

# The Life and Death Education for Teenagers in China: A Lesson of Rebirth

**Zixuan Guo\***

*School of Languages and Culture,  
Tianjin University of Technology,  
Tianjin, 300384, China*

*\*Corresponding author email:  
1974266077@qq.com*

## **Abstract:**

Life and death education is a crucial topic in everyone's life. In this world, birth and death occur every moment. However, in China, teenagers, who are at a critical stage of physical and mental growth, are often excluded from the door of life and death education. During adolescence, significant physiological and psychological changes occur, necessitating professional and scientific guidance to foster healthy beliefs. Yet, due to the constraints of traditional Chinese concepts and societal atmosphere, teenagers cannot receive adequate and correct education, easily forming misguided views on life and death, leading to life trivialization and excessive fear of death. To alter this status quo in China, concerted efforts from families, schools, and society are required.

**Keywords:** Life and Death Education, Teenagers, Value of Life

## **1. Introduction**

Adolescence is a pivotal period for the formation of life outlooks and values. Teenagers undergo significant physiological and psychological development, refining their understanding of life and value judgments. However, they are still susceptible to interference and misguidance from external negative information. Therefore, life and death education during this stage is crucial. Nevertheless, in China, life and death education for teenagers is often overlooked. Pressured by heavy academic demands, teenagers devote themselves entirely to coursework, with minimal exposure to life and death education content in learning materials. Textbooks merely recite slogans like "life is precious" without explaining the reasons behind them or elucidating the meaning of life and death. Even texts related to life and death in textbooks are gradually being removed. Without

exposure to these topics, students cannot comprehend the significance of life and death, leading to distorted beliefs and even the misconception that academic exams are more important than life itself. Instances of teenagers trivializing life and attempting to end their lives to escape academic pressure are not uncommon. As one of those who had experienced the Chinese college entrance examination, I was also once among the many students. During my high school years, a student suddenly died of a heart attack during a sports meet. Theoretically, sudden heart attack is not an extremely rare condition. However, the negative impact of this incident was far greater than anticipated. To minimize public opinion, the school prohibited students and teachers from spreading the news. Without proper life and death education, students misconstrued the school's actions as an attempt to evade responsibility, distorting the incident into

a malicious one and unfairly accusing and blaming the deceased student's homeroom teacher. The dual pressure from students and the school caused immense psychological stress for the teacher, preventing her from returning to work for nearly two months. Meanwhile, the school atmosphere plummeted. This was a result of students' lack of understanding of life and death and adults' neglect of life and death education for students.

Death is an inevitable thing, and understanding death is also understanding life. If teenagers do not receive appropriate life and death education during adolescence, it is easy to misunderstand life and death, or even have an escape mentality. If people can only think about the meaning of life and death when they have to face life and death after adulthood, then everything is too late.

## 2. The Definition of Life and Death Education

Life and death education originated from the United States as "thanatology" research and subsequently evolved into "death education." When it was introduced to Taiwan and mainland China, it was renamed "life and death education." The rise of death education in the United States is closely related to the values and culture of American society. Americans admired youth, achievement, health, individualism, and self-control, all of which failed to help them effectively deal with issues of death. Especially with contemporary medical technology, which has seen rapid development following breakthroughs in life sciences in the mid-20th century, but still remained powerless against many diseases. It added significant death anxiety to Americans who believed that the power of human will over nature. In 1928, marked by John C. Gebhart's first commentary on American funerals and funeral homes, the academic community began to study fields related to death, involving sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc., leading to the emergence of death education.

"The purpose of life education is to guide students to correctly understand the value and significance of life. Stimulate ultimate beliefs, nourish caring feelings, learn to revere, respect, cherish oneself, others, and even all living things, promote the healthy growth of students, improve the quality of individual life, and promote social harmony, civilization, and development." (Xu Lingyu et al., 2021) And "death itself is part of life, life is not outside of death. Talking about life must talk about death, carrying out life education cannot leave death itself and only talk about the beauty of life." (Xu Qizheng, 2022) That is to say, the final aim of life and death education is to let children form a correct understanding of the meaning and value of

life, so as to cope with death and its negative psychology correctly, prepare for future life, and not panic too much when facing death.

