

Ancient Confucian and Taoist Ideas on Life and Suicide in the Contemporary Setting

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Abstract

Confucianism and Taoism are China's ancient but still relevant schools of thought with more than two thousand years of history. The implications of their teachings on contemporary society have often been a subject of scholarly discussions. In the constantly changing scenarios of today, these teachings should be interpreted in the context of the social conditions of the day. The march of technological advancement is having an impact on modern civilization. Among the effects of this impact are the pressure of modern living and the rise of emotional stress and anxiety among both the young and old. Unmitigated emotional pressures lead to depression and uncertainties and, in extreme cases, to suicidal behaviour.

Suicide is becoming a common problem today. Specialists in psychology, psychiatry and sociology have attempted to prescribe solutions to curb suicidal tendencies. This study delves into the teachings of Chinese philosophies to explore the meaning of life in Confucian and Taoist thoughts of the pre-Qin era. The purpose is to seek insights on bolstering one's mental strength and broadening one's horizon to better face the problems of modern living and to thwart suicidal thoughts.

Key words: Suicide prevention, value of life, Confucianism, Taoism, social implications

Introduction

Confucianism and Taoism are two schools of Chinese philosophical thoughts that trace their origins to the pre-Qin dynasty more than two thousand years ago, yet they are still relevant in providing insights into the problems of contemporary society. The implications of these ancient thoughts have regularly been raised by modern day scholars. In the context of constantly changing social conditions, it is necessary to interpret the implications of Chinese ancient teachings to deal with complex contemporary needs. The impacts of technology on modern society are much more than bringing about material progress, but having ramifications on the life and behaviour of the individual and society. The intense pressure of modern living is causing emotional stress and tension to an extent that jeopardize the quality of life. Some are

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so adversely affected that they become impulsive and irrational and tend to harbour suicidal thoughts.

“Suicide” is understood as an intentional act that directly or indirectly causes one’s death and with total awareness of its consequences (埃米尔·迪尔凯姆/Durkheim Émile, 1996: 9-11). It is a “disease” that is becoming common in modern society and affects all age groups. A worrying trend is the increase in the suicide rate among the young and reported cases reveal only the tip of the iceberg. There are countless cases of suicidal attempts and even more cases of suicidal tendencies. The World Health Organization has identified suicide as one of the top ten causes of death worldwide, with the highest rate among the age group of 15 to 29 years. In Malaysia, the suicide rate for teenagers between 13 to 17 years old is increasing. In 2017, it was found that 10 per cent of Malaysian teenagers harboured suicidal thoughts, compared with 7.9 per cent in 2012. The percentage of teenagers who attempted suicide also increased from 6.4 per cent in 2012 to 7.3 per cent in 2017 (*New Straits Times*, 13 September 2019). In a 2018 study, the Asian Federation of Psychiatric Associations of Indonesia found that 5 per cent of high school students in Jakarta had suicidal thoughts and 3 per cent had tried to commit suicide (*The Star*, 15 February 2020).

Chinese philosophies are rich in their references to human life and values. The teachings of Confucius and Laozi of the pre-Qin dynasty are loaded with insights on mental wellness and healthy living as well as advice against taking one’s life. This study will focus on aspects of the relations between individuals as well as the individual and society in relation to the issues of suicide. The first section argues that instilling Confucian and Taoist ideas in children as early as possible is the best method to cope with the pressures and conflicts in life. Being conscious of Confucian and Taoist ideas on human life would broaden a person’s outlook and deepen the appreciation of the value of life. When a person is aware of different choices in life, he will be better able to choose an alternative path to deal with seemingly helpless situations, and thus to avoid losing hope and ultimately resorting to suicide. The next section discusses the philosophy of life of the pre-Qin era and its relevance as a preventive safety valve, and the last section will highlight and relate the philosophy with suicide prevention to provide insights into the issues of suicide in contemporary society.

Immortality of Life and Death: Positive View of Life in Confucianism

Pre-Qin dynasty Confucianism consistently promotes the idea of active participation in society as an objective of life. Confucian teachings advocate emphasis on the importance of morality. Confucius trained his students to become gentlemen and to excel in knowledge and morality, and to use what they learn to serve society well. Confucius asks:

“A man may be able to memorize the three hundred odes, yet if,
when entrusted with governmental affairs, he knows not how to

act, or if, when sent on a diplomatic mission, he cannot fulfil his professional duties; notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?"

