

Chinese Painting and Spiritual Healing: The Application of Traditional Art in Mental Health Intervention of College Students

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Abstract

Background and Aims: Objective: The increasing number of mental health problems in college students encourages researchers to explore new intervention methods. As an art form containing profound cultural connotations, traditional Chinese painting shows its unique potential for emotional expression and spiritual healing.

Research Methodology: This study used an experimental design, and 120 college students participated in the initial mental health assessment, including anxiety (GAD-7), depression (PHQ-9), and self-efficacy (GSE). 30 students with obvious mental health problems were selected and randomly divided into an experimental group and a control group, 15 each.

Result: The experimental group participated in the 8-week Chinese painting therapy course (once a week for 90 minutes each), and the control group did not receive any intervention. After the intervention, both groups again received the same mental health assessment. After the intervention, anxiety scores decreased by 25% ($p < 0.001$), depression scores by 30% ($p < 0.001$), and self-efficacy increased by 22% ($p < 0.001$). Qualitative analysis showed that participants reported significant improvements in emotional expression, self-perception, and a sense of inner peace.

Conclusion: Chinese painting healing has shown a remarkable effect in relieving anxiety and depression and improving self-efficacy. This study verified the feasibility of traditional Chinese painting as a tool for mental health intervention and suggested more widespread application in mental health services for college students.

Keywords: Chinese Painting; Mental Health; College Students; Anxiety; Depression; Self-efficacy

Introduction

With the rapid development of society and the increase in life pressure, mental health problems among college students are becoming increasingly prominent. (Lin, J., & Chen, 1995) Anxiety and depression have become the major factors affecting the mental health of college students. (Lei, et al, 2021) Effective interventions have become an important direction in mental health research. (Kuo & Kavanagh, 1994) In recent years, art therapy has received

extensive attention as a noninvasive psychotherapy. Efficacy and Acceptability of Pharmacotherapy, Psychotherapy, and Non-Invasive Brain Stimulation in Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review and Network Meta-Analysis of 595 Randomized Controlled Trials. Psychotherapy, and Non-Invasive Brain Stimulation in Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review and Network Meta-Analysis of, 595. in which painting therapy is widely used in psychological interventions through the expression and release of emotions in visual art Despite the important position of modern art forms in painting therapy, the potential of traditional art forms has not been fully explored.

Chinese painting, as a traditional art form with a long history and profound cultural connotation, is not only the medium of artistic creation but also the symbol and carrier of the spiritual world. (Cahill, 2005) Chinese painting provides a unique spiritual healing experience through the creation of artistic conception and the use of pen and ink. In the process of creation, individuals can achieve inner peace and tranquility through the combination of pen and ink and artistic conception. (Kuo, et al,1994) Integrating traditional Chinese painting into painting treatment can enrich psychological intervention (Gao, 2019) and provide a new way of inner adjustment and emotional release for college students through the aesthetic experience and spiritual nourishment of traditional culture. Studies have shown that the combination of cultural background and artistic style can significantly affect the effectiveness of art therapy. Compared with Western art forms, the application of Chinese painting has not been fully studied, and its unique philosophical view and artistic expression mode need to be further explored. (Cahill, J. (2005)

Such developments seem to take us far away from the Chinese painting scene. However, it appears that seeking this reflection approach can help artists and critics understand what is happening in the creative process. It may help them to stay true to their roots while avoiding the “essentialization” of their traditions and practices. It may help them to free up a space where the miracle of creativity and creation can occur again in the most unexpected places and times. And it is only by creating in the dynamics that connect creativity, interpretation, and identity that Chinese painting can find a place in the realm of contemporary art. (Lin & Chen,1995)

The purpose of this study

This study focused on the application of Chinese painting in the practice of mental health intervention among college students and focused on evaluating the relief of anxiety symptoms and depression, and the improvement of self-efficacy. By comparing the changes in the mental health indicators between the experimental group and the control group before and after the intervention, this study aims to reveal the unique role of Chinese painting as a traditional art form in spiritual healing, provide a new perspective for the modern application

of traditional art, and provide a practical reference for the mental health services in colleges and universities.

Methodology

Study design

This study used a mixed study design combining quantitative and qualitative methods to comprehensively assess the impact of Chinese painting on the mental health of college students. The study design included randomized controlled experiments in the experimental group and the control group, in which the experimental group received Chinese painting treatment and the control group did not receive any intervention. All participants underwent an initial psychological assessment at the beginning of the study; the experimental group underwent drawing treatment weekly for the subsequent 8 weeks, and no intervention in the control group. After the intervention, both groups were re-psychological assessments and interviewed. To ensure completeness in the research data collection.

Painting course arrangement: 1 time/week, 90 minutes/session, 8 weeks; location: West District Studio of the Sichuan University of Communication; number: 15 students. See Table 1 for the specific painting course content.

