An Analysis of Cultural Differences in Death Education between China and the West

Yiru Ma

Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
mayiru2021@163.com

Abstract: Death is a common topic, in early 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic revealed the frailty and impermanence of life. Death education refers to courses and activities that explore death--the experiences, meanings, and attitudes toward it. The differences between Chinese and Western death education are mainly embodied in the arrangements of death education curriculum and the acceptance of the subject of death. This article analyzed the valuable enlightenment of Chinese and Western thanatopsis on medical development and social reality on the premise of keeping the balance of universality and diversity of death ethics. It is hoped that through the discussion of the topic, we can live more meaningfully and apply what we have learned to our daily life.

1. Introduction

Although death is an inherent part of life, it is a taboo topic in society and education in China. In fact, it is not included as an educational topic in school curricula. Insufficient death education has brought many problems. One is that the current education system rarely regards life as the goal of education. The goal of knowledge-based education makes students manipulated by education. They may know "how to make a living" but not know "why they are born into this world". The second aspect is that insufficient death education makes people extremely vulnerable to psychological trauma when encountering emergencies or the death of their loved ones. As for the last aspect, insufficient death education has led to a lack of attention to the quality of death, leading to the overtreatment of end-stage patients, wasting medical resources and increasing the suffering of patients.

Death education favors a change of perspective, moving from death as a taboo to death as an educational need, through its inclusion as normal course content in the curriculum. This change of approach is justified by its educational value since an appropriate awareness of death is linked to a greater understanding of life, better preparation for future losses, a firmer grounding in personal and social values, enhanced sensitivity and personal/social empathy, greater personal maturity, openness to other cultures, etc[1].

2. Definition of Death Education

Death education is a teaching process of exploring the relationship between life and death. This process includes the views and attitudes of culture and religion toward death and dying. Concretely

speaking, death education is an education that promotes people to think deeply about the relationship between humans, nature, and society, comprehensively and objectively understand death, overcome the fear and anxiety of death, and live out the meaning of life by exploring the nature of death.

Also known as thanatology, death education has its beginnings in the 1920s in health education. It was developed to cater to the needs of healthcare professionals faced with situations of bereavement. In the late 1950s, it was first taught in American universities. One of the first educational plans intended for children suffering from illness is included in Sahler's The Child and Death, published in 1978[2].

Wass (2004) summarized death education as a formal or informal death-related teaching activity centered on death, including teaching objectives, content, methods, and evaluation. It is an integrated discipline covering death studies, psychology, ethics, and other content[3]. Xu (2016) proposed three levels of death: nature of death, how to deal with death and near-death and the emotional reactions they bring, and how to adjust death and near-death and suggested their wide range of implications[4].

3. Differences in Death Education between China and the West

3.1. Arrangements of death education curriculum

Since the 1980s, when the U.S. Federal Department of Education mandated "death education" in primary and middle schools, courses related to "death education" have been widely implemented. Death education has allied with parents, schools, government, and social organizations. In the United States, death education is regarded as a subject. Courses on death education are offered in kindergartens, elementary schools, high schools, and universities, as well as hospitals and social service institutions. Death education for preschool children is led by parents, while for students in primary and middle schools is dominated by teachers. At the level of higher education, death education is widely taught, and some universities even set up related master's degrees and specialized death school departments. Besides, social organizations such as "Death Education and Consulting Forum" also participate in death education by organizing events and providing services[5].

A unified death education system has been established in schools. The United Kingdom incorporated death education into the standards and syllabus of the national curriculum system. After the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988, items such as "death and sorrow" were included in the curriculum. Nowadays, death education has its own set of courses, becoming a daily teaching activity in schools.

The courses of death education can be divided into two types: teaching and practice. The teaching style focuses on knowledge related to death, while the practice style emphasizes death experience and emotional communication. Death education abroad pays more attention to practice. For example, there is a practical course in Japan that allows students to experience the process of "raising, killing, and eating" animals (such as chickens and pigs). In this process, students are guided to understand death and think about the meaning of life.

From the practice of three countries, it is reflected that international death education has the characteristics of diversified implementation entities, unified curriculum systems, and an emphasis on practice. This has provided a reference for death education in our country.

