

# What Do Children See in Other Children's Art? Intercultural Interaction through Art

What Do  
Children See in  
Other Children's  
Art? Intercultural  
Interaction  
through Art

Shei-Chau Wang  
Associate Professor  
Northern Illinois University  
Email: scwang@niu.edu

## Abstract

This study investigates the interaction between two groups of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade children using an Internet platform (weblog) to share their art in 2010. These two groups of children, one in the United States and the other in Taiwan, were invited to participate in an online artwork showcase. During a four-week period, the art teachers in both locations taught a lesson with a specific cultural context: "Door Gods for the Chinese New Year" in Taiwan and "Portrait of American Culture" in the U.S. Teaching materials/units and photographs of the children's works-in-progress were periodically posted on the weblog until their lessons had been completed. Then the two groups, assisted by their teachers, discussed/commented on their foreign peers' works. In the analysis of children's art and this intercultural art exchange, the following issues are discussed: visual symbolism, cultural familiarity, language, differing definitions of appropriate content, and instructional styles.

**Key Words:** intercultural interaction, visual symbolism,  
children's voices, cultural context

## Introduction

Internet access has come to play an essential role in social interaction and information sharing. People perform many Internet-based activities, such as sending and receiving email, forming and joining social networks, sharing and browsing information (Roland, 2010) as features of their everyday lives. The use of the Internet changes concepts of physical existence and transcends geographical limitations (Delacruz, 2009). Teachers cannot ignore the Internet as a useful tool/medium to teach and broaden students' vision of the world (Burton, 2010; Lin, 2011; Sweeny, 2010). To take advantage of the Internet, I recently designed a collaborative study that involved two teachers and their classes of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade children, one in the United States and the other in Taiwan. The purpose of my investigation was to gain an understanding of how children might experience intercultural communication through visual art and to examine the characteristics of cultural contexts in art teaching and learning.

A significant extra-artistic value of art education is assisting children to identify their own cultural heritage and appreciate the culture of others (Delacruz, Arnold, Kuo, & Parsons, 2009). Through interacting with adults and peers, children are able to explore culture-specific elements in a particular context. Rusanen, Rifa-Valls, Alexandre, Bozzi, and Haikio (2011) summarized three levels of interaction that lead to a better understanding of children's culture: "culture for children, the culture of children, and culture with children." These three levels, not "mutually exclusive" but "overlapping" (p. 246), illustrate the constantly changing role of adults' involvement in the cultural education of children. At each level, it is nearly impossible to eliminate an adult's influence on how children absorb cultural elements and gradually learn to create and establish their own cultural patterns. Listening to children's voices/opinions in the process of cultural exploration could help teachers assess how children connect what they have learned to their own visual/cultural context (Finger & Jamieson-Proctor, 2009; Nyman, 2002, Solano-Flores, 2011). So I provided an online discussion forum where children could share ideas about their art cross-culturally with each other.

## Framework of the Study

The study took place in fall 2010 when both Ms. V in the United States and Ms. L in Taiwan taught an art class of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade children in their respective schools. Each agreed to conduct a four-week culture-specific project and to document the development of the children's art. To emphasize the importance of cultural context in art learning, each lesson was designed to deal with a cultural icon/image. Each group was presented with a lesson, produced art in response, then shared and discussed one another's art online.

The American group consisted of twenty-one 4<sup>th</sup>-grade children in Ms. V's art class in a public elementary school in the Midwestern United States. Ms. V introduced "Jasper Johns—Portrait of American Culture" to her students and asked them to create art in response to the works of Johns. She then photographed the children's works in progress and their finished works, posted the photos on a weblog set up for this cultural exchange, and monitored the weblog posting. The Taiwanese group consisted of twenty-eight 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in Ms. L's art class in a public elementary school in central Taiwan. Ms. L introduced "Door Gods for the Chinese New Year" and did exactly the same things as did Ms. V.

