

The origin, application and prospect of the expressive therapy continuum (ETC)

Xiaohan Niu^{1*}

¹Graduate School of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Hanyang University, Korea

*Corresponding author: 741592554@qq.com

Abstract

With the rapid urbanization and economic development in China, mental health problems are becoming increasingly serious, especially in urban areas, where work and life pressures are huge, while in rural areas, mental health problems are more serious due to the lack of resources. Existing interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) have limitations in cultural adaptation and wide application, and it is difficult to fully meet the needs of the Chinese public. The expressive therapy continuum (ETC), as a multi-level art therapy model, helps patients release emotions, express feelings, and promote mental health through art activities at the levels of kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/emotional, and cognitive/symbolic. The flexibility and creativity of ETC enable it to better adapt to different cultural backgrounds, especially in combining traditional Chinese art forms such as calligraphy and painting, to develop treatment methods that are more in line with local culture. In order to better promote ETC, it is necessary to strengthen professional training and public education, cultivate art therapists that meet international standards, and enhance the public's awareness and acceptance of ETC. Through these measures, ETC is expected to play an important role in China's mental health field, make up for the shortcomings of existing treatment methods, and comprehensively promote the mental health development of the Chinese public. This innovative art therapy method can not only adapt to China's actual background, but also effectively deal with the psychological problems of the masses.

Keywords : expressive therapy continuum; art therapy; cultural adaptation; mental health; therapeutic intervention

Suggested citation : Niu, X. (2025). The origin, application and prospect of the expressive therapy continuum (ETC). *Journal of Modern Social Sciences*, 2(1), 36–42. <https://doi.org/10.71113/jmss.v2i1.185>

Introduction

China is one of the most populous countries in the world, and the scale and complexity of mental health problems have attracted much attention. With the rapid development of the economy and the transformation of social structure, people are facing unprecedented challenges. The accelerated urbanization process, the faster pace of life, and the rising competitive pressure have caused many people to face mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and stress. The Blue Book of "China's Mental Health in 2023" shows that more than 200 million people in China suffer from mental health problems of various degrees, and most of them do not receive timely and effective treatment and support. Mental health problems are particularly prominent in urban areas. Due to work pressure, life pressure and the complexity of interpersonal relationships, many people feel lonely, helpless and even desperate. At the same time, mental health problems in rural areas are also becoming increasingly prominent. Due to lack of resources and information asymmetry, it is more difficult for rural residents to support and rescue in the field of mental health. China's mental health problems have received more and more attention from the public and academia. National mental health is subject to socioeconomic changes, family environment influences and personal cognitive factors. Although there have been improvements in cognition and treatment, mental health still faces major challenges.

Socioeconomic factors are important external conditions that affect mental health. In China, rapid socioeconomic development has brought about tremendous changes in lifestyles, which have had a profound impact on individuals' mental health. Studies have shown that factors such as changes in socioeconomic status, employment pressure, and income inequality may lead to an increase in mental health problems. Ran et al. (2019) pointed out in

their study that due to economic backwardness in rural areas, the treatment access rate of patients with mental illness is low, and they lack the necessary family and social support. In addition, Jin & Tam (2015) found that the relative decline in social status (i.e., relative deprivation) is an important social psychological factor affecting mental health, especially in the context of rapid social change. The stigma associated with mental illness seriously hinders efforts to effectively address mental health issues. According to (Lin Z, 2023) in the book "Beyond the Individual: Intersectional Perspectives on Mental Illness Stigma in China", social stigma is not only pervasive, but also intersects with cultural norms and family expectations, creating complex barriers to accessing mental health services. This social stigma may delay diagnosis, prevent individuals from seeking help, and perpetuate misunderstandings about mental health.

As the first environment for individual socialization, the family has a decisive influence on the mental health of its members. In China, changes in family structure (such as the increase in single-parent families and the prevalence of nuclear families), tensions within the family, and the emphasis on children's education have all had an important impact on the mental health of family members. Ying et al. (2020) showed that during the COVID-19 epidemic, family members of medical staff experienced great psychological stress, especially excessive attention to epidemic information and concerns about the health of family members, which exacerbated the psychological burden on family members. In addition, the strength of the family support system is directly related to the individual's ability to cope with external pressure. As discussed by Lei, F et al., the expectations set within the family. In "Factors Affecting the Mental Health of Chinese College Students", it also significantly affects mental health outcomes. Educational pressure often exacerbates students' stress and anxiety.

