

DEATH AS AN AESTHETIC FORM IN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT OF CONFUCIANISM, BUDDHISM, AND DAOISM

Nguyễn Thị Hằng^a

(Received 04/02/2026; revised 22/07/2026; accepted 25/07/2026)

Abstract: Death - a human phenomenon that appears to signify an ending, stillness, sorrow, and loss - has nevertheless become a point of convergence and a central category of concern in three major Eastern systems of thought: Confucianism, Daoist philosophy, and Buddhism. Within these three traditions, death is not understood merely as the cessation of human biological activity; it is also considered within philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic categories. This article approaches death as an aesthetic form rather than as a dark and fated conclusion. It examines the conception of death in each system of thought, whose different epistemological foundations and perspectives generate distinct aesthetic values. By elucidating their philosophical depth, the article opens an aesthetic perspective on death at the point where Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism meet. It thereby arrives at the following conclusion: in Eastern philosophy, death is not an endpoint but a doorway into the profound dimensions of life, enabling human beings to perceive, confront, and experience the beauty of mortal existence.

Keywords: Death, philosophy, Eastern aesthetics, the common origin of the Three Teachings

Introduction

From an intellectual perspective, it may be affirmed that the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist systems of thought, established upon firm foundations and complete worldviews, became three spiritual pillars shaping the identity of Eastern philosophy, humanistic thought, and culture. Although each system has a different origin, purpose, and mode of interpretation, the long development of culture and the depth of historical acculturation reveal their most fundamental point of convergence: all three are concerned with the basic questions of human existence - life, death, morality, and the ontological problems surrounding being.

^a Thang Long Institute for Cognition and Education, Thang Long University
Email: nguyenhangk70hnue@gmail.com
<https://science.thanglong.edu.vn>

Email: vanhiendisan@thanglong.edu.vn

Among the philosophical and humanistic categories interpreted by these traditions, death emerges as a universal, contested, and haunting phenomenon. It is not only an inevitable biological event but also a metaphysical and ethical problem, and even a symbolic presence in human spiritual life. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoist philosophy have therefore all produced profound reflections, explanations, and meditations on death.

Within each system, death is not regarded as an absolute conclusion or an accidental stopping point; rather, it is always connected to a philosophical - religious framework of morality or ontology. This has enabled the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions to construct distinctive and internally consistent conceptions of death, not only at the level of thought but also at the symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural levels. Despite their different approaches and modes of interpretation, all three regard death as an inseparable part of life - a part that human beings must recognize, interpret, and, at times, aestheticize.

The problem of death in Eastern philosophy has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. Notable examples include Nguyễn Khuông Hồng Ngọc's study (2021), which compares the ontology of death in Zhuangzi and Heidegger, and Phùng Lô Tường's work (2010), which offers a detailed and systematic interpretation of Eastern and Western philosophies of life and death. These studies, however, primarily investigate death from a purely philosophical perspective. Building on those foundations, the present article broadens the scope through an intertextual approach: it compares the canonical texts of each doctrine and examines their ideas through works of medieval literature. Most importantly, the article's central concept - "death as an aesthetic form" - does not seek to judge death in ethical terms (right/wrong) or doctrinal terms (whether the soul exists). Here, the aesthetic is defined as the human capacity for contemplation, sublimation, and emotional responsiveness before the reality of life and death. It is the capacity to transform fear into the tragic grandeur of the sublime in Confucianism, the stillness of non - self in Buddhism, and the beauty of free and unfettered wandering in Daoist philosophy. The article seeks to explore this layer of aesthetic value, thereby opening a space of dialogue between philosophy and art in Eastern culture.

Content

1. Death in Daoist Philosophy: An Aesthetics of Joy and Equanimity

Before entering the analysis, it is necessary to distinguish Daoist philosophy - centered on the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi - from Daoism as a historical religion. Whereas religious Daoism pursued alchemical practices intended to attain longevity and immortality - a project that sought to resist the finitude of human life - Daoist philosophy offered an entirely different attitude. It advised human beings to receive death with serenity.

1.1. Death as a “Return to the Root”

As is well known, Daoist philosophy consistently values the condition of wuwei 無為, namely, refraining from acting against nature: not forcing things and not clinging to the self. Death, too, is encompassed within this conception. Zhuangzi praised the act of “dissolving oneself” into the Dao; the way of wuwei therefore celebrates the beauty of gentleness, dissolution, and liberation from the sense of ego. From this perspective, death in Daoist philosophy is not a condition of pain; it is a return to the vast light of boundless space. Human death is itself a link in the natural cycle, and the person who follows wuwei experiences death lightly and without obstinate attachment.

In his conceptions of death, Zhuangzi also shares many affinities with Laozi. Death is described as a return to the Dao, while the Dao is the root of the myriad things; death may therefore be understood as a “return to the root.” The Dao is that which precedes all things, itself ungenerated, and is the comprehensive principle from which the myriad things arise: *“The life and death, squareness and roundness, of the myriad things are all transformations of nature that have existed from antiquity to the present. Heaven, earth, and the four directions may be vast, yet they remain within the Dao; the tip of an autumn hair may be exceedingly small, yet it too takes form through the Dao. The myriad things rise and sink, transforming throughout their existence. Yin and yang and the four seasons proceed in ordered succession. The Dao is obscure, seeming not to exist and yet existing; at first it has neither shape nor trace, and yet it possesses a wondrous efficacy through which the myriad things are generated and*

transformed without knowing it. This is called the root of the universe. To understand this principle is to be able to contemplate the Way of Heaven.”²

