

# Community Attitudes Toward Near-Death Experiences: A Chinese Study

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**ABSTRACT:** In a survey of Chinese attitudes toward near-death experiences (NDEs), 197 respondents were read a hypothetical description of an NDE and asked to choose from a range of explanations and social reactions that might approximate their own. Fifty-eight percent of respondents believed that NDEs were probably hallucinations or dreams. Less than nine percent believed the NDE was evidence of life after death. Rural and younger persons were more likely to react positively to NDEs. The results are discussed with reference to an earlier Australian study by Kellehear and Heaven (1989).

In this paper we examine the attitudes toward near-death experiences (NDEs) of a sample of people from China ( $N = 197$ ). To do this we replicated an earlier study by Allan Kellehear and Patrick Heaven (1989). We posed the following questions: What are Chinese attitudes

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to the NDE? What demographic variables might influence these attitudes? Approximately what proportion of Chinese are familiar with media reports of NDEs? How many Chinese have had experiences similar to an NDE? These questions are necessarily preliminary questions because they reflect the current early state of academic enquiries about non-Western NDEs in general, and Chinese studies of the NDE in particular.

Near-death studies in non-Western countries have been few. Most of these reflect an interest in content analysis of the NDE. For example, Satwant Pasricha and Ian Stevenson (1986) examined Indian accounts of NDEs and Dorothy Counts (1983) examined Melanesian experiences. Both studies attempted to understand the role of culture in influencing the content of an NDE. Henry Abramovitch (1988) documented an Israeli example of personal confusion when an NDE and the NDEr's cultural expectations did not match.

These studies are important but early attempts to explore the role of culture in influencing the NDE. Like their Western counterparts, these studies do not examine other sociological issues such as community attitudes and the general incidence of NDEs. There are no attempts to formally measure public knowledge and explanations of the NDE. In this context, China is a good example of our limited knowledge of these areas.

Contemporary information about NDEs in China is scarce. An early historical paper by Carl Becker (1981) argued that the NDE was probably central to the development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. However, details of this experience are very general. Becker documented how a few key religious figures in the early development of Chinese Buddhism, after recovering from grave illness, reported visits to the "Pure Land." Later, these men appeared to make radical shifts in their values. In a later paper, Becker (1984) reviewed other accounts of deathbed visions, which included those of monks and laypersons. He observed that many of these contained most of the features of NDEs that we have come to know in the West, such as the tunnel experience, meeting a bright light, encountering other environments, and a life review. Aside from the admiring responses of a few there does not appear to be any documentation of societal attitudes to these claims. Contemporary attitudes to these types of experiences are not documented.

In the present study, we described a variety of features of the NDE to a sample of Chinese people and assessed their attitude to these. We wanted indications of how they might explain NDEs, and how they might react to those who claim to have had such experiences. We also wanted some indication of the extent to which reports of NDEs have reached (or are being generated in) China.

The results of this attitude study are useful for what they may tell us about culture specific attitudes. In other words, they can alert us to local cultural influences that promote particular national views. But these findings can also help determine whether attitudes in different countries may be connected with particular social circumstances rather than cultural differences. This is not simply an academic anthropological exercise. These studies also have practical implications for helping professionals, especially those working with NDErs from other cultures.

## Method

### *Sample*

Undergraduate students from the People's University of China were asked to administer the questionnaires. Two thirds of the students were instructed to visit rural areas around Beijing while the remainder was asked to survey Beijing itself. They were advised not to survey other students, that all respondents should be more than eighteen years of age, and that they should strive to sample as widely as possible with respect to age and occupation. The resulting sample is probably not representative of China, a country that is a predominantly rural peasant nation. Nevertheless, we believe the sample to be diverse enough for preliminary observations.

Responses were received from 197 respondents (99 males and 98 females). Of those, 32 respondents were aged between 18 and 25 years, 78 respondents were between 26 and 40 years, 72 respondents were between 41 and 60 years, and 15 were older than 60 years of age. In educational terms, 19 respondents had received no schooling, 31 respondents had attended lower primary school, 20 respondents had attended higher primary, 54 had reached middle school, 31 had attended high school and 35 had received a university education. There were 7 missing data. These education categories are Chinese national terms of reference. One hundred and thirty-three respondents gave their usual residence as "rural" and sixty-four claimed to reside in the city.