Children's mental health problems are particularly prominent in China. With the intensification of social competition and the increase of educational pressure, more and more children have mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Sun & Buys (2013) pointed out that the psychological pressure faced by Chinese children mainly comes from academic, family and social expectations. Especially in the case of fierce academic competition and high expectations from parents, children's mental health problems are more obvious. In addition, with the advancement of urbanization, the psychological problems of left-behind children and urban only children have also received increasing attention from society. The education system plays a key role in shaping the mental health landscape. Lei, F., et al. outlined how academic pressure and performance pressure lead to an increased risk of mental health problems among college students. This highlights the need for educational policies that support mental health and academic achievement.

China has made significant progress in the field of psychotherapy, especially in adapting Western psychotherapy approaches to China's unique cultural and social environment. These adapted approaches, especially interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), have been widely used to address a variety of mental health issues while reflecting China's unique cultural values.

Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) is particularly effective in treating depression. A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Tang, L., et al. (2023) highlighted the efficacy of IPT, which focuses on improving interpersonal relationships and aligns treatment with the values of family harmony and social connection that are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. This approach is particularly popular in China, where relationships play a vital role in personal well-being. On the other hand, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been used to effectively address conditions such as anxiety and eating disorders. The cultural adaptability of CBT is crucial, as it must take into account local eating habits, family expectations, and social norms regarding beauty and behavior. (Chen et al., 2021) emphasizes the need to modify CBT to fit the Chinese cultural and social context to ensure that the treatment remains effective and relevant.

The future development of Chinese psychotherapy is promising. (Ng et al., 2017) discussed the potential of integrating traditional Chinese medicine principles with Western psychotherapy practices. This integration may lead to innovative treatment approaches that are uniquely suited to the Chinese population, combining modern psychotherapy techniques with traditional Chinese philosophical and medical concepts. Despite these advances, these adapted therapies still have limitations. Both IPT and CBT require further customization to fully incorporate the deep-rooted cultural, familial, and individual differences of Chinese patients. In addition, the lack of trained therapists who can master both Western approaches and traditional Chinese concepts limits the widespread application of these therapies.

This context lays the foundation for exploring alternative treatment approaches, such as the expressive treatment continuum (ETC), which may offer alternative benefits where traditional psychotherapy falls short, especially in severe cases where other treatments have failed. These explorations may lead to a more comprehensive treatment framework that meets the diverse needs of the Chinese population in mental health care.

Background of the Expressive Therapeutics Continuum (ETC)

Art therapy, as a therapy that promotes psychological recovery and personal growth, occupies an important position in the field of psychotherapy. The Expressive Therapeutics Continuum (ETC) is a key theoretical framework in art therapy, which provides therapists

with a comprehensive and systematic approach to understand and apply the role of art intervention in the treatment process.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) severely impacts children's social development, presenting unique challenges with social interaction and communication. Research has illuminated several aspects of these challenges and interventions that may alleviate them. Children with ASD often demonstrate core deficits in basic social skills, such as eye contact, social smiling, and joint attention, which are critical for the early development of social relationships. However, research by Carter et al. (2005) showed that with appropriate intervention, children can improve these basic social behaviors, emphasizing the potential for growth despite initial deficits. In addition, Silveira-Zaldivara, Özerk, K., and Özerk, G. (2021) The critical role of social skills interventions in enhancing social competence has been highlighted, which has been linked to better outcomes in a variety of areas including academics and interpersonal relationships. Techniques have evolved to include both advanced technology and naturalistic teaching methods, which have proven effective in promoting social skills across different settings (Scattone, 2007). In addition, the role of parents is also critical; active parental involvement significantly influences the development of social communication and emotion regulation in children with autism (Crowell, Keluskar, & Gorecki, 2019). Overall, although the challenges are significant, a combination of targeted interventions and supportive parent practices offers a pathway to improving the social skills and abilities of children with ASD, facilitating their better integration into social settings, and improving their overall quality of life.

