Euthanasia and China: The Traditional Chinese Moral Perspective and Its Social Justice Implications

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This article begins by examining the Chinese relatively liberal stance on suicide. It explains the cultural forces that shaped traditional China's interpretation of life, death and motifs that validate self-sacrifice. To elucidate the Chinese perspective, the article incorporates extensive comparison with Christian viewpoints. It then addresses “self-regarding” euthanasia cases where death is advanced as a measure to relieve personal affliction. Following this are descriptions of the “other regarding” category, where euthanasia is invoked as an altruistic act to benefit the collective. The article then argues that given China's beleaguered public health system, there may be moral justification for some to waive their entitlement to life-prolonging treatment as a measure to curb excesses. It ends by contending that accelerating death, even when constricted by these exceptional instances, is not the favoured recourse. This is because the root causes of the current predicament stem from Beijing's failure to administer equitable care. Instead of pursuing the legitimisation of euthanasia, the stronger ethical response is to reform China's healthcare system with enhanced resources.

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Introduction

Decades of economic growth notwithstanding, China is in the crux of a healthcare crisis as it confronts the soaring medical demands of an ageing population. It is against this dire backdrop that the controversies surrounding euthanasia are being debated. And recent reports reveal a public sentiment that is disconcertingly tolerant towards this life-ending procedure.\(^1\) The purpose of this article is to decipher and evaluate the Chinese attitude and responses to this bioethical dilemma. More specifically, my aim is to highlight the social justice dimension of this end-of-life medical-welfare controversy. I begin by considering a related broader subject, the Chinese stance on suicide. To elucidate the traditional Chinese viewpoints, my analysis will incorporate extensive comparison with the Christian perspective. This article then addresses the euthanasia contention, commencing with the “self-regarding” cases where death is advanced as conduits to alleviate personal affliction. The Confucians, I explain, may approve of assisted suicide to halt terminal suffering. They would nonetheless object to its use as an exit from the broadly construed “loss of dignity” brought on by infirmity. Following this are explications of the “other-regarding” category, where euthanasia is invoked as an altruistic act to benefit the collective. At the outset, the Confucians would reprove attempts to allay the burden of care through life-shortening means, especially if it impinges upon the poor. I then argue that given China’s inequitable public health system, there may be moral justification for some to waive their entitlement to life-prolonging treatment as options to curb excesses. This article ends by contending that euthanasia, even when restricted to these exceptional instances, is not the favoured recourse because the root causes of these exigencies stem from Beijing’s dereliction to administer equitable care. Instead of pursuing the legitimisation of euthanasia, the stronger ethical response is to reform China’s public health system with an enhanced and fairer allocation of resources.

I. Suicide

For Christianity, all things came into existence and will cease to exist in accordance with a divine design. In this scheme of things, any unnatural destruction of life is perceived as a violation of nature. The intentional killing of human beings, including terminating one’s own life, is a contravention of the Creator’s intent. There are nonetheless exceptions to this general principle. The slaying of an enemy combatant as in a just war is morally justifiable.
To sacrifice oneself, as would the Christian martyr who chooses death over renunciation of his faith, is deemed laudable. That said, these are rare departures from the norm. The prevailing Christian ethos maintains a stern prohibition against the annihilation of life, including one’s own.²

The primordial Chinese envisages reality as emanating from a body of cosmic energy, namely *chi*, a sacrosanct life-force that drives and regulates the universe. To act in a manner that contravenes the *chi*-induced rhythm of life is considered an interruption of the sanctified order. At the outset, the deviant destruction of anything, the human biological form included, is adjudged as immoral.³ Nonetheless, as with Christianity, there are exceptions granted; for example, the self-defence immolation of a would-be assassin. Scholar-officials who opted to die rather than to submit to a depraved ruler were also extolled as noble exemplars.⁴ These are extraordinary circumstances that warranted uncommon counter-measures. Generally, the normative Chinese ethos is to uphold the inviolability of life as part of the divine *chi*, something to be preserved.