### *Questionnaire*

The design of the questionnaire follows closely that developed by Kellehear and Heaven (1989). This instrument has four sections. The first section solicits basic demographic data and the last section

quizzes respondents on their familiarity with NDEs from media, press and personal sources. The second section begins with a vignette description of a typical NDE that contains five main elements: tunnel sensation, out-of-body experience, meeting deceased acquaintances, meeting a bright light, and experiencing a life review. Questionnaires were divided into two types. Either the vignette portrayed "a relative" or simply "someone you know." Respondents were then asked to select from a range of explanations which best approximates their own. This list appears in Table 1.

The third section presents a further list of statements representing a range of attitudes to a person recalling his or her NDE. These included positive statements (e.g., "I would encourage discussion of his/her feelings whatever these might be"), negative statements (e.g., "I would visit this person less often") and neutral statements (e.g., "My reaction would depend on this person's reaction to the experience"). This list appears in Table 2. The logic and testing details of this design were described in the earlier study (Kellehear and Heaven, 1989).

There were several minor but necessary modifications to the earlier survey instrument. We did not ask questions that might appear ambiguous or troublesome in the context of the nation's political system. We therefore did not ask respondents their occupation or religion. The section devoted to explanations includes an extra item that invites respondents' explanations should they be dissatisfied with the ones offered. This was aimed at capturing categories of explanation that may be culturally unknown to us and therefore unanticipated. Finally, because the original survey instrument appeared in English, the ques-

**Table 1**  
**Responses to explanations for NDEs (N = 197)**

<i>Explanation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
1. It was a passing hallucination.	77	38.9
2. It was a dream.	38	19.2
3. It was the beginning of a mental illness.	10	5.1
4. It was the side effect of medical drugs/techniques.	9	4.5
5. It was possible evidence of life after death.	17	8.6
6. It was the product of a vivid imagination.	17	8.6
7. I don't know how to explain it.	24	12.1
8. Other explanations.	5	2.5

**Table 2**  
**Possible reactions to a person describing an NDE**

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1. I would try to change the subject. [-]
  2. I would seek professional advice before deciding how to respond. [0]
  3. I would be openly fascinated and interested. [+]
  4. I would humor this person until the delusion had passed. [-]
  5. My reaction would depend on this person's reaction to the experience. [0]
  6. I would reassure them that this did not lessen my regard for them. [+]
  7. I would be suspicious of this person's motives. [-]
  8. I would explore with them the variety of possible explanations for this experience. [+]
  9. I would visit this person less often. [-]
  10. I would take a "wait and see" attitude. [0]
  11. I would be puzzled by the story and tell them so. [0]
  12. I would encourage discussion of his/her feelings whatever these might be. [+]
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Positive reactions denoted by [+], negative reactions denoted by [-] and neutral reactions denoted by [0].

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tionnaire was translated into Chinese. This was then translated back into English by someone outside the research group, to check the accuracy of the translation. One methodological question remains: how culture bound is our NDE vignette? This is an interesting question.

Several points support our use of the NDE vignette used in this study. First, in the absence of contemporary Chinese accounts of NDEs, it would not be unreasonable to assume that several important features of Western NDEs might overlap with Chinese ones, even if other features appeared strange or foreign. Nonetheless, we are unable to say which features are particularly Western and which of those, if any, are not. Therefore, since it is not possible to judge whether the instrument is or is not culture bound, we include all the main elements as we know them.

Second, Becker's (1984) review of early Japanese and Chinese death-bed visions does suggest that many of these features may also be culturally relevant to these parts of the world. This evidence tends to favor the survey vignette.

Finally, many people who experience an NDE in the West do not fully experience all the features described in our "ideal" vignette. This does not mean that the core elements of our NDE vignette are culturally or personally irrelevant to these Westerners. Many Western NDErs, and many Indian or Melanesian NDErs, may relate to only one or two of these features but that does not mean they cannot recognize their experience in our vignette. Consequently, we do not think that the survey vignette is overly culture bound for any Chinese respondents who may be NDErs, or for those who may have heard accounts of NDEs in that country.

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted in April, 1989 (only weeks before the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing). Each respondent was approached by a student who then read the questionnaire to the respondent. This procedure was adopted to overcome any literacy problems that might arise, particularly for rural peasants. In the study, 103 respondents received a questionnaire referring to "someone you know," while 94 received a questionnaire referring to "a relative."

### *Results*

Respondents were asked to select the explanation that best explained the vignette for them. The percentage of all respondents ("someone you know" and "relative" vignettes) selecting each explanation is shown in Table 1.

