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# PEEKABOO! In Search of the Elephant in the Rubble: A Case Study of Art Psychotherapy with a Child Earthquake Survivor

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## Abstract

Children are particularly vulnerable when exposed to natural disasters. Beyond immediate harm, they may also suffer from long-term psychological deficits, especially those who have experienced insecure attachment during early childhood. Taiwan frequently experiences damaging natural disasters, including earthquakes and typhoons. This paper explores the object-relations approach to art psychotherapy intervention from a cultural perspective. A case study is presented, detailing the journey of art psychotherapy with a 7-year-old earthquake survivor who suffered from acute post-traumatic stress symptoms, including anxiety, sleep disturbances, and hypervigilance.

This case study illustrates how the child externalised traumatic experiences and represented them through repetitive symbolic play and art-making. This repetition provided a space for the child to reenact, regress, and redefine the traumatic events. The paper discusses how the art therapist created a secure holding environment by preparing art materials, enduring the child's attacks, and collaboratively exploring the multiple layers of trauma.

## Key words

Natural Disaster, Earthquake, Art psychotherapy, Repetitive symbolic play, Object relations theory, Taiwan

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## Introduction

In 2016, two days before the Lunar New Year, a 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck southern Taiwan at 3:57 am, while the country was still asleep, causing widespread damage. Numerous buildings collapsed, including a 17-storey residential building where nearly 400 people were trapped. A seven-year-old girl, Elephant (pseudonym), was among them. She was trapped under the rubble in darkness for over 16 hours before being rescued. Fortunately, her physical injuries were minor, and she was soon discharged from the hospital.

According to official records, the building collapse resulted in 176 injuries and 115 deaths (Wikipedia, 2016). Fortunately, Elephant's family and friends all survived. However, she suffered from severe psychological symptoms, including anxiety, hypervigilance, avoidance, insomnia, nightmares, a fear of being alone, and a fear of the dark. She became highly anxious whenever discussions about the earthquake arose. Her tutor expressed deep concern and believed that she could benefit from psychotherapy.

I am an art psychotherapist/counsellor based at the local student counselling centre, where most of the young survivors were referred. The institute provides outreach services to meet clients at their schools. Elephant was referred to me, and our sessions began within a month of the earthquake. Although the child appeared to be suffering from acute trauma reactions at the time, it was unclear whether these acute symptoms would develop into long-term PTSD.

This paper will first discuss the literature on acute trauma in children related to natural disasters, which suggests that early childhood experiences and attachment styles can significantly influence a person's emotional responses after encountering a major or life-threatening event (Gould et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2021). Following this, I will explore how I created an emotional container for multilayers of trauma related to natural disasters through the preparation of art materials. Both the literature review and Elephant's journey in art therapy reveal that if one's attachment is relatively insecure, unresolved trauma is more likely to be triggered and manifested through acute symptoms. Elephant's repetitive symbolic play and artmaking are described in

detail to show how she uses art and play to explore unconscious conflicts and process them in her own way.

This paper explores the case through the lens of the object-relations approach, incorporating my understanding of the parent-child relationship within the Taiwanese cultural context. My work with Elephant felt as though we were searching together for her fragmented self, embedded in the multiple layers of trauma—much like how the rescue team searched for her in the dark and dug her out from the rubble. This paper illustrates Elephant's process of searching for self (Winnicott, 1960) and how her new self-image emerged as secure attachment was re-established, shifting her self-identification from an earthquake victim to an artist with creative abilities.

Please note that all identifiable details in this article have been altered for confidentiality purposes.

### **Working with Acute Post Traumatic Disorder in Art Therapy**

Acute Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (APTSD) refers to symptoms that arise within a month of the traumatic event. When individuals experience an unpredictable and uncontrollable life-threatening event, such as an earthquake or witnessing a death, they may undergo a traumatic stress crisis characterised by dissociative amnesia, re-experiencing of the traumatic event, numbness, and avoidance. If these symptoms persist for more than a month and are accompanied by sleep disturbances, the condition may be diagnosed as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Early intervention aims to prevent these symptoms from developing into long-term PTSD (Roberts, Yeager, & Yeager, 2009).

