

## Life Education in Contemporary Greater China – Are Religions Back as Players in Public Education?

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In the past 20 years, the subject “Life Education” (*shengming jiaoyu* 生命教育) has become an optional standard in secondary schools in Taiwan; official textbooks on Life Education can be found at the National Textbook Library, and a research center on Life Education at National Taiwan University has been set up and publishes an in the meantime established *Journal of Life Education*. Religious agents have become self-confident in assisting the general development of the subject. How can one describe this emerging subject and its regional differences? How can it be historically contextualized? In how far does it relate to religion? And are religious organizations playing a role in its establishment? These are the questions of a new research project at Lund University, the first steps of which Esther-Maria Guggenmos introduced in her paper.

Since the late 1990s, Life Education has been gradually implemented at public schools in Chinese-speaking regions, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, and Mainland China. One might talk about an educational movement across shores despite contrasting political systems. When reflecting on the motivation behind the implementation of the new subject, it is often stressed that the educational system in East Asia emphasizes cognitive knowledge proven by success in examinations. Traditionally, “learning” was and remains one of the pillars of Confucian traditions. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the civil service examination system was core to the functioning of the Chinese Empire. With little space for personal reflection, students are under performance pressure in East Asia also today. In Taiwan, for the year 2017, within the group of 15–24 year-old students accidents and suicides are the top two causes of death (The News Press of the Ministry of Health and Welfare 2018). The situation was already considered alarming about twenty years ago. Taiwan promoted the development of Life Education with emphasis and is the only region among the four mentioned in which the subject is compulsory as a credit-bearing course in the senior secondary curriculum. Five elements of Life Education have been defined in Taiwan today that comprise religious, health, career, ethical, as well as “life-and-death” education.

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The rise of Life Education goes along with the emergence of political and research institutions fostering Life Education. In 1998, the former Department of Education of the Republic of China, Taiwan, founded its “Life Education Center” and established a respective committee in 2001 – a year that the ministry declared as the “Year of Life Education,” emphasizing their new agenda. Simultaneously, The Chinese University of Hong Kong stressed the importance of “Education for Quality Life” in the context of religious education raising the “public’s awareness of life education” (Lee – Yip – Kong 2021, p. 9). Taiwan can be seen as a forerunner in the implementation of Life Education, and the government reached out to academia to accompany its developmental process. Since it has been prioritized on the agenda of educational politics in Taiwan, there has been a considerable amount of academic reflection to date that assists in shaping the new subject, its content, and pedagogical formation.

The involvement of religious actors in this field is regionally distinct. In Mainland China as well as in Taiwan, religious education was in the past decades and is to this date officially not part of the school curriculum, as school education is regarded as secular. A state-driven secularisation process emphasises moral, civil, and ethnic elements instead of religious education (Zhao – Hunzai 2022). Public education is also differing across provinces. With the development of Life Education, we see in Taiwan for the first time religious communities engaging in curricular development. While organizations are allowed to open schools from a religious motivation (currently about 2% of primary schools and about 19% of secondary schools are operated by religious bodies, Cheung 2022, p. 29), none of their religious activities must be compulsory. Central to religious education in Taiwan is the Educational Fundamental Act (*Jiaoyu jiben fa* 教育基本法) which prohibits public schools from engaging in “promotional or other activities for any specific religion or belief” (Educational Fundamental Act, Art. 6, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=H0020045>, accessed Feb. 24, 2024). Religion is regarded as a private matter in Taiwan. Tolerating and even inviting religious communities in the creation of teaching material for public schools reflects a social change where especially Buddhist and Christian religious agents find themselves in new roles. In the case of Hong Kong and also Macao, the situation is shaped by a colonial heritage and the increasing alignment to Mainland politics in the past twenty years, which leads to a “repackaging” of religious education in the form of Life Education (Ho 2022, p. 50; see also Tse 2021). In Hong Kong today, Christian, Buddhist, Daoist, and Muslim communities offer public education. Colonial history led to the larger impact of Christian missionary schools, but since 2004, schools subsidized by religious bodies must form a management committee independent from their sponsoring bodies. Life Education in this context can serve as a “back-up plan” for religious organizations – a process described for Methodist Church primary schools (Tse 2020, esp. p. 105).

The complex entanglement between religions and education builds upon a longer history: With the advent of Chinese modernity around 1900, major shifts in mental maps occur. Probably through the translatory efforts of Japanese literati, the term *zongjiao* 宗教 is introduced into East Asian languages as a neologism for the hitherto unknown word “religion,” and “a self-consciously ‘religious’ field was opened in China, both by Christian mis-

sionaries and by secularizing political reformers and revolutionaries” (Goossaert – Palmer 2010, p. 10; on the emergence of *zongjiao* see also Goossaert 2006, 2007, Barrett – Tarocco 2012, Horii 2017, Meyer 2020). “Religion” served as a functional and political term that did not reflect socially developed categories of distinction. Whether it was Nationalists or Socialists, “religion” was something seen with caution and suspicion, of colonial flavour, and certainly something that could not provide the moral and value orientation “Confucianism” in its variations and the connected civil service examinations had secured over centuries. Nationalists and Socialists alike aimed at the renewal of morality among citizens and regulating religion was a necessity, a “political civilizing project” that aimed at replacing established forms of religion (see Goossaert – Palmer 2010, pp. 167-198). Moral education and classes about citizenship are therefore part of regular public education – whether in Taiwan or Mainland China. That “religions” could be essential for the moral orientation of citizens is a thought more or less alien to the intellectual history of Imperial China that echoes thereafter.

Therefore, research on Life Education and religious agency wins its topicality especially in relation to its historical background: On the one hand, East Asian moral education has a long-standing tradition broadly independent from religious players but rich in Confucian heritage. On the other hand, through Christian missionaries and Buddhist organizations, and the current engagement of religious organizations in Life Education, religious organizations help to realise educational goals and shape the worldview and mindset of pupils. Political trust in religious organizations seems to increase in the case of Taiwan, religious agents are more confident in shaping the future of Hong Kong due to their colonial heritage, while on the Mainland the situation is most distanced towards religious players. This amalgam leads to oscillations and notions of ambiguity across Greater China as Life Education proves to be a perfect lens through which we can trace the transformation and reformulation of the “religious” field in contemporary East Asian societies.

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