

**Exploring the Needs and Barriers for Death Education
Curriculum in Higher Education in Mainland China**

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis was conducted in full compliance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Except where proper acknowledgment is given, this work is solely the effort of the author. This thesis has not been accepted for the award of any other degree and is not being **concurrently** submitted for any other academic qualification.

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*Exploring the Needs and Barriers for Death Education Curriculum in
Higher Education in Mainland China*

ABSTRACT

Death education remains underdeveloped in higher education institutions in Mainland China due to cultural taboos, limited policy guidance, and insufficient curricular integration. This study aimed to examine the current status, educational needs, and implementation barriers of death education in Mainland Chinese universities, and to evaluate the impact of a structured, culturally sensitive death education curriculum on students' psychological well-being and professional preparedness.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 406 students and 392 faculty members selected using stratified and purposive sampling strategies. The instruments included a self-developed questionnaire assessing perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and barriers, as well as validated scales: the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R), the Coping with Death Scale (CDS), and the Frommelt Attitude Toward Care of the Dying Scale, Form B (FATCOD-B). In addition, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore experiential perspectives and contextual factors. A quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test design involving 160 students was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum intervention. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, difference analysis, and factor analysis, while qualitative data were examined through thematic coding.

The findings revealed significant knowledge gaps, particularly in grief and bereavement literacy, alongside generally positive but culturally constrained attitudes toward death education. Institutional barriers such as insufficient policy support and cultural taboos were identified as major challenges to curriculum integration. The quasi-experimental results demonstrated statistically significant improvements in students' death attitudes, coping competence, and professional preparedness following participation in the structured curriculum. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings supported the development of a culturally adaptive curriculum framework encompassing cognitive understanding, emotional processing, practical competence, and value reflection.

This study contributes empirical evidence for the feasibility and transformative potential of death education in Mainland Chinese higher education. The findings provide theoretical,

methodological, and practical insights for culturally responsive curriculum design and institutional policy development.

Keywords: Death education; higher education; mixed-methods research; quasi-experimental design; death attitudes; coping competence; curriculum development; Mainland China

Meneroka Keperluan dan Halangan bagi Kurikulum Pendidikan Kematian dalam Pendidikan Tinggi di Tanah Besar China

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan kematian masih kurang berkembang dalam institusi pendidikan tinggi di Tanah Besar China disebabkan oleh tabu budaya, panduan dasar yang terhad, serta integrasi kurikulum yang tidak menyeluruh. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti status semasa, keperluan pendidikan, dan halangan pelaksanaan pendidikan kematian di universiti-universiti di Tanah Besar China, serta menilai impak kurikulum pendidikan kematian yang berstruktur dan sensitif terhadap budaya terhadap kesejahteraan psikologi dan kesiapsiagaan profesional pelajar.

Reka bentuk kajian kaedah campuran selari konvergen telah digunakan. Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan melalui soal selidik berstruktur yang diedarkan kepada 406 pelajar dan 392 ahli fakulti yang dipilih menggunakan strategi pensampelan berstrata dan bertujuan. Instrumen yang digunakan termasuk soal selidik yang dibangunkan sendiri oleh penyelidik bagi menilai persepsi, sikap, pengetahuan, dan halangan, serta skala yang telah disahkan, iaitu 'Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R), Coping with Death Scale (CDS), dan Frommelt Attitude Toward Care of the Dying Scale Form B (FATCOD-B)'. Selain itu, data kualitatif diperoleh melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dan perbincangan kumpulan fokus untuk meneroka perspektif pengalaman dan faktor kontekstual. Reka bentuk kuasi-eksperimen pra-ujian dan pasca-ujian melibatkan 160 pelajar telah dijalankan bagi menilai keberkesanan intervensi kurikulum yang dicadangkan. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif, analisis perbezaan, dan analisis faktor, manakala data kualitatif dianalisis melalui pengekodan tematik.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan wujud jurang pengetahuan yang ketara, khususnya dalam literasi berkaitan kesedihan dan kehilangan, di samping sikap yang secara umumnya positif tetapi dibatasi oleh faktor budaya terhadap pendidikan kematian. Halangan institusi seperti kekurangan sokongan dasar dan tabu budaya dikenal pasti sebagai cabaran utama dalam integrasi kurikulum. Keputusan kuasi-eksperimen menunjukkan peningkatan yang signifikan secara statistik dalam sikap terhadap kematian, kecekapan daya tindak, dan kesiapsiagaan profesional pelajar selepas mengikuti kurikulum berstruktur tersebut. Integrasi dapatan kualitatif dan kuantitatif menyokong pembangunan kerangka kurikulum yang adaptif secara budaya yang merangkumi pemahaman kognitif, pemprosesan emosi, kecekapan praktikal, dan refleksi nilai.