Before implementing their current project, both teachers prepared their students for international communication by guiding them in writing artist statements about works they had completed and critiquing art in their classes. A Yahoo network group (weblog) was created as a platform to host both teachers' teaching packages, including lesson plans, teaching materials, photos of children's works in progress, and the final works. This weblog permitted the teachers to track each other's project and allowed the other group to review the works of their international peers. Ms. V presented her project so clearly that Ms. L could follow it and explain it to her class in Chinese. Since the weblog posts were in English, Ms. L, who is bilingual, also helped the children translate/edit their posted information and comments about their art and engage in online discussions. Using English for communication gave the Taiwanese children, in their second year of required English, a welcome opportunity to practice the new language they

were learning. Ms. L also translated her project for Ms. V and the American children. Translating cultural symbols and humor from Chinese into English was challenging because details about traditional background and local religions and their practices were very difficult to describe briefly.

During the four-week teaching period, both Ms. V and Ms. L updated their groups' work-in-progress on the weblog by posting photos weekly. When both projects had been completed, the children in both countries were assisted and monitored by their teachers as they commented on their international peers' works and participated in online discussion with each other for the next two weeks. Both teachers then sent me their observational reports and reflections for my analysis.

### **Ms. V's American Culture Project**

The objectives of this project were that children

- Identify and critically analyze images of American culture through the specific works of Jasper Johns, including his "American Flag"
- Create a flag to represent their personal ideas of American culture and write a one-paragraph artist statement to describe and reflect these ideas.

This project consisted of five units taught during the four-week period.

Unit 1: The Pop Art movement and Jasper Johns: Images of artwork in this movement were presented with in-class discussion. Works of Jasper Johns were featured with a focus on the iconic symbols.

Unit 2: Functions and meanings of a national flag

Unit 3: Composition and color plan for the children's flags

Unit 4: Paper tearing, tempera painting, and collage techniques

Unit 5: Artwork presentation: Matting and artist statement

At the end of these five units, each child filled out a Composition Reflection Form by responding to three questions: What does your flag symbolize to you? Why did you choose this design for your flag? What do the colors you chose stand for?

## Ms. L's Door God Project

What Do  
Children See in  
Other Children's  
Art? Intercultural  
Interaction  
through Art

The objectives of this Project were that children

- Become familiar with the myth of the Chinese New Year and the functions of door gods in Taiwanese tradition, identify the characteristics of door gods, and describe the cultural symbolism of color combinations in door god designs
- Design an original door god, define the god's characteristics, and create a paper door god by applying basic techniques of construction and coloring
- Present their door gods to the class on a stage by orally describing the uniqueness of the door gods.

This project consisted of six units taught during the four-week period.

Unit 1: A legend of the Chinese New Year: *Happy Chinese New Year*, a story book, was used to explain the mystery of the word “*nian*” (New Year in Chinese). In this narrative, door gods are mentioned as protective symbols for houses.

Unit 2: Chinese New Year customs

Unit 3: Basic elements of door gods and traditional door god examples

Unit 4: Technique: Construction and examples of puppets

Unit 5: Contemporary styles of door gods

Unit 6: Color study

At the beginning of the project, Ms. L gave each child a Door God Project Review Sheet (Figure 1). Children followed Ms. L's instructions to respond to activities and questions on the sheet. One question asked them to draft a door god and as basis for the artist statement to describe the door god's characteristics. In their final works, their drafts were enlarged to life-size door gods.

What Do Children See in Other Children's Art? Intercultural Interaction through Art

畫門神。迎新年 Door God Project Review Sheet

Class \_\_\_\_\_ Name \_\_\_\_\_ Seat Number \_\_\_\_\_

1. List three traditional Chinese New Year customs.

--	--	--

2. Design your door god and describe the characters/features of the god.

Draw your door god draft here.	Write the description here.

3. Which is your favorite door god in class? Why?

I like \_\_\_\_\_ (write your classmate's name) door god because-

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Which group's presentation were you impressed by the most? Why? (Note: students presented their door gods in groups with a theme.)