Thus, Christians and Chinese are one in affirming the sanctity of life, though both also allow for the deliberate ending of life under anomalous circumstances. Now, beyond this broad similarity, studies indicate that the Chinese register a more liberal interpretation of permissible suicide.⁵ One apt contrasting illustration is the aforementioned Confucian scholar-officials and Christian martyrs. Justifiable suicide for Christianity is extremely rare. Only when confronted with the grave choice of either to blaspheme God or meet certain death, like early believers who were thrown into the lion’s den, is the wilful surrender of life admissible. The Chinese criteria are less stringent. Some suicides are adjudicated as fitting even when there is no imminent mortal danger. The threat of public humiliation or imprisonment is sufficient reason for a Confucian to invoke the name of Heaven and contemplate committing the ultimate act of self-sacrifice.⁶ This invites the following question: if, as with Christianity, humanity is espoused as sublime, why do the Chinese exhibit a higher propensity for self-induced death? One explanation can be traced to how these two civilisations fundamentally conceive reality.

**Dualistic versus Organic**

Radical dualism underpins the Christian worldview, with reality demarcated into distinct sacred and profane spheres. This dichotomy is also framed in terms of an asymmetrical relation between the infinite and finite, the eternal and temporal, a central theme encapsulated in the Bible’s Book of Genesis. The
world today came into existence *ex nihilo*, via a divine power that created everything out of nothing. This accentuates creation’s utter indebtedness to the Creator, with an unbridgeable chasm separating the mortal from the immortal, impotent humanity from an omnipotent deity. The former is wholly reliant on the latter. Without Yahweh, the Adamic race would cease to exist. Christianity’s view on suicide is informed by such a bifurcated vision. Since existence is begotten entirely by the divine, God holds the prerogative to ascertain the beginning and ending of life. Conversely, with the exceptions of those isolated contingencies, humankind de facto possesses neither might nor right over birth and death, including one’s own.

Through the pan-Chinese religious theorem of *yin-yang*, ancient China similarly perceived the world dualistically. But the Chinese polarity is set in synthesis rather than antithesis: sun–moon, light–darkness, hot–cold, each harmonising and complementing the other. There is also a parallel recognition of distinct realms: the heavenly and earthly, otherworldly and this-worldly. Again, there are nuances vis-à-vis Christianity; the Chinese pairings are framed in a more symmetrical correlation.

The Chinese, as noted, extol existence to be sacrosanct, but unlike Christianity, there is no equivalent belief in a Creator. In this view, our living world simply emerged out of the divine *chi*. This version of origin points to another overarching framework, the organic Chinese cosmogony centred on a fountainhead of *chi* energy, from which the present *yin-yang* reality emanated and will ultimately revert back into that wellspring of life-force. In such a cosmogenesis, there is no radical dichotomy separating the celestial and terrestrial, divinity and humanity. Indeed, some Confucianists depict humankind as co-terminal with the transcendent and as co-creator of the cosmic order.

It is this anthropocosmic worldview that explains partly the Chinese’s stronger leaning towards suicide. Christian dualism makes it explicit that God is the sole author of life, and humans are utterly dependent creatures. The Chinese imminent-transcendence theology espouses a less contracted viewpoint. While finitude is conceded, humanity is not depicted as thoroughly inert or depraved. There is a positive impression of the homosapien species as an active participant rather than passive beneficiary of the creative cosmic energy. The Confucian sanguine theory of human nature lends to a broader scope for human agency, including discretion on matters concerning natality and mortality. Veritably, to intentionally extinguish life remains a taboo, and condonable suicides are the exception rather than the norm. But due to a transcendent-mundane mutuality, the Chinese exhibit less inhibition to wield their out-of-the-ordinary yet ethical prerogative to take their own lives.
**Linear-One versus Cyclical-Many**

Christianity’s dualistic worldview is ultimately embedded within an encompassing linear timeframe. Creation has an exact start and anticipated endpoint. This finite reality is in turn situated within an infinite macrocosmos, with no alpha or omega. As mortal entities, our present existence is foremost circumscribed by birth and death. Yet, in the hereafter, depending on each person’s earthly performance or divine grace, one could be rewarded with eternal bliss or punished with never-ending woes.\(^\text{11}\)

Though without a creation story, the Chinese similarly understand human history as bounded by time, and with a parallel scheme of divine judgement in a netherworld suspended in timelessness. But in one branch of Chinese religiosity, the Buddhist strand, there is a unique feature: the endless cycle of life. Contingent on karma, a person could be released from the tribulation of this incessant life-rotation into nirvana. For those who fall short, reincarnation into the existing cycle of suffering awaits them for yet another attempt at enlightenment.\(^\text{12}\) In such a Chinese Buddhist trans-migratory vision, one is accorded multiple chances, beyond the present embodiment, to strive for liberation from the torment of physical existence. This is in marked contrast to the Christian model, where every person is afforded a singular attempt. One’s fate in eternity is contingent exclusively upon this only known life.\(^\text{13}\)

