

ANTH5316  
Death, Death Ritual and Culture  
Spring 2025

Instructor: Andrew KIPNIS  
Class meeting: Monday 11:30-1:15 NAH114  
Tutorials: 1:30-2:15 NAH11  
Instructor Office Hours: by appointment: NAH405  
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**Course Description:** Death is both a human universal and a process deeply affected by the cultural context in which it occurs. Dealing with death, both practically and psychologically, is something that all humans must face. This course examines death and death ritual through the question of what is universal and what is culturally variant about how humans face death. It looks at death and death ritual in both modern and pre-modern contexts and analyses it socially, psychologically, politically, and culturally. From the course students will learn how the treatment of death varies cross-culturally; how understandings of death have shifted over human cultural evolution; what aspects of death are universal in human experience; and how death affects contemporary politics, economics, and culture.

**Learning Outcomes:**

- understand how the treatment of death varies cross-culturally, and thus how our own personal understandings of death are not necessarily universally shared;
- analyze processes of grieving and structures of death ritual in terms of how they vary cross-culturally;
- evaluate how death and fear of death affects contemporary politics, economics, and culture in societies across the globe;
- evaluate the place of death within our own lives.

**Language of Instruction:** English.

**Assessment:**

1. Attendance/Participation and Weekly Discussion Forum Postings: 25%: For 7 of the weeks for which there are readings, students should post questions and comments on the readings for tutorial on blackboard. You should post twice a week for at least 7 weeks and the deadline for each week is Sunday night before class at midnight.

**Forum posts:** For seven weeks of your choice, you will need to submit two forum posts on assigned readings (these should be either responses to your classmates' comments or your own post if you would like to discuss something different). Your posts do not have to be long—they could be as brief as two-three sentences, but they must meet the following criteria:

- be pertinent to the main arguments of the readings (demonstrate that you have read the texts)
- be meaningful and original (demonstrate that you have thought about the texts)

- *be polite and respectful*

*The posts should be posted to the forum "Discussion Forum" on Blackboard.*

2. Take-home midterm exam: 35%: Exam questions covering the lectures and readings for the first six weeks will be passed out after the lecture on February 10. Exam responses are to be double-spaced, in 12-point font and submitted via the plagiarism detection engine VERIGUIDE and use any coherent academic style for citations. Hard copies are to be turned in to the department office. The due date is Friday February 21 at 12 noon.

3. Final exam: 40%: Exam questions covering the lectures and readings for the last seven weeks will be passed out on the last day of class, April 14. Exam responses are to be double-spaced, in 12-point font and submitted via the plagiarism detection engine VERIGUIDE and use any coherent academic style for citations. Hard copies are to be turned in to the department office. The due date is Friday 2 May at 12 noon.

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **Week One: 6 January: SEX AND DEATH: Human Universals or Cultural Constructions?**

- Course introduction
- Why is studying death and death ritual important?
- Tutorial arrangements

#### **Week Two: 13 January CONCEPTUALIZING DEATH**

Read: Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *What Does It All Mean?* p. 87-94

--Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2018 [1954]. "Magic, Science, and Religion: Death and the Reintegration of the Group," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 79-83.

--Kipnis, Andrew B. 2017 "The Universality of Sex and Death" *American Anthropologist* 119(4): 759-761.

- Imagining death as a process
- The relationship of this process to life

#### **Week Three: 20 January THE DENIAL OF DEATH: PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS**

Read: Solomon, Sheldon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski. 2015. "Managing the Terror of Death," in *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, pp. 3-14.

Also read the following webpage and newspaper story

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/style/self-care/there-are-no-five-stages-of-grief.html>

and

--Danely, Jason. 2018. "Mourning as Mutuality." In Antonius C. G. M. Robben, ed., *A Companion to the Anthropology of Death*. Cambridge: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 131-143.

- Psychological mechanisms for accepting the death of a loved one
- Psychological mechanisms for accepting one's own mortality

#### **Week Four: 27 January DEATH RITUAL AS A PROCESS**

Read: Van Gennep, Arnold. 2018 [1960]. "The Rights of Passage," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 34-43.

--Murnane, William J. 1992. "Taking It with You: The Problem of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt." In Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, pp. 35-48.

- Handling the dead body
- Process of transition
- What does the process of death ritual accomplish?

**\*\*\*\*3 February Chinese Lunar New Year Holiday. Enjoy!\*\*\*\***

#### **Week Five: 10 February DEATH IN CHINESE SOCIETIES**

**Take home midterm exam will be handed out. Note that at least one of the questions will deal with material from week six, but you can start on some of the questions before then**

Read: Andrew B. Kipnis. 2021. *The Funeral of Mr Wang* (University of California Press). Chapter One.

James L. Watson. 1988 "The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rights" in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (University of California Press. Pp. 3-19

- What is specific to China?
- Is it filial piety in death ritual?
- What about the need for a home for the dead?

#### **Week Six 17 February FIELDTRIP TO WO HOP SEK CEMETERY**

- MEET AT BUS STOP ACROSS FROM UNIVERSITY STATION OUTSIDE CAMPUS
- Be there by 9:40am
- No Reading this week

**\*\*\*\*\*Take-Home mid-term Exam Due on Friday 21 February at 12 noon.\*\*\*\*\***

#### **Week Seven: 24 February FIELD TRIP TO SANDY RIDGE CEMETARY**

- MEET AT BUS STOP ACROSS FROM UNIVERSITY STATION
- EXACT TIME AND PLACE TO BE ANNOUNCED
- Do Readings on topic of Ghosts and Haunting

Read: Bosco, Joseph 2007. "Young People's Ghost Stories in Hong Kong" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40(5): 785-807.