I was impressed by Group \_\_\_\_\_ (list the group's name and its theme) because

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What have you learned from this project?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. In this project, I think I did  Excellent  O.K.  not as well as I expected (check one box)

7. I love the following part(s) of this lesson (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> The myth of the Chinese New Year	<input type="checkbox"/> The New Year customs	<input type="checkbox"/> Images of door gods
<input type="checkbox"/> Formation and examples of puppets	<input type="checkbox"/> Making a door god	<input type="checkbox"/> Group presentations
<input type="checkbox"/> Presenting and discussing our door gods	<input type="checkbox"/> Peer assessment	<input type="checkbox"/> Award ceremony

Parents' comments

\_\_\_\_\_



Figure 1 Door God Project Review Sheet (Originally in Chinese, translated by S.C. Wang)

### Children's Voices

After images of the finished works had been posted on the weblog, both Ms. V and Ms. L assisted their groups in typing artist statements to go with their works. The contrast in the English writing ability of the two groups of children very much affected the quantity and quality of their statements. All the American children wrote a paragraph to explain their use of symbols/icons and colors in their works and the meanings of the selected

motifs. However, most of the Taiwanese children could write only a few simple sentences in English but, of course, wrote full paragraph statements in Chinese. After the artist statements had been posted, both groups of children were led by their teachers to review the other group's works and leave brief comments. The American children left more comments on the Taiwanese children's works than the Taiwanese children left on the works of the American children. Thus, the online interactions could not be considered significant because the Taiwanese children were unable to respond enthusiastically to the American children's comments due to the language barrier. Therefore, Ms. V and Ms. L each showed the works of the other group to their respective class and conducted on-site discussions about these images. Below are samples of both groups of children's English artist statements and one set of the American children's comments on a Taiwanese child's work.

### Samples of American Children's Artist Statements

US-T: My flag symbolizes the terrorist war. My dad's friend works really hard to keep the United States safe so I wanted to cheer the army on by making the flag. The orange represents evil and the terrorists; the shield in the center represents the army; and the sparks represent the war burning away. (Figure 2)



Figure 2 US-T's flag

US-B: My flag represents the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. I chose this design for my flag because in this mess, many animals have oil on them. So, some people are trying to clean them up. The colors of red, white, and blue

stand for the U.S.A. The black means it has oil on the duck, and the light blue means it is okay. (Figure 3)



Figure 3 US-B's flag

US-A: My flag represents my Lithuanian culture and my American culture. I think it is important because where I come from is important to me. The four flags in the corners are Lithuanian flags. They represent my mom, grandma, great-grandma, and me. The red and white stripes in the middle are part of the American flag because that's a big part of my culture too. (Figure 4)



Figure 4 US-A's flag

### Samples of Taiwanese Children's English Artist Statements

TW-D: My door god is big and fat. He is bald and has big eyes and a small mouth but no nose. He looks crazy in his armor. He has knife. (Figure 5)





Figure 5 TW-D's Gang Door God

TW-A: My door god is tall, thin, and big. She has straight yellow hair, small eyes, a tiny nose, but no ears. She is wearing a shirt and a skirt. She look[s] nice. I love my door god. (Figure 6)



Figure 6 TW-A's Witch Door God

TW-Y: My door god is tall with average weight. She has long straight hair, big black eyes, a small pointy nose, and a pair of small ears. She is wearing a Japanese outfit that looks beautiful. I think she is nice and pretty. (Figure 7)

What Do  
Children See in  
Other Children's  
Art? Intercultural  
Interaction  
through Art



Figure 7 TW-Y's Goddess of Mercy

### American Children's Comments on TW-Y's Art

US-M: What is on the bottom of her feet?

US-V: Do the bright colors stand for anything?

US-C: The dress has a lot of colors.

US-S: I like the way you drew the face.

US-O: The hairstyle is cool.

### Analysis and Discussion

#### Visual Symbolism

Several American children used flag motifs to represent different aspects of American culture, such as family values, peace vs. war, or environmental concerns. Some children also included peace symbols, doves, pink ribbons, hearts, and hands in their flags to show their understanding of those symbols. In their artist statements, they indicated the colors and symbols they selected to convey particular messages or their relevance to their personal circumstances, feelings, or experiences. However, most chose common/universal symbols and color combinations for their designs and did not strive to invent personal symbols or arrange them in unique compositions as expected in the project objective. In retrospect, Ms. V stated

that an in-depth discussion about national and personal symbolism might have encouraged the children to consider a broader range of symbolic possibilities for describing their cultural identities.

