



## Review article

## Life, death, and spirituality: A conceptual analysis for educational research development

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## ABSTRACT

*Life education*, also known as *life and death education*, is an important subject in Taiwan. Life education is more than just the study of a person's development throughout the lifespan (e.g., cognitive development). Within the learning and sociocultural contexts of Taiwan, interestingly, the study of life and death education is concerned with the premise of the promotion and fulfillment of life qualities (e.g., a person's state of contentment), and the meaningful understanding of the nature of death. To facilitate appreciation and deep, meaningful understanding of the subject, and to emphasize its uniqueness, educators have included in their teaching the importance of Eastern-derived philosophical beliefs and religious faiths (e.g., Buddhism). For example, relatively significant in its emphasis, the teaching of this subject involves detailed examination of theoretical accounts of spiritual cultivation and its positive effect on a person's interpretation and enlightenment of life wisdom.

The study of life education, or life and death education, we contend, is of significance as it provides life-related insights and theoretical understanding into the intricate nature of life and death. One notable aspect of the subject entails a person's acquired life wisdom, which in turn may shape his/her life practice on a daily basis (e.g., the proactive engagement in Buddhist meditation). Importantly, the study of life education may assist individuals with their coping of grief, and to approach death with a sense of peace, calmness, and dignity. In this analysis, coupled with Buddhist faith (or any other religious faith for that matter) and facilitated by spiritual cultivation (e.g., the belief in the notion of *transcendence experience*), a person may overcome grief by believing in the possibility that there is some form of post-death experience and the presence of a loved one's spiritual being. Given this emphasis, we consider an important focus for discussion in this article: to explore the significance of life and death education and to determine how its 'positive nature' could potentially yield two comparable implications for development: (i) to engage in appropriate pedagogical practices that would encourage and promote the study of life and death education, and (ii) to advance innovative research inquiries, theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical, which could highlight the significance of life education for life purposes (e.g., the significance of Chinese ideograms, such as 孝).

## 1. Introduction

*Life education*, also known as *life and death education*, is an important formal academic subject in Taiwan. Numerous institutions, for example, offer degree programs and courses that emphasize the salient nature of life education, educationally and non-educationally, for implementation. One distinctive aspect of the study of life education in Taiwan lies in its emphasis on the utilization of Eastern-derived epistemologies, philosophical reasoning, and religious faith, namely, Buddhism (Yen, 2010;

Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976) for support. In general, from the perspective of Taiwanese Education, life education is concerned with the *promotion, fulfillment, and cherishing of quality life experiences* (e.g., personal contentment, happiness). One example of life education, in this case, relates to the teaching of three interrelated components: *life wisdom, life practice, and life care*. Furthermore, life education also espouses the cultivation of feelings and personal experiences of spirituality, which may assist individuals with their coping of negative life conditions (e.g., the onset of death or the coping of grief).

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As scholars of Education and Psychology, we find the topic of life and death education extremely interesting given its wide scope (e.g., educational and non-educational implications) for consideration. Indeed, the topic of life and death may have a number of life-related yields - for example: helping to create and facilitate a civil, vibrant society. We note, from observations, that many Taiwanese revere elders and the dead; likewise, Taiwanese, many of whom are 'spiritual', like to engage in benevolent acts, such as providing informal quality hospice care and spiritual advice to those who may be dying. Our research interest has led to our recent development of a conceptualization of a term, or a theoretical concept, which we coined as the 'spiritual and enlightened self' (Phan et al., 2020). A person's spiritual and enlightened self, we theorize, reflects the intricacy of his/her perceived sense of spirituality, giving rise to the emanation of life qualities and positive characteristics such as compassion, forgiveness, etc.

By all account, we acknowledge that the topic of life and death education is nothing new. In a similar vein, we contend that many related aspects of life and death (e.g., the importance of spirituality) are not exclusive to educational and sociocultural contexts of Taiwan alone. Other religious faiths and/or cultural beliefs and practices may also espouse to and/or refer to the nature of spirituality, especially in terms of its potent influence to assist individuals and society with remedy and the coping of different types of life conditions. We strongly hold the view that introducing this topic to the wider audience is insightful in terms of knowledge sharing, dissemination of ideas, and intercultural social dialogues for further development. It is not our intention to imply that life education, from the perspective of Taiwanese Education is unique and/or exclusive, or that it possesses distinctive characteristics that are not found elsewhere. Moreover, from this outset, we contend that our interpretation and viewpoint of the uniqueness of life education is based on personal interest and research development and this, in fact, could give rise to a number of valid critiques that would warrant further investigation. In sum, the aim of this theoretical analysis article is to complement our recent published work (Phan et al., 2020) by considering in detail a number of propositions, theoretical and methodological, which we believe could advance the study of life education.

## 2. Life education: a brief introduction

As an acknowledgment before we proceed, the topic of life and death education is not exclusive to the case of Taiwan alone. For example, the concept of death, a taboo for many Taiwanese, is rooted in the study of *thanatology* (Chapple et al., 2017; Doka, 2013; Fonseca and Testoni, 2012; Meagher and Balk, 2013), which is commonly explored and researched in the United States and in other Western countries. In a similar vein, the topic of life education, from the perspective of Western Education, is comparable to the study of 'human development' (e.g., 'stages of human development' across the lifespan) (Dacey et al., 2009; McDevitt and Ormrod, 2010; Sigelman et al., 2016). From the perspective of Taiwanese Education, however, the study of life education, or life and death education, is 'embedded' within the Chinese characters of '生命教育', which translate to mean 'life education' (Phan et al., 2020). Since 1979, with the publication of a seminal paper, titled '*Death Education: A controversial subject in School Health Education*' (Huang, 1993), the topic of life education, encompassing death as well, has become more pronounced and acknowledged by Taiwanese society, in general.

Indeed, as an important point for mentioning, the topic of life and death is closely associated with the Taiwanese government. In this sense, unlike any Educational Psychology topic that an educator may wish to teach to students because of his/her personal interest, life education in Taiwan is somewhat different, reflecting the strong emphasis of the government of the day. For example, the Ministry of Education, Taiwan dedicated 2001 as the 'Year of Life Education' in recognition of its importance and relevance to Taiwanese society, in general. In a similar vein, a number of established institutes throughout Taiwan have made concerted efforts, even to the present day, to promote the study of life and

death education (Ministry of Education Taiwan, 2008, 2011, 2018). The National Taipei University of Education (NTUE) is well known for its establishment of the *Life Education and Health Promotion Institute* where, interestingly, one important emphasis relates to the promotion of the subject of life (and death).