ETC's development and application around the world

The ETC model was proposed by Vija Lusebrink in the early 1990s based on her observations of the interaction between art media and psychological processes. The model emphasizes the interaction of different levels in artistic activities, such as sensory movement, emotional perception, and cognitive symbolism, and believes that these levels reflect the activities of different functional areas of the brain. The ETC model provides a structured perspective to help therapists choose appropriate art therapy techniques based on the specific needs of patients. In clinical practice, the ETC model guides therapists to touch and stimulate patients' inner resources through art activities. Through the kinesthetic/sensory level, therapists can help patients release repressed emotions and experiences; at the perceptual/emotional level, the use of colors and shapes guides patients to express and adjust their emotions; the cognitive/symbolic level helps patients explore their deepest thoughts and beliefs through symbols and metaphors; finally, at the creative/integrative level, patients integrate personal experiences through creative expression to promote self-understanding and growth. According to research, ETC has attracted more and more attention and applications since it was first proposed. In many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, etc., ETC is widely used in clinical practice and treatment. More and more psychotherapists and art therapists incorporate the ETC model into their work to help patients deal with emotional, psychological and spiritual issues. In addition, with the increasing awareness of mental health issues and treatment methods, some emerging markets and regions have also begun to adopt ETC as an effective treatment method, providing more opportunities and possibilities for the global promotion of this model.

As Chinese society continues to progress and develop, people are paying more and more attention to children's mental health issues. As awareness of mental health issues and treatment methods continues to increase, some emerging markets and regions have begun to adopt ETC as an effective treatment method. These regions may face challenges such as lack of mental health resources

and cultural differences, and the flexibility and creativity of the ETC model enable it to better adapt to different cultural backgrounds and treatment needs. In order to meet the growing demand, many institutions and organizations provide professional training and certification courses for the ETC model. These training courses cover the theoretical basis, clinical application skills and practical guidance of the ETC model, providing professional knowledge and skills support for psychotherapists and art therapists.

In many countries, ETC is widely used in the fields of psychotherapy and art therapy. More and more psychotherapists, clinical psychologists and art therapists are incorporating the ETC model into their work and applying it to various populations and clinical situations, including children, adolescents, adults and the elderly. The Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) provides a unique and effective treatment method for clients through creative expression and art forms. During the treatment process, clients can explore, express and process their inner emotions and experiences, promoting emotional regulation, cognitive reconstruction and personal growth.

The expressive therapy continuum is divided into the following stages

Kinesthetic/Sensory Level

In his research on the kinesthetic/sensory level, Lusebrink (2010) emphasized the application of the expressive therapy continuum (ETC) in art therapy, pointing out that this level reflects the different functions and structures of the brain in processing visual and emotional information. At this level, art activities focus primarily on direct physical interaction with art materials, such as touch, movement, and intuitive response. This interaction helps develop body awareness and non-verbal emotional expression. For example, using clay or painting can help clients express and process emotions through physical movement and tactile exploration. These activities not only promote the reception and processing of sensory stimuli, but are also important ways to regulate emotions. Lusebrink's research reveals how the use of art media at this level helps therapists assess how clients process information through the different levels of the ETC and how to identify step-by-step transitions between these levels and lateral changes within each level in treatment plans. This understanding enhances the effectiveness of art therapy interventions and promotes further research on art therapy and brain research.

In addition, Lusebrink et al. further elaborated on the interdisciplinary basis of ETC in their 2013 study, including cognitive psychology, art education, and the combination of multiple therapeutic approaches, which provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding the application of ETC at the kinesthetic/sensory level. This study emphasizes how the ETC model integrates multiple therapeutic approaches from basic sensory experiences to complex cognitive processes, demonstrating the wide applicability and flexibility of ETC in practice.

This is the lowest level of the ETC and involves basic physical actions and sensory experiences. In this level, art activities focus on the physical properties of materials and the sensory experiences when using art materials, such as touch, movement, and intuitive reactions. The kinesthetic/sensory level emphasizes direct physical interaction between the individual and art materials, which can help clients develop body awareness and non-verbal expression in emotion regulation. For example, working with clay or painting can help clients express and process emotions through physical actions and tactile exploration.

Perceptual/Affective Level

The Perceptual/Affective Level is a key level in the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) that delves into the perceptual

processes and emotional experiences of art activities. At this level, art therapy involves not only the stimulation of the senses, but also the deep perception and emotional response to these sensory experiences. This level aims to help clients explore and express personal emotions through art forms, such as color selection, shape, and image composition, which can reflect an individual's emotional state and inner feelings. The main task of the therapist at this stage is to help clients identify and interpret the emotional content of their artwork in order to better understand and meet their emotions and emotional needs.