The most noteworthy result was that 38.9% of respondents selected hallucination as their explanation. The second most popular explanation, chosen by 19.2% of respondents, was that NDEs are dreams. All other categories of explanation received only minor support, from between 3 to 9%, with the exception of the "Don't know" option, which was selected by 12.1% of respondents. It is also interesting to note that only 5 respondents (2.5%) chose to ignore the listed explanations, preferring instead to offer their own. These latter explanations included the following views: NDEs are ideational material from the mind's unconscious; they are side effects of illness; and NDEs are indication of serious brain disorder. One person declared the NDE account to be "sheer nonsense" and another respondent felt the account to be literally true and not in need of any other explanation. Overall,

however, it seems that most respondents (58.1%) favored the hallucination or dream explanation.

Respondents were also asked to select four statements that might best describe their reaction to a person recounting the experience to them. Only 145 respondents complied with the instructions for this section. More specifically, 62 "relative" and 83 "someone you know" surveys were usable for this part of the analysis. Other respondents chose one or two statements instead of the required four and were therefore not included in the analysis. The statements for this section of the survey are shown in Table 2. Negative statements were scored 0, neutral statements 1, and positive statements 2. Thus, a maximum score of 8 indicates a most supportive and facilitative response by a person. A Minimum score of 0 indicates a rejecting and dismissive attitude. Scores of 3, 4 or 5 indicate a more neutral, reflective and cautious attitude. The mean score for the "Someone you know" group was 4.6 (SD = 1.90) while that for the "relative" group was 4.7 (SD = 1.53) ( $t = 0.45$ ,  $df = 143$ , n.s.). As there was no significant difference in attitude to NDE, both groups were combined for further analysis.

Linear correlations were obtained between scores obtained in Table 2 and the demographic variables. These correlations are presented in Table 3. The correlations indicate that positive reactions to NDEs were significantly correlated with age ( $r = -.16$ ,  $P < .01$ ) and residence, in this case rural areas ( $r = -.15$ ,  $P < .05$ ). In other words, younger people and those who reside in rural areas were more likely to react positively towards those who claim to have had an NDE.

Other frequency data of interest indicate that 31% of respondents were familiar with the NDE from newspapers, books or magazines and 24% from television, radio or movies. And 13% of our Chinese sample of respondents claimed to have had an experience "similar to the one described by this survey." However, only 6 of those 26 respondents

**Table 3**  
**Linear correlations between positive reactions**  
**and demographic variables (N = 145)**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	.08	n.s.
Age	-.16	< .01
Rural vs. urban residence	-.15	< .05
Education	.07	n.s.
Belief in life after death	.01	n.s.

chose to explain the vignette as "evidence of life after death." The main explanations favored even by this group remained medical and psychological.

## Discussion

The most interesting finding of this study is the observation that more than half the sample (58.1%) believed that NDEs are either hallucinations or dreams. Only 8.6% believed that NDEs could be "evidence of life after death." This is the opposite result obtained by Kellehear and Heaven (1989) when surveying Australians. In that Australian survey, 57.8% of the sample believed that NDEs were evidence of life after death, while only 15% believed the experiences could be explained as dreams or hallucinations.

Of further comparative interest are the mean scores for attitudes to an NDEr in the two studies. In this study the mean score for Chinese attitudes to someone recounting an NDE was 4.8. In the Australian study, the mean was 6.15. Clearly the Chinese are more cautious and reserved than their Australian counterparts. The result, of course, is consistent with how each sample initially explained the NDE. The Chinese sample predominantly believed that they were responding to an ordinary medical or psychological event and therefore reacted accordingly. The Australian sample believed that they were responding to something extraordinary and positively intriguing and so their attitudes reflected this enthusiasm and support.

Why do the studies show such marked difference from each other? Cultural differences undoubtedly play a role but they may not necessarily play the major role. Several other explanations need to be considered before expounding the idea of East-West cultural differences.

First, when Kellehear and Heaven (1989) observed that Australian attitudes to NDEs were rather positive, this was a surprising result. Countless anecdotes by professionals and NDErs in the literature bear witness to the widespread existence of negative attitudes. But an important background factor in explaining the positive attitudes of the Australian study was the high level of familiarity with NDEs. Most of the respondents in that study (72%-79%) were familiar with NDEs from media and press sources. This is not unusual given the attention the NDE has enjoyed from publishers, radio, television, newspapers, and even movie and video makers. In this social context, it would be difficult to imagine currently surveying a community that is not ex-



posed to some part of this media and press attention. However, China is a country where the media and press coverage appears comparatively low. Only between 24% and 31% of the Chinese sample were familiar with NDEs from these media/press sources.