In conjunction with many established institutes throughout Taiwan, formal school and university curricula also place strong emphasis on the teaching, learning, and promotion of life and death education. Indeed, from our observation and current research undertakings, we note that the subject of life and death and, hence, the study of life education in Taiwan is quite pronounced. Why such an investment in effort and resources to promote and foster the study of life education? What is so unique about life education, and how does it facilitate and enhance the daily lives of Taiwanese? These sample questions, we purposely present, are intended to help us frame our conceptualization of theoretical tenets and propositions for discussion.

### 2.1. Goals, contents, and significance of life education

Technological advances and social stability of Taiwan, as well as her economic prosperity have overall been a successful story. Wealth and happiness, evident on a daily basis, have enabled many Taiwanese to enjoy their lives to the fullest. Having said this, however, many Taiwanese would argue that financial wealth alone does not bring true happiness, nor does it improve and/or 'purify' a person's mindset. In this sense, as many Taiwanese would attest, materialistic wealth is a double-edged sword: it brings happiness and personal satisfaction but, at the same time, it also causes various personal, social, and environmental problems, requiring some form of remedy and resolution. This discord, we contend, forms the basis of life education, which the government, stakeholders, educators, etc. believe could address many of the personal, social, and environmental problems that have been identified. The underlying premise then, according to the government, is that life education could serve as a 'remedy', helping individuals cope with life-related matters, issues, circumstances, etc. on a daily basis.

Despite differing offerings, viewpoints, and/or interpretations, the goal of life education is purposive and relatively straightforward: *to transform and reform Taiwanese society so that families and individuals can live fulfilling lives*. Coupled with this is the fostering of a term known as 'humanistic literacy', which considers the importance of knowledge, understanding, and literacy skills pertaining to the complex nature of humanity. In essence, the common viewpoint from many government officials, scholars, and educators is that humanities, science and technology, personal mindset, and materialistic wealth can co-exist with each other in a balanced, productive manner.

The main goal of life education in Taiwan, according to scholars (e.g., Chen, 2012; 2013; Huang, 2014; Phan et al., 2020), is to educate individuals to appreciate life and, more importantly, to *cherish and fulfill different types of life qualities* (e.g., personal contentment). This broad, altruistic purpose of life education, we contend, is also embedded in other cultural groups' expectations, philosophical beliefs, and customary practices. For example, the mentioning of the "fulfillment of life qualities and characteristics" (e.g., the importance of virtues) is described in the *study of positive psychology* (Seligman, 1999; Seligman and Csikszentmihályi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009), which focuses on the promotion and fostering of positive life conditions and qualities and adaptive outcomes (e.g., improvement in academic performance). In a similar vein, the teaching of *morality* in the subject of human development explores personal decision-making of an act (e.g., committing a criminal act, which is perceived to be of a correct decision), shaped in this case by a person's cognitive reflection of the difference between 'intent' and 'consequence' (Phan and Ngu, 2019; Sigelman et al., 2016).

Life education from the perspective of Taiwanese Education, interestingly, incorporates the teaching of Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976), as well as other traditional customary practices and philosophical beliefs. Unlike Western interpretations and teaching of

'stages of human development' across the lifespan (Dacey et al., 2009; McDevitt and Ormrod, 2010; Sigelman et al., 2016), the study of life education places strong emphasis on the *importance of spirituality* (Carmony et al., 2008; Chen, 2009; Huang, 2014), which details the essence of 'purified mind', 'life wisdom', 'spiritual awakening', and 'enlightenment'. In this analysis, emphasis pertaining to life education is closely aligned with the encouragement and fostering of personal feelings and experiences of spirituality. In saying this, we acknowledge that this coverage of life education (e.g., the nature of purified mind) may give rise to confusion, misalignment in expectations, and/or bewilderment for Westerners, as these described aspects (e.g., the concept of spiritual awakening that may associate with personal belief in transcendence) are somewhat esoteric and non-scientific, in nature.

## 2.2. The teaching of life and death educations

Formalized implementation of life education curricula in Taiwan has, to date, consisted of learning objectives and the stipulation of subject contents, which focus on three interrelated components, namely:

- i. **The Wisdom of Life:** It is important for a person, from birth to death, to continuously reflect on his/her acquired knowledge and experiences from the external world, which indeed may help refine understanding into the meaning of life wisdom. An example of life wisdom, in this instance, may consist of a person's pondering of the ramification of having free health care for all citizens. (e.g., "Should we offer free health care to recently arrived migrants?"). Life wisdom, as the term connotes, is a lifelong process that reflects cognitive maturity, diverse life experiences, and the continuation of acquired knowledge of different contexts. A person's wisdom of life, in this sense, is not analogous with his/her intellectual or cognitive development. Circumstances, situations, and contexts throughout the lifespan (e.g., a person's experience of poverty and his/her personal resolve to overcome this plight), in educational and/or non-educational contexts, play significant roles in accounting for a person's acquiring of life wisdom. This emphasis suggests the possibility that age and maturity (and not necessarily formal education) could contribute and/or facilitate in the continuation of the acquiring of life knowledge and experiences. One of our close Taiwanese colleagues, who is a Buddhist nun, recently says this: "with life, comes wisdom".

Life wisdom entails both quantity and quality: how much does a person know and what does he/she know about life? From our point of view, as a person progresses in life, he/she becomes wiser. This viewpoint is personal and relatively contentious for some, who would disagree and argue that individual progression does not necessarily equate to the acquiring of life wisdom. The testament that wisdom "comes with age" is similar to the general belief that cognitive intelligence (e.g., A Year-4 student being able to solve " $\_ + 6 = 19$ " versus a Year-10 student being able to solve " $x + 52 = 10$ , solve for  $x$ ") is closely aligned with a person's age and his/her cognitive development (Inhelder and Piaget, 1955/1958; Piaget, 1963). In the context of Buddhist teaching, life wisdom may entail in-depth knowledge of Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976) and/or the deep, meaningful understanding of life qualities that situate within and/or arise from different contexts. For example, a person's testament of life wisdom may reflect his/her logical explanation of the relationship between benevolent acts and good karma. As we explore next, the quantity and quality of life wisdom may govern a person's daily practice and direct him/her to engage in kind and selfless acts. A grandmother, in this sense, would show more inclination and willingness to assist a person in need than a university student.

- ii. **The Caring of Life:** Life wisdom, as we briefly described, may cultivate an appropriate mindset, which could emphasize the importance of empathy, compassion, mercy, and love towards oneself and towards others. These attributes, in turn, may

motivate and compel a person to show love and care for others in the community – that is, the proactive inclination and willingness to help others, regardless of their backgrounds, social standings, etc. This notion of life care, in part, reflects the teaching of Confucianism (Havens, 2013; Tam, 2016; Yao, 2000) especially the concept of filial piety (Chen, 2016; Chow and Chu, 2007; Hui et al., 2011), which places emphasis on reverence and respect for elders in society. Moreover, reflecting Buddhist teaching (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976), reverence for elders in the community conveys good karma and instills the belief that positive future consequences are likely to result.

