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A STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' VIEWS ON  
TABOO OF DEATH

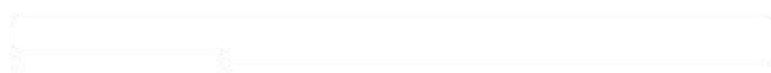
Master Thesis

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I have written this Research paper/Bachelor Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.



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## 1. Introduction

Death is an everlasting ultimate question, which everyone will inevitably face. However, death is not a frequent topic. The exist of death is just like a shadow beside you, while the taboo is the black scarf that covers it.

The concept of taboo of death was proposed by Herman Feifel in 1959, it is considered as a negative and avoidant attitude towards death (Romanova, 2017). In modern society, the lack of open discussion of death has been attributed to taboo attitudes towards death (Lee, 2008). The taboo of death is considered as a common cultural phenomenon. The main manifestation of taboo is the group's avoidance of certain behaviors, objects and words. It has a profound impact on the psychology and behavior of specific groups of people (Chi, 2018). Cassirer stated that taboos are constructed in response to people's need for survival and the worship of supernatural powers (2013).

The research on the taboo of death had a breakthrough trend in Western society in the 1970s. The intellectual group pointed out the taboo of death in society and its negative impact of it (Walter, 1991). The movement of British hospice (Du Boulay, 2007) and bring death out of the closet (Walter, 1994) encouraged people to break through the taboo of death, face up to the existence of death straightly to reduce the negative impact of death on individuals through public expression. In China, the taboo of death is embodied in the language and has a historical inheritance. To avoid the fear and unknown of directly talking about death, death euphemisms have been created as substitutes for expressing death (Chen, 2008). Death euphemisms are considered to be the embodiment of traditional Chinese values, including Confucianism and feudal social hierarchy concepts of seniority and inferiority. It is also influenced by ghost worship in primitive religions and mainstream religions such as Taoism and Buddhism. It reflected the local funeral customs and the cultural landscape of specific historical periods (Bao, 2000; Sun, 2005, as cited in Chen, 2008). The concept of the taboo of death is mainly spread in folk narratives in Chinese society. The taboo of death is considered to originate from the concept and attitude

toward death (Yang, 1961). Taboos are regarded as having rich local cultural meanings. From the individual's willingness of avoiding negative things, it forms specific rules in certain aspects such as festival customs and specific work scenes (Shi, 1992).

At present, in the existing research on the taboo of death in China, researchers focus on the pragmatic analysis of taboo words and the comparative study of taboo words in different languages. Liu (2013) researched taboo words of death from the aspects of word classification, word formation method, usage status and cultural connotation. Hu (2013) analyzed the characteristics and social functions of taboo words of death in Chinese and Japanese and discussed the influence of national culture and social background contained in taboo words. Zhang and Liu (2008) discussed the cultural differences between English and Chinese in terms of religious taboos, physical behavior taboos, disease and death taboos. Research on the concept of the taboo of death itself is relatively scattered, lacking highly generalized academic articles. There is a gap in conceptual conclusions about the concept of the taboo of death and its production process. What is the source of the taboo of death as an individual concept, and what factors are affected in the process of producing this concept, the answers to these questions have not been systematically proposed.

Based on the research background, I formulated my main research question: what are the concepts and attitudes of contemporary Chinese international students regarding the taboo of death? To explore the process of its formation, I also raised a supplementary question: how are those perceptions formed? This study will help to establish an analytical framework for the taboo of death and systematize this huge and complex idea.

To initially explore contemporary Chinese views on the taboo of death, I invited 20 Chinese international students as interviewees through snowball sampling and conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The screening criteria are Chinese students who have lived in China and are now studying abroad. This group not only has sufficient experience of living in Chinese local society and family but also

experienced a multicultural background when they study and live in a foreign society. Such experiences may add more insights into their views on death and the taboo of death.

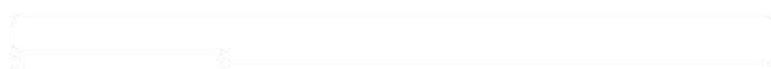
In the first part of the literature review, I will give a structured introduction based on death and the taboo of death. I will introduce the concept of death in Chinese religions and the Chinese mainstream school of thoughts. Also, I will introduce the research methods and results of previous researchers on attitudes towards death. Meanwhile, I will outline the history and research status of the studies on the taboo of death in worldwide and China.

In the second part of the methodology, I will describe the research method I have chosen and how it will address the research question I formulated. I will explain the process of data collection and organization, as well as analyzing methodology and its preliminary results. Based on the current research status, I will adopt grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) as the main research method, closely integrate the construction process with the collected data and generate new theoretical framework.

In the third part, I will analyze and discuss data in more detail based on my findings. I will combine the theoretical framework I have constructed with other related theories to build a structured and detailed analysis of the textual content.

**Keywords:** Taboo of Death; Belief Narratives; Social Norms; Social Behavior.

**Research classification code(s) (CERCS):** S210 Sociology; S220 Cultural anthropology, ethnology



## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Concept of death

In the era of gradual secularization, due to the weakening of the concept of divinity, the concept of death was discussed again. The longstanding question of what happens after death is replaced by the transition after death (Miller, 1998). "...death is no longer perceived as the final frontier but a transition to other destinations. Beliefs in these destinations, collectively labeled the afterlife, have become more profound and widespread" (Davies, 2017; Lee, 2003, as cited in Lee, 2008, p. 748). Fletcher (2004) views that the meaning of life is constituted by the interaction between belief and society.

#### 2.1.1. The concept of death in Chinese religions

Religion is the basis for the development and existence of Chinese social life and organizations. Combining Joachim Wach's structural perspective with Paul Tillich's functional perspective, Yang Qingkun (1961) defined religion as "...the system of beliefs, ritualistic practices, and organizational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life such as the tragedy of death ..." (p.1).

Chinese society's religious beliefs are controversial in academia. China is thought to be the least religious place in the world, and it is also the place with the weakest religious awareness (Liang, 1921, as cited in Yang, 1961). Hu (1998) also said that China is a country without religion. Matteo Ricci, who came to China to spread Catholicism in the Ming Dynasty, said that the unity of the three religions (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一) is Chinese superstition (Zheng, 2003).<sup>1</sup> The above statements are based on the perspective of foreign religions and try to explain Chinese indigenous beliefs with the logic of Western religions, thus resulting in their "marginal, incidental, and even heterogeneous" judgments (Zhang, 2017, p.246). Most of its criticism objects are folk beliefs handed down from the pre-Qin period (Lu, 2010). In fact, there are temples, ancestral halls, altars and other places related to religion all over China.

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<sup>1</sup> The unity of the three religions means the unity of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.

Their existence attested to the powerful influence of religion in Chinese society (Yang, 1961). The reason why Chinese religious practice is denied recognition from a Western perspective is that it lacks a significant structure that the Western recognizes (Jin & Fan, 2007). Based on the viewpoint of structural functionalism, Yang (1961) established an explanatory framework for Chinese religion with diffused religion and institutional religion as the core concepts. Institutional religion “has a system of theology, rituals, and organization of its own, independent of other secular social institutions. It is a social institution by itself, having its own basic concepts and its own structural system” (Yang, 1961, p.20).

Diffused religion is defined as:

...its theology, rituals, and organization intimately merged with the concepts and structure of secular institutions and other aspects of the social order. The beliefs and rituals of diffused religion develop their organizations system as an integral part of the organized social pattern (Yang, 1961, p.20).

Among them, diffused religion is considered to be dominant in Chinese social religion, while institutional religions such as Buddhism and Taoism do not provide ethical values for secular social relations but spiritual resources for the diffused religion (Yang, 1961). The fundamental difference between institutional religion and diffused religion can be summarized as whether it has an independent, significant structure and organizational system.

Leonard Norman Primiano offered the concept of vernacular religion in 1995 to make “the variety of manifestations and perspectives found within past and present human religiosity” be viewed fairly (p. 42). He argued that it was derogatory to describe vernacular religion as folk religion or religious folklore. The beliefs of religious people were distinguished from official religions for their status as unofficial religions (Primiano, 1995). Primiano emphasized the equality between the official religions and the unofficial religions and advocated focusing on “its process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and the material expression of religious belief” in the study of vernacular religion rather than its institutional system, social status,

and political aspects (1995, p.44). Yang also stated that “in the religious life of the people in China, it is the moral and sacred functions of folk beliefs that dominate people’s consciousness, rather than the description of the structure of religious belief” (1961, p.39).

#### **2.1.1.1. The concept of death in the institutional religions**

Buddhism and Taoism are regarded as institutional religions because they each have their basic concepts and organization (Jin & Fan, 2007). Hu Shi (1970) noted that before the introduction of Buddhism in China, the concept of the afterlife already existed in its primitive religious thought. Joseph Needham (1974, as cited in Yu, 2004) believed that there is no ‘other world’ in ancient Chinese thought, everything is natural until the introduction of Buddhism. This point of view shows that he summed up all ancient Chinese thought with the two institutional religions of Confucianism and Taoism (Yu, 2004).

Buddhism is regarded as the religion that values life and death the most (Lai, 2002). The concept of ‘nirvana’ in Buddhism believes that when people can face life and death calmly and without fear, they have already reached the realm of Buddha-nature. Achieving nirvana and attaining moksha are the ultimate goals in Buddhism (Buswell Jr.& Lopez Jr., 2013). Xiao Dengfu (2013) believed that the system of samsara in Buddhism has inherited Indian Brahmanism, and the concept of heaven and hell has also inherited the original concept of Indian Buddhism. Buddhism believes that life and death are interconnected by ‘karma’.<sup>2</sup> Death is just an illusion of life, not the end of it (Guo, 2010). Dependent origin (*pratītya-samutpāda-aṅga*) is one of the important basic theories of Buddhism. It is the reason for the life and death of all living beings that the Buddha realized before and after he attained enlightenment. The basic root of samsara is unawareness. Unawareness refers to a confused mind, a delusion. After the individual’s death, the extremely good or the extremely evil will go directly to moksha or go to hell, and others will re-enter samsara. Buddhism believes that the delusion and attachment in the heart can be

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<sup>2</sup> Karma is defined as “the retributive, ethnically committed causality of our actions” (Halbfass, 1980, p.269).

eliminated through practice, and this unawareness can be cut off to achieve detachment (Lai, 2002). In hospice care, the dying person is taught to ignore bodily sensations and emotional concerns. At the same time, they should recite the Buddha's name devoutly, and wait for Amitabha Buddha to lead the dying person to the Pure Land of Sukhavati (Chen, 2005).

Taoism is a native religion in China, but it is difficult to verify when it was founded and who founded it (Xiao, 2013). As a representative figure of Taoism, Zhuangzi regards life as a central circle. Life and death are the coincidence of the beginning and the end, and they are one (Kuang, 2016). Therefore, a person's life is a process of walking towards death step by step. Individuals in nature are all mortal, which is an inevitable result that no one can escape. In Zhuangzi's concept of life experience, this is a situation that needs to be faced peacefully. Therefore, Zhuangzi believed that all individuals can achieve spiritual transcendence by transcending the id (*ben wo* 本我) and ego (*zi wo* 自我), reaching the free and easy (*xiao yao* 逍遥) and superego (*chao wo* 超我) (Yang, 2010). Zhuangzi lived in the middle and late Warring States period when society was in violent turmoil (Jian, 1983). Therefore, Zhuangzi understands the suffering of the common people, so he does not advocate religious relief for death but transcends it (Li, 1999).

Liezi, another representative of Taoism, describes life from the beginning to the end as four stages: children, youth, old, and death (人自生至终, 大化有四: 婴孩也, 少壮也, 老耄也, 死亡也) (Liu, 2000, p.121). Liezi believed that death is the last stage of life. Therefore, he noted that facing death should "accept your fate and will die without fear" (知命故当死不惧) (Liu, 2000, p.128). Any anxiety or fear of death is unnecessary and unwise. This hedonistic concept of life and death did not conform to the mainstream ideas at the time, but it became an important source of secular ideas (Liu, 2000).

#### 2.1.1.2. The concept of death in the diffused religions

In the religious life of the Chinese, religion is based on the belief in gods and

souls and the ritual behavior and organization derived from this belief. People's religious life is centred on the concept of gods and souls (Yang, 1961). This kind of diffused religion is the basic hypothesis of Chinese religious belief and the premise of Chinese secular life. Its content can be embodied not only in philosophical concepts but also in customs and habits (Li, 1998).