1.2. Death as Cyclical Transformation

This conception is clearly expressed in Zhuangzi’s “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (*Qiwulun*). Its philosophy emphasizes following the intrinsic nature of things: each being has its own natural function and cannot, and should not, be coerced; each must be itself. The *Qiwulun* may therefore be regarded as a philosophy that values individuality, freedom, and respect for the nature of each particular being: *“Thus, a blade of grass and a great pillar, an ugly woman and the beautiful Xi Shi, together with all that is improper, deceptive, strange, and grotesque, are all united in the Dao. This unity divides into the myriad things; once divided, what existed before is no longer there and the present form will pass away. Yet no thing is truly generated or destroyed, for in the end all are reunited in the Dao”³* (Zhuangzi, “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”). Evaluation, judgment, and division are therefore contrary to nature; within the Dao, the boundaries created by prejudices concerning good, evil, and beauty are dissolved. Zhuangzi also discusses the transformation of the *ji*, the germinal impulse: *“Within the germ there is an exceedingly minute part called the ji. When this ji encounters water, it becomes a silk - like plant called jue; when it reaches the soil beside the water, it becomes green moss; on dry ground upon a hill, it becomes the plant known as plantain. Plantain, where there is manure, becomes crow’s - foot grass... The cheng gives birth to the horse; the horse gives birth to the human being; and the human being returns once more to the ji. Thus, the myriad things all arise from the ji and return to the ji.”⁴* This view does more than affirm that all things undergo transformation and cannot be rigidly separated. Beneath it lies a law of transformation in which the *ji* is both origin and termination, while termination itself gives rise to a new beginning in an uninterrupted cycle. The passage also implies Zhuangzi’s conception that death is not the end of life. A cyclical recurrence remains: the death of a thing at one stage leads to the birth of another thing at a subsequent

² Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Tề vật luận*, p. 322.

³ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Tề vật luận*, p. 122.

⁴ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Chí lạc*, p. 72.

stage, producing an unending sequence that becomes the law of existence of the myriad things. From this standpoint, death is merely a special state of being, a preparation for a new life in a new form. The human becomes the nonhuman, and the nonhuman passes again into the human; forms alternate and continue, living and dying, while death once again brings forth new life.

Accordingly, life and death are not defined through a rigid and absolute separation. They are relative and occupy equivalent positions within the natural and necessary cycle of transformation governed by the Dao. This conception is also embodied in Zhuangzi's *"Butterfly Dream"*: *"Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed that he had become a butterfly, fluttering joyfully about, no longer knowing that he was Zhou. Suddenly he awoke and was astonished to find himself Zhou. He did not know whether he was Zhou dreaming that he had become a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that it had become Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be a distinction. This is called the transformation of things."*⁵ Although the story does not directly formulate a doctrine of death, it contributes to the expression of Zhuangzi's understanding of death.

Nevertheless, life and death in Zhuangzi's thought do not have exactly the same meaning. Rather, Zhuangzi emphasizes the relativity of these two modes of existence as states within the ceaseless movement of things; in this article, death is therefore considered a form of "special movement." Zhuangzi holds that there is "neither beginning nor end": before birth and after death, all return to nonbeing. This once again confirms the Daoist conception of wuwei. To die is, in essence, to cast off the natural and material form and return to the root - the Dao - just as death is a return to one's place of origin. Zhuangzi understood this as a cyclical and transformative "great return," consistent with the *Qiwulun*. From this perspective, human beings need not search for an absolute beginning or end, because the myriad things move in cycles and no fixed boundary can be determined: *"Life leads to death, and death is the beginning of life. Who can know which comes before and which comes after? Human birth results from the*

⁵ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Tề vật luận*, p. 130.

gathering of qi. When qi gathers, there is life; when qi disperses, there is death. If life and death revolve in a cycle, what is there to worry about?”⁶

The aesthetic value of this view lies in its capacity to bring human beings lightness and peace of mind. Rather than being anxious about death as an ending, they accept it as the operation of nature. Death is received as an inevitable process of transformation - something that should and must occur. This attitude is expressed in the story of Zisi visiting his sick friend Ziyu. Seeing his friend's body painfully twisted and deformed, Zisi asked whether he found himself repulsive. Ziyu replied: *“No. Why should I? If the Creator were to transform my left arm into a rooster, I would use it to announce the dawn. If he transformed my right arm into a crossbow, I would use it to shoot down an owl for roasting. If he transformed my buttocks into wheels and my spirit into a horse, I would harness them and ride.”⁷* Awareness of death thus urges human beings to accept, and even welcome, it calmly and at ease, without panic, anxiety, or preoccupation, because they understand that they do not truly vanish, or that the condition of death is only temporary preparation for a new mode of existence.

1.3. Death as the “Joy” of Release

In responding to death, Zhuangzi directs human beings toward optimism rather than grief. Through an understanding of the nature of life and the transformative relation of death, he offers an exceptionally gentle and tranquil meditation on mortality: neither sorrowful nor mournful. Although he valued life and health - as shown in methods of nourishing life and accounts of keeping the body healthy and long - lived - Zhuangzi did not seek to cling to life. He held that one should not attempt to act against Heaven by escaping the span of years allotted to each person. Thus, in “The Great and Venerable Teacher,” Zhuangzi writes: *“Life and death are both determined by the decree of Heaven, just as there are night and day. What human beings cannot intervene in or change is the inherent condition of the myriad things.”* He also writes: *“The universe gives me a body, gives me life so that I may labor, gives me old age so that I may rest, and gives*

⁶ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Tề vật luận*, p. 331.

⁷ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Học thuyết của Trang*, p. 71.

me death so that I may repose; therefore, if life is regarded as a blessing, death must also be regarded as a blessing.”⁸ Human beings should live fully within the years Heaven has given them and observe the term Heaven has determined. Throughout, the governing conception remains wuwei. Because death is viewed as a natural principle, Zhuangzi advises human beings to arrive and depart lightly, accepting death as transformation, neither fearing nor avoiding it, and adopting an attitude that “equalizes life and death.”