According to Lusebrink (2010), this level emphasizes how individuals process emotions through perceptual activities in the process of art creation, which is closely related to the structure and function of processing visual and emotional information in the brain. By evaluating the formal elements in the artwork, the therapist can determine how the client processes information at different levels of the ETC, thereby more accurately planning the treatment process, identifying the gradual transition between levels and the lateral changes within each level. In addition, Lusebrink et al. (2013) further discussed the application of this level in their study of the interdisciplinary basis of ETC. They mentioned that ETC combines concepts from cognitive psychology, art education, and a variety of therapeutic methods, which provides a more comprehensive perspective for understanding the application of ETC at the perceptual/emotional level. This study shows how ETC integrates a variety of therapeutic methods from basic sensory experiences to complex cognitive processes, demonstrating the wide applicability and flexibility of ETC in actual treatment. Through these studies, we can see the core role of the perceptual/emotional layer in art therapy, that is, to promote individual emotional expression and emotional integration through perceptual and emotional experiences in artistic activities. This level not only helps clients express and adjust their emotions, but also provides therapists with an important basis for evaluating and planning treatment, making art therapy play a vital role in promoting individual emotional health and psychological growth. This level focuses on the perceptual process and emotional experience in artistic activities. At the perceptual/emotional level, art therapy involves not only sensory stimulation, but also the perception and emotional response to these sensory experiences. This level helps clients explore and express their emotions through art forms, such as color selection, shape, and image composition can reflect an individual's emotional state and inner feelings. Therapists at this stage can help clients identify and interpret the emotional content of their artwork to better understand their emotions and emotional needs.

Cognitive/Symbolic Level

The Cognitive/Symbolic Level is a high level of the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) and focuses on more complex thought processes, including symbolic thinking, abstract thinking, and problem solving. In this level, artwork becomes an important medium for expressing an individual's inner thoughts and concepts. By creating artwork with symbolic meaning, clients are able to explore and express their own ideas, belief systems, and personal and cultural identities. Therapeutic activities at this level help clients process deeper psychological issues through symbols and metaphors, while promoting the development of higher cognitive functions such as reflection and self-awareness.

The study by Lusebrink and Hinz (2020) highlights the similarities between cognitive and symbolic aspects of art therapy and large-scale network systems of the brain. They show that the cognitive/symbolic level functions of the ETC are directly linked to brain networks responsible for adaptive function, psychopathological disconnection, and compensation of functional components. This finding not only enhances the understanding of the art therapy process, but also promotes further research on art therapy and the brain. In addition, Lusebrink's 2010 study explored

how the ETC framework can help understand the application of brain structure and function in art therapy, especially the activity of different brain regions that process visual and emotional information. By evaluating the formal elements in the artwork, the therapist can determine how the client processes information at different levels of the ETC, thereby identifying gradual transitions between levels and lateral changes within each level in treatment planning. This approach enhances the effectiveness of art therapy and makes it a profound psychological exploration tool.

The higher cognitive/symbolic level involves more complex thought processes such as symbolic thinking, abstract thinking, and problem solving. In this level, artwork is viewed as a medium for expressing an individual's inner thoughts and concepts. By creating artwork with symbolic meaning, clients are able to explore and express their ideas, belief systems, and personal and cultural identities. Therapeutic activities at this level can help clients process deeper psychological issues through symbols and metaphors, while also promoting the development of higher cognitive functions such as reflection and self-awareness.

Creative/Integrative Level

In the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC), the Creative/Integrative Level represents the highest level of the therapeutic process, focusing on promoting a deeper integration of experiences and achieving personal growth and self-actualization through creative expression. At this level, artistic activities involve integrating perceived information, emotional experiences, and cognitive processing to express and understand one's inner world through a more complex artistic creation process.

According to Lusebrink and Mārtinsone (2013), the recreation/integration level emphasizes the integration of experiences at different levels of treatment through the medium of art to promote the overall growth and development of individuals in terms of emotion, cognition, and social function. The therapeutic activities at this level are not only art creation itself, but also reflection and introspection on the creative process, helping clients gain insight into and reorganize their life experiences and personal values. This comprehensive approach not only enhances the effectiveness of art therapy, but also makes it a powerful tool to adapt to different treatment needs.

Further research has shown that the application of the re-creative/integrative level can stimulate individuals' creativity and imagination through the medium of art, helping them to transcend traditional thinking patterns and explore new ways of self-expression. The goal of this level of treatment is to promote psychological integration and personal transformation through artistic activities, thereby improving quality of life and self-efficacy (Lusebrink, 2010).

The Re-Creativity/Integration level occupies a central position in the expressive therapy continuum and achieves the ultimate goal of treatment - personal growth and self-actualization - by promoting a deeper engagement with the art-making process and psychological integration. The successful implementation of this approach relies on the art therapist's expertise and sensitivity to the client's needs, as well as a supportive and open therapeutic environment, which are key factors in promoting individual progress and change on all levels. At this highest level of ETC, the treatment process focuses on promoting a deeper integration of the individual's experiences and achieving personal growth and self-actualization through creative expression. This level involves the integration of perceived information, emotional experience, and cognitive processing to express and understand the individual's inner world through a more complex art-making process.

