At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.

— Britta Erickson, The Art of Xu Bing
Contents

Foreword  Robert A. NEIMEYER ix
Foreword  Che Hung LEONG xi
Foreword  Vivian Taam WONG xiii
Preface xv
Contributors xiii

Chapter 1  Introduction 1
Amy Yin Man CHOW and Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN

PART ONE  DEATH

Chapter 2  Our Memorial Quilt: Recollections of Observations from Clinical Practice on Death, Dying and Bereavement 15
Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN and Amy Yin Man CHOW

Chapter 3  A Personal Journey: The Physician, the Researcher, the Relative, and the Patient 31
Yvonne Yi Wood MAK

Chapter 4  “Letting Go” and “Holding On”: Grieving and Traditional Death Rituals in Hong Kong 65
Peter Ka Hing CHEUNG, Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN, Wai FU, Yawen LI and Grace Yee Kam Pau CHEUNG

Chapter 5  Making Peace with the Unknown: A Reflection on Daoist Funerary Liturgy 87
Chi Tim LAI
Chapter 6  Death from the Buddhist View: Knowing the Unknown
Jing Yin  

Chapter 7  Autopsy in Chinese: A Forensic Pathologist’s View
Philip Swan Lip Beh  

Chapter 8  Death Metaphors in Chinese
Wing Shan Cheung and Samuel Mun Yin Ho  

Chapter 9  What Is Good Death: Bridging the Gap between Research and Intervention
Wallace Chi Ho Chan, Heung Sang Tse and Timothy Hang Yee Chan  

PART TWO  DYING  

Chapter 10  Impact of Palliative Medicine on the Quality of Life of the Dying
Michael Mau Kong Sham, Kin Sang Chan, Doris Man Wah Tse and Raymond See Kit Lo  

Chapter 11  Dying: The Last Month
Raymond See Kit Lo  

Chapter 12  Euthanasia and Forgoing Life-sustaining Treatment in the Chinese Context
Chun Yan Tse and Samantha Mei Che Pang  

Chapter 13  Community Palliative Care in Hong Kong
Faith Chun Fong Liu  

Chapter 14  The Role of Chinese Medicine in Cancer Palliative Care
Siu Man Ng  

Chapter 15  Providing End-of-Life Care: Enhancing Effectiveness and Resilience
Peter Wing Ho Lee and Tracy Tak Ching Kwang  

Chapter 16  Care for Chinese Families with Patients Facing Impending Death: Nurses’ Perspectives
Amy Yin Man Chow, Jess Shuk Fun Lo, Wendy Wai Yin Li and Carmen Yuek Yan LAI  

Chapter 17  Walking a Tightrope: The Loss and Grief of Parents with a Child Suffering from Cancer in Shanghai
Vivian Wei Qun Lou and Cecilia Lai Wan Chan
PART THREE BEREAVEMENT

Chapter 18 Bereavement Care in Hong Kong: Past, Present and Future
Amy Yin Man CHOW and Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN

Chapter 19 When East Meets West: The Implication for Bereavement Counselling
Brenda Wing Sze KOO, Agnes Fong TIN, Elaine Wai Kwan KOO and Sze-man LEE

Chapter 20 The Use of Structured Therapeutic Bereavement Groups
Agnes Fong TIN, Elaine Wai Kwan KOO and Sze-man LEE

Chapter 21 The Use of Volunteers in Bereavement Care
Eddie Ho Chuen CHAN

Chapter 22 The Day After: The Suicide Bereavement Experience of Chinese in Hong Kong
Amy Yin Man CHOW

Chapter 23 Conclusion
Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN and Amy Yin Man CHOW

Reference

Index
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Introduction

Amy Yin Man CHOW and Cecilia Lai Wan CHAN

Chinese Culture and Death

Fear marks the boundary between the known and the unknown. Some Chinese people believe that talking about death will increase the likelihood of occurrence. Also, by talking about death, evil spirits will be attracted to haunt people.\(^1\,^2\) In facing death, individual response is inevitably moulded by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of one's culture.\(^3\,^4\) Despite the large Chinese emigrant population in major cities in the world, available material in English on death, dying and bereavement among Chinese people is scarce. Only recently has a book, Fielding and Chan's\(^5\) *Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care in Hong Kong: The First Decade* addressed cancer deaths, psychosocial and palliative care, in English. Leung and Cheung's\(^6\) book, *Viewing Death*, in Chinese, is a collection of papers presented at a 2002 conference on life and death. Bagley and Tse's\(^7\) book is on suicide and bereavement of adolescents in Hong Kong. Other Chinese books on the topic of death and dying are translated works from the West\(^8\,^9\) or from Japan.\(^11\,^13\) There are a number of Chinese books on thanatology in Taiwan\(^14\,^18\) and Hong Kong.\(^19\,^20\) However, Chinese people in different communities may hold very different beliefs and practices related to death and dying. For example, Chinese in Taiwan want to die at home,\(^2\) whereas their counterparts in Hong Kong would prefer to die in a hospital.\(^21\) As Hong Kong is a place where East meets West, most professionals working in the field of death, dying and bereavement adapt knowledge from the West to their practice with the Chinese population. The intention of this volume is to consolidate and disseminate valuable practical wisdom with professionals in the local and international communities who serve Chinese patients and their family members.
Death: A Chinese Experience

Chinese people are known for their inability to articulate their feelings and for commonly resorting to somatization in times of stress and emotional difficulties. Grief and bereavement is even harder to articulate than are feelings, as death is seen as a curse in the Chinese culture. The intensity of the loss, pain, guilt and shame can be so acute that Chinese bereaved persons are unable to put their feelings into words. As well as somatizing their suffering, the pragmatic and action-oriented Chinese people focus on the performance of funeral and burial rituals, in the hope that such action can contribute to the smooth reincarnation of the diseased person. Thus, active participation in rituals and religious compliance to advice from authority are common. As a result of heavy reliance on experts and medical technology, ordinary people are excluded from taking a meaningful role in end-of-life decisions both for themselves and for their loved ones. What is left after death is a strong sense of helplessness, frustration and guilt among bereaved family members.