Zhuangzi not only understood the principle of life and death; he also confronted death with extraordinary calm. At his wife’s funeral, he did not weep but sat singing. When reproached, he explained that death was a return to the Creator and to the repose of the myriad things: *“But then I reflected that, in the beginning, my wife had no life; not only did she have no life, she had no form; not only did she have no form, she did not even have qi. Mingled within the obscure and indistinct, she transformed into qi; qi transformed into form; form transformed into life; and now life has again transformed into death. How is this different from the cycle of the four seasons? Now she rests peacefully in the ‘Great House’ - that is, heaven and earth - and if I were still to make a commotion by weeping beside her, I would show that I did not understand the principle of life and death. That is why I do not weep.”*⁹ This expresses his joy that his wife had escaped suffering and entered repose within the universe. The “joy” before death must not be interpreted as indifference; it is an awakening to the Dao. Only when human beings comprehend the law of transformation can they reach a state of freedom and self - possession, no longer regarding death as loss or as a cause of despair.

Zhuangzi’s “joy” before death is vividly expressed in his dialogue with a human skull. The story recounts how, while travelling through the state of Chu, Zhuangzi encountered a skull. After asking how it had died, he used it as a pillow and went to sleep. That night the skull appeared in his dream and said that, in death, there was no ruler above and no minister below, no labour according to the four seasons, and that the dead wandered freely, sharing the

⁸ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Dưỡng sinh*, p. 96.

⁹ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Thời đại và Cuộc sống*, p. 26.

longevity of heaven and earth - a happiness incomparable even to kingship. Zhuangzi did not believe it and asked whether, if restored to life and reunited with family and friends, the skull would wish to return. The skull frowned and refused: “*Why should I abandon a joy fit for a king and return to the toil and suffering of the human world?*”¹⁰ The skull thus becomes an image through which Zhuangzi presents his conception of death: death resembles release from constraint, suffering, and misfortune; it severs human entanglements and enables the attainment of absolute freedom.

1.4. Death in Daoist Thought through Selected Literary Works

To embody the philosophies of wuwei and the “equalization of life and death,” literature imbued with a Daoist sensibility often operates by cosmicizing human existence and dissolving death into the objective rhythms of great nature. Its characteristic symbolic images are not solid tombs or tears of separation, but dust, drops of dew, drifting clouds, butterfly wings, and green burial mounds in the wilderness. Death appears as the shedding of a narrow material shell, a “great return” through which the self is revealed in a state of free wandering and quietude with the Creator.

In Eastern literature, many authors celebrate the beauty of death in relation to the Dao, understanding death as cyclicity and as a return to the Dao through which serenity and fearlessness are attained. At the conclusion of *The Return* (*Guiqulai ci*), Tao Yuanming writes:

登東皋以舒嘯，臨清流而賦詩。

聊乘化以歸盡，樂夫天命復奚疑！

Đăng đông皋 dĩ thư khiếu, lâm thanh lưu nhi phú thi.

*Liêu thừa hoá dĩ quy tận, lạc phù thiên mệnh phục hề nghi?*¹¹

The poem celebrates the joy that arises from understanding human destiny and willingly accepting the Way of Heaven, thereby freeing oneself from excessive uncertainty and doubt about life, including death. Such thought allows human beings to live each moment fully, without fearing death or being troubled by the transformations of existence.

¹⁰ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.), *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing], chapter *Chí lạc*, p. 287.

¹¹ Đào Tiềm. *Quy khứ lai từ* [Return]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Đào-Tiềm/Quy-khứ-lai-từ/poem-sfHCqxaQ75Zp7Waf7a2TsA. Accessed 20 July 2026.

In *The Lament of a Royal Concubine* (Cung oán ngâm khúc), Nguyễn Gia Thiều writes:

*“What remains after a hundred years?
Nothing but an ancient mound grown green.”*¹²

These lines express a conception of life and death as natural principles. Human life passes in an instant and is only one link in an unceasing process. Death is therefore not a tragic termination, but the shedding of worldly splendour and a return to dust. This is a vivid expression of metamorphosis into nature: death as a gentle and inevitable transformation that human beings must recognize.

In *Bring in the Wine* (Jiang jin jiu), Li Bai writes:

又不見：
高堂明鏡悲白髮，
朝如青絲暮成雪？
*“Have you not seen:
In the bright mirror of the high hall, the sorrow of white hair,
Black silk at dawn, turned to snow by dusk?”*¹³

In these lines, Li Bai conveys the brevity of human existence, a recurrent Daoist idea. He therefore turns toward enjoying the present moment and accepting the movement of time, the transformation of the human being, and even death - that is, accepting the impermanence of life. In his poetry, life and death are not approached through a conventionally tragic inspiration but as necessary elements of the life cycle. Their beauty lies in a death lightly and calmly received, without fear or regret.

2. Death in Confucianism: An Aesthetics of Moral Principle and Moral Courage

In Confucianism, death is not conceived as absolute extinction; it is connected to ethical value. If Daoist philosophy constructs an aesthetics of wuwei and celebrates a spirit of freedom and ease, Confucianism places death within the

¹² Nguyễn Gia Thiều. *Cung oán ngâm khúc* [Lament of a royal concubine]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Gia-Thiều/Cung-oán-ngâm-khúc/poem-_hf1rw-MrPILEBF0l7MVPA. Accessed 20 July 2026.