Buddhism’s cyclical worldview furnishes another explanation for the Chinese disposition on suicide. It is not uncommon to read of Chinese Buddhists who elect death as conduits to short-circuit their present tribulations. In so doing, they seek to “reboot” life, as it were, and “bet” for a better lot in the next cycle.\(^\text{14}\) Acts like these are not universally sanctioned by moral traditions in China. The Confucians, for instance, renounce such giving-up of life as fatalistic escapism.\(^\text{15}\) But for some Chinese, suicide in the context of the Buddhist reincarnationism provides a gateway to circumvent the misfortune of this lifetime and wager for a more favourable rebirth in subsequent cycles.\(^\text{16}\)

**Unique-Individual versus Diffused-Collective**

Besides the belief that this is our only life, in Protestant Christianity especially, every human being will, in the hereafter, stand alone before God’s judgement throne to personally account for his individual destiny in eternity.\(^\text{17}\)

Fate in the otherworld for the Chinese involves a more complex set of determinants. Personal accountability is a key but not exclusive criterion.
Causative agencies exterior to the self also have bearings. The Chinese veneration of the dead is an example where the pious acts of living descendants can affect a deceased’s well-being in the netherworld. Furthermore, in Buddhism, one’s afterlife depends not solely upon this incarnation but the cumulative effect of karma from one’s prior lives.

In actuality, the telos in Chinese religiosity is not delineated sharply in individualistic terms. There is a self-transcending aspect in the Chinese spiritual aspiration, intertwined most directly with their next-of-kin. In pursuing the Dao, the Chinese do so conjointly, in unison with, inter alia, their forebears’ spirits. In comparison, Christian salvation is transfixed on the atomic self, where one is ultimately responsible for his respective immortality.

This contrast leads to a key observation: the ambivalent nature of Chinese personhood. The Christian self is truly unique: who we are today is our only known personality, one that will outlive this earthly pilgrimage surviving into the heavenly kingdom. This is not the case with the Chinese selfhood. A Buddhist can be reborn into the existing realm, assuming a different persona and sentient form. In Confucianism and Daoism, one’s destiny and identity will be homologised into one’s ancestral lineage and finally dissolved into the sacred cumulative chi.

The dissimilarity between Western individualism and Eastern communitarianism has been extensively analysed. Their distinctive traits are by-products of multifaceted forces, with deep-seated religious beliefs as a salient marker. In the Chinese case, the embrace of an organic cosmology where reality is construed as unified has undoubtedly etched into the Chinese psyche an indelible holistic consciousness.

This affinity with the whole is carried over into the Chinese view of suicide. Broadly, suicide may be divided into two types: self-regarding and other-regarding. The former is driven by egoistical impulses whereupon premature deaths are co-opted to sidestep personal predicaments such as financial failures or chronic depression. The Confucians would censure such acts as petty self-destruction. With the latter, suicide is committed to benefit subjects outside the self, as in dying for the sake of the country, master, family and friends. These are uniformly exalted as praiseworthy deaths. Now, to perish for a higher cause is surely a universal virtue. Like the Chinese, Christianity also extols the forgoing of life out of deference to a transcendent God. The Chinese, however, have taken this commitment to the nth degree, sanctioning suicides to advance seemingly more mundane objectives.

This liberal latitude is unquestionably an outgrowth of the underlying monistic cosmology and afore-discussed imminent-transcendence theology. It lends
to a more pervasive “suicide talk” in the Chinese milieu, particularly of the other-centric genre where a wider spectrum of “others” are held up as objects worthy of self-sacrifice. Indeed, this self-denying inclination gets featured prominently in the Chinese thinking on euthanasia. But in what follows, we will first look at those case studies with a self-centric focus.

II. Self-Regarding Cases

In 1986, the induced death of a 59-year-old Shaanxi woman afflicted with cirrhosis became the first legal test case involving euthanasia in China. In order to end the suffering of the by then comatose patient, the dying woman’s children procured the assistance of local physicians to hasten their mother’s passing. The siblings, alongside the doctors, were subsequently charged and found guilty of murder. This episode triggered intensive debate on euthanasia among Chinese intellectuals and the general public. Given the preceding exposition on suicide, how would China’s moral traditions react to this dilemma? Is it ethically prudent to rush the moment of death as a means to end unrelievable suffering?

