

The Significance of Art Therapy For Retired, Elderly Chinese Population

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Abstract

Due to the accelerated ageing process in China, the elderly population is steadily growing, resulting in a substantial and increasing number of retired seniors. Consequently, the psychological issues afflicting retired seniors are becoming increasingly severe, necessitating an urgent focus on enhancing their mental well-being. It is imperative to promote the utilisation of Chinese freehand painting as a therapeutic tool to ameliorate the psychological challenges that are faced by retired seniors. This research endeavour seeks to discern the importance and merit of art therapy for geriatric mental health issues within the Chinese context. This study employs a literature review approach to investigate prevailing trends, pinpoint existing gaps, and recommend future strategies for advancing the use of Chinese freehand brushwork as a therapeutic medium. It particularly emphasises the impact of art therapy on older adults, both from a theoretical and practical perspective. The results of the study reveal the efficacy of art therapy in alleviating the psychological problems of older Chinese adults. This study emphasise the far-reaching significance and value of art therapy in addressing the mental health-related challenges of retired Chinese seniors.

Keywords: Art therapy, Effects on the elderly, Psychological well-being and Chinese freehand painting

Introduction

Ravid-Horesh (2004) notes that most of the literature on art therapy for older adults has emerged in recent years. Although the volume is growing rapidly, it is still not sufficiently systematic. Correspondingly, Smith (2017) has noted that art is important for older adults. Art therapy is beneficial in providing a stimulating social environment and can alleviate the difficulties that are associated with aging. However, further research is needed to develop more art therapy tools for use with older adults (Bennington et al., 2016). Painting therapy has started late in China and its development is still in the initial exploration stage (Wang & Xie, 2018). As a new form of psychotherapy, painting art therapy has gradually been favored by the people, however, while there are more art therapy studies abroad, few are in China. This paper will comprehensively sort out the existing literature on the impact of art therapy on the elderly and consider its theoretical basis and potential limitations. In addition, this paper will clarify the research methodology that is employed before describing the expected results. The aim of this study is to emphasize the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing retirement syndrome in older Chinese adults and to highlight the far-reaching significance and value of art therapy for this population. Ultimately, this study aims to promote Chinese painting as a therapeutic tool to improve the mental health of retired older adults in an aging society.

Research Methods

This paper adopts the literature review research method, and its integration process draws on the works of Masiran et al. (2020) as well as Ibrahim and Mustafa Kamal (2018). In the process of learning this independent literature review typology (Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008) borrowed from Yu and Watson (2019) and Templier and Paré (2015), the research question theme, which in turn was borrowed from Ibrahim's (2011 & 2020) structural classification technology. This study selected related articles under art therapy for reporting. It uses search engines such as Google Scholar, Baidu Scholar, CNKI, and other search engines to identify documents as well as keywords related to the selected major themes, such as the effects on the elderly and theory and limitations of form. After the title search and filtering out full research papers from 2003 to 2021, a total of 45 journal articles were identified. Abstracts of the literature were reviewed along with key findings, and an analysis was performed based on their recommendations for future research. Forty-five articles with strong potential to address the main research question were selected in the literature review process. Assignments on smaller subtopics are based on their existential importance, as research indicates that new but key emerging topics may have fewer literary articles. This paper integrates and intersects several themes to analyze the need for mental health care among retired seniors. Therefore, there is a need to promote the use of Chinese pictorial painting to improve the psychological problems of retired elderly people. This section covers the effects on the elderly, theory, and limitations of form. The objective is to understand the value of art therapy for Chinese retired elderly people.

Effects on the Elderly

The main method of art therapy is painting therapy. Previous art therapy research has used painting mediums such as printmaking, watercolours, and mandalas as art therapy. Zhao (2021) stated that art therapy was first used in the fields of education and psychotherapy. As a non-verbal therapy method, it can release the patient's inner anxiety and relieve pain and sadness. Yuan, Li, Ye, and Zhu. (2021) as well as Dalebroux, Goldstein, and Winner (2008)

suggest that drawing therapy can effectively relieve negative emotions and promote emotional well-being.

Art therapy for the elderly offers a wide range of significant benefits. Studies by Barfarazi, Pourghaznein, Mohajer, Mazlom, and Asgharinekah (2018), along with the research conducted by Mishra, Misra, and Chaube (2021), highlight the substantial positive impact of painting therapy on the well-being of the elderly.

