

HUMA 2639 Death, Dead Bodies, and Cultures¹

Class Time: 15:00-17:50, Friday

Class Room: RM2302

Professor

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Course Description

This course introduces students to topics on death and dead bodies from an anthropological perspective. It specifically aims to teach students to see the politics of death and dead bodies. Death and dead bodies are more than a matter of biology even though death is a human universal. For example, from what counts as being dead, to how to handle dead bodies, on to the identification of dead bodies, we see how death and dead bodies are socially and culturally constructed. As such, three fundamental questions we ask throughout this course are: What happens when we die? What impacts do death and dead bodies have on social life? How can we better understand the politics and economy of death? Answering each of these questions will provide key elements to understanding how different forms of power shape the management of death and dead bodies in different cultures. In this course, we will discuss specific ethnographic cases from all over the world with a concentration in the East Asian region both through classic and contemporary anthropological works. We will particularly discuss the power of the state and of capitalism, social relationships, and modern institutions and their impacts on managing corpses, performing rituals, and regulating grief and mourning in the modern era.

General Rules

- No. 1:** All assigned readings and weekly assignments **MUST** be done **BEFORE** the lecture. Students are required to show up and be prepared to answer and ask questions in class. Please do not take this class if you are not willing to do this.
- No. 2:** No Class on February 8, 2019. Instead, this class will be held on **May 10, 2019**. On this day, you will present your “Writing about Death” project and comment on other students’ projects during your session. Half of students will be placed in the morning session (9:00-13:00) and the other half will be placed in the afternoon session (14:00-18:00). Don’t take this class if you cannot attend either of these two sessions.
- No. 3:** All verbal communications in class will be in English. Weekly assignments are in English as well (Times New Rome, 12 font size, double spaced, 2.5cm margins). However, you can write your final project either in “written Chinese” or English. Even

¹ Syllabus is subject to change.

if you write your final project in written Chinese, you will still present your project in English. Finalized details about this project and its presentation will be announced later in class. Please note that many of the assignments require a reflection on that week's assigned readings. This means you **MUST** start the readings **EARLY!**

No. 4: No electronic products (laptops, smartphone, pads etc.) during lectures.

No. 5: Please **NO TALKING** during lectures. I will ask you to leave the classroom after one warning (and then your attendance will not count that day).

Grading Distribution

Weekly Writing Assignments: 24 % (6 assignments)

Weekly Group Discussions: 12 % (6 assignments)

Attendance: 4% (W3-W12)

“Writing about Death” Final Project: 60 % (Your own essay: 54%; Giving suggestions on other people's proposals 1%; Your own project presentation: 2%; Making comments on other people's presentations: 3%)

Course Schedule

Feb 1, 2019 (Week 1)

- Introduction

Feb 8, 2019 (Week 2)

- No Class today (Class will be held on May 10, 2019).

Feb 15, 2019 (Week3)

- Topic: Conceptualizations of Death
- Required Reading:
 - Malinowski, Bronislaw. 2004 [1954]. “Magic, Science, and Religion: Death and the Reintegration of the Group,” *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 19-22.

Feb 22, 2019 (Week 4)

- Topic: Death as Process
- Required Reading:
 - Van Gennep, Arnold. 2004 [1960]. “The Rites of Passage,” *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp.213-223.
- Announcing Final Project Details
- **Assignment No. 1 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 1: Death and European Fairy Tales

Choose two out of the following three common European fairy tales: Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, or the Three Little Pigs. Please examine your choice of two fairy tales based on the following questions: 1) Who dies? 2) How and why did the death occur? 3) Was the dead body shown? If there was a death ritual, what was it? 4) Did the characters in the story express grief? 5) Did the story mention the words “death,” “dies,” or “dead”? 6) What would a child be likely to learn about death from hearing or reading these stories? 7) How do Malinowski and Van Gennep's works help to explain these questions? For Q1-6, you need to write 2 pages. For Q7, you need to have 1 page.

Note: you can choose either the English version or the translated Chinese version of these fairy tales (the assignment itself needs to be written in English though). Make sure you write down

the basic publication information about the books (language, how many pages, year of publication, and publisher etc.).

Mar 1, 2019 (Week 5)

- Topic: Death as Pollution
- Required Reading:
 - Hertz, Robert. 2004 [1907]. "A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 197-212.
- **Assignment No.2 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 2: Genealogy of Death

This assignment has two parts:

Part I: Please make a genealogy of death chart (1 page). You will need to make a kinship chart and then write down the year, the mode (accidents, aging, disease etc.), and location of death (home, hospital, institutions etc.) of each relative's death. Write "unknown" for the parts that you don't know. This one page kinship chart can be hand-written.