Reviewing the literature, after a major earthquake, people are likely to go through a process of continuous reconstruction of both external reality and internal psychological reality. The earthquake may reopen previous psychological wounds (Green, 2018), exacerbating the trauma experienced in the past (Brolles et al., 2016). Research shows that using art as a therapeutic intervention after natural disasters could help develop resilience (Chilcote, 2007; Brolles et al., 2016) and serves as a sanctuary to support people express unspoken pain, to learn to bear with the chaos and

fragmentation caused by the disaster, rebuild connections and meaning until a new order emerges (Green, 2018).

Post-earthquake symptoms in children may manifest differently at various developmental stages. For example, school-age children often experience difficulty sleeping, oppositional behaviour, and an obsession with traumatic details. While these symptoms are generally normal reactions in abnormal circumstances, they can still be disruptive to a child's development (Chen, W. T., & Lin, H. H. 2004 ; Guo, H. Z., et al. ,2020 ; Olness, K. ,2021 ; Child Mind Institute , 2023 ). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud (1914/1937) suggested that individuals who have experienced trauma exhibit an impulse and drive to repetitively reenact or relive traumatic events. This phenomenon, known as compulsive repetition in therapy, signifies the presence of deeply buried unconscious conflicts. Each repetition within play may help to reduce negative emotions associated with the trauma, allowing individuals to gain a greater sense of control (Gil, E., 2017). In this case study, Elephant also demonstrated an obsession with details within play as a mechanism to cope with fear. I will explore this aspect further in the following sections.

Garland, C. (1998) suggests that current traumatic experiences are connected to pre-existing internal objects and past experiences. The occurrence of a traumatic event signifies a loss of the containing function, and psychotherapy aims to help restore this function. In order to move forward from traumatic experiences, survivors must be able to grieve and separate themselves from the lost object and event (Srinath, 2002).

Be able to use art materials in a safe environment could support children's recovery from various forms of harm and deprivation, such as earthquakes, family trauma, and other traumatic experiences, which allowing them explore meaning to their trauma (Brolles et al., 2016). Wright (2009) suggests that artists select materials and create in ways that enhance adaptability and meet internal needs. Through the use of materials, they create an object that can contain and help realise the self. (Wright, 2009, cited by Caldwell, 2017, p.1079). Meyerowitz-Katz and Reddick (2017) argue that art therapy can serve as a secure base for children's attachment needs, providing containment for their traumatic experiences. The art therapist also acts as a witness, accompanying the individual through a safe environment to re-experience the trauma,



reinterpret it, and find inner strength. In this sense, psychodynamic approach art therapy could serve as a container and an appropriate intervention for children who are experiencing acute post traumatic symptoms and alleviates the stress by the art therapist being a witness and accompany the child to re-visit the trauma in a safe environment.

### **Preparing Art Materials for Client with Post-earthquake Distress**

My institute provides outreach psychotherapy services, and sessions often take place in spare rooms at the client's school, where art materials are typically not provided. The need to bring my own materials offers an opportunity to tailor the collection to each client's emotional needs. As an art therapist, the act of preparing art materials and the therapy space serves as a non-verbal message to the client, signalling that the therapist is both psychologically and physically ready to receive them. The process of preparation reminds me of a mother breastfeeding her baby. In this context, the client is 'nurtured' by the therapist and invited to enter the transitional space of creation.

In my experience working with a non-directive approach, clients are intuitively and unconsciously drawn toward the medium in the space that 'feels right' for them, which may act as a container allowing the trauma to be replayed. Therefore, my selection criteria are based on whether the medium or objects enable the client to feel in control and explore the trauma at sensory, tactile, and emotional levels, thereby explores the anxiety caused by the traumatic memory. In this case, for example, I focused on the following four aspects:

Materials that provide sensory experiences and emotional support: These included a range of clays with different textures and colours to offer tactile engagement and emotional holding. Familiar and age-appropriate art materials: I selected art and craft materials commonly used by a seven-year-old schoolgirl in Taiwan, such as crayons, coloured pencils, and a variety of craft paper with printed patterns. Symbolic objects connected to Elephant's experience: Based on her experience of being buried and rescued, I made assumptions about objects she might feel symbolically connected to, aiming to create an environment where she could safely reenact and reinterpret the traumatic experience. For instance, I included first aid vehicle toys (Fig. 1), coloured glazed pebbles resembling rubble, and white foam tape symbolising medical care and

plaster. Soft and soothing objects: To provide comfort and a sense of safety, I included items such as a bunny comfort blanket and animal finger dolls.