Beyond well-being, the realm of art therapy extends to promoting healthy aging, as underlined by the work of Gall (2010), Kim (2013), and Klimczuk (2016). It also serves as a valuable adaptive tool for older adults navigating life transitions, as observed by Smith (2017). Furthermore, the potential of art therapy is most evident in its ability to enhance cognitive function, alleviate depression, and improve the overall quality of life in the elderly. Choi and Jeon's study (2013) highlights the cognitive and emotional improvements achievable through art therapy. It is also a potent intervention for addressing cognitive impairment in older adults, as demonstrated by Mahendran, Gandhi, Moorakonda, Wong, Kanchi, Fam, Rawtaer, Kumar, Feng, and Kua (2018).

The therapeutic benefits extend to emotional well-being, with art therapy being employed effectively to treat depression in older adults, as exemplified by McCaffrey's research (2007). Ezell's study (2016) further underscores its potential in alleviating anxiety, enhancing emotional resilience, and increasing self-esteem.

Art therapy has also proven to be highly beneficial for elderly individuals with dementia, as evidenced by the studies conducted by Waller (2003) and Nelson (2018). Kaplan's insights (2000) emphasize the strong connection between art therapy and improved mental health. The stimulation of the brain through art therapy promotes positive emotions, reduces negative ones, and fosters higher self-esteem, as highlighted by Paskaleva and Uzunova (2015) and Fancourt, Garnett, Spiro, West, and Mullensiefen (2019).

Ultimately, art therapy helps elderly individuals develop a positive mindset as they age, regardless of their physical health, according to Valliant's findings (2002). Collectively, these insights affirm the profound and diverse benefits of art therapy in enhancing the lives of the elderly.

In China, art therapy has a significant impact on the well-being of the elderly. A comprehensive examination of relevant research shows that it encompasses various aspects. Qin (2021) has proposed that painting therapy effectively alleviates the loneliness experienced by the elderly, while Suo (2011) has emphasized how engagement in painting and calligraphy provides a deeper sense of meaning to the lives of retired seniors.

Furthermore, Zhou (2018) has suggested that painting therapy has the potential to improve cognitive impairments in the elderly, and Deng, Jiang, Duan, and Wang (2018), along with Sun (2019), have found that painting activities contribute to enhancing the subjective well-being of the elderly. Yin (2021) has highlighted the capacity of painting therapy to boost the elderly's sense of self-worth and confidence. Additionally, Zhu (2021) has proposed that painting therapy can assist patients in enhancing their self-concept and regaining cognitive function, thereby leading to improved mood and restoring social functioning.

Notably, painting therapy has also shown promise in the treatment of schizophrenic patients in China. Meng's study in 2004 revealed that it effectively alleviates the negative symptoms of schizophrenia, enhances self-concept, and elevates the quality of life, consequently reducing recurrence and readmission rates.

The application of painting therapy extends beyond addressing the specific needs of certain groups, as it also holds substantial potential for the psychological development of the general

population. It is a versatile form of therapy that not only promotes the mental well-being of older adults but also fosters physical and social development.

Given the increasing psychological challenges faced by retired elderly individuals in an aging society, the application of painting art therapy holds significant value. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the significance of art therapy in addressing retirement syndrome among the elderly in China, with a focus on three key aspects: the theoretical underpinnings of art therapy, its therapeutic efficacy, and the challenges related to its adaptation to the Chinese context. The overarching goal is to encourage the widespread adoption of art therapy as a valuable resource for the well-being of the elderly in China.

Rose and Lonsdale (2016) state that painting activity can promote subjective well-being in older adults. They have highlighted that cultural and creative-focused activities benefit the mental health and subjective well-being of experts and non-experts. However, they have only focused on the relationship between painting and subjective well-being in older adults. Therefore, this research focuses on painting creation activities with cultural creativity as the core to promote the mental health of retired elderly people.

Johnson and Sullivan-Marx (2006) have provided insights into how art therapy can meet the emotional needs of older adults. They believe that art therapy, as a non-drug, non-medical intervention, can address the challenges of aging and promote mental health in older adults. However, Johnson et al. (2006) have primarily focused on artistic creation as a culturally competent approach that can effectively address the specific developmental tasks of older adults.

Kim (2013) has confirmed that art therapy can promote healthy aging through a randomized controlled study. He believes that the goal of art therapy should be to develop positive attitudes, boost self-esteem, and eliminate negative emotions to promote emotional well-being. However, Kim (2013) has only focused on how art therapy can promote healthy aging in Korean-American seniors. Therefore, this research will examine the active role of Chinese retired elderly individuals in this treatment.

Choi and Jeon (2013) discuss the effects of art therapy on cognition, depression, and quality of life in the elderly. They used a non-equivalent control group to confirm that art therapy can prevent or reverse dementia and reduce depression. However, they have mainly focused on the effects of memory therapy in older women who are at high risk for dementia. Therefore, this research will address the treatment of psychological problems among some retired elderly individuals.

