

# Confucian and Taoist Influences on the Images of Life Among Seniors in Taiwan

## TAYVAN'DA YAŞLILAR ARASINDA YAŞAM İMGELERİ ÜZERİNE KONFÜÇYUSCU VE TAOİST ETKİLER

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### Abstract

Rapid advances in medical technology such as genetic engineering and stem cell-based therapies will make it possible that in the near future, except for accidents, "natural" aging and the diseases of old age will be the main causes of human death in rich societies. When dealing with issues at the end of life medical sociology will need to focus more on person's life and death in senior years. Understanding the attitudes of older person's toward life and death is important for both performing end-of-life medical care and in making end-of-life policy.

To attempt to overcome the taboo on death conversation as well as to look at life and death as a whole, in-depth interviews were conducted with 112 randomly selected seniors (persons 60 years and older) in Taiwan on their images of life. Analysis of the key concepts they mentioned revealed significant influence of Confucian and Taoist philosophies. We suggest that Chinese people's attitudes to life and death can be largely understood through the values expressed in the underlying philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. According to those the value of life transcends from the quality of life to the quality of death. Almost no person had considered the usefulness of advance directives nor did many want to use them when it was suggested to them. Rather they generally prefer to leave such decisions either to the very last moment as nature decides it, or to their children whom they expect to look after them when they become frail and aged.

**Key Words:** Taiwan, China, death, end of life, advance directive, ethics, life view, taoism, confucianism, decision-making

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### Özet

Genetik mühendisliği ve kök hücreye dayalı tedavilerde olduğu gibi tıbbi teknolojideki hızlı ilerlemeler, yakın bir gelecekte zengin toplumlarda insan ölümlerinin, kazalar dışında başlıca nedeni olarak doğal yaşlanma ve yaşlılık çağı hastalıklarının olmasını sağlayacaktır. Yaşam sonu sorunları ile ilgilenildiğinde tıbbi sosyoloji, insanın ileri yaşlardaki hayatı ve ölümü üzerinde daha çok odaklanma gereksinimi duyacaktır. Yaşlı insanların yaşama ve ölüme karşı tutumlarını anlamak hem yaşam sonu tıbbi bakımın yerine getirilmesinde, hem de yaşam sonu politikasının belirlenmesinde önemlidir.

Yaşam ve ölüme bir bütün olarak bakmanın yanı sıra ölüm üzerine konuşma tabusunun üstesinden gelmeyi denemek amacıyla Tayvan'da randomize olarak seçilen 112 yaşlı (60 yaş ve üstü) ile yaşamlarının imgeleri üzerine ayrıntılı görüşmeler yapıldı. Yaşlıların belirttiği anahtar kavramların analizi, Konfüçyuscu ve Taoist felsefelerin önemli etkisini ortaya çıkardı. Çin halkının yaşam ve ölüme karşı tutumlarının büyük ölçüde Konfüçyusizm, Budizm ve Taoizm felsefelerinin temelinde açıklanan değerler doğrultusunda anlaşılabilceği görüldü. Bu felsefeler göre, yaşamın değeri yaşam kalitesinden ölüm kalitesine geçmektedir. Bu, kişilere önerildiğinde insanların hiçbirini ne ileri talimatların yararlılığını düşündü, ne de kullanmayı istedi. Genel olarak, güçsüz ve yaşlı olduklarında bu kararları doğanın en son anda vermesine ya da kendilerine bakmalarını bekledikleri çocuklarına bırakmayı tercih ettiler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tayvan, Çin, ölüm, yaşamın sonu, ileri talimatlar, etik, yaşam görüşü, taoizm, konfüçyusizm, karar verme

With the rapid improvement of bioscience, many people may expect humanity's age-old struggle with immortality would no more be an exercise in futility.<sup>1</sup> However, from the biological, ecological, medical, sociological, cosmological, philosophical and ethical

views, "death" is always an inevitable event in human life.<sup>2,3</sup> There area range of views towards life that can be seen in different traditions. Biologically speaking, all organisms die but in the process of living have some sense of love of life to survive and reproduce, while in relationships to other beings.<sup>4</sup> From the cosmist point of view, each human being, like the other organisms is but an object to the cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

As in Martin Heidegger's description "everyday being-towards-death",<sup>6</sup> life is a journey towards death and nothing is more definite than death in human life. In fact, death is definite existence to show you are alive (and we

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Türkiye Klinikleri J Med Ethics 2004, 12

could say “the true authenticity of existence”). From the Eastern understanding, anything with shape will crumble away. The world and life are not permanent but in a constant motion and subject to change.<sup>5,7</sup> Biology and ecology have disclosed that humans are only one species of many organisms in the world. Therefore to arrange to “get along well” with habitat and species biodiversity is very important for humans to survive. Death seems an inalienable way to keep the cycle of metabolism and to achieve the balance of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Although some have argued for the possibility of human immortality in the near future,<sup>9</sup> from the social and medical views, if humans have success to live for a tremendously long time, a tumultuous background can be expected, for example, rising medical costs, a rapid growing geriatric population, the overuse of high technology treatments, fear of rationing, intense competition and enormous healthcare reform.<sup>10</sup> In the medical domain, limitation of medical science has been accepted to cast away the illusion of infinite human life. Declines and dying in the very old age are part of natural process that has positive as well as negative dimensions.<sup>11</sup> For example, death makes way for the birth of children, just as others made way for our existing.<sup>12</sup>

Even so, nowadays, with the development of human civilization, life expectancy is much higher than before. Judging from the efforts of modern medicine to keep us away from death, more and more medical technologies appear to regard death as the enemy that we should combat with. As a consequence of this, death is less of a reality in our life than before, so our attitude towards death may change and we have great difficulty with the issue of death and therefore try to avoid it at any cost. One of the very miseries for humans is to use high-tech medicine to prolong “biological” life in the sterile atmosphere of the modern hospital. It is totally alien to the idea we held for thousands years that death is part of the normal cycle of life and should take place normally in one’s home, or alternatively in nature.<sup>13,14</sup>

For the end of life issues, bioethics thinking will lead to a common philosophy within all culture. For example, the first priority of the imperative is to respect the autonomy of dying person. However, in Eastern society there are several difficulties to the Western notion of respecting persons. Autonomy in dealing with their end of life; for example, death is always a taboo in many cultures. Also, in Eastern society, the family has traditionally played a role in making medical decisions for the dying patients, so many of the medical systems did not offer medical options for the terminal patients to help them to accomplish their end of life wishes and most of people has ambiguous concept of the meaning of a good death. These difficulties are related to the concepts of human value of life and several

moral reasons that may be resolved through bioethical deliberation and dialogue.<sup>15,16</sup> Bioethics will accomplish the mission of progress a proper dying process in human society.

