

Beyond Neglect: The Gap and Innovative Approaches in Life Education in China from the Perspective of Death Meaning Reconstruction

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Abstract

This study examines the gap in death meaning education within life education research in China, inspired by the proposition “Death is not the end; oblivion is” from the animated film Coco. A systematic review of existing literature shows that while current research has made progress in constructing life value systems, curriculum frameworks, and home-school-community collaboration, there remains a pervasive systemic avoidance of death, meaning education. Three key gaps are identified: (1) the disconnection between theory and educational practice, (2) insufficient cultural contextualization, and (3) limitations in the application of educational technology.

Keywords

Life education; death meaning; Coco; cultural transmission; curriculum reconstruction.

1. Introduction

With the strategic elevation of lifelong education under China’s Education Modernization 2035 initiative, life education has become central to holistic student development. However, despite substantial progress in value system construction, pedagogical innovation, and educational technology, a critical shortcoming persists: the systematic avoidance of death education. Rooted in Confucian traditions that emphasize life while neglecting death, Chinese life education frameworks often omit discussions on mortality, limiting their ability to address students’ psychological needs and existential development.

This avoidance is not without consequence. Contemporary youth face rising levels of death anxiety, with recent reports indicating that nearly a quarter experience related psychological distress. Existing curricula focus heavily on safety and moral instruction but fail to provide meaningful engagement with the concept of death—a necessary element in helping students construct a coherent and resilient worldview. In contrast, cultural narratives such as those depicted in the animated film *Coco* demonstrate the transformative power of integrating memory, loss, and intergenerational connection into educational practices. This paper identifies key gaps in current life education research in China, including the disconnect between theory and practice, insufficient cultural contextualization, and the underutilization of technology. It further explores innovative pathways for integrating death meaning education into life education, aiming to transform death from a taboo into a constructive pedagogical resource.

2. Deficiencies in Life Education

Contemporary Chinese life education research demonstrates three prominent trends: (1) value profundity (deepening philosophical foundations), (2) carrier innovation (novel pedagogical approaches), and (3) technological exploration (AI/VR integration). Yet, this multidimensional

advancement coexists with a striking paradox—the persistent systemic avoidance of death, meaning education, the field's core dimension. Montaigne's philosophical assertion—"He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave" [1]—stands in stark contrast to China's death-avoidant educational paradigm. This tension reveals:

2.1. Deepening of Value Dimensions

Li Chaomin's proposed three-dimensional value system of "conceptual-moral-guidance" establishes a logically rigorous and hierarchically precise framework for contemporary life education in China. The "conceptual value" lays the cognitive foundation [2], addressing "what life is"; the "moral value" cultivates inner virtue and social behavior, answering "how to treat life (one's own and others)"; while the "guidance value" directs future orientation and choices, responding to "where life should lead." These three dimensions progress sequentially toward a core objective: guiding individuals to maximize their life potential (personal growth) through profound experiences of life's meaning - which requires confronting life's entirety, including death - while consciously integrating personal value realization into societal service, collective contribution, and national rejuvenation (social value realization), ultimately achieving harmony between individual and collective values. Implementing this system demands educators shift paradigms: from mere knowledge transmission to creating rich experiential contexts, facilitating deep reflection, and courageously deconstructing traditional taboos like death to enlighten life holistically and profoundly further emphasizes that "experiencing life's meaning" constitutes life education's core purpose, with both scholars' deconstructing death's pivotal role in meaning generation [3]. As Montaigne observed: "The worth of life lies not in its duration but in its depth" [1], where death awareness precisely forms the cornerstone for expanding life's depth.

2.2. Innovation in Practical Carriers

Li Wendan innovatively proposed the use of dynamically generated campus culture as a carrier for life education, incorporating landscapes that reflect a life care [4] (such as establishing a seasonal garden symbolizing the cycle of life and showcasing resilience through a "Wall of Life"), forward-looking school mottos (such as the motto of Shishi Middle School that emphasizes patriotism, public benefit, adaptation to circumstances, orderliness, seriousness, and the concepts of responsibility and growth), as well as cultural activities infused with life education. For example, the 'Planting Green' initiative (a campus tree-planting and conservation activity) guides students to experience the miracle of life's nurturing and growth; the 'Chasing the Vanguard Action' (volunteer service inspired by Lei Feng) allows students to reflect on the extension of life's value through acts of service. These practices vividly connect life experiences with social values but primarily focus on the dimension of 'life' (appreciation, growth, responsibility, contribution), while exploring topics like 'death education' and the completeness of life remains relatively weak. Gu Yanzhu designed experiential activities such as 'Planting Green' and 'Chasing the Vanguard Action' to enable students to grasp the value of life through practical involvement. However, these innovative practices are confined to the dimension of 'life' and lack space for dialogue about 'death'[5]. In contrast, the film 'Coco' utilizes the colorful skeletal characters of the 'Land of the Dead' to visually mitigate children's fear of death, providing an innovative vehicle for death education [6].

2.3. Technology Empowers Exploration

Cheng Jia took the lead in using AI technology to build life education modules and applied 3D visualization technology to improve the learning experience in anatomy teaching [6]. However, such technical applications only serve the learning of biological knowledge and do not touch the deep educational needs of "death memory inheritance". Cruz M.'s empirical research shows that the audience's emotional resonance with "family memory continuation" increases by 37.5%

through the VR-style narrative experience of "Coco" [7], confirming the feasibility of technology empowering death memory education.

Research gaps: Existing research generally avoids death education, which starkly contrasts the philosophical view of "forgetting is the ultimate death" in Coco, highlighting the dual lack of culture and technology.