Opinions are divided on whether folk beliefs in China belong to the category of religion (Zhang, 2017). Zhong Jingwen (2009, as cited in Zhang, 2017) stated that folk beliefs are "a set of god worship concepts, behavioral habits and corresponding ritual systems that have been produced and passed down among the people during the long-term historical development process" (p. 251). Lu Yao (2011) proposed that folk beliefs are subordinate to institutional religions and have an interactive relationship with diffused religions. Zhang Zhigang (2017) proposed to "regard Chinese folk belief as a broad category and interpret it as an original ecological religious-cultural phenomenon group" (p.254). China's folk beliefs are complex and have huge categories, and most of the existing forms of folk beliefs can be understood as religious cultural phenomena.

Folk diffused religions about death revolve around the deceased. In order to change the impact of the death of the deceased, the living chooses to assume the continued existence of the deceased. The manifestation of this assumption is to believe in the existence of the soul, and the other is to pay homage to the dead. Belief in the existence of the soul and the assumption of its interdependence with the living led to ancestor worship (Yang, 1961). Li Yiyuan (1998) believed that under the influence of Chinese diffused religion, there are no absolute non-believers. People who grow up in Chinese cultural background will more or less have the characteristics of traditional Chinese religious beliefs, they just don't practice a certain institutional religion.

### **2.1.2. The concept of death in the Chinese mainstream school of thoughts**

Chinese people's perception of the universe and human life patterns is deeply influenced by the world of gods, ghosts and spirits (Yang, 1961). The mainstream

thinking represented by several major academic schools in ancient China does not believe that there is a world after death. In the pre-Qin period, only Mozi (墨子), the representative figure of Mohism (墨学), claimed the existence of ghosts and gods. However, this concept is considered to be a kind of “Shendao teaching (*shen dao she jiao* 神道设教)” statement, which means the theory of ghosts and gods is used as an educational method, and the people are persuaded by the theory of cause and effect of misfortune and fortune (Li, 2020). Regarding Mozi’s views, Fan Zhen, an atheist thinker in the Southern Qi Dynasty, believed that such belief in ghosts and gods was for political purposes, and the ghosts and gods here was man-made thing (Chen, 1957). At this time, the concept of ghosts and gods can be regarded as more of a political means. The concept of death in the Yin and Zhou dynasties believed that after death, the emperor would ascend to the heavenly court to assist the emperor of heaven. The soul which represented collective authority does not perish after death (Yu, 2004). The concept of death at this time has obvious social class characteristics and is only limited to the emperor and the noble class. The posthumous concept of civilians appeared in the Spring and Autumn Period. It is recorded in *Zuo Zhuan* (《左传·昭工七年》): “People can become ghosts. The soul after death is divided into two parts: the Hun (魂) of Yang (阳) and the Po (魄) of Yin (阴). If People don’t have a good death, their souls can take possession of living people (人能为鬼。人生始化曰魄。既生魄，阳曰魂。...匹夫、匹妇强死，其魂魄犹能凭依于人)” (Zuo, Spring and Autumn Dynasty, as cited in Yu, 2004, p.11). During this period, the idea of the underground after death also gradually formed. The word ‘*huang quan* (黄泉)’ is mentioned in *Zuo Zhuan* (《左传·隐公元年》), which is considered to be the world where people live after death (Chen, 2008). Subsequent descriptions of the idea of the underworld were gradually completed. Song Yu (as cited in Yu, 2004), a poet of the Warring States Period, wrote in *Chu Ci* (《楚辞·招魂》) in commemoration of Qu Yuan: “Come back, the soul. Please don’t go to the world in the sky, and please don’t go down to the underground you du (魂兮归来。君无上天些...君无下此幽都些...)” (p. 13). Compared with ‘*huang quan*’, ‘*you du* (幽都)’ mentioned here has been added

some ghosts and gods as managers. In the Han Dynasty, the belief of the Great Deity of Mount Tai (*tai shan fu jun* 泰山府君) appeared. He was the god in charge of life and death. The concept of death in this period was more influenced by the real social system. The underground world after death is conceived as a system of ghost power in accordance with the secular official system (Yu, 2004).

## 2.2. Attitude towards death

The concept of death may affect the attitude towards death, and it varies among individuals (Lester & Templer, 1993). Psychologist and thanatologist David Lester (1993, as cited in Lester & Templer, 1993) mentioned in an interview that “death is not a topic amenable to laboratory research, and psychology has been addicted to laboratory research” (p. 2). In 1897, Durkheim published *Suicide, A Study in Sociology*, which analyzed the motivation and classification of suicide from a sociological perspective. This finding has given suicide a degree of respect in research. But no famous theoretical psychologist has ever paid attention to death (Lester & Templer, 1993). Until the 1960s, Templer conducted research on the concept of death anxiety. It remains a taboo topic among behavioral scientists and mental health professionals (Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994). Individual attitudes and feelings about death are complex. In his research on death anxiety, Lester (1991) pointed out that it has flaws because individuals have different awareness of death anxiety in different situations. For example, under a specific stressor, the individual’s actual anxiety level is different from the self-reported level by answering the questionnaire.

To effectively test individuals’ attitudes towards death, Wong, Reker and Gesser (1994) jointly developed the Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R). After the test and analysis with a sample size of 300 people, five main theoretical scales were obtained: Approach Acceptance (AA), Escape Acceptance (EA), Neutral Acceptance (NA), Fear of Death (FD), and Death Avoidance (DA). The findings suggest that older adults are more accepting of death and less fearful of dying. Women are more likely to accept death and less avoid it. On this basis, Ray and Najman (1974) developed a new scale for testing the acceptance of death. They added seven new items on top of

the Templer scale (1970) and parts of the Sarnoff and Corwin scale (1959). This improvement was due to their belief that the presence of many death anxiety items in the above two scales would confound the respondents' actual attitudes. After analysis, the Three-Component Model of Death Acceptance was obtained: Neutral Acceptance (NA), Approach Acceptance (AA) and Escape Acceptance (EA). This research refines the types of death acceptance based on previous research results.

Fear of death is seen as specific and conscious, whereas death anxiety is seen as more general and possibly unaware. Fear of death stems from "the loss of self and the unknown beyond death, fear of pain and suffering, realization of lost opportunity for atonement and salvation, and concerns about the surviving family members are just some of the sources of death fear" (Feifel, 1977; Feifel & Nagy, 1981; Fry, 1990, as cited in Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994, p. 2). From an existential perspective, the fear of death stems from the failure to find personal meaning for one's life and death. Whether to fear or accept death depends largely on whether the individual accepts their only life cycle. People with purpose in life have less fear of death and a higher level of acceptance (Durlak, 1972). According to Ray and Najman (1974), death acceptance is not the absolute opposite of death fear. Religious belief has a certain influence on an individual's attitude towards death. Peterson and Greil (1990, as cited in Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994) pointed out that individuals' belief in the afterlife is significantly related to various indicators of religious belief. Religious people believe more in an afterlife and are therefore less afraid of death.

### **2.3. Taboo of death**

In everyday usage, taboo refers to something that is forbidden by custom rather than by law (Walter, 1991). In Freud's (2001) *Totem and Taboo*, the object of taboo is defined in two different forms: the revered, which cannot be mentioned or used freely, and the ominous, which cannot be mentioned or touched freely. Modern scholars summarize it as "taboos are human worship of the unknown, or defense against calamity, and the taboo of death belongs to the latter" (Chi, 2018, p.65). A taboo is a measure of restriction or avoidance of a specific person, object, word, or action in

order to avoid a calamity brought about by some supernatural force or dangerous thing (Shi, 1992). The setting of taboos can be seen as a warning line, which has a restraining effect on human perceptions and behavior.

As a pioneer of the modern death movement and research, Feifel's book *The Meaning of Death* is considered to have broken the taboo on the study of death (Lamers Jr, 2012). After World War II, Feifel (1995) realized that few scholars paid attention to deaths during the war, it was considered a taboo topic. In the later research process, Feifel encountered several setbacks due to the taboos and avoidance concepts held by society at that time (Lamers Jr, 2012). In modern society, the lack of public discussion of death and near-death is derived from the taboo of death (Lee, 2008). Modern society has been described as a "death-denying" society (Kellehear, 1984, as cited in Walter, 1991, p.295). In any society, death is inevitably denied and accepted (Walter, 1991).

Ariès (1981, as cited in Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015) believed that from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, society's attitude towards death has changed. From World War I, people gradually banished death. Death is medicalized and society tries to hide it. There was a social taboo for discussing death. In the 1960s, intellectual groups talked more and even tried to challenge death. However, this breakthrough did not occur in the whole society. The working class is gradually slipping into the taboo of death, which is affected by the complexity of the concept of death and custom itself (Walter, 1991).

During this period, Gorer (1965) and Ariès (1981) pointed out that death is "uniquely badly handled by modern society" (as cited in Walter, 1991, p. 295). Gorer (1955, as cited in Walter, 1991) believed that after people experience the grief of death, if their emotions are not ritualized, it will cause mental illness. Rudestam (1992) noted that the people most likely to experience unresolved grief were those who never talked about death with others. In a society that refuses to talk about death, people's negative emotions associated with death may be amplified. For sociocultural reasons, some relatives who have suffered a traumatic death feel pressure to express grief.

They are apprehensive about expressing grief publicly (Doka, 2002). Whether people feel “allowed” to grieve after a traumatic death is an important factor in their efforts to understand death (Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015, p. 623). Apparently, this need cannot be answered in a society that avoids talking about death openly. Avoidant attitudes make relatives feel “cursed” and socially isolated (Wertheimer, 2001, as cited in Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015, p.610). Repressed emotions are the result of society’s attitude towards the taboos of death.

In the late 20th century, a new chapter of death research was unfolded in Western society. The 1970s is a special period in the study of death. Previously, the study on death was mostly relegated to the medical field and mentioned less in sociology (Walter, 1991). To break society’s death taboo, Cicely Saunders founded the British hospice movement, which promoted the importance of speaking openly about one’s feelings (Du Boulay, 2007). The increased attention on hospice movement, the study of death and near-death experiences and cinematic artworks about death form a trend that demonstrates the changes that occurred during this period weakened the previous taboo of death (Lee, 2008). In North American hospital, Kübler-Ross (1997) raised the need for dying people to speak openly about their feelings. The bring death out of the closet movement proposed by Walter (1994) encouraged the bereaved to actively communicate with counselors or therapists or seek help by joining mutual support groups. Many great movements have been founded in the process of breaking the taboo of death. The weakening of taboos indicated the emergence of a new context in which discourses about death are considered illuminating rather than morbid. This situation is referred to as re-enchantment, as opposed to the disenchantment of the taboo itself (Lee, 2008).

Talking openly about death can have positive effects on individuals. The support of family, friends and the community can help the bereaved to resist the taboo of death in social discourse. In recent years, the Death Café movement initiated by Bernard Crettaz (2010) has also provided a place where people can openly talk about death and share their feelings, hoping to help people fully enjoy their limited life by

raising awareness about death. The growth of the internet has allowed people to express their grief and gain support from others who have similar experiences (Chapple, Ziebland, & Hawton, 2015).

It can be concluded that Western society has been and is carrying out various social movements to break the social taboo of death. It encourages talking about death openly, taking the power to explain and shape it. Although there is uncertainty about the possible consequences of these movements on society and individuals. Walter (1994) believed that perhaps the public discussion of death may lead to the deepening of the isolation of individuals in society.

### 2.3.1. Taboo of death in China

The taboo of death is the most direct manifestation of the human fear of death. Fear and anxiety are the most immediate human responses to death. To avoid the pain implied by death, people exclude the topic of death from their words, attitudes and actions, forming a taboo pattern of putting death on hold (Chi, 2018). The existence of the taboo of death is thought to be used to alleviate anxiety about the unknown of death. In Chinese, the etymology of the word 'taboo' (*ji hui* 忌讳) is related to the ancient death taboo. 'Ji' (忌) has the meaning of fear, when used as a noun, it can also refer to the anniversary of the death of a person. 'Hui (讳)' has the meaning of concealment (Wang, 2016). Chinese scholars believed that the most direct taboo of death is to avoid mentioning it. Avoiding the direct expression of the word 'death (*si* 死)' in language can cover up the sadness and pain of death itself (Shi, 1992). According to ancient Chinese famous thinker Gu Yanwu's book *Ri Zhi Lu* (日知录), while a person is alive, a name is called a name; after a person dies, the name is called a taboo (生曰名, 死曰讳) (as cited in Wang, 2016, p. 29). Taboo is something that cannot be spoken and must be avoided. *The Chinese Euphemism Dictionary* written by Zhang Gonggui (1996) contains 481 euphemistic expressions for death. They are differentiated according to age, status, occupation, and cause of death, avoiding the word "death" as much as possible. Some of these euphemisms are no longer used due to social changes, while new ones are constantly being created. In modern internet

communication, euphemisms about 'death' have been developed and widely spread. Compared with traditional euphemisms, it has richer sources, such as local dialects (ger pi 嗝儿屁 from Beijing dialect), foreign languages (GG), film and television works (eat box lunch 领盒饭) and network new words (4, pronounced the same as death in Chinese) (Yang & Quan, 2019).