Bedding and Sadlo (2008) point out the retiree's experience in taking art classes. They emphasized that painting can bring satisfaction, challenge, fulfillment, productivity, and confidence to retirees and promote their positive emotions. However, they have only focused on respondents being white British retirees. Furthermore, this research is consistent with Bedding and Sadlo (2008) that painting brings satisfaction, challenge, time transformation, fulfillment, productivity, and increases the confidence of retirees. These results confirm and extend previous research linking creative activity to well-being, including those that reveal how positive emotions can promote health. Therefore, this research will focus on retired, elderly Chinese people.

Bennington et al. (2016) state that art therapy in art museums can promote social connection and mental health in older adults. They have used phenomenological research to find that viewing paintings can increase self-awareness and promote social connection in older adults. However, they have only focused on the mental health effects of viewing art in museums. Therefore, this research will extend to the impact on the painting process.

Meanwhile Zhou (2006) states the unique role of painting psychotherapy. She highlights that painting therapy has been widely used in Western countries and has become one of the main techniques for psychological counseling and therapy. Existing theoretical discussions and empirical studies have shown that painting has its unique role as a psychotherapy method, which not only can deal with people's emotional and psychological traumas, but also improve their self-image, self-esteem, or self-concept, social skills are improved, and language development and cognitive function are improved. However, Zhou (2006) has only focused on the theoretical basis, mechanism of action, application status, and efficacy of this technology to make a basic overview. In addition, based on Zhou's (2006) work, this study will focus on painting therapy dealing with people's emotional and psychological trauma problems. It can enhance language development and cognitive function. Drawing therapy can enable patients to safely release negative emotions in a proper way, and their souls can be sublimated.

Qiu, Liang, Chen and Yi (2015) state that research progresses on the role of painting therapy in psychological rehabilitation. They have highlighted that as a non-drug treatment method, painting therapy can overcome the side effects of drugs and improve the social function and mental health of patients. However, they have only focused on four aspects: the overview, development history, mechanism of action, and application of painting therapy; the positive role of painting therapy in different psychological (mental) diseases is systematically reviewed. Finally, based on Qiu et al. (2015), this research focuses on drawing therapy as a non-pharmacological treatment method that can overcome the side effects of medications and improve the mental health of retired elderly people. This research agrees that art therapy is beneficial in promoting subjective well-being and can promote emotional well-being in older adults by fostering positive attitudes, increasing self-esteem, and counteracting negative emotions. Painting provides retirees with satisfaction, challenge, time transition, a sense of achievement, and productivity.

De Petrillo and Winner (2005) state that art therapy can improve mood. They emphasised that artistic creation can promote positive emotions and vent negative emotions. However, they represent preliminary attempts to test the underlying hypotheses of art therapy through experimental designs. Future research should also test the generalisability of these findings to other art forms beyond visual arts.

Zhang (2006) states the role and application of painting in psychotherapy. She highlights drawing therapy as a form of psychotherapy which is based on the division of labour between the two hemispheres of the brain and the theory of psychological projection. According to structured therapy, patients can express their negative emotions through painting, to get rid of psychological distress. However, Zhang (2006) has only focused on theoretical discussion. Notably, this study agrees that painting therapy is one of the most effective psychotherapy methods.

Theory of Art therapy

In Zhang's study (2006), drawing therapy, a form of psychotherapy, is highlighted for its foundation in the division of labor between the two hemispheres of the brain and the theory of psychological projection. This structured therapy provides a means for patients to express their negative emotions through art, effectively alleviating psychological distress. Lusebrink (2004) underscores the significance of art therapy in treatment and rehabilitation, elaborating on its benefits from both a neuroscientific and holistic perspective. Zhou (2006) confirms the unique role of painting psychotherapy, emphasizing its widespread application in Western

countries. The existing body of theoretical discussions and empirical studies provides substantial support for the distinct advantages of painting as a psychotherapeutic method. It not only addresses emotional and psychological trauma but also enhances self-image, self-esteem, self-concept, social skills, and fosters improvements in language development and cognitive function. This study aligns with the perspectives of Zhou (2006), Zhang (2006), and Lusebrink (2004), all of whom center their focus on the practical application and advantages of painting art therapy for mental health within the framework of psychological theories, which encompass brain lateralization and projection theories.