Disclosure of grief to non-family members might be perceived as inappropriate. Chinese family members are very close to each other. Discussing family matters in public would be disloyal to the family. Survivors should say only good things about the deceased family member. Sibling rivalry, interpersonal tensions or conflicts previously hidden may surface soon after a death in a family, as death is a stressful and traumatic event for everyone. There are also conflicting role expectations, alliances as well as questions of power and control, especially when it comes to the division of the estate and for rights over the items the deceased person has bequeathed.

Death Denial

Despite the knowledge that everyone dies, there is a general denial of death among the Chinese population. It is believed that death will come knocking if the word “death” is called or mentioned. Even the thought of the word “death” would bring bad luck. As people do not talk about death, they do not prepare for it. When people die without preparing for it, they die with unfinished business. Such denial of death may result in deep regret and severe self-blame among the bereaved loved ones.

Similar to saying “Your Excellency” or “Your Honour”, people addressed the emperor in China as “Ten Thousand Years Old, Ten Thousand Years Old”. Princes and princesses are “Thousand Years Old, Thousand Years Old”, to signify that they are close to heavenly gods who are immortal. Death is not acceptable to those in power. The attending doctors who failed to heal the emperor would have to be buried with him, for their incompetence at curing disease. Enormous resources were invested in the construction of tombs for
kings and emperors, even when they were young. The most scenic places in China are the tombs of ancient emperors. Most of the treasures recovered from tombs are now being turned over to heritage museums all over the world. The tombs at Xi’an are a good example of the magnificence of an emperor’s tomb.

Talking about death is taboo in the Chinese culture. Words that sound like “death” are avoided as far as possible. For example, the number “four” (四) sounds like “death” (死) and so is avoided. Car registration numbers with the number four may invite accidental death. The numbers “fourteen” and “twenty-four” on car plates are worse, because fourteen sounds like sure (ten) death (four), and twenty-four like easy (two) death (four). Some car-owners will withdraw their randomly assigned plate number if it includes the number four, even at the expense of paying extra, to have another chance of a licence plate without four. The number “9413” will never appear, as it means nine out of ten will die (four), and only one out of ten will live (three). Flats on the fourth, fourteenth and subsequent floors ending in four in multistorey buildings in Hong Kong usually cost less than do flats on other floors. Some developers even deliberately omit all floors that end with the number four. More superstitious developers also remove the thirteenth floor from the numbering. Living on a floor that ends in the number four is seen as unlucky, as it can hasten death in the family, although there is no empirical evidence of this.

**Death: A Failure to Care**

In the midst of the rapid advancement of medical technology, people are given a false impression that modern medicine can cure all previously incurable diseases, and people do not have to die. Doctors see terminal illness as a “failure” of medical treatment, and family members see death as an “unsuccessful” cure. No matter how old the patients are, family members usually believe that their loved ones have died too young. This strong refusal to accept death reinforces prolonged grief among family members, because their loved ones continue to fight vigorously until the very last moment of life. When we get an injection, if we relax our arms and muscles, there is very little pain after the injection. If we are tense and tighten up, the insertion of the needle will bring greater and prolonged pain. The same phenomenon takes place in death and dying. If one is willing to accept death and relax, there is greater comfort and peace. If one fights death vigorously, the death can leave severe damage and suffering, not only on the deceased but also on the loved ones. Thus, if one is more willing to let go of life, one has more energy to live and die with peace of mind. A study on cancer patients found that fatalism and a fighting spirit is a continuous positive variable in the Chinese population. Accepting fate can actually free up one’s energy to cope more effectively with life-threatening illness and trauma.
Chinese family members are closely knitted by a sophisticated web of mutual obligations and responsibilities. The refusal to embrace death is also driven by a survivor’s guilt at failure to fulfil filial obligations towards elderly parents, the duty of a husband to care for his wife, and the responsibility of parents to look after their children. For failure to protect loved ones from ill health and death, Chinese persons may indulge in self-blame, shame and guilt.

The Case of a “Crazy” Doctor

Dick was a well-known TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) practitioner who had a very good relationship with his wife and mother. He lost both of them to cancer in one year. He felt that he was totally “useless”, as he could not cure his mother and his wife. He closed his clinic and lived in self-blame. Ten years later, a community worker identified him as a “crazy herbalist” who was living on welfare in a slum and spending his time talking to insects.

Death: Isolation of Bereaved Family Members

According to old traditions, a white lantern is hung outside the house if someone in that family has died. Then, the neighbours and others in the community will know what has happened. People would come to mourn and offer their condolences to the family during the first two days. Then the corpse would be buried. The children, friends and relatives will stay awake in the house, burn paper money continuously and chat until the next day. Stories around the deceased person were told, and people felt the re-establishment of connections. In psycho-social-spiritual terms, such a ritual is a debriefing experience as well as an occasion for the living trying to pave the way for the deceased to move into the next world. Burning paper money is seen as a way to provide the deceased person with the necessary financial support so that he or she can buy his or her way through the guards and gods of the underworld, to ensure a good reincarnation in the subsequent life assignment. Daoists and Buddhists describe the elaborate punishments in hell for the various crimes one commits, as deterrents for the living to violate the social expectations of a good citizen.

