



Living Funerals as an Emerging Ritual: Exploring Its Presence and Perceived Meaning Among Malaysian Chinese

*Upacara Pengkebumian Semasa Hidup sebagai Ritual yang Muncul: Menjelajahi
Kehadirannya dan Makna yang Dirasai dalam Kalangan Masyarakat Cina Malaysia*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the Malaysian Chinese community perceives and responds to the concept of living funerals, an emerging ritual that has sparked public interest amid shifting attitudes toward death. Using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as a framework, it investigates how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape individuals' intentions toward this practice. Through semi-structured interviews with 12 Generation Z participants and thematic analysis, the findings reveal that while cultural taboos and limited social support remain challenges, many view living funerals as a meaningful, reflective practice. Personal beliefs and psychological readiness often outweigh external pressures in shaping willingness to consider such rituals. This research offers new insights into death-related behaviours and beliefs in a multicultural context.

Key Words: Living Funeral, death rituals, Malaysian Chinese Community

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka bagaimana komuniti Cina Malaysia menilai dan memberi respons terhadap konsep “upacara pengkebumian semasa hidup” (living funerals), satu ritual yang semakin mendapat perhatian sejajar perubahan sikap terhadap kematian. Dengan menggunakan Teori Tingkah Laku yang Dirancang (Theory of Planned Behaviour, TPB) sebagai kerangka teori, kajian ini meneliti bagaimana sikap, norma subjektif, dan kawalan tingkah laku yang dirasakan membentuk niat individu terhadap amalan ini. Melalui temu bual separa berstruktur dengan 12 peserta Generasi Z dan analisis tematik, dapatan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun tabu budaya dan sokongan sosial yang terhad kekal sebagai cabaran, ramai yang melihat upacara ini sebagai satu amalan yang bermakna dan mendorong refleksi. Keyakinan peribadi dan kesiapsiagaan psikologi seringkali mengatasi tekanan luaran dalam membentuk kesanggupan untuk mempertimbangkan ritual sedemikian. Penyelidikan ini memberi pemahaman baharu tentang tingkah laku dan kepercayaan berkaitan kematian dalam konteks berbilang budaya.



Kata Kunci: Upacara pengkebumian semasa hidup, Upacara kematian, Kommuniti Cina Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The ways societies manage death and the established norms surrounding it have become reflective of their collective beliefs about mortality (Gadberry, 2000). Douglas asserts that funeral rites serve both social and personal functions, and help the bereaved navigate the psychological distress brought about by death (Davies, 2017). Over time, the traditional concept of funerals, which primarily focuses on serving the deceased, has begun to shift. As proposed by Wolfelt in 1997, the “life-centred funeral” movement challenges conventional funeral industry norms and values. The transformation of funeral rites, moving away from religious and culturally ingrained notions of death, has led to a renewed focus on the essence and meaning of life (Huntington & Metcalf, 1979). Consequently, the secularization of funeral rites has emerged as a major trend in the modern funeral industry (Davies, 2017).

With the development and promotion of the funeral industry and life education in Malaysia, the perspectives of Malaysian Chinese on death and funerals have undergone significant changes. Among these, pre-planning and end-of-life care have gained increasing attention (Moh, 2021). On April Fool’s Day 2024, the “living funeral” organized by Malaysian Chinese singer Namewee caused a big stir, and his “incomplete” living funeral was criticized by all walks of life as “dragging the feet of life education” (Adamou, 2024). The content and value of the living funeral has also attracted extensive discussion, with some arguing that it is a waste of money and resources, and that it has been guided by the media and the market to gain attention and promotion (Peng, 2024).

Amidst the trend of secularization and personalization of funeral rituals, living funeral occupies a special place. Despite its gradual development in different cultural contexts, it is still a relatively unfamiliar concept in the Chinese community in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how Malaysian Chinese individuals become aware of, understand, and accept the practice of living funerals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LIVING FUNERALS

The history of living funeral can be tracked back in Japan, be attributed to the country’s aging society since the 1950s and the excessive commercialization of the funeral industry in the late 1980s, has led consumers to seek greater autonomy in funeral planning (Kawano, 2004). Beyond this, psychological and emotional dimension is one of the reasons that living funerals have gained attention in modern society. For instance, South Korean funeral service provider



has conducted over 25,000 living funerals, to reflect on life and its meaning, ultimately helping to relieve stress and alleviate depression (Woung & Seo, 2019).

