

# Cross-cultural application of archetypal images in art therapy in China: a case study of Mandala images

Yifei Liu\*

School of Arts, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

**Abstract.** Due to their ancient healing genes and significant modern therapeutic implications, Archetypal symbols have been widely employed in art therapy practices. However, research on their application effectiveness still lacks discussion in cross-cultural contexts. This study focuses on the use of archetypal symbols in art therapy—particularly Mandala images—within the cultural context of China. The research focuses on exploring the cultural adaptability of Mandala art therapy in China, along with the cultural challenges and opportunities faced in empirical studies. It further investigates the efforts made by Chinese therapists to optimize Mandala art therapy techniques, enabling better integration into Chinese cultural and therapeutic practices. The results indicate that although research and application in this field are still in the exploratory stage in China, Mandala drawing therapy has demonstrated effective healing and evaluative roles in empirical studies in China. It confronts cultural challenges with localized attempts, revealing the universality and localization trends of archetypal symbols in cross-cultural art therapy practices.

## 1 Introduction

In the course of human civilization, art therapy—particularly as a form of non-verbal treatment using archetypal symbols like mandalas—has demonstrated unique therapeutic effects across various cultural contexts due to its deeply rooted universality in the collective unconscious. Given its significant potential in psychological healing and cultural adaptability, the Mandala has attracted widespread attention in the Chinese psychology community over the past five years, leading to numerous empirical studies. Internationally, in 1986, McConeghey published "*Archetypal Art Therapy is Cross-Cultural Art Therapy*" [1]. This article first discussed the cross-cultural implications of archetypal symbols. It elaborated in detail on Jung's application of archetypal symbols in psychology and the use of Mandala images in medieval European alchemy and among the Oglala Lakota Sioux. McConeghey creatively emphasized the importance of cross-cultural art therapy but did not delve deeply into the interpretation and therapeutic effectiveness of the same archetypal symbol across different cultural contexts. The study mainly focused on applications in Europe and America, with no mention of applications in East Asia. Since the 1960s, after the Swiss psychologist

---

\* Corresponding author: [2022202215@ruc.edu.cn](mailto:2022202215@ruc.edu.cn)

Carl Jung introduced mandalas into the field of art therapy, more discussions have centered on the effectiveness of mandalas and Jung's theories, leading to extensive empirical research, yet there has been a lack of exploration into the cross-cultural meanings of symbols.

The theoretical and practical research on Mandala drawing psychotherapy in China began relatively late. This archetypal symbol was introduced into the country through Tibetan Buddhism and is commonly used as a symbolic illustration in religious architectural art. In 2013, the article "*The Effects and Mechanisms of Mandala Drawing on Improving Emotions*" published in the "*Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology*" brought mandalas into the academic view of art therapy [2]. Since 2017, broader empirical studies have focused on alleviating emotional distress such as anxiety and depression. However, current applications of Mandala drawing therapy in China often lack an assessment of cultural cognitive differences. When using images as exotic symbols, art therapists frequently overlook the cultural specificity and the evolution of symbolic meanings across different cultural contexts when evaluating the psychological state of the subjects. This urgently requires further exploration.

This research is based on the healing effects of Mandala symbols within the Chinese cultural context, delving into the practical applications and effectiveness of cross-cultural collective consciousness archetypes in art therapy. By analyzing the fundamental elements of Mandala healing and the therapeutic models and localization trends of cross-cultural artistic interventions in the regions of application, this study aims to demonstrate the universality of archetypal symbols in the field of art therapy. Consequently, it seeks to break through cultural barriers and achieve resource sharing in non-verbal art therapy.

## **2 Interpretation of the Mandala concept with archetypal features**

In Sanskrit, the term "Mandala" is composed of "manda," meaning essence, and "la," denoting achievement. Thus, the original meaning of Mandala is "essence achievement," which over time has evolved to represent "something with essence and spirit" [3]. Fundamentally, mandalas reflect the orderly nature of the universe, embodying the basic structure of both the microcosm and macrocosm. Everything from flora and fauna to mountains and the universe itself can be viewed as a Mandala. In biological contexts, a Mandala is referred to as *Datura*, which in Chinese broadly covers the modern applications of Mandala flowers and symbolic imagery.