# Books and other publications on what punishments in hell are like can be obtained from temples in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Buddhists believe that, by promoting knowledge of karma (causes and consequences), one can accumulate credits in Heaven. Thus, they would sponsor books to be given out freely to temple visitors. Some of these books can also be found in vegetarian restaurants run by practising Buddhists.
After the burial, people will stop visiting. In fact, the house in which a person dies will be seen as a place that radiates bad energy (qi, 氣). It may be difficult to understand this from a Western viewpoint. Why do peers shy away when the family needs support most? In the old rural communities in China, a significant number of deaths might have been caused by infectious diseases. The bad qi around the family of someone who died might have been bacteria and virus that may spread infection and illness. Naturally, the community would tend to avoid going near that household.

Also because of the fear of infectious diseases, all clothes worn by the family members during the funeral and burial will have to be burnt. The family will have to eat a good meal after going to the burial, take a bath in hot water with herbs, and then burn all clothing. Although the original intention of such rituals was to stop infection, these measures reinforced the traditional concept that there is negative energy around death. Anything related to the funeral and burial rituals carry bad luck or evil energy and thus have to be destroyed. Therefore, for three months after the death, neighbours and friends will not visit a home where someone died. They have to walk over a burning fire before entering their own home, in order to burn away the "bad" or "toxic" energy that they might have picked up in the home of the deceased person. If we look at it from the perspective of modern medicine, these measures were performed for the prevention of the spread of epidemics in olden days.

Bereaved family members may not be able to concentrate and be accident-prone. If something goes wrong, the hypothesis that the bereaved person carried "bad luck" is confirmed. Without trying to find out the true reasons for cultural myths, the concepts of toxic energy and bad fate around bereaved family members continued into modern society. The fear of death and the reluctance to go near a house in which someone died are still very common, despite the fact that very few people actually die of infections in modern Chinese cities such as Hong Kong. The mass infection of SARS in Toronto during the SARS outbreak in 2003 reminded us of the possibility of infection at funeral services.

When friends are not willing to visit, the bereaved are left to grieve alone. Besides the loss of a loved one, bereaved persons have to bear social isolation from friends and peers. They are expected to stay away from happy celebrations such as weddings and birthday parties, because the bereaved will bring bad luck. It is a stressful experience to have someone die in the family, especially when the bereaved are seen as carrying negative energy around them.

Funerals and burial rituals give bereaved family members a sense of security, as it creates structure for the bereaved to hold on to. There are specific tasks to carry out during each day after death until the forty-ninth day, when the deceased is supposed to be reincarnated. Traditional Chinese mourning rituals last for three years, according to Confucius’ teaching. Widows
in traditional China are expected to mourn for the rest of their lives, because a woman can be married to only one man. Details of the Daoist rituals can be found in Chapter 4.

**Death: The Great Teacher of Life**

Death is often seen as a bad experience, yet there can be precious discoveries. The positive reaction to the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a good example. Through the pain of facing death, we can appreciate the blessings in life. It is in the midst of the fear of death of our beloved family members that we treasure each and every one of them more dearly. In fact, death is not necessarily sad and miserable. Death can be a precious moment of completion, fulfillment and a perfect ending to lifelong learning. Our funeral is equivalent to our graduation ceremony to celebrate a life worth living and the legacies we leave. Awareness of death leads us to the appreciation of the vulnerability of life and life itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life</th>
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<tr>
<td>Life is an opportunity, benefit from it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life is beauty, admire it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life is bliss, taste it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a dream, realize it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a challenge, meet it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a duty, complete it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a game, play it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is love, enjoy it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is mystery, know it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a promise, fulfil it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is sorrow, overcome it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a song, sing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is a struggle, accept it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is tragedy, confront it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is an adventure, dare it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life is life, fight for it.</td>
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*Author Unknown*

If we replace the word “life” in the above verse with the word “death”, most of the sentences in the passage still make sense. Death is part of life. Life is uncertain. The only certain promise in life is that all of us will die. According to Eastern philosophers, life is a difficult journey full of suffering. Infants start the journey by crying and end with a sense of relief when they
Most people refuse to acknowledge the inevitability of death. As we become attached to people, to possessions, to power, to material comfort, it is hard to say goodbye to life.

Life and death, sickness and health, meeting and parting, love and hate, attachment and letting go, apathy and involvement, disengagement and integration, dependency and alienation are part of the reality of our existence. We have an impression that these facts of life are opposites, like the sun and the moon. In reality, we can always find the moon shining in the sky before the sunset. Life is interesting because of its impermanence and unpredictability. The processes of gain and loss can be both joyful and painful. For example, when a couple gets married, they are happy and joyful. Despite the wish to live happily ever after, one certain outcome of marriage is that it will end. In pre-marital classes, couples learn to handle matters of trust, intimacy, in-law relationships, family planning and asset management. However, there have yet to be offered anticipatory divorce or bereavement courses to help people prepare for the end of marriage, through spousal death or marital breakdown.

**Death, Dying and Bereavement**

In the first part of the book, we focus on the discussion of death. Chapter 2 is the recollections of our clinical experiences in the area of death, dying and bereavement. At times we witnessed the pain of the family when a family member faced death. Some patients isolated themselves or used all their energy to fight the unbeaten enemy — death. There are those who use their final days to attend to unfinished business, to reconcile and to forgive their loved ones as well as to realize their dreams. Those that can give the patient permission to die have an easier bereavement. Effective communication among family members seems to be a crucial step to restructure a mutually accepted way of facing the impending death.

In Chapter 3, Yvonne Mak shares her personal experience as a patient, a hospice physician, a researcher and a care-giver of her own family members with life threatening illness. She affirms that death can be transformational. There can be growth through the process of confronting our death and end of life and that of our loved ones and the people we serve.