Please note that these are my subjective assumptions. I do not pre-determine how the client will use them, nor do I intentionally guide her towards using specific objects. I simply place them in the media box and allow her to choose freely.



Figure 1. First Aid Vehicle Toys

### **Repetitive Symbolic Play in the Therapy**

Some significant elements that emerged during our initial session, such as the bunny blanket and the invisible animals, later developed into repetitive play and recurring themes. Therefore, I would like to highlight the relevant content in the following vignette as a starting point for further discussion:

In the initial session, she smiled at me when we first met. She initiated the conversation, and sat on the sofa opposite me. I used a bunny comfort blanket to attract her interest and introduced myself as Miss Bunny. I reassured her that this was her time and space, and she could name herself whatever she wanted.

“Please call me Elephant,” she said. “Miss Bunny, I am an Elephant, but my aunty doesn’t call me Bunny.”

Her words sounded somehow conflicting, so I asked for clarification. “Do you wish to be called Bunny?” I double-checked with her.

“No, I am an Elephant.” She smiled and confirmed.

Then, she stroked the bunny blanket gently and said, “I know this. You could wrap the bunny up like a baby. I want to wrap her up.” Elephant talked while she was wrapping the bunny, “My granny was a nanny. She could take care of four babies all at once. Our house was always full of babies’ noise. But granny had passed away.” She showed me the swaddled bunny (fig. 2) and left the sofa to sit on the floor. She hid half of her body under the glass coffee table. She said when she had been buried under the collapsed building, the night was very cold without her duvet.



Figure 2. The bunny swaddle

I showed her the art material box and invited her to make some art. Elephant chose crayons and drew some squares with animals inside. “These are invisible animals.

They lived in the dark.” Then she announced, “I want to draw a door so they could find their way out and won’t get lost.”

“Do they need lights?” I asked.

“No. Their eyes glow,” Elephant said.

The bunny swaddle’ and ‘the animals in search of their way out’ later became important recurring themes throughout the therapy, as did how she physically moved around the room. Elephant explored these recurring themes through her own rituals and at her own pace. Here is an example of a typical session with Elephant during the early stage of therapy:

Every session, she began by wrapping up the bunny blanket. Then, she created artworks to tell stories about how animals were rescued and sent to the hospital. The stories were slightly different each time. Elephant sometimes associated these stories with real-life events and the way her friends and family experienced the earthquake. She also liked to discuss accidents that occurred in her everyday life, such as a recent fire disaster in her neighbourhood, which made her feel lucky to be alive again. Bodily sensations, such as numb legs, could also trigger her associations with being buried under the rubble.

Apart from wrapping the bunny and rescuing the animals, she also engaged in other repetitive play, including covering the animals with a duvet. The duvet was a significant theme for her because she said she was freezing cold while waiting to be rescued in the dark. As the therapy progressed, the animals were replaced by coloured pebbles. The pebbles were rescued by the ambulance and gradually developed into the game ‘finding pebbles in the dark.’

We will explore in more detail how Elephant revisited, reenacted, and reinterpreted the traumatic scenes through this process. However, before that, I would like to introduce another layer of trauma from her early childhood, which often intertwined with her art and play.

### Earthquake Trauma and Early Childhood Attachment

According to recent research on teenage earthquake survivors, the level of their PTSD can be predicted by their attachment style to their parents. The findings indicate that teenagers with insecure attachment are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic distress (Zhou, Zhen & Wu, 2020). In *Prior Trauma-related Experience Predicts the Development of PTSD after a New Traumatic Event* (2021), Gould also suggested a similar outcome. This is evident in Elephant's case, where the disaster event triggered a sense of insecurity originating from her early childhood, such as witnessing violence between her parents from the age of two and being locked in a room by her father during his moments of rage. She also experienced her parents' separation and divorce, which had a significant impact on her.