¹³ Lý Bạch. *Thương tiến tửu* [Bringing in the wine]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Lý-Bạch/Thương-tiến-tửu/poem-2SOZi2_E9ZMjy3mQn1w89A. Accessed 20 July 2026.

category of the sublime, where will and moral righteousness overcome the biological instinct of self - preservation. In this sense, death in Confucian thought functions as an expression and a sign of the completion of the human moral vocation.

Grounded in a philosophical system that elevates humaneness, ritual propriety, righteousness, wisdom, and trustworthiness (ren–li–yi–zhi–xin) as fundamental human principles, Confucianism considers death in relation to the capacity to preserve ethical commitments and fulfill the ideals of “consummating humaneness” and “upholding righteousness.” For Confucianism, the moral way of being human is the central value that a person must pursue even unto death. On this premise, death becomes associated with a range of aesthetic values. Its beauty does not consist merely in ethical correctness, but in the powerful aesthetic emotion evoked by heroic courage and voluntary sacrifice.

2.1. Death in Confucianism as Inherent and Inevitable

In the Confucian conception, death is not an accidental event but an inevitable part of the cosmic order. Confucius understands death as a natural law connected to the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” (tianming). This idea is clearly affirmed in the Analects: “商闻之矣：死生有命，富贵在天” (Shang wen zhi yi: si sheng you ming, fu gui zai tian) - “*I have heard that life and death are determined by destiny, while wealth and honour rest with Heaven.*”¹⁴ Recognizing death as part of Heaven’s mandate enables human beings to rise above instinctive fear and to see departure as a return to an eternal law. Confucius also compares this submission to nature with the flow of time: “子在川上曰：逝者如斯夫，不舍昼夜” (Zi zai chuan shang yue: Shi zhe ru si fu! Bu she zhou ye) - “*Standing by a river, the Master said: ‘What passes away is like this, flowing without cease, day and night.’*”¹⁵ Here, death is understood like the current of time: an unceasing movement of nature. Human beings should therefore follow that current with equanimity and without resentment.

The aesthetic emphasis of this view lies in calmness before the decay of the body. Life and death are treated as two aspects of one process, in which death is

¹⁴ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 104.

¹⁵ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 79.

not a tragedy but the completion of the cycle of life. Precisely because it respects natural accordance, Confucianism values a disciplined manner of living and an appreciation of the time one has been given, rather than obstinate resistance. Confucius also warns against a mode of life that violates natural and moral order, when a person no longer contributes to society and instead damages familial and social norms: “老而不死，是为贼” (Lao er bu si, shi wei zei) - “*To grow old and yet not die is to become a thief.*”¹⁶ In this context, death is interpreted as an appropriate response to nature when the life cycle has been completed. One should not allow attachment to material existence to overturn the ethical order that forms the foundation of society. Death then becomes an aesthetically proper conduct when a person knows when to stop and remains in harmony with Heaven and earth.

Thus, the aesthetic dimension of death in Confucianism lies in the active posture of the human being. One must neither assume the power to take life without cause nor misuse life itself; rather, one must live worthily so that when the “Mandate of Heaven” arrives, it can be received with serenity and dignity. The inevitability of death becomes an impetus to live every moment fully, to refrain from violating the lives of others, and to preserve one’s own moral character until the final breath.

2.2. Death as the Completion of the Human Moral Way

From the perspective of Confucius, death is aestheticized through an ethical lens. Biological death is transformed into sublime death. Meaningless deaths are to be criticized, while death itself may become an expression of putting the Way into practice.

The “aesthetics” of death in Confucianism does not lie in the termination of life but in the sublimation of character. When human beings confront the boundary between life and death, the capacity to relinquish life in order to preserve an ideal becomes the highest symbol of humanity. In the “Duke Ling of Wei” chapter of the *Analects*, Confucius states: “殺身以成仁” (sha shen yi cheng ren) - “*to sacrifice one’s life in order to consummate humaneness.*”¹⁷ This celebrated statement clearly expresses the central ethical thought of

¹⁶ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 133.

¹⁷ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 136.

Confucianism: human beings are not born merely to exist biologically; they must live in a manner worthy of human dignity, that is, they must “consummate humaneness.” When continuing to live would mean betraying moral principle, death is no longer something to be avoided but becomes the right choice. Confucius therefore does not praise death out of emotion or despair; rather, he emphasizes a rational and ethical death, in which the body may be sacrificed but moral principle must not be lost. Death is thereby aestheticized as an act of absolute moral value and as the completion of character.

Mencius further elevates this thought by placing life in direct tension with righteousness: “生，亦我所欲也；義，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍生而取義者也” (Sheng yi wo suo yu ye; yi yi wo suo yu ye. Er zhe bu ke de jian, she sheng er qu yi zhe ye) - “*Life is what I desire; righteousness is also what I desire. If I cannot possess both, I will give up life and choose righteousness.*”¹⁸ This is the true beauty toward which Confucianism aspires and which it praises: resolute will, integrity carried to its utmost limit, and especially an aesthetic sense of humaneness - the “beauty of consummated humanity” embodied by the exemplary person. Mencius moves beyond Confucius’s emphasis on “consummating humaneness” by affirming that although human beings naturally desire life, righteousness remains the supreme value and may be worth the surrender of life itself. Righteousness is therefore ranked above biological survival. Within this argument, death becomes a conscious act and the result of a rational decision, rather than an affective impulse. It is an ethical and intellectual choice that demonstrates human maturity before existential contradiction. Aesthetically, this is a death characterized by voluntary sacrifice. It does not contradict Confucius’s view of natural death and noninterference; instead, it elevates death as an act that transcends the instinct for survival in order to preserve the ideal of righteousness. The beauty of death here is sublime and tragic - heroic: the human being refuses to submit before danger and preserves moral integrity. Trần Bình Trọng’s immortal declaration - “*I would rather be a ghost of the South than a king of the North*” - and Từ Hải’s “death while standing” in *The Tale of Kiều* are exemplary expressions of this ideal. Their choices reveal an upright courage that does not fear death or sell honour,

¹⁸ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (trans.) (1996), *Mạnh Tử* [Mencius], p. 53.

in accordance with Confucius's spirit of "sacrificing the self to consummate humaneness." This is the beauty of death idealized through morality: an aesthetic symbol of righteousness and fidelity, and a vivid embodiment of the Confucian model of "relinquishing life to preserve righteousness."