In the medical environment there is wide cultural variation in the way that senior persons are treated in hospitals. There has been attention paid to the needs of seniors in making treatment decisions, and developments in many countries enhance personal decision-making consistent with the ethical principle of autonomy. When discussing the appropriateness of intensive care and modern medicine to the dying process in elderly persons, we should know something of their life views. Seeking the opinions of seniors is a necessary part of any process that respects their autonomy.

Ethical debates regarding appropriate care for the dying are as old as medicine itself. In the religious world, the sanctity of life was often extolled as the paramount standard, while in many philosophies and modern value system, quality of life consideration has assumed equal or greater important. Nowadays, modern life-prolonging technologies heighten the debate by allowing these two standards to dramatically conflict.<sup>17</sup> Physicians in the acute hospital setting are able to do much more than cure disease and alleviate suffering by critical care technologies. They are able to prolong function in human organisms. The medical technologies are not, however, without cost. The cost includes a huge medical fee and a long term suffering of patients caused by artificial prolonging life.<sup>18,19</sup>

More than that, there is a shift in cause of death during the past century. Especially in developed countries, acute deaths have been replaced by diseases that generally entail a more protracted dying process. Advances in medicine have greatly improved possibilities to treat serious ill patients and prolong life. However, extension of life might not always be a goal of many patients, other goals such as improvement of quality of care should be achieved by medical decision-making.<sup>20</sup> Planning in advance then is widely encouraged as a way to improve quality of care at the end of life.<sup>21</sup> However, the willingness to consider future illness and the end of life is not universal.<sup>22</sup> When faced with very serious illness both the young and the elderly in some communities are reluctant to consider or talk about this matter.<sup>23-26</sup> In fact, the prevailing societal attitudes denying the reality of old age and death would be barriers for the preparation for death. That is why most people struggle with the certain knowledge that we must die when they are actively involved with their or someone else serious illness or death.

In Taiwan, death is considered as a taboo discussion topic. The public is reluctant to talk or think about death, preferring not to consider death until it occurs. Families or

doctors' authority are usually enacted to decide all medical options for the dying patient.<sup>27</sup> This situation in current practice makes it very difficult for medical staff to practice the principle of respecting patients' autonomy. Different from Taiwan, medical end-of-life decisions frequently precede dying in Western countries today, although in the 1950s this was not true. According to an international comparative study, the proportion of deaths that were preceded by end of life decisions in European countries may range from 51% (Switzerland) to 23% (Italy), and patients are generally involved in decision making. In USA, the practice of non-treatment decision making has been studied extensively, showing many patients die after forgoing treatment in this country.<sup>28,29</sup> The inevitable differences in cultural values and attitudes towards death may be the potential barrier to practice end-of-life decisions.

Medical decision making for patients with life threatening disease increasingly entails balanced ethical consideration which include factors like: whether to withdraw or withhold potentially life prolonging treatment such as mechanical ventilation, dialysis, and tube-feeding; whether to alleviate pain or serious syndromes with strong drugs in doses large enough to hasten death as a possible or certain side effects; and whether to consider euthanasia or physician assisted suicide. To face the situation of difficulty to get decisions from patients about the end of life medicine in advance, social consensus about appropriate way in dealing with end of life might be considered feasible to achieve a proper end of life in our society.

In Taiwan, the "Hospice Palliative Medicine Act" enacted on June 7, 2000 ill allows terminally patients to choose palliative medicine and to refuse CPR, at least on paper. However, it is not clear about the refusal of life support or life-sustaining treatments. To make the law clearer, an amendment was passed on 22 November, 2002 which allows doctors to legally remove life-sustaining treatments under the intention of patients or their families, however, should there should be a document of a written consent from the patient him/herself. Even though some people think that the goals of the law have not been accomplished, we may conclude that in respecting autonomy, the first priority principle in dealing with end of life issues, has been followed under the law.

However, many doctors argued that if a patient and their families hold a traditional expectation of medicine, so that they refused to stop medical treatment, should the expensive and meaningless treatments keep on being given forever? To combat waste, can a life-sustaining medical intervention be limited without the consent of patient or families when the intervention is judged to be futile? On the other side, respect for patient autonomy is the primary basis for withhold and withdraw therapy. Does it also mean

that the patient has a right to ask to keep all forms of medical treatments being done even when the doctor has declared futility? To relieve the worries of clinical physicians and to ease the limited medical resource, the exploration of public's view about life and dead, and their expectation of medicine about dying should be done immediately. This paper examines how cultural factors in Chinese thinking may affect the views of seniors when facing end of life decisions.

Socially the appropriateness of a palliative medicine law is one thing, but public consensus is often more important than passing a law.<sup>30,31</sup> If the public has a reasonable attitude toward life and death, patient and patients' family could accept the truth that human life is finite and medicine also has its limitations, it won't be difficult to get the consent of withdrawing interventions from terminally ill patient and their families. Under the full information, patients and their families may understand that all kinds of efforts are only prolonging the dying process, and the patient will be relieved from the treatment burdens once we change the aim of medicine from sustaining life to ease a dying process. For the purpose of getting a consensus over end of life medicine, we should collect data on attitudes toward life and death from society. The senior, defined in this paper as persons over sixty years of age, represent a group of persons less remote from death and with fulfilled experiences of life. They therefore can be expected to have their own philosophy of life to share with us and to answer the questions about life and death.

For the site of our study, Taiwan, we would predict that many images of life among the seniors may be derived from the values of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism in Chinese culture. However, for most people the values system they hold were not only absorbed from the ancient wisdom or philosophers, but some part may originate from some other sources such as sociobiological mechanisms that appeared through human evolution, and the beliefs and life experiences inherited from several generations. We hope that this would promote an understanding of how people grasp that they must take leave of life and prepare for the end of life. The results may also lead to dialogue of how to make policy to match the Chinese philosophy of a good life and good death. Also it may encourage health professionals to prepare medicine to serve and guarantee a higher humanity in dying.