These events left marks on her and appeared in her play and artwork during therapy. Once, she stuck together three first aid vehicles with clay and wished that the three of them would never have to separate again (Fig. 3). In another session, she scribbled blue tornados and said that things were separated because they were being naughty (Fig. 4). Her associations reminded me of the triangular relationships between parents and the child, as well as the child's sense of guilt regarding her parents' separation, and her wish to be protected.



Figure 3. Elephant wishes three cars will never separated.



Figure 4. They are separated because they were being naughty.

### The Therapist's Reflection and Countertransference

After more than a month of intervention, her acute symptoms showed significant improvement, especially with her sleep problems. At this stage of therapy, Elephant projected a lot of positive feelings toward me, as if I were her good mother and she was my good daughter. However, I felt puzzled—where were her negative emotions? Elephant presented herself as a well-behaved child and appeared to be “sweet and lovely,” which gave me the impression of her as a ‘cute cartoon elephant.’ But I wondered, is this really who she is? I thought about the story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*<sup>1</sup> and felt that I was only seeing a part of her.

The following vignette presents the epiphany moment when I realised there was much more hidden beneath her ‘cute’ side, which made me rethink the direction of our therapy:

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<sup>1</sup> This parable originates from Buddhist scriptures and serves as an allegory for the nature of perception and interpretation. Buddhist teachings assert that all individuals possess Buddha-nature, yet each person understands and interprets this concept differently. In this account, a king convenes a group of blind men and instructs them to touch different parts of an elephant.

The individual who touches the tusk asserts that “an elephant resembles a radish.” The individual who touches the head describes it as “similar to a stone.” The individual who touches the trunk claims that “an elephant resembles a pestle.”

Each person perceived the elephant differently, yet none fully understood its true form.

Elephant excitedly shared with me a comedy she had watched on TV about a comedian being put into an ambulance because he was suffocating. She thought this was hilarious! She described the scene in a jolly voice and said they sang a song called “The Existence” (Tang & Wang, 2011), which she also found very funny.

I was not familiar with the song, so I checked the lyrics after the session. Surprisingly, it is a song that explores the philosophical question of “how should one exist?” in a serious manner. I was struck by the strong contrast between Elephant’s light-hearted tone and the heaviness of both the emergency scene and the song, which made me wonder: are there other layers beneath her “lovely and sweet” persona? Instead of being a cute cartoon-like elephant, could the other side of her resemble *The Elephant* (1948) in Dali’s painting, walking in the desert while carrying huge weight on its back atop brittle legs?

I realised that the therapy with Elephant was about more than addressing post-earthquake distress; it was also a journey for her in search of her true self (Winnicott, 1984), and I was there to witness and accompany her through the process. I wondered if this “cute elephant” persona she presented was more of a false self and a reflection of her worry that the therapist might not survive her emotional attacks. I reminded myself to patiently wait for the process to unfold and for the false self to fade.

### **The Repetition of “Finding Pebbles Game”: from the Beginning to the End**

‘Searching for something in the dark’ was an important theme for Elephant. She developed a series of games closely related to the idea of ‘searching’ and called them the ‘finding colour pebbles’ game. She would scatter the pebbles around the room and invite me to go on a patrol to search for them. She invented many variations, such as stuffing pebbles into the toy ambulance or burying them in clay and then digging them all out again. Sometimes, she would look for them in the dark corners of the room, such as under the sofa.

This game gave me a sense of how she was re-enacting and externalising the traumatic scene through the coloured pebbles. Since she had been buried under the collapsed building for more than 16 hours, I felt as though I was in a parallel process



of searching for her real feelings, which were buried under the rubble from both the earthquake-related and early childhood traumas. As the play progressed, Elephant began to show herself as more than just 'cute and lovely' and started expressing her negative feelings by attacking the therapist during the game. The following vignette illustrates an important moment when I was able to verbalise her frustration, and we worked through it together:

Elephant invited me to participate in a "who can find more pebbles" competition. When I had more pebbles than she did, she attempted to seize mine aggressively, putting me in a position where I had to protect my own property. I tried to verbalise what was happening by saying, "It seems like you want me to find pebbles, but you also don't want me to find too many of them. There is a sense of wanting to be found, but also not wanting to be found." This interpretation seemed to resonate with her. She quieted down.