The Mandala, originating from Hinduism, was historically translated in older texts as "altar" or "sacred ground," denoting the earthen platforms set up during ritual ceremonies that functioned as protective enclosures. Practitioners often depicted or placed figures of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas on these altars, thus imbuing mandalas with the connotation of "gathering" [4]. In more recent translations, it is defined as "circular and complete," symbolizing the essence of Buddhahood [5]. The interpenetration of the material and spiritual realms, epitomized by the cycle of life and death and "Nirvana," spatializes Buddhist thought, aiding practitioners in establishing connections between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The center point of the Mandala, known as the bindu, represents the cosmic center in spatial terms and signifies absolute truth in conceptual terms. Surrounding symbols, arranged in geometric forms, symbolize various representations of truth. Moving from the outer edge to the center symbolizes a journey towards deeper understanding and essence, integrating fragmented forms into a complete and perfect "oneness."

In the process of moving from the outer edge to the center of the Mandala, there is an inherent driving force. Buddhism posits that everyone possesses an inner Buddha-nature, which represents the highest state of completion—perfection. This innate completeness is often diminished by worldly impurities, necessitating spiritual practices such as meditation

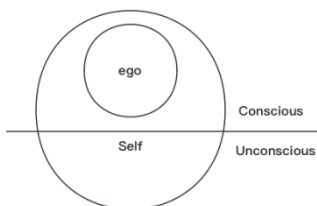
and mindfulness to promote psychological integration, thereby restoring the mind to a state of fullness and wholeness.

Jung's understanding of East Asian culture enabled him to keenly perceive the profound significance of the configurational elements in Mandala symbols. He extracted the Mandala from its religious context and emphasized the importance of its geometric forms in the construction of the psyche [6]. The primary geometric symbols of the Mandala—circle, square, and triangle—transcend time and space, appearing in human societies across different regions and epochs as spiritual symbols, reflecting a universal inner consistency in human societies. Jung referred to these as "archetypal symbols" and introduced the concept of the "collective unconscious." The collective unconscious refers to ancestral experiences that are transmitted to descendants in the form of genetic symbols through intergenerational inheritance as part of the evolutionary process. Archetypal images are characterized by their latent, non-figurative nature, only manifesting during moments of diminished conscious awareness, such as in dreams, meditation, and artistic creation. In this process, individuals deepen their connection with the broader human community, becoming more profoundly aware of their existence and place within the cosmos. While the forms of archetypal symbols may differ across regions, their core and fundamental structures are consistent, providing the genetic basis for the widespread distribution of archetypal symbols throughout human society and history.

### 3 Cultural adaptability of Mandala art therapy in China

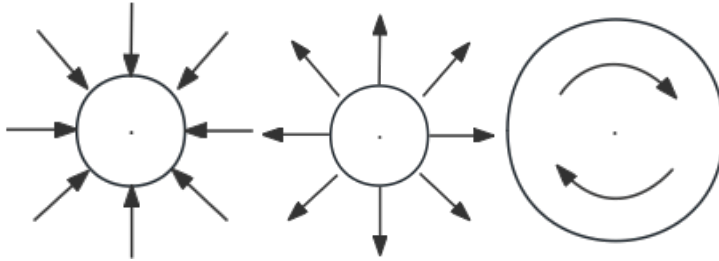
#### 3.1 Jung's theory of individuation and the cultural background of using Mandala images in China

Jung believed that the personality has two centers: the ego, which is the center of the conscious personality, and the self, which is the center of the complete personality, referred to earlier as the "Buddha-nature" in Buddhism. The self represents a greater individual whole, encompassing the conscious, the unconscious, and the ego. According to Jung, Mandala images are symbolic representations of unconscious content, often developing independently of the creator's intentions. Therefore, the Mandala serves as a bridge, facilitating communication between the conscious and the unconscious. The process of creating images allows the conscious self to integrate with the collective unconscious, merging the internal masculine and feminine archetypes, thereby achieving unity with the greater human Self. This process, termed "individuation" by Jung, enables individuals to experience a breakthrough in the psyche and a reorientation of self-awareness (Fig.1). Jung's theory of individuation is clinically significant for Mandala drawing therapy. It highlights the therapeutic goals and essence, wherein therapists assist clients in understanding their psychological development stages, clarifying the main tasks they face during individuation, and thus promoting the integration of the self's functions to achieve unity between the ego and the self [7].



