

The Lack of Contemporary Death Education in China and Its Impact on Public Awareness

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Abstract: China lacks three categories of education: sex education, education of love, and death education, which correspond to the integrity of the body, the abundance of the soul, and the value of life, but they have become forbidden, obscure, and taboo. In recent years, self-mutilation, suicide, and violence are becoming infantilization, which has a growing negative impact on teenagers. Through literature review, the main arguments of this paper are 1) the social influences caused by the lack of death education' 2) the process of developing public awareness of death from 1928 until the present, and 3) the discussion on the first-hand data from the primary questionnaire. Therefore, this paper investigates in-depth domestic death education in China, aiming to find the correlation between whether people have received death education before and their awareness of death.

Keywords: death education, life value, public cognition, education deviations

1. Introduction

“Death” is the term that most Chinese people choose to avoid, yet it is frequently towards the very end of life that individuals start to consider the idea of life and death. However, the core of this phenomenon is that people struggle to acknowledge and accept the potential of awful occurrences. The fundamental reason for this idea to emerge is people's difficulty in facing and obtaining unfortunate possibilities. Due to this cause, there has almost been no instruction given to students in schools or at home on death. Most parents and teachers regard keeping death under wraps as an excellent approach to safeguarding children; nevertheless, just because people avoid it does not imply that it does not exist. Life's worth can only be considered to the entire degree by being aware that one must die. In addition, people should consider what prompts these children to opt for the most hopeless form of defiance, such as "death as a means of expressing their will." Hence, avoiding death through education is like avoiding thinking about life. Therefore, it is crucial to end old taboos and begin teaching the public about death in schools as soon as feasible.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the definition of death education, scholars worldwide mainly hold the following representative views. Firstly, Leviton argues that death education is a developmental process that disseminates knowledge and application about death to individuals and society. Secondly, according

to Gibson and others, death education refers to the operation of the ongoing investigation into aspects of death and their connections to survival [1]. Thirdly, Shumei Zhang believes that the basic concept and meaning of death education is to explore the nature of death so that people can reflect deeply on their relationship with others, society, the soul, and even the universe, thereby being able to perceive the ultimate meaning of life. Only if people can face death by overcoming the fear and anxiety of death can they reveal the glory of humanity and live the true meaning of life [2].

2.1. The History and Development of Death Education

The study of "death" is a new comprehensive discipline that emerged in the United States after the Second World War, covering a wide range of subjects, including suicide, abortion, death, and hospice care [3]. It has gone through several critical historical periods, divided into four different stages [4]. Pine identifies the first stage as the exploratory period from 1928-1957, marked in 1928 by the publication of John C. Gebhart's first review of American mourning and funeral homes when the field of death-related research began [5]; the second developmental period (1958-1967) was when the death education was incorporated into the formal curriculum of universities, and also the first death education research center was established; Kubler-Ross's book *On Death and Dying* brought the field of death education to the public during the third flourishing period (1968-1985), and by the late 1970s, its influence spread to primary and secondary schools; The fourth stage is the maturation period (1985) where 61% of US universities offered at least one course on death education and all medical and nursing schools had incorporated death education into their curricula, indicating the widespread implementation of death education [6].

The study of life and death in mainland China began in the 1980s, especially with the first euthanasia button in China in the 1990s, which aroused widespread concern. At the same time, the issue of hospice care was also discussed and implemented [7]. In the meantime, the issue of hospice care has also been discussed and implemented. With the impetus of social practices related to life and death, the academic community in China has also seen a boom in the exploration of death issues [8].

2.2. Death Education in the Contemporary Society

As early as 2002, China Education News called for "death education to be introduced into the classroom shortly" [9]. However, after 18 years, the popularity and recognition of death education in China is still shallow, and in primary and secondary schools, it is almost a blank. The lack of death education makes it difficult for the public to obtain scientific explanations from traditional sources. Instead, they are left with unscientific or even incredibly wrong information from negative subcultures. The author argues that the impact is significant for children who have not yet developed their cognitive abilities, leading to biased perceptions of death and fear of death and anxiety. Moreover, it can lead to misconceptions about life, values, and the world, and in extreme cases to disregard for one's own life or the lives of others [10].

3. Research Question

After reviewing previous literature, this study mainly explores the research question of whether people have received death education before and their awareness of death:

- 1) Whether these participants have received death education before?
- 2) What is these participants' awareness of death education?
- 3) Is there any correlational relationship between these above two variables?

4. Research Method

The researcher uses two methods to gain knowledge about death education, the information provided by the literature review as unobtrusive research has high validity and reliability. Therefore, it minimizes the possibility that the findings may be subject to social desirability bias or response bias caused by extraneous variables. Apart from that, the first-hand data come from the primary questionnaire that the researcher created.

The researcher designed an online semi-structured questionnaire which contains both opened questions and closed questions, to quantify the subjective questions on death attitudes and perceptions and also to collect participants' thoughts, which allows the final results to be easier processed and analyzed statistically, thus making the conclusions more comprehensive with more excellent reliability. The questionnaire is designed to be anonymous to reduce cognitive bias and social desirability. The questionnaire has two different versions because the researcher aims to control the extraneous variables by using the method of counter-balance to the questionnaire. The target group is people aged 16-50 from mainland China; the result from participants beyond the scope of the study would not be considered valid data, which are 326 questionnaires.