With the promotion of life education, these ceremonies are no longer strictly framed as “funerals” but can take diverse forms. In the specific cases in Singapore, living funeral referred as “Love Party” (Hoh, 2024), expressing that “making death less frightening” (Soh, 2024), emphasize personalization and customization.

According to a survey, 26% of Singaporeans expressed openness to hosting their own living funerals (Samuel, 2024). However, in Malaysia, living funeral sparked strong backlash from netizens, by the cause of “trivializing life and death” and crossing ethical boundaries (Tan, 2021).

DEATH RITUALS

In Chinese culture, discussing one’s own death and afterlife arrangements is considered disrespectful to elders, while participating in funerary affairs is often seen as bringing misfortune (Kew, 2012). However, with the promotion of life education, public perceptions of funeral traditions have gradually shifted. For example, a phenomenological study on South Korean funeral experiences found that “preparing for death, whether alone or as a family, reduces the emotional burden associated with the funeral process” (Sungwon, 2022). The global COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 accelerated the normalization of pre-arranged death planning, bringing the increasingly will-writing among younger individuals in Malaysia, reflecting a growing awareness of end-of-life planning (Li, 2021).

Previous studies suggest that funerary rites symbolize the transition of the deceased, marking the final passage of life, while also serving as a means for the living to cope with grief and maintain a sense of continuity (Huntington & Metcalf, 1979). This concept has also been extended to living funerals, where individuals perceive them as “rebirth ceremonies”, to embrace and heal from their fears, ultimately achieving personal transformation (Chu, 2024). Confronting to death can lead individuals to re-evaluate their life priorities, shifting their focus from external achievements to inner fulfilment (Seifu et al., 2022). This aligns with the concept of “Back to Zero” event, where participants lie in coffins for a minute to simulate death, inspiring them to reflect on the significance of life (Zhong, 2024). Overall, existing research suggests a strong connection between perceptions of death and funerary rituals. Changes in attitudes toward death and funerals can reflect broader societal shifts in understanding and acceptance of mortality.

Personalized and customized funerals, which share conceptual similarities with living funerals, as a part of pre-planned funeral arrangements, reflecting the transition from traditional religious funerals to modern, personalized funerary practices. In a study on alternative funerals, 70% of participants believed that personalized funerals, which cater to the needs of the deceased, provide greater emotional support and empowerment compared to traditional funerals (Bergen & Williams, 1982).

In Malaysia, despite a few funeral companies beginning to offer related personalized services, whether evolving societal values, the promotion of life education, and the



development of the funeral industry will impact the way people view funerary rites—including living funerals—remains an important question.

In summary, research on death rituals is highly diverse. By exploring the experiences and expectations of the living regarding funerary practices, this study aims to uncover how the general public engages with discussions on death-related topics and further extends this inquiry to the emergence of personalized and innovative funerary practices, including living funerals.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative study to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and acceptance of living funerals among Malaysian Chinese by using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. TPB suggests that human behavioural intentions can be reflected through attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, and that attention to attitudes and perceived behaviours toward specific behaviours can lead to a better understanding of the formation of behavioural intentions and the occurrence of behaviours (Ajzen, 2005). Attitude refers to an individual's positive or negative evaluation of the given behaviour, subjective norms represent the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform the behaviour, and perceived behavioural control is defined as the perceived capability and control over executing the behaviour. (Renzi & Klobas, 2008). In research related to death and funeral rituals, TPB has also been applied to examine consumer behaviour in end-of-life planning (Kemp & Kopp, 2010; Katan et al., 2019).

By applying TPB, this study aims to explore how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence decision-making processes related to living funerals among the Malaysian Chinese community.