Taboo, however, is not only negatively affected by death in the Chinese mind. It also has a positive meaning. Taboo shows people's desire, ideal and pursuit of beautiful things. Out of positive expectations for future life, some negative omens are tabooed in advance, and "bad omens" are prevented, to realize good wishes (Shi, 1992, p. 99). Understanding and obeying the rules related to taboos can reduce the individual's mental pressure on the fear of the unknown. As a common cultural phenomenon in human society, taboo has a profound impact on the psychology and behavior of specific groups (Chi, 2018). There are taboos in specific work scenes. There is a taboo on words related to possible accidents. This kind of taboo is mainly caused by people who are in danger and cannot get absolute security, and they have a sense of anxiety about their own safety. This is not only a superstition, but also a vigilance and requirement for self-protection. For example: in a mine, it is forbidden to say 'suffocate (bie Si 憋死)', 'smash to death (za si 砸死)' and 'buried (mai si 埋死)'. It is forbidden to say 'turn over (fan 翻)' or 'fall over (dao 倒)' on board (Shi, 1992). The taboo of death has a certain function and can restrict human behavior.

The objects of Chinese folk taboo of death mainly focus on the deceased and related things, such as the body of the deceased, relics and occasions related to funerals and rituals. Because death itself is frightening, the dead who are subject to death are also considered evil. In funerals and rituals, the living needs to take some measures to avoid possible dangers, while expressing their love and respect for the deceased to obtain blessings (Yang, 1961). On this basis, it extends to the main colors of funeral activities and words that have the same pronunciation as 'death' and so on (Chi, 2018). The purpose of all taboo actions is to free the living from evil harassment, thereby eliminating the fear of death, rebuilding confidence and hope and returning to

normal life (Yang, 1961). In addition, there are special taboos on certain occasions and festivals. According to Shi (1992), there are more taboos during Chinese New Year and festive occasions like weddings. The emergence of these taboos comes from the Chinese people's mentality of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages. Because the occasion is full of positivity and hope, it is considered more necessary to avoid things considered inauspicious, especially death. This point of view is not supported by statistical data or empirical examples, so its accuracy needs to be verified.

During the literature search process, I noticed that there is still a considerable gap in the research on death taboos in Chinese academia. On Zhi Wang (知网, cnki.net), which is considered to be one of the most authoritative platforms for Chinese academia, there are only seven documents directly related to the subject of 'the taboo of death'. The research content of the literature containing the keyword 'taboo of death' in Google Scholar is mostly based on linguistics and intercultural communication theory. The existing literature lacks systematic research on the taboo of death in China and a specific framework for analyzing the taboos of death. Compared with a series of movements breaking the death taboo in Western society, there has never been such a concentrated and large-scale trend of thought in Chinese society. There is no normative system in academia for the concept and attitude of death taboo. When scholars try to discuss and make statements about this topic, most of their sources are based on traditional concepts and social consensus. This has caused some scholars' arguments to be relatively subjective and difficult to verify through reliable sources such as ethnography.

Concerns about death and dying are on the rise in China. A search for 'death cafes' on Xiao Hong Shu (小红书), China's mainstream social networking platform, reveals that many people are spontaneously organizing and promoting these events (Gu Xing Solitary, 2023). At the same time, the death tavern<sup>3</sup> was launched, aiming to discuss death in a more relaxed atmosphere (Moonlight Showohs Projection, 2023). Similar

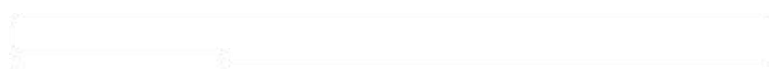
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<sup>3</sup> Death tavern here refers to a kind of party held in a tavern with the theme of death.

events include death-themed roundtable talks (Boss Dong, 2023), pet healing parties (In Spirit Flow, 2022), and so on. According to this public information, most of the activity sites are concentrated in the first- and second-tier cities (<http://www.gov.cn/>, 2022). Facing the aging trend of China's social population, the Chinese government has incorporated hospice care and elderly care into the basic law in the field of national medical care and health promotion in terms of policies. At present, China's hospice care still has problems such as imperfect regulations, unspecific management and service standards, inadequate financial and medical security, and low social awareness (Li, Wang, & Wang, 2022).

#### **2.4 Research questions**

Based on the current literature, the main research question I propose are: What are the concepts and attitudes of contemporary Chinese international students regarding the taboo of death? How are those perceptions formed?



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research strategy

In terms of research steps, this study used semi-structured interviews to collect text data.

During the transcription process, I used Iflytek (<https://www.iflyrec.com/>) artificial intelligence recognition and checked the accuracy of the content again before translating it into English. In this process, the possible ambiguity caused by the localized expression in Chinese was avoided as much as possible, which improved the accuracy of the interview content. Recording the entire interview can provide a more comprehensive and authentic source of information. While coding, the recordings were able to reproduce the content and context of the interview. The storage of interview recordings can assist me in the process of coding and integration to test and adequate the content and improve the reliability and validity of the research. However, there are disadvantages of using audio recording as an interview tool, which may make the interviewees have some concerns or unnatural mentality, which will affect the authenticity and validity of the data. The content of the interview was transcribed and used as text data, with a total of 94,691 words in original Chinese and 56,264 words in English after translation. I analyzed the English content sentence by sentence and generate open coding.

The interview guide (see Appendix A) is mainly divided into five parts. The first part is about the basic personal information and belief status of the interviewees. Since interviewees' understanding of "religious belief" in the question may be limited to institutionalized religion, "activities or behaviors related to religion or belief" is added as a supplement. The second part revolves around the theme of the interviewees' concepts of death. To help the interviewees better understand and answer this question, I provide some questions to help guide them. The first part of this section is based on the individual experience of the interviewees, guiding them to express their concepts and views on death through their own experiences. The second part is an overall description of the concept of death. On the basis of the previous part, the interviewees

can develop their thinking, so as to get more complete and specific answers. The third part of the guide is about the interviewees' attitudes towards death. In the preliminary preparation, I conducted mock interviews to initially test the feasibility of this interview guide. The initial question for this section is "How do you feel about death?". During the mock interview, the interviewees were puzzled by this question and pointed out that its ambiguity affects the answer. While reviewing the text of the results of this interview, I found that this question may lead to confusion between the interviewees' answers and the second part. Therefore, I subdivided this question into multiple items to guide the interviewees to think and answer. Questions do not have a logical order and are raised according to the expressions of the interviewees. The fourth part is about the interviewees' knowledge, attitude, understanding and feelings about the taboo of death. The purpose of the setting is to assist the interviewees to express the taboo of death in as many aspects as possible. The last part is the end of the entire interview, and the reason for setting it up is to obtain spontaneous reflection and supplementation from the interviewees on the content.

In collecting and using the data, I followed the contemporary regulations governing ethics in the social sciences and humanities, as elaborated by international organizations: the guideline paper 'Ethics in Social Science and Humanities' (2021), the American Folklore Society's 'Position Statement on Research with Human Subjects' (2011), American Anthropological Association's 'Statement on Race' (1998).

### **3.2. Participants**

First, 20 international students from China were selected for interviews through a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling starts with a subset of volunteers, and subsequent samples are screened based on their social networks. The screening criteria are Chinese students who have lived in China for a long time and are now studying abroad. 12 of the interviewees are currently studying in Estonia, 4 in Italy, 2 in the UK, 1 in Japan and 1 in the US. Interviews were conducted in March 2023. The interviewees are currently studying for a bachelor's degree or above. They all come

from Chinese families and completed their previous education in Chinese public schools. The average age of the 20 interviewees is 24.9 and the average interview time is 23 minutes.

Table 1

*List of the participants*

Interviewee Number	Age	Gender	Interview Format	Length	Religious Identity	Ethnic Group <sup>4</sup>
N1	29	Male	Face to Face	17 min	No	Han
N2	29	Male	Face to Face	32 min	No	Han
N3	24	Female	Voice Call	22 min	No	Zang (Tibetan)
N4	27	Male	Face to Face	27 min	Not Religious/Grandparents are Christians	Han
N5	33	Female	Face to Face	13 min	No	Han
N6	25	Female	Voice Call	22 min	No	Han
N7	21	Female	Face to Face	13 min	No	Han
N8	23	Female	Voice Call	28 min	No	Han
N9	28	Female	Voice Call	20 min	Not Religious/Grandmother and aunt are Christians	Han
N10	24	Male	Face to Face	27 min	Not Religious/Relatives believe in Dongbei folk religion	Han
N11	30	Female	Voice Call	21 min	No	Han
N12	24	Male	Voice Call	32 min	No	Han
N13	21	Female	Face to Face	12 min	Not Religious/Grandmother is Buddhist	Han
N14	21	Female	Face to	22 min	Not Religious/Parents	Han

<sup>4</sup> During the sampling process, ethnic background was not considered additionally in the sampling criteria. Thus the sample size of student from ethnic minority groups is relatively small.

			Face		and grandparents have Buddhist behavior, uncle is Buddhist	
N15	20	Female	Face to Face	15 min	Not Religious/Grandmother is Christian	Han
N16	24	Female	Voice Call	28 min	Not Religious/Mother is Buddhist/Father has Buddhist behavior	Han
N17	20	Female	Face to Face	21 min	No	Han
N18	28	Male	Voice Call	19 min	No	Han
N19	23	Male	Voice Call	31 min	Not Religious/Grandmother is Christian	Han
N20	24	Male	Voice Call	31 min	No	Han

Source: Compiled by the author

### 3.3. Research ethics

Since the interview text will be transcribed by software, I informed the interviewees prior to the interview and obtained their permission to record. Before the interview began, the interviewees were informed about the theme and significance of the study. Since death is usually considered a serious topic and may cause emotional fluctuations to the interviewees, I informed the interviewees in advance that they could ask the interview to be suspended or stopped if they felt that the topic was difficult to continue. Interviewees were also informed that the content of the recordings will be used only for this research and will not be disclosed to third parties. The information of the interviewees was anonymized and given code names from N1 to N20 (see Table 1).

### 3.4. Research methods

Grounded theory is a research method proposed by Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* in 1967. Before the study began, the researchers made no theoretical assumptions. To understand the

concepts and attitudes of international students from China towards the death taboo, I adopted grounded theory as a research method.

Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and participant observation, are usually used in the process of data collection. Grounded theory collects data in a bottom-up manner, and on this basis organizes and analyzes the core concepts or categories that reflect the nature of things and phenomena. After induction, comparison and analysis of codes and categories, further links between concepts or categories are used to construct an explanatory framework. A highly procedural three-level coding is adopted in the data analysis stage, which is considered to be the core of grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodology does not impose strict restrictions on coding procedures and forms three schools of classical grounded theory, procedural grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory in its development. In this study, the procedural grounded theory established by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was adopted in the analysis process. This branch of theory is characterized by emphasizing the normative nature of the coding process. From a theoretical perspective, this school leans toward constructivism, which sees analytical data as an interpretation by the researcher. For researchers, the stricter analysis process can ensure the coding system more rigorous and standardize the operation. The first step in the main operating procedure is open coding, a process of reading, coding, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing materials without presupposing a point of view. This process converts textual data into concepts and forms categories. In the second part of the axial coding process, based on the categories generated after open coding, sort out the subcategories and categories and connect the relationship between them, and find out the core categories. In the last step of the selective coding process, the concept of the core category is identified, and its conceptual relationship with other categories is systematically explained and tested. This process can be summarized as a continuous analysis and comparison of data collection, abstraction and conceptualization, and finally construction of a theory based on concepts and categories extracted from the data.

Due to the lack of an explanatory framework for the taboo of death in existing research, it is a better choice to solve the research problem by analyzing the content of the text in detail and constructing a new theory. Grounded theory has local characteristics and can fully reflect the experience of the parties involved (Xu, 1996). This feature is conducive to retaining and emphasizing the Chinese characteristics contained in the taboo of death in the research question.

Since the data source is entirely based on interview content, and the analysis process is highly dependent on the researcher's own control of the data, grounded theory is considered to have certain flaws. For example, it is difficult to control the credibility of the theory, and the generated theory lacks strong universality. Regarding the first point, since the research object is the individual's taboo concepts and attitudes towards death, there is a certain degree of subjectivity in itself. This does not affect the credibility of the theory that will eventually be generated. Regarding the second point, even if the generative theory is considered difficult to provide a relatively complete explanation of the taboo concept and attitude towards death, it can provide some clues for researchers following this research direction.