Act of life care, in part, reflects love, compassion, mercy, understanding, and empathy. Life care in Taiwan is usually associated with hospice care for senior citizens. Having said this, it is also sufficed to mention that life care also expands to encompass other individuals in society (e.g., helping a teenager who is experiencing anxiety). What is important, though, is that life care is concerned with different types of positive and benevolent acts, highlighting a society's vibrancy in kinship, relationship, and collectivism. As we alluded earlier, the quality of hospice care in Taiwan is exceptional with many Taiwanese showing their generosity by engaging in voluntary acts, where possible.

- iii. **The Practice of Life:** It is a noteworthy feat for a person to live a meaningful life and to contemplate, refine, and improve himself/herself. Meaningful life practice, in this case, may consist of voluntary community services (e.g., helping out at church on Saturday) on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Life education, from our professional experiences, also entails the teaching of Buddhist meditation (Hanh, 1976; Loden, 1996), which could foster positive daily academic and/or non-academic practices. Such discourse (i.e., the daily practice of Buddhist meditation) may, importantly, encourage and enable a person to have 'purified' insights and visions about life and the world, in general. Other forms of daily practices may consist of a healthy diet, self-awareness of the importance of physical exercises, the attempt to 'purify' and 'enlighten' one's mindset, and engagement in and attention to rules of etiquette.

Proactive life practice, indeed, reflects the self-cognizance of subjective well-being (ACU and Erebus International, 2008; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012; Diener et al., 1999; Fraillon, 2004). In this sense, active engagement of daily life practice (e.g., engaging Buddhist meditation or caring for a loved one) may be geared towards oneself, and/or it may be directed towards others in society. This testament contends that life care is not (and should not be) an 'individualistic' act that ensures the well-being of oneself. Rather, incorporating the teaching of Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976), life practice may also encompass the excellence of society and its citizens' subjective well-being. Life care, in this sense, does not simply connote health care – it may, of course, espouse other forms of care as well – for example, financial care, spiritual care, psychological care, etc.

From the preceding section, life wisdom, life care, and life practice may act in unity to instill understanding of the significance of life education. Moreover, the teaching of life wisdom, life care, and life practice may provide and/or encourage meaningful appreciation for two contrasting positions in life: a person's life and his/her ultimate demise. Furthermore, from our point of view, the combination of life wisdom, life care, and life practice may play a pivotal role in helping individuals (e.g., university students) to embrace and/or to appreciate different religious faiths and philosophical beliefs – for example, Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976) and Confucianism (Havens, 2013; Tam, 2016; Yao, 2000). In this sense, the teaching of life education, encompassing life wisdom, life care, and life practice may also instill appreciation for the natural qualities of life and, more importantly, the anticipation of death with a sense of *acceptance, positive outlook*, and

serenity. In essence, as a point of summation, we theorize that life wisdom, life care, and life practice, in combination, would impart the following:

- Elucidate the true nature of life for a person, which in this case consists of different 'life course trajectories' that he/she may have in his/her lifetime – for example: a person's life course trajectory as a bank employee versus her life course trajectory as a spouse. Different life course trajectories, in this sense, account for and make up the totality of a person's life from birth to death. This emphasis contends that in a person's lifetime, he/she will have many life course trajectories, which may largely relate to and/or depend on his/her maturity, experiences, circumstances, and environmental influences. One person's life course trajectory may involve her being a university student majoring in History whereas, in contrast, another person's life course trajectory may involve him joining the military.
- Provide insights into the true meaning of life, which emphasizes the importance of non-materialistic thinking (e.g., that happiness does not arise from materialistic wealth) and a personal mindset that gears towards appreciation for the aesthetic nature of life, both in the physical sense and the esoteric sense (e.g., the concept of transcendence experience). Life from the perspective of an individual is beautiful and fulfilling, regardless of obstacles, perceived difficulties, hardships, etc. Moreover, the success of life may not necessarily rest with financial wealth, successful academic accomplishments, etc. This theoretical positioning, we contend, coincides with and reflects the tenets of positive psychology (Seligman, 1999; Seligman and Csikszentmihályi, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009) for its beautiful outlook of life.
- Introduce a person to the concept of spirituality, which may incorporate the importance of esoteric experiences and Eastern-derived philosophical and religious beliefs for consideration – for example, the belief in Buddhism may assist and/or compel a person to consider the 'possibility' of the endless cycle of birth, rebirth, and redeath (i.e., the concept of *samsāra*). In this analysis, unlike scientific research inquiries in the field of Educational Psychology (e.g., the study of *personal self-efficacy*: Bandura, 1997), esoteric understanding is non-conventional, placing emphasis on the possibility that there are unexplained matters and phenomena in this world that one cannot scientifically validate (e.g., the possibility that there is some form of experience in death and/or after death). A person's understanding and experience of spirituality, in this case, may relate to his/her acceptance of esoteric phenomena and/or experiences, which then would assist him/her with coping of negative life conditions (e.g., grief and the coping of loss).
- Direct, guide, and motivate indifferent and/or non-religious individuals to view life education and, in particular, religious faiths (e.g., Buddhism, Hindu) in a positive light. The study of life education, in this case, may encourage non-religious and/or indifferent individuals to seriously evaluate and consider the relevance and applicability of spirituality and religious sentiments, which could instill and promote attributes of *compassion, harmony, tranquility, unity, and enlightenment* (Phan et al., 2020). In essence, an underlying premise for consideration is that life education may, in place of religious faiths or in tandem with religious faiths, impart meaningful understanding into the essence of spirituality, such that individuals may come to view death as a temporary state of affair. Religiously likewise, from the perspective of Taiwanese Education, life education may encourage individuals to seek the 'stature' of Buddha, which is perceived and believed to bring inner satisfaction, contentment, and serenity.

### 2.3. The importance of death

From a general point of view, which everyone would agree with, death is the ultimate fate of a person: that is, the *permanent ceasing of life*

*of any biological organism*. Regardless of what one may say and/or existing research tells us, approaching death is a daunting experience and, likewise, coping with grief after a loved one has moved on is extremely painful and difficult. Approaching death is not the same as failing a major exam or the onset of financial ruin as these experiences are not permanent and individuals may bounce back later on in life. The onset of death, in contrast, is permanent by which one cannot ignore and/or 'bounce back'. Indeed, aside from this taboo status, death is not something that one can recall to another person. In an article published in *The Atlantic*, titled '*What it feels like to die*', Jennie Dear (September 9, 2016) interestingly sought to clarify the nature of death (i.e., what it feels like to die). In her writing, Dear cited a palliative-care specialist at Stanford University, Dr. James Hallenbeck, and his interpretation and analogy of death. Dr. Hallenbeck's reference of death to that of blackholes – "We can see the effect of black holes, but it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to look inside them. They exert an increasingly strong gravitational pull the closer one gets to them. As one passes the 'event horizon,' apparently the laws of physics begin to change" (Source: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/09/what-it-feels-like-to-die/499319/>).

