

Challenges of Complex Social Environment and Cultivation of Positive Qualities of Citizens

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Abstract: The respect for human life is a universal morality. Suicide is a reaction against ethics of life . The contagion of suicide is a pain in the heart for many countries. There are both similarities and distinct features concerning youth suicide in different nations. At present, compulsory education in China is still obsessed by the excessive pursuit of "examination-oriented system", which has left the students with heavy academic burden and psychological pressure, and damaged the physical and mental health of many children and teenagers. Life education and human care in its genuine sense is still in infancy at many schools. To conduct life education among the youth, we need to foster positive characters among them, which includes the senses of responsibility, optimism, fortitude, open-mindedness and so on. We can guide them to learn to undertake their social responsibility through participation in public service activities. Through the analysis of key events, figures and issues, we can develop their abilities to overcome the fear within them and cope with adversity. By helping them set up the positive and optimistic "sunshine attitude" towards life, we can teach them to treat the unhappiness in the society with optimism. Psychological counseling and educational intervention to sensitive

students should be strengthened so as to enhance social care and humanitarian aid , and create a harmonious and warm social atmosphere.

Key words: suicide, academic burden, life education, civic character

I. Suicide is a reaction of citizens or quasi-citizens against ethics of human life

1. Life activity is a universal morality

Human civilization is a wonderful master piece in the vast universe. The Milky Way Galaxy is a small wave in the vast ocean of the universe; the solar system is a drop of water in the long river of the Milky Way, and the Earth is a thin tributary in the stream of the solar system. Human beings are just a grain of dust, infinitely small and insignificant in the universe. But mankind is the master of all things on the earth, the wizard of the universe. The brilliance of human intelligence can illuminate the universe billions of light years away, can trace or predict the long process of cosmic evolution more than 10 billion years away. The vitality of human life is peculiar to the animal world. Life activity is the essential feature which distinguishes human beings from the non-living things. Human life is transient and extremely valuable. Life is like the lightning in a long night. Short as it is, it is still illuminous in the pursuit of glory. This is the ethics of life in the universe. As a responsible citizen in the modern society, we have to have a strong commitment to our own lives. The commitment to our own lives is the commitment to our home planet.

2. Suicide is a reaction against ethics of human life

In reality, however, for a variety of complex reasons, some people are willing to end their own lives and return to the long dark night of mortality. These phenomena should be classified into two types: sacrifice and suicide. We should like to pay tribute to the few who laid down their own lives for a just cause and for the public interest of the state, the nation, the community and others. These people are all referred to as heroes and martyrs. But suicide is another case. The living often feels helpless, sorrow and sad when facing the suicides.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim pointed out in *Suicide* that, "the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result".^① The emergence of suicide committed by children is a tremendous human tragedy. Data shows that, since around the age of 15, youth suicide rate increases rapidly and has become one of the world's biggest threats to human life.

3. The spread of suicide has become a pain in the heart for many countries

The total youth suicide rate in the U.S. rose by 3 times since 1950; 85% of the young people have thought about committing suicide, 50% of them have developed suicide plans. Report shows that the suicide rate among American adolescents increased dramatically. The number in 2004 was 8 times more than that in 2003. Robert Gipson, professor of biological statistics and psychology at University of Chicago, led a study

which found that the increase of the suicide rate among the Americans was related to the decrease in taking antidepressants. Data revealed in the research report shows that, if the use of anti-depressants decreases by 20%, the annual number of suicides will increase by 3040. Suicide rates among young people under the age of 19 and among young girls in the U.S. have risen to the highest level in 15 years. In 2004, 4599 young Americans committed suicide, which became the third leading cause of death, following on the heels of traffic accident and homicide. Thomas Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health said that, after the government warned of the side effects of anti-depressants, suicides among children had not diminished but increased[®].