In Confucianism, death also functions as a measure by which the exemplary person may be reflected upon and judged. Death is not simply physiological cessation; the exemplary person must comprehend the value of existence: "朝聞道，夕死可矣" (Zhao wen Dao, xi si ke yi) - "*If one hears the Way in the morning, one may die content in the evening.*"¹⁹ In this argument, death ceases to be a heavy and sorrowful event and becomes the aesthetic culmination of a meaningful life: one lives in order to understand, and one may then die for that understanding. Every moment lived with the highest awareness of the Way becomes the foundation for a beautiful death - the capacity to endure and not yield before impermanence. Death is thus placed in the position of a final test, through which the exemplary person fully reveals his or her character.

For Confucius, the value of living is more important than meaningless continuation. In his dialogue with Zilu, Confucius says: "未知生，焉知死?" (Wei zhi sheng, yan zhi si?) - "*If you do not yet understand life, how can you understand death?*"²⁰ The aesthetic value of this statement lies in its celebration of a morally grounded life. Life is the foundation of a beautiful death - a death that does not fear, flee, or debase human dignity. Human beings must understand the nature of both life and death. Yet Confucianism does not encourage dying as an act in itself; the claim must be read from a philosophical and ethical perspective: only those who live rightly can truly confront death, and only then can death be called worthy. The statement defines the Confucian aesthetics of death by refusing speculative absorption in metaphysical projections about what comes after death and concentrating instead on the creation of beauty in present life. Life acquires meaning through an understanding of death, and death becomes beautiful only when life has been lived according to the Way. Death is therefore not mere termination but the

¹⁹ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 33.

²⁰ Phùng Hoài Ngọc (trans.) (2011), *Luận ngữ* [The Analects], p. 95.

inevitable conclusion of an ethical journey in which each person comes to understand the truth of moral righteousness.

2.3. Death in Confucian Thought through Selected Literary Works

In contrast to the inward and self - possessed worldview of Daoist philosophy, literature influenced by Confucian thought refracts death through the lenses of sublimity and the tragic - heroic. For the Confucian scholar, ideal death does not appear as a silent dissolution into grass and trees; it exists as a conscious act of establishing words and virtue. Confucian literary imagery is often epic in character and symbolizes fidelity: blood staining battle robes, solemn vows, immortal spirits transformed into the sacred energy of mountains and rivers, and honourable names preserved in historical memory. Death is aestheticized as a ritual of completing character, in which the destruction of the biological body becomes the firm foundation for the permanence of righteousness and sociopolitical ideals.

In Vietnamese medieval literature, many writers influenced by Confucianism express a conception of death closely connected to moral righteousness. In Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's *Funeral Oration for the Martyrs of Cần Giuộc*, we read:

“In life they fought the enemy; in death they still fight.

Their spirits follow and aid the armies;

Through ten thousand lifetimes they vow to avenge that wrong.”²¹

Here, death is not regarded as an ending and does not carry the tone of personal lamentation. It is idealized as the highest manifestation of moral righteousness, in the spirit of “sacrificing oneself for a great cause.” The deaths of the Cần Giuộc martyrs are celebrated because their sacrifice embodies loyalty to the sovereign and love of the country, a perspective close to the Confucian ideal of the exemplary person.

In *The Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu*, Nguyễn Trãi does not directly speak of death, yet the idea of “sacrificing oneself for the nation” lies deeply embedded in the work, especially in its progressive principle: *“Use great righteousness to overcome cruelty; take utmost humaneness to*

²¹ Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. *Văn tế nghĩa sĩ Cần Giuộc* [Oration for the righteous fighters of Cần Giuộc]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Đình-Chiêu/Văn-tế-nghĩa-sĩ-Cần-Giuộc/poem-KdLiE7HzgpevhRTxSmKEw. Accessed 20 July 2026.

replace violence.”²² The soldiers of the Lam Son uprising heroically sacrificed themselves and staked life and death upon a great cause. This is precisely the kind of thought consistent with the conception of death celebrated by Confucius.

In *The Tale of Kiều*, Nguyễn Du also connects death with fidelity and righteousness in his description of Từ Hải’s death:

*“When his sacred energy had returned to the spirits,
He still stood towering, his feet rooted within the encirclement.”*²³

The image of his continuing to “stand towering” is artistically distinctive. Physical death has occurred, but the posture of the exemplary person remains upright like a pillar of righteousness. This “death while standing” offers a compelling demonstration of the Confucian conception: when death is joined to duty, it is no longer annihilation but the culmination of the value of life and the enactment of moral righteousness.

Confucian thought is also present in the poetry of Nguyễn Công Trứ. Although he does not directly describe death, his conception of life and death consistently turns toward the creation of an honourable name:

*“Having gained a name beneath Heaven and earth,
One must leave some name among the mountains and rivers.”*²⁴

To live fully according to the human moral way and to leave an honourable name after death - through the establishment of virtue and achievement - is the life principle through which the Confucian scholar completes the value of character. Death thereby becomes part of an undertaking that endures with history. According to this conception, only when human beings leave behind meaning and fulfill the Way of life are they worthy of a complete death.

