

Qualitative Exploration of Death Education in Mainland China: Generating Design Considerations for a Culturally Relevant Curriculum Framework

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Abstract

Death education has garnered increasing global attention for its role in enhancing emotional resilience, ethical awareness, and psychological preparedness, particularly in health and social sciences. However, in mainland China, its development remains constrained by deep-rooted cultural taboos and limited institutional support. This qualitative study explores design considerations for a culturally relevant death education curriculum within Chinese higher education. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 58 participants—including faculty, administrators, and students—from four universities across China. Thematic analysis revealed four core domains essential for effective curriculum development: (1) underlying principles, (2) content design, (3) organization and delivery, and (4) assessment and feedback. Findings emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity, interdisciplinary integration, and participatory curriculum co-construction. The study contributes empirical evidence and practical strategies for embedding death education in ways that align with Chinese cultural norms and evolving educational needs, offering a robust foundation for future curriculum reform in this emerging field.

Keywords: death education, Chinese higher education, curriculum design, Mainland China

1. Introduction

Death is a universal experience that evokes deep psychological, emotional, and cultural responses. In recent years, death education has gained growing attention globally as a multidisciplinary approach to fostering awareness about mortality, grief, and the meaning of life. The integration of death education into higher education curricula has shown promise in enhancing students' emotional intelligence, resilience, and ethical sensitivity, particularly in health-related and social science fields (You, Liu, & Boateng, 2025; Gu & Jiang, 2024).

However, in mainland China, the development of death education remains limited due to traditional cultural taboos, lack of institutional support, and insufficient curricular frameworks (Liu, 2023; Hong & Sun, 2024). Confucian values, which emphasize filial piety and societal harmony, often discourage open discussions of death. This cultural silence has contributed to widespread discomfort among students and educators when confronting topics related to mortality, end-of-life care, and grief (Lan & Wang, 2024).

Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate culturally sensitive death education into Chinese higher education, especially in disciplines such as medicine, nursing, psychology, and ethics. Previous studies have mostly explored theoretical frameworks (e.g., Ling et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2024), compared Western and Chinese paradigms (Jiang & Guo, 2024), or assessed death attitudes among health professionals (Ji et al., 2024). Yet, there remains a significant gap in empirical research that examines the practical considerations for curriculum design from the perspectives of both students and educators in the Chinese context.

To address this gap, the present study investigates design considerations for a culturally appropriate death education

curriculum framework in mainland China. Through qualitative inquiry involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups across four universities, this research aims to develop actionable, culturally grounded strategies for curriculum integration. By exploring stakeholder perspectives and synthesizing thematic insights, the study provides practical recommendations for integrating death education into Chinese higher education in a way that aligns with both cultural values and contemporary educational needs.

2. Literature Review

The conceptual foundation of death education encompasses psychological, ethical, and pedagogical dimensions. Internationally, scholars have emphasized the role of death education in promoting psychological well-being, reducing death anxiety, and preparing professionals—especially in health care—for end-of-life communication (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Song, 2021).

In Western contexts, death education is often embedded within social work, nursing, and thanatology programs (You et al., 2025). It is characterized by experiential learning approaches, such as case simulations, reflective writing, and interaction with palliative care environments. These models aim to cultivate empathy, moral reasoning, and practical coping strategies (Ling et al., 2024).

In contrast, Chinese studies have predominantly focused on conceptual analyses and value orientation. For example, Gu and Jiang (2024) proposed that death education should reflect traditional Chinese philosophical ideals, such as the Confucian notion of "ren" (benevolence), and Buddhist views on impermanence. However, practical implementation models remain underdeveloped. Lan and Wang (2024) argued for integrating death education within the national education framework but stopped short of outlining curricular elements. Similarly, studies such as those by Li (2024) and Ling et al. (2024) provided insights into sector-specific frameworks, particularly for medical students, but lacked a comprehensive, empirical approach that incorporates stakeholder feedback.

Moreover, existing literature often overlooks the role of institutional governance, student psychological readiness, and cross-disciplinary integration in shaping effective death education. According to recent studies, death literacy—defined as the capacity to understand and act on death-related issues—is vital for public health and emotional development but remains inadequately addressed in Chinese and global university systems (O'Shea et al., 2024; Sultana et al., 2024). Comparative analyses by Phan et al. (2024) offer a universal life-and-death education framework that highlights the need for culturally sensitive implementation models. These contributions align with the goals of this study by offering tested curricular elements and pedagogical approaches that can inform local adaptations.

This study contributes to the literature by bridging empirical gaps and addressing the practical dimensions of death education framework design. It highlights the voices of both educators and students from diverse disciplines and regions, offering a grounded and holistic perspective on how to structure death education curricula that are pedagogically sound and culturally appropriate.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This approach enabled the exploration of complex, culturally sensitive perspectives surrounding death education from both educators and students.

3.2 Data Collection and Participants

Participants were drawn from four higher education institutions across different regions of mainland China to ensure geographical and institutional diversity. A total of 58 individuals participated in the study: 20 faculty members, 8 administrative staff, and 30 undergraduate students.