In a more recent work by Zhang (2020), a theoretical framework for painting art therapy and its physiological-psychological basis is proposed. Zhang emphasizes that the scientific foundation of painting therapy is grounded in the theory of brain function lateralization, with its psychological basis encompassing projection, sublimation, displacement, and imagery. She categorizes the theoretical orientation of painting art therapy into psychoanalytic, humanistic, and psychoeducational orientations, although her research specifically focuses on printmaking as a medium of art therapy. This research aligns with Zhang's (2020) classification of the theoretical orientations in painting art therapy. Notably, the primary recipients of painting art therapy are individuals who are grappling with psychological issues or psychological issues linked to physical health problems.

limitations of form

Huang (2020) posits that the use of flower and bird painting as a medium in art therapy can effectively address depression. She underscores that mainstream art therapy predominantly relies on Western painting forms, including oil painting, stick figures, and watercolor painting. Western art is deeply rooted in Western culture and religion, creating a substantial cultural divide between it and other regions. This cultural disparity can impede the effectiveness of art therapy when Western painting is the chosen medium. For instance, social and cultural differences can lead to varying aesthetic preferences among patients from diverse regions, subsequently affecting the therapeutic outcome.

Nonetheless, Huang's work focuses solely on the application of Western principles of art therapy. In contrast, this study endeavors to explore the potential of using flower and bird paintings as a therapeutic medium in art therapy, with a specific focus on its psychotherapeutic impact on depression—a prevalent mental disorder. The objective is to develop a more culturally suitable form of art therapy for the Chinese population, which is grappling with depression and other mental disorders.

In light of Huang's (2020) insights, this study highlights the prevailing emphasis on Western painting forms, such as oil painting, stick figures, and watercolors, in the realm of art therapy. It calls for the broadening of the horizons of art therapy, advocating for the incorporation of traditional Chinese painting as a viable therapeutic medium. Diverse art therapy methods have already been proven to be effective for the elderly, where the prevailing Western-centric approach is acknowledged. To enrich the landscape of art therapy, it is essential to integrate Chinese painting as an additional dimension of this therapeutic discipline..

Wang and Xie (2018) have emphasized that painting therapy involves the use of painting as an art medium, grounded in psychological projection theory and brain lateralization theory. Through this approach, the artist externalizes subconscious conflicts to achieve personal improvement or as a form of treatment. Painting therapy exhibits a wide range of applications, serving not only for the psychological correction of special populations but also for the psychological development of the general public.

They also noted that painting therapy has had a relatively recent introduction in China, and its development is still in the initial stages of exploration. Several key challenges were identified. First, there exists a deficiency in professional theoretical research, with limited studies on the utilization of drawing therapy to enhance mental health, and an insufficiency of data to support its effectiveness. Second, there is a lack of mature and standardized operating institutions. Currently, few professional organizations implement painting therapy in China, and most of them are in the exploratory phases. Third, public awareness of art therapy is limited. Given its recent introduction in China, the general public lacks a deep understanding of this therapeutic method, and many individuals continue to opt for traditional psychotherapy approaches.

Significantly, this research aligns with Wang and Xie's (2018) perspective that, rooted in psychological projection and brain lateralization theories, painting as an art medium can enhance the mental well-being of individuals through artistic expression. It is also acknowledged that painting therapy has a broad spectrum of applications, applicable not only for the psychological adjustment of specific groups but also for the psychological development of the broader population. As painting therapy is still in its nascent stages in China, there is a pressing need for research and the development of an approach that aligns with the unique requirements of China, promoting its growth within the country.

In general, painting therapy incorporates various psychological theories, such as brain lateralisation theory, projection theory, and humanism-oriented and Gestalt-oriented holistic theory. While Western painting forms serve as a foundation for this approach, Chinese painting can also play a significant role in expanding the scope of art therapy for the elderly, thereby, enhancing their emotional well-being. By fostering positive attitudes and mitigating negative emotions, painting therapy, grounded in psychological theory, offers notable benefits for the mental health of older individuals.

Utilising Chinese freehand painting as an art therapy not only diversifies the art therapy landscape but also contributes to the emotional well-being of retired seniors, ultimately promoting their mental health. Consequently, painting therapy integrates psychological theories such as brain lateralisation theory, projection theory, and humanism-oriented and Gestalt-oriented holistic theory, while incorporating both Western and Chinese painting forms to advance the emotional well-being of older adults. Figure 1 illustrates how the synthesis of literature reviews advances the proposed theory that is aimed at addressing the imperative need for facilitating the use of Chinese freehand painting as therapy. This, in turn, is encapsulated in the proposed conceptual framework as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 1: Point of Departure (POD) Tree Diagram for Study on art therapy (Adapted from Ibrahim & Mustafa Kamal, 2018)