### Methodology

Literature review was conducted, and an interview questionnaire was designed. The research has to examine the attitude of seniors towards their life and death. Through this research, the essence of people's concept of the end of life, expectations of medical help and anticipation for their good death was explored.

The assumptions included:

- A1. 'Death' is a taboo among seniors of Taiwan,
- A2. Attitude toward life and death of seniors in Taiwan has been influenced by their eastern living culture.
- A3. Seniors expectations of their end of life guide them to plan for their death.
- A4. A consensus will be achieved through the debate and subject of life and death.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 112 seniors (persons 60 years and older) in Taiwan. A range of persons of different ages, backgrounds and health conditions were sampled to explore the diversity of attitudes in the population. The criteria for selection of respondents was a commitment to interviewing people who have had experience with the culture of senior age which was the target of the study. Because the focus of this study was to better understand the perspectives of seniors about their life and practice of belief in multiple realities, in-depth interviews were designed to gather qualitative data. The procedure involved selection of persons, with a request for an interview. For this survey, healthy senior persons of 60 years or older were purposely chosen from several settings were invited as participants, including:

- 1) home (living on their own or living without a family member);
- 2) community (approaching persons inside a games or sports club);
- 3) park (persons were approached in a park);
- 4) institution (persons visiting a day care center, residential house, adult college and nursing home).

About half of persons approached for an interview refused. There were more refusals from persons in parks, where less than a quarter accepted. No incentive was offered to people to participate. Persons who agreed to participate were first given an initial written survey of four questions that asked them to give open responses on their image of life, and expectations from medicine. Secondly, an interview that followed up the initial four written open questions centered on their attitude about life, with a series of a dozen questions was conducted within one week of giving the written request. Concretely, interviewers attempted to explore their values about life in order to find out what people want from medicine for their end of life.

Tape recordings were used during the one to two hour long interviews. No one refused a tape recording and 112 interviews were conducted in mid-2002 in Taiwan. The first interview was on the 2nd July 2002 and the last interview was on the 4th September 2002.

Qualitative data were collected through two stages. For the first stage, the initial written survey with four open response questions was processed 1 day to one week before interview. A structured open questionnaire sheet with four initial questions was given when seniors were selected to be the participants. Persons who agreed to participate were first, given an initial written survey of four questions that asked them to give open responses on their image of life, personal feelings of health and long life, expectations from medicine and a broad sense of biotechnologies. The purpose to give initial questions is to call for the in-depth thinking in advance of the themes related to life and death, also to let participants confirm themselves that they really accept to talk about these questions during the interview. The participants were expected to readily consent for the next stage interview after they read the survey form and the written questions.

A series of questions was conducted within one week of giving the written request. For the second stage, an in-depth interview was performed with 15 structured questions. Direct question and conversational probes were used to elicit open-ended responses about three themes - attitudes toward life and death, expectations of medical services about death, and a broad sense of how they felt biotechnology might improve their life and death.

Concretely, interviewers attempted to explore their values about life in order to find out what people want from medicine for their end of life. The qualitative interview guide was structured to the following questions:

1. How do you see your life?
2. What are the most important other lives in addition to your own?
3. How does human life relate to animal's life and other creature's life in the world?
4. Is sickness and death part of life?
5. Do you agree or disagree, and what are your ideas?
6. Is "To die", the definite end of human's life? How do you think about that?
7. According to your imagination, what is the perfect end of life?
8. Where do you want die?
9. About dying, what do you want from medicine?
10. Have you heard of biotechnology or genetic engineering before?
11. What do you expect from biotechnology to improve your life and death?
12. When is the most recent death you experienced? Who was it?
13. Where did you get your ideas from for these answers?

14. What do you think about your health condition?  
(In this moment)

15. If you are talking about death, what makes you feel uncomfortable?

Please share your experience.

To allow further comparisons the interview results for the question on the images of life in Taiwan were compared with the written answers received from senior respondents in the randomly conducted International Bioethics Survey from 1993 in Japan, New Zealand and Australia.<sup>32</sup>

**Sample Characteristics**

The sample of 112 persons was gender balanced with 51% female. Of the 112 persons, 56 were from the home group, 24 were from parks and the community and 32 were from institutions (including day care centers, nursing homes and residential houses). A summary of the sample characteristics is in Table 1.

Half (54%) were aged 70-79 years with 23% older and 23% younger. There was a majority (69%) from urban areas. Only 4% were single, but 48% were widowed so only 47% were currently married. Nevertheless only 13% were living alone, 17% were living only with their spouse, 28% were living with their children and their spouse, and 43% were living with their children. Half (49%) had 2-4 children and 46% had more than 4 children. When asked their religion, 20% said they were Buddhist, 19% said Daoist, 20% said I-Kuan Tao, 12% folk religion, 11% Christian and 19% said they had no religion.

**Taiwanese Seniors' Images of Life**

The first question in the written survey and spoken interview was designed to seek in a non-leading way the images of life that persons had, based on a question used in the International Bioethics Survey.<sup>32</sup> The question was, "Please express the images which come to your mind when you hear the word of life". As explained in the methodology chapter, the key words and concepts were placed into categories. A summary of the 164 concepts expressed in the answers from the 112 persons are shown in Table 2.

More than one third of the people (N=43) gave a comment in which life was expressed as "the course of Nature" which someone can hardly predict or control by themselves. This view suggests people have to follow their fate, respecting Karma. We human beings should not expect too much, and just let our life and death happen naturally. Some example comments are:

"The death of a human-being is just like to go out of light, to follow nature is what we can do."

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics of Taiwanese Seniors' Interviewees.

