

# From Qingming to Coco: The Case for Promoting Life and Death Education to Chinese Minors

Keyue Li

Nanjing Foreign Language School

## **Abstract:**

The essay first discusses cultural roots of Chinese people's avoidance of discussing death and then argues why death education should be promoted in China.

## **1.Introduction: Life and Death Education in China**

The popularity in China of the Disney movie *Coco* (2017), which follows a 12-year-old, music-loving boy's unforgettable journey to the Land of the Dead, has raised heated discussions about whether Chinese minors should be taught about life and death and, if the answer is in the affirmative, how to teach them. Life and death education can be traced back to the modern death movement, which began with American psychologist Herman Feifel's 1959 book, *The Meaning of Death*. Noting the taboo on discussions of death and dying, Mr. Feifel, as well as other scholars who later joined the movement, challenged individuals to acknowledge their personal mortality, as they suggested that doing so is essential to living a meaningful life. Their suggestions have been well

received in the United States and European countries, where life and death education has gained momentum. A notable exception to this trend is China, whose large population generally shows a deep-rooted cultural resistance against the discussion of death primarily due to inadequate understanding of the subject.

In this essay, the authors first discuss, through key cross-cultural comparisons, the roots of Chinese people's avoidance of discussing death and the common arguments against offering life and death education to minors. The authors then analyze three reasons why, despite such resistance, teaching Chinese minors about life and death is important. On this basis, the authors conclude the essay with a call for the enactment of related legislation and the establishment of a mechanism to allow for the cooperation of schools, family, and

society to improve education about life and death for future generations in China.

## **2. The Cultural Roots of Chinese Attitudes Towards Death**

While Mexicans celebrate Día de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead) with carnivals, prayers, and music, Chinese people sweep tombs and burn ghost money to grieve for the dead under the gloomy atmosphere of the Qingming Festival. Guided by Confucianism, which, for thousands of years, has been the most influential belief system in China, many Chinese people have followed the mainstream Confucian principle of “If we don’t understand life, how can we understand death?” (未知生，焉知死; *weizhisheng yanzhisi*) to focus on one’s life instead of reflecting on the meaning of death. As a result, “death” has become a taboo in China, in stark contrast with the Mexican approach of treating death as a reflection of and the ultimate culmination of life. In addition, China embraces collectivism, which emphasizes one’s role in society, while western countries embrace individualism, which stresses one’s *personal* experiences on earth. All of these factors lead to a lack of protocols in China for teaching minors how to positively view life and death issues and, by extension, how to protect themselves physically and psychologically.

## **3. Common Arguments Against Life and Death Education for Minors**

The Chinese cultural resistance against discussing death has led to many objections to the promotion of life and death education targeting Chinese minors. For example, an assignment by a Chinese middle school teacher asking her students to write their bucket lists and epitaphs sparked a great deal of criticism and complaints from parents, who claimed that the teacher was cursing their children. Opponents of life and death education hold the view that the subject is too difficult for students to grasp. They also state that the subject induces anxiety and fear towards death because it exposes minors to morbid themes that arouse difficult and sometimes concerning emotions from which adults should seek to protect them.

## **4. Three Reasons for Teaching Chinese Minors About Life and Death**

Despite the controversy surrounding life and death education, this type of education should be promoted to Chinese minors for three main reasons.

First, the mental health of minors closely correlates to how well they comprehend tragedies, and death education helps minors resolve their own feelings about the fate that all people must eventually face and, therefore, leads to more rational thinking. Knowledge gives people, regardless of their ages, a measure of control while ignorance produces more panic and anxiety. Even

more, there seems to be some correlation between death anxiety and somatic symptoms. Feeling like one has control is useful even in the extreme case of people facing imminent death. For example, research has found that after educating 92 cancer patients about life and death, their fear of death dropped from 73.91% to 9.78%, while their resistance towards death decreased from 67.39% to 11.96%.

Second, through life and death education, young people receive well-structured instructions that can help them better understand the meaning of life and, accordingly, value their lives more. In this era of developed technology and material abundance, the rise of consumerism, together with the utilitarianism that follows, has become popular and has, to some degree, caused a shallow view of life. This problem is also prevalent among young people, as demonstrated by the large numbers of increasingly younger children who commit suicide or self harm. Facing these challenges, adults generally try to protect minors by avoiding any discussion of life and death, not knowing that a better way to help minors withstand these challenges is to counter them directly.

Third, a warm and colorful delivery of life and death education cultivates a positive attitude towards life among minors. In an attempt to change the general impression that such education must be gloomy and abstruse, Chinese scholar Feng Jianjun has suggested weaving lessons about life and death into other courses and combining

related lessons with other activities in an interdisciplinary approach focused on real-life relevance. For example, in Japan, life and death education is integrated into various curricula like psychology, physical education, and biology. Also, in the United States, based on Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey's suggestion to combine education with life experience, the subject is taught in an open and pluralistic way, with such activities as raising a virtual child, plants, or animals, role play, discussing related books and films, and visiting hospitals, orphanages, and prisons. In addition, films like *Coco* and picture books like the beloved 1982 classic from *New York Times* bestselling author Leo Buscaglia *The Fall of Freddie The Leaf (A Story of Life for All Ages)* are perfect examples illustrating the warmth that can be at the core of life and death education and the colorful ways it can be presented to minors.