Dear's (September 9, 2016) article and personal account of death is interesting as it makes attempts to understand the nature of death. This attempt, we contend, is somewhat meaningless as it does not completely explain the complex nature of death and its relatedness – namely, the onset experience of death (e.g., one's onset experience as he/she approaches death), and/or a relative's grief, suffering, etc. We do not intend to devalue Dear's (September 9, 2016) attempt to seek clarification into the meaning and complexity of death. In fact, from our point of view, Dear's (September 9, 2016) article has provided fruitful information, which coincides with and supports the teaching of life and death education in Taiwan. Specifically, the underlying premise of life education contends that one may, perhaps, use this subject as a 'coping mechanism' (i.e., to cope with death). For example, let us consider two possibilities:

- i. The use of life education to overcome grief for a loved one who has passed on.
- ii. The use of life education to prepare a person for the eventuality of death.

From the aforementioned description, death entails two distinctive cases: a person who is approaching death and, in contrast, a person who is grieving for someone who has moved on. Regardless of their different statuses, both cases are unified by a common denominator – namely, the fact that death in itself is negative and extremely depressing to discuss and talk about. This testament, we contend, is interesting as there are two contrasting entities, opposite to each other in terms of nature and characteristics: life is positive and 'light' (e.g., celebration, joy) whereas death, in contrast, is negative and 'dark' (e.g., sorrow, grief). Any student in school or university, for that matter, would choose to study life over death. Having said this, however, it is inevitable that at some stage during the course of human development, every single one of us would have to confront this 'negative, dark' subject. Aside from this unavoidable experience, the aftermath effect of grief, sorrow, and despair, upon death of a loved one, is something that is inevitable, requiring assistance, counselling, and some 'form' of resolution. On a personal level, all of us try to cope and resolve the burden of grief differently. As a form of remedy, for example, one may choose to withdraw from the external world and mourn and/or to combat his/her struggles and conflicts in private. In general, on a daily basis, how could we assist and counsel individuals to confront and face death with a sense of dignity, serenity, and respect (Fu, 1993)?

### 2.4. The possibility of transcendence

The teaching of life education in Taiwan, as we described, is quite unique for its Buddhist teaching (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976), as well as its incorporation of Eastern-derived epistemologies,

philosophical beliefs, and customary practices – for example, acknowledgment of the importance of Confucianism (Havens, 2013; Tam, 2016; Yao, 2000), which teaches a person to revere and to respect elders. One interesting concept, as previously detailed, relates to a person's feeling and experience of spirituality (Carmody et al., 2008; Chen, 2009; Huang, 2014), which may or may not associate with his/her religious faith. 'Being spiritual' in this sense may reflect a person's willingness to embrace Buddhist teaching and/or to accept the legitimacy of the esoteric tenet of samsāra, which delves into the endless cycle of birth, rebirth, and redeath. In a similar vein, a person's experience of spirituality may consist of his/her inclination to consider the possibility of *transcendence beyond death* (Conn, 1998; Hood and Morris, 1983; Long, 2000; Rowe, 1997; Ruschmann, 2011), or the notion that it is plausible to 'transcend' beyond death itself. We contend that this consideration may seem implausible for some, giving rise to criticisms, ridicules, incredulous reactions, etc.

Transcendence, broadly speaking, may elicit a direct simplistic interpretation – namely, like in a typical movie, a person miraculously 'transport' himself/herself from one time-space realm to that of another time-space realm. However, from the Taiwanese cultural point of view, which may coincide with other cultural beliefs and practices (Hood and Morris, 1983; Levin and Steele, 2005; Lobos, 2016; Rowe, 1997; Wade, 1998), the notion of transcendence is more complex in terms of conceptualization, interpretation, understanding, etc (Levin and Steele, 2005; Long, 2000; Ruschmann, 2011). In our recent writing (Phan et al., 2020), for example, we proposed a temporary dividing line between life and death and that, importantly, transcendence experience espouses two possibilities and/or interpretations:

- i. The continuation of a person's life in the form of rebirth to another time-space dimension. This rebirth, reflecting the endless cycle of life and death, also intricately links to the concept of Buddhist karma. In Taiwan, for example, many Taiwanese believe in good deeds (e.g., willingness to help another person) as these are positive karmas, which would result in positive future consequences (e.g., in a person's next life, he/she is likely to be....). By the same token, it is believed that bad deeds would result in negative life consequences (e.g., in a person's next life, he/she is likely to face....).
- ii. The existence of higher-order, divine experiences in which death for a person is only a temporary state of affair. That indeed, the ceasing of physical life does not exclude the possibility that a person's soul and 'esoteric being' may still exist in the physical world. Again, as with the case of Taiwan, there are many Taiwanese who revere and believe in the notion of a higher-order entity that is unknown and unobservable. It is interesting to mention that some Taiwanese nuns and monks that we know of have reported their capabilities and experiences to 'detect' and 'sense' the esoteric existence of 'others'.

In Taiwan, there is an interesting ritual ceremony known as Guan Luo Yin (i.e., also known as '观落阴') (Source: <http://taoist-sorcery.blogspot.com/2014/03/taoist-tour-to-hell-to-visit-dead-guan.html>), which means "going to the 'Hell' and watch the afterlife". Many Taiwanese would describe Guan Luo Yin as a "tour to the other world" in order to meet a loved one who has moved on. According to one Taiwanese colleague that we collaborate with, the ritual ceremony of 观落阴 is available to those who wish to seek comfort, having grieved, by "visiting the dead (i.e., loved ones)". Interestingly, there are a few Master thesis, published journal articles, and YouTube videos (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CihzXp-Q828&t=156s> (Part 1) + <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hV34nS8yF4g&t=14s> ==<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yngbu4LJfy8&t=228s>) that have attempted to describe and explain the intricate process and experience of Guan Luo Yin or, alternatively, a person's tour to the other world to visit the dead. Having said this, however, there are a number of potential questions, comments, and/or remarks that one could make regarding the scientific validity and/or legitimacy of the experience of Guan Luo Yin. Is there any concrete evidence that we could incorporate

to substantiate the belief of Guan Luo Yin? By all account, personal accounts such as those described in the aforementioned YouTube videos are simply that – personal with the intent to allow the involved person to revisit at a later date for reflective purposes.