3. Death in Buddhism: An Aesthetics of Liberation, Compassion, and Non - Self

3.1. Death as Liberation: An Aesthetics of Awakening

²² Nguyễn Trãi. *Bình Ngô đại cáo* [The Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Trãi/Bình-Ngô-đại-cáo/poem-mLEGY5d9nFI0RH280X-vIQ. Accessed 20 July 2026.

²³ Nguyễn Du. *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kiều]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Du/Truyện-Kiều/group-uAY7gIaARbh2b4DCVporPQ. Accessed 20 July 2026.

²⁴ Nguyễn Công Trứ. *Đi thi tự vịnh* [Self-composed poem on taking the imperial examination]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Công-Trứ/Đi-thi-tự-vịnh/poem-q0xC2UK9UkWFqcgpVz7iQA. Accessed 20 July 2026.

In Buddhism, death is not regarded as a painful and unacceptable catastrophe. It is an inevitable element of the cycle of birth, ageing, illness, and death. Rather than bearing the tragic and pessimistic character of ordinary loss, it may be elevated into a phenomenon of “transmigration” and, for practitioners who have attained a certain degree of virtue and wisdom, a form of liberation. This is not merely a simple conception of death; it contains a profound aesthetic value. Human beings must understand the nature of death in order to avoid errors of consciousness, distance themselves from negative thought and evil action, and concentrate on self - cultivation. The Buddhist conception lightens the human condition by replacing fear of termination with insight. The awakened person sees death as part of life and can therefore confront it calmly when it truly arrives. The distinction between one who is awakened and one who remains unenlightened is clearly stated by the Buddha in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*:

*“The uninstructed ordinary person, himself subject to death and unable to escape death, sees another person who has died and becomes distressed, ashamed, and disgusted, forgetting that he is the same. I too am subject to death and cannot escape death. After seeing another person die, should I become distressed, ashamed, and disgusted? Such a response would not be fitting for me.”*²⁵

Death in Buddhism does not exist as the terminal point of the human cycle. When a person attains awakening and escapes the cycle of rebirth, the state of Nirvāṇa becomes possible; death then resembles the state of “neither arising nor ceasing.” The basis of this liberation lies in the eradication of the roots of saṃsāra - greed, hatred, and delusion - as the Buddha taught:

“Because greed has not been abandoned, hatred has not been abandoned, and delusion has not been abandoned, one is not liberated from birth, ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. I say that such a person is not liberated from suffering. But one who lives contemplating the danger in the phenomena from which fetters may arise - monks, in that person greed is abandoned, hatred is abandoned, and delusion is abandoned. Because greed, hatred, and delusion are abandoned, that person is liberated from birth, ageing,

²⁵ Thích Minh Châu (trans.). *Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ* [The Numerical Discourses], section *Sứ giả của trời*, p. 127.

death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. I say that such a person is liberated from suffering. These, monks, are the two kinds of persons.”²⁶

In Buddhism, *samsāra* refers to the ceaseless transmigration of sentient beings. It is the chain of birth and death through the six realms: gods, human beings, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. The Buddha taught that human beings remain bound to this turning wheel by karmic force. Karma is understood as the wholesome or unwholesome action accumulated by each person during life. According to one's karma, one will be reborn in one of the six realms. This teaching therefore also functions as an ethical admonition, directing human beings toward goodness and wholesome living.

According to the Buddha, in order to attain ultimate liberation, the practitioner must eliminate ignorance through the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These constitute the Middle Way leading to the end of suffering and the cessation of birth and death. Human beings must attain perfect wisdom; when ignorance dissolves, the practitioner produces no new karma and is no longer bound by old karma. In Buddhist thought this state is called *Nirvāṇa* - a condition of absolute freedom rather than ordinary biological death. *Nirvāṇa* is supreme, unborn and undying, a state beyond both grasping and relinquishing. This is an aesthetic philosophy that allows human beings to see impermanence clearly, abandon fear, and confront death with a peaceful mind. The self - possessed attitude that overcomes intoxication with health, youth, and life in order to reach the purified goal is expressed in verses rich in the aesthetics of cultivation:

*Subject to illness and to ageing
And also subject to death
The ordinary person feels disgust
When others suffer in this way
Yet if I too were to feel disgust
Toward beings subject to the same fate,
It would not be fitting for me,
Living as I do under the same law*

²⁶ Thích Minh Châu (trans.). *Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ* [The Numerical Discourses], section *Hình phạt*, p. 47.

*Therefore I live in accordance with truth
 Knowing the state beyond acquisition
 Intoxication with freedom from illness
 With youth and with life
 All these I have subdued
 Seeing the peace of renunciation
 I arouse energy within myself
 Because I have seen Nirvāṇa
 I can no longer delight
 In the pleasures of desire
 I shall not turn back
 I have reached the goal of the holy life²⁷*

In Buddhism, the image of the Buddha entering parinirvāṇa represents the culmination of a death free from pain and fear. The death celebrated here is one in which all karmic conditions have come to an end. It is associated with fulfillment and purity, and its departure possesses aesthetic significance: an unencumbered death, a serene death that has passed beyond all suffering. Death becomes a symbol of beauty, a still point filled with purity after an active life marked by many transformations.

3.2. Death and the Cycle of Rebirth

In Buddhism, the term “rebirth” designates a new life arising under new conditions after death. This conception also proceeds from the law of impermanence: all things are subject to ceaseless change, and nothing exists eternally or remains forever unchanged. Buddhism holds that everything in the universe changes and transforms. This does not mean complete disappearance but a change of state - an idea that, in one respect, may be understood as analogous to the law of conservation of energy in modern science. Under the law of impermanence, successive scenes and states are not separated by absolute boundaries. They continue into one another and form a continuous process like a “current.”