Japan's suicide rate among women between 15 and 24 years old is even higher than that in the United States. Youth suicide in Japan has shown a tendency of involving more younger people . From 1972 to 1973, 20% of the total suicides in Japan were children under the age of 15. In 1979, averagely three children under the age of 19 committed suicide per day. Japanese scholar Mochizuki Kazuhiro said that, the surge of suicide among Japan's primary and secondary students and the tendency of suicides at an increasingly younger age has become a worldly topic. Compared with the elderly suicide in Sweden (Swedish elderly suicide rate is the highest in the world), Japanese adolescent and child suicides have been more heavily criticized globally. Hiroshi Inamura believes that, the high suicide rate among youth aged between 15 and 24 has become a sign of social unrest.[®]

Youth suicide in France also deserves attention. According to a survey report released by the French Ministry of Health, every year in France, 1.55 million people attempted suicide and up to 11,000 people died from suicide. The report said that, the actual number of death by suicide in France might be much larger. The suicide rate in the age group between 25 and 34 is the highest. Suicide has become almost the first cause of death for this age group. Followed by 15 to 24 years old, among which suicides account for 15% of the total number of young deaths. Elderly suicides are also severe, accounting for 1.33% of total elderly deaths. From a gender perspective, the rate of male suicide is almost 3 times the rate of female suicide. Although the causes of suicide among people of all age groups are not the same, their main reason is still the loss of confidence in life. ^④ A survey report released by the French Institute of Health and Medical Research shows that, youth suicide has become a serious social problem in France. The report revealed that, 1.2 million people committed suicide each year in France, among which up to 8000 were teenagers. France has become one of the four countries with the highest proportion of suicide victims in Europe. The report also pointed out that economic difficulty was one of the main causes for youth suicide. Some young people suffering from mental depression started to drink excessively and use drugs. Without any income, it was difficult for them to survive, which eventually led to suicides. Another major cause for youth suicide was the heavy psychological burden resulted from the academic problems. The report revealed that 9% of boys and 19% of girls under the age of 15 have had suicidal intentions. ^⑤

Literature reflects that the United Kingdom is also troubled with youth suicide. In 2008, the British town Bridgend was trapped by the "suicide curse". Within 18 months, 21

people hanged themselves. In the Bridgend suicide chain, the 27-year-old Gareth Morgan was the oldest among all the dead. Before committing suicide, Morgan left a brief note scribbled, "Mam, I'm sorry. I just can't do it no more. Tell Leanne I love her. I love you. All my love, Gareth." Melanie, mother of suicide victim Thomas Davis, told a journalist of the Daily Telegraph that, "It's like a craze - a stupid sort of fad. They all seem to be copying each other by wanting to die... He did go on Bebo and apparently he had a page on there. He must have discussed his other friends dying on there... I think the problem is they do not know how to speak like adults about serious issues like this. They can speak to each other on the computer but do not know how to express their emotions in other ways."[®]

According to the Observer, about 1/5 of British girls between 10 and 20 years old were on an irregular diet and 4% of female university students suffered from bulimia. A survey of the UK Department of Health said that, the alcohol consumption of young people aged between 16 and 24 has doubled compared with 10 years ago, 17% of young men under 25 years old said they "drink to get drunk"; 30% of the British teenagers in the 16-24 age group have tried at least one kind of drugs, and more boys than girls tended to use drugs; the number of suicides among young people aged between 15 and 19 has increased by 70% compared with the number in the 1970s. Adolescent suicides each year in the UK amounted to 19,000, in which the number of boys committing suicide was 3 times that of girls. [®]China's youth suicide problem is worrying, too. The information provided by the First National Conference on Injury Prevention and Control in 1999 revealed that, each year more than 200,000 people committed suicide, in which 15 to 34 were the peak age for suicide. Survey report shows that, China's suicide rate among children aged from 10 to