Table 1 Curriculum setting of Chinese painting therapy

NW	TITLE	COURSE ARRANGEMENT
1	Course introduction and basic training	Course introduction: The purpose, method, and expected effect of Chinese painting treatment. Basic training: brush holding, basic brushwork practice (point, line, surface), and understanding the Chinese painting materials. Creative practice: with the theme of "first knowledge of brush and ink" as the theme, create freely and experience the feeling of pen and ink on paper.
2	Improvement of techniques and emotional expression	Review and sharing: creation experience sharing last week, discuss the preliminary feelings in the work. Technique improvement: learn the "ink is divided into five colors" in Chinese painting, and try to use different ink colors in the creation. Creative practice: take "the color of emotion" as the theme, and express the current emotional state with ink color.
3	Thorough techniques and	Interpretation of works: analyze the use of ink and emotional expression in last week's works.



NW	TITLE	COURSE ARRANGEMENT
	self-exploration	New technique learning: learn the "white space" technique in Chinese painting and understand its role in emotional expression. Creative practice: with "self-exploration" as the theme, the use of blank techniques to express the inner unknown or expectation.
4	Composition and theme creation	Group discussion: Share their feelings and changes during the painting treatment process, and discuss the importance of composition. Composition learning: learn the principles of composition in Chinese painting, such as near and far, high and low, density, etc. Creative practice: with "the scenery in the heart" as the theme, composition, and creation.
5	Color and emotional deepening	Color theory: introduce the application of color in Chinese painting, and its relationship with emotion. Creative practice: take "emotional color" as the theme, and use color to express more complex emotions. Sharing and feedback: Share works and discuss how color affects emotional expression.
6	Comprehensive techniques and personalized creation	Technique fusion: try to integrate the techniques learned before together for free creation. Personalized guidance: Therapists provide personalized, creative advice according to the characteristics of each student. Creative practice: with the "unique self" as the theme, personalized creation.
7	Work presentation and group discussion	Works display: show the works of all students for collective appreciation. Group discussion: discuss the highlights and growth of the work, and share the insights in the creative process. Treatment summary: Review the whole painting treatment process and summarize the personal harvest.
8	Course completion and follow-up planning	Personal summary: Each student writes a personal painting treatment summary to reflect on the growth and change. Follow-up advice: The therapist provides personalized follow-up mental health maintenance advice according to each student's condition.



NW	TITLE	COURSE ARRANGEMENT
		Closing ceremony: End the course in a relaxed and happy way, and encourage students to continue to use painting for emotional expression and stress management in their daily lives.

Selection of study subjects and samples

The study involved 120 students from Sichuan University of Media and Communication. From these, 30 students with mental health concerns were chosen, including 11 males and 19 females. They were divided into two groups of 15 each. The experimental group received Chinese painting therapy, while the control group did not. Participants were aged 18 to 22, interested in painting, and had no severe psychological or medical issues.

Data collection tools

The GAD-7 scale. The GAD-7 scale (Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale), a self-rating scale for the assessment of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) symptoms, was first proposed by Spitzer et al. (2006). The scale contains seven items and is mainly used to measure the severity of anxiety symptoms in subjects in the past two weeks. Each entry was scored according to its frequency of occurrence, from "no at all" (0) to "almost every day" (3), with a total score range of 0 to 21.

The PHQ-9 scale. The PHQ-9 scale (Patient Health Questionnaire-9) is a self-rating scale widely used to assess the severity of depressive symptoms and was developed by Kroenke et al. (2001). The scale includes nine items designed to measure subjects' depressive symptoms over the past two weeks. Each entry was scored based on the frequency of symptoms, from "no at all" (0) to "almost every day" (3), with a total score ranging from 0 to 27.

The GSE scale assessed the self-efficacy. The GSE scale (General Self-Efficacy Scale) is a self-rating scale for assessing individual self-efficacy and was developed by Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1995). The scale is designed to measure an individual's confidence in coping with challenges and handling difficulties. The GSE scale included 10 entries covering the evaluation of self-efficacy on various challenges of daily life. Each entry uses a 4 comment system, from "completely inconsistent" (1) to "fully consistent" (4), with a total range of 10 to 40. The GSE scale is widely used in research to help assess individuals' confidence in their challenges and guide psychological interventions.

Statistical methods

The data on anxiety (GAD-7 scale), depression (PHQ-9 scale), and self-efficacy (GSE scale) in the experimental and control groups were summarized and calculated. Changes in mental health indicators were compared before and after the intervention using paired-sample t-tests to assess the significance of the intervention effect. To compare the index differences between

the experimental and control groups after the intervention, an independent sample t-test was used. Effect sizes were calculated to assess the practical significance of the intervention effects. All statistical analyses were performed in the SPSS statistical software, and $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant. Major themes and patterns were identified by coding the interview and observation records. Statistical frequency of EE and self-perception improvement to achieve efficiency.

Ethical considerations

The study strictly followed ethical norms, and all participants signed informed consent forms and were informed of their rights and obligations in the participation process. Participant information was kept strictly confidential, and any reported and published findings involved no personal identity. For possible psychological discomfort during the study, the investigators will provide necessary psychological support and referral services.