PARTICIPANTS

This study adopted purposive sampling to focus on Malaysian Chinese aged 18–30 years, with experience that have participated in a funeral or are aware of living funerals, but not restrictions on religion or profession to ensure diverse perspectives. Additionally, snowball sampling will be used to expand the participant pool by asking interviewees to recommend others who meet the criteria. **The demographics of participants can see Table 1.**

TABLE 1. Demographics of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Experience
P1	25	Male	Currently engaged in funeral industry
P2	22	Female	Previously participated in related activities
P3	26	Male	Previously worked in the funeral industry
P4	26	Female	Currently engaged in funeral industry
P5	26	Female	Previously participated in related activities
P6	26	Male	Previously participated in related activities or courses
P7	25	Male	Previously participated in related activities or courses



P8	25	Female	Conducted relevant academic research
P9	26	Male	Previously participated in related activities or courses
P10	25	Female	Previously participated in related activities or courses
P11	26	Female	Previously participated in related activities
P12	26	Female	Previously participated in related activities

DATA COLLECTION

This study developed 15 interview questions based on the three main domains of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and an in-depth interview with 12 participants who had been exposed to or were involved in the relevant field. Eligible participants received text messages or email invitations containing concise information regarding the purpose of the study and the interview. They were informed that the interview was voluntary, that their identity and employment would not be disclosed, and that interviews would be conducted individually either online or offline. This content was gathered through semi-structured interviews incorporating open-ended questions. The inquiries in Table 2 were formulated on the basis of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and pertinent literature on death rituals.

TABLE 2. Interview protocol

No	Questions
1	What do you know about the concept of “living funeral”? What do you think is the point of it?
2	If you had the opportunity to host a living funeral for yourself, would you be willing?
3	What do you think is the impact of hosting a living funeral on an individual and family?
4	What do you think is the difference between a living funeral and a traditional funeral?
5	Do you think your elders and peers will accept you holding a living funeral?
6	Do you think talking about death will change your outlook on life?
7	What influences you to have a living funeral?
8	Do you think this ritual will be accepted in Malaysia’s future society? Why?

DATA ANALYSIS

This study employs Thematic Analysis (TA) as the data analysis method. Its key feature lies in its theory-neutral flexibility, allowing researchers to explore core themes from multiple perspectives while maintaining a structured and systematic analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for examining individual experiences, social meanings, and cultural phenomena, especially in critical frameworks where psychological, emotional, and social values related to a specific topic are explored (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Given that this study aims to explore the perceptions, acceptance, and socio-cultural influences surrounding living funerals among the Malaysian Chinese community, thematic analysis is an appropriate method. This study adopts the three core components of TPB as the main thematic categories, integrating them with the systematic steps of thematic analysis.



RESULTS

Based on the TPB framework and using Nvivo to explore the coding phase, eight sub-themes were generated from the interview data. The table 3 outlines the themes and their analytical descriptions.

TABLE 3. Main themes and sub-themes derived from the analysis.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Attitude	Diverse but Positive Perceptions
	Emotional Resonance and Functional Benefits
Subjective Norm	Cultural Reluctance and Positivity to Discuss Death
	Understanding and Comparison to Death Rituals
	Limited Societal Openness and Acceptance
Perceived Behavioural Control	Perceived Constraints and Psychological Readiness
Behavioural Intention	Idealized Living Funeral Format
	Situational and Psychological Conditions Shaping Willingness

MAIN THEME 1 : ATTITUDE

This topic explores participants' fundamental understanding and general perception of living funerals. From various perspectives, participants discussed the existence and influence of this ritual in contemporary society, including its ceremonial function, practicality, emotional value, relational bonds, and experiences of death.