14 was 2.41 per 100,000 persons. According to incomplete statistics, there were 155 suicide deaths from 1987 to 1989 in Guiyang City, among which 10 to 29 year-olds accounted for 41.81%, 10 to 19 year-olds accounted for 19.64%. Chinese children also have higher suicide intentions. American journalist Katherine McLaughlin reported that in Shanghai, 1/4 of children aged between 8 and 15 have "considered" suicide. Nanjing Institute of Educational Sciences did a sample survey in 2001 of nearly 2,000 students in Nanjing, and found that 40.1% of the primary school students have said "would rather die". Another survey targeted at 2,500 children in Shanghai (Gao Hongyun, 2004) showed that, 24.0% of the children have had suicidal thoughts; 15.2% have seriously considered to take action; 5.85% have attempted suicide and failed. However, before the 1970s, there has been no report on children committing suicide.[®] During the three months from April to June 2005, three students of Peking University jumped off the school building. On the morning of July 10, 2005 in Ningxia Autonomous Region, a 13-year-old girl Xiu Xiu (pseudonym) chose to kill herself for reasons like "I am a poor student" and "I can save 100,000 yuan for you (father) if I die". On May 2010 in the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen, China, 13 employees successively jumped off the plant building. This "one after another" suicide wave has caused a panic in the society.

II. Causes for youth suicides

There are both similarities and distinct features concerning the causes for youth suicides in different nations. At present, compulsory education in China is still obsessed by the "examination-oriented system", which has left the students with heavy academic

burden and psychological pressure, and damaged the physical and mental health of many children and teenagers. Life education and humanitarian care in its genuine sense is still in infancy at many schools. The shadow of exam-oriented education, the tribulation under the academic pressure, the increased difficulty of the teaching materials, have all led directly to the polarization among students in their study, and that the group of problem students grew larger and larger. Compared with some western countries, Chinese teenagers are under much heavier academic pressure, in a tense learning atmosphere, and with much less interest in study.

According to my special survey from 2001 to 2003,^⑨ children from China, the United States and Canada show significant difference in learning. Chinese children have an apparently heavier burden of study. In terms of self-confidence in learning, reading ability and learning atmosphere etc., children from Canada and the United States in the survey gained significantly higher indices than Chinese children.

Considering self-confidence in learning, children from the United States and Canada under survey showed significantly higher self-confidence in learning than Chinese children. In all three countries, most of the surveyed children said they liked their schools; girls loved their own schools more than boys did, yet boys' self-confidence in learning was significantly higher than girls. The indices of students' self-confidence in learning were: Chinese students 33%, Canadian students 49%, and American 57%.

On learning methods, students of all three countries showed their respective advantages in learning approaches. The computer capacity of Chinese children was

stronger than Canadian and American children, while children from Canada and the United States showed greater ability to borrow and read books than Chinese children. In all three countries, the percentages showing boys' ability to read books were higher than their female counterparts. The percentages of positive responses to "I often use the computer to aid my learning" were as follows: Chinese students 50%, Canadian students 37%, and American 36%. The percentages of positive responses to "I often borrow books from the library" were: Chinese students 34%, Canadian 75%, American 96%. In terms of learning capability, the American children had a stronger feeling of good learning effects than the Chinese and the Canadian children, while the Chinese students showed the strongest ability to complete homework. 57% of the children from China, 45% from Canada and 43% from the United States thought they could complete homework.

From the aspect of learning environment, the learning environments for Canadian and U.S. students are much more relaxed than that of Chinese students. Students' burden from homework in China was considerably heavier than those from the United States and Canada. The surveyed children from the U.S. had the lightest academic burden. The percentages of positive responses to "I often have much homework to be done" were: 39% in China, 25% Canada, and 7% in the U.S. The students from the United States and Canada had significantly higher percentages in "believing to have often received praises from teachers" than those from China. On this index, the American children had the highest percentage, 70%, Canada 43%, and China had the lowest percentage, 29%. A much larger number of American and Canadian students agreed that there were many

interesting books and toys in their classrooms, compared with Chinese students. The respective percentages on this index were 30%, 73%, and 68%.