For the possible flaws in the research method, I made up for them through active communication with the interviewees during the interview process, such as flexibly guiding them to make more supplementary explanations based on the answers they gave. This approach will make the data sources as comprehensive and objective as possible.

After the process of coding, I analyzed and sorted out the text data as shown in the following table:

Table 2

*Main results for open coding, axial coding and selective coding*

Selective Coding (Core categories)	Axial Coding	Open Coding	Open Coding (example)
C1. The Source of the Concept of Death	B1. Local culture	A1. Ethnic customs	N11a1. Manchu Shaman Ritual ...
		A2. Local tradition	N7a2. Manipulation

			of corpses in Xiangxi;
		A3. Traditional funeral custom	N7a3. Rituals around the house of the deceased ...
		A.4 Traditional festival	N12a4. Qingming ...
		A5. Religious belief	N1a6. Buddhist reincarnation ...
	B2. Personal experience	A6. Near death experience	N3a4. Asphyxiation ...
		A7. Witnessed death	N2a5. Witnessing charred corpses ...
		A8. Personal belief	N10a3. Atheism ...
	B3. External experience	A9. Others experience	N8a4. Others' narration of past life memory ...
		A10. Cultural work	N13a5. Fantasy novel ...
	C2. Concept of Life and Death process	B4. Death is the end point	A11. Death is physical death
A.12 Death is the completely end			N9a13. Death is the disappearance of everything ...
A13. Death is biological definition			N1a12. Death is loss of life sign
B5. Continuation after death		A14. Death isn't the end	N5a12. Exist in another way after death ...
		A15. Soul continues to exist after death	N17a15. Death is the soul leaving the physical vessel ...
B6. Existing after death from the perspective of others		A16. Inheritance of consciousness	N2a50. One's consciousness is passed on after death ...
		A17. Exist in the form of memories	N3a13. Lives on after death in the form of memories ...
B7. Transitional phase		A18. A process between the moment of death and rebirth	N11a12. There is a chaotic process after the moment of death ...
B8. Form of afterlife		A19. Enter reincarnation	N3a14. Reincarnation into other creatures

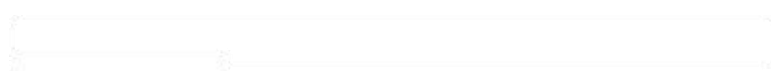
			after death ...
		A20. Other dimensions	N16a7. Can survive in another dimension after death ...
		A21. Parallel world	N2a14. The afterlife is a parallel world ...
		A22. Fall into a dream	N16a5. Death is entering into a dream from which we cannot wake up ...
	B9. Afterlife belief	A23. Past and present	N11a17. The sense of déjà vu makes people believe in the past and present ...
		A24. Decision rule	N3a13. Karma determines the next life ...
C3. Link between Life and Death	B10. Connect with the deceased	A25. Active connection	N4a46. Communicating with the Dead Through Divination ...
		A26. Passively accept connection	N5a6. Dreamed by the deceased ...
		A27. Sense of presence	N6a3. Sensing the company of the spirits of the deceased ...
		A28. Supernatural power	N17a20. The presence of ghosts ...
C4. Attitude towards Death	B11. Acceptance of death	A29. Inevitability	N1a34. Death is bound to happen ...
		A30. Difference in acceptability	N2a16. Indifferent to one's own death ...
	B12. Resistance of death	A31. Fear	N3a15. Fear of death ...
		A32. Rejection	N12a8. Avoid imagining death ...
		A33. Escape	N18a23. Want to escape from death ...
		A34. Guilt	N18a6. Feel guilty about life ...
	B13. Factors influencing the degree of 'Acceptance-Resistance'	A35. Experience	N9a8. No more fear of death due to the death of a loved one ...
		A36. Relationship	N4a22. Acceptance of

			death depends on relationship with the deceased ...
		A37. Concept	N8a9. Different stages have different ideas about death ...
		A38. Environment	N19a22. Helplessness and loneliness abroad ...
		A39. Age	N11a24. The older the more you accept death ...
		A40. State	N6a8. Objective distance from relatives ...
	B14. Approach of death	A41. Curiosity	N2a26. Willing to try dying out of curiosity ...
		A42. Achievement	N20a27. Euthanasia is a relief for patients ...
	B15. Variables of attitudes towards death	A43. Age awareness	N1a23. Youth distances death ...
		A44. Safety awareness	N2a52. Safe environment reduces awareness of death ...
		A45. self-consciousness	N12a20. Personal growth enhances death awareness ...
		A46. Cultural environment awareness	N1a67. Forget about sacrificial ceremonies and customs after going abroad ...
C5. Manifestation of the Taboo of Death	B16. Emergence of the taboo of death	A47. Occasion	N1a50. Avoiding the topic of death on ritual occasions ...
		A48. Object	N10a24. Avoid saying death to elders ...
	B17. Solution of the taboo of death	A49. Respect	N10a17. Respect other people's taboos ...
		A50. Obey	N18a28. Observe known taboos ...
		A51. Criticize	N12a17. Be critical of taboo customs ...

C6. Sources of the Taboo of Death	B18. Sources of the taboo of Death	A52. Family environment	N2a90. From family tradition ...
		A53. Subject education	N1a71. Biology class
		A54. Local culture	N14a28. Local customs ...
		A55. Social activity	N3a38. From social activity rules ...
		A56. Personal experience	N14a29. Unlucky for failing to observe taboos ...
C7. Attitude towards the Taboo of Death	B19. Shifts in attitude towards the Taboo of Death	A57. Serious	N12a12. Colloquial use of taboo words reduces the seriousness of death ...
		A58. Emotionalize	N4a34. Can emphasize emotions
		A59. Entertaining	N16a27. Treat taboos with entertainment ...
	B20. Multicultural differentiation	A60. Low social participation	N20a50. Have not attended a funeral or service overseas ...
		A61. Multicultural background	N16a21. There are no taboos about cemeteries in foreign countries ...
		A62. Community belonging	N19a43. Taboo has culture, family belonging ...

Source: Compiled by the author

Theory coding is a process of constructing a new theory, which can be either substantive or formal (Wu, Wu, & Ma, 2016). According to the category and logic rules, two thinking mode interpretation frameworks are generated (Figure1 & 2). These two sets of explanatory frameworks generated by grounded theory are the basis for the theoretical framework of this study and will be used in the process of interpreting and analyzing.



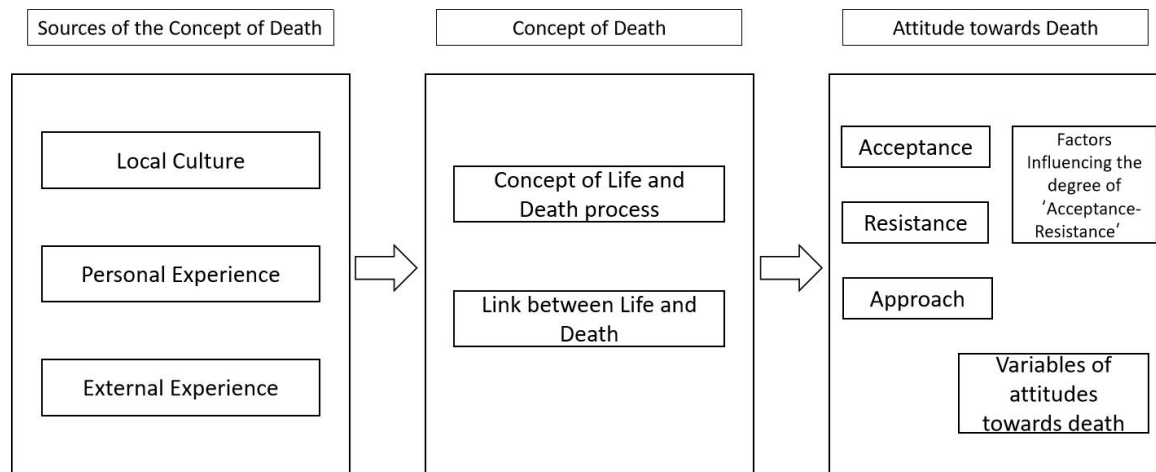


Figure 1. The frame of thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of death

Source: Compiled by the author

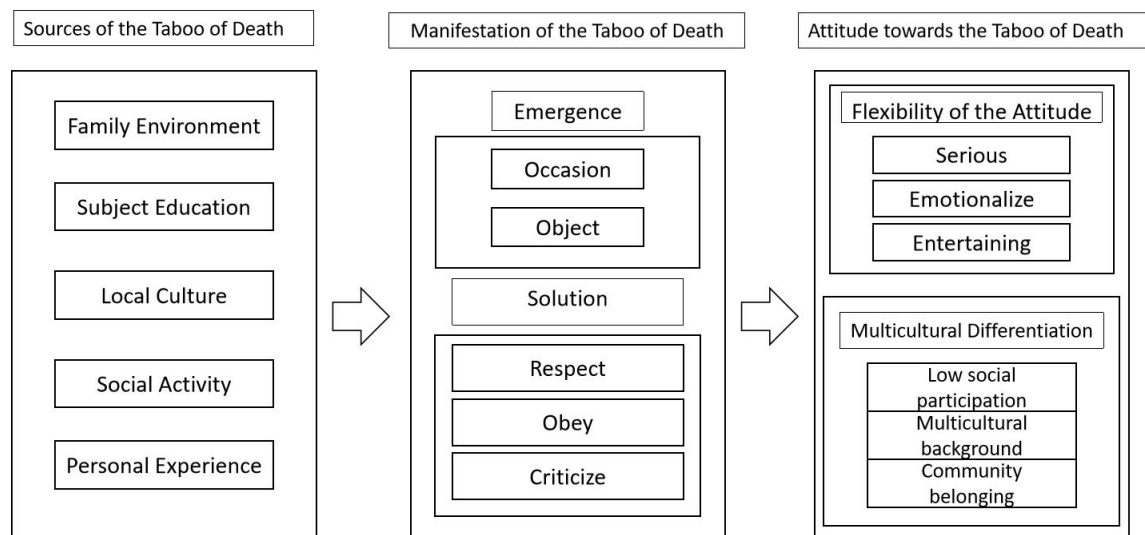


Figure 2. The frame of thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of taboo of death

Source: Compiled by the author

By analyzing the relationship among the seven core categories, I divided them into two parts for discussion.

In the first frame (Figure 1), the narrative process of interviewees' perceptions of death is constructed. This process includes two sets of causalities: the construction process of the concept of death and the attitude towards death influenced by the conception of death. The concept of death part consists of two core categories: C2.

Concept of Life and Death Process and C3. Link between Life and Death. The main source of the concept of death consists of three parts: B1. Local culture, B2. Personal experience and B3. External experience. Interviewees' attitudes toward death based on their concept of death consists of three main types (B11. Acceptance of death, B12. Resistance of death and B14. Approach of death), B13. Factors Influencing the degree of 'Acceptance-Resistance' and B15. Variables of attitudes towards death. The content of this frame represents a new theoretical framework that I obtained through grounded theory: a thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of death.

According to the narrative process of the concept of death part, I constructed a linear thinking framework—Point Division of 'Life-Death' Process (Figure 3).