Kajian ini menyumbang bukti empirikal mengenai kebolehlaksanaan dan potensi transformatif pendidikan kematian dalam pendidikan tinggi di Tanah Besar China. Dapatan kajian memberikan implikasi teoritikal, metodologi, dan praktikal untuk reka bentuk kurikulum yang responsif terhadap budaya serta pembangunan dasar institusi.

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan kematian; pendidikan tinggi; penyelidikan kaedah campuran; reka bentuk kuasi-eksperimen; sikap terhadap kematian; kecekapan daya tindak; pembangunan kurikulum; Tanah Besar China*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CGS	Centre for Graduate Studies
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
DAP-R	Death attitude profile revised
CDS	Coping with death scale
FATCOD-B	Frommelt attitudes toward care of the dying scale, form B
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
LSD	Least Significant Difference

CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 discusses the study's context and problem statement in relation to current issues germane to the research field. The research queries are then presented alongside the research objectives and hypotheses. This chapter also includes the significance of the study, its limitations and scope, as well as definitions of key terms. The chapter concludes with a concise overview.

1.1 Background of Study

Death, an inherent and universal aspect of the human experience, has consistently engendered profound philosophical and societal discourse. However, culturally mediated perceptions of and attitudes toward mortality significantly influence the development and implementation of death education initiatives. Globally, death education is increasingly recognized as an integral component of comprehensive educational systems, designed to foster a deeper understanding of life and death, cultivate effective grieving processes, and enhance individuals' capacity to navigate end-of-life challenges. This pedagogical approach has achieved a relatively advanced state in numerous Western nations, resulting in a substantial accumulation of theoretical and practical expertise.

Death education in Mainland China remains in its early stages of systematic development, with limited institutional integration and policy endorsement. Due to the influence of traditional Confucian and Buddhist teachings, death is often deemed a taboo subject, leading to a prevalent inclination to evade discussion and even regard it as an unlucky symbol. This cultural reticence presents substantial barriers to the overt and systematic delivery of death education.(Pun et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022; Bai, 2021).In tandem with the progression of social development and modernization, conventional perceptions of life and death are undergoing disruption(Liu, 2022), This has led to a state

of ambiguity and disquietude among members of society, with youth in particular often exhibiting a deficit in appropriate knowledge and psychological preparedness when confronted with mortality.(Liang et al., 2024; Wang, 2020).

The extant literature demonstrates that death education in mainland China is yet in the initial stages of its evolution (Shu et al., 2023), revealing a paucity of empirically supported curricula and efficacious pedagogical strategies (Duan&Lee,2024). Despite the implementation of certain death education-related activities by a number of universities and social organizations, these undertakings are often characterized by a lack of integration, consistency, and well-defined objectives (Lan et al.,2024 ; Wang , 2020) Despite increasing academic attention, the field continues to face structural and conceptual fragmentation, indicating that comprehensive curriculum implementation has yet to be fully realized. Due to the influence of traditional Confucian and Buddhist teachings, death is often deemed a taboo subject, leading to a prevalent inclination to evade discussion and even regard it as an unlucky symbol. This cultural reticence presents substantial barriers to the overt and systematic delivery of death education. (Pun et al., 2024; Zhen et al., 2023).The extant literature exhibits a paucity of investigations into the specific requirements of university students in mainland China and how to more efficaciously administer death education in the presence of cultural diversity. (Duan & Lee, 2024) .

In contrast to the United States and Europe, death education development in higher education in mainland China reveals marked differences. Western nations have acquired extensive expertise in the theoretical, curricular, and practical aspects of death education, and also place greater importance on students' emotional articulation and open discourse. Nevertheless, this model's relevance may be circumscribed by the Chinese cultural setting, where death is commonly considered a sensitive and taboo topic(Ma, 2023).Consequently, the delivery of death education within the higher education sector in mainland China necessitates adapting international expertise while incorporating indigenous cultural values and national realities, thereby fostering an educational model tailored to the Chinese context.(Hong & Sun, 2024)

In addition, social development and demographic changes are leading to more complex issues for university students, including how to address life's uncertainties and death..(Tang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021).In the context of higher education students, exposure to death education has the potential to facilitate both a profound appreciation for

life and a deeper understanding and management of death, while also promoting their personal growth and psychological health.(Ronconi et al., 2023)

Hence, this study seeks to provide an in-depth investigation of the needs pertaining to death education within institutions of higher learning in mainland China, to evaluate the barriers currently hindering its development, and to furnish both theoretical validation and practical directives for the redesign of a death education curriculum framework specifically tailored to the Chinese milieu. This research endeavors, through systematic investigation and deliberate analysis, to promote the overall development of death education in universities on the Chinese mainland, thus making contributions to the cultivation of future talents who possess a sound understanding of death, positive death-related emotions, and the ability to cope with death.