(《子路》/Zi Lu, quoted in 朱熹/Zhu Xi: 1983:143)

What Confucius stresses is a positive and progressive outlook on life. Knowledge alone without putting it to use to serve the people is meaningless. A person's role in society is not just to be benevolent, upright, or knowledgeable but also to possess the noble spirit of service to the betterment of the self and society.

Emphasis on Responsibility and the Value of Life

Confucianism teaches that a person's existence is more than just being responsible for himself but also to have an influence on the welfare of the country and society. As early as the Spring and Autumn period (770-221 BC), the classic *Zuo Zhuan* had introduced the idea of the "Three immortalities in life" (杨伯峻/Yang Bojun, 1990: 143). One of the interpretations of the three immortalities refers to a person's success in displaying his virtues, contributing meaningfully through action, and being trustworthy in words.

A person's existence on earth, if it is marked by great efforts to practise the "three immortalities" and thus to gain fame and position and to bring glory to the family and ancestors, would be seen as the greatest form of filial piety. Filial piety is not exclusive to the Chinese, but it has continued to be preserved and practised until today (罗素/Russell Bertrand, 1996: 30). Indeed, the famous Sinologist Hu Shih once pointed out that Chinese culture, in a way, may be known as the culture of filial piety (胡适/Hu Shih, 1996: 1130).

Chinese tradition remembers the dead through their practice of virtues, words and deeds during their lifetime. Memories of the "three immortalities" associated with them would be handed down the generations. Common among East Asian societies is the idea that a person who had led a life that reflected the desires of the average person was in fact an emphasis on the relationship between society and contemporary material life (钱穆/Qian Mu, 2004: 7 and 17). If we realize the importance of our relationship with society, and when we appreciate that we have to be responsible for our own actions and that our behaviour is liable to public scrutiny, we will think twice before we act, especially when it touches on matters of life and death. Although we do not wish to live under public scrutiny, it is almost impossible to avoid being labelled and branded in ways beyond our control.

A person may feel that his life belongs to himself and he might decide to put an end to it if it is no longer meaningful or worth living. However, this drastic decision will torment and shock members of his family who are made to bear the trauma and psychological burden for years.¹

Confucian teachings advocate that filial piety begins when the son does not inflict any harm to his physical body that has been bestowed to him by his parents (阮元/Ruan Yuan, 2009:

5,526). The *Analects* relates to an incident of Confucius escaping from the territory of Kuang and who feared that his disciple Yan Yuan had died when he was nowhere in sight. When Yan Yuan learned about this, he told Confucius respectfully that he had not dared to die when his master was still alive. This incident reinforces the moral obligation of the young to be alive and to cherish the value of life when their parents are still around (朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983:128).

Some scholars attribute suicide among East Asians to the influence of traditional Chinese culture. They argue that the influence of the Confucian concepts of “laying down one’s life for justice” and “killing oneself for noble causes” has been ingrained into the psyche of later generations. However, the implications of these concepts have to be interpreted in the historical and societal contexts. These concepts were put forward by Confucius in a war-ridden age when the rules of propriety were disintegrating and morality was in general decline. It was also a time with many contending schools of thought and debates on such issues as righteousness versus profit-taking. Confucius had advised that his countrymen should make sacrifices for justice and to save the country during times of crisis. The ultimate purpose was to urge his countrymen to stand up for the country’s interests and to minimize the social unrest prevailing then. These concepts were in actual fact products of the time of Confucius.

In contemporary society, there are countless reasons why people commit suicide. These are usually personal reasons, some feel their lives have become meaningless and look upon life as a torture to themselves and a burden to others, and ultimately deny the value of their very own existence. Others take their own lives because they are not able to cope with varying degrees of the pressure and emotional strain in life. Yet others are inflicted by a lack of correct outlook on life and its values or unable to release their negative emotions.

These causes of suicide are not tolerated in Confucian teachings which stress that life is a mission and a duty, and a person has a duty to himself, the family, society and country and hence has to be positive and forward-looking and capable of doing good. Consequently, persons who are quarrelsome or treat life lightly are looked down upon. Instead, one should be discrete and avoid acting impulsively according to The *Analects* (朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983:95). The idea of sacrificing one’s life for justice or for a noble cause that was advocated by Confucius is not to be likened to the contemporary practice of committing suicide. The former is symbolic of moral uprightness while the latter is that of selfishness.