I placed all my pebbles in her hand and reassured her, "This is your time and space, and all the pebbles are yours. We can look for them together. They are very safe here. Shall we put them all into a bag?" Elephant seemed to relax; she smiled and agreed. Together, we collected all the pebbles and placed them in the bag (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Pebbles in the bag



Elephant continued to play the finding pebbles game with me during every session until, six months later, she transformed these coloured pebbles into pizza toppings, and the game finally ended. The game reminds me of a baby's peekaboo. Winnicott suggested that peekaboo play may originate from how an infant's sense of self is initially merged with the object at the beginning of life. The separation process then occurs as the object is rejected and survives, feeds back to the infant about their understanding, and eventually helps the baby develop the ability to be alone in the presence of others (Winnicott, 1958).

I wondered if the pebbles were Elephant's projection of herself; she wants to find the object and also to be found by it. The game may have been her way of processing the horror of not being found. The therapy room provided her with a safe space to regress to the origin of unresolved conflicts and explore her experiences through symbolic play in the presence of the therapist.

To me, this repetitive game feels like Elephant's journey to find her true self. I had the impression that she wanted her true self to be seen but also did not want to be seen, creating a sense of ambiguity. According to Klein, a child also has ambiguous feelings towards wanting to be cared for by the good breast while simultaneously showing envy towards it (Klein, 1988). Art therapy is a place for Elephant to explore the multiple layers of ambiguous moments in her life, from past to present. She may also envy the therapist. However, if the therapist could contain and process these emotions, then reflecting them back to her in a language she could understand (Bion, 1962), then the primal anxiety may be transformed and creating a space for thought. In this process, the therapist recognises and makes use of the ambiguous emotions in a constructive manner. Art therapy allows Elephant to explore the conflicting emotions in her life experience—the desire to be found and yet not to be found, both in the past and present. She leads the therapist in searching through the darkness, much like wanting to be found in the darkness after an earthquake, and also like her desire to explore the depths of the unconscious.

### **The Bunny Blanket and the Mirroring of the Therapist**

Besides the finding pebbles game, wrapping the bunny blanket was another recurring theme that kept evolving in its own way. From the first to the fifteenth session, Elephant

repeatedly dressed up the bunny with all sorts of coloured paper and wrapped it with tape, as if she was tightening the swaddle. Figure 7 shows some of the bunny's transformation process. In the first session (Fig. 7-1), the bunny was a wrapped infant (Fig. 7-2). As the therapy progressed, Elephant created all sorts of pretty dresses for it (Fig. 7-3, 7-4).



Fig. 7-1

Fig.7-2

Fig. 7-3

Fig. 7-4

Fig. 7-5

The play continued for more than four months until the session when she wrapped the bunny's head and body with heart-patterned paper and then cut off the tape to reveal the head (Fig. 7-5). After that, her passion for dressing up the bunny gradually ceased. Around the same time that the finding pebbles game came to an end, the bunny blanket also acquired a new form: she made a clay rabbit with short ears and told a story about how a unique rabbit found her confidence (Fig. 8).

When Elephant can stop playing the finding pebbles game, the bunny swaddling game also stops around the same time. As Elephant realised she could still be loved even as a rabbit with short ears, she seemed to accept herself as she was. Her false self faded, and her true self gradually emerged. I believe that the evolution of the rabbit symbol may be related to the attitude adopted by the art therapist in therapy. The earthquake stirred up deeply buried issues of early trauma and insecurity, and the art therapist's mirroring opened up a gateway to returning to the early mother-infant relationship.