Intractable Terminal Suffering

One cardinal Confucian virtue is compassion, a rectitude explicated in Mencius’ famous exposé of a child about to fall into a well. For the Chinese sages, a person of ren (benevolence) cannot bear to see another being suffer needlessly. In general, a humane civilisation cannot stay indifferent to the distress of the innocent. Hence, on the above predicament, out of commiseration for the dying woman’s torments, one should act to relieve her from further anguish.

There is, however, a prima facie complication with attempts to justify euthanasia base on Mencius’ exposé. Even as mercy is extolled, the scenario expounded by Mencius does not directly support life-termination as a means to allay afflictions. The benevolent act rendered towards the child is life-saving rather than life-denying.

Now, despite this dissonance, it is still plausible to argue for a Confucian endorsement of euthanasia. As mentioned, Confucians do condone suicide for wide-ranging moral rationales. Aside from defending honour and integrity, these motifs encompass dying on account of loyalty; as a token of gratitude; even for keeping a secret for someone. Given the liberal provisos, one can contend that for the sake of mercy, euthanasia is admissible as a way to release the terminally ill from extraneous pain. This proposition is most compelling if to abbreviate life is the only effective option to mitigate suffering. In such a
desperate circumstance, I think the Confucian compassionate ethics would not oppose the use of euthanasia.

The thrust of this argument hinges on the conditional if, that is to say, assisted suicide is the sole passage out of futile suffering. Advancements in palliative care and hospice service are nonetheless positing some challenges to this premise. They have proved to be effective therapies for managing pain and freeing the dying to pursue the greatest amount of personal fulfilment possible in their remaining life.31

If this is the case, and one increasingly supported by professional opinion, then to advocate euthanasia as the only deliverance from intolerable affliction could be factually incorrect. For the Confucian, to provide healing and relief that are life-sustaining would be the preferred remedy. Therefore, in the face of incurable suffering, the priority ought to be palliative care.

That being said, there are two qualifications to this life-affirming alternative. While its general efficacy is acknowledged, palliative medication is not a panacea. It may yet prove ineffectual in alleviating the unmitigable agitation of some patients.32 In these extremely rare cases, the Confucian tradition could hitherto accede to euthanasia, albeit as an absolute last resort.

Another provision pertains to the availability of hospice services. As is the reality with most developing countries, mainland Chinese today lack access to palliative treatment.33 In the current state of affairs, for those without ready access to pain-relieving therapy, euthanasia may unfortunately be the only passage out of their irremediable vexations. Under such adverse exigencies, for the Confucian, mercy should prevail over the preservation of life. Out of compassion, one could rightfully though regretfully choose to prematurely discontinue a suffering life.

Loss of Dignity

Born with cerebral palsy, Li Yan, from Anhui, lives a dependent existence. In 2008, at age 28, with her elderly parents struggling to nurse her, she expressed fear for her future. Hoping to evade impending desolation, she petitioned online to end her life. Li Yan’s dilemma represents another genus of the euthanasia motif: freeing oneself from an undignified existence.34

Aside from ren, another categorical moral value that encapsulates the Confucian good life is yi (justice). A virtuous personhood is one where the spirit of ren and yi prevails. Correspondingly, an ignoble existence is one devoid of benevolence and justice. On these latter conditions, death, Confucius declared, may sometimes be preferred over an existence tarnished by malevolence and injustice.
For gentlemen of purpose and men of ren, while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of ren, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have ren accomplished.\textsuperscript{35}

Mencius rendered a similar assertion but in terms of yi:

Life is what I want; yi is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take yi than life. ... though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. On the other hand, though death is what I loath, there is something I loath more than death.\textsuperscript{36}

That thing that early Confucians abhor more than death is the thought of subsisting in ignominy. Indeed, “death to prevent indignity” is one key Confucian premise for committing suicide.\textsuperscript{37} Imperial China's history is replete with approving accounts of scholar-officials who would rather die than suffer disgrace, dishonour or injustice. The prospect of undignified humiliation is, for the Confucian, a state of being that is worse than death. Given these abhorrences, would discomfiture brought about by physical degradation, resembling Li Yan's circumstances, justify the deliberate termination of life? Lo Pong-cheung formulated a noteworthy negative Confucian retort to this question.\textsuperscript{38}

To begin with, the criterion used to validate those commendable deaths almost exclusively refers to the moral instead of the physiological state. Crises where suicide cases are warrantable, like with the early Chinese court officials, were conceived in terms of a perceived threat to a person's ethical-social status, rather than his corporeal status. It is when one's moral integrity is put at risk, in lieu of mere danger to one's physical being, that the ultimate act of self-sacrifice becomes compelling.