The “Golden Mean” as a Behavioural Standard

Confucius teaches his students to be positive and progressive, to serve society and hence to establish a good reputation. Contemporary norms of behaviour are often devoted to gaining fame and wealth. It is natural that the average person is ambitious and seeks success to build a better future. But many tend to think that gaining fame, glory and wealth is a sure way to happiness. Unfortunately, some end up by losing their dignity, time with their family, freedom, and their individuality even before they attain what they are striving for. Some succumb to the intense pressure of life and admit defeat by committing suicide.

Pursuing one's desired lifelong goals does not necessarily entail the relentless preoccupation with the attainment of these goals as the only purpose in life. This process runs the risk of leaving no allowance for failure and leading to the path of ruin and eventual destruction. In education, the obsession with examination results above all else has been behind reports of suicides among students in Malaysia. The release of the results of China's National College Entrance Examination or South Korea's College Scholastic Ability Test may cause an upsurge in the incidence of student suicides. Among business persons, the mania for wealth and fame is a major cause of bankruptcy that may lead on to total despair.

Confucian teachings endorse the idea of realizing one's clear mission and purpose in life rather than to labour aimlessly without direction. More importantly, a person must adopt an attitude of tolerance for failure or success and avoid being overly ambitious. This is in keeping with the doctrine of the "Golden Mean" that is valued in Confucianism as a behavioural standard rooted in the ideas of moderation and harmony. The doctrine discourages excessive feelings such as extreme happiness or sadness that could provoke bodily harm, while suicide is branded as a most foolish act. Confucian values place life above wealth. Upon the occurrence of an accident or disaster, the Confucian concern is the safety of life of humans rather than that of animals or physical damages (朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983:121).

Confucian teachings prefer one to be content with poverty rather than losing one's inner self in the passionate pursuit of wealth and fame. Confucius once praised one of his students for his admirable virtue of living in happiness under difficult and distressing circumstances (朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983:87). He contends that all men desire wealth and honours but, if acquired through devious means, should not be tolerated. Similarly, all men abhor poverty and meanness, but should not avoid sufferings through foul means. Thus, a gentleman practises virtuous living by maintaining benevolence and righteousness even when going without food or in the face of danger (朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983:70). Living in abject poverty is not a justification for any person to abandon his conscience by resorting to stealing, cheating, snatching or other illegal means, or to succumb to circumstances by committing suicide. Regaining one's senses on time from the despair and loss of direction arising from, for example, heavy debts and financial pressure through indiscrete behaviour, would help one to pursue a spiritually fulfilling life again and avoid taking drastically insane acts such as taking one's life and that of the children.

In *Mencius*, inheriting the ideas of Confucius, Mencius reiterates the need to focus on self-improvement when one is poor, and be generous to others when one is rich (《朱熹/Zhu Xi, 1983: 251). Life has its ups and downs, and it is not confined to any specific path or direction. Cultivate one's mind and be prepared for the right time to prove one's worth and to accomplish remarkable deeds. Confucian teachings provide advice on following a contented life through self-cultivation to achieve harmony between the heart and mind and to be insulated from the interferences of external forces.

The insights of Confucian teachings suggest a model of the ideal life. This is a life that enjoins every individual to self-cultivation and self-advancement in order to contribute positively to society and to adopt a never-say-die attitude in life. If a person strives and fails to achieve anything, he may choose to settle down to a quiet life to cultivate himself and to accept life as ordained by circumstances. Confucius detests lazy habits, and anyone whose efforts have been fruitless and takes his own life in despair is effectively acting against the Confucian doctrine of the mean.

Living in Longevity: Taoism's Soft Attitude to Life

Taoism places importance on life and thus advances the idea of healthy living in longevity in a desire inspired by the dream for immortality. Indeed the Taoist's attitude is one of an extreme love for life. The concept of longevity is to live till life reaches its natural end and not to be deliberately shortened by any means.

Valuing Life Above All Else

While Taoism endorses the pursuit of fame and fortune, it values human life above all else. If material possessions were to harm human nature or threaten lives, Taoists will choose to avoid them. They tend to have an otherworldly sentiment that resists the temptation of immediate interest and to give up fame and profit to free themselves from the burden of material possessions. Taoism differs from Confucianism in its belief that one's life is in the hands of oneself and not in others'. The emperor's life is not more precious than that of the average person's, or as valuable as all the wealth of the world. Life is precious and, once lost, is gone forever (郑诗侯/Tey Shi Bin, 2010: 80). In his discourse on life, Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi argues that life is precious beyond compensation by the fame and power of kingship. A wise person appreciates the holistic nature of life and the need to nurture it through healthy habits and to refrain from the desire for materialistic comforts in order to enjoy the full span of life till its natural end. Zhuangzi's idea on life was recorded by the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian. When offered a thousand pieces of gold and the prime ministership by King Wei of Chu, Zhuangzi replied with a smile and asked to be left alone, saying that he would rather be his happy self and play in a polluted drain than to be controlled by the king (司马迁/Sima Qian, 1982: 2,145).