Figure 8. The Short-eared Rabbit and its Chinese

Jacques Lacan (1949) proposed the mirror stage theory, which emphasised the gaze, in which the infant recognises themselves as the initial development of the self. Winnicott (1971) argued that the mother served as the initial mirror. Bion (1962) proposed the idea of the mother as the container, providing the infant with a holding environment. Stern (2018) suggests that children need to see mirroring in the eyes and faces of their caregivers, and that the therapist's mirroring could facilitate the space for the client's subjectivity to develop. Case and Dalley (2014) suggest that the art therapist's response to aesthetics allows the client to see their imagery brought to life in the same way that a baby sees itself through the eyes of its mother, gaining a sense of self, value, and identity.

My role as an art therapist is like a mother's gaze and response to her baby. In the therapy setting, the client has the chance to become a baby again. This is a safe place to experience trauma in a supportive environment. The art materials are an extension of the mother-infant interaction (Douglas, 2007) and can also act as an extension of the holding environment described by Winnicott. When the client makes art during the session, I pay particular attention to my internal flow before giving any verbal feedback, reflecting on questions like: "Whose needs am I responding to? The child's or mine? Is it necessary to ask this question? Will this statement interrupt their thinking or

creative process? Do I expect the work to be perfect more than the child? What does the child want to create? What does the child value most at this moment?" (Ho, 2019). As an art therapist, I believe that the process is more important than the outcome. I respond to the child in the metaphorical language they have developed. When working with Elephant, I am careful with my interpretations, trying not to disturb their flow with my language, and only doing so to respond to their unconscious needs and bring them to the conscious level. In this case, the repetitions ceased when the inner conflict was gradually worked through.

### **Working with the Repeating Attack: From a survivor to an artist**

Shortly after both the finding pebbles game and the bunny dressing play stopped, Elephant decided to make dumplings. Traditionally, Taiwanese dumplings are made by mixing flour and water to create white dough, which is then filled with minced meat and vegetable. Elephant flattened the white clay to make the dough and wrapped coloured clay as the filling (Fig. 9). She concentrated on making the white dumplings and arranging them on the floor. As more and more dumplings lay on the floor, the scene reminded me of dead bodies covered in white cloth, as if people were being carried out from the collapsed building one after another.



Figure 9. Dumpling-making

This scene gave me chills, and at that same moment, a sudden loud and piercing sound of an ambulance siren from the street broke into the room, as if the outer world

was echoing what was happening in the therapy room. I thought about how Elephant had mentioned seeing an ambulance without a siren carrying a lot of bodies when she was being taken away.

Suddenly, Elephant threw the dumplings at me, and by the look on her face, she seemed to think it was funny. I felt shocked and angry about her behaviour, so I shared my feelings with her and wanted to revisit the boundaries. I said:

"You seem to want to try and see what would happen if you threw a dumpling, and just now you chose to throw it at me. I am shocked, feeling a little angry and a little upset, and I'm wondering why you did this. I don't like it, but it doesn't affect my love for you. I have to protect myself from harm, so you can't throw things at me. But maybe we can throw at another target or play this game in a different way, such as aiming at the floor or the wall?"

In my response, I was reflecting on how our therapy was like paving a way to allow regression to happen. The sound of the ambulance siren and the corpse-like dumplings brought me back to the traumatic scene, and I wondered if she also had similar feelings. I suddenly had the thought that perhaps this moment in the therapy room was a fleeting return to an inner reality of Elephant's past. All the difficult moments she had been through in her life could intertwine and run parallel: the night in the rubble, the times she witnessed domestic violence, and perhaps other events as well.

The path to healing is never linear. At this moment in the therapy room, she chose to attack me with the clay dumpling. I wondered if she was acting out those moments when she felt under attack and hurt. Does she want to know if the therapist can survive her aggression? Can the therapist respond differently to her experience? In my response, I interpreted my understanding of the destructiveness, fear, and darkness she might have experienced. At the same time, I tried to reassure her, accompany her, be her witness, and survive with her.

Elephant tilted her head and thought about what I said for a while, then agreed with me. She decided to invite me to take turns throwing the dumplings against the wall.

She started by throwing them high and enjoying the process, and when I was done, she added one or two black eyes to the dumplings that were stuck to the wall and picked up the ones that had fallen.