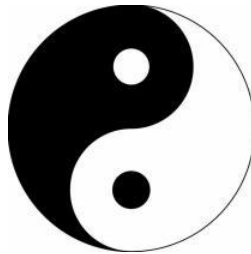
**Fig. 1.** The process of Jungian individuation.

In Jungian terms, the Mandala stimulates the healing mechanism of "individuation" rooted in its geometric composition, typically exemplified by the circle [8]. Originating from a central point, the circle possesses both centripetal and centrifugal radiating forces (Fig.2). This movement from the periphery to the center symbolizes the achievement of self-perfection and the realization of individuation, where the center represents a state of complete individuation [9]. The circle is not only a spiritual schema in Hinduism and Buddhism across Southeast Asia, but it also represents a significant spiritual archetype in Chinese civilization. This reflects the consistency of Eastern archetypes and further corroborates the psychological foundation for using Mandala imagery as a method of art therapy in China.



**Fig. 2.** Geometric tendency of the circle.

In traditional Chinese culture, the circle also symbolizes the completeness of the human spirit. The term "circle" is defined as "whole" in the "*Shuo Wen Jie Zi*" which in the language of images is primarily represented by the Taiji diagram from Taoist thought. Tao signifies the trajectory of things' movements, and by extension, the ultimate principle governing all things in the universe. Both humans and the cosmos follow the same laws, intertwining and thereby influencing each other. The Taiji diagram is a visual representation of the content of the Tao (Fig.3), adhering to the cyclical nature of the circle as well as its centripetal and centrifugal forces.

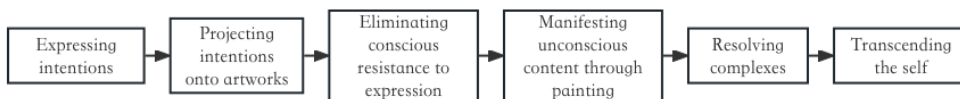


**Fig. 3.** Taiji Diagram [10].

In the "*Appended Phrases*" of the *I Ching*, it is stated: "Taiji generates the two modes, the two modes generate the four images, and the four images generate the eight trigrams." Taiji represents the fundamental principles and source of power for the cyclical flow of all things, where Yin and Yang alternately wax and wane, opposing and depending on each other, unified in the whole. This concept aligns with Carl Jung's theory of individuation, which involves integrating the masculine archetype (animus) and the feminine archetype (anima) from the unconscious to achieve a "multiplicity of balance." Jung's development of his theory of individuation was deeply influenced by the *I Ching* and the *Tao Te Ching*. American Jungian analyst David Rosen noted, "Jung's psychology of opposites, fundamentally, is consistent with Taoist thought", highlighting the applicability of the Mandala individuation theory in the Chinese context [11].

### 3.2 The application model of Mandala as an archetypal image in China

Mandalas in painting applications can primarily be categorized into structured and unstructured mandalas. Structured mandalas, also known as painted mandalas, typically feature central symmetry and an outer circle [12]. Participants are required to color within a predefined pattern, and therapists assess the psychological state of the participants based on the colors, lines, and drawing trajectories used [13]. In China, empirical studies predominantly employ the Jungian and Charlie-style structured mandalas introduced by scholar Chen Canrui. Unstructured mandalas, also referred to as autonomous mandalas, start with a blank circle as the base. Therapists guide participants to freely create within the circle, which can be categorized into doodle-style and imagery-style mandalas, primarily using the images in the artwork for psychological assessment [7]. Both Mandala models facilitate emotional expression and reduce conscious resistance during the drawing process, enabling the recognition of unconscious content at the conscious level. This aids participants in resolving inner conflicts, thereby enhancing psychological and cognitive aspects (Fig.4).



**Fig. 4.** Mandala drawing intervention mechanism.

In the process of Mandala drawing, practices in China often incorporate interdisciplinary elements such as music and literary expression to enhance participants' self-disclosure and emotional expression [14]. Currently, Mandala art therapy in China's empirical research has shown significant effects in enhancing self-efficacy, repairing psychological trauma, and alleviating negative emotions such as anxiety [15]. It is primarily applied in emotional therapy for individuals with schizophrenia and cancer patients, demonstrating great developmental potential [16-18].