Variables	Item	N(112)	% (100)
Gender	male	55	49
	female	57	51
Source	Family	56	50
	Community and park	24	21
	Institution	32	29
Age	60-69	26	23
	70-79	60	54
	80-89	23	21
	90+	3	2
Living area	Urban	77	69
	Rural	35	31
Religion	Buddhism	22	20
	Dao	21	19
	I-Kuan Tao	22	20
	Folk religion	13	12
	Christian	10	9
	Catholic	3	2
Marriage status	None	21	19
	Single	5	4
	Married	63	56
	Widow	54	48
Living status	Alone	14	13
	With spouse	19	17
	With children	48	43
	With children & spouse	31	28
Number of children	0	3	3
	1	3	3
	2-4	55	49
	4+	51	46
Education background	None	29	26
	Primary school	40	36
	Middle school	11	10
	High school	26	23
	College and above	6	5
Health satisfaction	Good	15	13
	Not bad	42	38
	Not good	37	33
	Bad or poor	18	16
Activity (frequency to go out every week)	None	12	11
	1-2 times	31	28
	3-5 times	7	6
	5-10 times	31	28
	more than 10 times	29	26
Frequency to visit a doctor	More than once a week	5	5
	1-4 times a month	63	56
	1-12times a year	32	29
	Less than once a year	6	5
	Other	6	5

"Birth, age, illness and death - that is human life. You can hardly control or predict it. Just follow nature. Thus, we do not have to think too much".

"Life and death are decided by your fate, wealth or your fortune is up to heaven."

"Life is nothing to pursue, just flowing with nature to reach harmony"

**Table 2.** Images of life among Taiwanese Seniors' expressed in Interviews (N= 164 /112).

Category	Number of Comments	%
A. Life is a Natural course – from birth to death	43	38.4
B. To be treasured	22	19.6
C. Health and disease – life is meaningful if in good health	19	17.0
D. Donation, responsibility	18	16.1
E. To be enjoyed	18	16.1
F. Spiritual comment	15	13.4
G. Life is struggling	13	11.6
H. Life is inherited and continues, off-SPRING	10	8.9
I. Hard to say	4	3.6
J. Others	2	1.8

The second most frequent idea was life is “to be treasured” (N=22), because life is short and fragile, and also wonderful and valuable. Many expressed their appreciation of their life by indicating that life is inherited from parents and “Heaven”, so that we should take good care of ourselves, protecting and conserving life to the last minute, and nobody (including ones' self) but God has a right to take it back. Representative example comments are:

*“Your body, hair and skin are originated from your parents, so they have to be treasured. Take good care of your life.”*

*“Life is a miracle, we have to thank our parents and use it properly.”*

*“Life is valuable, which is inherited from parents, we should treasure and preserve it. Nobody (including yourself) but God has a right to take it back.”*

*“Life is fragile, and should be treasured.”*

*“As a human, we should appreciate it.”*

*“Life is not easy to get. Have to thank our parents, treasure our life and make an effort.”*

The third most common comment (N=19) mentioned about “health and disease” when we talk about life, many of them insisting that life is meaningful only when you have good health. Some example comments are:

*“Life, what to say?...it was given by heaven with certain assignment, however, without health only prolonging your life, life is meaningless.”*

*“If humans can be free of diseases, that's nice. If not, do not prolong too much. You may feel at ease if you do not bother others when you getting old.”*

“Responsibilities of their life” and “donating my life” were concepts mentioned by similar proportions (N=18) of seniors. By donating their life they contribute to their family and children, also country and society, which will make

the life of a person meaningful. Some example comments are:

*“As a hard worker in the past I feel at ease to endure anything that happens to the rest of my life.”*

*“A person should work hard to pass each of their days”*

*“To donate myself to the society as long as I am alive is my hope, since service is the source of my happiness.”*

*“As a hard worker when you were young, then you are at ease to accept every thing.”*

*“Man should work hard to pass each of his days”*

“To enjoy”, is one of the important things mentioned by 18 seniors, as they said, life should be happy and satisfied. Compare to this, to have a long life is not important. For them, to feel at ease is kind of enjoyment, for example:

*“Day by day, to live at ease, that is life. I am satisfied with my life.”*

*“Life should be enjoyable, compared to this; to have a long life is not important.”*

*“The enjoyment of your time on this world is a kind of responsibility of your life.”*

*“Day by day, to live at ease, that is life. I am satisfied with my life.”*

Some seniors (N=15) gave direct “spiritual comments” as the key point of their life, emphasizing the meaning of life as an immortal spirit.

*“Life is to behave with your own morality. I am proud to owe nothing to the world, to be flexible and satisfied.”*

*“Life is to behave your own morality.”*

There were also those who gave comments that concluded that “life is a struggle” (N=13), full of frustrations and it will never end until a person is dead. However, you have no choice but to face it. As an explanation of struggle

**Table 3.** Images of Life among Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia and Japan.

Reason	T (112)	%	NZ (75)	%	Aus (44)	%	Jan (41)	%
<b>N comments/sample</b>	172/112	1.53	122/75	1.63	73/44	1.66	63/41	1.54
A. To be treasured	22	19.6	20	26.67	6	13.64	24	58.54
B. Natural course - from birth to death	44	39.3	15	20.00	11	25.00	14	34.15
C. Health and disease - life is meaningful if in good health	20	17.9	10	13.33	6	13.64	6	14.63
D. Life is inherited and continues,	10	9.0	6	8.00	3	6.82	3	7.31
E. Donation and responsibility	18	16.1	10	13.33	6	13.64	4	9.76
F. To be enjoyed	18	16.1	10	13.33	8	18.2	1	2.4
G. Hard to say	4	3.6	1	1.33	0	0	0	0
H. Spiritual comment	15	13.4	8	10.67	3	6.8	5	12.2
I. Life is A struggle, have no choice	12	10.7	1	1.33	2	4.5	0	0
J. Creation, experience and growing, baby	-		6	8.00	4	9.1	0	0
K. Other living things	-		12	16	17	38.6	2	4.9
L. Enjoy nature (sharing with others, ecological view, relationships)	-		16	21.3	5	11.4	0	0
M. Family and friend	-		3	4.0	2	4.5	0	0
N. Quality of life	-		1	1.3	6	13.6	0	0
O. Try to live longer	-		3	4.0	0	0	7	17.0

in life, one is to pay one's debt of the last life; those seniors can accept their tough fate, to face it with little resistance. As they said:

*“To die, the early the better, you will be relieved by your death ,....”*

*“Life is so so,..., from youth to age, always working hard, it is too much struggle.”*

*“Life is suffering, that is all, especially when you get old,....”*

Some had a strong idea that life is *“inherited and should be continued”* by the offspring (N=10), for example:

*“Life should pass from one generation to another; it should be increasing and alternation of generations.”*

*“As long as my children (off spring) are well, I am satisfied.”*

*“My effort is only for my children, I hope that they will have enough money to buy a house and have their own business.”*

Overall in the interviews only four said that they cannot give any other comment except that life is very hard to define in words. However, some of them needed to have stimulation by repeated questioning and encouragement to answer the questions.

