teacher interfered as little as possible in the process of children's creation of self-portraits, thus allowing children to use materials more freely and express themselves. I conducted this project as follows:

FIRST STAGE (1 HOUR)

1. Introduce, compare, and appreciate self-portraits both from China and from Western countries.
2. Help children understand the characteristics of different styles of self-portraits and develop a new understanding of self-portraits through comparing and appreciating self-portraits from China and Western countries.

SECOND STAGE (1 HOUR)

1. Introduce ink-painted self-portraits and the Chinese painter Qi Baishi to show that a self-portrait does not have to resemble reality.
2. Have children express feelings and thoughts with ink paints while exercising basic techniques.
3. Help children think about what kind of person they are and draw a self-portrait using an ink brush and paint.

THIRD STAGE (1 HOUR)

1. Draw self-portraits while considering the elements that constitute the self-portrait, such as figure, face, clothes, surroundings, and colors.
2. Have children complete their self-portraits.
3. Experience mutual appreciation of the completed self-portraits.

While implementing this project, I conducted action research to determine its effectiveness. I administered pre- and post-questionnaires to the participating children to gain information regarding the effectiveness of the project. The items in the questionnaires included the following: 'In the art class, I can recreate images from my memory'; 'In the art class, I can see the merits of others' work'; 'In the art class, I can express the emotions and stories that I want to convey'; 'In the art class, I can feel satisfied with my own work'; and 'In the art class, I can have fun'.

Four choices were provided for each item, and the scores 4, 3, 2, and 1 were allotted to a respective choice: 4 to 'Precisely applicable', 3 to 'Somewhat applicable', 2 to 'Not really applicable', and 1 to 'Not at all applicable'. I calculated the mean scores obtained from the pre- and post-questionnaires and compared them to gain information regarding the educational effects of the project. In addition, I analysed the children's drawings and written documents produced through the project for the purpose of extracting information to understand their learning process for self-expression.

RESULTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Figure 1 shows the mean scores of the pre- and post-questionnaires. The overall mean scores were 3.44 for the pre-questionnaire and 3.54 for the post-questionnaire, an increase of 0.1 point.

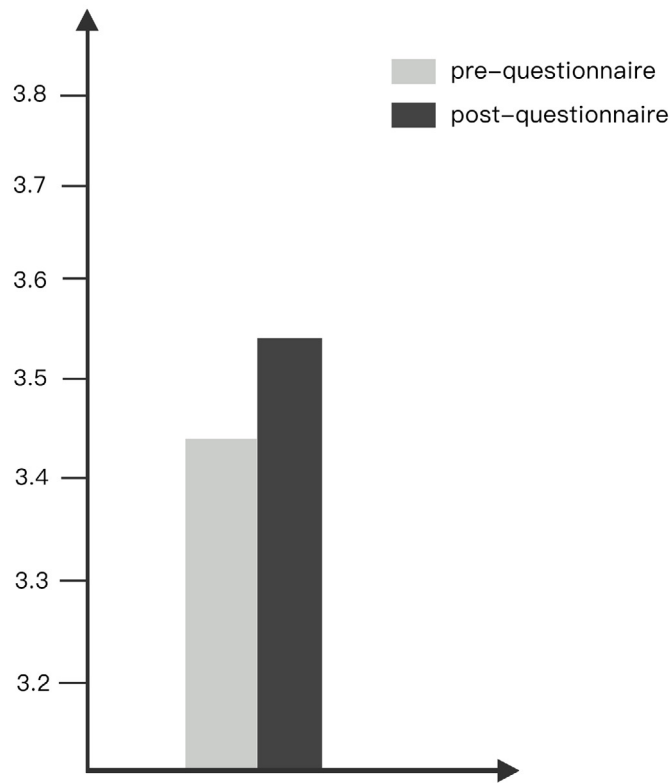


Figure 1.

Comparison of the mean scores on the pre- and post-questionnaires.