The ETC provides a multi-level framework that enables art therapists to choose different levels of intervention methods based on the specific needs of their clients. By flexibly switching between the four levels, therapists are able to fully support their clients' therapeutic process, from basic sensory experiences to complex

symbolic expressions, helping them achieve holistic growth and development in emotional, cognitive, and social functioning. This comprehensive approach not only enhances the effectiveness of art therapy, but also makes it a powerful tool that can be adapted to different treatment needs.

The Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) is a foundational model for art therapy that has been recognized for its effectiveness and adaptability in diverse cultural and clinical contexts around the world. As described by Lusebrink (2010), the ETC framework is built around a neuroscience foundation related to brain function and structure, enhancing the application of art therapy by matching therapeutic interventions to the cognitive and emotional processing needs of clients. This alignment is critical to promoting targeted and effective treatment outcomes, making the ETC an important tool in clinical art therapy practice. In addition, Hinz demonstrated through case studies how the ETC can be used to interpret the interaction between clients and art materials, further emphasizing its practical value in determining treatment direction and measuring treatment progress. Lusebrink, Mārtinsone, and Dzilna-Šilova (2013) emphasized the interdisciplinary nature of the ETC, integrating cognitive psychology, art education, and various therapeutic approaches, illustrating the comprehensive applicability of the model and its role in advancing art therapy as a complex therapeutic discipline. Additionally, Nam and Yau incorporated Chinese calligraphy into the framework, demonstrating the flexibility of ETC to adapt to different cultural contexts, highlighting the model's ability to resonate across different therapeutic traditions. General research on ETC emphasizes its role in enabling art therapists to understand and guide clients' interactions with art materials, which reflect their cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic processes. These interactions can provide insights into clients' psychological well-being and inform treatment strategies (Hinz, 2015; Lusebrink, 2010). Broader explorations of the development of ETC emphasize its complexity and potential to promote change through art therapy, which is relevant regardless of cultural context. Overall, these studies advocate for continued exploration and application of ETC, emphasizing its key role in enriching the therapeutic process and outcomes of art therapy around the world.

Cultural compatibility and adaptation of ETC in China

The cultural adaptation of the expressive therapy continuum (ETC) in China highlights the need to integrate Western treatment models with traditional Chinese cultural norms to improve their effectiveness and acceptance. Research has highlighted some strategies and challenges for adopting such models in the Chinese cultural context. For example, by studying foreign teachers in China, a deeper understanding of the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation was obtained, suggesting that similar approaches can promote the integration of therapeutic practices such as ETC by addressing language barriers, cultural misalignment, and building supportive relationships. Guo Feng and Hanley discussed the adaptation of cognitive behavioral therapy in China, emphasizing the need to adjust treatment techniques to conform to Chinese cultural expectations and values, which can be reflected in the adaptation of ETC. In addition, Xue Haofang et al. conducted a study on the digital adaptation of mental health interventions, emphasizing the importance of modifying content and delivery methods to resonate with local cultural preferences and proposed ways to integrate digital and art therapies (such as ETC) to better adapt to Chinese clients. Together, these findings suggest that effective cultural adaptation of ETC in China requires a comprehensive approach that includes understanding local cultural dynamics, carefully modifying treatment content, and adhering to cultural norms to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of treatment.

The ETC model emphasizes intervention through art activities at the sensorimotor, perceptual-emotional, and cognitive-symbolic levels to promote the individual's psychotherapy process. This model has been widely used and studied in Western countries, but in China, due to differences in culture, education, and social environment, the application and research of ETC is still relatively preliminary. Traditional Chinese culture values restraint and collectivism, which may affect the way individuals express themselves and deal with emotions, thereby affecting the implementation and effectiveness of ETC.

With the rapid development of social economy and the accelerated pace of life, people are facing increasing psychological pressure. In this context, mental health issues have gradually attracted the attention of the public and professional institutions, while traditional psychotherapy methods are often limited by cultural and language barriers. As an innovative art therapy method, the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) has shown unique importance in the field of mental health in China. Although its application in China is still in its infancy, the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) has begun to receive some attempts and applications in different fields and scenarios. With the increasing attention to mental health and the increasing recognition and demand for creative therapy methods, the application of ETC in China is expected to be further expanded and deepened.