The conception of rebirth also arises from the law of cause and effect and from the Buddhist understanding of karma. Karma may be regarded as an

²⁷ Thích Minh Châu (trans.). *Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ* [The Numerical Discourses], section *Sứ giả của trời*, p. 128.

ethical causality that shapes the destiny of sentient beings and leads to rebirth. In the Buddhist account presented here, the crucial element in human rebirth lies in consciousness: the craving and desire to live become a form of energy, so that when the body dies, this energy is reconstituted in the womb of a mother under the appropriate conditions for conception; a new life is thereby born. Rebirth does not mean revival of the same body, but transformation into another existence. The endless current of saṃsāra from one life to another is vividly described through the penetrating vision of the awakened person:

*“He recollects: ‘In that place I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, was of such a social class, had such food, experienced such pleasure and pain, and lived for such a span. Having died there, I was born elsewhere. There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, was of such a social class, had such food, experienced such pleasure and pain, and lived for such a span. Having died there, I was born here.’”*²⁸

Within this conception of rebirth, Buddhism emphasizes the role of karmic force and the causal relationship among past, present, and future. It therefore teaches the law of sowing causes: human beings should live rightly, increase wholesome karma, and thereby be reborn in a favourable realm after death. In Buddhism, death is governed by dependent origination. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha defines the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination as follows: *“Monks, with ignorance as condition, volitional formations arise; with formations as condition, consciousness; with consciousness as condition, name - and - form; with name - and - form as condition, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as condition, contact; with contact as condition, feeling; with feeling as condition, craving; with craving as condition, clinging; with clinging as condition, becoming; with becoming as condition, birth; and with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair arise.”*²⁹ Thus, from the Buddhist perspective, death is simply the inevitable consequence of birth. Only because of ignorance are human beings swept into saṃsāra. Death therefore does not mean disappearance or total loss; it is an

²⁸ Thích Minh Châu (trans.). *Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ* [The Numerical Discourses], section *Nhỏ*, p. 145.

²⁹ Thích Minh Châu (trans.), *Kinh Tương Ưng Bộ* [The Connected Discourses], section *Phật Đà*, p. 242.

inevitable link in the chain of rebirth, shaped by karmic force. This conception brings human beings a contemplative calm rather than panic before death.

3.3. *Death in Buddhist Thought through Selected Literary Works*

If Confucianism chooses the tragic - heroic and Daoist philosophy chooses free and unfettered wandering, Buddhist literature constructs an aesthetics of death around awakening and the insight of non - self. In Zen and Buddhist works, death is not evaded but confronted directly through symbolic language that interprets the law of dependent origination. The end of a life cycle is often associated with images of cyclical temporal transformation and inherent natural law: spring departing and returning, flowers blossoming and withering, a lamp exhausting its oil, dew upon the tip of grass, or the illusion of lightning. Death in Buddhist poetry and prose does not bear the tone of nihilism or despairing extinction. Instead, it contains an aesthetic stillness in which the practitioner casts off defilements, recognizes the nature of suchness, and attains a pure condition of liberation.

More specifically, many literary works refer to death indirectly through natural objects and cycles. In the verse of the Zen master Mãn Giác, the movement of spring departing and spring returning, together with the cyclical pattern in *Cáo tật thị chúng* that reveals nature's unending process, is also the recurring cycle of all things, including death. Life is impermanent, yet this impermanence is not negative. At the end, the human being must awaken to the "single branch of apricot blossom" as a symbol that transcends time. It represents transformation and the beauty of the cycle in which birth leads to death and death again to birth. The poem also manifests a calm and self - possessed spirit consonant with the Buddhist ideal of Nirvāṇa.

In "*Instructions to the Disciples*," the Zen master Vạn Hạnh likewise expresses a conception of the human cycle:

*"The body is like lightning: now it is, now it is not.
In spring the myriad trees flourish; in autumn they wither again.
Let rise and decline follow their course, without fear;
Prosperity and decay are like dew spread upon the tips of grass."*³⁰

³⁰ Vạn Hạnh Zen Master. *Thị đệ tử* [Instruction to the disciples]. Accessed from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Van-Hanh-thien-su/Thi-de-tu/poem-vllyEjwntk1F3Edn7UebZw. Accessed 20 July 2026.

The poem offers a profound view of the impermanence of human life. Present existence is understood as temporary, “*like dew*” and “*like an image*,” while the line “*in autumn they wither again*” presents existence as cyclical. Human beings should therefore neither fear nor cling pointlessly before events, including death, but should receive prosperity and decline, life and death, as self-evident laws. Death in the poem resembles the dissolution of an illusion; the human being dies in order to return to suchness. This is consistent with the Buddhist conception of liberation, in which all things are viewed “*like a drop of dew upon the tip of grass*.”

4. Points of Convergence among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism in Their Conceptions of Death

Although they originate in three different philosophical systems, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism nevertheless share points of convergence and intersection. This may be understood as a manifestation of the idea of the “common origin of the Three Teachings,” which refers to the meeting and convergence of fundamental humanistic values that supplement and support one another across the three traditions.

All three systems regard death as an inevitable and undeniable reality of human life. Yet death is not considered a complete ending or an eternal cessation. Although their explanations differ, all three reject an annihilationist view of death. Confucianism overcomes the finitude of the body by celebrating immortality in honour, moral principle, and the spiritual legacy left to later generations. Daoist philosophy sublimates death into a “return to truth,” a return to the Dao and a harmonization with the myriad things within the universe’s endless cycle of generation and transformation. Buddhism interprets death as a link in the chain of dependent origination, removing the fear of nothingness by enabling human beings to understand impermanence, *saṃsāra*, and causality, and ultimately to aspire toward liberation in *Nirvāṇa*.