The dialectic at work here can be framed in terms of the tension between biographical and biological life. The ancient Chinese vision of a holistic personhood embodies the soul and body, spirit and matter. However, if a conflict arises, the Confucian first principle is to accord primacy to the former. The safeguarding of inner integrity takes precedence over the preservation of outer well-being. As Lo puts it: “Biological life is a good, but it is not the highest good; the \textit{summum bonum} is moral sagehood”.\textsuperscript{39} Physical vitality is essential, but the idealised Confucian self of the \textit{junzi} is defined foremost by their spiritual virtues.

If biological life is not the highest good, the inverse is also true. “Biological death is an evil, but it is not the biggest evil; the \textit{summum malum} is moral depravity”.\textsuperscript{40} The inference is that bodily infirmity, while dreadful, is not “a state of living that is worse than death”.\textsuperscript{41} As such, indignity arising from
Physical decay does not warrant the ultimate sacrifice, that is, suicide. Generally, the Confucian rule, and that which is true for most religious traditions, is that ill health in and of itself is not a moral deprivation.

When assessed in these terms, the Confucian rejoinder to Li Yan’s conundrum is to affirm life instead of advocating death. A person’s physiological degradation does not constitute the kind of moral contravention that justifies the cessation of life. Even in the face of declining biological status, there is a duty and possibility to maintain a meaningful biographical existence guided by ren and yi. The appropriate response therefore is to persevere and strive for inner spiritual resolve needed to prevail over one’s outer physical feebleness.

That said, there is one qualification to this assertion, as it relates to the afore-discussed terminally ill patients, mired in unremitting agony. In these extraordinary cases, there is a compassionate reason to hasten the moment of death so as to release the dying from intractable physiological torment.

Now to some extent the contributing causes of Li Yan’s trepidation are not limited to physical frailty per se. It is the premonition of being left uncared for that compounds her fear. This being the case, Li Yan’s despondency is in many ways an indictment against the society at large. A humane order is one where the community rallies around those who are vulnerable, to assist in restoring their hope and capacity to persevere. For someone like Li Yan, to succumb to destitution would be a manifestation of not merely her individual setback but the moral dereliction of the corporate body.

Hence, when confronted with perceived indignity precipitated by a combination of deteriorating health and social isolation, the Confucian riposte is to sustain life. Privately, individuals are exhorted to retain the zeal for living even when beset by physiological infirmity. And publicly, the collective is enjoined to discharge its communal obligation towards the disadvantaged.

**Individual Autonomy versus Collective Authority**

Another complexity with the “death with dignity” proposition pertains to its implementation and repercussions. If exceptions are expanded to encompass non-terminal illness, how does one ascertain which patient meets the criteria for euthanasia? Could being “tired with life” be so classified as well? Really, who is to rule whether a life is no longer worth living, hence qualifying someone for euthanasia?

For libertarians such as Feinberg and Engelhardt, this dilemma is resolved by invoking the doctrine of autonomy: every human, the argument goes, is endowed with an intrinsic right of “self-determination”, including choosing the
manner and timing of one’s own passing. The corresponding presupposition is that euthanasia cases are private affairs and free of public implications, hence people should be allowed to be their own judge, independent of unsolicited external constraints.

Eastern communitarianism is at variance with the libertarian version of Western individualism. As described above, traditional Chinese cosmology envisages each self as bound to the many, ultimately dissipating into the masses. Enveloped within such an organismic vision, for the Chinese, a person’s life is never absolutely his own. How one plans to live and for that matter, die, is not without external causes and consequences. Indeed, the extended social network, the nucleus family specifically, has critical sway in a person’s decision-making process. To be sure, the Chinese are not totally devoid of self-rule, but their affairs are conducted in greater deference to the community-at-large. For this reason, Confucianism would have difficulty approving the libertarian’s radical attempt to isolate euthanasia as a private act disconnected from public effects and considerations.