Ms. L's door god project was part of her "Chinese New Year Celebration" series. The children's task was to create a door god to be hung on the front door to protect the family during the coming year, the original function of door gods. In order to encourage the children to create their own door gods, Ms. L showed both traditional and contemporary door god images and some graphic designs inspired by door god images. Therefore, many children's designs were influenced by cartoons or comics. For example, TW-W transformed Doraemon, a popular Japanese Manga character, into his door god (Figure 8). Doraemon is a robot cat with magic powers very similar to those of a Chinese door god. In the past 30 years, the mass import of Japanese pop culture and TV programs, which contain not only Japanese but also American/European cultural elements, has significantly influenced the lives and therefore the art of young Taiwanese children (Kuo, 2009). Thus, children adopt many Japanese pop cultural icons and acquire Western culture/knowledge through Japanese TV programs translated into Chinese. Scholars define the Taiwanese as having a multilayered cultural identity (Kuo, 2009; Wang, & Kuo, 2009; Wang & Lo, 2010) in which Taiwanese/Chinese tradition is primary and foreign cultures, such as Japanese and American/European, are secondary. Most children grow up in this culturally mixed environment, defined as "cultural harmony" (Huynh & Benet-Martinez, 2011, p. 830); they accept those cultural values (Tu, 1996; Yang, 2001). This background knowledge shows why TW-W chose Doraemon as a superhero for his door god. Without this knowledge, the American children could not understand his choice; therefore, they did not comment on it.

What Do  
Children See in  
Other Children's  
Art? Intercultural  
Interaction  
through Art



Figure 8 TW-W's Doraemon Door God

Note: Images of Doraemon and the information about its creator can be found on the Fujiko F. Fujio Museum website <http://fujiko-museum.com/english/>

### Cultural Familiarity

Although Taiwan has a culturally mixed environment, it is not comparable to the more diverse cultural/ethnic environment in the United States. After reviewing Ms. V's lesson, I found that designing a flag with symbols and colors to represent American culture was challenging and not an altogether effective way of informing children about cultural uniqueness because living in a cultural environment is not the equivalent of understanding its cultural complexity. Assigning nine- or ten-year-old children a broad topic like "American cultural identity" without specific definitions or guided discussions seemed to be an ineffective approach. The children ended up using common/universal symbols as the images of American culture that they had recently learned from other classes. However, a successful work done by US-A (see Figure 4), who recognized her mixed cultural background and explained her symbols by a personal narrative, could promote "an understanding of cultural heritage and cultural diversity" (Rusanen et al., 2011, p. 246).

In contrast, Ms. L's lesson focused specifically on cultural tradition with "culturally controlled imagery" (Wilson, 2004, p. 307) and included examples from folk/decorative art and art-making to teach about door gods. The children followed guidelines to make their door gods culturally correct, while they also integrated images from other traditional or contemporary/popular cultural sources. Ms. L's teaching materials included a mixture of myths, folk tales, local religions, history, and tradition, a comprehensive view of the Chinese New Year celebration, that outsiders could hardly comprehend holistically without in-depth knowledge and physical participation. However, both the Taiwanese and American children shared an understanding of popular images, such as hearts, pink ribbons, high-tech cartoon weapons, jet-propelled shoes, miniskirts, etc.