In his writing on healthy living, Zhuangzi advises against being overly intentional in thought and action to the extent of affecting the purity of human nature. Instead, the path to healthy living is to avoid sources of harm, gossips and conflicts and be rid of burdensome engagements to keep a free and easy spirit. Excessive display of one's talents is to attract the metaphorical knife on one's throat and be butchered at will by others (郭庆藩/Guo Qingfan, 1961:117-119).

Zhuangzi laments humanity's attraction only to "the use of the useful", but blind to the "the use of the useless". In his discourse on "humanity", Zhuangzi uses the oak tree as a metaphor of the "useless". The huge oak tree provides shade to a thousand cows and attains an impressive height. While many worship the oak tree, the carpenter shuns it because it serves no purpose as a building material. This is why the tree is left untouched and survives for a thousand years. Its "uselessness" is indeed its most meaningful function (郭庆藩/Guo Qingfan, 1961: 170-174). In a similar vein, modern-day scholar Guo Moruo declares that a person who is "useless" contributes nothing to society but, by living the full span of his natural life, is instead immensely "useful" to himself by being able to protect himself, his life and his relatives. This in fact is the real function of this person (郭沫若/Guo Moruo, 1954: 176-177).

To be ostentatious is part of human nature. In the desire to win admiration and approval, no one is guaranteed this admiration from society. The pleasure derived from public applause is short-lived while the mental torment and psychological damage from criticisms or denunciations is permanent. In the midst of public acclaim, social highfliers generally lead lonely lives in private. Once their reputation runs into ruinous encounters, they become targets of intense public scrutiny and are readily sneered at. When the emotional stress and depression become unbearable, the outcome could lead to a suicidal end. Few, however, ever foresee that affairs of the world are disappointingly and fleetingly ephemeral.

Those who desire fortune and fame may learn from the wisdom of Confucian or Taoist teachings. Confucius views wealth and fame as floating clouds, fleeting and short-lived. To Zhuangzi, nothing is important or petty, honourable or disgraceful, and superior or inferior. Therefore there is no joy or grief whether one succeeds or fails, wins or loses, or whether one is rich or poor.

Inaction for Ease and Comfort in Life

Zhuangzi's concept of "the use of the useless" is derived from Laozi's idea of existence or *you* (有) and non-existence or *wu* (无). Laozi refers to the spokes of a wheel that connect to the hub, but it is the empty space (*wu*) in between that makes the wheel turn. An earthen vessel is made by moulding the clay. What makes the vessel function is its empty space. A house is installed with doors and windows but it is the empty space in between that enables the house to fulfil its functions. Thus, while what is present brings convenience, what is not present makes things serve their purposes (陈鼓应/Chen Guying, 1992: 104). *You* brings conveniences, while *wu* brings functions. People desire to "gain" and hate to "lose"; they see what *you* can bring, but blind to the advantages that *wu* brings. In short, they admire "the use of the useful", but fail to appreciate "the use of the useless".

Reports in local newspapers of suicides often cite reasons linked to jilted or unrequited love, failed businesses, emotional collapse caused by disappointing examination performance or by crippling diseases. Extreme dejection leads to doubts on the value of life and the suppression of the will to live. The truth is that life has its own purpose. It is not necessarily

linked to the achievement of “success” of any kind to give it meaning. A student does not have to attain top score; an employee does not have to occupy the highest position; or a couple does not have to possess a big house or a luxury car to live a happy life. It is indeed possible to learn from Zhuangzi and understand the inner meaning of the “useful” and “useless”. All must learn to appreciate the fact that a happy and meaningful life can be built on our “uselessness” without having to undergo the self-inflicted pressure from the relentless chase of fame or fortune for its deceptive and superficial facade of success.