Results of the study

Changes in anxiety symptoms

There was no significant difference in GAD-7 scores; the GAD-7 score at 8 weekends post-intervention was better than the control group, and the mean GAD-7 score decreased from 11.5 to 8.6 post-intervention, which was significant ($p < 0.001$). The control group then showed no significant changes. See Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of group GAD-7 scores

Group	n	GAD-7 scores	
		Before therapy	8 weeks
Observation	15	12.1 $\pm$ 1.9	8.1 $\pm$ 1.2
Control	15	12.0 $\pm$ 2.0	11.8 $\pm$ 2.1
<i>t</i>		0.45	4.52
<i>p</i>		0.65	0.001

* $p < 0.05$ vs. baseline (paired t-test)

Changes in depressive symptoms

There was no significant difference in PHQ-9 scale scores between the 2 groups before the intervention. The PHQ-9 scale of 8 weeks post-intervention was better than the pre-intervention and control groups, and the PHQ-9 scale decreased from 14.2 to 10.0, all showing significant significance ($p < 0.001$). The control group then showed no significant changes. See Table 3.

Table 3 Comparison of group PHQ-9 scores

Group	n	GAD-7 scores	
		Before therapy	8 weeks
Observation	15	14.7±1.6	11.0±1.5
Control	15	14.5±1.7	14.0±1.8
<i>t</i>		0.27	5.63
<i>p</i>		0.79	0.001

**p*<0.05 vs. baseline (paired t-test)

Changes in self-efficacy

There was no significant difference in the GSE scale scores between the 2 groups before the intervention. After the intervention, the results of the GSE scale showed that self-efficacy increased significantly from 18.0 to 22.0 in the experimental group, with a statistically significant difference (*p* <0.001), but no significant change in the control group. See Table 4.

Table 4 Comparison of group GSE scores

Group	n	GAD-7 scores	
		Before therapy	8 weeks
Observation	15	18.0±1.07	22.0±0.84
Control	15	18.2±1.70	18.0±1.45
<i>t</i>		0.01	11.4
<i>p</i>		0.1	0.001

**p*<0.05 vs. baseline (paired t-test)

Qualitative analysis results

Qualitative data analysis was based on the analysis of the participant interviews and observation records.

Emotional expression: 80% of participants reported experiencing significant enhancement in emotional expression during painting treatment, and were able to express inner feelings more freely; 15% of participants reported experiencing slight enhancement in emotional expression during painting treatment; and 5% reported experiencing no change in emotional expression during painting treatment.

Self-perception: 70% of participants noted improved self-awareness and more clearly realized their emotions and psychological state; 20% indicated that their self-perception improved and realized their emotional state; 10% of participants considered no change.

The analysis shows that painting treatment not only significantly improved mental health but also effectively promoted the emotional expression and self-cognition of participants.

Conclusion and recommendations

In contrast to previous studies, this study fills a gap in the existing literature on the intervention effects of specific art categories by focusing on Chinese painting as an art form. As a medium with a profound cultural heritage and unique artistic style, Chinese painting can provide a unique psychological intervention experience, especially for participants with consistent cultural backgrounds. This finding provides new perspectives for the integration of traditional art forms into mental health intervention practices.

The influence of Chinese painting treatment on the mental health of college students

The results show that Chinese painting as a psychological intervention has a significant effect on the mental health of college students. The experimental group significantly improved anxiety, depression symptoms, and self-efficacy than the control group. The anxiety score significantly decreased from 11.5 to 8.6, and the depression score significantly decreased from 14.2 to 10.0. These data support the effectiveness of Chinese painting in emotional regulation and psychological interventions. Through qualitative analysis, participants can obtain emotional catharsis, improve self-cognition, and enhance cultural identity in the process of painting. These results show that Chinese painting is not only an artistic expression mode, but also a carrier of cultural identity. Through the study and creation of Chinese painting, the participants have enhanced their sense of identity with Chinese culture and promoted the improvement of their mental health.

Theoretical and practical enlightenment

This approach is particularly appropriate for culturally appropriate participants. The results support the application of art therapy in college students' mental health intervention and suggest that university mental health service centers explore intervention methods with cultural characteristics and enrich students' mental health service system (Smith & Jones, 2018). Painting treatment not only improves mental health but also promotes the enhancement of cultural identity, and it is suggested to be included in more mental health intervention programs to better meet the psychological needs of different populations.

Recommendations and limitations

Although this study verified the positive effects of Chinese painting on mental health, some limitations remain. First, the sample size is relatively small, limiting the generalizability of the results. Second, the intervention period is 8 weeks, and further research is needed to reveal the long-term effects. Future studies should validate these findings in groups of different age groups and cultural backgrounds. To improve the effect of painting treatment, universities should increase their investment in art intervention projects, including the provision of professional painting guidance and sufficient art materials. Mental health workers are trained in art therapy to improve their expertise and skills in the application of painting therapy to better serve students' mental health needs.

Recommendations for the future

Studying Chinese painting on mental health. Integrating traditional art forms into mental health intervention provides audiences with new ways of emotional expression and cognitive adjustment.

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