

Facing the Threat of Nian: Caring for Children During the Pandemic

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The Spring Festival is the greatest traditional festival of the Chinese nation. It is a time for family reunion and happiness, and also the happiest day for children. The Spring Festival is also known as "Meeting Nian". There was a legend saying that during the coldest and darkest nights of winter a monster named "Nian" would come to the village to eat people and animals. Later, inspired by a wise old man, people used firecrackers, gongs and drums, red color and fire flame to conquer "Nian", driving it to the mountains. The people were safe again! Since then, to celebrate this victory, "Meeting Nian" symbolizes a new beginning. Gongs and drums, red color, firecrackers, fireworks, feasts, red envelopes, laughter and songs gradually became symbols of the Spring Festival.

However, this winter, we have no idea how the monster Nian came back! Maybe it came from bats, maybe it came from somewhere, a very vicious and cunning virus sneaking into the human world in the coldest and darkest time. When people fell asleep, the virus was spreading like ink on rice paper in Wuhan. When the people woke up, the virus had uncontrollably spread across the country and around the world. This huge pandemic and disaster pushed the pause button on China.

You can imagine how severe and devastating this pandemic has been. The virus strikes directly at the respiratory system, disrupting the immune system, hardening the lungs and trachea. In some sense, this picture is also a reflection of the gradual hardening of the human being, their separating from the outer world, and their inability to breathe healthily. What does it seem to indicate?

In the face of this pandemic and disaster, no matter governments, scientists, doctors or civilians need to rethink and reflect: what caused today's disaster? What is each person's responsibility for this? What can we do in the future to keep the monster "Nian" (this odd virus) to where it belongs? How can human live in peace with nature and animals? How can the health care system be improved? How can we face such a critical crisis?

In this disaster, we also see a lot of light. The bravery, greatness and dedication of the medical staff moved us to tears, people's sincere help makes kindness and courage be seen everywhere. Traditional Chinese medicine has played a great role in the treatment and it is amazing. This has given many people, especially young people, a new understanding of Chinese medicine.

We suddenly feel the preciousness and beauty of life between life and death. Because people have to stay at home, they can now spend more intimate, quiet time together. It gives many people a chance to really enjoy and appreciate the family life and feel the warmth. Life during the pandemic reduces consumption to the minimum. We can see that life can be very simple. We can reduce our waste. The quiet domestic life gives people a chance to look inward, meditate and read, being with themselves is a rare and important moment.

If we consciously practice the openness and positivity exercises of the six basic exercises, there are still many gifts we can harvest from this disaster.

For teachers and families in Waldorf circles across the country, we are very fortunate to know that only one friend and her family have fallen ill due to the virus, but they are gradually recovering now. The husband of a teacher from the Chengdu Waldorf School went to Wuhan as a doctor to work at the front line. We pray for him to return home safe. A child from Hangzhou Waldorf kindergarten and her father wrote a very beautiful song for the people and doctors in Wuhan. The song was spread all over the country and moved many people.

Today, the pandemic is being brought under control, the patients are recovering, people are going to work, but “Nian” is still abusing people in many places. Some cities are still closed. Many people are still at home. Schools have not opened yet. Everything is on hold. Yes, winter is almost over and Spring is just around the corner. We just need more patience and confidence.

In this battle without gunfire, children's daily lives are inevitably greatly affected. Let's take a look at the current state of the children:

- Since January 20th, many children in the city can only stay in the small apartments in high-rise buildings, unable to play outside or be in the nature.
- They are also not able to play with their friends but only by themselves or with their parents. In their boredom, sometimes they are very creative and play well, and sometimes agitation is common.
- A huge amount of information about the pandemic is flooding people all the time and giving children a lot of overstimulation. In a stressful environment, many children are showing anxiety, excitement, fear, clinging to their parents and have a difficulty in sleeping and calm down.
- Staying at home for a long time, although, a lot of children like it, but the rhythm of family life is quite chaotic, the rhythm of sleep and eating are both affected.
- Many parents, while taking care of their families, are also following the latest updates of the pandemic and doing their own work on line. Their emotions and consciousness are in an uneasy state.

Online learning looks for some to be a way to solve some problems, which has suddenly resulted in many online courses for children from kindergarten to college. China was forced to become a pioneer in which all students are studying online in the short time without any question. Of course, in a few days later, National Education authorities emphasized that kindergarteners do not need online classes, but teachers need to work with parents online so that parents can support children at home.

What should Waldorf teachers do with this situation? How do we work with modern technology? How do we deal with the so-called Ahrimanic forces? How can we bring movement to children's souls and bodies through online courses? How can we involve their will and feeling in online learning? It is quite interesting for a lot of teachers and it may be full of creativity, but in this new way of working, we need to keep watch and be cautious.

In mainland China, there are a total of 320 Waldorf kindergartens. Due to limited space and conditions, only 40 kindergartens have official licenses. After the outbreak began, these legal kindergartens were immediately guided by the local education authority to do Epidemic Prevention work, while the other many small Waldorf kindergartens had to seek out information and solutions by themselves.

Therefore, after the outbreak of the virus, the China Early Childhood Education Forum (CECEF) work group immediately took up the responsibility to support and guide these kindergartens. We launched many online activities across the country, supporting parents and teachers, and showing society the development and the lively force of Waldorf education in China.

Here is an overview of CECEF's main activities during the pandemic:

Since Jan 27 until February 24, we published 1-3 articles daily on Wechat, a total of 40 articles have been posted, views reaching over 60,000 people. The topics including greetings, pandemic prevention work, practical guidelines for family life and child care, stories, fairy tales, music, songs, morning circle activities, handwork, also some quality articles etc. The most remarkable work is that

we have created and collected several healing stories to help children transform the trauma from this disaster.

Through the internet, members of CECEF working group gave two online webinars about “How to Take Care of Children at This Special Time” for the Wuhan Waldorf circle with 500 hundred people in it. Later, we did another 8 online webinars with different topics to do with family life and children's needs at this special time. More than 25,000 people participated in these online experiences.

In the face of the monster “Nian” and the unpredictable future, may these words from Steiner help us gain the courage, wisdom and inner peace to move on, to care for our children and their childhood.

*“We must eradicate from our soul
All fear and terror that comes to meet us from the future.
We must look forward with absolute equanimity
To whatever comes
and we must think only that whatever comes is given to us
by a world direction full of wisdom.”*

Li Zhang was introduced to Waldorf Education in 1994 and later completed her Waldorf early childhood master's degree at Sunridge College in Spring Valley NY. In 2004, she and her husband Huang Xiaoxing (Harry) and children returned to Chengdu. As pioneers, they co-founded the first Waldorf School in mainland China and she became the first Waldorf kindergarten teacher in mainland China. Currently, she is responsible for the training center at the Chengdu Waldorf School and is the chairperson of the college of teachers for the whole school, as well as the chairperson of the China Waldorf Early Childhood Education Forum (CECEF).