- **Faculty and Administrators (n=28):** Participants were recruited from four universities (two public, one private, and one medical) representing eastern, central, southeastern, and western China. Disciplines included psychology, education, medical ethics, nursing, engineering, sociology, and philosophy. Faculty members were primarily involved in curriculum design or teaching, while administrators held roles in academic, medical, and personnel management.

- **Students (n=30):** Undergraduate students were selected from a range of academic disciplines, including education, medicine, nursing, humanities, engineering, and social sciences. Students came from all four universities,

with representation across year levels (1st to 4th year). Six focus groups were conducted to gather collective perspectives, promoting dynamic exchange of ideas and reflections.

Participation was voluntary and purposive sampling was used to select individuals with relevant experience or interest in death education. Interviews and focus groups were conducted using semi-structured guides designed to probe perspectives on death education content, pedagogical approaches, and institutional readiness.

Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' home institution. Informed consent was collected, and anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms and coded data management.

4. Results

Thematic analysis yielded four major themes, supported by 15 sub-themes. These were categorized based on recurring patterns in responses from 28 faculty/administrators and 30 students. Table 1 below summarizes the core themes and sub-themes.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes in Curriculum Design

Theme	Sub-Themes
1. Underlying Principles	Clear Objectives, Practical Coping Strategies, Mental Health Education
2. Curriculum Content Design	Interdisciplinary Perspective, Tiered Structure, Interactive Modalities
3. Curriculum Organization & Delivery	Integration into Existing Courses, Elective Modules, General vs. Professional Tracks
4. Assessment & Feedback	Diverse Assessments, Timely Feedback, Continuous Improvement

Participants emphasized the importance of aligning curriculum content with students' psychological maturity, personal values, and career aspirations. Practical tools such as scenario simulations, peer reflection, and professional mentoring were consistently identified as effective teaching strategies.

Faculty from medical universities (e.g., T6, T8) emphasized training in emotional communication, while engineering faculty (e.g., T20) highlighted ethical perspectives linked to technological responsibility. Students from humanities emphasized the philosophical dimensions of death, whereas those in health sciences stressed emotional resilience and end-of-life communication.

5. Discussion

This study highlights key curricular design elements necessary for effective death education in mainland China. The findings affirm that curriculum design must be culturally contextualized, psychologically appropriate, and pedagogically versatile.

5.1 Cultural Relevance and Psychological Readiness

The cultural silence surrounding death in Chinese society necessitates curricula that approach the subject with sensitivity. Previous studies have noted how traditional Chinese values can create emotional discomfort around discussions of mortality (Lan & Wang, 2024; Gu & Jiang, 2024). Our findings confirm this, as both educators and students called for gentle, tiered exposure to death-related content. Integrating Confucian ethics and collective cultural values supports a localized framework that respects traditional sensibilities while encouraging critical reflection.

5.2 Pedagogical Innovation and Interdisciplinarity

Interactive learning modalities such as role-play, narrative writing, and peer discussion were valued across participant groups. These techniques resonate with experiential approaches used internationally (You et al., 2025) and should be tailored to Chinese learning styles, which often emphasize collective reflection and indirect expression. Furthermore, interdisciplinary integration—combining psychology, sociology, ethics, and even technology—broadens students' perspectives and fosters a more holistic understanding of death, as supported by Ling et al. (2024).

5.3 Structural Flexibility and Policy Alignment

Embedding death education within general education and offering professional modules for medicine and nursing students ensures broad accessibility while addressing specific competencies. This two-tiered system parallels recommendations by Zhou et al. (2024) regarding death literacy across academic disciplines. Institutional support,

administrative buy-in, and teacher training emerged as key success factors.

5.4 Assessment and Feedback Loops

Effective assessment in death education should emphasize internalization, not rote learning. Our study recommends reflection journals, scenario simulations, and peer evaluations—aligned with best practices in Western programs (Song, 2021). Feedback mechanisms must be immediate and adaptive, allowing real-time curriculum refinement.

In summary, this study reinforces the importance of a dynamic, student-centered approach to death education. A culturally rooted yet globally informed framework can empower Chinese higher education to foster students' moral development, emotional resilience, and preparedness for life's most difficult realities.

6. Conclusion

This study presents a qualitative exploration of design considerations for a culturally grounded death education curriculum in mainland Chinese higher education. Drawing on insights from educators, administrators, and students, it highlights four core domains for curriculum development: design philosophy, content planning, organization and delivery, and assessment mechanisms.

The results emphasize that curriculum objectives must extend beyond content knowledge to include emotional resilience, coping strategies, and life values. Interdisciplinary integration and tiered instruction are critical for addressing students' diverse needs. Implementation strategies should allow for flexibility, combining general education requirements with professional reinforcements in relevant fields. Assessment mechanisms should measure internalization and provide timely, adaptive feedback.

Importantly, the study demonstrates the need for curriculum co-construction—where students and educators collaborate to design meaningful learning experiences. This participatory model fosters cultural sensitivity, institutional acceptance, and student ownership, making it essential for sustainable curriculum integration.

By contributing empirical evidence and practical recommendations, this research offers a robust foundation for future curriculum reforms in death education across Chinese higher education institutions.

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Authors contributions

DSY and Dr. LJC jointly oversaw the study design and subsequent revisions. DSY was responsible for data collection and drafting the initial manuscript, while Dr. LJC provided critical revisions to refine the final version.

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