On these philosophical foundations, death in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism is elevated to ethical, ideal, and aesthetic planes. It possesses the beauty of serenity and freedom and rejects evasion and panic. The beauty of death in Confucianism is the tragic grandeur of righteous courage; in Daoist philosophy, it is free wandering and accord with nature; in Buddhism, it is the light of

wisdom that accompanies awakening. None of the three traditions accepts a wasted death, a death bound by ignorant attachment, or a death submerged in despair born of desire.

Ultimately, the most important point of convergence - and the one possessing the highest aesthetic value - is the use of death as a “mirror” in which the reality of life itself is reflected. Directing human beings to confront death is not intended to disseminate pessimism, but to awaken them to the need to live fully and rightly in every present moment. The essence of Eastern thought on death lies in transforming an inevitable biological phenomenon into an aesthetic phenomenon: the complete crystallization of character. All three doctrines guide human beings toward a condition of relinquishing attachment, comprehending the law of existence, and acting in accordance with moral principle.

Thus, although these convergences form the phenomenon known as the common origin of the Three Teachings, the traditions do not dissolve into one another. Each retains its own identity, conception, and emphasis in speaking of death. The “common origin of the Three Teachings” discussed in this article should therefore be understood as a harmony and convergence in humanistic purpose, not as a complete identity of methodology. While each tradition preserves its own distinctiveness, all ultimately aspire to free human beings from the fear of life and death, so that death no longer appears as an abyss but as a doorway opening onto eternal values.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it may be argued that in Eastern philosophy death is not merely a biological phenomenon but a category containing profound intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. Each system of thought offers its own interpretation. In Buddhism, death is a transformation that can liberate human beings from ignorance and become a path toward Nirvāṇa. In Daoist philosophy, death is a return to the source and to the Dao, a dissolution of the ego into the Great Dao, and a continuation within the eternal cycle. In Confucianism, death is understood as the completion of the human moral way, the culmination of moral integrity and righteousness, and a measure of ethical character and human dignity.

Despite these different explanations, all three systems enable us to perceive the distinctive beauty of death in Eastern philosophy. It is the beauty of relinquishing fear, leading human beings toward completeness in the moral way of being human, toward wholehearted engagement with the present, and toward harmonious life with nature. The simultaneous presence of life and death within each system has created an Eastern philosophy of death grounded in a positive conception, directing human beings toward the ideal of living rightly and dying beautifully. Death reflects the beauty of wisdom and awareness and may therefore be regarded as the human being's "final beauty."

References

- Đào Tiềm. (n.d.). *Quy khứ lai từ* [Return]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Đào-Tiềm/Quy-khứ-lai-từ/poem-sfHCqxaQ75Zp7Waf7a2TsA
- Lý Bạch. (n.d.). *Thương tiến tửu* [Bringing in the wine]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Lý-Bạch/Thương-tiến-tửu/poem-2SOZi2_E9ZMjy3mQn1w89A
- Nguyễn Công Trứ. (n.d.). *Đi thi tự vịnh* [Self-composed poem on taking the imperial examination]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Công-Trứ/Đi-thi-tự-vịnh/poem-q0xC2UK9UkWFqcgpVz7iQA
- Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. (n.d.). *Văn tế nghĩa sĩ Cần Giuộc* [Oration for the righteous fighters of Cần Giuộc]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Đình-Chiểu/Văn-tế-nghĩa-sĩ-Cần-Giuộc/poem-KdLiE7HzgpevhRTxSmKEw
- Nguyễn Du. (n.d.). *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kiều]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Du/Truyện-Kiều/group-uAY7gIaARbh2b4DCVporPQ
- Nguyễn Gia Thiều. (n.d.). *Cung oán ngâm khúc* [Lament of a royal concubine]. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Gia-Thiều/Cung-oán-ngâm-khúc/poem-_hflrw-MrPILEBFOI7MVPA
- Nguyễn Hiến Lê (Trans.). (1994). *Trang Tử và Nam Hoa Kinh* [Zhuangzi and the Nanhua Jing]. Văn Hóa Publishing House.

- Nguyễn Hiến Lê (Trans.). (1996). *Mạnh Tử [Mencius]*. Văn Hóa Publishing House.
- Nguyễn Khuông Hồng Ngọc. (2021). *Quan niệm về cái chết trong triết học của Trang Tử và Martin Heidegger [The conception of death in the philosophies of Zhuangzi and Martin Heidegger]* [Master's thesis, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam].
- Nguyễn Trãi. (n.d.). *Bình Ngô đại cáo [The Great Proclamation upon the Pacification of the Wu]*. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Nguyễn-Trãi/Bình-Ngô-đại-cáo/poem-mLEGY5d9nFI0RH280X-vIQ
- Phùng Hoài Ngọc (Trans.). (2011). *Luận ngữ [The Analects]*. An Giang University.
- Phùng Lô Tường. (2010). *Triết lý sanh tử Đông Tây [Eastern and Western philosophies of life and death]* (Thích Hoằng Trí, Trans.). Phương Đông Publishing House.
- Thích Minh Châu (Trans.). (1993). *Kinh Tương Ưng Bộ (Saṃyutta Nikāya) [The Connected Discourses]*. Tôn giáo Publishing House.
- Thích Minh Châu (Trans.). (1996). *Kinh Tăng Chi Bộ (Aṅguttara Nikāya) [The Numerical Discourses]*. Tôn giáo Publishing House.
- Vạn Hạnh, Zen Master. (n.d.). *Thị đệ tử [Instruction to the disciples]*. Retrieved July 20, 2026, from Thi Viện: thivien.net/Vạn-Hạnh-thiền-sư/Thị-đệ-tử/poem-vllyEjwntk1F3Edn7UebZw