To examine whether there were any demographic factors associated with particular images of life, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software and checked by Chi-square (see appendix). The results of statistical

analysis showed that only education level had some significant influence.

### Comparisons to Images of Life in Australia, Japan and New Zealand

The question discussed above on the “images of life” was also asked in the International Bioethics Survey in 1993 in ten countries across the Asia and Pacific area.<sup>32</sup> The answers received in writing from persons 60 years and over in New Zealand (122 concepts from 75 seniors), Australia (72 concepts from 44 seniors) and Japan (63 concepts from 41 seniors) were examined. Because that survey was written the frequency of not stating ideas was higher than in the interview. The written comments were analyzed to compare with the results in Taiwan (Table 3). Many of the ideas are common between these four countries, while Japanese people have most similar comments with Taiwanese such as life is valuable, and death is definite in your life, for example:

*“Life was given by parents; is important; received with gratitude (pleasure); but has a limit.”*

*“I want to keep natural fate.”*

*“...And it reminds me that I cannot control my life and the Absolute or the Almighty may dominate it.”*

Many of the Japanese seniors have the same worry about whether their end of life will trouble others (especially their family). They prefer to choose *natural “inochi”* (life) instead of a long life that may necessitate one should stay in bed and trouble people around them.

*"Though I think I can live longer and be happy, I am wondering whether it should be forced to live longer by treatment. Natural inochi might be good."*

*"...I don't want to suffered from an incurable diseases, dementia; \*I don't want to trouble others."*

*"Though it should be protected, it is not needed to live being in bed with old age."*

*"I regard the importance of life is to endeavor to live until their ends, but sometimes I think I would choose my death if my condition will trouble people around me"*

A very popular concept "life should be treasured" was found with a significant proportion in the Japanese group (59%). This kind of idea was derived from the concept that life is limited, following a natural course from birth to death.

*"I remember death. And it reminds me that I cannot control my life and the Absolute or the Almighty may dominate it. Therefore life should be taken extremely good care of."*

*"Life is precious, never recovered if you lose it. Want to take care of it. Everyone will lose (die), however, we would take good care of it until then, and make an effort to live comfortably."*

In addition to those categories analyzed through the comments of the Taiwan group, six further categories were used to more fully represent the concepts expressed by persons in these countries. These are *new life and growing, other living things, enjoy nature, quality of life and try to live longer* (Table 3). The comments from Taiwan were re-examined to see whether these types of comments were also found, but there were few or none.

According to the extended categories, seniors from New Zealand and Australia were more likely to think about living things and enjoy nature. The comments like to share life with others, to see nature from an ecological view and to build a proper relationship with other organisms in the world. When they think about life, they also have more feeling of new life (babies) and growing things. Australian seniors have concrete concepts to emphasize the quality of life. Seniors in Japan and New Zealand expressed their wish of trying to live longer.

In these comments the seniors seldom expressed concrete ideas about being sick, however some in Australia used a concrete idea of quality of life. They also talked about inheritance and continuity of life (N=6, 8%), but in these comments the focus was not on their life or their own offspring, but more on the biological life of the world. Japanese seniors have most similar ideas of life with Taiwanese; however 17% of the seniors in Japan expressed their eagerness for living longer, which did not appear among the 112 seniors of Taiwan. To compare with each

other, enjoyment seldom appeared in Japanese life, but responsibility and donation were more popular in Chinese seniors. Also the conclusion of *life as a struggle* was more common in the responses from Taiwan.

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### General Life Attitudes in Taiwan

The most common comments in response to the second interview question, "How do you see your life?" (Table 4) were *"Just follow the natural way and my fate"* (50%). In this category, many of the respondents seem to have Taoist philosophy to see their life is a harmonious action to cooperate with nature, and also to have Confucian philosophy to accept their fate (a type of fatalism). The common words they said were ideas like, "do not think too much", "try to be at peace with myself", "be ready to go", "nothing too violent (struggle)", or "it is my fate". Some example comments were:

*"Never think too much or insist on something. It is impossible to avoid."*

*"What it should be. I always recognize life's pattern and flow with nature."*

*"I am satisfied to have an ordinary live, even if a big fortune or power can be returned empty"*.

*"Life is just like the ocean, nothing to bargain with."*

*"...now there is nothing to expect, I am ready to return..."*

**Table 4.** Taiwanese Seniors' Views on their life (N=170 /112).

Category	Number of comments	%
Just do and follow the natural way (Tao)	56	50.0
To give and take, a meaningful life	36	32.1
Family and children are the core center of life	27	24.1
Since I worked hard, life is now getting easier	26	23.2
Enjoy the rest of my time	13	11.6
Health is my only hope	12	10.7

*"To give and take, a meaningful life"*, is another common theme when seniors review their life, given by 32%. There were 36 comments related to this category. People expressed their affections of appreciation, satisfaction and many thanks first, and then recognized their life as a meaningful procedure of processing under the logic of to give and take. They affirm that paying and receiving should be balanced which will make them at peace with themselves and have no guilty conscious. Example comments include:

*" My life has been donated to my country, and I've got return from that, I feel satisfied. "*

*" I did nothing bad or evil to the society, and I feel I am a man of achievement, it is a meaningful life."*

*" life is valuable, I just try to contribute myself and I know I will not pay in vain."*

*"my life is just like sea waves, happy and sad are repeated. I have learned a lot, the most important thing is that you are not wasting your life."*

*"To do all I can do and to get what you should have, that is a balanced life."*

A total of 27 (24%) talked about their *"family and children are the core center of life"*, and they focused on their success or dedication to society by donating good children, and feeling proud of children's achievement and recognizing that their hard work is worthy. To get feedback from children as a reward, they concentrated on their children's well-being and on whether their children have a good life. To think about their children's happiness and welfare, many of them hope with all their heart that they won't be a burden to their children during their end of life period. Example comments include:

*"If only my junior generation can have stable lives, I have nothing to complain about. Anyway, I do not need to worry about them, that is good enough for me ..."*