Sub-theme 1 : Diverse but Positive Perceptions towards Living Funeral Participants' initial reaction to living funerals is usually shock and curiosity: "I was shocked at the time. I used to think that farewell ceremonies were something that people did after they died. I never thought that a farewell ceremony could be held even before a person died." (P2). It was felt by most participants that a space to open up and resolve past issues was provided by the ceremony, allowing difficult-to-process emotions to be dealt with: "It may provide another solution to the problem of life for human beings in the 21st century." (P1)

In terms of function and practicality, participants felt that the ritual allowed people to "experience death", encouraging reflection on mortality and evoking the most authentic feelings about life. Participants also mentioned that increasing awareness of death can encourage people to cherish the present, enjoy life, and become more engaged in their own lives: "We should realize that regardless of gender or age, death does not necessarily occur in old age. Accidents can happen at any time, reminding us to cherish our loved ones and care for them while we can". (P11)

As a ceremony similar to advance planning, participants believe that living funerals also have the important meaning of "advance preparation" and can effectively avoid family disputes



and confusion after the death of the deceased. However, although most participants had a relatively positive understanding of the meaning, function, and connotation of living funerals, they believed that such ceremonies should be reserved for “those who truly need them” rather than being viewed as a tool for healing and resolving disputes in life. One of the participants said that: “I think it’s understandable that terminally ill patients, elderly people, or those who know they don’t have much time left and are prepared to face death would hold a living funeral.”(P10)

Sub-theme2: Emotional Resonance and Functional Benefits Participants who had positive thoughts about living funerals generally believed that such ceremonies could provide emotional and spiritual support. In addition to the most significant factor—“they have a chance to say things that they did not have time to say” (P4)—participants believed that this ritual’s impact on individuals, families, and communities lies in strengthening relationships. Participant 7 shared about his feeling: “I think it may cause a lot of waves in the relationship, and then make the cherishment of each other, cherishing life and cherishing the present more concrete... about strengthening or deepening the bond.”(P7)

In addition to strengthening or repairing relationships between the living and the deceased, participants believe that living funerals create a space for understanding personal duality. This allows people to understand and care for different aspects of the deceased’s life experiences, bringing the group closer together. As the participant said: “Many people’s perspectives are one-sided, but at the living funeral you can really get to know this person again in a comprehensive way. I think this is a very new experience, and you will better understand what this person is thinking.”(P5)

Some participants suggested that living funerals could enhance the promotion of life education by combining concepts with rituals: “When you watch all the works about the subject of life and death, you will have deep feelings, but after the feelings, you usually digest it internally, so you may not be able to fully act. But if there is really such an activity, then whether it is a participant or an initiator, I think it can be carried out in a very specific way”(P7)

Furthermore, participants believe that living funerals can impact behaviour. Aside from eliminating the need to speak on behalf of the deceased through wills and messages, participants can understand how those around them feel about death during the ceremony, thereby knowing how to approach the dying person. “From the funeral to the time of his death, his friends know whether I should go to find him or not, whether I should be by his side. And not only friends, but also relatives. I know what this person is thinking and what his situation is, and I also know how can I views his death, to react.”(P6)

While participants tend to have a positive attitude and open mind when it comes to life issues and living funerals, their relatives, friends, and the surrounding community hold different opinions.

MAIN THEME 2: SUBJECTIVE NORM



The second construct factor of TPB theory states that this theme centres on the attitudes of participants' friends, family, and social groups regarding living funerals. It also explores participants' comprehension of funerals, their propensity to discuss death, their social openness, and other related factors. The theme includes three sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1 : Cultural Reluctance and Positivity to Discuss Death

Due to differences in Chinese culture and religious backgrounds, the older generations still have certain taboos regarding this topic. Even if they don't firmly refuse to discuss it, they express their unwillingness by changing the subject or remaining silent. However, it is noteworthy that, while they are reluctant to discuss their own death or that of their relatives, they do not object to discussing the death of others: "They may not directly tell you 'Don't tell me this, I don't want to hear it', but when you try to talk to them, or you specifically chat with them, they may just say a few words to avoid the question."(P1)

Participants believed that older Chinese people believed in the saying, "Trouble comes from the mouth", and held the superstition that "every time you celebrate your birthday, the underworld marks you once." Therefore, they refused to talk about death themselves and did not want their children to talk about it either: "As for me, my family used to be very 'bantang'. When I was a kid, I would be slapped if I said the word death. People couldn't say anything unlucky."(P4) According to participants' observations, most people avoid discussing death because they fear the loss, uncertainty, and future that death brings: "I think the so-called superstition is often because we don't understand death. And it is not that you have done more, but that you have done less. "(P4); "I think it's a fear. It's not in death; it's in the instability of losing."(P1)