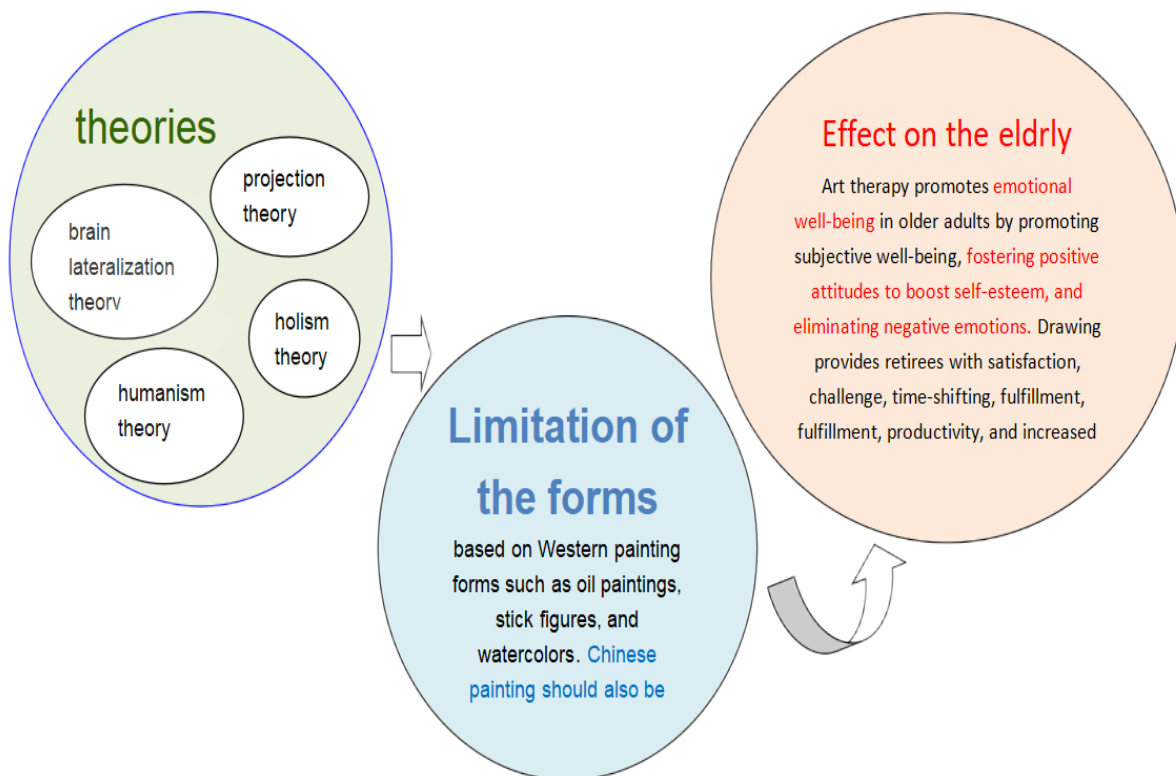


Figure 2: Theoretical Concept diagram based on art therapy (Adapted from Ibrahim & Mustafa Kamal, 2018)

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to understand the value of art therapy for the mental health of retired Chinese older adults. This article documents the results of the synthesised process of a systematic literature review on the topic of art therapy. With regard to the effects on older adults, studies have found that art therapy promotes emotional well-being in older adults by fostering positive attitudes to boost self-esteem and eliminating negative emotions. Painting provides retirees with satisfaction, challenge, time-shifting, fulfilment, productivity, and increased confidence. For Theory, research has found that art therapy is a non-drug and non-medical intervention based on some psychological theories that can directly affect the health of older adults. As a form of art therapy, drawing therapy includes psychological theories such as brain lateralisation theory and projection theory. Due to the limitations of the form, studies have found that various art therapies have been used for older adults, and it is generally believed that painting therapy is based on Western painting forms, such as oil paintings, stick figures, and watercolours. Chinese painting should also be applied to art therapy to expand the form of art therapy. Combining the above results, it is concluded that painting therapy is based on the Western painting form, and Chinese painting as therapy can expand the form of art therapy and promote the emotional health of the elderly.

The results are important because they contribute to key theory-building in art therapy for retirees, significance in art therapy for retirees, and their benefits for the first application of art therapy to the retirement syndrome. It is recommended that further research performs a meta-analysis of the literature supporting the proposed theoretical proposition. Furthermore, future research is recommended to incorporate the results into Chinese freehand painting as art therapy. Thereby using Chinese freehand painting as a form of art therapy to promote the emotional health of Chinese retirees, and thus achieve mental health.

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