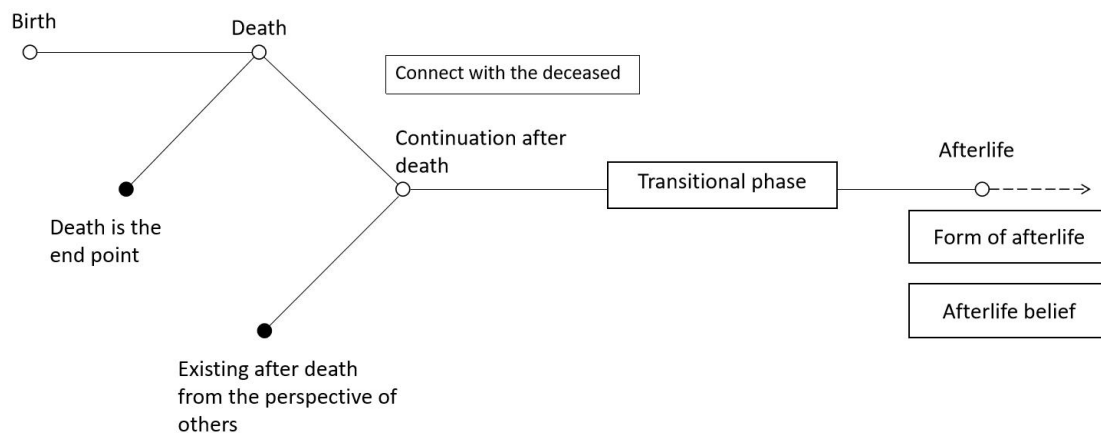


Figure 3. The frame of Point Division of 'Life-Death' Process

Source: Compiled by the author

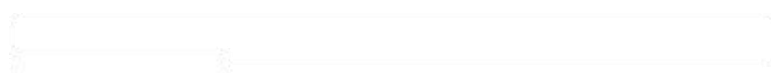
This framework is composed of B4~B10 generated in axial coding, which together formed the core categories C2 and C3. Based on the interviewees' expressions of the concept of death represented by the six subcategories B4~B9, I extracted four key points and constructed a linear thinking framework: birth, death, continuation after death and afterlife. Birth is the common starting point of life. Interviewees' conceptions were different on the point of death, which is divided into two directions according to whether they think death is the end point: B4. Death is the end point and B5. Continuation after death. The continuation after death is divided

into two directions according to its form of existence: B6. Existing after death from the perspective of others and B7 Transitional phase. In the transitional phase, the soul has already left the physical body. According to the interviewee's concept, the soul may go to the afterlife. B8. Form of afterlife and B9. Afterlife belief are the roots of the interviewees' beliefs in the afterlife. Interviewees brought up the idea of the link between life and death, so I added B10. Connect with the deceased next to the point of continuation after death. The frame of Point Division of 'Life-Death' Process is helpful for understanding the description of the interviewees' perception of the concept of death.

The second frame (Figure 2) includes three main categories: C5. Manifestation of the Taboo of Death, C6. Sources of the Taboo of Death and C7. Attitude towards the Taboo of Death, forms a sources-manifestation-attitude thinking mode, which is the core of the second new theoretical framework of the thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of the taboo of death I generated through grounded theory analysis. The sources of death taboos part consists of five main categories: A52. Family environment, A53. Subject education, A54. Local culture, A55. Social activity and A56. Personal experience. The content of this section can explain the sources of interviewees' taboos on death, that is, how it is formed. The manifestation of the taboo of death part consists of B16. Emergence of the taboo of death and B17. Solution of the taboo of death. This part contains how the taboo of death exists in interviewees' life and experiences and how they responded to them. In the attitude towards the taboo of death part, I identified three categories of shifts in interviewees' attitudes toward the taboo of death: serious, emotionalize and entertaining. The multicultural differentiation section summarizes the phenomena and reasons why the interviewees have changed their attitudes towards the taboo of death under a multicultural background.

To ensure the validity of those generated theories, I randomly selected 5 of the 20 interview materials to participate in the theoretical saturation test. In this process, no new concepts and categories were found and the original logical relationship between

the various categories was steady. Therefore, the two theoretical frameworks can be considered as passed the saturation test.



## 4. Analysis and discussion

After sorting out the text of the interview content, seven core categories were summarized and extracted. It includes four aspects of the concept of death (C1. The Source of the Concept of Death; C2. Concept of Life and Death Process; C3. Link between Life and Death; C4. Attitude towards Death) and three aspects of the taboo of death (C5. Manifestation of the Taboo of Death; C6. Sources of the Taboo of Death; C7. Attitude towards the Taboo of Death).

### 4.1. The concept of death

#### 4.1.1. The source of the concept of death

The main category of C1. The Source of the Concept of Death is composed of three subcategories, namely local culture, personal experience, and external experience.

Some interviewees believed that their concepts of death were influenced by the local culture. One of the interviewees N3 from an ethnic minority background said that her understanding of death stems from the Tibetan sky burial custom (N3a3). In the supplementary communication after the interview, she said her impression of sky burial came from a story she heard when she was a child. What impressed her most was the concept of sacrificing the body and gaining the freedom of the soul. Although due to family reasons, she was seldom influenced by some traditional Tibetan ideology in her later growing environment, she still agrees with and respects the concept of body and soul obtained from that story. N11 took the initiative to learn about the practical rules of Manchu shaman rituals out of her own interests.<sup>5</sup> Although she said that she does not believe in Manchu shamanism, it still affects her concept of death to a certain extent (N11a3). Local traditions have influenced some interviewees' ideas, such as the local legend of corpse manipulation in Xiangxi mentioned by N7. In the local festival Qiyue Festival (七月节), the living burned

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<sup>5</sup> N11 mentioned here that the Shamans walks between the afterlife world and the real world through specific rituals and communicate with souls between the two worlds.

packages with the names of the deceased to send items and their miss to them (N14a3). In funeral ceremonies, traditional customs such as seeing off around the house of the deceased (N7a3); wearing special colored clothing and accessories at the funeral (N2a1, N8a1); burning paper money (N12a2) and so on (N10a2, N15a3...) are a part of the source of the concept of death. As a traditional Chinese festival closely related to death, Qingming Festival (清明节) is recognized as an important moment for ancestor worship and commemoration. Various customs had an impact on the interviewees' concepts of death (N12a4, N17a3, N19a5, N20a3). Religious beliefs, such as the Buddhist concept of reincarnation (N1a6); daily temple visits (N1a1, N3a1, N14a4...); Taoist festivals and temple fairs (N19a2), etc. are also considered to have an impact on the concept of death. Some of the religious beliefs are self-selected by the interviewees (N9a2, N10a1) while some are influenced by the daily practices of their families (N4a1).

The personal experience of the interviewees participated in the process of forming the concept of death. For interviewees who had a near-death experience such as asphyxiation (N15a4); respiratory illness (N6a2); allergies triggering choking (N17a5), there are differences in their thoughts about the impact of such experiences on their perceptions of death.<sup>6</sup> N17 believed that this unusual feeling intuitively influenced her conception of death. N15 indicated that the experience at that time left more of a physical and psychological fear, without triggering thoughts about death. N6's heart attack occurred shortly after the death of a relative with similar symptoms, thus deepening her apprehension of death at that time. However, she also did not directly relate the situation to death, thus the experience did not have much impact on her conception of death. The witnessing of death is also considered to be one of the influential causes of the conception of death. For the sighting of a dying person (N1a9), the death of a loved one (N3a6, N9a8, N15a5), the slaughter process of an animal or the remains (N2a8, N19a6, N14a8, N18a6), the experience of remains in different states (N2a5, N17a9, N20a5) are mentioned in this section. In addition to

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<sup>6</sup> The near-death experiences mentioned by the interviewees are mainly focused on describing the moment when they thought they were closest to death.

this, personal non-religious beliefs are also involved in shaping concepts of death, such as atheistic, materialistic views (N10a3, N18a10).

Experiences from others together with cultural works constituted the external experience that became the source of the idea of death. N5 mentioned that she had heard of patients' out-of-body experiences during surgery, so she chose to believe in the continued existence of the soul after the death of the physical body. N8 believed that the soul exists independently of the physical body because of the memories of former lives described by others. The interviewee may have two seemingly contradictory conceptions of death due to the influence of different external information:

In the metaphysical worldview, maybe a person died and the soul still exists. Through another way, a new body may be acquired...Anyway, nowadays, from a scientific point of view, human being as carbon-based organisms. When we die, we probably turn into ash and then they turn into whatever chemically speaking molecules or something, and you just diffuse and then disappear. That's the more decent understanding now. But what I hope is that when I die, my body may be gone, but my soul may float, or may be to hell or heaven in our Chinese tradition, or go through the ghost gate and drink Mengpo's soup, and then I might be able to get another life again<sup>7</sup> (N13).

#### **4.1.2. Concept of life and death process**

Interviewees' conceptions of death can be divided into a four-point process. Their perceptions of death itself can be divided into two main categories: death is seen as a point of end, or there is a continuation after death. Some of the interviewees emphasized that physical death is ending from an individual perspective (N1a13, N19a10, N14a34). N19 separated the idea of death in terms of its different perspectives on the individual as well as on others. He made clear that the meaning of death for man as an individual and as an object in the eyes of others is different. However, he affirmed the terminal significance of death for individuals: "I think from

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<sup>7</sup> In legend, after drinking Mengpo's soup, people can forget everything and go to the next life.

my point of view, it's over, but for others, the deceased will still be missed, so I think from the outside, it's not the end" (N19).

Death is the complete end (N1a11, N10a19, N17a14 ...). It is an irreversible process (N2a81, N12a7, N4a12), and the end brought by death means the disappearance of everything in this life of the individual (N9a13, N1a15, N1a20). Death as a physiological phenomenon is defined in biological terms (N10a4, N18a9, N20a9), such as the loss of vital signs (N1a12, N1a14).

When death is not considered to be a complete end (N3a10, N5a4, N2a11...) the existence of the soul is proposed several times (N8a6, N17a15, N5a12...). The idea of the soul's existence independent of the physical body increases the space for discussion of the state of human beings after the point of death. After the soul is separated into another part by the death of the physical body, some interviewees believe that it will remain in this form and continue to exist in this world (N7a7, N2a82, N5a12...), while others believe that the soul will move on to the next body (N17a16):

...each human body is equivalent to a container. In fact each of us is also controlled by our consciousness. Our brain, for example, gives us emotions, gives us ideas, and lets us know what we are going to do today. Such a brain, such a soul, it is unique to each person. After each person dies, these memories are sealed in the soul and then carried into the next life (N17).

The view of the perception of the concept of death is not limited to the subjective perspective. Some interviewees believed that existence after death can be defined from the perspective of others. In this point of view, traces left by people before their death (N11a14), such as spiritual forces (N2a49, N4a16, N2a51), ideologies (N2a50), and presence in the memories of others can be considered as the continuation of life after death.

When death is regarded as a moment, the existence of a period of time after this point can be considered as a transitional phase. This process is considered chaotic (N11a12). After this stage, the soul after former death can achieve rebirth (N7a8,

N9a6).

Interviewees' conceptions of the afterlife can be summarized in four forms: enter reincarnation; other dimensions; parallel world and fall into a dream. Interviewees who believed that after death the soul would flow into reincarnation assumed that the existence of the next life was not limited to humans. This concept is similar to the Buddhist concept of samsara, but none of the interviewees explicitly stated that their beliefs were directly related to Buddhist doctrines.<sup>8</sup> N8 believed that after reincarnation, souls may turn into other creatures. In N9's opinion, reincarnation into plants or human babies is equally possible. Regarding N17, the process of the soul entering the next body after flowing can be considered as entering the afterlife. N16 presented the idea of dimensionality. She believed that after death, the soul goes to a "space that humans cannot perceive, a three-dimensional, four-dimensional space" (N16a7). She also put forward the idea that death is a dream which cannot wake up and the so-called reincarnation is what happens in the dream (N16a5, N16a6). N2 believed that after death in the current world, one can continue to live in another parallel world. He did not emphasize the idea of being born again and starting a new life.

The above concepts were presented by the interviewees based on their individual beliefs about the afterlife. The concept of afterlife belief can be divided into two parts: the belief of past and present and decision rule. The former part is about why those interviewees believe there is an afterlife. N6 and N18 considered the belief in the afterlife as spiritual support. Despite questionable attitudes about the existence of the afterlife, the belief in the afterlife is a spiritual pillar for N16 when faced with the death of a beloved family member:

At first, I don't believe in the afterlife, but I think for me myself, facing the death of my family and my loved ones, even if I didn't believe in the afterlife before, I would hope (that there is one) in this case. Though I don't really believe in the afterlife, I would like to think of the afterlife as a kind of support,

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<sup>8</sup> In contemporary forms of Buddhism, there are 6 realms in samsara: hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, gods and demi-gods (Wilson, 2010). The interviewees' concept of samsara focused on humans and animals, with additional mention of plants.

a spiritual support. Otherwise, I don't think I can get through that time. The only way I can have a hope is to believe that there is an afterlife (N16).

The reason N11 believed in the afterlife is that she considered the *déjà vu* that happened in her life may come from her past life experiences:

I am very interested in the content of the memories. Because I sometimes get in a trance and a place, I've never been to feels familiar to me. At that time I wonder if I have been to this place in a previous life in my current one (N11).

Even though N4 also believed in the existence of the afterlife, he found that only the present life can really be controlled by him. N2 has a more positive attitude towards the afterlife for his concept of the afterlife is mainly derived from the description of literary works, which is influenced by dramatization (N2a12). Both N15 and N20 believed that life and death constitute a cycle and that the whole process can be called life. The rules that determine the situation in the afterlife are thought to be influenced mainly by karma (N3a13, N8a8, N2a13...) and metaphysical factors (N11a15), as well as possibly by randomness (N13a9).