In addition to social workers and physicians, a professional actively involved in the area of death is the funeral director. The funeral arrangements in Hong Kong are quite different from those in the West. Usually, different rituals dominate funerals. Based on an interview with a funeral consultant in Hong Kong, personal reflections as well as literature review, Ka Hing Cheung and colleagues contribute the fourth chapter of this book, unveiling some of the mysteries around the Daoist funeral rituals in Hong Kong. Using the
continuum of letting go and holding on, they analysed the meaning behind the different rituals and how they contributed to the adjustment to bereavement. Chapter 5 is also about funeral rituals, but from an academic point of view. Chi Tim Lai shares his reflections on Daoist funerary liturgy. A chapter by Jin Yin follows, on the Buddhist view of death, dying and bereavement.

Forensic pathologists deal with unnatural deaths such as suicide, homicide and accident. About thirty percent of deaths in Hong Kong involve pathologists in identifying the causes of death. Philip Beh, an experienced forensic pathologist, briefs us on the procedures in handling unnatural deaths, in Chapter 7. Facing the deep-rooted traditional belief of being buried whole, he shares the interaction and dynamics with family members on the negotiation of autopsies.

Wing Shan Cheung and Samuel Ho share their study on the personal meaning of death among Chinese, through the images or metaphors of death. The most common theme in the drawings of death among their respondents is “a separation from the loved one”. The interpersonal nature of death and bereavement is obvious. Although the majority of the respondents used negative adjectives to describe death, as well as black and white to draw images of death, a substantial percentage of respondents used positive adjectives or bright colours. The perception of death among Chinese is not necessarily all negative. Wallace Chan and his colleagues reconsider the topics of good death through a historical review of traditional philosophy and public opinion studies. Physical and psychosocial well-being are the two key factors contributing to a good death.

The second section of our book is on the process of dying. About one-third of the deaths in Hong Kong are caused by cancer. Palliative hospice care is for those who have incurable cancer. Through home care and hospice beds, professionals address the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual needs of their patients through the last months, weeks and days of their lives. The Chinese name for hospice care has been translated as xian zhong (善终, literally, good ending). More recently, there has been a change in the use of term, because the public resents the concept of the hospice and equates it with death and the termination of life. New terms, such as xian ning (善寧, literally, good and peaceful), ning yang (寧養, peaceful and nurturing) and shu huan (舒緩, relax and relief) are being used in the name of service units instead of the old term of “good ending”. Chinese in Hong Kong probably find the term “zhong” (终, ending) hard to accept. No matter what name is used, the professionals of palliative hospice care in Hong Kong are committed to providing quality care to all who are facing death. When we first shared our idea of editing this book, responses from the palliative care teams were very positive. Contributors of the second section of this book are from the palliative hospice care professionals in Hong Kong.

Michael Sham, Doris Tse, Kin Sang Chan and Raymond Lo are leaders of
hospital and palliative care in Hong Kong. Their chapter, “Impact of Palliative Care on the Quality of Life of the Dying”, succinctly describes the key concerns from the perspective of health care providers. With a rich historical review and detailed research findings, Chapter 10 guides us through a timeline of palliative care development in Hong Kong. Raymond Lo further elaborates on the medical and psycho-social-spiritual aspects of the final month of a dying patient. After discussing the problems faced by patients and families, he proposes strategies to relieve both the physical symptoms and psychosocial distresses.

Chinese people use the terms “euthanasia” and “palliative hospice care” interchangeably. The confusion lies in the similarities in their Chinese name and poor public knowledge of what death, euthanasia and palliative hospice care are about. Chun Yan Tse and Samantha Pang offer the term “euthanasia” from medical, legal and cultural points of view in Chapter 12. They further differentiate the term from “palliative care” and “forgoing life-sustaining treatment”. Though forgoing life-sustaining treatment seems to be a patient’s individual decision, such a decision is affects the whole family as well.

Nursing and community care are two significant components in palliative hospice care. Faith Liu, an experienced nurse specialist in palliative care, highlights the development of community palliative care in Hong Kong, in Chapter 13. Because of her extensive experience in caring for families with end-stage cancer, this chapter blends her expert knowledge and her devotion to promoting humanity. At the end of her chapter, she suggests practical tips that health-care professionals should note.

Despite the fact that Western medicine dominates the health-care delivery system in Hong Kong, patients pragmatically seek different sources of care, including Chinese medicine, when disease progresses. Siu Man Ng, a registered practitioner in Chinese medicine with rich experience in the field of mental health, describes the contribution of Chinese medicine to cancer palliative care, in Chapter 14. For those unfamiliar with the concepts of Chinese medicine, this chapter is an excellent start. Chinese medicine can be a complimentary treatment and helps to reduce undesirable side effects of chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery. Chinese medicine can also enhance the total well-being of the dying patients and increase the participation of family members, by helping them to accept the inevitability of death.

Human resources are the most important assets in the health-care system, especially in palliative care. Peter Lee and Tracy Kwan remind us of the importance of staff support in palliative care. Compared with other units in health care, palliative hospice care has the highest “death rate”. In repeatedly confronting death, which might be taken as professional failure, health-care professionals respond with great emotional and spiritual pain. Lee and Kwan share their vision of how appropriate staff support can facilitate greater effectiveness in the delivery of palliative care.

Death can also be caused by illnesses other than cancer and can happen
in wards other than hospice wards. Amy Chow and nurses in Kwong Wah Hospital describe ways of handling death in acute wards like medical, surgical and intensive care units, in Chapter 16. Strategies in working with patients and families facing death with little time to prepare for it are described through two case stories. A CDE model is introduced for working with families facing impending death.

Although the majority of deaths take place in late life, children and adolescents can die. In Chapter 17, Vivian Lou and Cecilia Chan discuss their study of grieving parents of children with cancer in Shanghai, where couples are allowed only one child. Thus the impending death of the only child may mean an end to their future as parents. The parents may spend all their money or even get themselves into heavy debt, as there is limited financial support for medical care in China. The parents grieve the loss of the child as well as the end of their dreams. It is hoped that this chapter can raise the concern of policy-makers on the establishment of proper medical insurance and protection for the population in mainland China.