We cannot be definitive but we are open-minded to the possible existence of Guan Luo Yin, which could help advance our theoretical premise of transcendence. Transcendence, from our consideration, is concerned with a person's wholistic entity, living or dead, that may traverse from the living world to other worlds. Regardless of its unscientific, esoteric nature, we contend that the intricate process of Guan Luo Yin is insightful and may, in fact, encourage a person to consider and/or to embrace experience of spirituality. Testament of spirituality, in this case, is reflected by a person's open-mindedness and willingness to accept the possibility of esoteric experiences, such as the 'transcendence' of himself/herself from this physical world to another world (e.g., the underworld). In this sense, from our point of view, transcendence may serve to enhance the following argument. That life and death are both continuous and this overlapping may, in fact, reflect some unknown time-space esoteric entity or dimension that we do not know of. Moreover, from our consideration, the ceasing of life is simply temporary and that the deceased person would either: (i) reborn into another life, which is based on the philosophical reasoning of Buddhism (i.e., the notion of samsāra) (Thannissaro, 2015; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976), or (ii) enter into another time-space realm in which he/she does not necessarily have a physical presence (i.e., perhaps, the existence of a person's 'soul').

We consider the premise of transcendence as being somewhat of an unknown, questionable phenomenon that has not yet been scientifically proven. How do we prove that there is 'existence' of such discourse? Will it or can it ever be proven? Is it even possible to reject such 'truthiness' and/or to convince a rational mind that such possibility is credible – that a person could transcend, physically or otherwise, to another time-space realm to visit a loved one? These questions are reflective, placing emphasis on mystical and esoteric experiences that have no scientific boundaries for guidance (Levin and Steele, 2005). Indeed, and interestingly, there are many Taiwanese who revere and hold dearly to the belief of the afterlife in which the ceasing of life in one physical world would then result in the reborn of life in another physical world (i.e., samsāra: reborn into another life). By the same token, regardless of its legitimacy, the Taiwanese ritual ceremony of Guan Luo Yin is significant as it considers an alternative viewpoint: *the possibility of us traversing into another time-space realm in order to meet loved ones*. This practice and/or thinking is spiritual and encouraging (e.g., the belief in the afterlife), helping to alleviate a person's fear and trepidation of death itself. Importantly, of course, spiritual belief into mystical and esoteric matters is unbounded by convention, instilling optimism, wishful thinking, and hope for those who are involved.

### 3. Implementation of life education

The preceding sections have briefly introduced the subject of life education from the perspective of Taiwanese Education. Indeed, there has been extensive research development in Taiwan (e.g., Chen, 2017; Huang, 2014; Phan et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2020; Tsai, 2008), theoretically and empirically, to investigate the positive impact of life education on society, individuals, organizations, etc. We contend that it would be enriching to advance this scope by focusing on cross-cultural comparableness of relevance and applicability of the theory of life and death education.

There are many university students, educators, stakeholders, and government officials in Taiwan who are more interested to seek understanding into the practicality and application of life and death education. One notable line of thinking is concerned with the transformation of theory and research into practice. It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the availability of scientific evidence to substantiate its standing, many in Taiwan have embraced life and death education into everyday life practice. A successful story in Taiwan that we want to

acknowledge and emphasize on is the establishment of Huaan University in 1990, situated in New Taipei City. The remoteness of Huaan mountain where Huaan University is located (Source: <https://www.hfu.edu.tw/en/eng>) is perfect and, at the time, fitted in with the founder's philosophical belief and epistemology: that the remoteness of the location would be perfect to help 'purify' one's mind, and to cultivate the relationship between human beings and nature. Fresh air, social isolation, and connection with nature emphasize the uniqueness of Huaan University as a 'facilitator' of life wisdom and spiritual education. One interesting initiative of Huaan University, in this case, consists of a compulsory course, titled '*Enlightenment Wisdom and Life*', which students have to undertake in order to complete their academic studies. This course is interesting as its learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and subject contents reflect the important attributes of life education (e.g., a focus on the meaning of enlightenment).

Aside from the Enlightenment Wisdom and Life course offering, Huaan University also offers other courses that emphasize different aspects of life education. The former Department of Buddhist Studies and the Department of Asian Philosophy and Eastern Studies, for example, offer courses that introduce students to the subjects of Buddhist mindfulness, Buddhist meditation, Asian philosophy, and spirituality. These courses, in conjunction with each other, explored different aspects of humanities with purposes that relate to the promotion of spirituality, life wisdom, human relationships (e.g., showing compassion), and appreciation for nature. Aspects and learning outcomes of the course on Buddhist meditation, in this instance, entail the practice of meditation '*in situ*' with the environment. The underlying rationale of this philosophical and teaching approach, interestingly, is that this would encourage students to appreciate the close interaction between humans and nature. In a similar vein, the teaching and practice of Buddhist meditation also involve the chanting of Buddhist sutras as one engages in 'walking meditation', etc.

Other institutions in Taiwan, likewise, have been proactive in the promotion and implementation of life education theories into practice. For example, in 2004, the National Taipei University of Education (NTUE) established an institute, known as the Life Education and Health Promotion Institute, which focuses on the teaching, learning, and research development of life and death education. Similar to the rationale of Huaan University, the teaching at NTUE explores different aspects of life education – for example, the importance of spirituality, focusing on topics such as transcendence and life beyond death. The subject of death, likewise, considers different aspects for which students could appreciate – grief, school-based counselling, and spiritual advice.

Other universities in Taiwan, likewise, have established research and teaching institutes, which offer courses and degree programs pertaining to the importance of life and death education. For example, in 1997, the University of Na Hwa established the Institute of Life and Death Studies and in 1994, the Taipei College of Nursing offered a compulsory course that explored the importance of life and death. Interestingly, in 1983, the Catholic Kangtai Medical Education Foundation was established. It was at the time the first established foundation that identified two major purposes: to promote the study of life education and to enhance and promote hospice care.

At present, regardless of our viewpoint or position (e.g., regarding the relevance, appropriateness, and/or validity of life and death education), it can be said that Taiwan, overall, offers quality health care services. For example, many Taiwanese believe in voluntary community services and hospice care work, which may involve the benevolent act and free offering of spiritual advice and other forms of assistance to senior citizens. This voluntary work is testament of 'good karma' and is believed to bring positive future consequences. Some Taiwanese who practice Buddhism, likewise, often make home visits (e.g., on weekends), offering spiritual and religious advice to senior citizens and those who have poor health (e.g., in the form of, say, half an hour of chanting of Buddhist sutra).