### 3.3 Cultural challenges faced in the application of Mandala symbols in China

Archetypal symbols are universally applicable yet lack specificity. Jungian and Charlie-style structured mandalas possess universal geometric structures, including closed structures, centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, and the unity of internal and external oppositions. These give rise to their four therapeutic functions—protection, orientation, cohesion, and integration [7]. Although such mandalas can alleviate negative emotions during therapy, their highly abstract and conceptual forms lack clear directionality, making it challenging to address specific emotional complexes within the Chinese context.

Therapists' interpretations of images often lack integration with Chinese culture. The archetypal symbols in the collective unconscious are a form of expression with formal implications. Jung believed that archetypes are defined not by their content but by their form; it is only when these archetypal symbols are placed within a specific cultural context that the resulting concrete images become content-related. Although archetypes possess cross-cultural universality, the same archetypal symbol can develop different images in different cultural contexts. Currently, the interpretation of images in Chinese Mandala art therapy often adopts Western understandings, for example, those summarized by Jung in "*Concerning Mandala Symbolism*" such as circles, flowers or wheels, suns, chakra-like spirals, serpents spiraling around a center, squares combined with circles, castle courtyards, eyes, and forms repeatedly divided by four [19]. While these images are also present in Chinese art, they cannot simply be transposed with Western interpretations. Analyzing specific images requires consideration of the cultural background; only analyses that align with the cultural

background can more closely match the psychology of the visitors, helping them to derive more targeted therapeutic strength from their culture.

The therapeutic cycle cannot always meet some individuals' high demands for efficiency. In China, current empirical studies typically measure therapeutic cycles in weeks, which helps deepen and stabilize therapeutic effects. However, the fast-paced social life demands more diversified treatment approaches. There is a growing need for quick and effective therapeutic methods, and it is urgent to develop and validate treatment plans that better suit the modern pace of life.

## 4 Localized innovative applications of Mandala art therapy in China

### 4.1 Localization of structural models — cultural mandalas

The current clinical research commonly adopts the structured model from "*Mirror of the Soul: Mandala Painting Therapy*". In China, psychological therapy groups and salons have been experimenting with initiating treatment through the structural models of images, developing a set of Mandala patterns centered around traditional Chinese cultural symbols. These include the Prosperous Descendants Mandala, Antiquities Pattern Mandala (Fig.5), and Cloud Dragon Pattern Mandala, using murals and patterns as the underlying themes. The book "*Cultural Mandala: The Healing Power of Art Therapy*" displays a series of classic cultural images (Table 1) [20].



**Fig. 5.** Ancient pattern mandalas [20].

Cultural mandalas construct connections between traditional cultural motifs and the developmental context of modern life. Chen Canrui believes that while Jung's theory of individuation emphasizes profound personal exploration, cultural mandalas focus more on various life situations and relationships, representing a horizontal expansion of life's breadth. Combining the theory of individuation with cultural mandalas can help individuals achieve more comprehensive and multi-layered self-enhancement within a cultural context. On one hand, this combination addresses the issue of the strong universality but weak specificity of archetypal symbols, providing clear directionality for complex emotional entanglements; on the other hand, it thematically synthesizes Chinese traditional cultural images, offering strong contextual relevance and specificity, effectively filling the interpretative gap in Mandala art regarding Chinese cultural imagery.

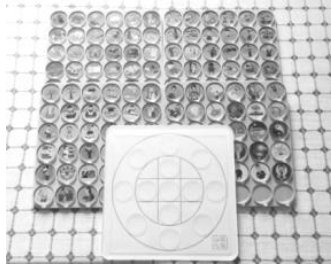
**Table 1.** Themes and imagery of Chinese cultural mandalas