The third section of this book focuses on bereavement, the loss of loved ones through death. In Chapter 18, we describe the development of bereavement care in Hong Kong. As there is no equivalent Chinese term for bereavement, we increase the awareness of the needs of bereaved persons and generate guiding principles in working with the Chinese population. These strategies have been well received by professionals all over the world and can be applied to Chinese who are migrants to other countries.

Agnes Tin, Brenda Koo, Elaine Koo, and See Man Lee of the Jessie and Thomas Tam Centre (JTTC), the community-based bereavement counselling centre in Hong Kong, contributed to Chapters 19 and 20. Chapter 19 integrates the traditional Eastern values and cultures into counselling models and offers practical guidelines in serving different bereaved groups of widows, widowers, parents, children and grandchildren. Chapter 20 discusses the theoretical background, design, application and implementation of structured therapeutic bereavement groups in Hong Kong. The authors introduce creative and culturally sensitive group activities as well as outcome evaluation on the effectiveness of these groups.

In addition to professional care, volunteers provide bereavement services. Eddie Chan, from the Comfort Care Concern Group, a volunteer-oriented organization in providing services for terminally ill and bereaved persons, shares his experience in using volunteers in bereavement care. Chan discusses the difficulties encountered in recruitment, selection, training and mobilizing volunteerism in the Chinese culture. Contrary to common beliefs that bereaved Chinese person is well supported by the family, Chan saw growing demand for volunteers in bereavement care as well as in guidance through funeral and burial rituals.
Suicide is considered a family shame. Along with guilt, shame, confusion, the traumatic scene of the suicide and the complicated criminal investigations before getting a death certificate, the pathway to recovery for the bereaved family of a suicide is often prolonged and difficult. In the last chapter, Chow portrays the pathway of the bereaved families of suicides in Hong Kong. A SUICIDE bereavement model is proposed as the intervention with this special target group.

We hope the rich cultural illustrations on a different temporal frame of death can help to paint an impressionist picture of death among Chinese, a forbidden and mysterious yet necessary path that we all have to take in our lifetime. Let’s start the adventurous journey ...
Index

Abandonment 140, 295, 303
Accident and emergency room (A&E) 226
Accomplishments 129
Active treatment 152
Acupuncture 201, 202
Adult children, Grieving 267
Advance directives 313
Adversity 314
Altruism 281
Anatomy 114, 115
Ancestor worship 259
Anniversaries 258
Appreciation 217, 314
Assumptive world 263
Attachment 100
Attitudes towards death and dying 140
Audits 144, 145, 154, 165
Autopsy, 105, 108, 113, 114, 235, 299
Resistance to 112, 113
Autonomy, 158, 172, 188
Family 174
Bad luck 5, 67, 214, 264, 276, 290, 296, 305
Bad news,
   Breaking of 226, 266
   Receiving 226, 298
Balancing harm with benefit 154
Bardo, semi divine being 100
Befrienders 286
Bereaved children 266-267
Bereaved persons,
   Guilt of 20
   Isolation of 4-5, 214
   Self-actualization of 264
   Self-care of 264
   Self-identity of 264
   Self-image of 264, 277
   Support for 265
   Unsolicited support of 19
Bereavement, 253
   Suicide 293, 295
Bereavement as social construction 261
Bereavement care, 25, 286
   Coordinated multidisciplinary 260
   Indigenous 258, 259
Bereavement counselling, 225, 236, 254, 255, 261, 275, 286, 289
   Effectiveness of 257, 276
   Universal need of 257
Bereavement counsellors 312
Bereavement experience,
   Sharing of 259
Bereavement groups 254, 265, 273, 277, 283, 286
Bio-psycho-spiritual 140
Bo-soul 71, 88-89
Body of the deceased
   Bathing of 73, 85, 134, 231, 232
   Claiming of 308
   Contact with 83, 231
   Handling of 134, 230
Identification of 209, 286, 290, 291
Touching of 73, 83, 192, 231
Viewing of 134, 231, 232, 299
Body-mind-spirit approach 254, 315
Body-related expressions 258–259
Bowel obstruction 156
Breaking of bad news 226
Browning out 220
Buddhist practices
  Avoid crying 99
  Don’t touch the body of deceased 99
  Meditation 99
  Reciting the name of Buddha 99
Buddhism 93, 128, 143, 215, 262
Burden of illness 139
Burden to others 130, 131, 172, 186, 246
Burial 68, 113
Burnout 220

Cachexia 147, 162
Calmness 307
Care at home 185, 186
Caring for
  the dead 90
  the living 90
Cause and effect 96
CDE Model 233
Chants 92, 98, 99, 302
Children as possession 242
Chinese Medicine 195
Ching Ming Festival 115, 263
Chung Yeung Festival 263
Cleansing after funeral 5, 70, 76
Commonality,
  Sense of 263
Communication,
  Facilitating 233
  Indirect 262
  Non-verbal 228, 233
Communication skills 227, 233
Communication with patients and
  families 165, 228
Community-based services 243, 255, 273
Community care 164, 183
Community education 147, 153, 256, 286
Community nursing service 184
Compassion 215, 217, 218, 219, 222, 227, 311
Compensation 244
Complementary and alternative medicine
  (CAM) 195, 313
Concealment of cause of death 295
Condolence cards 254
Confucian traditions 69
Confucians 90, 128, 142, 143, 186, 211, 216, 242, 267
Connectedness 35, 45, 46, 57, 217, 311
Consensus-building approach 176
Constipation 142
Consultative service 147, 184
Continuing Bond 258, 259, 263, 267, 270, 283
Continuous effort 308
Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) 163, 164
Coroner 105
Coroners Ordinance 108
Cremation 68, 113, 286, 291, 308
CT-scans 114
Culture 258, 261, 271, 277, 291, 295
Cycle of life and death 93

