

Pandemic Picture Stories: Chinese and Australian Children's Art and the COVID-19 Pandemic

BARBARA PISCITELLI AM¹ & CHEN ZHICHAO²

State Library of Queensland¹; School of Education, Wuchang Engineering College²

ABSTRACT

Children's views are rarely considered during times of crisis, yet children often have deep insights into current events and the world around them. Their voices are often silenced or ignored by their societies as children are seen in a process of "becoming" a citizen, rather than understood as "being" a member of society (James, 2011; Uprichard, 2007). Within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children are considered as important people in society whose views deserve to be heard. This paper presents young children's views of the COVID-19 pandemic and is written from a rights perspective.

Keywords: Children, Art, Pandemic, Virus, Hubei, Queensland

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)

Pandemic Picture Stories: Chinese and Australian Children's Art and the COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Art is a very important language for children. Children's art is one of an important set of tools used to raise the voice of children in society. Their art and stories help us understand the "unique contribution" children make to our understanding of events and experiences in the world (James, 2007). Through their art and story, children have shown us how they experienced the early pandemic as the world was beginning to change. Even though Hubei children cannot speak English and Queensland children cannot speak Chinese, they use the same language – art – to exchange ideas. We can see how they made sense of the confusing and challenging world they encountered. Their voices have shown that they understand how to protect themselves and others from the "monster" of the virus.

There are many ways of looking at children's art – from the normative to the comparative to the personal (McArdle and Boldt, 2013). Our interpretation of the children's pandemic picture stories is written to resist normative and comparative interpretations so often seen in educational and cross cultural studies. Instead, we focus on the personal stories told by the children's art. In examining these pandemic pictures, we use multiple lenses to look at children's art including art and aesthetics (Fineberg, 1997, 1998 & 2006), children's voices (James, 2007; Wright, 2010), children's artistic and cultural practices (James, 2007 and Tobin, 1999) and children's material culture (Brookshaw, 2009; Roberts, 2006).

Children are viewed in the material culture arena as a "minor concern" (Roberts, 2006) and most often are represented in collections by toys, clothing, schoolbooks and handcraft – materials provided to children by adults, often from commercial sources. Children's self-created material culture – such as drawings, paintings and stories – accounts for a very small part of collections in museums, libraries, archives and galleries. Even so, children's self-created collections are significant because they reveal children's images and stories and provide an opportunity for their ideas to be seen and heard in society. This collection forms an enduring legacy of original artworks by children of the COVID-19 pandemic era.

CREATING THE PROJECT

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, life changed for everyone. Among the first to feel its effects were the citizens of Hubei, China who experienced a hard lockdown for six weeks from 23 January to 8 March 2020. As their lives ground to a halt, children and families were confined to home during the cold winter months – waiting for Spring and hoping for the end of the virus. Work, school and civic life were all at a standstill.

I (Barbara) was highly alert to the situation because I knew people in Hubei quite well. I was particularly concerned about my Wuhan-based colleague and friend, Chen Zhichao. We have known one another and worked on international children's art exchanges together for more than 25 years. Our working relationship has been long and very productive. Together, we have collected over 750 examples of young children's art and stories from Hubei (China) and Queensland (Australia) from the

1990s to 2020.¹ During the pandemic outbreak, we were communicating on WeChat about our lives, and checking in on one another's welfare, as friends do.

A CALL FOR PANDEMIC COLLECTIONS

In March 2020, the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) put out a call for pandemic collections. I (Barbara) contacted Chen to see if he wanted to do another children's art exchange – this time asking young children to tell us about the pandemic. I (Chen) agreed. This became our third project, and perhaps our most important.

Using transcripts of our WeChat conversations, the children's art collection, ongoing correspondence and reflections, we wrote this article about how children in Hubei and Queensland handled the pandemic from two very different societies and circumstances. In gathering these works and observing the children's art, we discovered some ways to think about dealing with disruption, uncertainty, confinement, change and challenges. We believe there are important lessons to be learned from the children, their art and their stories.

In this paper, we explain our rationale and working process for gathering the children's art. We showcase 12 artworks made by children aged 4 to 8 years, provide contextual information about their art and interpret their key messages for the wider world. Finally, we discuss what we can learn from children about how to cope with pandemic life.