In contrast, death education in China originated in the 1990s, mostly focusing on the study of death and hospice care in medical colleges and universities. Some universities have set up electives related to the death view, such as the "Philosophy of Life and Death" course at Nanchang University and the "Philosophy of Death" course at Wuhan University[6], but death education for the public is rare.

In 1988, Wang Jianmin's translation of "Death Education" introduced the concept of death education to the mainland academic community for the first time[7]. Since then, there has been a lively discussion about death education until 2010. In 2016, the first Seminar on Contemporary

Deaths in China was held at Tsinghua University. At present, there are not many schools that explicitly offer death education as a curriculum, and without exception they are electives[8]. In primary and secondary schools, life education courses do not or rarely address the subject of death education.

In 2019, Gu Jin, a representative of the National People's Congress, proposed that death education be carried out for all citizens. Shandong University has been offering "death culture and life and death education" elective courses for clinical medical students for 14 years. At present, more than 20 colleges and universities, including Peking University and Guangzhou University, have offered courses related to death education. The relevant courses guide students to face death and revere life flexibly and diversely[9].

In short, the content of death education in foreign schools is often based on the needs and concerns of students, as well as students' backgrounds and learning abilities. They tend to regard death education as an educational concept and promote it with the mode of "death education" and "frustration education" in the actual educational practice. Taking death education as a breakthrough point, we can reflect on the relationship between ourselves and others, society and nature, face death with a correct attitude, and then examine the ultimate meaning and value of life, transcend death form a positive outlook on life, and constantly improve our own value of life. Compared with the United Kingdom and the United States, China is a conservative country. In terms of curriculum formulation, there are basically no sensitive courses such as death education, and there is no national unified life education curriculum. Moreover, the teaching of all subjects is almost independent without integrating the content of life education. In primary and secondary schools, there are only health education classes, aimed at cultivating students' physical health quality, emphasizing the knowledge of protecting personal safety and strengthening physical fitness. In addition, these courses are in a dispensable position, so the quality of death education is difficult to guarantee[10].

3.2. Social acceptance or avoidance of the topic of death

Westerners have a more rational and open-minded cognition of death. They are more able to face death directly and discuss the issue of death relatively easily. Influenced by religion, Westerners believe that the soul can exist independently from the body and value the soul more than the body. Organ donation is relatively easy to promote.

In sharp contrast to Western people, conversations on death and end-of-life care remain a taboo in China. Conversations about death are often associated with fear, anxiety, avoidance, and misunderstandings. Families often find it difficult to discuss death, because not all family members are equipped or comfortable to have such conversations. Public awareness of end-of-life planning and accessing services such as palliative care is still low[11].

4. The Reasons behind

From a historical perspective, the perception of death is affected by many factors and is often closely related to the economic level and social system of an era, especially cultural traditions and living customs.

4.1. The Differences in Religion

The comparison of Chinese culture which is dominated by Confucianism and Taoism with Western culture which is dominated by Christianity reflects different cognition and attitude on death and death education.

The origin of life in Christianity comes from God weakened and separated the family connection between parents and children in the world, and alienated the Western concept of family affection and

the sense of family responsibility. For Westerners, death is more of a personal matter. The process-oriented way of thinking makes them pay more attention to the pursuit of real enjoyment of life, so when death comes, there are few regrets about not enjoying life. The Western rationalist tradition has always emphasized the value and quality of life. Ever since Socrates' "The unexamined life is not worth living", this idea has been dominant in Western cultural traditions[12].

For a long time, the traditional Chinese view of death is to enjoy life and hate death, and always adopt a negative attitude, refusing to accept death. Confucian culture has always been the core of Chinese traditional culture. Recorded in The Analects of Confucius, "You do not yet know about the living, how can you know about the dead?" Confucius believed that people should first attach importance to life, focus on real social life, and then know death, which is the logical starting point of the Confucian view of life and death, also has the meaning of mourning death.