*"I have worked so hard for my early years... Even I have grievance to my ill-fate, I felt rewarded that my children can behave well. Everything becomes worthy."*

*"For the past, it was hard, now, life is getting easier... my future,? it should be depend on my sons...."*

*"... it is worthy to sacrifice for your children, To have an non-filial son or daughter is worse than to die."*

One category that could encompass many comments was to include the concept that *"Since I worked hard, life is now getting easier"* (23%). Many of the seniors were satisfied with their present life by feeling easier now. They concluded it was a reward of their working hard in youth. This kind of Karma law can give a reason why people should experience struggle in their life, which was a response given to the general question on their images of life. Moreover, according to their definition, children's achievement means a lot to their easier life. This idea can be combined with the idea of family/children at the centre. Example comments include:

*"I have been worked so hard for my early years. Even if I have grievance to my ill-fate, I felt rewarded that my children can behave well, and everything becomes worthy"*.

*"If only my junior family can have a stable life, I have nothing to complain about."*

*"For the past, it was hard, now, life is getting easier. My future? Depends on my Sons..."*

*"To bring up my children is my target before, now I look upon things ordinarily, but I will treat myself better."*

*"I had worked hard to support my children, Now they are all well educated (two doctoral degrees in my family). They are all nice to me, I can depend on them for my elderly life. I feel satisfied with the result of life is getting easier."*

*"... it is worthy to sacrifice for your children, To have an non-filial son or daughter is worse than to die."*

*"To bring up my children is my target before, now I look upon things ordinarily, I will treasure every days I have and treat myself better."*

*"work hard when you are young, then you may live at easy while you are getting old, I should enjoy my life right away."*

*"I had worked hard to support my children. Now they are all well educated (two doctoral degrees in my family). They are all nice to me; I can depend on them for my elderly life. I feel satisfied with the result of life is getting easier."*

*"I have realized life by reading the 'Yi' recently, life is hard before, but I can relax and enjoy a peaceful old age."*

For the rest, some (12%) gave a goal for their future *"to enjoy the rest of their life"*. Some (11%) held a viewpoint that there is *"nothing but health as their hope"* in this stage.

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software and checked by Chi-square to examine whether there were any demographic factors associated with particular attitude toward their own life (see also appendix). Only education level and educational background have some significant influence.

Overall except for the key concept of fatalism and flow with nature, the logic of “give and take”, “work hard and enjoy”, and to appreciate the value of a “worthy” or “rewardable” life were very important for seniors to incorporate their past life into their current life view, giving them insight into the present and creating a more inspiring personal future. Children and family are always the main prospect and core centre of this philosophy.

The results of the next interview question “Who are the important other lives to you?” included: Children, grandchildren to continue (off-spring) (N=27); Spouse (only men said spouse) (N=9); Family around (N=25); None – only myself (N=18); Equality; any one including all the creatures of the world (N=18); Spiritual life (N=3); Nothing (N=23); and 3 said they did not know what to say.

A quarter mentioned children and grandchildren are the very important other “lives”, to inherit and continue not only their life but their own spirit. For example:

*“I would say relatives and family, because they can extend to the society. As we said ‘govern the family and rule the state’ are why family is very important.”*

*“Young generation, everything is in vain if your children are not well enough. What is a useful man? He should behave?”*

*“Your family member, especially your children ...because which can extend to the society. As we said - govern the family and rule the state that why family is very important.”*

*“...generation of descendants, that is the core meaning of my life.”*

*“Your children..., to have sons to carry on your family name is very important thing in my life.”*

*“Of course, your own children are the most important, how could other people compare to them?”*

Only a few (N=9) specifically indicated that their spouse (wife or husband) is practically important to them at this moment of aging. More, 25, commented that their families around them are all very important. Of the total, almost half the comments were related to family members (children, spouse, and family around), that can reveal a central Confucian concept of Chinese people.

However one quarter (N=23) commented that there is no life important for them in this stage, they referred to their final life as being hollow (empty), without burden and

responsibility, thus nothing is important now. Furthermore, 19 persons raised the idea that nothing is important except themselves. Within these two kinds of comments, people show their leisure attitude toward their life. For example;

*“My children they all grow up, and can take their own responsibility....for me, nothing is important at the moment.”,*

*“At the moment, I myself am the only important one. I had finished my job to bring up my children. I was relieved my duty, I think now I should take care of myself well.”?*

*“To be honest, nothing is important except myself. It is time to grasp my own life; however I would flow with the nature.”*

Unlike the responses to the general question on the images of life where few mentioned any other lives (Table 2), in response to this more direct way of asking about other lives, 18 seniors thought of the equality of all the organisms and concluded that any creature's life of the world is equal to other humans in playing an important role to them. The concept of universal love, equality of being, and idea of serve the public were collected in this group. For example:

*“Humans should practice their indiscriminate love”*

*“Anything you saw should be treated as equally important, and then we may enjoy happiness.”*

Three seniors insisted that their moral life is most important to their life. For example, to have a good name for their “after-life”, and to have their moral spirit will “prolong with heaven and earth.”

Overall in response to this question, when thinking about other lives, these seniors in Taiwan would first talk about their junior generation, which was important to inherit and continue their “after-life”. Second, they thought about their spouse or families members around them, who are taking care of their living things and will accompany them for their final stage of life. A significant minority adapted the Taoist philosophy of Wu-Wei, thinking of natural flow, without seeking to control life, and for them no life is important for them in this stage.

When asked how human life relates to other creature's lives one third of the people commented that they have no idea about this concern (N=36). Among these 36, many of them expressed this concern is not within their knowledge (N=14), a similar number said they can not figure out whether there is any relationship between these lives (N=15), while the rest of them said they had never thought about that, and do not know why they have to talk about it (N=7).