### 3.1. In-depth analysis: application life education for consideration

Foremost, from our discussion so far, a pervasive question that we could ask is whether the study of life and death education (Chen, 2012, 2013; Huang, 2014; Phan et al., 2020) is logical and well-reasoned, providing grounding for implementation for effective daily use? By all account, it is not our intent to inculcate readers and/or to encourage readers to accept this subject without any serious scrutiny. Having said this, however, we contend that there are a number of practicalities that are noteworthy for consideration. In this instance, there are two main issues to consider: (i) to instill a belief and conviction to society that life education, as an academic subject, has potential relevance for daily life purposes, and (ii) to design and construct different forms of information, practical in nature, that could introduce the subject of life education, and/or to accentuate the significance and convey the true meanings of life education.

Our overview of the subject of life education purports the important fact that life education, significantly, unites people of different historical, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds together. We propose that, in particular, religious institutions, organizations (e.g., a football club), and independent entities could incorporate various facets of life and death education theories for daily life purposes. The daily practice of voluntary work at a religious institution and/or the sharing of spiritual faith with a senior citizen, for example, indicates proactive social relationships between individuals in society. This testament, importantly, illustrates kinship, closeness, friendship, and respect for people and, of course, life in general. Throughout the history of humankind, there have been monumental events, numerous encounters, activities, etc. that showcase the aesthetic nature of life education – care, love, compassion, respect, etc. between individuals, communities, and societies. Helping a homeless person, for example, does not simply reflect a person's awareness of another person's state of affair, needs, etc. It is also an indication of 'evidence', perhaps, of the person's kinship, compassion, love, empathy, and care for another human being. This reasoning, we contend, is similar to that of Maslow's (1968, 1970) emphasis on reverence and the practice of self-actualization. In a similar vein, rotary service clubs (RSL) that make attempts to "unite men and women from different backgrounds, cultures, religious and political beliefs the world over, allowing ordinary people to do extraordinary things" (Source: [http://rotaryaustralia.org.au/news/4926/about-rotary-in-australia?fm\\_id=14](http://rotaryaustralia.org.au/news/4926/about-rotary-in-australia?fm_id=14)) are inadvertently practicing the tenets of life education (e.g., emphasis on unity).

Our premise then, as exemplified, is that daily contexts, situations, and circumstances may serve to facilitate the 'enactment' of life and death education. Helping a homeless person to find a place to sleep, offering spiritual advice to someone who is critically ill, providing a religious sermon on a Sunday morning, etc. are daily examples of life education in action. By the same token, of course, in a non-conventional, esoteric manner, one could also consider other forms of spirituality advice – considering, for example, the mentioning to someone that the 'ceasing of life' is not permanent and that the physical world, conceptually, may coexist with other non-physical worlds. We acknowledge, however, that this approach is somewhat non-conventional and some individuals may not be receptive to such belief.

### 4. Conceptual analysis: proposition of inquiries for consideration

By all account, the study into the relevance, practicality, and effectiveness of life and death education is nothing new. There are numerous theoretical perspectives and viewpoints, both in Western and Eastern contexts, that offer comparable and differing interpretations. Despite this testament, our research development with scholars from Taiwan has led us to adopt this line of educational research for further advancement. What we find most unique about the Taiwanese perspective of life and death education is its 'open-mindedness' to take into account non-

conventional, non-scientific, and esoteric knowledge, which may help to elucidate and facilitate in-depth understanding of this subject.

Indeed, we acknowledge that interpretation of the significance or insignificance of life and death education is subjective in nature, reflecting a person's own perceived interest, experience, appreciation, etc. of the topic/subject itself. It is not our intention, in this analysis, to assume and/or to exert absolute truth into the subject of life and death education from the perspective of Taiwanese Education. Readers may choose to critique and scrutinize this line of inquiry by referencing this understanding to other theoretical orientations of Education and/or Psychology, which may delve into a person's academic and/or non-academic well-being differently. Having said this, however, we hold the view that there is valid grounding to consider two possibilities: (i) inquiries into the development of theoretical, methodological, and empirical conceptualization for advancement, and (ii) inquiries into the quality teaching practice of life education for effective learning. In this section of the article, we explore two different lines of inquiries, which may add clarity and inspire readers to focus on the subject of life and death education for development.

#### 4.1. Research development: conceptual, methodological, and empirical

It is interesting to note that in Taiwan there is extensive research development into the subject of life and death education (e.g., Chen, 2017; Huang, 2014; Phan et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2019; Tsai et al., 2020). Despite this plethora of research into the nature and effectiveness of life and death education, there is still ample evidence of relatively unknown inquiries that require clarity and further development. One interesting line of inquiry, which we alluded in the preceding sections, is the study of life and death education from a non-scientific, non-conventional perspective. In this section of the article, we specifically focus on the essence of transcendence experience, which may associate with and/or reflect a person's sense and embracement of spirituality.

##### 4.1.1. Conceptual analysis of transcendence experience

Consider, for example, the intricate experience of spirituality, situated within the context of Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Thanissaro, 2015). A person's 'spiritual sense', in this case, may relate to his/her feeling and experience of transcendence – say, the indication of having briefly traversed into the unknown world in order to experience life beyond death. This discussion indeed is related to the proposed esoteric nature of life and death education, which would require the development of a conceptual framework for grounding. Such conceptualizations may posit aims, hypotheses, and/or research questions for addressing. Often the case, aside from empirical evidence derived from scientific inquiries, researchers may engage in philosophical psychology and/or personal intuition as guidance when developing conceptualizations. Our prior research, for instance, has involved the use and incorporation of philosophical psychology and personal life experiences for support, resulting in conceptualizations of theorizations of the *process of optimization* (Phan et al., 2017, 2019), the *multifaceted structure of mindfulness* (Phan et al., 2020; Phan et al., 2019), the *nature of optimal best* (Phan et al., 2020; Phan et al., 2016), and *holistic psychology* (Phan et al., 2021).

Conceptual analysis of an inquiry, based on personal reasoning and philosophical psychology, has become quite popular in the academic circle. For example, the journal of *Frontiers in Psychology* has a devoted section that focuses on the importance of *conceptual analysis* of an inquiry or inquiries. Conceptual analysis, in this sense, may provide grounding for further research development, theoretically, methodologically, and/or empirically. Conceptual analysis of life and death education, in this case, is interesting and may focus on the validity of esoteric and mythical phenomena. We encourage researchers to consider analytical critiques of our previous mentioning of spirituality, especially in relation to a person's feeling and experience of transcendence (Levin and Steele, 2005; Ruschmann, 2011; Villani et al., 2019; Wade, 1998). This

recommendation of a conceptual analysis of personal transcendence, reflecting higher-order spiritual experiences, has been described in an earlier publication by Levin and Steele (2005), titled "*The transcendent experience: Conceptual, theoretical, and epidemiologic perspectives*". Indeed, for consideration, it is plausible for researchers to theorize various conceptual frameworks, which could yield evidence and/or clarity into the definition and/or esoteric nature of transcendence. As Levin and Steele (2005) detailed in their introduction, the concept of transcendence experience, unlike other scientific-validated psychological and educational concepts (e.g., *personal self-efficacy*: Bandura, 1997), is not easily defined and/or described. In saying this, we could incorporate Levin and Steele's (2005) description of transcendence experience, which stipulates the following: "This [i.e., transcendence experience] experience typically evokes a perception that human reality extends beyond the physical body and its psychosocial boundaries" (p. 89).