## 3. The Importance for Teenagers

In recent years, suicides among middle school students in China have occurred frequently, with the adolescent suicide rate continuing to rise. "In China, the number of suicides each year has reached 287,000, of which young people aged 15-24 account for more than 26%, and even more have suicidal thoughts." (Wang Zaijian, 2020) Adolescents may choose suicide due to academic or emotional problems, but in the eyes of adults, these difficulties are not enough to end one's life. Ultimately, the root cause of frequent suicides among adolescents lies in their weak awareness of life and death. Children do not understand what life and death mean, mistakenly regarding temporary problems as obstacles hindering their lives, and thus choose to escape difficulties by death.

Adolescents are in a period of gradual physical and psychological maturity, where they form their own perspectives on the world and their various beliefs gradually mature. During this period, the influence of the outside world on them is crucial, and without timely intervention and guidance, they can easily go astray.

"Therefore, it is very necessary for the healthy growth of teenagers to carry out and popularize scientific death education as soon as possible, combined with positive life education, so that students can treat death with the correct attitude, understand the greatness and hardship of life, thus treating life correctly and loving life." (Xu Qizheng, 2022) People ought to understand the meaning of life and death before they have to face life and death, forming a specific and positive understanding of life and death, so that they can better plan and play their own value in life, and calmly face death when it comes, without excessive panic.

## 4. The Current Situation in China

Compared with the West, China's life and death education curriculum can only be said to be in the initial stage. For example, the United States regards death education as a subject, and offers death education courses in kindergartens, primary schools, middle schools, universities, hospitals, social service institutions, etc. Germany allows children to learn about death through games and obtain education from an early primary school age, and organizes middle school students to visit funeral homes, enabling young people to face the end of life directly. Many developed countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan,

France, and the Netherlands also incorporate death education into teaching plans, and publish relevant textbooks and books on death education to guide the public towards a correct view of life and death, which is recognized and welcomed by the public. However, “China’s life and death education research is still in the theoretical exploration stage relying on foreign theories and research results, discussing the importance, feasibility, and content of death education quite a lot, but the actual development in classrooms at all levels and its effectiveness research are still very scarce.” (Meng Ling, 2018) There are almost no relevant general education course objectives in the middle school curriculum standards throughout the country. According to Su Chenxi, “In terms of teaching methods, there are relatively few practical activities related to death education in China. Many schools that offer this course adopt the method of large-scale lectures, which results in students lacking the ability to solve problems related to death. They still experience a high degree of anxiety when facing death, significantly reducing the effectiveness of education.” (Su Chenxi et al., 2022)

In addition, accompanied with the social atmosphere of “not saying the word ‘death’ in front of children”, teenagers are gradually blocked at the threshold of life and death education, as if this is to protect their physical and mental development. However, this approach is completely wrong. *First Financial Daily* reported that there was a party who pointed out that “Due to the lack of positive guidance and education on death in today’s society, people tend to focus on negative and fearful factors, stigmatizing death. Those who have not experienced death are undoubtedly afraid of it.” (Peng Xiaoling, 2023) Children who have not received correct education may have a vague understanding of the meaning of life, even despising life, and can be excessively scared when facing death.