#### **4.1.3. Link between life and death**

From the point of view of some interviewees, the gap between life and death is not unbridgeable as most people realistically believe. Certain connections exist there between the living and the deceased, which can be divided into four categories: active connection; passively accept connection; sense of presence and supernatural power.

It is considered feasible to actively contact with the deceased. People try to communicate with them for different purposes. N4 mentioned the fortune-telling rituals in his home region of Guangdong. The medium of communication with the deceased is a set of divination tools in the shape of a crescent moon, operated by a local master with special abilities. After connecting with the spirits of the deceased, the master asks the living what they want to know, such as seeking guidance about the future or asking whether something is right or wrong. The state of the tools of divination is considered to present the message and the will that the deceased wanted to convey (N4a46). Another form of communication in which the third-party acts as a

medium is the celebrant at the funeral. Although the celebrant does not have the ability to communicate with the spirit, the speech will carry on the will of the deceased during the lifetime, acting as a channel to soothe the living in order to serve as an emotional relief (N9a10). Besides inviting a medium, people tried to communicate with the spirits in a more direct way. N3's family members still prepare tableware for the deceased at dinner time (N3a38). N5 introduced the custom of tying red ropes around the ankles of the deceased to retain the soul (N5a2).

Communication with the deceased is sometimes thought to be passively accepted. The presence of ghosts is regarded as something that confused people's linear understanding of time. Their appearance brought some related memories (Valk, 2006). Their connection with the alive is believed to have a certain purpose. N5's mother used to have frequent dreams about a deceased relative of hers. This phenomenon is interpreted in Chinese culture as *tuo meng* (托梦), which means accepting the connection of the deceased in the dream world. Until she found this relative's grave and made worship and offerings, such dreams disappeared (N5a7). N16's friend is believed to have a natural ability to witness ghosts. The paranormal phenomena she has experienced with her friend convinced her of the existence of ghosts (N16a11).

Interviewees who were unable to see the soul in person also described their experiences of sensing the presence of a spirit:

After my grandmother died, I had a feeling, whether it was something that really happened or just my own feeling. She was with me for about a week after she died. I felt that she was there for me. I obviously had the feeling that one day this sense of company suddenly disappeared (N6a3).

...when my grandfather died, we went to burn some paper money for him. I remember on that day the weather was quite good. There was not much wind. But when we are burning the paper, there was a sudden gust of wind. I felt that my grandfather had really received the (paper money) we burned for him. It was that feeling. After a person dies, he will still be looking at you in the sky and still have a kind of contact with you that you can feel (N8a5).

What those experiences have in common is that the sense of presence of the souls has given the interviewees a certain spiritual relief.

Regarding supernatural forces, interviewees held different conceptions. N4 viewed the existence of ghosts and spirits as a subjective human description (N4a19). It needs to be scientifically proven to be believable (N20a10). The occurrence of personal experiences greatly influenced the interviewees' conceptions of existence after death.

#### **4.1.4. The attitude towards death**

Interviewees' attitudes toward death are complex and multi-layered, which can be seen as a process of changing. Three main types of attitudes towards death can be classified: acceptance, resistance, and approach.

##### **4.1.4.1. Acceptance of death**

Part of the interviewees considers death as an inevitable thing. Death needs to be accepted because of the inevitability of its occurrence (N3a19, N1a22). Thus, the acceptance of death made people feel being forced (N17a22, N18a11, N19a15...). Meanwhile, some interviewees found that the inevitability of death was due precisely to its natural occurrence. Just like birth and illness, it is a normal process in human life (N10a7). N12 argued that people should accept the fact of death with a more open attitude. N20, who has a similar point of view, advocated facing death through a rational way of thinking. He believed that people need to learn to reconcile with death (N20a21). Likewise, there are differences in the degree of acceptability among the interviewees. Such differences are reflected in the attitude towards the death of oneself and others. For their own death, interviewees generally found it more acceptable (N6a7, N16a17, N2a73...). N16 found no particular feelings about her own death: "I just don't feel anything. I feel indifferent, but not completely indifferent. I might feel sad because there are things I haven't finished yet, but it's not that sad, it's over and done" (N16).

This can be interpreted as a subtle emotion. The interviewees are more open

about their own death than the deaths of others that had already occurred or existed in their imagination.

#### 4.1.4.2. Resistance of death

Resistance of death is represented by four main types of emotions: fear, rejection, escape and guilt.

Fear of death can be attributed to an embodied object, such as human or animal remains (N17a13, N2a6, N4a10...), legendary ghosts (N11a33, N16a31), death-related rituals (N11a34, N15a6, N3a34...), artwork based on the theme of death (N11a18). Fear may also originate from thoughts and imaginations such as the loss of a loved one (N16a13, N6a15, N14a35...), potential death (N17a23, N11a20), the pain of death (N14a6), what might happen after death (N4a27, N17a42, N20a18...), insecurity (N2a8), and loss (N16a14, N19a17, N12a9...). When death or near-death situations occurred, fear was described as one of the most intuitive reactions (N15a4, N17a7, N4a10...).

Since the interviewees' descriptions of their negative attitudes toward death were relatively detailed and specific, I summarized those negative emotions as the rejection of death. Rejection can be interpreted as unacceptability. Many interviewees specifically stated that they had difficulties in accepting the death of their families (N3a18, N6a6, N16a17...). Among them, N3 even thought about whether to end her life actively before her parents because it was difficult to accept their death. N6 once decided to commit suicide right after the day her parents died (N6a7). Although N20 argued that death should be viewed from a rational perspective, he also admitted that it is emotionally unacceptable. Death makes people feel uncomfortable and sad (N9a14, N16a16, N19a9...). Those characteristics also affected how people felt about death-related occasions such as funerals (N2a75, N14a7, N18a26...).

Escaping is the most direct manifestation of resistance of death. The tendency to avoid death is reflected in the desire for life. N20 hoped that the human lifespan can be extended, while N13 holds the expectation of attaining immortality. Despite N2's doubts about immortality, he believes that even if someone obtains eternal life, it does

not mean that he can enjoy it forever: “(Immortality) is really boring, too. If youth lasts forever, you can think about it, but if your body is aging with time, even if you have a long life, there are many things you can’t experience” (N2). But he also said he had fantasies of perfect immortality with the help of technology or other ways: “I would like to live forever in a very perfect state. I have that desire. Like high tech (or something).”

Interviewees generally believed that death cannot be escaped. Technology and medical treatment can only achieve a short extension of life while the occurrence of death is inevitable (N5a17, N18a14, N1a18...). The miracle of life does exist but rarely happens. People who are awakened by the calling of their families when they are dying will eventually have to face death again (N14a13).

The guilty expressed by the interviewees about the death stemmed from the death they once caused. N18 mentions a concept that he describes as “utilitarian”:

I once stepped on a cockroach, I had no feelings. I have to say that this is rather utilitarian, for example, if I accidentally hit and killed a cat when driving, I would feel pain and guilt, but if it was a cockroach, it doesn’t matter (N18).

N14 once caused the death of two pet rabbits due to her own negligence. She said that after that she no longer wanted to keep any animals. The guilt for the death contributed to her awareness of responsibility but also destroyed her confidence (N14a33).

#### **4.1.4.3. Factors influencing the degree of ‘acceptance-resistance’**

Between the extreme opposite sets of attitudes of acceptance and resistance, there are differences in degree. The influences that contribute to this phenomenon are categorized into six factors: experience, relationship, concept, environment, age and state.

Experiences produced a shift in interviewees’ attitudes toward acceptance or resistance to death. N20 assumed that elder people around him are becoming more accepting of death because they have experienced so many others’ deaths in their lives

(N20a38). N9 had just experienced the sudden death of her boyfriend's mother a month before the interview. She said that this experience made her no longer fear death (N9a8).

For individuals, the acceptance of death is related to the relationship between the deceased and themselves (N4a22, N15a16, N15a23...). As the points summarized above, interviewees generally feel more sensitive and difficult to accept the death of their families. This is also reflected in the feeling of death-related occasions. N2 mentioned his experience of once attending the funeral of a relative. When the burial, the close family members of the deceased all acted painful. Meanwhile, for some participants who were more distant from the deceased, the funeral was more of a party (N2a72).

N8 considered that there are differences in her attitude towards death at different stages:

I feel that I have different thoughts about death at different stages. For example, I had a very bad time before and then I would think about death like crazy. I feel that death is a kind of relief, that is, to end the mess of my life, and then do not care anymore. You don't have to suffer or go through something bad. Then, after that period of time, when you look at it now, because the emotions may not be as low as before, and now (in) a more peaceful stage, you may not think too much about death (N8).

The change of acceptance in stages is not simply because of the situation at the present time. Rather, it is a transition to the current situation after a certain period. Thus, the concept can be seen as a combination of former experience and present situation.

The environment is a collection of realistic factors. N14 felt more open to death after studying abroad (N14a14). N10 found that the social distance between people grew when studying abroad and he had more time to put his attention to thinking about himself. Death is one of the issues:

...I always thought death was a very distant thing from me. But during the

study abroad period, a big difference in my living environment was that I was less social and the average distance between me and other people increased. It was easy to feel that I was more isolated as an individual in a social sense...I became more concerned and thought more about myself as an individual. So it is inevitable to think about whether death is closer to me (N10).

Age is an influential factor in the acceptance of death. Both N11 and N20 believed that aging increases their acceptance of death. N5 stated that now the reason why she can fully accept death is just because she has reached middle age (N5a11). N2 considered dying at a young age as a very regrettable incident. However, as one grows older with a more complete life experience, death gradually becomes more acceptable (N2a31).

The attitude towards the acceptance of death also depends on the state. An unexpected death is considered more difficult to accept (N3a8, N4a11, N7a5...), while an anticipated death gave people certain times to accept and relieve their emotions. N6 felt an increase in her anxiety about death after studying abroad because of the actual state of her family members:

...and because you are not with them now, you can't take care of them when they are sick, and you can't notice any changes in their health in time. Because many Chinese people only tell the good news but not the bad, so it's hard for me to notice some changes in time because of the distance (N6).

#### **4.1.4.4. Approach of death**

Acceptance and resistance of death can be regarded as a passive response to the existence of the death itself. While the approach to death can be seen as an active exploration. Curiosity about death is a common phenomenon. The mysterious and unknown characters of death raised the interest in topics related to death itself and the destination of the afterlife (N5a14, N1a17). Curiosity motivated the interviewees to explore death in various ways. N2 indicated that he is willing to try near-death for curiosity (N2a26). Occasions related to death are uncommon, both N3 and N17 said they were intrigued when participating in funeral or ritual events. N18 and N5 tried to

explore the nature of death by reading.

Achievement of death is a generalization of a mentality of actively choosing to die. Death is a relief in some specific contexts, such as people in a depressive state (N2a38), people with serious diseases and their families (N20a27, N20a28) and people in a negative status (N8a9). Both N13 and N8 indicated that they had the idea of seeking death as a relief when they were in a low period. N2 interpreted suicidal behavior as a reaction to the negative status and a desire for a better afterlife.

#### **4.1.4.5. Variables of attitudes towards death**

Attitudes toward death are not static. The four awareness as variables have a certain impact on it: age awareness, safety awareness, self-consciousness and cultural environment awareness.

Part of the interviewees considered themselves presently at a young age. This perception made them feel that there is still a distance between themselves and death (N1a23, N5a24, N2a31...). Thus, N1 considered it unnecessary to feel anxious about death prematurely:

I think I am still young. Death is far away from me, so I feel it is a concept that is not very relevant to me. (So) not to worry about this thing prematurely (N1).

While N12 felt that the growth made his awareness of death more intense. Compared to his ignorance of death when he was a child, now he has a greater sense of the seriousness of death (N12a21).

Safety awareness affected the individual's attitude toward death. N2 felt insecure in the new social environment after studying abroad. When there was uncertainty and unsafety in the environment, it made him more concerned about death (N2a53).

Self-consciousness includes self-awareness and the perception of the current state. N11 found when she feels mentally vulnerable, her awareness of death becomes stronger (N11a23). When facing the death of a non-human species, N19 said he had no attitude that could be described, because its death cannot evoke his awareness of his own death (N19a6). When being in a period of having a relatively stronger

concern for oneself, the consciousness of death is correspondingly increased (N10a11, N11a19).

The change of cultural environment after studying abroad also contributed in the differences of interviewees' attitudes toward death. N14 felt that there was less attention on the culture of death in abroad, thus her awareness of death was diminished (N14a30). After studying abroad, N1 gradually forgot some important days in his original cultural background, such as death-related festivals or the anniversary of a family member's death (N1a168).