In actuality, insofar as the Confucians sanction euthanasia for those in irremediable pain, this is as much an exercise of communal consent as it is the exertion of a patient’s wish. The Confucian vindication is manifestly paternalistic, an act of compassion bestowed by the surviving kinship upon the dying kin. Hence, in contrast to the libertarian’s formulation, for the Confucian, euthanasia is never wholly an expression of individual autonomy; it is also a demonstration of communistic authority.

Now this pronounced Chinese collectivism impacts the euthanasia discourse in a different and more explicit way, where it is invoked by individuals to promote the interests of others, a phenomenon we will examine in the next section. But before that, it is apt at this juncture to interject into our analysis two other euthanasia classifications.

Let us begin with the voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary typology. In unison with the prevailing judgement, the Confucians would at the outset censure involuntary (against the patient’s will) euthanasia as immoral and inadmissible. And to the extent consideration is accorded, credence would be given only to those petitions made voluntarily (with consent) or non-voluntarily (without explicit consent), as with the case of Li Yan and the Shaanxi woman, who each represent the voluntary and non-voluntary genres, respectively.

A second set of categorisation defines euthanasia into the active and passive form. The former, with its commission “to kill” is undoubtedly the more controversial of the two. Indeed, of the scenarios where the escape of death is deemed permissible, these are restricted to the latter, “to let die” category. Now, concerning Li Yan’s episode, her entreaty would most likely entail a direct
act to induce death. Be that as it may, the crux of Li Yan’s quandary is not with active euthanasia per se. Rather, as explained, the Confucian objection to Li Yan’s appeal is over a more fundamental principle, i.e., physical debilitation does not justify the cessation of life.

It is with the Shaanxi affair where active euthanasia posits actual complications. As alluded to, when admissible, the mainstream consensus is to free the dying from intractable pain by forgoing life-sustaining treatment. Advocates such as Rachels and Brock challenge this prevalent stance and aversion towards active euthanasia. They argue that if the aim is to hasten death, then “to kill” vis-à-vis “to let die” is in fact more humane since it would facilitate a swifter end, thus quicker relief from suffering.\textsuperscript{44}

Efforts to excise the moral distinction between active and passive euthanasia remain controversial. Based on the contending arguments presented thus far, I think the Confucian tradition would not categorically reject active euthanasia.\textsuperscript{45} Nevertheless, it is reasonable to surmise that the Confucian predilection, in concord with today’s predominant sentiment, is to opt for the morally less contentious alternative, i.e., passive euthanasia.

III. Other-Regarding Cases

Jin Guilian, a young peasant from Anhui province endured a jarring two-day bus ride to the nearest county hospital to treat his heart condition. After a four-day stay, the medical fees depleted his household’s meagre savings. Lacking alternative support and not wanting to bankrupt the family, he returned home to face an early death from a curable ailment.\textsuperscript{46} Jin’s case epitomises a critical fault-line in the PRC’s public health system: its failure to dispense adequate provisions to its citizens.

It is against such a disheartening backdrop that we hear of the appeal to euthanasia as a route for people to avoid encumbering others with the burden of care-giving. In fact, this is one of the most persistent Chinese motives for euthanasia, i.e., individuals requesting an earlier, cheaper death so as to free loved ones from further inconveniences, financial or otherwise.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{Inauspicious Selfless Acts}

To advance the common good is a paradigmatic virtue. As mentioned, a substratal communitarian ethos has moulded into the Chinese psyche a predilection towards bettering the whole, to the extent of enduring the
ultimate act of self-sacrifice. A scholar-official, for instance, would rather die than corrupt the body polity by betraying the Heavenly Principles. Similarly, in the name of defending familial repute, a filial son is prepared to lay down his life.

Could this time-honoured Chinese admiration for other-regarding suicide be extended to include euthanasia? Should fast-forwarding death be a rightful recourse to relieve others of the cost of caregiving? At first blush, this is no less a magnanimous endeavour. After all, the intention is to benefit others. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the Confucians would have difficulty endorsing the surrendering of life under these settings.

The controversy pertains to the status of the agent. With those esteemed altruistic suicides, the actor is viewed as a positive solution to an existing perplexity. The literati-bureaucrat, for example, relinquishes life as an ethical remonstration against Imperial injustices. His martyrdom is commended as a catalyst to right a present wrong. This is not the case with the central character in the euthanasia scenario. The ailing person in this instance is treated (and/or perceived themselves) as part of the malady, a liability to be expunged so as to facilitate the desirable outcome.