COLLECTING CHILDREN'S ART DURING THE PANDEMIC

Around the world there are many collections of children's art, but few are acquired with full details of the child artist's identity, location and story. Over many years, we have gathered children's ideas in a systematic way so that the work has the same integrity as adult work in museum collections. This method is revealed in the section below, and reflects our practice as collectors and curators of children's art.

Barbara:

Once State Library of Queensland approved a collection of children's art about the pandemic, I contacted Chen to see if he was interested in carrying out another children's art exchange. He left a hesitant message to say he thought it would be difficult to collect children's art because Hubei was very compromised with severe restrictions, including the closure of schools and kindergartens. He explained that people were confined to home. Population testing and social distancing was taking place to ensure that the virus was contained and extinguished. I left a voice message and asked if he could tap a few teachers on the shoulder to try to collect work while the children were at home. I suggested it could be a small-scale project that could be a positive experience. Chen agreed this was a "good idea" and went ahead to make contact with kindergartens.

Chen:

¹ These works form a significant part of the children's art collection at the State Library of Queensland. The [Dr Barbara Piscitelli AM Children's Art Archive](#) is considered a treasure and an important part of Queensland's memory. See Series 2 [Together Under One Sun](#) (1995) & Series 14 [One Sun, One World - Many Dreams](#) (2016) for our previous collections of children's art.

In March, I talked with Barbara. I decided I wanted to organise a program for young children's artworks about COVID-19 in Hubei, the place where the virus struck first. I phoned the heads of the early childhood education commission in different cities across Hubei. The Hubei Society of Early Childhood Education has 17 branches with many kindergartens and they agreed to join us. The kindergartens were all closed, but the children were still involved in learning at home supported by their teachers, principals and parents.

Barbara:

In Australia, a nationwide lockdown started in late March and schools were closed in Queensland until early May. In Queensland, the stay-at-home orders took place during the balmy days of early autumn following the Easter school holiday period, giving children an extended period of time with their families combined with learning online. I made contact with two kindergartens and two schools during the lockdown period and they agreed to collect some work when the children returned to school in May.

Once the groups agreed, I prepared a set of written guidelines to ensure that everyone was focused on the same objectives while collecting young children's art works in kindergartens and schools in the two countries. (See attachment.)

Chen:

In May, I sent a letter to the local committees of early childhood education to ask them to collect the children's art works. I used Barbara's guidelines to send out the call.

Hubei had a very difficult time extinguishing the virus. During lockdown and the time of strict restrictions, parents told children what was happening and got news stories from watching TV together with their children. Some parents, especially doctors and nurses, had to go out to work during lockdown. Medical parents told their children about what happened. The children used their eyes and ears to watch what the parents did and said. The children heard many stories from their parents and from the TV.

To fight the virus was a very great battle – a war – so we needed to have many helpers. Doctors and nurses came from all over China to help. The government built two large hospitals to care for sick people and did this in less than 3 weeks. Children watched this on TV and out the windows of their homes. To gain a victory against the virus was a great challenge. Kindergarten teachers asked the parents to tell their children the story of the challenge. I asked the principals of kindergarten to select children with parents who were doctors or nurses because they told the children the true story of what they did in hospital and how to fight the virus in everyday life. At that time, what children were seeing on TV were empty streets, hospitals being built, patients, doctors, nurses, protective clothing, and syringes for injections. You can see those images in their artworks.

The Hubei Society for Early Childhood has an Academic Commission with 35 members; members come from the different universities colleges and education societies, so I chose 15 members from the Academic Commission to help me select the children's artworks which were sent to Australia. The group included kindergarten principals, the chairs of the local societies of early childhood education, professors and teachers in the colleges and universities, and some from the education sector.

We received more than 850 art works from across the province. We used two principles to help us select the children's work to become part of the pandemic collection: the work had to reflect the children's own true stories and be made by the children themselves.