It may be, therefore, that if a survey were conducted in any Western nation 20 or 30 years ago, the findings might not be so dissimilar from the Chinese ones presented here. Without the regular public interviews with NDErs, without the debate between conflicting "experts" on NDEs that has been so widely publicized, many people might readily choose materialistic explanations. Debates about explanations, and media interviews with NDErs recounting their experiences, provide opportunities for reflection that can quickly erode or qualify many people's tendencies to adopt standard medical or psychological explanations. Indeed, this may be reflected in the choice of nearly 18% of Australians to indicate that they "did not know how to explain it" (Kellehear & Heaven, 1989). If the level of information and debate about NDEs is an important variable in explaining community attitudes toward them, then the findings of the Chinese survey may be a reflection of social circumstances (i.e., insufficient information) rather than cultural differences between countries.

Second, there may be a methodological reason for the preference for a medical/psychological explanation and cautious social attitude in the Chinese study. The data were collected by students from the People's University of China in Beijing, the premier Communist Party educational institution in China. The university is not simply endorsed by the Party but was also built, staffed, and attended overwhelmingly by party members, and is widely recognized in China to be favored by the Chinese Communist Party. A further complication is that many rural people in China identify visitors from the city with government agencies. There is a possibility therefore that respondents, on being quizzed by people from the city, and from this particular institution, wished to appear ideologically sound. In this situation they might choose explanations of NDEs that complemented the Marxist materialistic view of the world. If that is the case, our survey would, in part at least, be measuring ideological rather than simply personal responses to NDEs.

On the other hand, the point is complicated by the difficulty of separating public ideologies from personal ones. If the Chinese respondents choose materialistic explanations, do they do so for mere interpersonal reasons or do these views reflect genuinely held personal assumptions? Also, to what extent do materialistic views exist in contradictory but personally acceptable ways with traditional religious views? A qualitative study employing interviews, or a replica-

tion of the survey that does not use people from the city and particularly this educational institution, would be important ways of exploring this problem further.

Finally, the cautious attitudes and preference for medical/psychological explanations may indeed reflect certain cultural values of the Chinese people, and these may serve to complicate the methodological artifact mentioned above. Hisashi Hirayama and Muammer Cetingok (1988) emphasized the importance of the values of interdependence and vertical relations among Asians including the Chinese.

The traditional respect given to those in authority springs from deeper sources than simply the powerless appeasing those with knowledge and power. Among other cultural influences, the Confucian system of thought in China is a secular philosophy permeating all social relations in that country (Shen Ryan, 1985). It emphasizes the interdependence of individuals in a community of interests. This community is then dependent on a community of benevolent authorities who are older, wiser, more informed, or all of these characteristics. This way of relating may bias Chinese respondents in favor of explanations that they believe might be favored by those in authority, in this case the government. Chinese government and academic psychology has favored biological explanations because these explanations are consistent with Marxist theories of historical and dialectical materialism (Brown, 1983; Goodman, 1986). In this context, community explanations for NDEs may reflect both the dominance of these perspectives and/or the known government preference for them. It is not simply the content of the explanations that is cultural in this case, but also the means by which explanations are sought.

Of additional interest are the observations that place of residence and age are correlated with attitudes to someone recounting an NDE. More specifically, rural people and younger persons are more likely to take a positive attitude.

Rural Chinese tolerance for NDEs may derive from the common social experience of peasants with traditional religious ideas and practices. Peasants may have a personal empathy for ancestor worship or stories about the "Pure Land" irrespective of whether these are actual held beliefs of the respondent. They may be more tolerant because they are more accustomed to interacting regularly with those who hold traditional religious beliefs about rebirth and the afterlife. Conversely, urban Chinese may be less receptive to NDEs because they may associate such accounts with the superstitious beliefs of peasant culture. To the "modern" urban dweller in China these may appear "backward," that is, a belief that is inconsistent with modern ideas. Tolerance for NDEs in this cultural context might therefore be lower.

An alternative explanation for the correlation between rural residence and attitudes to an NDEr may be related to the pattern of sampling. The sample was biased towards rural residents and this may load the correlation in this direction. Future research could verify this finding by sampling equal numbers of city and rural people.

The observation that younger persons will take a more positive attitude to NDErs was also found in the Australian study (Kellehear & Heaven, 1989). In that study, the explanation for this tolerance was tied to the pattern of conservative beliefs in different age groups. Older people tend to be more conservative (Wilson, 1973) and this also appears to be the case in China. The crushing of the pro-democracy student movement by the aging rulers of China in June 1989 is a dramatic and tragic example of the clash between youth and age and the experiences and ideologies associated with these.

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