Generally, when a person’s life is regarded (rightly or wrongly) as vexatious, to commit suicide as a way out of that quandary is not considered a constructive resolution. For this reason, insofar as the sick are dealt with as loathsome, the Confucian would rebuff the use of euthanasia under such conditions as inauspicious self-sacrifice.

Specifically, the Confucian opposition relates to the underlying premise that the sick are (mis)treated and viewed as problematical. They are in fact casualties of a socioeconomic order that has negated its citizenry’s basic rights. In a fiduciary society, those with wants as essential as elementary healthcare ought not be dealt with as disposable impediments. The Confucian objection is rendered more poignant when appraised from the perspective of filial piety. It is the gravest offence if elderly parents are allowed, voluntarily or otherwise, to become forsaken. The ethical response is to take on these challenges as duties to the elderly and less fortunate, and doing so in a life-affirming manner. For the Confucian, to allow the sickly and elderly to commit suicide, even if it is underpinned by unselfish motives, is to neglect our fundamental responsibility towards the vulnerable and dependent. Thus, though the intent is well-meaning and the effect may profit the collective, Confucianists would have serious qualms sanctioning euthanasia in a scenario where the ailing and ageing are (or are at risk of) being wrongly dealt with as encumbrances to be banished.
Justifiable Sacrifice

A senior Chinese research scholar suffered a stroke and fell into a persistent vegetative state. His wife, a senior employee of the United Nations, stayed at his bedside until he became completely unconscious. She returned to work only when the doctor informed her that her husband would never again regain consciousness. At that point, she told the doctor that he need only let her know if his heartbeat and respiration stopped. She would trust the hospital to plan the funeral; she might not attend. In other words, in the hearts of his family the patient was already dead. But the government paid large sums of money—approximately ten times a professor’s salary—to sustain the existence of this famous professor. Meanwhile, his life as a family member had ended and only biological functions remained. About a year later he died. His wife did not attend the funeral.48

This narrative lays bare a critical fissure in modern China: the disparities in quality of care that the citizenry receives. There is in practice a two-tiered healthcare system operating in the PRC, mirroring the widening gap between the minority rich and majority poor. Not every Chinese is weighed down by medical expenditures. Through state-financed schemes, public figures like the famous professor are entitled to services denied to most. In the non-state sector, the newly rich are also enjoying first-rate services in exclusive private hospitals or at overseas facilities as part of the growing global boom in medical tourism. It is in this wider context of inequality that the plea for euthanasia assumes another form, this time aimed at tackling perceived excesses and waste. A party cadre’s pronouncement captures this line of thinking.

A Communist Party member before death faces a revolution once more. When I am about to pass away, by all means do not try to save my life by applying medication. It would be a waste of effort and resources. Please organize criteria for legalization of euthanasia.49

With technological advancement, death can now be postponed artificially for a much longer period of time but these complex systems of maintenance come at a heavy cost. Given the continuing inconsistent quality of care that different segments of society receive, the utilisation of costly therapies has serious implications for social justice. Clearly, China today needs to strive for a more equitable and judicious deployment of its limited pool of medical resources. But should attempts at cost-rationing include withholding or withdrawing life-prolonging treatment?

To begin with, with respect to those who have fallen into an irreversible loss of consciousness, like the famous professor, Confucianists would not oppose
switching off life support. This is consistent with the aforementioned Confucian principle of spirit taking precedence over matter. If an individual’s biographical personhood ceases to exist, there is no moral imperative to sustain his biological form for its own sake. In a reality wrestling with myriad competing demands, to do so may well be judged as a careless waste of scarce resources.

The rationale for hastening the exit from this life could also be made for another category of people, akin to the party cadre who, via some form of advance directive, expresses a person’s wishes not to be resuscitated and/or kept alive mechanically in a near vegetative state. Two clarifying arguments are needed here.

One relates to the previously expounded Confucian dismissal of the “dying with dignity” proposition. The scenario under consideration circumvents this objection because it is an other-regarding and not a self-regarding case. The cadre’s request is driven primarily by an obligation to the public good rather than apprehension over private indignity. At least that is the stated motivation. The contention therefore is whether it is morally permissible for someone like the cadre to surrender life for the common good.