Daoism, 87, 128, 143
  Definition of 87
  History of 87
Daoist masters, daoshi 91
Daoist philosophy 171
Daoist rites
  Attack on hell 91
  Bathing and dressing 91
  Crossing the bridge 91, 92
  Invocation of Daoist God 91
  Penitential litanies 88, 91
  Retreat 88
  Recitation scared scriptures 88, 91
  Rituals of merit 88
  Summons of the soul 89
  Universal deliverance of hungry ghosts 91
  Untying the knots 91
Daoist texts
  Scripture of Great Peace 87, 89
Day care 164
Death,
  Acceptance of 131, 230
  Acknowledgement of 261, 279
Adjectives about 121, 124
Announcement of 226
Avoidance of 3, 17
Awareness of 129
Causes of 106, 108, 110, 113, 114
Certifying 107
Colours describing 120
Community education of 147, 153
Continued existence in 117
Denial of 2, 17
Drawing about 121, 122-123
Fear of 118, 142
Full meal before 70
Good 127, 129, 131, 132, 133, 215, 231, 256
Meaning of 117, 119, 123, 125, 126, 262
Metaphors of 118, 119, 126, 261
Negative energy around 5
Positive orientation of 124
Preventing for one's 216, 225
Registration for 304, 308
Undignified 152
Unexpected 268
Unnatural 105, 132
Untimely 88, 268
Death and Life 117
Death Anxiety 125
Death as beginning of afterlife 118
Death as extinction 118
Death certificate 107, 291
Death concepts,
   Biological 121-122, 123
   Psychological 121-122
   Metaphysical 121-122
Death constructs 118
Death education 313
Death of children 68, 231, 241, 243
Death rattle 156
Death scene 235
Debriefing 289, 309
Deceased,
   Continuing bond with the 65, 72
   Identity of 110
   Photographs of 77, 80-81
   Relationship with 83,
   Talking about 76
Throwing away belongings of 77
Transformation of 83
Decision-making process 174, 176, 231, 233
Delivery of messages 234
Demons 89
Dependent origination,
   Principle of 94
Destagnation 203, 205
Diagnosis of terminal illness,
   Disclosure of 18
   Informing 212
Die at home 147, 188
Die on table 227
Dilemma,
   Ethical 139, 152
   Practical 139
Disclosure of information 174, 191, 245
Discretion 235
Disease 262
Disease-centred 140
Dreams 259
Dying,
   Fear of 157
Dying at home 130, 144, 193
Dying patient,
   Communication with 81
   Decision-making of 174, 175, 231, 233, 312
   Dignity of 158
   Existential concern of 159
   Incompetent 175
   Permission to die for 26
   Reassurance for 25-26,
   Self acceptance of 16-17,
   Struggle of 24-25,
   Suffering of 45, 132, 152, 156, 157, 174
   Vulnerabilities of 37
Dying phase 151
   Dying with dignity 15
   Dynamic equilibrium 198
Dyspnoea 147, 153, 155, 165, 204
Eating 142, 161, 191, 229
Elderly,
   Grieving 268-269
Eldest son 74, 75, 191, 230
Emotion-oriented 265

Emotions,
Angry 228, 302, 304
Anxious 211, 222
Coping of 243
Expression of 210, 214, 247, 254, 258, 262, 263, 266, 267, 277, 279–280, 282
Intense 210, 233, 265
Sorrowful 304

Emotional well-being 218
Empathetic approach 145, 217
Empathy 237, 287, 307
Empowerment 158, 278, 309, 310
Empty nest 269
End-of-life care 209, 227
End-of-life concerns 161
End-of-life decisions, 256
Communication of 24
Ethical considerations 302
Eulogies 84
Euthanasia, 169
Chinese term for 171
Definition of 169
Legal 169
Legalization of 170, 173
Patient requesting 36, 38, 176

Evidence-based practice 256
Evil spirit 89, 296

Exhaustion,
Emotional 220
Mental 220
Physical 220

Existential well-being 158, 281
Experiential learning 31-32, 36, 43
Explanation 235
Expression of grief 92, 270, 277

Extension,
Biological 270
Psychological 270

Face 142, 160–161, 262, 295

Family,
Ambivalence of 248
Angry 111, 132
Consensus within 161
Decision making of 235, 247

Discrepancies within 152
Gathering of 79, 81
Good 130
Needs of 185, 229–230, 244
Protecting 312
Relationships with 190
Self-actualization of 264
Self-care of 264
Shame of 262
Suffering of 48, 50, 89, 106, 186, 312

Family affairs 259
Family autonomy 174
Family communication 243
Family continuity 242
Family determination 174
Family dreams 246
Family involvement 174
Family obligations 130, 133, 211, 215, 228, 229, 248, 263, 276, 305
Family support 158
Family ties 142

Fate,
Clashes of 296
Fatigue 146, 153, 204
Fee-for-service model 242
Feelings, sharing of 2
Feng Shui (Geomancy) 67, 262, 296
Festivals 258
Filial piety 15, 70, 85, 186, 229, 267, 313
Final moment of consciousness 99, 100
Financial considerations 173, 186, 242-243, 247, 290
Five elements 196-197
Food as care 142, 162, 229
Forces,
Facilitating 197
Repressing 197
Forgoing life-sustaining treatment 169, 173
Fragility of life 305
Fu (Blessing) 70