WHAT CHILDREN FROM HUBEI AND QUEENSLAND THINK OF THE PANDEMIC

Through our collection, we have been able to glimpse into how young children in two nations made sense of the pandemic at its start in 2020. Children from Chinese and Australian societies paint different pictures and tell different stories about the pandemic. Art education is valued and taught differently in China and Australia. We have previously explored why this is so and believe it has to do with different expectations of children from the societal to the personal level, and of different material and socio-cultural support systems for art education. Our observations from twenty years ago remain much the same today (Piscitelli, Pham and Chen, 1999) – children are shaped by the cultures in which they live and the schools they inhabit. In China, children receive a strong art education from the early years. Chinese children's art has been deeply influenced by traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, so children's work shows the details of objects and events, bringing new vitality to traditional painting. Australian children, by contrast, have a less structured art education and fewer skills are taught; children invent their own systems for making art in classrooms where freedom is highly valued.

Our pandemic collection includes 60 Australian artworks and 102 Chinese artworks. We selected 12 artworks to feature in this paper, but invite you to look further and explore the works for your own analysis and interpretation online by connecting to [Series 16: Pandemic Picture Stories](#).

HUBEI CHILDREN AND THE PANDEMIC

We start with the children's story of the pandemic in China. Children in Hubei's kindergartens tell detailed stories of the pandemic with their drawings and paintings reflecting the events they saw around them in everyday life. Their art and stories expose the key messages being promoted in the media and in the family – that the virus could be defeated by protecting one another, having faith in the experts, and staying home. Children were told the virus was airborne, and that they needed to take decisive action to prevent catching the virus, such as washing their hands, wearing a mask and social distancing. These ideas were explored in their art and stories, and because of the Hubei children's ability to illustrate ideas in detail, we were able to see clear thinking about how to fight the virus. As well, the emotional lives of the children may be understood by seeing how they depicted themselves in relation to the pandemic, the colours they chose and the scenes they set for living in pandemic times.

During this time, children stayed at home and were not afraid. Most of them were very happy because they could be full time in the company of their mother, father, brothers, sisters, grandfathers and grandmothers. The family could always get together at home. This was a very happy time for them to play games. There was also good food for the family because they had time to cook.

Doctors and nurses were called "white soldiers" who won victory in the pandemic battle, so this was very important to the children. Chinese children did not harbour fears. They, of course, missed their teachers and their friends, but did not show any fear in their artworks. For children, the pandemic was a special experience for family, not a fearful time. Their pictures tell powerful stories.



IMAGE 1: HELP DAD GET RID OF THE VIRUS²

Pingchuan Tang, aged 5, from no.2 kindergarten affiliated to Hubei Provincial Organisation, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the quarantine in Wuhan, everyone responded to the call to stay at home to reduce the risk of infection. In order to ensure the daily diet of my family, my father, who is the strongest, took the important job of buying food in the community. Every time my father went to buy a group purchase, he would be "fully armed", wearing goggles, mask, hat, raincoat, shoe covers and gloves. As soon as he got home, my mother and I would help him, spraying alcohol to sterilize and make sure he wouldn't bring the virus home. We believed that with our joint efforts, the virus would be driven away and the pandemic will eventually come to an end.

² Each artwork title is hyperlinked with a persistent URL to a high quality image in the SLQ Dr Barbara Piscitelli AM Children's Art Archive Collection Guide. Press on the title to see the image.



IMAGE 2: [I LOVE MY FAMILY](#)

Shuqi Zheng, aged 5, from Chuang Wang Town Central Kindergarten, Xianning, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

COVID-19 appeared, the sky was full of viruses and all the people were staying at home. In order to protect everyone, the brave little girl stepped forward to fight with the virus. She dialled 120, called for white angels from the sky to eliminate the virus.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 3: [BATTLE OF THE NEW WHITE COAT ANGELS AGAINST COVID-19](#)

Sihan Li, aged 5, from Huanggang Experimental Kindergarten, Huanggang, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

COVID-19 suddenly invaded our home. Many of my family members are doctors. They and their colleagues in the hospital, dressed in white protective suits, holding syringes, disinfection guns and carrying disinfectant, fought against the virus bravely. People in the cities stayed at home, protecting themselves and supporting the white soldiers silently. I hope this battle will soon be over and the white soldiers will come back in triumph.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 4: [HOPE](#)