--Freed, Stanley A. and Ruth S. Freed, "Taraka's Ghost," in J. Spradley and D. McCurdy (eds), *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*, p. 283-290

Andrew B. Kipnis. 2021. *The Funeral of Mr. Wang* Chapter Eight.

**\*\*\*3 March No Class Reading Week\*\*\***

### **Week Eight: 10 March GHOSTS AND HAUNTING; GRIEF AND MOURNING**

Read: Radcliffe-Brown, A.R.. 2018 [1922]. "The Andaman Islanders," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, pp.151-155.  
pp. 151-155.

--Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2018 [1993]. "Death Without Weeping," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, pp.167-180.

- Is Mourning universal or state related?
- Mourning elderly versus mourning children
- Dealing with grief cross-culturally
- Is the belief in ghosts traditional or modern?
- What do ghosts tell us about being human?

### **Week Nine: 17 March UNCOMMON DEATH, WITCHCRAFT AND VENGEANCE**

Read: Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 2018 [1937]. "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, pp. 83-89.

--Rosaldo, Renato. 2018 [1989]. "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, pp. 156-166.

- Cause of death and blame
- The supernatural and the social

### **Week Ten: 24 March GUEST LECTURE: CONTEMPORARY HONG KONG FUNERALS**

Read: Short Story by Xi Xi (西西) "A Girl Like Me". You can read either the English or the Chinese version. If you have a chance, see the 2024 fictional movie about a Hong Kong funeral company ("The Last Dance" (破地狱), the Chinese title is the name of a Daoist funerary ritual). [The Last Dance \(2024 film\) - Wikipedia](#) It is in Cantonese, but has Chinese and English subtitles. It stars the famous Hong Kong actor and comedian, Dayo Wong (黄子华).

## **Week Eleven: 31 March DEATH, POLITICS AND POWER**

Read: Verdery, Katherine. 2004 [1999]. "Dead Bodies Animate the Study of Politics," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 303-310 (read pp 306-308 only).

--Wakeman, Frederic. 1988. "Mao's Remains," *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 254-288.

- Death and Regime Change
- The Soul of Politics
- Death and Protest

## **Week Twelve: 7 April DEATH AND MODERNITY**

Read: Aries, Philippe. 1981. "Invisible Death" *The Wilson Quarterly* 5(1): 105-115.

--Kipnis, Andrew B. 2021 *The Funeral of Mr Wang*, Chapter Seven.

- Urbanization and Death
- Science and Death
- Souls and Choice in Modern Societies

## **Week Thirteen 14 April GOVERNING DEATH and HONG KONG FUTURE**

Read: Mullaney, Thomas. 2019. "No Room for the Dead: On Grave Relocation in Contemporary China" *The Chinese Deathscape* Stanford University Press (digital publication, no page numbers). <https://chinesedeathscape.supdigital.org/read/no-room-for-the-dead>. If you can check out the video in figure three: "grave-flattening style."

MA students and ambitious undergraduates should also read

--Toulson, Ruth, 2012 "Necessary Mistakes: Reconciling the Unsettled Dead and the Imagined State in Singapore," *Power: Southeast Asia Perspectives*. Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nick Long, and Lee Wilson, eds, pp. 93-106. (Note that pp 101-105 are difficult. Don't get bogged down and move ahead where you don't understand, but do read the conclusion on pp. 105-6).

- How do states regulate death around the world?
- How do religions regulate death?
- How does the private sector regulate death?
- How does this affect the imagination of death?
- How will the treatment of death change in Hong Kong future?
  - Land use issues
  - Shrinking family issues
  - Ritual technology issues
- Pass out Final exam

**FINAL TAKE HOME EXAM DUE FRIDAY 2 May at 12 NOON**

GRADE DESCRIPTORS:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Criteria for 1) the course and 2) for coursework</i>
A	<p>1) Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work has creatively synthesized course materials and key ideas in an original way. The argument is logical and cohesive, the discussion is well-organized, and the writing is clear. Concrete evidence corresponds to statements and claims.</p>
A-	<p>1) Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work synthesizes course materials and key ideas in an original way, but there are areas for improvement.</p>
B-range	<p>1) Substantial performance on all learning outcomes, OR high performance on some learning outcomes which compensates for less satisfactory performance on others, resulting in overall substantial performance.</p> <p>2) The work demonstrates a solid grasp of course materials and key ideas. There are areas for improvement with respect to building a cohesive argument, organizing the discussion, communicating clearly, and/or identifying relevant evidence.</p>
C-range	<p>1) Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, possibly with a few weaknesses.</p> <p>2) The work shows some effort, but course materials have not been sufficiently engaged. The argument and the writing is not clear, and/or there is no evidence for statements and claims made.</p>
D-range	<p>1) Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes.</p> <p>2) The work shows little effort to engage course materials. There are major problems with clarity of argument and writing.</p>
F	<p>1) Unsatisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, OR failure to meet specified assessment requirements.</p> <p>2) The work has failed respond to the assignment prompt.</p>