The heavy academic and psychological burden will bring considerable negative impact. The emergence of polarization on students in their first year of primary schools should arouse our deep concern. Heavy academic burden will stifle children's learning interests and self-confidence in study, increase unrest in their learning activities and mental activities, and induce early learning disabilities. The frustration from failure in learning would be transferred to the lives of children and adolescents, and become an incentive to suicide and other negative behaviors.

III. Approaches to cultivate positive civic characters

American educator Horace Mann pointed out that, "It may be an easy thing to make a republic, but it is a very laborious thing to make a citizen of a republic." Similarly, to foster responsible and strong citizens is a difficult task for education. Lessons from suicides all over the world, suicide jumps of students from Peking University, the shocking death note of the 13-year-old girl in Ningxia China, and the "one by one" suicidal behaviors of 13 employees in Shenzhen Foxconn, all made every one of us engaged in educational work couldn't help weeping. "When the youth are strong, the nation will be strong"; when the citizens are strong, the state will be prosperous. It is a challenge before us to attach great importance to physical and mental health problems of teenagers and effectively prevent youth suicide. And the life education on young students to cultivate in

them as citizens positive characters such as responsibility, optimism, fortitude, open-mindedness is a pressing task.

1. School teachers and parents bear a special responsibility to take the initiative to guide the young people in understanding correctly the meaning and value of life. Nothing exists if there is no life. Families, kindergartens and schools should guide the children to correctly understand the source, meaning and value of life, and carry out scientific life education. Human life belongs to oneself, but its owners are more than oneself. We should help children to understand that, each development stage of their own lives is brought by great efforts of others. To lead a healthy and meaningful life is to show respect for the labor of others. A meaningless death is easy to make, but to live a meaningful life is very difficult. Chinese statesman Mao Zedong said in his article "Serving the People" that, "Though death befalls all men alike. It may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather. To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai." When choosing suicide, have these victims ever thought of "the interests of the people"? The answer is clearly no. The "happiness education" carried out in primary and secondary schools in the UK is worth learning for their Chinese counterparts.

2. We should help young people learn to assume their social responsibilities through participation in community services. Sense of responsibility is one of the basic qualities of citizens, and a "firewall" against suicide. Every suicide definitely has difficulty and pains worth compassion from others. However, ignoring their own social responsibilities might be the fuse leading to their suicidal behaviors. Xia Xueluan,

Professor of Sociology Department at Peking University commented on suicidal jumps of university students that, "It is irresponsible to choose suicide." In my opinion, this statement of Professor Xia Xueluan is highly targeted. While the causes leading to suicide are complex, choosing to commit suicide is certainly a negative escape, a harmful and irresponsible behavior for families and friends of the victims. Students' suicide acts are a betrayal of their own social responsibilities. Families and schools should also have in-depth reflections on which one is more important, a healthy mentality and personality, or a higher test score? When exam-oriented education reaches a certain degree, the students will be devoid of social responsibility. We should get the children actively involved in various social welfare activities, so that they can appreciate the meaning and happiness of life in their service to others. Only when they jump out of the small personal world, will they be able to take the responsibilities conferred by the society.

3. Through the analysis of key events, figures and issues, we can train young people's ability to overcome inner fear and cope with adversity. Although IQ and EQ are very important for people, the intelligence to cope with adversity is equally important. The quality of a person often depends on his/her performance in adversity, because under favorable circumstances, one's ability to resist pressure is not distinguishable. China's one-child policy has played an important role in reducing fertility and controlling excessive population growth. Undeniably however, such a population policy has also brought an enormous "national sacrifice", that is, social relations were cut off, and the "only children" developed many natural defects, such as dissociable, selfish, stubborn, vulnerable, and naïve, from the unique growth environment in the context of losing many family ties. In