Pay attention to mental health

The evolving psychotherapy approaches in the Chinese government reflect a growing awareness of mental health needs and the importance of culturally appropriate interventions. Beginning in 1991, Tung emphasized the need to modify insight-based therapy to fit the cultural background of Chinese American patients, stressing the importance of cultural compatibility in therapeutic practice. Hodges and Oeifurther explored the topic of cultural adaptation in 2007, discussing the compatibility of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) with Chinese cultural values and advocating for structural changes to the therapeutic process to better serve Chinese clients.

In 2003, Ran et al. demonstrated the effectiveness of a psychoeducational family intervention for schizophrenia in rural China, showing significant improvements in treatment adherence and reductions in relapse rates, indicating the benefits of family-based interventions. Building on this, (Ng et al., 2017) reviewed the status of mental health in China, noting that mental health services have continued to expand and integrate culturally adapted approaches such as CBT due to the increasing demand for mental health care.

Further, for example, the study by Zeng et al., researchers studied specific populations and revealed significant gaps in the knowledge and acceptance of psychotherapy among Chinese cancer patients, but also noted that most patients recognized the importance of psychotherapy after learning about it, suggesting that enhanced education and recognition by medical professionals can enhance treatment utilization. More recently, in 2023, Wei et al. documented efforts to train physicians in psychosomatic medicine and psychotherapy, reflecting institutional initiatives to improve the qualifications of healthcare providers, thereby improving the accessibility and quality of mental health care in China.

This chronological review demonstrates China's ongoing efforts to incorporate psychotherapy into its healthcare system. By emphasizing cultural sensitivity and professional education, China is gradually building a more comprehensive and effective mental health service system. These efforts have not only improved the quality of mental health services, but also helped reduce public misunderstandings and prejudices about mental health issues and promoted social acceptance and cultural adaptation in the field of mental health. This process is a strong testament to the continuous progress and development of China's mental health services, and

demonstrates China's active participation and contribution in the global mental health field.

Discussion

As a comprehensive art therapy framework, the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) has gradually attracted attention in China in recent years. Due to its unique treatment model and methods, the promotion and implementation of ETC in China faces many challenges, but also holds great development opportunities. This article will discuss in detail the cultural challenges, educational and policy environment deficiencies, and opportunities arising from the application of ETC in China, and finally propose corresponding strategic recommendations to promote the healthy development and widespread application of ETC in China.

Challenges

The first challenge facing the promotion of ETC in China is cultural adaptability. Since ETC originates from the Western cultural background, its treatment concepts and methods are different from the traditional Chinese expression habits. Chinese society traditionally tends to be restrained in emotional expression and collectivist values, which is to some extent in conflict with the individual expression and emotional directness encouraged by ETC. For example, the way of freely expressing the inner world through artistic creation emphasized in ETC may be regarded by some Chinese patients as inconsistent with traditional etiquette or too direct. Therefore, how to adjust ETC to be closer to Chinese cultural customs and psychological characteristics without losing its therapeutic effectiveness is an urgent problem that needs to be solved.

In addition, China's professional training and education resources in the field of mental health are relatively insufficient, which limits the training and development of ETC professionals. Although the Chinese government has increased its support for mental health education in recent years, professional art therapists are still very scarce compared to demand. As a treatment model that requires highly professional training, ETC has extremely high professional requirements for practitioners, including the dual professionalism of artistic skills and psychotherapy abilities. At present, there are few related art therapy courses in higher education in China, and related continuing education and vocational training are not popular enough. These are key factors restricting the development of ETC.

Insufficient policy and regulatory support is another challenge that ETC faces in China. In China, the regulations and policies for psychotherapy services are not yet fully mature, and the relevant professional qualification certification, service standards and regulatory mechanisms are not yet sound enough. This not only affects the guarantee of ETC service quality, but also restricts the standardization and professional development of this field.

Opportunities and strategies

Despite the many challenges, the development of ETC in China also faces unprecedented opportunities. With the rapid development of China's social economy and the improvement of public mental health awareness, the demand for psychotherapy services continues to grow, providing a broad market space for ETC. Especially in the current context of high social pressure and frequent psychological problems, ETC's treatment method of emotional regulation and psychological counseling through artistic creation has been welcomed and recognized by more and more people.

In order to seize this opportunity, we first need to strengthen the research on the cultural adaptability of ETC. Through interdisciplinary collaborative research, we can combine traditional Chinese cultural elements with modern psychotherapy theories to

explore ETC application models suitable for the Chinese cultural background. For example, we can combine traditional art forms such as Chinese calligraphy and painting with the ETC framework to develop art therapy methods with Chinese characteristics.