## **4.2. The taboo of death**

### **4.2.1. Manifestation of the taboo of death**

The manifestation of the taboo of death can be summarized from two perspectives: emergence and solution. The former describes how interviewees' taboos of death exist. The latter summarizes how they responded to the existence of those taboos.

#### **4.2.1.1. Emergence of the taboo of death**

The taboo of death is particularly evident on certain occasions. Some occasions related to death are seen as objects of taboo existence. Religious places, such as Buddhist temples, are taboo occasions due to their function of hosting events closely related to death, such as rituals or soul releasing (N1a46). On this kind of occasion, death and related topics are intentionally avoided. This act is considered as a taboo of death. N1 and N10 stated that their purpose for following such rules was out of respect for the deceased and their families. They expressed clearly that they do not believe in the existence of so-called supernatural powers on such occasions (N1a48, N10a26). Funerals are also considered to be tabooed. As a farewell event for the deceased, it is inevitably considered to have the character of death. N19 was taught not to return home directly after the funeral. Before returning, attendees should stay or dine somewhere else to avoid bringing the atmosphere of death into their home (N19a30). Death is considered inauspicious, therefore occasions associated with it are

affected by this characteristic which led people to attempt to avoid it. Some special rules at funerals, such as no make-up (N4a41) and the requirement of wearing specific colors of clothing (N2a1), are also observed in response to this taboo. Some of the taboos in terms of color are derived from the rule of funerals. N5 mentioned when her elder relatives were seriously ill, her mother did not allow her to dress in black and white colors. It was because those are the main colors in traditional Chinese funerals. It is considered as an inauspicious sign for relatives to wear blacks and whites. In the taboo for the cemetery, N4 mentioned the taboo that there should be no grass growing near the tombstones. This taboo can be interpreted as originating from the Chinese concept of filial piety (孝道 *xiao dao*) and family (N4a39). Descendants have the responsibility of taking care of the tombstones of their ancestors. Obeying these rules can express their respect and earn the blessing of their ancestors. Correspondingly, violating those taboos may lead to bad things happening, such as hunting from spirits. Valk (2006) mentioned that the presence of spirits has the purpose of alerting the living, such as regulating their behavior and traditional customs. Their appearance expressed the emphasis on their own wishes. The pacifying function of rituals can make ancestors find peace and contentment.

In addition to this, words and topics related to death are appropriately avoided in public or on serious occasions (N2a62, N1a35, N9a11...). As an uncommon topic, death will not be actively mentioned in daily conversation. This taboo is classified as a matter of etiquette.

The taboo of death is reflected in specific objects. Interviewees' perceptions of the specific objects of the taboo of death are related to the traditional order of seniority in Chinese society. Topics related to death are tabooed in the presence of the elders (N1a39, N10a24, N17a31...). Elders are generally perceived to be closer to death, thus they are assumed to have a more sensitive attitude toward death. 'Death' is considered to have a cursing connotation. Besides, elders themselves may also hold an avoidant and taboo attitude toward death due to age and health status (N2a58). Mentioning death purposely is considered offensive and impolite (N20a32).

Children are also considered to be the objects of avoiding talking about death. Both N7 and N13 had experienced being hidden from the death of their families in their childhood:

I was 10 years old. I may not be able to understand these things very well. At that time, my family probably thought, "You're a child, I can't talk to you too much about this kind of thing". So, on the last night before my grandfather died, they left me in a nearby hotel. At that time, I remember that my grandma and I were sleeping, and then she was called away in the middle of the night, but they said to me: "It's okay, you shall go back to sleep". Then the next morning I knew that my grandfather had died that night. What I felt at that time was that I couldn't believe it. I was numb and didn't have any other feelings (N7).

...I didn't know what to do. After that, I didn't attend the funeral because my families wouldn't let me go (N13).

Children are thought to be less able to digest the heavy fact of death. In fact, the effects of simple taboos and avoidance are not as positive for children as expected. N14 found that the source of her contradiction between the acceptance and resistance of death was her taboo against it. This concept stemmed from the taboo and concealment of death by her families in her childhood (N14a31).

For the recently bereaved and those in poor psychological condition, interviewees considered it appropriate to avoid mentioning death with them as well (N15a15, N3a29). The taboo of death should also be observed for people who are considered socially distant, such as teachers or unfamiliar persons (N1a39, N7a12).

#### **4.2.1.2. Solution of the taboo of death**

There are three main categories of interviewees' responses to the objective presence of the taboo of death: respect, obey and criticize.

Most interviewees held a respectful attitude toward the taboo of death. Even though there are differences in attitudes or behaviors regarding the taboo, they also expressed a willingness to respect it (N18a25, N10a17, N11a35...). None of those

interviewees directly expressed a negative point of view on the taboo of death. However, N12 raised a critical question of the taboo of death:

...I don't know enough about these taboos, I don't know much about them, so this will lead me to think more from an environmental or security point of view when I see some behaviors such as paper burning. That is, putting aside the value of ancestor worship, I would think more from the perspective of whether this behavior is harmful to society or brings some fire problems. Therefore, I do have some opinions about these behaviors. I will have some negative comments and opinions about some things that are not suitable for this society at present. This is my own opinion, of course, I will not tell others, but after I have experienced it myself, I will leave a question mark in my own mind (N12).

Interviewees' obedience to the taboo of death was reflected in attempts to resolve the content which caused the taboo. The use of euphemisms, dialects and words representative of holiday customs to replace direct expressions of death is a widely adopted solution (N2a57, N14a18, N19a18...). N6 and N11 mentioned the tradition of touching wood after the use of taboo words to dissolve the negative effects.

According to the theory of planned behavior model (TPB) proposed by Ajzen (1985), one's behavior is determined by the intention, while attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control shape the intention. When analyzing why the interviewees adopt the above three ways of responding taboo of death, attitude can be understood as an individual's perception of death. TPB stated that if one's attitude towards a certain behavior is more positive, then the behavior intention gets stronger (Ajzen, 2005). The higher the individual's recognition of taboos, the more they tend to respect and obey specific rules. Subjective norms are mainly derived from social and other environmental influences. N12 specifically mentioned that during his growing up, he has lacked taboo awareness education. This can be considered as lacking subjective norms from the family environment. Through the experience, N12 has not encountered any negative impact due to his non-compliance with tabooed rules. It

also might be because he doesn't actively associate the occurrence of some things with tabooed behaviors, he hasn't been affected in terms of perceived behavioral control.

#### 4.2.2. Sources of the taboo of death

The sources of interviewees' perceptions of the taboo of death were divided into five main categories: family environment, subject education, local culture, social activity and personal experience.

Influence from the family environment exists in different forms. Daily life communication and parental teaching are the most common and intuitive ways (N1a73, N5a23, N16a33...). When one's family has a religious background, the beliefs of family members can influence the perception of the taboo of death through their daily interactions (N4a20, N14a26). N14's family was strongly influenced by Buddhist beliefs, thus she found she was often taught on avoiding taboos. Some traditions that have been handed down within the family, such as special taboos taught by elders, have distinctive family characteristics (N2a85).

N1 and N18 stated that their perceptions of the taboo of death oriented from subject education, which is science education in Chinese public education system. N1 admitted that there are indeed several death-related behaviors that should be avoided in daily life, but it is out of the consideration of personal safety. Compared with taboos originating from a metaphysical perspective, he rather tend to accepts the guidance from biological (N1a71). N18 indicated that his rationalistic point of view on the taboo of death was built up by the subject education from school (N18a30). From the point of education, part of the interviewee mentioned the lack of death education. N11 was deeply impressed by the suicide of one of her friends, who died in junior high school age. She attributed his death to the lack of death education, both from family and school:

First, because he was in a very good school, his classroom pressure was very high. Also the teacher did not take time to guide him, because at that time teachers only focused on academic performance and did not understand what the student was thinking. In his family environment, his parents were not

around for a long time, he did not have a good way to talk and communicate, a way to vent. So, I think it will always lead to the accumulation of psychological pressure. Finally, it led to a variety of stress (N11).

N12 and N14 also found the lack of death education caused a certain negative impact on their own growth. N12 believed that this effect will eventually spread to the whole society (N12a24).

Local culture has been generally mentioned by interviewees as an important source of the conception of the taboo of death. When interviewees summarized the influence of culture on their perceptions of taboos, they mentioned local customs (N2a88, N12a18, N14a27...), literature (N13a19) and Feng Shui (风水) (N6a1). N14 shared a local custom of her hometown:

In my hometown, during Qingming Festival, children should wear their clothes in a backward way. When I was a kid, I have not thought about whether to disobey or something, I just accepted it as a traditional custom (N14).

In traditional Chinese culture, death contains the connotation of curse when it was directed at others (N2a61, N11a29, N18a19...). It is aggressive and offensive (N2a60, N15a12, N19a27). In the Chinese causation ideal system, the usage of words related to death is seen as the presence of sympathetic magic (N10a12). Verbal references to death might have an impact on reality. This kind of phenomenon is described in Chinese culture as '*yi yu cheng chen* (一语成谶)' means a joke turned into a reality (N2a64).

Conceptions of the taboo of death can be learned from experiences of participating in social activities. When participating in important occasions such as festivals or rituals, the taboo of death is always given more emphasis and attention (N4a33, N14a15, N16a28...). Observing the taboo rules is believed to ensure the ceremony goes smoothly (N14a23).

According to the ostensive theory proposed by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, as a legend-telling means, "ostension is the only communication means that, by its

very essence, does not use the sign" (1983, p.6). Ostensive action has the characteristic of directly showing the realities themselves without using any significations and modifications. The completion of the ostensive action requires effective communication between the sender and the receiver of the information. To ensure correct information transmission, the sender needs to make sure that the receiver has the ability to receive and respond to the message when showing the object. The receiver needs to make a judgment base on the context at that time and be familiar with the object shown by the sender. If this process is not fully handled by both parties, the sender will resend the message by verbal repetition (1983). For example, traditional festivals related to death, such as Qingming Festival and Zhongyuan Festival can be regarded as the current context. Certain actions to be avoided out of the taboo of death and rituals to be performed in responding to the taboo can be interpreted as objects of ostensive action. People from the same cultural background are more likely to understand and empathize with these actions. Some receivers who failed to receive the message would be told verbally, or find answers by themselves in other forms of narrative. The facts represented by the ostensive action and the narrative contained in the non-ostensive action together constitute the spread of the taboo of death in local culture and social activities. Dégh also pointed out that people are more tend to spread legends by ostensive action (1983). In the process of transmitting, the sender and the receiver can intuitively see each other's reactions. N19 said that when he finds that someone has violated the taboo rules, whether to point out their problems depends on the context and the relationship between them (N19a36). This polite consideration reflects the advantage of ostensive action, that is, intuitive communication, which can effectively transmit legends while avoiding possible contradictions and conflicts.

Some of the interviewees had experiences with negative consequences for not following the forbidden rules (N13a20). N1 was taught that one would be punished for not following the taboos. He had heard some stories of his relatives' unlucky experiences from elders, thus he chose to follow certain rules (N1a74). This kind of

story about the taboo of death has a similar function as a traditional cautionary tale. Bhutia (2021) mentioned in her research on the death by poisoning in Sikkim that “...traditional cautionary tale is ‘weaponised’ and used as a tool in real-world accusations” (p. 66). In the story of unlucky associated with the taboo of death, all encounters suffered by the main character are attributed to their failures of obeying the taboo rules. This is a rather subjective accusation since the direct connection between the character’s behavior and the taboo rules cannot be objectively proven. However, the purpose of spreading this kind of story cannot be generalized as negative. The elders told N1 those stories in order to emphasize to him the importance of obeying the taboo rules. In the unlucky stories, there are more suspicions than accusations.

#### **4.2.3. Attitude towards the taboo of death**

##### **4.2.3.1. Shifts in attitude towards the taboo of death**

Taboo content is tended to be avoided and hidden. Facing the phenomenon of the usage of taboos in modern society, the interviewees presented their views from different perspectives. There are three main shifts in interviewees’ attitudes toward the taboo of death: serious, emotionalize and entertaining.

N12 pointed out that currently, public opinion towards death is lacking respect and seriousness (N12a22). When the taboo content is no longer considered taboo, its warning effect is weakened. While N15 held an opposite attitude, she found people are “too taboo on death” (N15a18). She prefers to look at death in a peaceful way rather than consider it as taboo.