Themes	Imagery of Cultural Mandalas
Marriage & Love	Twin Lotus, Butterfly Love Flower, Auspicious Dragon and Phoenix, Double Ring Dragon and Phoenix, Mandarin Ducks Playing in Water
Parent-Child Attachment	Many Children Many Blessings, Continuous Melon, Mother and Child Deer, Kirin Spitting Fire, Five Relationships Diagram, Frog Pattern, Propitious for Offspring, Jade Eagle
Career Planning	Antique Pattern, Floral Pattern, Adding Flowers to the Brocade, Suitable for Official Position, Kui Dragon Pattern, Harmony in Six Directions, Four Gentlemen, Cloud Dragon Pattern, Attracting Wealth and Prosperity
Ideal Personality	Fighting Beasts Pattern, Hawk Snatching Goose Pattern, Capricorn Fish, Coiled Dragon Pattern, Twelve Ornaments Pattern, Three Friends of Winter, Evergreen, Fragrant Flowers Triad, Success All the Way, Parrot Pattern, Crane in the Clouds
Physical and Mental Health	Double Blessing of Longevity and Prosperity, Helper Holding Ring, Wealth and Safety, Square and Compass Mirror, Tiger Pattern, Crane and Pine Prolonging Life, Forget-me-not, Joyful Meeting
Totem and Identity	Phoenix Pattern, Tortoise Pattern, Coiled Dragon Pattern, Sun God Bird, Taotie Pattern, Totem Dance, Spiral Pattern, Fish and Human Face Pattern, Jade Plaque
Exploration of Life and Death	Flying Crane, Rolling Cloud Pattern, Lotus Pattern, Figures Riding Dragons, Winter Jasmine Pattern, Immortal's Mirror, Harmony, Eternal Boundlessness
Religious Spirituality	Dunhuang Colored Cloud Caisson, Dunhuang Vajra Caisson, Dunhuang Lotus Caisson, Dunhuang Rabbit Pattern Caisson, Tang Dynasty Heaven Altar, Tibetan Mandala City

**4.2 New therapeutic forms based on Mandala structures — Mandala Dynamics Chess**

Another therapy form aimed at resolving complex issues is Mandala Dynamics Chess (Fig.6), which is based on the same foundational ideas as the individuation perspective of psychological structures in Mandala drawing [21]. Dynamics Chess combines traditional Mandala drawing therapy with chess-playing skills, transforming the Mandala’s geometric structure into various "formations," with chess pieces representing various self-identities, psychological types, defenses, and coping mechanisms. During the therapy sessions, therapists guide participants to face and resolve issues directly through structured chess moves in a controlled environment. This method not only integrates Eastern cultural chess tactics but also innovates short-term treatment models, effectively overcoming resistance encountered by clients during counseling and showing significant therapeutic effects in alleviating conditions like anxiety disorders, phobias, PTSD, and social anxiety [22].

Cultural Mandalas and Mandala Dynamics Chess address the cultural challenges faced by the application of Mandala symbols in China from the perspectives of cultural imagery and strong specificity, respectively, showing great potential for development.



**Fig. 6.** Mandala Dynamics Chess [23].

### 4.3 Characteristics and limitations of localized innovation

Drawing on the current exploration of the localization of Mandala art therapy in China, it can be observed that it features thematization, short-term focus, and strong interactivity. Cultural mandalas and Mandala dynamics chess typically concentrate on a specific theme during the therapeutic process, aiming at problem-solving to provide clients with therapeutic feedback in a short period.

In the cultural Mandala, themes of marriage and parent-child relationships encourage family members to participate together in the drawing process, whereas in psychodynamic chess, the therapist not only engages actively in the arrangement of the visitor's game board but also serves as a facilitator. Both methods are highly interactive, helping visitors to introspect and understand themselves by cognizing others, thus breaking through their cognitive barriers.

However, as the current attempts at localization are still in an exploratory stage, there are certain limitations and unverified aspects remaining. For instance, in cultural mandalas, some images might de-emphasize the central symmetrical geometric structure of mandalas by stressing traditional motifs (Fig.7). This could lead to two issues: one is that the dominance of traditional images in mandalas might influence the therapeutic outcome based on the subject's understanding of these images; the second is that reducing the proportion of geometric forms might affect the deep therapeutic mechanisms of mandalas, thereby influencing the therapeutic efficacy. Therefore, the relationship between structural changes in the localization of Mandala art therapy and therapeutic outcomes requires further empirical validation.



**Fig. 7.** Pine and Crane Longevity Mandala [20].

## 5 Conclusion

Research has shown that archetypal symbol art therapy, exemplified by Mandala therapy, exhibits significant cultural adaptability in China. This adaptability is not only reflected in the psychological resonance that Chinese individuals have with the geometric structures of



mandalas but also in the significant therapeutic outcomes evidenced in empirical studies within China. Chinese therapists have effectively addressed cultural challenges present in existing clinical research by localizing structural models and therapeutic approaches, demonstrating profound developmental potential. This indicates that archetypal symbol art therapy possesses cross-cultural universality and therapeutic potential on a psychological level. However, when introducing archetypal symbols, it is still necessary to adapt them to local cultures to enhance the acceptance and therapeutic efficacy of the treatment methods.