5. Results

According to the basic information questions, there are 125 male participants out of 329 and 204 female participants; however, gender is not the main factor in this study. According to Figure 1, most participants had received an average of nine years of compulsory primary education, with more than half of them (56.23%) having received higher education. However, the pie chart indicates that nearly three-quarters of the participants had not heard of death education, which answers the first research question. It directly reflects that the popularity of death education in China is shallow, as well as people's knowledge.

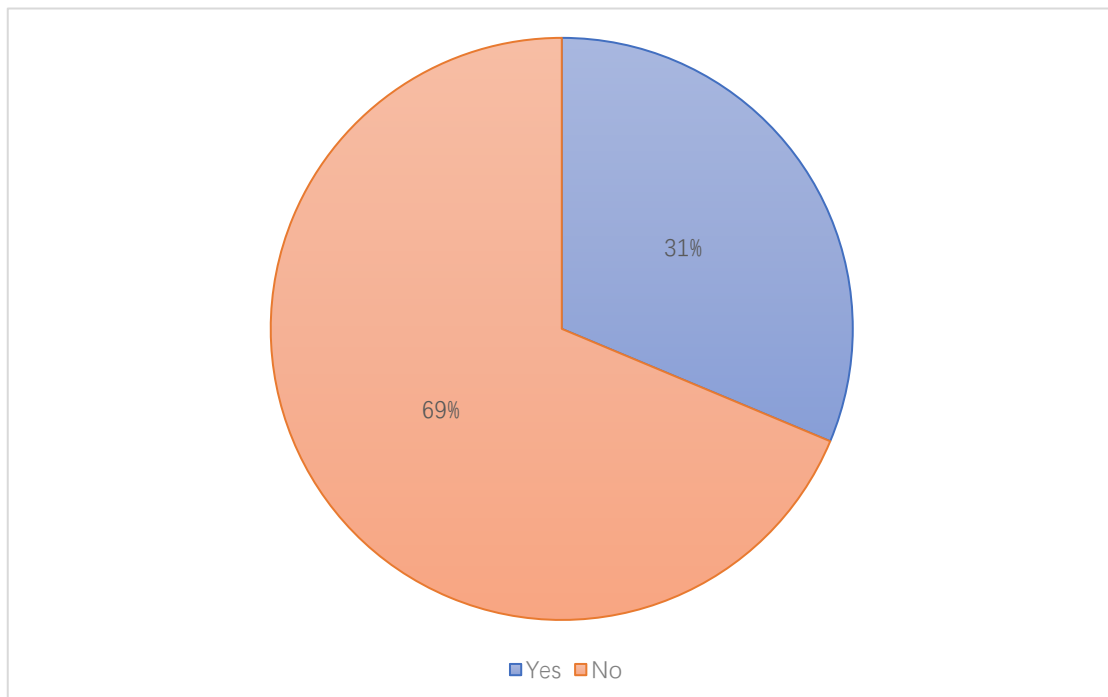


Figure 1: The proportion of people who have heard of death education.