This leads us to the second argument: the Confucian refutation of euthanasia as a method of cost reduction. First, insofar as the cadre is perceived as an inconvenience to be rid of in order to lessen stress on the public health system, his self-sacrifice remains objectionable. That said, the Confucianists may tolerate this regrettable suicide on grounds that the subject in question is conceivably a “liability” and the wrong involved is comparatively less severe.

In a finite world where the utilisation of resources is ultimately a zero-sum game, what is spent by one has ramifications on the needs of others. Indeed, as in other countries, since the rich and privileged are exacting disproportionate demands on what is available, the rest of the mainland Chinese have to contend with a smaller fraction of an exhaustible supply of medical reserves. Of course, in a free-market economy, the consumer-patient has the right to procure whatever therapy he can afford. Likewise, public figures are entitled to generous services that may include state-approved artificial life support. But are these consumptions and entitlements morally justifiable when many in the lower social stratum are deprived of the most rudimentary care?

Certainly, the supreme good is to meet every need and affirm all life. Yet in a milieu strained by scarcity and inequity, at times one can only strive for the admittedly morally compromised utilitarian goal of the greatest good for the greatest number. And arguably the circumstances surrounding the cadre’s entreaty is a case in point. In a situation like this, it is fair to question whether sustaining a vegetative patient is a scrupulous employment of resources when
many are succumbing to preventable deaths and at a younger age, cutting short their natural lifespan.

It is in this sense that the entitlement accorded to the professor and cadre may be deemed problematic simply because it violates our intrinsic sense of fairness. Putting it differently and more broadly, unlike the victimised poor, individuals like these public figures are beneficiaries, perhaps even causal factors in the existing inequitable healthcare system. Consequently, there is justification to assert that the minority rich owes to the majority poor a moral duty to rein in some of their rights and claims. To be clear, it remains lamentable that efforts to ration costs should involve the premature ending of life. However, when placed within this wider context of injustice and transgression, the cadre’s request for voluntary passive euthanasia can be seen as a lesser malevolence and thus a permissible self-sacrifice.

To recap, the Confucian norm pertaining to the other-regarding cases is to reprove the use of euthanasia as a cost-saving measure, especially if it involves the poor. But there are moral grounds to assent to certain individuals’ entreaty to waive their entitlement to life-prolonging treatment as a private response to correct a public health system plagued by excesses and waste.

**Conclusion**

The Chinese’s comparatively liberal stance on suicide notwithstanding, the instances in which Confucianists morally sanction euthanasia are in fact limited. Now even when restricted to those exceptional cases, the ending of life is still not the ideal recourse because these exigencies stem from socioeconomic failings that could and should be rectified without falling back on euthanasia. As argued, for those mired in terminal suffering, an early exit is acceded mainly because many still lack access to palliative treatment. Furthermore, it is due to the prevalent inequity in medical coverage that the Confucian may endorse some form of passive euthanasia to curb wastage. Evidently, these concessions to assisted suicides are negative resorts arising from Beijing’s failure to administer adequate and equitable healthcare. Moving forward, rather than pursuing the legitimisation of euthanasia, the sounder ethical strategy is to work on eradicating the root causes. One positive action is to secure a greater availability of hospice services. The other and broader challenge is to reform the PRC’s strained public health system with increased investments and a fairer dispensation of scarce resources.
Notes

6. Lo, Confucian Views on Suicide.
17. Catholicism’s stance differs somewhat from the Protestant’s view of the afterlife. The Catholic Church’s belief in purgatory, an intermediate phase between death and the final judgement, allows the living to intercede on behalf of those departed in order to affect the deceased’s fate in the hereafter. For an extensive analysis of the Catholic and Protestant views of life after death, see Clarke, P. and T. Claydon, eds. (2009) *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, UK.
20. Hsu, *Under the Ancestor’s Shadow*.
22. Ibid.


25. Lo, Confucian Views on Suicide.

26. Ibid.


29. “My reason for saying that no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child … The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence.” (Mencius 1984: 2A6)

30. Lo, Confucian Views on Suicide.


38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 65.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.


47. This is by no means a problem peculiar to developing countries like China. Even in first-world constituents like Oregon where euthanasia is considered a valid form of healthcare, one annual report cited that in 63% of the deaths reported, fear of being a burden was expressed as a reason for requesting assisted suicide (Sleebom-Faulkner 2006).

48. Qiu, Morality in Flux, 25.

49. Sleebom-Faulkner, Chinese Concepts of Euthanasia and Health Care, 207.