Yuxiang Wang, aged 4, from Huanggang Experimental Kindergarten, Huanggang, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the pandemic, we were not allowed to go out to play with our friends. My sister and I stayed beside the window to enjoy the scene outside. Mum took a photo for us, and I painted this picture.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 5: [PUT ON YOUR MASK AND SAY NO TO THE VIRUS](#)

Yu Feng, aged 4, from No.3 Kindergarten Affiliated to Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

What can we do to keep the virus from getting into our body? Yeah, use a mask! Before the scientists eliminate all these viruses, we can use masks to prevent the virus from entering our bodies. Come with me to wear a mask to protect yourself!

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 6: [GUARDIAN OF LOVE](#)

Ruixue Shi, aged 4, from Affiliated Kindergarten to Administrative Organisation of Jiangxia, Wuhan, Hubei, China.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My little baby sister hasn't come out from mummy's belly yet. I told her that when she comes out, all will be better and we can have fun in the sunshine freely, because the virus will be defeated by our medical staff and people soon.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)

QUEENSLAND CHILDREN AND THE PANDEMIC

In Queensland, a relatively small number of COVID-19 cases were recorded at the time of lockdown but people were on edge from the unknowns of the pandemic. Fear ran rampant in society, leading to panic buying and denial. The messaging about COVID-19 was often unclear and ambiguous, particularly in the early days when the nation was coming to grips with the threat the virus presented (Davey, 2020). Children, especially young children, gathered their ideas from watching television, observing and listening to their parents, and experiencing a new way of life at home in lockdown.

I (Barbara) recruited four programs to participate from the Brisbane region, representing a cross section of inner city and outer suburban children from diverse cultural and socio-economic circumstances from kindergartens and primary schools. After a five week lockdown, when children returned to their kindergartens and schools, they made images about their theories of the coronavirus and conveyed information about their everyday lockdown lives at home – playing outside in the autumn weather and learning online.

Queensland teachers said children were tired of the pandemic and few really wanted to make picture or tell stories about their experiences. In the two kindergartens, children were blasé about the initiative but teachers found that group time conversations yielded some voluntary work by very young children where they shared their theories about the virus and the pandemic in their graphic works. At the primary schools, children were prompted to create picture stories in a semi-structured session where they thought about what they felt like during the pandemic – looking at the happy/sad parts of their experiences.



IMAGE 7: [UNTITLED](#)

Maxwell Klug, aged 5, from Chapel Hill Kindergarten, Chapel Hill, Queensland, Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Corona virus goes from body to body. It spreads and spreads and spreads.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 8: [UNTITLED](#)

Sophie Moore, aged 4, from Chapel Hill Kindergarten, Chapel Hill, Queensland Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

The germ is going into her mouth. Then, she coughed out the germs. Hundreds of germs come from lots of people. The germ is called the Corona Virus.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)



IMAGE 9: UNTITLED

Letasi Funganitou, aged 8, from Woodridge State School, Woodridge, Queensland Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the coronavirus pandemic, schools were closed. We all needed to stay home. I was sad because we could not come to school and I would miss art lessons and learning.

My artwork is about one of my favourite things I did during my time at home. I played on my computer doing Mathletics.



IMAGE 10: UNTITLED

Steve Said, aged 8, from Woodridge State School, Woodridge, Queensland Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the coronavirus pandemic, schools were closed. We all needed to stay home. I was sad school was closed but happy that we could do online learning.

My artwork is about one of my favourite things I did during my time at home. After I finished doing my schoolwork online, I was able to play a game called Roblox.



IMAGE 11: [UNTITLED](#)

Farhiya Asad Ali, aged 8, from Woodridge State School, Woodridge, Queensland Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the coronavirus pandemic, schools were closed. We all needed to stay home. I was worried that the schools would never be open again.

My artwork is about one of my favourite things I did during my time at home. I liked to ride my scooter up and down my street.



Image 12: [Untitled](#)

Noah Sciascia, aged 7, from Woodridge State School, Woodridge, Queensland Australia.

ARTIST STATEMENT

During the coronavirus pandemic, schools were closed. We all needed to stay home. I was sad because I would miss seeing the teachers at school.