### Language

The language barrier of the Taiwanese children had made communication difficult with the American children. Although most of the images of door gods created by the Taiwanese children were easy to identify without additional textual information and explanation, they could not fully express their thoughts in English. But in Chinese, they could write in detail; for example, TW-Y's Chinese description of her Goddess of Mercy (see Figure 7) is very different from her English statement. Here is my translation: "My goddess has an ancient Chinese hairdo decorated with a blue ribbon. She wears a colorful kimono with a blue miniskirt. In her ballet shoes, she stands on a lotus-shaped flying cloud. She is very cool!" It is worth noting that the superhero image of the goddess combines the lotus blossom on which a female Bodhisattva always stands and the flying cloud on which the monkey king in a famous 16th-century Chinese novel always flies. This cultural collage of Chinese, Japanese, Buddhist, and Western/European components reflects cultural harmony, while references to contemporary fashion and ballet, a beloved activity of little girls in many countries, render the image intriguing and accessible for cross-cultural conversation. Most of the American children had no problem writing their artist statements in English to explain the symbolism and context of American culture. With their very limited English, the Taiwanese children struggled to read their American

peers' statements and were less motivated to respond to them. The American children felt discouraged and challenged when trying to communicate with their Taiwanese peers. If the situation were reversed and the American children had to write in Chinese, the result would be the same. In addition, although Ms. L translated her teaching materials and helped her group to write artist statements in English, asking her to translate anything else in a short period of time was not practical.

### **Differing Definitions of Appropriate Content**

That some Taiwanese children represented their door gods armed with traditional or contemporary weapons surprised the American children. They wondered how Taiwanese children were allowed to include weapons in their art, when in American elementary schools the inclusion of weapons or violent images is prohibited. The American children asked Ms. V: "Why can they draw weapons on their pictures and we cannot?" Ms. V explained that the door gods are a feature of Taiwanese culture and weapons are essential to depictions of door gods. Ms. L also responded that the carved or permanently painted door gods displayed in local temples and shrines all show weapons; there is no way to talk about door gods without including these weapons. With a carefully arranged discussion, the children could gain an understanding of weapons as instruments of defense/protection, not aggression. Ms. L also mentioned that there was no reason not to allow this type of image because the children have seen them through the mass media and mostly through playing video games. Instead of covering children's eyes, teachers are responsible for guiding them to make critical judgments of images.

### **Instructional Styles**

Both Ms. V and Ms. L designed their projects to make children aware of some of the cultural elements around them. Ms. L introduced a cultural tradition through art, and the majority of the class carefully followed her instructions. However, she did not give many rules on how to make a door god; the children therefore were free to define the characteristics of their

door gods and include some pop-culture elements in the door gods. For example, traditionally door gods hold swords or other weapons that symbolize protection; in the children's works, some door gods have machine guns, cell phones, and other high-tech accessories as their weapons. This evidence shows that the children in Ms. L's class were able to construct and include their own visual cultural components in their art (Wilson, 2004).

Ms. V's American culture project emphasized the Pop Art movement and the commercial and mass-media influences. To introduce her project, she showed American culture through Pop Art and advertisements but did not clearly connect the cultural/artistic concepts of her teaching materials to the children's art production. She focused more on their skill development, such as the use of colors and techniques, than on the correlation between concepts and skills. As a result, the children's images were less conceptually original than those of the Taiwanese children and relied heavily on generic symbols and design, which fulfilled the requirements of Ms. V's assignment.

## Summary

This intercultural interactive communication through children's art would have been impossible without Internet access and the weblog, which served primarily in the image exchange. During this study, I focused on the art projects taught by two art teachers and the children's responses through their art. One significant benefit of using an online platform in this study is transcending the geographical limitations. Through the Internet, the children had the opportunity to share their art experience with their international peers, and art teachers were able to observe and learn from art instruction in different cultural contexts. Although the weblog communication was not significant and the two groups of children were unable to directly exchange opinions about each other's art, this study opened the 4<sup>th</sup>-grade children's eyes to the art that children in another country were making in their classroom. The language difference is always an issue in any international communication and collaboration; however, with the newly developed Internet/computer technology, translation may be accurate enough to overcome this barrier soon, especially for children at the elementary level.

What Do  
Children See in  
Other Children's  
Art? Intercultural  
Interaction  
through Art

Learning cultural context is not just checking the written documents or browsing the Internet resources but requires engaging in cultural practices and broadening a person's cultural imagination. Ms. L integrated the children's own cultural tradition with a contemporary teaching idea. The superhero is one of the big ideas in teaching visual culture (Chen, 2009; Wilson, 2007). Children love to create special features for their heroes. This attempt is a new way to think about preparing cross-cultural lessons: we don't need to teach a culture that is totally foreign; we can use our own cultural base to connect different cultures. Ms V reported that after seeing the door god designs of the Taiwanese class, her class asked to do the same project. Their excitement indicates that their participation in this cross-cultural project has increased their global and cultural awareness. Their request inspires me to take the project further: the lessons taught in different cultural settings can be exchanged to examine the correlation between children's cultural knowledge and their cultural interpretation through art.