There were three levels of self-expression found through analysing children's artwork and written documents: Level 1, profound self-expression; Level 2, moderate self-expression; and Level 3, little self-expression. In articulating the three levels, I analysed the expressiveness of the children's self-portrait together with the written documents. The perspectives for analysis included expressiveness of design elements such as colors, lines, background, and composition, as well as the mood children felt toward the subject. Level 1 is defined as being able to express oneself adequately using design elements. Level 2 is defined as being able to express oneself to some extent using some design elements but not adequately, and Level 3 is defined as not using sufficient design elements to express oneself. Next, I present three children's cases to demonstrate each level.

LEVEL 1 CASE



Figure 2.
Self-portrait by child Pei.

Child Pei titled her self-portrait 'I Want to Love the World So Much'. This child stated that she was always misunderstood by others and that there were many people who did not like her. This self-portrait expressed her emotions such as fear, nervousness, a sense of being overwhelmed, and sadness, as well as the overbearing and aggressive nature of the person behind her. What she directed her attention toward most in creating the self-portrait was the idea that she felt helpless and that she blamed herself. She only used one color dominantly rather than multiple colors because this use of color suitably expressed her mood. After the project, she stated that she generated a new perspective of herself through creating this self-portrait: 'I will have a brave heart and a strong will, and I will not cry anymore'. In general, children are straightforward and carefree and are not as concerned with their inner selves. The case of Child Pei showed that she became more sensitive and reflective toward herself in relation to others through creating her self-portrait.

LEVEL 2 CASE



Figure 3.
Self-portrait by child Yang.

As shown in Figure 3, child Yang used multiple colors, both cool and warm, instead of black ink. The title of this self-portrait was 'The Heir of Poseidon'. He connected the self with the characters of an anime comic that he liked. He stated that he regarded himself as of the bloodline of Poseidon. He further stated that he had two types of souls, represented by the Poseidon Trident and Ashura's divinity, and that he created a new figure to represent himself by combining the two characters. This self-portrait was a large part of his own imaginary self. The idea of the amalgam was creative; however, he had few thoughts on why he wanted to make his self-portrait figure colorful, or on the understanding of his character in relation to the expressive quality of the work. Thus, his level is assigned as Level 2.

LEVEL 3 CASE



Figure 4.
Self-portrait by child Ding.

Figure 4 shows child Ding's self-portrait, which is at Level 3. The title was 'Little Girl'. Ding attempted to draw an ideal image of herself in her self-portrait. However, very little self-examination and self-reflection took place during the creation of this self-portrait, and her final project did not show a strong connection between the work and her inner thoughts. I speculated that she had not sufficiently mastered her painting skills, such as the portrayal of the figure, the use of color, brush strokes, and creating an effective background, as necessary to express her ideal image. This made it difficult for her consider her inner thoughts concerning her ideal image. This case indicated that mastering skills may be essential for the child to frequently engage in deep dialogue with their inner self in the subconscious of their mind.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nearly one-third of the participating children achieved Level 3. They re-examined themselves and developed a new understanding of themselves through creating a self-portrait using Chinese painting. In the process of creating a self-portrait, the participating children often realized aspects of themselves that they had never noticed before. They reflected and recognized the weaknesses, strengths, and negative and positive feelings through inner dialogue and with others. This reflective self-examination process is an educationally essential part of the self-portrait.

Goal 4 of the UN's SDGs is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations 2015). It states, 'By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations' (United Nations 2015), and as per my understanding, the perspective in this statement is reflected in my project. The materials used in Chinese painting, such as ink and paper, which are simple and easy to handle, are equally accessible to all children and facilitate their pursuit of free expression.

Dewey believed that the biggest difference between the living and the non-living lies in renewal and growth of the living. Children's self-understanding changes at different ages and has innumerable possibilities, and the creation of a self-portrait provides them with an opportunity for renewing themselves. This project was designed for fifth graders. If the opportunity arises, a study with a more comprehensive age range will be conducted.

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