## **5. Concluding Remarks: The Future of Life and Death Education in China**

The lack of life and death education for Chinese minors is a problem rooted in Chinese culture, which has long avoided discussions about death and the limits of one's natural life. In Chinese society, there is strong resistance to the promotion of life and death education, with opponents claiming that such education will increase people's anxiety about death and that the subject is too difficult for minors to grasp. However, these arguments are weak because they are inconsistent

with the facts, ignore the relationship between many social problems and the lack of life and death education, and reflect a conventional stereotyping of life and death education. As the Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore said, “Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come.” Death education is not submerging people in darkness; it is teaching us about our finite nature, which reminds us of the meaning of life. In recent years, Chinese officials and scholars have begun to realize the significance of promoting life and death education to minors. The *Outline of the National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)* issued by the Chinese government lists life and death education as a strategic theme. Despite this milestone and the fact that this plan ended in 2020, there remains no framework that clearly defines the objectives, contents, and delivery of life and death education, nor have the related duties of the government, schools, media, enterprises, and communities been clarified. China must enact laws and regulations to define and guide life and death education, as well as establish a mechanism to allow for cooperation among schools, family, and society. This will allow the country to fully realize the value of life and death education and impact future generations of Chinese youth in a positive way.

## Works Cited

*Supra* note 8.

Rabindranath Tagore, “Say Not in Grief,” SHORTPOEMS.ORG, <https://www.shortpoems.org/poem/say-not-in-grief-tagor/index.html>.

(*Outline of the National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)*), issued by the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China on July 29, 2010, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-07/29/content\\_1667143.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2010-07/29/content_1667143.htm).

Sébastien Billioud & Joël Thoraval, *The Contemporary Revival of Confucianism: Lijiao: The Return of Ceremonies Honouring Confucius in Mainland China*, CHINA PERSPECTIVES, no. 4, 2009, at 82, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43393029>.

Confucius, *THE ANALECTS*, The Chinese University Press (1992).

LUO Yu & ZHANG Huilan, *A Prospective Analysis of Domestic and Foreign Death Education*, (J. OF NURSING ADMINISTRATION), Issue No. 3, 2018, at 175, 184, <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2018&filename=HLGL201803009&v=aLoMuPuZeNU%25mmd2FI9hnKzymb0S3oSZq2M20bB2itAEg0gIgeuH0MqLSchnyPf9aPFyB>.

LI Xu & DUAN Lihong, *From “The Fall of Freddie the Leaf” to “Coco”: Narrative Reconstruction of the Meaning of Death in Children’s Life-World*, JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES, Issue No. 15, 2019, at 27 <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2019&filename=XKJY201905004&v=j4KAmNsmkZZxOVI%25mmd2BEw24B>

dMztD8%25mmd2Fep0b0TZoSZD%25mmd2BH9c  
%25mmd2FZbVXpMGIMLBgsYFFLq0.

GEERT HOFSTEDE, *CULTURE'S CONSEQUENCES: COMPARING VALUES, BEHAVIORS, INSTITUTIONS, AND ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS NATIONS* (Sage Publications, 2001).

FENG Jianjun, *The Connotation and Implementation of Life Education, Ideological and Theoretical Education*, (IDEOLOGICAL THEORY AND EDUCATION.), Issue no. 21, 2006, at 25,

<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2006&filename=SLLJ200621005&v=f9XW9X6QV4Yy%25mmd2FH7R8muNGLgOangQLdPamxKazDBQKIP4o%25mmd2B1OVmLOMUYQCiHNYaDO>.

Dr. Nina Ribak Rosenthal, *Death Education: Help or Hurt?*, 53 THE CLEARING HOUSE 224 (1980), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30185309>.

Gretchen C. Mills, Ray Reisler, Alice E. Robinson & Gretchen Vermilye, *Discussing Death: A Guide to Death Education*, 76 AM. J. OF NURSING 1341 (1976), <http://doi.org/10.2307/3424026>.

Ahmed M. Abdel-Khalek & David Lester, *Death Anxiety as Related to Somatic Symptoms in Two Cultures*, 105 PSYCHOL. REP. 409 (2009),

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40022086\\_Death\\_Anxiety\\_as\\_Related\\_to\\_Somatic\\_Symptoms\\_in\\_Two\\_Cultures](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40022086_Death_Anxiety_as_Related_to_Somatic_Symptoms_in_Two_Cultures).

ZHONG Xiaoqin & LI Xiaoxia, *(Effects of Death Education on Cancer Patients' Perspective of Death and Their Quality of Life)*, (J. OF NURSING SCIENCE), Issue no. 5, 2009, <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2009&filename=HLXZ200905>

017&v=e329mwMbC%25mmd2BMXIUzLmTMN3Fs  
OIc7qSVvL4v4cq2ojIXWazU4NwMDPF19DNLfjPCe  
E.

LUO Yu, ZHANG Huilan, *A Prospective Analysis of Domestic and Foreign Death Education* (J. OF NURSING ADMINISTRATION), Issue no. 3, 2018, at 175, 184, <https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2018&filename=HLGL201803009&v=aLoMuPuZeNU%25mmd2FI9hnKzymb0S3oSZq2M20bB2itAEg0gIgeuH0MqLSchnyPf9aPFyB>.

*Supra* note 7.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *EMILE, OR ON EDUCATION* (Allan Bloom trans., Basic Books 1979) (1763); JOHN DEWEY, *DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION* (The Free Press, 1996).