My artwork is about one of my favourite things I did during my time at home. It is a picture of me and my Dad playing in the rain. It was so much fun.

JACE Vol 15, No 1 (2021)

WAYS OF LOOKING AT CHILDREN'S PANDEMIC ART: CONCLUSIONS

Children's art is art. When looking at children's art, we use the same kinds of strategies we would use in talking about any art. For example, we explore the elements of art such as colour, line, shape, design, composition, texture and pattern. We examine the meaning in the child's art, and ask questions to tease out any story behind the picture – looking for clues in titles or artist statements. We also read the emotional content of the image, as a way of interpreting and understanding children's aesthetic practice.

In this collection of pandemic picture stories, young children from Hubei and Queensland provide us with clear localized messages about life in a time of global change. From these works, we have seen how children deal with disruption, uncertainty, confinement, change and challenges. They speak in both images and words about the importance of protecting one another, of looking outward to the hope of a virus free world, and of having faith in ourselves and others against the common enemy of the virus. While they acknowledge that they missed their friends and schoolmates during lockdowns, they also indicated that they found pleasure in life at home – especially having time to play with family, to share meals and to be together.

Art makes children powerful – their creative practice contributes to their well-being and provides a sense of achievement. When children take their place in the public arena as artists, the work they make provides society with a chance to hear their voice, to see their ideas and to consider them as astute observers of life itself. Children often say in art what they can't say in words, and their pandemic picture stories reveal deep understanding and sensitivity about how to protect one another and the wider world through self-care and social distancing.

These pandemic picture stories art are much more than pretty pictures – they are documents that reveal to us the ideas of children in a global health emergency. These images will be forever accessible to the wider world to see how young children viewed the COVID-19 pandemic and learned about how to live with confusion, challenge, disruption and change.

Children's pandemic picture stories revealed to us an important truth that children not only use their artworks to express what they see with their eyes and the emotions they feel in their hearts, but also use art to truly record the reality of important global events. These artworks arouse thinking about social reality from a wider point of view, enabling once sidelined voices and views to have a place in public discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge and thank the many children, teachers, parents, principals, colleagues and organisations who helped us to make this collection a reality. To the children, we owe a debt of gratitude for sharing their ideas with humanity. To all the adults, thank you for the work you have done with young children to gather their ideas during the start of the pandemic.

All participants donated original artwork and stories to the State Library of Queensland in 2020.

REFERENCES

- ACEQCQA - Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (2020). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Framework for Australia*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks>.
- Brookshaw, S. (2009). The Material Culture of Children and Childhood: Understanding Childhood Objects in the Museum Context, *Journal of Material Culture*, 14 (3), 365 – 383.
- Davey, Melissa (2020). Australia is crying out for clearer messaging on coronavirus rambling politicians told, *The Guardian*. (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/mar/24/australia-is-crying-out-for-clearer-messaging-on-coronavirus-rambling-politicians-told>)
- Fineberg, J. (1997). *The Innocent Eye: Children's Art and the Modern Artist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fineberg, J. (Ed.) (1998). *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fineberg, J. (Ed.) (2006). *When We Were Young: New Perspectives on the Art of the Child*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- James, A. (2007). Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials, *American Anthropologist*, 109 (2), 261-272.
- McArdle, F. and Boldt, G. (Eds.) (2013). *Young Children, Pedagogy and the Arts: Ways of Seeing*. New York: Routledge.
- Piscitelli, B., Pham, M. C. & Chen Z. (1999). Young Children's Art Education in Australia, Vietnam and China: A Comparative Perspective. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 19:1, 21-30.
- Read, Stella. (2020). Big Voices – Children's Art Matters - <https://vimeo.com/416215278>.
- Roberts, S. (2006). Minor Concerns: Representations of children and childhood. In *British Museums, Museum and Society*, 4 (3), 152 – 165.
- United Nations (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>.
- Uprichard, E. (2007). Children as 'beings and becomings': Children, childhood and temporality. *Children & Society*, 22, 303-313.
- Wright, S. (2010). *Understanding Creativity in Early Childhood: Meaning Making and Children's Drawings*. London: Sage.