Among those who gave a concrete answer to this question, 32 persons realized that humans and animals are mutual owners of the world, they share it and depend on

**Table 5.** Taiwanese Seniors’ Views on Human’s life in relation to animal’s life or creature’s life (N= 122 /112).

Category	Number of comments	%
Do not know, nothing, never think about that	36	32.1
Mutual owner, share the world, depend each other...	32	28.6
Equal inheritance from God, Earth...respect natural	17	15.2
Humans are at a higher level – can eat as food....	11	9.8
Affection, companion, scenic, spiritual dependence?	7	6.3
Karma, circle	7	6.3
Do not kill, have pity on...	5	4.5
Other	5	4.5
Leave each other alone	2	1.8

each other to survive. There were also 17 comments on the idea of the equality of beings, that all the organisms are inherited from heaven, humans should respect the power of nature; that is to respect all lives in the world. For example:

*“According to the natural law, all species are equal.”*

*“To treat all the living things equally and to respect each other is to flow with nature.”*

However, there were 11 persons who commented that human beings are at a higher level. While derived from this view point; some said humans have responsibility to protect other animals and some said animals were offered as the food of humans. There are a few seniors who also talked about do-not-kill and having pity on animals as their philosophy to treat other animals. Some mentioned the Buddhist concept of transmigration that lives will circle between animals and humans and that it is karma.

The results of the question of “how does human’s life related to animal’s or creature’s life?” are in Table 5. A big population of people commented that they have no idea about this concern (N=36). Among these many expressed this concern is not in their knowledge (N=14); some said they can not figure out that there is any relationship between these lives (N=15); and the rest of them said they had never thought about that, and do not know why have to talk about it (N=7). For example:

*“I have no idea about that, why talk about that? It is not to my knowledge. Human has better think about themselves isn’t it?”*

*“ I’ve never thought about that....I think human beings are all selfish,”*

*“ I don’t think there is any, anyway I am too busy to think about other life”*

*“I prefer not to think about it, it is too heavy for me...”*

A second big population realized that humans and animals are mutual owners of the world, they share and depend upon each other to survive. For example:

*“humans have better follow the natural law to concern the ecology, In fact, human cannot exist without other organisms, we are the mutual owners of the world”*

*“Nowadays, we have learned that if we do not take care the nature or what to say?...yes, Ecology, it will bring calamity.”*

*“ to survive, we should respect other organisms”*

Related to this, 17 comments hold the idea of equality of beings, all the organisms are inherited from heaven, humans should respect the power of nature; that is respect all lives in the world. For example:

*“All living beings of the cosmos are all under the protection of God”...“Even beast and cult are sons of the heaven, everyone are equal, should be treated with indiscriminate love.”*

*“Do not kill other life my own principle, especially we are not the center life of the world, have no right to harm.”*

However, there were 11 persons who commented that human beings are at a higher level. While derived from this view point; some said humans have responsibility to protect other animals and some said animals were offered as the food of humans. There are a few seniors who also talked about do-not-kill and having pity on animals as their philosophy to treat other animals. Some mentioned the Buddhist concept of transmigration that lives will circle between animals and humans and that it is karma.

### The Influence of Taoist and Confucian Philosophy

Most of these concepts (see Table 2) can be understand through the philosophy of Taoism (especially for categories A, F and G), Confucianism (especially for categories B, H and D) and Buddhism (especially for category G). For many of these elderly people, life should follow its natural course, from birth to death. Everyone has their own Karma. Since there are many things we can not control, thus, it is better to follow your fate to treasure what you have and enjoy it. Among these seniors, some have images of life in society like responsibility to others and service or donation, while others have a practical view that health is definitely important to their life. There are also some spiritual comments about life, and that life is inherited and continuous as a reason for it being very important. Finally life was viewed as a struggle, from birth to death, with some saying we just should follow life and let it be, do not

worry and don't think too much, that is life. One striking feature of the interviews was the idea of donation, inheritance and intergenerational continuance of life being seen as circulating around family, parents and children.

Based on the comments given during the interviews, it is apparent that many of the persons interviewed in Taiwan accept Taoist philosophy as their attitude towards their declining life. They easily explained death as a return to nature, or life should return to its source like ten thousand things. Taoist thinking provides a defensive attitude toward their declining life that is "Wu-Wei", harmonious actions and flowing with the nature.<sup>33</sup> We also see how Confucian philosophy influenced people to have a more aggressive attitude to treasure their life, to protect and conserve it till the last moment, for example the famous Chinese saying; "Your every part of body are inherited from your parents, thus should protect it from injury". Both of these concepts are common views that appeared in the lines of seniors' talks, first; a moral life or higher spiritual status may achieve an immortal life; and second, to understand your fate which was decided by heaven can help to reach a fullness of life. To compare with each other, the Taoist thinking of natural harmony is a more popular view among these seniors groups. This can be explained as a trend of retired people to have a more defensive attitude to cooperate with nature and act in harmony with it. For them, to pursue freedom from inner conflict and feel the peace of themselves is the way to adapt Taoist Wu-Wei and to see life as a nature course in order to be at ease with both death or life.

One third (35 /112) seniors mentioned the word "death" on their own initiative when invited to talk about life. While this could suggest that death is a very important part of their life and that they may look at life and death as a whole, most of them admit they feel reluctant to talk about death and dying in front of their family, or people they are very close to. Actually, since they had seen life as a natural course, in their mind they have accepted death as a definite thing that will happen sooner or later. The reason they do not talk about this is also they see death as a natural rule, thus, it is in vain to talk about it or try to control it. According to Taoist thought, once you may recognize life's pattern and flow with them, you will have nothing to be concerned about but follow your fate. People who follow the way of Tao are supposed to be at peace with themselves and free from inner conflict.<sup>34</sup> In this moment we can not tell whether people who hold the Taoist values of becoming one with nature can accept their utmost fear in their last moment, one thing we can sure is that they are free from struggling to live for a long life. However even among those who mentioned death, most feel that dying and death conversations are useless to change what you

should be in the future, thus it is not usually chosen as a topic of conversation in people's daily life.

Other than the aging death, an immature death such as to die in an accident or in an inappropriate period of life is recognized as an ill-omen which should be avoided absolutely. Thus, in custom, this kind of thinking or conversation is ill favored and in that sense people would see it as a taboo. This may be true of most cultures not just in Taiwan. An aged death of the senior of the family who enjoyed the fullness of life and dies in his home with the young generation around him should regard it as a great fortune of a perfect human life.