Secondly, it is also crucial to improve the training and education of ETC professionals. We can cooperate with international professional organizations to introduce mature foreign ETC education resources and training systems, and at the same time, open more ETC-related courses and majors in domestic universities and research institutions to cultivate more professionals that meet international standards. In addition, we can also carry out public mental health education projects through cooperation between the government and society to improve the public's awareness and acceptance of ETC.

Finally, seeking more support from the government is also the key to promoting the development of ETC in China. Through industry associations or professional institutions, we can suggest to relevant government departments to formulate targeted policy measures, such as establishing professional qualification certification, providing policy and financial support, and establishing industry service standards, so as to promote the healthy and orderly development of the ETC industry.

The development of ETC in China is a process full of challenges and opportunities. Through the implementation of the above strategies, we can effectively promote the cultural integration, talent cultivation and industry development of ETC in China, and ultimately make a positive contribution to promoting the mental health of the Chinese public.

Conclusion

The Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC), as the theoretical foundation of art therapy, has not only promoted the academic development of the field, but also greatly enriched the methods of clinical practice. The systematic and flexible nature of the ETC model allows it to adapt to the treatment needs of different patients and is an indispensable tool for psychotherapists in art therapy practice. Although the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) provides a powerful framework for art therapy, its application in China must be thoughtfully adapted to local cultural norms and artistic traditions such as calligraphy. To ensure the successful integration of ETC into the Chinese treatment environment, therapists must be provided with targeted professional training that highlights these cultural differences. In addition, the document calls for systematic efforts in public education to increase awareness and understanding of the benefits of ETC, encourage its acceptance and enhance its efficacy in meeting the mental health needs of China. This tailored approach is essential to the relevance and effectiveness of ETC in China's unique sociocultural landscape.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and valuable suggestions.

Funding

Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Author Contributions

Not applicable.

About the Authors

Xiaohan Niu

Graduate School of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Hanyang University, Korea

References

- [1] Ran, M.-S., Weng, X., Liu, Y.-J., Zhang, T.-M., Yu, Y.-H., Peng, M.-M., ... Xiang, M.-Z. (2019). Changes in treatment status of patients with severe mental illness in rural China, 1994–2015. *BJPsych Open*, 5(2), e31. doi:10.1192/bjo.2019.13 10.1192/bjo.2019.13
- [2] Jin, L., & Tam, T. (2015). Investigating the effects of temporal and interpersonal relative deprivation on health in China. *Social Science & Medicine*, 143, 26–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.08.014>
- [3] Zhuyun Lin. Go beyond the individual: an intersectional perspective on mental illness stigma in China, 27 April 2023, PREP RINT (Version 1) available at Research Square [<https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2851490/v1>]
- [4] Lin Z., 2023, "Go beyond the individual: an intersectional perspective on mental illness stigma in China". Research Square.
- [5] Ying, Y., Ruan, L., Kong, F., Zhu, B., Ji, Y., & Lou, Z. (2020). Mental health status among family members of health care workers in Ningbo, China, during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak: a cross-sectional study. *BMC psychiatry*, 20(1), 379. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02784-w>
- [6] Lei, F., Chung, E., & Ling Siew Eng. (2022). Factors Affecting Mental Health Among Chinese College Students: A Preliminary Review of Literature. *Journal of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development*, 8(1), 175-185.
- [7] Sun, J., PhD., & Buys, N., PhD. (2013). Challenges, opportunities and strategies in mental health promotion in china: Literature review of mental health promotion models. *International Public Health Journal, Suppl.Special Issue: Health Promotion to Improve Quality of...*, 5(4), 385-397. <https://doi.org/10.33736/jcshd.4496.2022>
- [8] Tang, L., Xu, F., Yu, G., Li, C., Wen, S., & Zheng, W. (2023). Efficacy of interpersonal psychotherapy in mainland China: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 14, 1160081. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.1160081>
- [9] Chen, J., Guo, L., Gu, L., & Han, H. (2021). The introduction of treatment and the cultural adaptability of western psychotherapies for eating disorders in China. *The International journal*