Funeral,
Extravagant 130
Function of 5, 6, 68
Happy 216
Invitation to 302
Involvement in 267, 270
Laughing 130
Meaning of 84
Preparing for one's 82, 130, 216, 256
Funeral halls 302
Funeral industry 84-85,
Funeral rites
Attack on hell 74, 91
Bathing and dressing 73, 85, 91
Break a comb 73
Burning paper money 75
Crossing the bridge 75, 91, 92
Hero's shedding of mourning clothes 76, 84
Last adornment 73
Last respects 75
Longevity meal 77
Receive the heads of longevity 77
Untying the knots 74, 91
Funeral rituals 253, 277, 279, 286, 291, 302
Funeral services,
Buddhist 66
Daoist 66, 73-76, 83, 88, 91
Funeral support 289
Gender 265, 266
Goodbye,
Saying 82, 83
Good deeds 301
Gratitude 217
Grief, 254, 275
Accommodating of 276
Definition of 275
Grief Reactions Assessment Form (GRAF) 258, 273
Griever,
Instrumental 266
Intuitive 266
Silent 308
Gui (Ghost) 89, 92, 296
Guilt 142, 152, 162, 216, 217, 259, 268, 295, 302, 304
Habit 95
Healing 63
Help-seeking,
Reluctance in 190, 258
Helplessness 247
Herbalist consultation 186
Holistic care 145, 227, 315, 317
Holistic perspective 196, 203
Home care 164, 243
Homicide 303
Homogenous 277
Hope 159, 270, 281
Hopelessness 250
Hospice 255, 285
Hospice care 183
Hospice Care Performance Inventory 144
Humanity 222
Humour 221
Hungry Ghosts Festival 101
I Ching 196
Imbalance in systems 199
Immortality 128
Impermanence 100, 103, 128
Incompleteness 303
Incontinence 158
Independence,
Loss of 142
In-depth interviews 244, 245
Indigenous practice 256, 258, 259, 313
Infantilizing 268
Information,
Sharing of 249, 308
Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor 196
Integration of
Chinese and Western Medicine 207
Intensive Care Unit (ICU) 226, 231
Interdependent 117, 143, 214, 242, 264, 268, 269, 276, 312
Interpersonal 118, 122, 230, 263, 264, 273, 276, 277, 311
Interpersonal learning 282
Insurance,
Health care 242, 250
Insurance claims 106
Joy 222
Karma 67, 95, 96, 97, 98, 102, 313
Weighty 97-98
Habitual 98
Death-proximate 98
Lactation 232

Lama 98

Last office 226, 230, 235

Last month of life 155

Last thought 97

Last weeks of life 146

Last wish 130, 133

Law of Conservation 94

Law of nature 270

Law-abiding 111

Legacy,

Leaving a 316

Legislations 111

Let-go 259,

Let nature take its course 146, 158

Leukaemia 241, 246, 249

Life after death 93, 94

Life-saving orientation 212

Limited time 219

Listening 35

Loss of dignity 142

Loss of future 246

Loss of independence 142

Loss of social role 142

Love 215, 217, 311, 317

Making sense of death 303, 307

Malignant hypercalcaemia 152, 154

Manifestation of seeds 96

Meaning,

Positive 314

Reconstruction of 127, 134–135, 227

Meaning making 313, 314

Meaning of death 263, 270, 295, 296, 303

Meaning of grief 270, 277

Meaning of life 158–159, 160, 183, 222, 281

Meaning of work 217, 222

Medical devices 114

Medical expenses 250

Medical malpractices 114

Medical social worker 249, 254, 312

Meditation 99

Memorial services 101–102

Memories,

Sharing of 236, 263

Meridian theory 198

Microscopic examination 115

Mindfulness 41

Moment of death 97–99

Mood disturbances 205,

Morphine,

Intravenous 155

Oral 155

Reluctance in using 190

Subcutaneous delivery of 155

Mortuary 134

Mourning,

Chronic 249

Mourning cloth 115

Mourning period,

Duration of 84

End of 71, 72, 84

Mouth care 144

MRI 114

Multi-disciplinary 307

Murder 300

Mutual support 254, 288, 302, 317

Mystery 124

Nasogastric tube 156

Natural Instincts 113

Nausea 142, 144

Next-of-kin 108

Niche 291

No-show rate 258

Non-cancer 147, 153

Non-judgemental 157, 263

Non-maleficence 173

Non-possessiveness 311

Normalization 277

Nourishing life, 87

Now 220

Offerings 101, 263

Ongoing in-service training 287

One-child policy 242

Organ donation 300

Organs,

Yin 197

Yang 198

Outreaching consultative service 184

Overnight stay facilities 164
Paediatrics 243

Pain, 142, 143, 144, 147, 153, 154, 204, 314
  Avoidance of 143
  Assessment of 143
  Multi-dimensions of 143
Pain management 143, 144, 158

Palliative care, 139, 144, 151, 172
  Art of 31, 33, 37
  Audits of 144–145, 154, 165
  Chinese terms for 171
  Community 183
  Curriculum of 62
  Definition of 183
  Effectiveness of 146
  History of 140–141
  Purpose of 183
  Satisfaction towards 143, 145, 184, 185
  Training in 140, 153, 164

Palliative care worker,
  Avoidance of 213
  Commitment of 219
  Demoralization of 213
  Duty of 158
  Emotional management of 217
  Failure of 216
  Goal-setting of 219
  "I" or “me” of 219
  Involvement of 209, 210, 213
  Over-identification with patient by 213
  Personal distress of 210, 238
  Self-care of 215
  Sense of helplessness 212-213, 238
  Stress of 220, 226
  Struggle of 53, 152, 209, 214, 226
  Suffering of 34, 46–47, 209
  Transference 209, 210
  Uncomfortable in communication of 152, 209