From a distance, the dumplings on the wall reminded me of breasts. While we were throwing the dumplings, I thought about a baby attacking the mother's breast, as if we were in the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1929). When I said to her, "I don't like what you did, but I still love you," I was trying to integrate the split and support her in entering the depressive position. I also hoped to explore the traumatic experience and the issue of death through artistic expression, and to engage in reparation.

This is how I rationalised Elephant's unconscious urge to attack me in therapy: maybe the attack symbolised her desire to go back in time to uncover what really happened in those moments when she felt traumatised. Could it be a manifestation of her real memories from her early years? Winnicott suggested that such fears would not end until they are re-experienced. It felt as though Elephant was taking me back to those moments in her life, and now I was in the position of being attacked instead of her. However, the fact that I was able to express my feelings, protect myself, and demonstrate how to draw boundaries also allowed her to create boundaries between her trauma from the past and her present self, keeping her safe from future dangers.

Our therapy room was not used by other clients during the week, so Elephant could keep the dumplings on the wall and continue to work without interruption. In the next ten sessions, she worked on making more dumplings. At first, we put the dumplings on plates, but they quickly filled up, so we used a larger tray that had previously been used for the short-eared rabbit. Soon, this too was not big enough, so Elephant began throwing the dumplings at the wall. Gradually, the whole wall was needed to accommodate her attacks (Fig. 10). Sometimes, she would poke the dumplings to check if the fillings were still inside (Fig. 11). This gave her a sense of security and control.

At this point in therapy, Elephant's symptoms of traumatic distress had improved tremendously, and she appeared to be doing well in school and family life. Therefore, our therapy came to an end. In the final session, Elephant decided to leave the entire

dumpling wall to me, taking the rest of her artworks with her. I kept all the dumplings in a box to contain everything she left with me.



Figure 10. Dumplings on the wall



Figure 11. Elephant poked the dumplings to check if the fillings is still there



### Discussion: The Transformation of the Duvet Symbol

In the initial session, Elephant mentioned that the night under the rubble was very cold without her duvet. This theme of the duvet repeatedly appeared in our conversations and became a significant symbol in her artmaking, continuing to transform throughout the therapy. For example, she wrapped the bunny with a blanket or stuck white foam tape on the animals when she was telling stories about how they lived in the dark. Elephant said the 16-hour wait for the rescue team under the collapsed building was freezing cold, terrifying, and left her body numb. When Elephant covered the animals living in the dark with a duvet, it seemed to me like the soothing and comfort she had longed for that night.



Fig. 12-1



Fig.12-2



Fig.12-3



Fig.12-4



Fig.12-5

In her artwork, the transformation of the duvet often took the form of circular objects. From dressing the bunny with felt balls (Fig. 12-1) and covering animals with round foam tape duvets (Fig. 12-2) to pebbles covered in clay (Fig. 12-3), the pebbles and



coloured clay balls eventually became toppings for pizza (Fig. 12-4). Finally, the flat, round dough and coloured clays became dumplings (Fig. 12-5).

In the early stages of therapy, the image of the duvet was represented by soft materials. Then, in the middle stages, it gradually transformed into hard, coloured pebbles. I tried to understand these circular objects as symbols of her self. When the pebbles were placed into the ambulance, it was as if Elephant was digging herself out, searching for her fragmented self all over the room with the therapist. After the finding pebbles game ended, the circular objects transformed into pizza and dumplings. The Chinese pronunciation of 'dumpling' (*shuǐ jiǎo*) is similar to 'sleeping' (*shuì jiào*), and the flat dumpling dough could potentially represent the soft and warm duvet and its protection. Although the large number of dumplings Elephant made reminded me of dead bodies and frightened me, as if I were witnessing the scene of death with her, these dumplings also symbolised gentleness and resilience. Even when Elephant threw them aggressively against the wall, they still safely held the coloured clay fillings without being damaged.