There are several seniors in the surveys from Japan and New Zealand who expressed their expectations of trying to live longer (Table 4), while this expectation did not appear among the 112 seniors of Taiwan. Some of the Taiwanese mentioned about the idea of "a death that has enjoyed a fullness of age", but none of them expressed they will try to live longer at their age. We can ask whether this comes from Taoist philosophy? Rather we may suppose that senior adults try to restrain their "greed" for a long life to follow Taoist doctrines which the interviews have revealed is a composed manner to accept the reality of death, and according to Tao, to purchase a longer life which merely means to prolong human's suffering.

### **Karma, Fate and Advance Directives**

When elderly people review their own life, moral insight was a key point to conclude the meaning of their life. Tracing back through their dialogue, the formal religion they hold did not play an important role to guide their moral thought. This is consistent with the results of the 1993 International Bioethics Survey across a wide range of Asian cultures. On the contrary, the ambiguous concept of Karma, fate and Heaven are popular in folk-use to explain their logic of sustainable life. For example, people respect and are in awe of Heaven or "Tien", a scared power and the source of everything.<sup>27</sup> People belief their fate or Karma was inherited from Heaven, with this kind of respect, you have no choice but to accept your fate or Karma. This kind of thought is similar to the Eastern thinking of Indian religion that a person's duty is to preserve the natural order and not to interfere with it. The order has a divine nature and one should enter into it, and any attempt to correct the nature or break the mature Karma is not allowed.<sup>35</sup> With this kind of universal thought, the struggle of life can be explained. Also, because the powerful Heaven can judge your Karma, there is logic to the balance between giving and taking, working hard and getting an easier life which are remarkable thinking which arose especially to the aged people when they attempt to integrate their life.

If people believe in fate, and the flow with the nature, how is it possible to plan in advance for their future death? Is it possible to popularize the living will or advance directives in Taiwanese society? None of the 112 seniors who gave an interview has prepared advanced directives or a living will for themselves. It is similar in fact to the results of recent study in a country that is said to be the epitome of pursuit of individual autonomy, USA, and which actually has a law to offer all persons who stay in hospital a chance to make an advanced directive. The US study finding was that elderly people were resistant to planning in advance for their future death.<sup>36</sup> However, many Taiwanese persons expressed strong views during the interview that some particular health conditions are worse than death. To be a burden on junior families because of impaired health is one of the most terrible things they are concerned about. However, there is no practical action to avoid it. Most people gave an answer like *"I will follow my fate, who know what will happen to me?"*, *"My fate, how can I do for my fate?"* or *"If it happens to me, there is nothing we can do."* They said they would even never talk to their children about their concern.

Because of the strong doctrine of filial piety of their junior generation, they prefer to believe that children will do what they can for their best interests at that time. On the other hand, they also are concerned that it will put their children in a conflict situation to think about parents' death. Only few of them said that they will try to set a conversation about that. As the popular saying reads, *"It is useless to worry about that, your fate will guide your future, and it is hard to change what it should be."* It will therefore be a challenge for health care professionals to make people understand that high tech of medicine makes it possible to change your fate and alter the time and schedule of your death.

### Relationships to Other Lives

People we interviewed were firstly concerned with other life as first; their offspring that is the young generation who will continue the life of the family, and then there are also other families around them who suppose to take care of them till the last minute. This very strong family-centered idea may derive from Confucianism, which teaches that people should love their family first and other persons to lesser degree,<sup>37</sup> as opposed to the philosophy of Mo Tzu who taught of a wider circle of universal love.<sup>4</sup> Taoist philosophy has the concept that in nature everything has its place, and everything is valuable,<sup>38</sup> while Confucian "relational personhood" emphasizes the love of gradation,<sup>39</sup> and has shaped the culture so that elderly people in Taiwan may concentrate on the relationship of closeness so much, that they can hardly show concern for other living

things or show altruistic behaviors to protect them. This could also explain why there are fewer environmental or ecological views of seniors in Taiwan compared to the other countries. While there are affects of the surrounding questions used in the 1993 survey that included some environmental questions, the differences seen in Table 3 between cultures suggest further comparisons will be productive.

Some ideas of do not kill (Ahimsa), equality of beings or having pity were derived from religion, for example Buddhism. However, in Taiwan religions play an ambiguous role to influence people's attitudes to life, thus these concerns of other living things are also not popular in Taiwanese seniors' groups.

### Conclusion

In conclusion we have found that a common view is that humans should follow the "Natural" way because life is thought of as a natural course among seniors in Taiwan. The survey has shown that Taoist and Confucian philosophies have important influences upon people's views of life. To follow nature means to flow the way of Tao, which will promote a life in harmony with oneself and the cosmos. In this dimension of thinking, most people easily accept the definite truth of their own death as part of the natural process. However, to protect their life and to maintain a healthy body in the meaning to live the "fullness of your time" and what was given by nature is also one's responsibility. Thus, the immature or "unnatural" death is totally different from death as a result of aging. With this consideration, the concept of natural death, free of artificial maintenance therapy for humans' end of life can be understood with no doubt. With this agreement of the public, modern medicine would reconsider its role to perform a proper end of life care which may promote a higher humanity of dying to the aged people.

Overall when thinking about other lives, these seniors in Taiwan would first talk about their junior generation, which was important to inherit and continue their "after-life". Second, they thought about their spouse or families members around them, who are taking care of their living things and will accompany them for their final stage of life. A significant minority adapted the Taoist philosophy of "Wu-Wei", thinking of natural flow, without seeking to control life, and for them no life is important for them in this stage. Most of the Taiwanese seniors' thinking is more in line with the philosophy of letting go of life and against the pursuit of immortality, ideas discussed in the introduction.

The family-centred nature of senior's life is another key point of their concept of life. Confucian ideas, which lead to the emphasis that the family is the original source of everything were revealed clearly in the seniors group. For example, life is inherited from your parents and ancestors and passed onto your children and offspring.<sup>38</sup> When you are young, your effort is directed at raising your young generation. Thus, to be provided for when aged by the young generation is such a favorable situation that most expect it as their final target of life.

Moreover, a worthy life should be recognized as a good return from your children. Finally, the meaning of life can be achieved by an immortal life, which is continued by ones' descendents. These invulnerable concepts support seniors to face the cruel reality of the decline in their physical and social status. As we may suppose for the welfare of aged groups, nothing, not even full social welfare, or generous medical pay can replace the function of the family to fulfill an aged life. We suggest further international studies should be conducted to examine whether keeping the family tradition is really more common in Chinese society than other parts of the world.

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