1.2 Problem Statements

Death remains a culturally sensitive and often taboo subject in many societies, including Mainland China, where traditional Confucian and Buddhist values heavily influence perceptions of mortality and the afterlife (Zhang et al., 2020). This cultural hesitancy to discuss death has significant implications for higher education, where there is a growing need to prepare students for professional roles that demand competence in addressing end-of-life issues, such as healthcare, counseling, and social work (Chen & Huang, 2022). Despite the critical importance of this subject, death education is noticeably absent from most higher education curricula in Mainland China, creating a gap in knowledge, psychological preparedness, and cultural competence among students (Liu et al., 2021).

Efforts to introduce death education in Mainland China face several barriers, including deeply rooted cultural stigmas, institutional inertia, and the absence of comprehensive educational frameworks tailored to the Chinese context (Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, while global best practices in death education have demonstrated the value of structured curricula in fostering emotional resilience, ethical sensitivity, and professional preparedness, such approaches often fail to account for the unique cultural and societal dynamics of Mainland China (Kellehear, 2018).

The lack of formalized death education not only limits students' ability to navigate personal encounters with death but also hinders their professional development, especially in disciplines where dealing with loss and grief is a fundamental component (Chen & Huang, 2022). This gap underscores an urgent need to explore the educational needs, perceptions, and barriers associated with death education in higher education settings in Mainland China.

This research aims to address these challenges by identifying the specific needs and barriers to death education, analyzing existing frameworks, and proposing a culturally sensitive and contextually relevant educational framework tailored for Mainland Chinese higher education. By redesigning and implementing this curriculum, the study seeks to enhance students' psychological well-being, cultural competence, and preparedness for addressing death-related issues in both personal and professional spheres.

1.2.1 Contextual gap

Death education has gained recognition globally as a critical component of higher education, particularly in fields such as healthcare, psychology, and social work, where professionals often encounter end-of-life situations (Kellehear, 2018). Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan have integrated death education into their curricula, focusing on fostering emotional resilience, ethical sensitivity, and cultural competence (Chen & Huang, 2022). However, in Mainland China, the integration of death education remains limited, with sporadic efforts that lack consistency, cultural adaptation, and institutional support (Liu et al., 2021).

Existing studies primarily highlight the theoretical importance of death education and the psychological benefits it offers (Zhang et al., 2020), but few address the practical challenges of designing and implementing such programs in the context of Mainland China's unique cultural, societal, and institutional environment. Traditional values rooted in Confucianism and Buddhism often discourage open discussions about death, creating significant cultural barriers (Wang et al., 2019). Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive framework tailored to the specific needs and sensitivities of Chinese students and educators exacerbates the issue, leaving a critical gap in the literature.

While international frameworks provide valuable insights, they fail to account for the nuanced cultural and institutional dynamics of Mainland China. For example, practices from Western contexts may emphasize individual autonomy and open communication, which may not align with Chinese cultural norms that prioritize familial roles and collective decision-making in end-of-life matters (Kellehear, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). This disparity underscores the need for localized research and culturally relevant strategies to address the gaps in death education in Chinese higher education.

This study addresses this contextual gap by exploring the specific needs, perceptions, and barriers associated with death education in Mainland China. It aims to design a culturally sensitive and contextually relevant framework that bridges the disconnect between global best practices and local cultural considerations. By doing so, the research contributes to the broader discourse on death education while providing actionable solutions for higher education institutions in Mainland China.

1.2.2 Empirical Gap

Despite the growing global interest in death education, there remains a lack of empirical research that systematically explores its integration into higher education in Mainland China. While studies in Western contexts have demonstrated the effectiveness of death education in enhancing students' psychological resilience, cultural competence, and professional preparedness (Kellehear, 2018), similar empirical evidence is sparse in the Chinese context. Existing research in Mainland China primarily focuses on theoretical discussions or qualitative insights into cultural attitudes toward death (Zhang et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019), with limited empirical data on how these attitudes translate into educational needs or barriers within higher education institutions.

Moreover, the studies that do exist in Mainland China often lack a comprehensive framework for assessing the effectiveness of death education programs. For instance, while some research highlights the psychological benefits of discussing death-related topics (Liu et al., 2021), there is little empirical evidence on how such programs influence students' professional competencies or their ability to navigate culturally sensitive end-of-life scenarios. This gap leaves educators and policymakers with insufficient data to design and implement effective death education curricula.