When people avoid thinking about death, they are forced to confront its unexpected arrival. Participants mentioned that most people suddenly become concerned with the topic of death when someone close to them passes away. They stated that "no one can truly prepare for death", but one can choose not to panic or feel helpless when faced with it. From another perspective, some participants believe that Chinese people cannot shake off their superstitions about this topic because they have a deep reverence for tradition and are afraid to break long-standing customs. At the same time, it is also due to the practical and uncommunicative habits of local Chinese people, who therefore adopt a more pointless attitude toward death. As the participants claimed: "We don't dare to flatter traditions, but do we have new ideas? Actually, no."(P8); "I think Chinese society doesn't like to express emotions, I'm dead then dead lah, why should I set up such an occasion?"(P6)

However, participants believed that the extent of discussion about death and attitudes toward it depend largely on personal growth and cultural background. There is no fundamental right or wrong, "I think talking about life and death is a way to reflect on your entire life process. It is not necessarily right or wrong."(P7). Participants generally demonstrated a higher degree of openness and willingness to discuss the topic with peers than with elders, who generally had a lower level of acceptance regarding discussions about death. However, participants believed that this situation is changing.



Sub-theme2 : Understanding and Comparison to Death Rituals Participants' understanding and interpretation of funerals greatly affect their willingness to hold living funerals and their awareness of the importance of death rituals. Participants distinguish clearly between traditional and living funerals, believing the former are for the living and the latter are for the dead: "It's special for the people dying that do a farewell to the world and convinces himself to accept the arrival of death."(P3)

In other words, despite their differences in content, form, and rhythm, rituals all aim to provide comfort regarding the changes brought about by death and separation. However, participants also noted that traditional funerals are solemn and involve many taboos and complicated steps that create a separation between life and death. Participants felt that traditional funerals were too hurried, complicated, and tradition-laden. Relatives and friends were too busy completing a series of activities, which left them exhausted with no outlet for their grief afterward. Furthermore, people's confusion over the intricate rituals of traditional funerals, coupled with low religious devotion, diminishes the meaning of funerals. This reduces the efficacy of rituals in processing grief, alleviating the fear of death, and accepting the deceased's departure: "People nowadays may have a lower level of piety towards religion; they may not understand these traditional rituals well enough." (P8); "If you don't believe in salvation and heaven, then the funeral is not for the person, right?(P6)"

Participants expressed the sentiment that traditional funerals often fail to resolve feelings of regret, instead leaving people immersed in guilt, regret, and sadness. Despite most participants find the elaborate rituals of traditional funerals troublesome, they still believe that these rituals are significant and will remain the mainstream choice for funerals in Chinese society, with the reason that "have their own meaning."(P1)

Participants' deep reflection and understanding of traditional funerals largely shaped their positive attitude toward living funerals.

Sub-theme 3: Limited Societal Openness and Acceptance However, when assessing social openness, participants believed that, although the general public's understanding of living funerals varied, their level of acceptance did not differ greatly. It also includes Asian societies' lack of obsession with expressing and dealing with emotions. Participants indicated that older generations at most not be overly surprised or strongly opposed to such a funeral, but it is uncertain whether they would organize or participate in one. This attitude also applies to younger generations: "Young people may be more open-minded, but it cannot be ruled out that they view it as something fun."(P11)

Moreover, from a counselling and psychological perspective, if living funerals serve as a means of resolving regrets, then it cannot be ruled out that individuals with suicidal tendencies may engage in suicidal behaviour after participating in such activities. One of the participant claimed that: "As I said, many times the purpose of a living funeral is to reduce regrets. Some people may feel that they really have no regrets after doing it, and they can leave this world."(P4)



Finally, regarding the possibility of change in the Malaysian Chinese community's future views on the ritual, most participants believed that people would prefer to adopt an indifferent attitude. Even if change is possible, it will not be easy, the participants trusted about: "Chinese are still very pragmatic. They won't be too eager to spend the money. They may want to die on their own."(P6); "Malaysia is a very superstitious country, regardless of race"(P5)

There is a certain gap between participants' personal awareness and the general public's views, and the final behavioural assessment factor will examine participants' capabilities and resources to more accurately determine the causes behind their transition from cognition to action.