## 5. The Causes of the Situation

Firstly, in traditional Chinese culture, the concept of “valuing life and avoiding death” has existed for a long time. For example, Confucianism, one of the most influential schools of thought in China, believes that death is sinful, sad, and should be avoided. “Confucius said, ‘Poverty and death are the greatest evils of man.’ Mencius said, ‘I dislike death, but there are things I dislike even more than death.’” In Confucian culture, life and death are clearly opposed. Life is the way to realize one’s self-worth and social value, while death is the negation and end of life, therefore, “death” is considered an extremely evil thing. (Wang Zheng et al., 2015) Even though Taoism holds the view of “conforming to the will of heaven” and “equality of life and death,” due to “the long-standing tra-

ditional status of Confucianism as the dominant ideology in Chinese culture has not changed, and later generations vulgarly regarded Taoism’s transcendence of death, the realm of ‘eternal life,’ as the pursuit of physical ‘immortality,’ actively prolonging life, and gradually forgetting the natural view of life and death that is ‘accepting one’s time and place.’” (Wang Zheng et al., 2015) Therefore, the taboo on death in the hearts of Chinese people has long been ingrained, which naturally affects the education and guidance of the next generation. In today’s era, this concept has weakened, but most people still avoid talking about death, especially in front of minors. Adults always say “children shouldn’t ask what they are not supposed to know”, and even threaten their children that there are ghosts in places like cemeteries when passing by, using this to “educate” children not to run around and talk nonsense. The words and deeds of adults directly affect the formation of kids’ thoughts. In the adolescent stage, children’s concepts of life gradually take shape, and their understanding of life and death comes from the adults around them. They are influenced by adults, avoiding and panicking about death, so they cannot face death head-on, causing the shadow of death to continue to expand.

Secondly, China has a large population base with limited resources, and as a result, the Chinese education model has evolved into “exam-oriented education” amidst the ongoing competition for resources. “The awkward reality is that under the coercion of exam-oriented education, grades have become the common goal pursued by schools, students, and parents, while life education is virtually non-existent.” (Zhang Songchao, 2015) Under this situation, for nearly every Chinese student, the goal of life in adolescence seems to be simply to study hard and get into a good university, but the meaning of life and death is completely chaotic in their minds. At the same time, “Hiding the illness or death of family members from children who are about to take the middle and high school entrance examinations is a common news. This utilitarian practice is an erosion and even alienation of life.” (Zhou Wei et al., 2023)

## 6. Possible Measures

Firstly, schools, which bear the main educational role and are also the place where children stay the longest during adolescence, can provide the most educational environment and resources. China can “learn from foreign death education methods, carry out education from primary and secondary school stages, and enable teenagers to establish a correct view of bioethics from an early age. In primary and secondary school stages, the form of combining game teaching with classroom teaching is used to enable

students to have a preliminary understanding and positive cognition of life and death, and reduce excessive fear of death.” (Wang Zheng et al., 2015) According to Wang Zaijian, China’s education departments should improve the discipline setting and curriculum system research of life education as soon as possible. At this stage, all high schools should also independently develop school-based courses on life education, focusing on the physiological and social significance of death, respecting life, protecting one’s own life, and correctly facing setbacks. (Wang Zaijian, 2020) We can observe that “as education continues to advance, scenario simulation teaching and role-playing have gained recognition from students in more and more countries. Allowing students to experience death and combining practice with theory enables them to better understand the meaning of life. Diversified educational methods are worth learning from.” (Su Chenxi et al., 2022) Therefore, schools can try diversified and interesting teaching methods to make it easier for students to accept complex knowledge. If teenagers can receive timely and correct guidance in school, think about the meaning of life and death, realize their own value of life, then the purpose of promoting children’s physical and mental health development and improving the quality of individual life can be truly achieved.

Secondly, as the initial medium for children to receive education, families should provide a suitable atmosphere for them and give them positive lead and encouragement through events that may be encountered in life, such as the death of pets, illness of people around them, helping children form correct concepts. “Teenagers are increasingly experiencing the sudden or tragic death of peers, such as accidents, suicides, and murders. Strengthening meaningful communication within families and participating in illness treatment are important channels for death education, so as to deeply understand the true meaning of life, clarify self-worth, and gain insights into life.” (Yang Hong et al., 2023) It is completely wrong for parents to avoid talking about life and death with their children or to order them not to ask too much. Parents need to be able to face life and death first, so that children can be positively influenced.