Part II: Please write your reflection on your genealogy of death (a total of 3 pages). On this reflection, discuss 1) what you learned about how your relatives deal with death, 2) has this exercise changed how you related to certain members of your family? 3) what patterns did you see emerging? 4) how difficult was it for you to attain this information? 5) what are Hertz's points and how did his work help you understand your own genealogy of death. You need to write 2 pages for Q1-4 and 1 page for Q5.

Mar 8, 2019 (Week 6)

- Topic: Death in Sinophone Societies
- Required Reading:
 - Ruth Toulson, 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, p.93-106. London: Routledge.
- **Assignment No. 3 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 3: Funeral Ethnography

Please describe and analyze a funeral you attended before. If you only attended part of this funeral, then focus on describing and analyzing the part that you actually attended. The description of the funeral should be about 2 pages long. Then analyze this funeral with concepts you have learned from previous classes (check our lecture notes). The analysis of the funeral is 1 page. If you have not yet attended any funerals in your life, then interview one of your family members who have.

Mar 15, 2019 (Week 7)

- Topic: Uncommon Death
- Required Reading:
 - Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 2004 [1937]. "Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 115-121.
- **"Writing About Death" Proposal Presentation**
- **Assignment No. 4 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 4: Uncommon Death

Please choose an uncommon death that you know something about (murder, suicide, disaster, etc.). Please describe this death and then explain what makes this death “uncommon.” How do people manage the “uncommon” nature of this case of death? This assignment should be 3 pages long.

Mar 22, 2019 (Week 8)

- A Documentary Film
- A Feature Film
- Critical Analysis on grief and mourning of both films (to be submitted on March 29)

Mar 29, 2019 (Week 9)

- Topic: Grief and Mourning
- Required Reading:
 - Radcliffe-Brown. 2004 [1922]. “The Andaman Islanders,” *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp. 151-155.
 - Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2004 [1993]. “Death Without Weeping,” *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp.179-193.
- **Assignment No. 5 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 5: Analyzing Grief and Mourning

Please describe and analyze the grief and mourning scenes from the two movies you saw on March 22 in terms of the following questions: 1) When did people cry in the two films? 2) Describe the differences in gender and age in those crying scenes. How did these crying scenes in the movies affect your understanding of the relationship between gender/age and crying? 3) Were there moments that you thought people should cry but they didn't? What were those moments and why do you think that they should cry at those times in the first place? 4). What are the arguments of Radcliffe-Brown and Scheper-Hughes and how do their works help you to understand when people should and should not cry? Q1-3 should be 2 pages long and Q4 should be 1 page long.

Apr 12, 2019 (Week 10)

- Topic: Dead Body Politics
- Required Reading:
 - Verdery, Katherine. 2004 [1999]. “Death Bodies Animate the Study of Politics,” *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp.303-310.
- **Assignment No. 6 Due in Class**

Assignment No. 6: Dead Bodies in Public

Please discuss how Hong Kong media (or mainland Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or American medias depending on where you come from) portrays the death of a particular leader of a nation-state or a religious organization OR anonymous or ordinary people's dead bodies. The nationality of the leader and the media do not have to be the same (so, for example, a Hong Kong student can choose how a HK news media outlet reported the death of Kim Jong-il). “Media” here is broadly defined. You can choose news media or fictional media including TV drama or films (CSI, for example).

In the assignment, I would like you to address the following questions: 1) Who is this dead body you chose to describe and how is the death of this dead body portrayed? 2) Is the corpse ever depicted in the media? If yes, then how is it presented? 3) Comparing this death with

other deaths in the same media source, what are the similarities and differences in terms of presenting a corpse in the public gaze? 4) Discuss Verdery's articles to explain why and how dead bodies animate the study of politics and how her work helps you to understand your own case. Q1-3 should be 2 pages long and Q4 should be 1 page long.

Apr 26, 2019 (Week 11)

- Topic: Capitalism and Death
- Required Readings:
 - Suzuki, Hikaru. 2002. "The Commoditization of the Bathing Ceremony," *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan*. Stanford University Press.

May 3, 2019 (Week 12)

- Topic: Science and Dead Bodies
- Required Reading:
 - Lock, Margaret. 2004 [1998]. "Displacing Suffering: The Construction of Death in North America and Japan," *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Readers*, pp.91-111.

May 10, 2019 (Week 13)

- **Final Project Presentation Day**

May 16, 2019!!

Final Essay Dues on Canvas at 11am (Late submissions will receive grade deduction(s)).

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs):

- 1 Explain theories related to foundational anthropological studies on death and dead bodies and their related ethnographic examples
- 2 Exemplify ethnographic studies on death and dead bodies
- 3 Examine how politics and economy shape death and dead bodies
- 4 Explain how death and dead bodies are social and cultural in addition to being biological phenomena
- 5 Analyze students' own cultural ideas and practices regarding death and dead bodies