face of adversity and challenges in life, the “only children” are more likely to be lack of the courage and spirit of fighting against hardships. Our education should be carried out effectively targeted at this unique reality. "Although the road of life is long, its most important sections are often covered in only a few steps, especially when a person is young". School education and family education should guide students to deal with "critical points" in life, and help them to face straight with pressure and frustration. Educators should grasp the opportunities for frustration education and develop a strong psychological quality in the young people through key events, figures and issues. Sister Jiang is the heroine in Chinese history. Recently, from the memoirs written by Peng Yun, the son of Sister Jiang, I learned that on Aug. 26, 1949, Sister Jiang knew that she would soon be killed by the enemy. Before taking the way to the execution ground, she grinded chopsticks into bamboo stick pens in prison, made cotton ash into ink, and wrote a will note on a piece of deckle-edged paper. The note reads: "If unfortunately I have to leave you, please adopt Yun (the infant name of her son Peng Yun). I do hope that he can follow his parents' footsteps and bear the ambition to build a new China. The children should never be indulged; rough clothes and light meals are enough." Two months later, Sister Jiang died a heroic death. Sister Jiang is a great hero, whose will is as strong as steel. As a mother, she is also kind and gentle. How she hoped that she could lead a happy life together with her son! But when catastrophe strikes, she was perfectly clear-minded. She treated her son kindly but did not spoil him. She was full of affection but did not allow the affection to confuse her mind. She hoped that her son could have a promising future, "follow his parents' footsteps and bear the ambition to build a new China". She hoped that

her son would "never be indulged; rough clothes and light meals are enough". Sister Jiang's character as a great mother is more worthy of learning for all parents.

4. We should help the young people set up a positive and optimistic "sunshine attitude" towards life so that they can treat the unhappiness in the society with optimism. "Examination-oriented education" neglects children's interest and personality, which makes them feel painful. Only the education committed to quality training is happy education. An American teacher teaching English in a primary school in Beijing once told me about her view on China's education that, "I find very few children in China are happy at school. They lack the smile which belongs to children, which to me is quite strange." The teacher's words are worth deep concern. Exam-oriented education is not judged by children's happy feeling but their examination results only. In this case, how can they smile? Isn't the suicide of Xiu Xiu, the 13-year-old girl in Ningxia who killed herself for the reasons that "I am a poor student" and "I can save 100,000 yuan for you (father) if I die", a criticism to the wrong mode of education? To develop in the young people a positive and optimistic "sunshine attitude", we must start from changing our education system and mode. We need to cultivate open-minded and humorous characters in the young people, because the society is full of contradictions and problems, and other negative emotions such as dissatisfaction, frustration and distress are a necessary component of life. Those who are grateful towards life and willing to forgive others will not commit suicide easily.

5. Psychological counseling and educational intervention to sensitive groups should be strengthened so as to enhance social and humanitarian care, and create a

harmonious and warm social atmosphere. The indifference of the society will deteriorate the suicide problem. A survey found that, mental disorder is the inner psychological motivation or root cause for many suicide cases. British and American scholars think that, about 90% of suicides have had diagnosable mental diseases over the course of their lives. The suicide rates among the mentally ill are 10 to 90 times higher than the general population, or even 727 times higher as reported. Among the suicides, those with mental disorders occupy about 74% to 100%, in which 13% to 52% have mental diseases. Most of the mental patients committing suicide have schizophrenia and depression. College students are a high risk group of mental illness. Some Chinese researchers found that, 39.27% of college students who committed suicide had mental illness and mental disorders. Educational administrative departments should encourage and support professional research institutions and experts to conduct more professional and efficient services in colleges for the sensitive groups. Primary and secondary mental health education should also realize the unity of form and content, and work hard on the effectiveness of their services.

At the end, we wish every flower of life a full blossom; every citizen a positive mental quality, so as to assume their responsibilities for the society, for others, their family, and themselves!

Note:

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