3. The Cultural Paradox of Death Education: Traditional Taboos and Modern Needs

Traditional taboos (such as the Confucian taboo view of "unknown life, how to know death" and the taboo of folk funeral language) systematically suppress public discussion on the issue of death, resulting in a long-term gap in education. Contemporary adolescent psychological crises (such as the suicide of a 17-year-old student in Shanghai due to untreated bereavement trauma, and the 2023 Youth Mental Health Report shows that 24% of respondents have death anxiety) form a backward force. The paradox is that taboos require avoidance of death, but the crisis forces education to face death head-on. For example, after a middle school in Nanjing opened a grief counseling course, the suicide rate of students dropped by 40% in two years, confirming the urgency of death education.

3.1. Cultural Exclusion

Wu Xueqin pointed out that the Confucian idea of "rebirth and avoidance of death" has a profound impact on educational practice, and traditional culture regards death as an "ominous sign", resulting in life education focusing on "cherishing life" but avoiding talking about "death value" [8]. This cultural taboo is reflected in the curriculum system, which is manifested in the general lack of death issues in school-based curricula, and teachers also lack relevant teaching ability, such as a middle school in Shandong forcibly deleted the "hospice care" chapter of the textbook, and the school annotated that "the content is unlucky"; According to the Beijing Teacher Training Survey, 83% of teachers admitted that they could not respond to students' questions about "where did grandma die"; The mental health class of a school in Guangzhou was permanently suspended due to a joint complaint by parents about "discussing suicide is unlucky". The Mexican Day of the Dead culture proves that death education can be embodied as "the road home paved by golden marigold petals" [9], transforming taboos through cultural symbols.

3.2. Practical Dilemma: Psychological Crisis Forces Reform

Yang Xinying's empirical studies have shown a significant positive correlation between adolescent depression rate and lack of sense of meaning in life ($\beta=0.37$, $p<0.01$) [10]. Song Chunxiao's classroom experiment found that 62% of junior high school students experienced acute anxiety (such as crying and trembling) during the "What do you regret the most about the end of life", but through curriculum interventions (such as "butterfly slap" soothing techniques and reconstructing life value discussions), students' anxiety levels decreased significantly [5]. Specific case: A student who cried bitterly because he did not honor his grandparents calmed down after being guided to formulate an action plan for "cooking for his parents on weekends". The assessment at the end of the course showed that the participating students had an average reduction of 19.3% in their Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) scores, confirming that confronting death in a structured way can resolve fear [5].

3.3. International Comparison: Localization Required for Western Death Education

The West confronts death education through "hospice care practice" and "death experience camp", but domestic imitation encounters cultural exclusion. Yu Lanxi tried to apply the

Socratic dialogue method to the life education of visually impaired students and found that local narratives, such as "Theon lost the horse," must be grafted to be accepted by students [11]. The success of *Coco* lies in transforming Mexican Day of the Dead culture into a universal emotion: "Remember me before the memory of love fades"[7], which provides a model for localization.

4. Path Innovation: Building a Life Education Paradigm

Inspired by the concept of "memory inheritance" in "*Coco*", the implementation path of education on the meaning of death is reconstructed.

4.1. Curriculum Reconstruction: Cultural Decoding of the Meaning of Death

The concept of "memory inheritance" in *Coco* was introduced, the "family oral history" course (Wu Xueqin's traditional cultural resource activation) was developed, and the "death memory" module was added to the "four types of course forms" [12]. For example, the Chinese class is connected to the "sacrificial culture" in the poem "Qingming", and the art class designs the "life commemorative book" creation activity. This curriculum design echoes the cultural practice of turning the altar into a "temple of remembrance" on Mexican Day of the Dead [7], transforming death education into a cross-generational emotional connection.

4.2. Technology Empowerment: Life Continuation in Virtual Scenes

Drawing on Cheng Jia's AI 3D technology, teaching tools such as "digital family tree" and "VR life memorial hall" are built [13]. Develop the "Memory Guardian" gamified learning project, where students understand the value of memory inheritance by completing the "Family Memory Fragment Collection" task. Cruz M.'s experiment proved that the value of "family connection" increased by 43% after the audience experienced memory inheritance in the virtual undead world. Technology should serve cultural inheritance rather than stop at anatomical model display [7].

4.3. Evaluation Turn: Creative Expression of Memory Media

Reform Liu Hui's course evaluation system incorporates expressive assessments such as 'Life Story Creation' and 'Family Memory Installation Art'. Establish a 'Life Memory Bank' repository to collect students' creations of family oral histories, ancestral portraits, and other memory carriers. For instance, the imagery of the marigold petal bridge in '*Coco*' can be used to create a 'Memory Corridor' on campus through AR technology, rendering abstract memories into tangible cultural symbols [14].

Transform 'death' into an educational resource for 'memory inheritance', empowering evaluation through cultural decoding technology, and constructing a life education paradigm that combats forgetfulness.

5. Conclusion

Current life education avoids the topic of death due to cultural taboos, leading to an incomplete construction of the meaning of life. The future direction should draw inspiration from '*Coco*' by integrating cultural elements, deepening technological applications, and establishing an evaluation system focusing on creativity and expression, thereby transforming 'death' into a positive educational resource concerning 'memory inheritance' and 'life continuation.' This signifies that life education needs to shift from its past model, which primarily emphasized 'survival skills and safety precautions,' to a greater focus on constructing the eternal meaning and value of individual life within a cultural context. The goal is to assist individuals in achieving a culturally significant existence that transcends forgetfulness.

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