Several interviewees mentioned the colloquial use of taboo words, such as the most commonly used word ‘death’ (si, 死). Most of them no longer define death as a taboo word in daily usage, they remove the meaning of death itself (N5a21, N10a22, N17a30...). When expressing “I want to die” or “deadly...”, interviewees rather viewed it to relieve stress or as a degree of emphasis (N2a66, N4a34, N15a11). Death can also be considered as an expression of dissatisfaction with the present or emotions

(N10a23, N13a15).

N16 shared her shift process of approaching taboos with an entertaining mindset. The awareness of the taboo of death was emphasized mainly within her family environment. After leaving this environment, her attitude towards the taboo of death gradually relaxed and weakened. Influenced by internet phrases, she began to entertain the usage of taboo words. "It's just a joke for fun", she said (N16a27). N20 found using words related to death with friends could make the chatting atmosphere more intimate and relaxed (N20a42).

#### 4.2.3.2. Multicultural differentiation

As international students, the interviewee group has a combined sociocultural experience of both China and abroad. They had different experiences and opinions about the changes in their attitude towards the taboo of death during the study.

Most of the interviewees found their attitude towards the taboo of death has not produced a significant change. Most of them considered their conception of death had already been formed well before they went abroad (N18a17, N19a21, N19a23). This concept is relatively stable, thus it will not be simply affected by the change of living environment. N5, who now studies as a graduate student, considered her time abroad to be relatively short. She did not have the time and opportunity to participate in local social and cultural life during the one- or two-year study, not even mention the possibility of intersecting with death. N20 also found that international students were not able to participate in local funerals or rituals due to their low social participation.

Studying abroad can be interpreted as a multicultural background. Interviewees found and mentioned differences in taboos of death between China and foreign countries, such as the urban planning of cemeteries and language usage habits. N16 and N20 pointed out that in the United States and Japan, the setting of cemeteries and human living areas is different from China. These differences originated from the perception of the taboo of death (N16a20, N20a31). N20 gave an example of the difference in the usage of taboo words between Japanese and Chinese:

For example, death in Japanese word “*死ぬ* (*shi ne*)” is a very serious word

from the Japanese point of view. It is a taboo word. I think maybe these verbal terms are closely related to the social acceptance and the different cultural styles and cultural heritage of each country (N20).

Interviewees expressed their understanding and respect for those differences (N16a22, N2a91).

The perception of the taboo of death gave the interviewees a sense of belonging. In N19's point of view, the taboo of death itself is "unscientific". However, such an attitude does not completely negate the existence of it in his mind. The taboo of death gave him a sense of community belonging (N19a42):

I am relatively rational, so I tend to discuss death itself from a scientific point of view. But at the same time, there are some unscientific aspects, such as taboo, which seem to be inconsistent with some rationality...You have a culture of family, you have a sense of belonging to the family. So maybe there are some things that I don't understand but I would choose to do (N19).

According to the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner, social identity is the recognition of one's identity based on the group to which they belong (1979). This identity is not attached to the external world but based on the normal cognitive processes of the individual. There are three steps to build up social identity: social categorization, social identification and social comparison. Even though the perception of the taboo of death held by N19 is not the same as his family's, he chose to categorize himself and his family into the same social group for sharing the same family culture. Therefore, he chose to obey those certain rules of taboo.

## 5. Conclusions

This study aims to understand and explore the concepts and attitudes of contemporary Chinese international students regarding the taboo of death. With the supplementary question of how those perceptions are formed, I wanted to know what factors are involved in its construction process. To answer the above questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 international students from China.

Through the grounded theory analysis of the interview text, I obtained a complete set of selective coding form. Through the analysis and arrangement of categories at all levels, I completed the construction of two sets of new theoretical frameworks: thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of death and Chinese international students' view of the taboo of death.

According to the thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of death, narratives of interviewees' views on death can be viewed as three stages: sources of the concept of death, the concept of death and attitude towards death. The concept of death is mainly influenced by three aspects: local culture, personal experience, and external experience. Ideas from those three aspects shape the linear narrative of the point division of the 'life-death' process, which I organize into a narrative frame with four main points. In the process of dividing life and death and afterlife state as points, according to the interviewee's description, the link between life and death was additionally established. Based on their conception of death, interviewees identified three main attitudes towards death: acceptance, resistance and approach. Six factors influenced the degree of 'acceptance-resistance', while four awareness formed the variables of attitudes towards death. This set of thinking model frameworks explains the formation process and attitude feedback of Chinese international students' views on death.

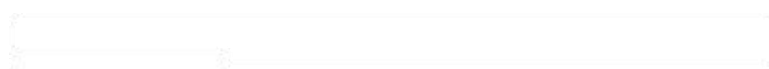
The thinking mode of Chinese international students' view of the taboo of death constructs a process of sources-manifestation-attitude. The source of the taboo of death section answers the source part of 'how formed' in the supplementary question with five main categories: family environment, subject education, local culture, social

activity and personal experience. The emergence part in the manifestation of the taboo of death reflects the existence and form of taboo in the interviewees' concept, what it is like and how it is embodied and realized in life. In the solution part, three main ways of responding to taboos are summarized: respect, obey and criticize. It reflects the concepts and ways of interviewees in the practical application of taboos. Taboo itself is tended to be avoided and hidden. Facing the phenomenon of the usage of taboos in modern society, three main shifts in interviewees' attitudes toward the taboo of death are listed: serious, emotionalize and entertaining. The study and life experience of international students in a multicultural background also constitutes influences on their attitude towards the taboo of death.

The results obtained so far basically describe the concepts and attitudes of Chinese international students towards the taboo of death. It has preliminarily completed the construction of the thinking framework of the taboo of death and systematically summarized the relationship between the source, manifestation and influencing factors of the taboo of death. Views on death can be considered as the basis of concepts and attitudes towards the taboo of death. However, because the connection between these two conceptual systems is too individualized, it is difficult to generalize the relationship at a deeper level. Meanwhile, during the narrative process, the interviewees have certain limitations in directly enumerating and describing the content of death-related taboos. They tend to describe the content or behavior of taboo in a specific scene. This narrative tendency resulted in fewer direct descriptions of the taboo of death in the interview text. Therefore, in the research results of the concept of the taboo of death, there are fewer enumerations of the taboo content itself.

This study is also limited in the number of samples. Most of the samples live in Estonia and the representativeness of the research results to the international student population in other regions cannot be verified at present. Due to the limitations caused by the number of samples and the method of sampling, this study was not able to collect more samples with ethnic minority backgrounds. In future studies, the sample

size and scope can be considered to be expanded. In the sample of this study, the international students are simply studying in abroad and have no deeper connection with the local population, such as forming a family. Samples with a higher degree of social participation can be considered to study more in-depth the impact of multicultural environment on the views on the taboo of death in future research. In future research, the results of this study can be used to analyze the content and production process of an individual's taboo of death and provide a reliable data source for Chinese society's concepts and attitudes towards the grand topic of death.



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#### Fieldwork data

1. FW 1- Interview with interviewee N1, 29 years old, face to face, 12/03/2023.
2. FW 2- Interview with interviewee N2, 29 years old, face to face, 13/03/2023.
3. FW 3- Interview with interviewee N3, 24 years old, on WeChat, 17/03/2023.
4. FW 4- Interview with interviewee N4, 27 years old, face to face, 12/03/2023.
5. FW 5- Interview with interviewee N5, 33 years old, face to face, 19/03/2023.
6. FW 6- Interview with interviewee N6, 25 years old, on WeChat, 14/03/2023.
7. FW 7- Interview with interviewee N7, 21 years old, face to face, 18/03/2023.
8. FW 8- Interview with interviewee N8, 23 years old, on WeChat, 18/03/2023.
9. FW 9- Interview with interviewee N9, 28 years old, on WeChat, 18/03/2023.
10. FW 10- Interview with interviewee N10, 24 years old, face to face, 15/03/2023.
11. FW 11- Interview with interviewee N11, 30 years old, on WeChat, 22/03/2023.
12. FW 12- Interview with interviewee N12, 24 years old, on WeChat, 14/03/2023.
13. FW 13- Interview with interviewee N13, 21 years old, face to face, 18/03/2023.
14. FW 14- Interview with interviewee N14, 21 years old, face to face, 18/03/2023.
15. FW 15- Interview with interviewee N15, 20 years old, face to face, 18/03/2023.
16. FW 16- Interview with interviewee N16, 24 years old, on WeChat, 13/03/2023.
17. FW 17- Interview with interviewee N17, 20 years old, face to face, 18/03/2023.
18. FW 18- Interview with interviewee N18, 28 years old, on WeChat, 16/03/2023.
19. FW 19- Interview with interviewee N19, 23 years old, on WeChat, 15/03/2023.
20. FW 20- Interview with interviewee N20, 24 years old, on WeChat, 17/03/2023.

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### 1. Individual background

How old are you?

Are you religious?

Is your family member/spouse religious?

In your daily life, are there any activities or behaviors related to religion or belief?

#### 2. Concept of death

##### 2.1 Individual experience

Do you have embodied feelings about death (near-death experience)?

Have you ever witnessed death?

Is there any death-related experience that impressed you?

Do you know some Chinese folk customs related to death?

##### 2.2 Concept description

Do you think death means the end?

Do you think there is an afterlife after death?

What is your understanding of death?

#### 3. Attitude toward death

(How do you feel about death?)

Do you find death acceptable?

Are you fascinated/interested in death?

Are you afraid of death?

When thinking/talking about death, do you have any other negative emotions?

Is death a negative/negative word for you?

Does death make you want to escape?

Do you think death is a point that can be restarted/changed?

Do you think that people's subjective will can change death or have any influence on it?

Did your attitude towards death change during your study abroad? What kind of change?

#### 4. Taboo of Death

Do you know any taboo of death?

Do you often bring up or talk about death? Why?

Will your attitude towards taboo of death change under certain circumstances?

What kind of feelings do you have when you participate in some death-related activities?

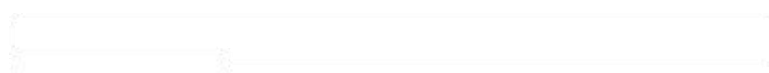
What do you think shapes your views on death taboos?

Has your attitude towards taboo of death changed? at what time? Why?

Did your attitude towards taboo of death change during your study abroad?

5. Supplement and summary

Is there anything you would like to add based on our topic of death?



### Resümee

## UURIMUS TÄNAPÄEVASTE HIINA RAHVUSVAHELISTE ÜLIÕPILASTE ARVAMUSTEST SURMA TABU KOHTA

Ruoxi Lyu

Surm on igavene lõplik küsimus, millega igaüks paratamatult silmitsi seisab. Siiski ei ole surm sagedane teema. Surma vältimine on üks surma tabu ilmingutest. Tänapäeval piirduvad akadeemiline surma tabu uurimine Hiinas keeleteaduse- ja tabusõnadega, kuid süstemaatiline uuring surma tabu arusaamisest puudub ikka. Uurimistöo tausta järgi esitasin oma peamise uurimisküsimuse: milline on tänapäeva Hiina välisüliõpilaste arusaamine ja suhtumine surma tabusse? Selle kujunemisprotsessi edasiseks uurimiseks esitasin ka lisaküsimuse: kuidas need arusaamad kujunevad? See uurimus aitab luua surma tabu analüüsiraamistikku ja süstematiseerida seda tohutut ja keerulist ideed.

Eespool esitatud küsimustele vastamiseks tegin poolstruktureeritud intervjuud 20 Hiina välisüliõpilasega. Intervjuude teksti põhistatud teooria analüüsi ja narratiivse analüüsi kaudu sain täieliku valikulise kodeerimisvormi, ning kõigil tasanditel kategooriate analüüsi ja paigutuse järgi moodustasin kahe mõtlemisviiside komplekti: Hiina rahvusvaheliste üliõpilaste mõtlemisviiside suhtumine surmasse ning surma tabusse. Kahe mõtlemisviiside raamistiku põhjal tegin intervjuu vastusega narratiivse analüüsi. Seni saadud tulemused kirjeldavad põhiliselt Hiina rahvusvaheliste üliõpilaste arusaamist ja suhtumist surma tabusse. Arvamusi surmast võib pidada surma tabu suhtes kehtivate arusaamise ja suhtumise aluseks. Käesolev uurimus on esialgu lõpetanud surma tabu mõtlemisraamistiku koostamise ning süstemaatiliselt kokku võtnud suhted surma tabu allikate, avalduste ja mõjutavate tegurite vahel. Tulevikus saab käesoleva uuringu tulemus aidata üksikute surma tabude sisu ja kujunemisprotsessi analüüsida ning pakkuda usaldusväärset andmeallikat sellele, kuidas Hiina ühiskonnad surma temast arusaada ja sellesse suhtuda.

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**18/05/2023**