## References

- Burton, D. (2010). Web-bases student art gallery. *Art Education*, 63(1), 47-52.
- Chen, H. P. (2009). Using manga to teach superheroes: Implications for the classroom. *Colleagues*, 4(2), Article 8. Retrieved September 15, 2011 from <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol4/iss2/8>
- Delacruz, E. (2009). Art education aims in the age of new media: moving toward global civil society. *Art Education*, 62(5), 13-18.
- Delacruz, E., Arnold, A., Kuo, A., & Parsons, M. (2009). (Eds.). *Globalization, art & education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Finger, G. & Jamieson-Proctor, R. (2009). Assessment issues and new technologies: ePortfolio possibilities. In C. Wyatt-Smith & J. Cumming. (Eds.). *Educational assessment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Connecting theory and practice* (pp.63-81). New York: Springer.
- Huynh, Q., Nguyen, A., & Benet-Martinez, V. (2011). Bicultural identity integration. In S. Schwarz, K. Luyckx, & V. Vignoles. (Eds.). *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 827-842). New York: Springer.
- Kuo, C. (2009). Taiwanese picture books and the search for national identity. In E. Delacruz, A. Arnold, A. Kuo, & M. Parsons. (Eds.). *Globalization, art & education* (pp.7-13). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Lin, C. (2011). A learning ecology perspective: School systems sustaining art teaching with technology. *Art Education*, 64(4), 12-17.
- Nyman, A. L. (2002). Cultural content, identity, and program development: Approaches to art education for elementary educators. In Y. Gaudelius & P. Speirs (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in art education* (pp. 61-69). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Roland, G. (2010). Preparing art teachers to teach in a new digital landscape. *Art Education*, 63(1), 17-24.
- Rusanen, S., Rifa-Valls, M., Alexandre, R., Bozzi, G. M., & Haikio, T. K. (2011). Cultural dialogues in European art education: Strategies for enhancing children's culture and constructing diversity. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 7(3), 245-265.

- Solano-Flores, G. (2011). Assessing the cultural validity of assessment practice: An introduction. In Basterra, M., Trumbull, E., & Solano-Flores, G. (Eds.). *Cultural validity in assessment: Addressing linguistic and cultural diversity* (pp. 3-21). New York: Routledge.
- Sweeny, R. (2010). I love technology, always and forever. In R. Sweeny (Ed.), *Inter/actions/inter/sections: art education in a digital visual culture* (pp. ix-xvii). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Tu, W. (1996). Cultural identity and the politics of recognition in contemporary Taiwan. *The China Quarterly*, 148, 1115-1140.
- Wang, L. Y., & Kuo, A. (2009). Glocalization: Art education in Taiwan. In E. Delacruz, A. Arnold, A. Kuo, & M. Parsons. (Eds.). *Globalization, art & education* (pp.14-19). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Wang, T. W., & Lo, M. L. (2010). Visual cultural image on globalization and glocalization of Taiwanese art teacher education students. *The International Journal of Arts Education*, 8(2), 95-124.
- Wilson, B. (2004). Child art after modernism: Visual culture and new narratives. In E. Eisner & M. Day. (Eds.). *Handbook of research and policy in art education* (pp. 299-328). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Wilson, B. (2007). A story of visual cultural and pedagogical webs. In L. Bresler (Ed.). *International handbook of research in arts education*, Vol. 16, (pp.917-921). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Yang, S. K. (2001). *Dilemmas of education reform in Taiwan: Internationalization or localization?* Paper presented at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society, Washington D. C., USA. Retrieved September 15, 2011 from <http://www.ntnu.edu.tw/teach/messboard/message/doc/20010312.doc>