Contemporary society is indeed deemed with countless temptations and rivalries arising from self-centred and competing interests in which one may live an unrestrained life. In contrast, Confucianism advocates a life guided by “virtuous” values while Taoism seeks wisdom from the character and behaviour of water. Water is soft, does not compete with other objects and flows downward. Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet nothing surpasses water in its power to dissolve the hardest materials (陈鼓应/Chen Guying, 1992: 350). Softness is symbolic of the living while hardness is for the dead. The living body is soft while the dead body is hard; growing plants are soft but dead ones become hard. Laozi argues that people who look weak are inwardly strong, just as water is so soft that it cannot be cut into half. The strong tend to be confident and take risks and more likely to suffer injury, just like trees that grow big and tall are chopped down. Hence being soft and avoid conflicts like water accord with the wisdom of life (陈鼓应/Chen Guying, 1992: 342). Laozi’s suggestion of being soft and avoid conflicts has often been interpreted as a negative outlook on life. In truth, Laozi advocates “action through inaction” or to live by the principle of taking the path of least resistance similar to the character of water and closest to the “way” or “*Dao*” (陈鼓应/Chen Guying, 1992: 89). Laozi’s philosophy that is documented in Laozi is fit for emperors and leaders as well as commoners. To emperors and leaders, it is a valuable reference on political strategy, and to commoners it is a source of insights and teachings on life. It teaches that the key to live an unrestrained life is to keep away from daily rivalries and jealousies in the workplace and society. Zhuangzi’s writings on the human pursuit of self-interest cite the story of a mantis stalking the cicada, but which is unaware of a canary lurking and ready to strike from behind (郭庆藩撰/ Guo Qingfan, 1961: 695). In modern society, many strive and scheme to trick others but often end up worse off than before. The retributions for treacherous behaviour are often severe, with some losing everything and others paying with their lives.

The focus of Pre-Qin dynasty Confucianism and Taoism is centred on the philosophy of life but differs in emphasis. The former calls for positive and progressive attitude that may enhance the value of life, while the latter emphasizes the need for a soft attitude that helps to avoid conflicts and strive to take good care of one’s health to live until the end of one’s natural life span. However, both these schools of thought lead to the same conclusion that calls for the need to respect and cherish life. In particular, the Taoist belief in the natural course of life and death, like the inevitability of the interchanging of night and day, is to caution against arbitrary violation of this biological process.

Modern society may draw insights from ancient Chinese teachings on the value and meaning of life to instil a firm belief in the inviolability of human life. A greater understanding of the Confucian and Taoist concepts and ideas on the philosophy of life will provide a source of guidance and counselling on the prevention of suicide in the modern setting.

Being Pragmatic and Adaptable: Confucian and Taoist Ideas and the Prevention of Suicide

Confucian and Taoist ideas on life are in agreement in some aspects and disagreement in others. Ideally, integrating positive ideas from all schools of thought will provide a multifaceted view on life. Confucianism may serve as a primary source of ideas to be complemented by related ideas from other schools of thought. Buddhism, for example, is strongly against suicide and its belief penalizes persons guilty of committing suicide to face retribution in hell. Hence the devout Buddhist would banish the thought of self-destruction. Integrating ideas from different sources of ideas will prepare society to face the many uncertainties of life and to guide them to overcome obstacles that may emerge.

Drawing on the historical records of Sima Qian (司马迁) whose ideas are derived from Confucian and various other sources will reaffirm the belief in the sanctity of life. The most celebrated historian in ancient China, Sima Qian was imprisoned and sentenced to death by Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty for defending a general who had lost a battle and surrendered to the enemy. As allowed by the law of the Han empire, he could choose to die or to avoid it by undergoing castration. To fulfil his father's last wish and his dream to complete the *Records of History (Shiji)*, he chose the latter in order to preserve his life. Castration then and now is viewed as a shameful and disgraceful punishment by many who would rather die than be humiliated, but Sima Qian thought otherwise. He contended that death befalls all men but, depending on what one lives for, it could be looked upon as a solemn matter or could be dismissed lightly. If one could not die honourably, it would be preferable to suffer humiliation to maintain one's life. Sima Qian was in fact critical of those who died cowardly because they succumbed to the problems in their lives, and also those who paid with their own lives out of pride or "face".

Choosing to be castrated was to suffer the ultimate humiliation of manhood. Sima Qian lost his manhood and his social standing, was sneered at and lived in the depth of depression (郑诗侯/Tey Shi Bin, 2010: 72). But he endured the unbearable and continued to live with an iron will to complete *Shiji*, the acknowledged masterpiece which has become the supreme symbol of scholarship in Chinese historiography.