Conceptualization into transcendence experience (e.g., Levin and Steele, 2005; Long, 2000; Ruschmann, 2011; Wade, 1998) may add clarity (e.g., a consistent definition of transcendence) and provide support into the 'cultureless' nature of spirituality. We concur with existing writings (e.g., Levin and Steele, 2005; Long, 2000; Ruschmann, 2011; Wade, 1998) and acknowledge that spirituality does not limit to Buddhism (Yen, 2010; Yeshe and Rinpoche, 1976) alone, nor does it exclusively associate with the Taiwanese culture. This testament espouses the viewpoint that spirituality is something that may transcend beyond a particular cultural group and/or religious faith. It would be insightful, for example, to conceptually consider a consensus position, if possible, by which we could clearly define the nature of spiritual feeling and experience of transcendence. Such affirmation, in particular, may provide grounding for educators to design appropriate learning objectives, education programs, and/or subject contents that could instill and/or facilitate appreciation for and meaningful understanding into the notion of transcendence experiences.

##### 4.1.2. Methodological consideration

Closely relating to the conceptual analysis and conceptualization of life and death education is the development of an appropriate methodological design or designs that could assist in the scientific and non-scientific validation of conceptualizations of transcendence experience. 'Methodological appropriateness' (Phan et al., 2019) is an important element in research undertakings, which places emphasis on a researcher's serious consideration into the conceptualization and development of an accurate methodological design and/or approach that could result in the collection of empirical data for the purpose of scientific validation. For example, our recent research undertakings involved the use of appropriate Likert-scale measures and structural equation modelling (SEM) (Kline, 2011; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004) techniques to clarify the structure of 'optimal best experience' in learning (e.g., Phan and Ngu, 2020; 2021; Phan et al., 2019). This established evidence, we contend, supports scientific protocols that emphasize a requirement for the use of 'hard-sourced' data and stringent statistical analyses for affirmation (Creswell, 2003; Hanson et al., 2005).

It is of interest for researchers to consider the development of a relevant and/or an appropriate methodology that could gauge into and validate the esoteric nature of transcendence experience. Our recent publication of life and death education (Phan et al., 2020) introduced a number of spiritual-related attributes and characteristics, such as 'tranquility', 'transcendence', and 'nirvana'. How would we delve into and accurately measure and assess such attributes and characteristics? This is a difficult, if not impossible, feat for scholars to achieve. Would it be logically sound for us to reject such discourse if we are not able to establish empirical evidence? What would be an appropriate methodological design that we could use to gather evidence to substantiate and/or to illustrate a person's experience of transcendence and, hence, his/her perceived sense of spirituality? One Taiwanese scholar at NTUE who teaches life and death education suggests the use of a personal diary or journal to document one's esoteric feelings and/or experiences (e.g.,

describing keywords). Moreover, according to this scholar, Buddhist meditation on a daily basis is beneficial as this practice could instill and facilitate meditative, contemplative, and reflective thoughts, all of which may help to illuminate a person's 'inner' spiritual insights, feelings, and experiences. 'Evidence' of transcendence experience, via means of meditation practice, may entail a person's qualitative indication of his/her spiritual feeling and experience of being 'transported', psychologically and physically, to another time-space realm.

In essence, unlike the social sciences, research inquiries in the area of life and death education can be somewhat difficult to scientifically validate. Attesting to the effectiveness and/or the relevance of life and death education, as a subject, is relatively straightforward. Both quantitative (e.g., the use of a survey) and qualitative (e.g., the use of observations) methodological designs (Creswell, 2003; Hanson et al., 2005), in this instance, may yield relevant information (e.g., a student's indication of his/her proactive daily functioning), which could substantiate and affirm the potency of this subject. Despite this testament, of course, there are reservations regarding the feasibility of an appropriate methodological design or designs that could be used to gauge into the nature of esoteric and mystical matters of life and death education. Aside from personal diary entry (i.e., first person account), for example, what else (i.e., methodology) is available that could offer a third-person, non-subjective account of a person's transcendence experience? The description of transcendence experience as being "beyond perception and beyond human understanding... and [that] in some crucial sense, higher than...the reality of everyday experience" (Levin and Steele, 2005, p. 89) connotes, from our point of view, a complex entity that is not easily assessed. This indication, importantly, contends the notion that designing an appropriate methodology *in itself* is a line of inquiry that is worth pursuing.

#### 4.2. Quality teaching practice of life education

How does life education relate to the field of Education? Life education may situate within different areas of education – for example: curriculum development of life education, policy development of life education, sociology and history of life education, and educational psychology of life education. We posit that life education, detailed in the preceding sections, has potential educational relevance outside the Taiwanese learning and sociocultural contexts. In this analysis, let us consider three possibilities:

- i. The use of educational psychology theories (e.g., the topic of motivation) to facilitate and enhance the teaching of life education. In terms of in-class teaching, we could provide a tutorial-based activity and/or a whole-class discussion, which seeks to query students to explain how the *process of optimization* (Fraillon, 2004; Phan et al., 2017, 2019) is related to the importance of a person's daily practice. This whole-class introduction of optimization could, in this case, could support meaningful theoretical understanding of life education – for example, central to the active processes of human agency (Bandura, 1986, 1997), optimization may facilitate and optimize a person's engagement in the daily practice of Buddhist meditation.
- ii. The use of life education to facilitate and enhance the teaching of educational psychology. In terms of in-class teaching, we could explore the extent to which life wisdom is closely aligned with a person's *intrinsic motivation* (Becker et al., 2010; Gottfried, 1985; Ryan, 1993) to engage in academic learning and non-academic learning experiences (e.g., does life wisdom facilitate proactivity in a person's willingness to engage in voluntary community service on weekends?). As a group research project, students could undertake a literature search on the topic of motivation (Franken, 2007) and develop a concept mapping that depicts, for example, the potential relationship between Maslow's (1968, 1970) *humanistic theory of motivation* and life wisdom.

- iii. The inclusion of a learning outcome that stipulates understanding into the application of life education theories. Students could work individually or collaboratively (e.g., a group research project) to explore the practical relevance of life education in both academic and non-academic settings. For oral presentations to the whole class, say, students could provide 1–2 practical examples, which may emphasize the application of life education theories and how this transformation of theory and research into practice could assist society, organizations, individuals, etc. This learning outcome highlights, in particular, students' deep, meaningful understanding of the nexus between theory and practice, as reflected by their ability to propose practical examples for in-class discussion.