- of eating disorders, 54(1), 102–106. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23437>
- [10] Ng, R. M., Lee, C. K., Liu, J., Luo, J., Zu, S., Mi, S., et al. (2017). Psychotherapy services in China: current provisions and future development. *J. Contemp. Psychother.* 47, 87–94. doi: 10.1007/s10879-016-9345-4. [10.1007/s10879-016-9345-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-016-9345-4)
- [11] Carter, A., Davis, N., Klin, A., & Volkmar, F. (2005). *Social development in autism. Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders* (3rd ed., pp. 312-334).
- [12] Silveira-Zaldivara, T. ., Özerk, G. ., & Özerk, K. (2021). Developing Social Skills and Social Competence in Children with Autism. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 13(3).
- [13] Scatone, D. (2007). Social skills interventions for children with autism. *Psychology in the Schools*, 44, 717-726. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.2026>
- [14] Crowell, J. A., Keluskar, J., & Gorecki, A. (2019). Parenting behavior and the development of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 90, 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2018.11.007>
- [15] Lusebrink, V. B. (1990). *Imagery and visual expression in therapy*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- [16] Malchiodi, C. A. (Ed.). (2003). *Handbook of art therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- [17] Rubin, J.A. (Ed.). (2016). *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- [18] Lusebrink, V. B. (2010). Assessment and Therapeutic Application of the Expressive Therapies Continuum: Implications for Brain Structures and Functions. *Art Therapy*, 27(4), 168–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2010.10129380>
- [19] Lusebrink, V.B., Martinsone, K., & Dzilna-Šilova, I. (2013). The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC): Interdisciplinary bases of the ETC. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 18(2), 75 - 85.
- [20] Lusebrink, V. B., & Hinz, L. D. (2019). Cognitive and Symbolic Aspects of Art Therapy and Similarities With Large Scale Brain Networks. *Art Therapy*, 37(3), 113–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2019.1691869>
- [21] Hinz, L. D. (2015). Expressive Therapies Continuum: Use and Value Demonstrated With Case Study (Le continuum des thérapies par l'expression : étude de cas démontrant leur utilité et valeur). *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal*, 28(1–2), 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2015.1100581>
- [22] Nam, C., & Yau, E.A. (2021). Expressive Arts Therapy with Chinese Calligraphy Elements as a Working Approach. *Creative Arts Educ Ther*, 6(2):179–186 <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2020/6/2>
- [23] Hinz, L. D., VanMeter, M. L., & Lusebrink, V. B. (2022). Development of the Expressive Therapies Continuum: The Lifework of Vija B. Lusebrink, PhD, ATR-BC, HLM. *Art Therapy*, 39(4), 219–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2022.2131951>
- [24] Yi, S., Wu, N., Xiang, X., & Liu, L. (2020). Challenges, Coping and Resources: A Thematic Analysis of Foreign Teachers' Experience of Cultural Adaptation in China. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 168. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00168>
- [25] Guo, F., & Hanley, T. (2015). Adapting cognitive behavioral therapy to meet the needs of Chinese clients: Opportunities and challenges. *PsyCh journal*, 4(2), 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.75>
- [26] Sit, H. F., Ling, R., Lam, A. I. F., Chen, W., Latkin, C. A., & Hall, B. J. (2020). The Cultural Adaptation of Step-by-Step: An Intervention to Address Depression Among Chinese Young Adults. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 11, 650. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00650>
- [27] Tung M. (1991). Insight-oriented psychotherapy and the Chinese patient. *The American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 61(2), 186–194. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0079249>
- [28] Hodges, J., & Oei, T. P. (2007). Would Confucius benefit from psychotherapy? The compatibility of cognitive behaviour therapy and Chinese values. *Behaviour research and therapy*, 45(5), 901–914. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2006.08.015>
- [29] Ran, M. S., Xiang, M. Z., Chan, C. L., Leff, J., Simpson, P., Huang, M. S., Shan, Y. H., & Li, S. G. (2003). Effectiveness of psychoeducational intervention for rural Chinese families experiencing schizophrenia—a randomised controlled trial. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 38(2), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-003-0601-z>
- [30] Zeng, Z., Deng, Y., Liu, J., Yang, K., Peng, H., & Jiang, Y. (2022). Chinese Cancer Patients' Attitudes Toward Psychotherapy and Their Willingness to Participate in Clinical Trials of Psychotherapy. *Cancer control : journal of the Moffitt Cancer Center*, 29, 10732748221112664. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10732748221112664>
- [31] Wei, J., Fritzsche, K., Shi, L., Cao, J., Bassler, M., Müller, A. M., Zhang, Y., Lüdemann, H. T., & Leonhart, R. (2023). Training in psychosomatic medicine and psychotherapy for medical doctors in China: A field report. *Frontiers in medicine*, 10, 1119505. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fmed.2023.1119505>