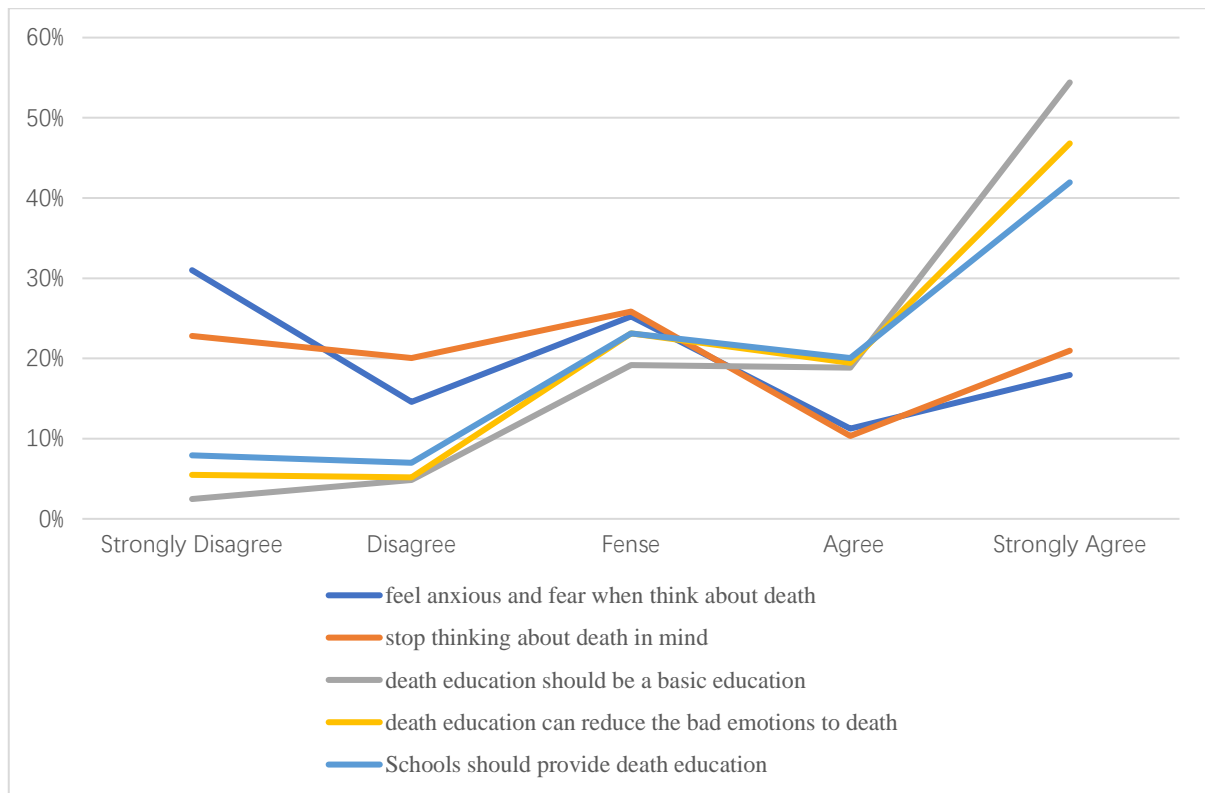


Figure 2: Personal attitudes towards death education.

Figure 2 includes five subjective questions, which all explored people's perceptions of death, and none of the results obtained differed significantly. As the answer to research question 2, most participants had an open, positive attitude towards the end and recognized that death education is valuable. Participants highly agreed that death education is one of the foundations of civic education. The standard deviation is 1.285, which shows that there is indeed a positive correlation between the two variables.

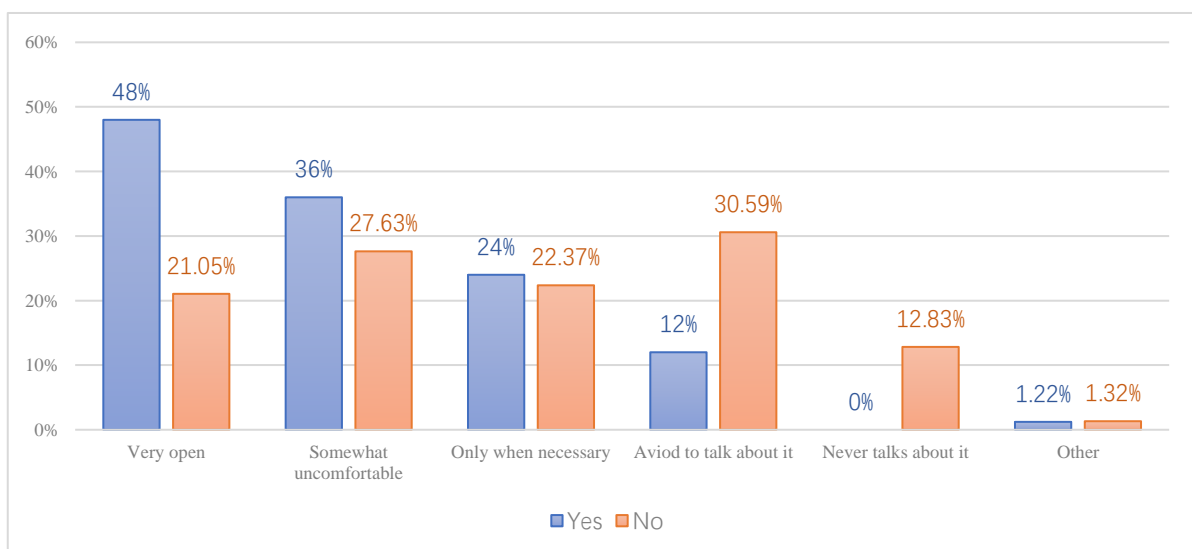


Figure 3: The proportion of people who have received death education & The atmosphere when families talk about death.

Figure 3 combines two questions, representing the two variables in the research question, respectively, "whether received death education before" and "the awareness of death." The graph shows that families with death education participants are more open and receptive to talking about death-related topics, and the arrangement of the data also offers a more significant normal distribution, so this suggests that there is a positive correlation between the two variables, which means that receiving death education increases the public's perception of death.

6. Conclusion

The Confucian cultural tradition in China, which "values life over death," has to some extent hindered the development of death education, resulting in the few death education today being focused on "praising the greatness of life" rather than teaching people to realize that "Death is inevitable, it is the opposite of life and a complement to it." Most Chinese families generally do not actively talk about death; when they have to, they are vague or glorify it. Chinese society is currently transitioning, with all kinds of old and new values washing over people's minds. Society lacks a humanistic approach to life and death and has not developed a social atmosphere of reverence for life and the pursuit of eternal values. The government and the education administration do not attach much importance to death education for young people, and there is a lack of financial and policy support. This paper's main result shows a positive correlation between the popularity of death education and general cognition towards death, which indicates that an increase in the representativeness of death education can side-step some of the risks caused by a lack of death education.

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