The representations of the duvet transitioned from soft materials to hard and then became soft again. Perhaps this transformation reflects the change within Elephant—from being vulnerable and wanting to be found to being strengthened by a sense of security. The wall of dumplings became a piece of installation art after Elephant worked on it week after week. This made her more than a client/patient in psychotherapy; she also became an artist.

The art therapy room created a sense of security through the structured time and space framework of the therapy, as well as the presence of the art therapist. This allowed her to explore the horror and fear evoked by death anxiety through artmaking, not just as a client but as an artist. The artworks functioned like transitional objects in this case, providing comfort and accompanying her as she navigated the process of separation from the mother. The food Elephant made in the sessions, such as pizza and dumplings, could also be interpreted as a form of self-care. The initial psychological care of the baby comes through physical feeding; food brings warmth, nourishment, and healing.

## **Cultural Factors**

It is a journey that Elephant took with Miss Bunny (the therapist's nickname), through the rubble, in search of the full picture of her true self. The rubble that had covered her gradually transformed during the therapy process: from the rubble that caused the damage to the duvet that she longed for; from the coloured pebbles to the rabbit's clothes, and finally to the nourishing dumpling dough. As she internalised the symbol of Miss Bunny (the therapist), she was able to accept herself as a short-eared rabbit and gradually piece together the whole picture of herself as Elephant.

Elephant made the therapist feel very needed at the beginning of the therapy. I wonder if perhaps her childhood experience made her feel the need to take care of her mother, and so she unconsciously felt the need to take care of the therapist as well. Perhaps she was denying her own need for her mother. As a child, she was exposed to parental conflicts and the violent scenes between her parents. Although her caregivers did their best to provide care for her, she did not receive the appropriate emotional holding to contain her anxiety when she needed it the most. After her parents' divorce, Elephant lived with her mother, who tried very hard to give her a sense of love and security. However, her mother was influenced by the traditional Chinese parenting style of the 'tiger mother,' which placed more emphasis on external achievements and not enough attention on the child's internal feelings. Elephant's real feelings and emotions were repressed, and she gradually developed a false self that met the expectations of her mother and society.

Obedience to parents is expected of children in Chinese-speaking societies. Elephant's mother often said to her, "I'll leave you if you don't behave!" The earthquake disaster brought Elephant's fears of separation from her mother and her unconscious fear of being abandoned to the surface. It was as if a baby's fantasy of losing their mother suddenly became reality. The earthquake stirred up her deepest fears, and she felt as though she was being punished for being 'bad.' During the process of art therapy, the psychodynamic approach provided her with a different experience from the achievement-oriented style of her mother-child relationship and allowed her to explore who she truly is. The therapist's mirroring and reflection of her experiences opened a space for her to connect with the feelings she had long repressed. Her sense of self gradually emerged, and her subjectivity grew. She was able to move on from the role

of being a caretaker for her mother, take off the 'good child' persona that constrained her, and break free from the traditional social expectations imposed by the 'Tiger mother,' gaining the freedom to express herself.

On the other hand, as Elephant's mother began to see the changes in her child, she became more active in learning how to interact with Elephant in an open way, trying to break out of the traditional Taiwanese cultural stereotype of the Tiger Mother and learn to love her child for who she truly is. By the time Elephant's therapy came to an end, their relationship had become more intimate and had improved significantly.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored how the art therapist can respond to and contain the client's traumatic experience of a natural disaster through the preparation of art materials. In this case, the therapist adopts a psychodynamic, non-directive approach and creates a space for the client to engage with the art materials spontaneously, allowing her to safely re-enact her traumatic experiences as an early intervention to alleviate acute trauma symptoms.

Elephant's journey in art therapy demonstrates how repetitive play and artmaking can mirror the re-enactment of traumatic scenes. The trauma is not only rooted in the experience of the natural disaster but also in the insecure attachments from early childhood. The repetition can be seen as a way to navigate out of the chaotic darkness of death and toward rebirth. This paper illustrates the process of how the repetition ceased when the therapist was able to contain the client's fear and aggression. When the false self faded away, the true self finally had space to emerge. Elephant was able to shift her role from being a victim of the earthquake to becoming an artist with creativity, moving from being stuck in recurrent traumatic experiences to achieving restoration.

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