MAIN THEME3: PERCEIVED BEHAVIOURAL CONTROL

This theme further examines participants' beliefs, resources, and concerns about holding living funerals.

Sub-theme 1: Perceived Constraints and Psychological Readiness Participants commonly mentioned "mental preparation", "clear purpose" and "financial circumstances". The opinions of friends and family, as well as social reactions, were unanimously found not to influence participants' willingness to hold a living funeral. Due to practical considerations, participants believed that financial circumstances inevitably became the most significant factor in how individuals planned and conducted the ceremony. However, even the economy is the biggest obstacle, participants believe there are many ways to approach planning. It is not necessary to allocate many resources; rather, the focus should be on expressing the purpose of the ceremony. They identified the psychological preparation for their own impending death as the most challenging aspect: "The lack of psychological construction and the fear of falling into a sad scenario."(P9)

Participants claimed that death rituals are the most important rituals in life and that organizing a funeral that is uniquely one's own does not require excessive concern for social reactions or the opinions of relatives and friends. From personal cognition, social and external acceptance to practical abilities and resources, participants generally maintain a positive attitude toward the ritual and are willing to promote it. The specific imagination of a living funeral can help participants form clearer behavioural intentions, which is also the final conclusion-oriented conclusion in TPB theory.

MAIN THEME4: BEHAVIOUR INTENTIOIN

Participants had a strong preference for living funerals that were completely different from traditional ones.

Sub-theme 1: Idealized living funeral format Participants' ideas for planning a living funeral reflect their approach to saying goodbye to the world. They reject the solemnity of traditional funerals, hoping instead to bid farewell in a relaxed and joyful atmosphere. In the



living funeral envisioned by the participants, the ceremony's primary purposes are to "explain one's influence on others" and "summarize one's life", rather than to express sadness or regret. Participants also pointed out that in a living funeral, the most important thing is the connection between people, not the form or procedures. What matters is the gains achieved through the activity: "I think the focus is not on how the ceremony is run, but on the people, that is, how the people who come to the funeral process their emotions, and which links can help them deal with the possible psychological burden brought by the whole activity."(P6)

In the participants' specific ideas, they hope to view the funeral as a party, a gathering, or even a general farewell party, and hope that the participation of the counsellor will ensure that the attendees do not feel burdened by the deceased and that the emotions brought about by the ceremony can be digested: "I would first look for someone who does counselling, rather than someone who works in the funeral industry."(P6)

Sub-theme 2: Situational and Psychological Conditions Shaping Willingness Participants generally expressed a desire to hold a living funeral or practice "pre-death farewells", but they were more inclined to do so when they were nearing death. On the other hand, some participants held completely opposite views, believing that the importance of a living funeral lies in the concept it conveys rather than its form, and that even without a ceremony, it is possible to "say what needs to be said". While participants had varying views on the timing and purpose of holding a living funeral, they were unanimous in their strong desire to participate in someone else's living funeral. Even if they were not yet prepared for the death of a loved one, this did not affect their desire to participate.

DISCUSSION

The research findings show that participants generally hold positive views towards living funerals, especially in recognising the emotional support, promotion of death reflection, and the intrinsic value of breaking cultural and religious superstitions embedded in the ritual. As in previous studies, the social atmosphere and family environment perceived by participants provide limited support for this ritual (Ngah et al., 2023), and the prevailing Chinese pragmatic worldview and death taboos restrict open discussion (Jiao & Hussin, 2020). However, their recognition of the value of the ritual ensures that internal beliefs are not overridden by external norms. This indicates that the motivation behind participants' willingness to carry out a living funeral stems more from personal needs, understanding of the ritual, and its purpose, while external pressures such as resources, financial burden, and social perception can be mitigated through various planning approaches, shows that in situations where attitudes are strong, PBC has less predictive power for intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