Sima Qian derived his courage and resolution from famous historical figures such as Confucius and others who had endured hard times or humiliation to achieve unmatched success. His determined resolve to preserve his own life in the face of extreme psychological torment eventually allowed him to complete the history of the Chinese civilization from early times to the reign of the Han Emperor Wuti. This multi-volume classic features not just the

progress of early Chinese history but more importantly the lives and struggles of a gallery of exemplary personalities. This remarkable classic featuring perceptive analyses of selected historical figures has become essential reference on the study of ancient Chinese history. Through his efforts, Sima Qian won the universal admiration of the Chinese and became a source of inspiration to generations of scholars.²

The East and West have different attitudes to life and death. Western society views life from the perspective of death and that humans live to die. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (叔本华/Schopenhauer Arthur, 2007: 426) describes life as a journey with constant obstacles but may not cause us to fail. The physical body constantly avoids instant death but continues on until the end is reached. However, death will eventually occur as humans are destined to die from the moment of birth. Life is not a gift from heaven but a loan agreement extracted from the death that has ultimately to be repaid.

The Chinese traditional concept of life and death is concerned more with life here and now and the emphasis is on the importance of living. Confucian and Taoist teachings emphasize the value of life and its preservation. They advocate a healthy indifference to the search for fame and fortune and a good sense of knowing when to relinquish one's duties and responsibilities. Human life has its own beginning and end. Although death is inevitable, life is not meaningless and one is not justified to choose to end it as a means to stop any sufferings to the self or to others. Instead, life should be regarded as a gift to be lived as fully as possible. In the process of "delaying" death, one may learn from Confucianism to be positive and progressive in creating value in one's life, or to learn from Taoism to remain indifferent to fame and fortune to live healthily in longevity.

There are too many uncertainties in life. The prescience of Laozi's teaches that "good fortune rests upon bad fortune, while bad fortune hides within good fortune." In short, nothing in life is absolute and the joys of blessings or the setbacks from misfortunes are often transient and short-lived (陈鼓应/Chen Guying, 1992: 289). Every danger or misfortune might be a blessing in disguise as it may be followed by a turn of good fortune and vice versa. One should remain sober and view the ups and downs of life with stoical forbearance, for change for the better or for worse is beyond the control of one.

Many ancient venerable scholars pursued self-cultivation and practised the *Dao*, and tried their best to do the right thing (徐梵澄/Xu Fancheng, 1988: 84). Not everyone may understand the life philosophies of the wise people of the past, but it is worth remembering that there were people who did not walk the path of self-destruction. Instead, they chose to turn away from what others might regard as life's *cul-de-sac* and continued to seek meaning in life. We will benefit by distilling the teachings of Confucianism and Taoism on the meaning of life, to discover an inner peace of mind and to renew our lives with greater focus and purpose.

The young and their parents in contemporary society will benefit immensely from Confucian and Taoist teachings on the meaning of life and be equipped with the correct outlook and rational attitude on life. If the young are well-schooled in the essence of their cultural

inheritance pertaining to the philosophy of life, they will live with a well-balanced and healthy attitude based on the hope and reward of an optimistic future.

Conclusion

The Chinese have inherited a vast treasure stove of teachings and ideas on life and healthy living from different schools of thought based especially on Confucianism and Taoism. These are invaluable sources of wisdom to guide and counsel us on how to cope with the pressure of the times that have led many to live impetuously. Distilling and understanding the teachings of ancient Chinese thought offer a useful source of insights on the meaning and value of life. Widening the channels to preserve and disseminate these positive teachings would contribute significantly to modern society to navigate the twists and turns of life and to light up the life especially of the young and overly ambitious.

Teachers in primary to tertiary institutions of education who are the effective transmitters of culture, should be concerned not merely with student learning outcome and performance, but equally also with their mental well-being. Students well-equipped with a good foundation in the knowledge of positive Chinese cultural values will appreciate the precious value of life and its sustenance with a healthy and balanced attitude on life.

Notes

- 1 Taiwan novelist Wu Tanru (吴淡如) recounted her experience of having to live under the shock and dark shadow of her brother's suicide that persisted for years. She also alluded to the intense remorse and guilt of family members of similar suicidal cases.
- 2 Sima Qian's *Records of History* features the study of historical characters such as Fan Li (635-488BC) of the Yue Kingdom who helped King Goujian to regain control of his kingdom. Another character was Zhang Liang (250-189BC) whose wise counsel enabled Liu Bang (247-195BC) to become the founding Emperor of the Han dynasty. With their respective masters successfully enthroned, both saw it fit to withdraw rather than waited in anticipation of reward. Fan Li became a merchant and devised a set of business rules that are still regarded as sound business principles in the contemporary setting and Zhang Liang lived a reclusive life devoted to the cultivation of Dao.

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