This study not only explores the therapeutic efficacy of Mandala drawing within the Chinese context from a cultural-historical perspective, but also reveals the issues and challenges encountered when introducing archetypal symbols across cultures, providing a new cross-cultural viewpoint for the development of art therapy in China. Given that Mandala art therapy is still in its nascent stages in China, its innovative explorations are currently limited to art therapy workshops and salons. Future research should expand these explorations into broader and more rigorous clinical practices to more comprehensively assess their effects and applicability.

## References

1. H. McConeghey, Archetypal Art Therapy is Cross-Cultural Art Therapy. *Art Therapy*. **3**, 111-114 (1986).
2. C. Chen, D. Zhou, Y. Gao, The Effects and Mechanisms of Mandala Drawing on Improving Emotions. *Chinese J. Cli. Psy.* **21**, 162-164 (2013).
3. H. Hou, On the Early Mantra Methods in Esoteric Buddhism. *World Religion Studies*. **3**, 30 (2011).
4. X. Li, An Aesthetic Interpretation of 'The Circle'. *J. Liter. His.* **3**, 36 (1995).
5. J. Hu, Exploration of the Healing Functions of Mandala Painting. Dissertation, Central Academy of Fine Arts (2020).
6. G. E. Cairns, The Philosophy and Psychology of the Oriental Mandala. *Philosophy East & West* **11**, 223, 226-227 (1962).
7. C. Chen, Y. Gao, *Mirror of the Soul: Mandala Painting Therapy*. Jinan University Press, 5-6 (2014).
8. A. Babouchkina, S. J. Robbins, Reducing Negative Mood Through Mandala Creation: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *Art Therapy* **32**, 34-39 (2015).
9. L. Wang, *Visual Art Psychology*. People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 76 (2006).
10. Tai Chi Diagram. [https://mbd.baidu.com/newspage/data/dtlandingsuper?nid=dt\\_4021950317550437687](https://mbd.baidu.com/newspage/data/dtlandingsuper?nid=dt_4021950317550437687).
11. H. Shen, L. Gao, *Spirituality: Analysis and Experience*. Jinan University Press, 31 (2002).
12. C. Chen, Y. Gao, C. Zheng, The Theory and Application of Mandala Painting in Psychotherapy. *Medical Philosophy (A)* **34**, 19-23 (2013).
13. Y. Lu, Z. Li, Study on the Effect of Mandala Painting Trajectories on Improving Adolescent Depressive Mood. *Chinese J. Cli. Psy.* **30**, 1235-1239 (2022).
14. P. Xie et al., Application of Mandala Painting Therapy in Patients with Schizophrenia in the Rehabilitation Phase. *Ningxia Med. J.* **40**, 1189-1190 (2018).
15. P. Bai et al., Study on the Rehabilitation Effect of Mandala Painting Therapy on Patients with Schizophrenia. *Inner Mongolia Med. J.* **51**, 126-127 (2019).

16. S. Zhao, F. Tang, The Effect of Mandala Painting Psychotherapy on Anxiety in Cancer Patients. *Tianjin Nursing* **25**, 505-506 (2017).
17. L. Sun et al., The Impact of Mandala Painting Therapy on Negative Emotions of Cancer Patients. *J. PLA Nursing* **38**, 71-74 (2021).
18. Y. Cui, F. Wang, The Research Focus and Development Trend of Art Therapy in Chinese Education Since the 21st Century. *Frontiers in Psychology* **13**, 1002504 (2022).
19. C. G. Jung, Concerning Mandala Symbolism. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (1950).
20. C. Chen, Y. Gao, Cultural Mandala: The Healing Power of Art Therapy. Jinan University Press (2019).
21. C. Chen, Y. Gao, Mandala Psycho-Dynamic Chess Therapy Operation Manual. Jinan University Press, **22**, 24-27, 81-82, 93 (2017).
22. H. Zhao, C. Zhang, Y. He, The Application of Mandala Psycho-Dynamic Chess Therapy in the Psychological Correction of Criminals. *China Prison Journal* **37**, 92-100 (2022).
23. Mandala Dynamics Chess. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/h3qFcLidL62441AiI62pdA>.