Thirdly, the influence of social atmosphere on children is also very important. Durkheim believed that “a certain suicide rate is a normal phenomenon in society, but abnormal suicide reflects the inadequate presence of society, where society fails to play its role of integration and regulation, and the resulting emotional state is concentrated on the suicide victims.” The gradually increasing suicide rate among adolescents in recent years is a warning that social intervention is indispensable. (Durkheim, 2005) Related department should pay attention to this issue and put ap-

propriate content in the media that children can access, such as short video platform content push, extracurricular reading for teenagers, film and television works, teaching aids, etc. “If we can make use of new media and supplement it with professional answers to doubts, we can weaken or eliminate the public’s taboo psychology of death and effectively popularize death knowledge.” (Ji Chunyu, 2018) And “Community medical institutions can regularly hold lectures on medical ethics, psychology, and medical knowledge to promote scientific medical knowledge and concepts of life and death, and educate the public on how to rationally view the death of loved ones, medical accidents, sudden medical events, and other issues. Non-profit organizations can break the taboo of death through educational forums, door-to-door propaganda, parent-child interaction, etc., allowing the public to talk about death and face life and death directly.” (Wang Zheng et al., 2015) Through subtle influence, help children establish correct views on life and death, integrate education into daily life, give children correct psychological hints, let them face up to the meaning and value of life, face up to the arrival of death.

## 7. Conclusions

Life and death education is a subject that everyone needs to study for a lifetime. Life and death run through a person’s life, only by truly understanding life and death can we calmly face all kinds of vicissitudes in life. And before leaving the protection of family and school, having to really face life and death on their own, the life and death education that teenagers need to receive is particularly important. The traditional concepts and social atmosphere of China have caused the problem that teenagers lack life and death education today, and under this situation, from schools, to families, and then to social atmosphere, all need huge changes. However, this change is long and difficult. Faced with the problem of teenagers lacking life and death education, China still has a long way to go.

## References

- Durkheim, E. (2005). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Ji, C. Y. (2022). *Discussing the normalization of death education through the movie “Lighting up the Stars”*. *Media and Art Research*, (03), 65-71.
- Meng, L. (2018). *Students’ intrapersonal polyphony and perspective shifting: An examination of life and death education courses in colleges and universities*. *Linguistic Research*, (02), 145-157.
- Peng, X. L. (2023). *If the whole society makes up for the*

lack of death education, death will no longer be stigmatized. *Yicai Daily*, p. A11.

Su, C. X., Jiang, Y. M., & Yan, Z. F. (2022). The current state of death education. *Yunnan Education (Vision and Current Affairs Edition)*, (72), 15-16.

Wang, Z. J. (2020). *A Study on Influencing Factors and Educational Countermeasures of Suicide Ideation in High School Students*. Unpublished master's thesis, Changchun Normal University, Changchun, China.

Wang, Z., Pan, H. F., Zhao, J. Y., Lin, Z. Y., & Ye, X. X. (2015). Differences in views on death and death education between China and the West from the perspective of doctor-patient conflicts. *Chinese Journal of Ethnomedicine and Ethnopharmacology*, (12), 156-159.

Xu, L. Y., & Li, S. (2021). A brief discussion on how to

integrate life education into the work of homeroom teachers. *Science Advisory (Educational Research)*, (02), 40-41.

Xu, Q. Z. (2022). Exploring the necessity of implementing death education courses in high schools. *Science Enthusiast*, (03), 26-31.

Yang, H., Li, P., & Hu, M. R. (2023). On the cognition and acceptance of death. *Medicine and Philosophy*, 44(05), 54-58.

Zhang, S. C. (2015). The phenomenon of adolescent suicide requires urgent attention. *Changjiang Daily*, p. 007.

Zhou, W., & Xue, S. (2023). We owe our children an education on death. *Friends of the Homeroom Teacher (Middle School Edition)*, (05), 51.