4.2. The Differences in Philosophy

Western culture originated from the Hebrew civilization rich in religious consciousness and the ancient Greek civilization full of profound rational spirit. The reflection on death is the eternal theme of Western religion and philosophy. From Thales, the earliest philosopher in ancient Greece, to Derrida and other postmodern thinkers, all Western philosophy has been deeply thinking about death. Socrates, known as the father of Western philosophy, put forward the definition of philosophy as "preparation for death", and also created a model in the practice of death that passed down through the ages. The Stoic school even gave rise to a culture of suicide; Even in the age of medieval scholasticism, religious philosophers used philosophical reason to construct and justify death and the world after death. With the decline of Christianity after the Renaissance Movement, man and his reason was the only yardstick for thinking about death, which had obvious naturalism and rationalism nature. Since the Enlightenment, philosophers have explored the question of death with a new modern spirit--scientific spirit and rational spirit. The most famous one is the German philosopher Heidegger, the pioneer of contemporary Western existentialism, who made a profound elaboration on the question of death. Western philosophy on death, especially the nature of death is rigorous and profound.

5. Consider Death Education into the Education System

Through the comparative analysis of death education in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan, it can be seen that the achievements of death education in these countries are relatively rich and worthy of reference in China. Given the benefits of death education, China can consider its inclusion in the education system.

5.1. Frame death education as "Life Education"

This is not a euphemism but an accurate description. Stanford's psychologist Dr. Laura Carstensen developed the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which proposes that as you perceive your time horizon to be reduced, you become increasingly selective with how you spend time, thereby investing resources in emotionally meaningful goals and activities. Upon realizing that life is finite, individuals can better determine their priorities.

5.2. Make death education a part of the education system

Due to the significant overlap of death education with character education, it has been integrated into the education curriculum. Even in academic subjects like language and history, teachers are

encouraged to incorporate death education. As a result, death education is not viewed in isolation, but as a component of the education system. Death education can be integrated into Character and Citizenship Education, especially since it overlaps with syllabus objectives, such as self-awareness and active community life.

5.3. Develop whole-of-society collaboration in promoting death education

This whole-of-society approach is only possible if society is convinced of death education's importance. Given the growing importance of end-of-life issues and holistic education in China, families and community organizations should be more engaged in death education beyond schools.

Firstly, the country should improve relevant laws and regulations to ensure the effective implementation of death education. Although the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the socialist core values from the three levels of the state, society, and individuals, involving the connotation of death education, the relevant laws and regulations of death education in China are still imperfect, and the state must formulate special laws to promote the development and popularization of death education in primary and secondary schools. Then, society and family work together to teach children about death. Families should also assume the responsibility of death education for children, such as appropriate frustration education for children, to cultivate children's ability to do things independently, and create a warm family environment for children so that children understand life and cherish life.

5.4. Incorporate experiential learning in death education

Experiential learning is included through field trips to hospices, interviews with relatives, and small-group discussions with classmates so that students gain deeper insights beyond the textbook. Through field trips to observe the life cycles of plants and animals in parks and zoos, death education helps to normalize death as natural, rather than a failure of modern medicine. This helps to shape perceptions of a "good death", calling to question the pursuit of life-sustaining medical treatments at the expense of comfort care.

5.5. Taking the traditional ideology and culture of our country as the source, endow death education with it

Death education in all countries is based on their own traditional culture, trying to make it more suitable for a certain period of education model and development. Due to the great differences between China and foreign countries, we should start from our own excellent traditional culture, study the life value concept contained in it, and apply it to the death education of students in China.

6. Conclusions

Through the comparison between China and the West above, we can conclude that death is still a social and educational taboo and a radical pedagogical need for China while Westerners are more likely to accept death as a part of life.

Death has been medicalized in modern societies, associated with long painful treatments and the loss of personal agency and identity for individuals nearing death. Good death should also be a right. With the development of the times, we should realize that life and death are inseparable, and the culture of death is also a culture of survival. Death education can help individuals and families prepare to approach and deal with death in a more deliberate and informed manner.

In the future, China could introduce death education as part of its Citizenship and Character

Education and it could be done in collaboration with the local palliative care team, to promote awareness about end-of-life planning and dismantle the taboos around death. Only by establishing a correct view of death, can we face life more bravely.

All creatures undergo the process of death. Whether we avoid it or not, this is the only way to go. Only by understanding the meaning of death can we truly appreciate the value of life. This may be called "being towards death".

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