Palliative Home Care Team 184, 313

Palliative medicine 147, 154, 212

Parent,
  Grieving 269–270
  Parent-child 243, 270
  Paternalistic 174

Pathologists 106
Pathology 114
Patience 145
Peace of body 129
Peace of mind 129
Peace of thought 129
Person-centred 140
Personal growth 276
Personhood 45, 46
Play 267
Police Investigation 108, 300, 308
Postvention 293
Practice,
  Reflective 39
  Pre-diagnostic phase 151
  Pre-group interviews 278
  Preferred place of death 1
  Preferred way of death 21–23,
  Presence 35, 217
  Presence of family
      in time of death 15, 70, 130, 131, 132, 229, 230, 234

Priorities
  Life 117, 315
  Privacy 163, 188, 209
  Professionalism 210
  Prolongation of dying process 163, 172
  Prolongation of physical life 87, 139, 140
  Proxy assessment 165

Psychologist,
  Clinical 249, 254, 312
  Psychosocial 243, 249
  Psycho-socio-spiritual 157, 205
  Public awareness 313
  Public donation,
      Appeal for 248
  Punishments 305

Qi, 198, 200, 201
  Stagnation of 200
  Qi-tonifying herbs 201, 202, 204

Quality of Life 139, 141, 142, 144, 145, 146, 157, 160, 162, 165, 183, 196
  Quiet room 164

Rebirth 93, 94, 95, 99-100, 102
  Reciprocal 281
Reconciliation 92, 130, 159, 166
Registrar of Births and Deaths 107
Regrets 304
Re-grief 267
Reincarnation 67, 70, 71, 85, 94, 117, 128, 230, 234, 259
Relational-oriented grief 244
Relational self 174
Relationship
   Between the deceased and family 89, 92
Religious beliefs 158
Remembrance 86,
   Ren, a moral standard 128, 264
   Renqing debt 242
Repaying the debt 296
Research,
   Hermeneutics 38, 39
Research and Practice 127
Resilience 315
Respect 158
Resuscitation 99, 162-163, 226
Retirement 269
Revised Death Fantasy Scale (RDFS) 118, 119
Right hearts 215
Risk assessment 254
Risk-taking behaviours 266
Rites of bathing and dressing 73
Rituals,
   Death 65, 91
   Purifying 296
   Spirit return home 79
   Therapeutic 281-282
Role of professionals
   In death 72,

Safety 307
Screening 278
Secondary loss 270
Self,
   Interdependence of 214, 242, 264, 268, 269, 276
   Relational 174
Self-attribution 296
Self-development 40
Self-healing 201
Self-reflection 217

Sense of control 196, 203, 227, 233, 262, 263
Separation between living and the dead 70, 83, 89, 92, 253
Seventh day 71
Sexuality 146
Shame 264
Shan bei 254
Shared decision making model 176
Shortness of breath 142, 146, 155, 157
Siblings,
   Grieving 232
Sin,
   Inheritance of 89-90,
   Sins of ancestors 85, 90
Social discrimination 249
Social support 250, 253, 276, 278
Somatization 2, 258, 263, 277
Space 307
Spiral 306
Spiritual care workers 158
Spiritual growth 316
Spiritual well-being 218
Spirituality 143, 145, 158-159, 218, 227
Stagnation,
   Blood 201, 204
   Depression as 205
   Qi 200, 204
Stigmatization 276, 277, 279
Stillbirth 231-232
Subsequent temporary upsurges of grief (STUG), 306-7
Cyclic 306
Linear 306
Stimulus cues 307
Suicide,
   Avoiding the word of 295
   Discovering of 297
   Media reports on 301, 302
   Physician-assisted 169
   Sub-intentional 294
   Thought of 142
Suicide in hospitals 227
Suicide notes 305
Suffering, 31, 44, 102, 128, 129, 217, 315
   Alleviation of 147, 158, 173
   Cause of 128, 216
   Cessation of 128, 133, 143
Family 48, 50, 89, 106, 186, 312
Fear of 142
Meaning of 36, 37, 52
Prolongation of 152
Relief of 101
Trajectory of 44
Suppression of grief 92
Supervisors 221
Susceptible of vulnerability 295
Sympathy money 290
Symptom,
   Alleviation of 154
   Control of 153, 165, 188
   Identification of 153, 188
Syndromatic diagnosis 196, 199
Systemic balance 197
Taboo 261, 279
Tai chi 164
Templer’s Death Anxiety Scale (DAS) 119
Terminal illness
   As a failure 3, 26
Terminally ill patients,
   Problems of 187
   Treatment for 143–144
Thematic analysis 245
Total well-being,
   Enhancement of 196, 203
Tranquility 217
Transfer of merits 101
Transference 209, 210, 237
Transformation 311, 314
Treatment,
   Active 152, 153, 158
   Adjunctive cancer 196, 202
   Aggressive 155
   Forgoing life-sustaining 169, 173, 226
   Individualized 155
   Invasive 152
   Life-sustaining 175
   Withholding and withdrawing 152, 173, 226
Triggers, 306
   Smell as 298
Ultrasound 114
Uncertainty 305
Underworld 70
Unfinished business 155, 238, 244, 292, 299
Universality 279
Unspoken words 304
Untaken actions 304
Vicarious Traumatization 294
Viewing of the body 72
Viewing room 134
Visitation,
   Grave 263
   Hospital 235
Visiting hours,
   Flexible 158
Volunteer,
   Assessment of 289
   Bereaved 289
   Recruitment of 287
   Supervision of 288
   Training of 164, 286, 287
   Use of 285
Vomiting 142, 144, 153, 156, 161, 165, 202
Vulnerability 311
Walking a tightrope 246
Washing away of wrongs 110
White affairs 214, 290
Wholeness 45
Widowers, 265
   Meaning of 266
Widow-to-widow 286
Widows 264, 265
Withholding and withdrawing treatment 152, 226
Withholding information 174
Women as carers 187
Wounded healers 32, 33, 34
Yin 262
Yin-yang 196–197
Yuan 262