##### 4.2.1. Spiritual cultivation

Practical cultivation of spirituality is a possible line of educational development that could assist students in terms of their non-academic well-being experiences (e.g., emotional well-being). Coping with unfavorable life conditions is not an easy feat and may take some time to overcome, requiring some form of perseverance and resilience. One notable life-changing experience, of course, relates to grief and a person's coping with a loved one's death. By all account, many individuals would find it extremely difficult to cope and overcome such negative life experiences. Our research collaboration with colleagues in Taiwan suggests, interestingly, that spiritual advice, which may encompass religious faith(s) (e.g., volunteers making home visits to provide spiritual advice) could be used to assist individuals and families with their coping. This consideration emphasizes the extent to which school contexts could encourage and foster the proactive engagement in the subject of spirituality. A focus on the teaching of transcendence experience (e.g., Levin and Steele, 2005; Long, 2000; Ruschmann, 2011), in this analysis, may facilitate some understanding and, hopefully, appreciation for the possibility and legitimacy of esoteric and mystical knowledge.

Spiritual cultivation is a line of learning and research inquiry that is personal and philosophical, requiring one's willingness to consider perception, understanding, and feeling that are analytical and of higher-order (Bonab et al., 2013; Koenig, 2012; Srivastava and Barmola, 2013; Thanissaro, 2015). Cultivating spirituality, in this sense, requires effort, dedication, personal commitment, conviction, and determination. For us as researchers, as the preceding sections have highlighted, spirituality cultivation may involve instillation of deep, meaningful understanding of a perceived sense of spirituality. By the same token, spiritual cultivation and feeling and personal experience of spirituality may consist of in-class teaching (e.g., implementation of formal curriculum of life and death education in Taiwan), daily social interactions, and formal cultural customary practices (e.g., the traditional ritual of 观落阴). We contend that the purposive fostering of spirituality may, importantly, frame a person's mindset to consider all different types of possibilities of life and death.

##### 4.2.2. The importance of character building

One interesting line of inquiry that we are currently exploring entails the notion of what we term as 'character building' (Phan et al., 2021). Character building relates to the study of Chinese characters that have significant meanings, which in turn could explain a person's philosophical reasoning, motivational beliefs, cultural customary practices, etc. For example, the Chinese character of '孝' (xiào) depicts the concept of *filial piety* (Chen, 2016; Chow and Chu, 2007), which emphasizes a person's deference to his/her family, parents, ancestors, country, and leaders. This concept of filial piety, 3000 years in existence, connotes to a person the significance of obedience, respect, care, and support. For a Taiwanese family, filial piety plays an important role in teaching a child to study hard so that later on in life, he/she could look after the parents and provide them with material comforts. Indeed, the concept of 孝 is quite interesting and many scholars (e.g., Chen, 2016; Chen and Ho, 2012;



Chow and Chu, 2007; Hui et al., 2011) have argued that appreciation and deep, meaningful understanding of this concept may in part explain why many Asian students do so well at school.

We believe that character building may coincide with the study of life education. It is interesting to consider the possibility that Chinese ideograms and their combinations, describing specific words and/or phrases (e.g., loyalty) could help to explain and/or account for a person's proactive behaviors, positive emotions, philosophical beliefs, etc. There is acknowledgment from scholars and individuals of an Eastern descent that deciphering Chinese ideograms into meaningful concepts and/or expressions may, in fact, encourage reverence and deference towards specific customary practices, cultural values, and philosophical beliefs. For example, referring to our previous description, the Chinese character of 孝 is made up of the combination of two characters: 老 (lǎo) (i.e., means old) and 儿子 (érzi) (i.e., means son). 老 is the top half of the character xiào, whereas érzi forms the bottom half of the character. Overall, this character depiction, 孝, shows a father or an older person or generation (i.e., burden) being supported or carried by a son, daughter, or a younger person or generation (i.e., support).

Asian families and society, to a large extent, appreciate and understand the Chinese ideogram of 孝, or filial piety. From a young age, many children would have been taught this ideogram, resulting in expectations for them to show respect (e.g., to older siblings, parents, grandparents, etc.), to work hard at school, and importantly to understand the meaning of family honor. Obtaining excellent academic results is crucial as this would bring pride, prestige, and joy to the family. For us, upon reflection, working hard and studying was a norm and not an expectation. It was normal at an early age to show respect, be dutiful, and to listen without questioning. We believe there is an eternal debt to our parents, which is ongoing and requires some form of 'repayment'. This repayment, of course, exists in the form of scholarly excellence – that is, a duty-bound belief to work hard in order to achieve academic excellence. Indeed, this introductory account of Chinese characters is insightful and may, perhaps, coincide with other cultural groups' customary practices, philosophical beliefs, expectations, etc. We acknowledge that the premise of 'character building' is interesting but not necessarily exclusive and/or unique in terms of significance – that is, by all account, it is plausible that other cultural 'significant connotations' could, likewise, impart deep, meaningful understanding, which in turn would facilitate proactive behaviors, positive thoughts, motivational beliefs, etc. On this basis, it would be of interest to explore in-class, or in other non-educational contexts, whether there is 'evidence' of *universal* characters and/or ideograms that could instill duty-bound beliefs and other life-related qualities.

## 5. Conclusion

Life education, also known as life and death education, is an important subject that students in Taiwan enroll in. Over the past four decades in Taiwan, established institutes and degree programs offer provide pathways, means, and opportunities for students, educators, researchers, stakeholders, etc. to study this topic in detail. Our research development has led to a recent inquiry, wherein we provided a conceptualization that detailed the significance of life and death from the perspective of Taiwanese Education (Phan et al., 2020). For example, we postulate philosophically that a 'purified mindset', facilitated in this case by the practice of Buddhist meditation could produce a number of qualities and positive life characteristics (e.g., a person's indication and willingness to forgive others).

The purpose of this article, complementing our recent published articles (Phan et al., 2020; Phan et al., 2020), is to introduce readers to the study of life and death education. The aforementioned presentation is not intended to make generalization and/or to mandate the subject for formal teaching or daily implementation. Instead, as resonated throughout this article, our objective is to share knowledge and to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue of this subject for further development (e.g.,

the discussion of three components of life: life wisdom, life care, and life practice). One interesting aspect of our discussion is related to the notion of spirituality, which intimately may associate with a person's transcendence experience. For us, conceptually, transcendence experience is 'something' that extends beyond the physical laws of nature and/or the realm of psychosocial and psychological boundaries. Indeed, we posit that the nature of the study of life and death may expand to encompass other non-reality, esoteric entities, which many of us have not considered. A person's esoteric experience, for example, may provide support, assisting in the coping of pathologies and negative life conditions.

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