Although the older generation accepts death as a natural part of life, Lei's research shows that they still tend to avoid discussing it and preparing. As participants pointed out, generational cultural differences, fear of death, and avoidance are the main reasons that hinder public discussion of death (Lei et al., 2022). Beside this, in the Malaysian and Asian contexts,



emotional resistance and cultural differences regarding “speaking one’s mind” are significant factors that influence people’s consideration of living funerals (Hei et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2025). Therefore, regarding whether knowledge in this field can be accepted or popularised, participants believe it is a gradually improving but extremely slow process.

The results of this study show that within the TPB model, although all three core variables exert influence, “attitude” and “perceived behavioural control” play more prominent roles. As TPB suggests, when individuals believe they are capable and affirm the intrinsic value of an action, positive behavioural intentions may arise even in the face of social normative pressures (Ajzen, 2005).

During the reflection on death rituals and the imagination of living funerals, participants proposed integrating elements such as parties and gatherings, emphasising the creation of an emotionally connected, warm and relaxed space. Their imagination of personalised and non-traditional forms of living funerals echoes Walter’s observation that death rituals centred on the individual and focused on the meaning of life have become a growing trend (Walter, 1996). In addition, participants generally agreed that thinking about and planning for death in advance can bring spiritual comfort and even practical benefits to life, preventing unexpected situations such as emotional breakdowns or family disputes due to unpreparedness among loved ones, aligns to “preparing for death in advance, whether alone or with family, can reduce the difficulty of the funeral process” (Park et al., 2020).

In summary, this study reveals the presence and significance of living funerals as an emerging death ritual within the Malaysian Chinese community. It is seen as a ceremony that promotes life education, encourages a more open mindset towards death, resolves regrets and conflicts. Although society generally maintains a conservative attitude, individual needs, psychological readiness, and positive interpretations of the ritual have become the core driving forces for promoting and accepting such ceremonies.

CONCLUSION

This study is guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which provides a neutral framework and intrinsic variables of human psychological behaviour, to develop new interview design and systematically address the rising and culturally sensitive issues of death and living funerals (Francis, 2004). By applying TPB to the culturally and emotionally complex topic of death, it reveals the interaction between cultural cognition and psychological readiness in end-of-life decision-making, and shows that changing one’s attitude toward a specific topic will have a greater impact on the outcome of one’s intentions (Sussman & Gifford, 2018).

The objective of how Malaysian Chinese perceive, experience, and conceptualise living funerals has been thoroughly addressed in this study. Findings showed that living funerals are meaningful, especially in term of emotional support, reflection on life and death, and breaking cultural taboos. Although society and family support may be limited, many individuals remain open to the idea due to their personal beliefs and emotional needs. In conclusion, the current



study revealed that, although uncommon in the Malaysian Chinese community, living funerals are an area drawing positive attention.

Through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, this study found that attitudes and perceived behavioural control are more effective predictors of behavioural intention than social pressure (Ajzen, 1991). Participants are more willing to hold a living funeral if they understood its purpose and felt emotionally prepared, regardless of others' expectations. Many also suggested that living funerals should be warm and personal, incorporating elements such as gatherings or celebrations to make the experience more meaningful, emphasized the social dimension of death ritual and the value of emotional expression (O'Rourke et al., 2011).

Moreover, living funeral was interpreted as both a therapeutic and ritualistic practice, reflecting individuals' positive subjective responses in death dialogues, emotional preparation, and the construction of personal values (Kellehear, 2007). However, due to limited familiarity, participants often relied on prior experience with death and funerals, resulting in responses that were sometimes fragmented, but on the other hand, it allowed the thematic boundaries of the discussion to be more open and expansive (Patton, 2015). While the sample—aged 22 to 28—who offered reflective insights, though their exposure to life education and openness toward death may have likely contributed to the generally positive attitude towards living funerals. Therefore, suggesting a need for broader age and cultural diversity in future studies, and the themes developed may serve as the basic for future quantitative tools, informing the development of measurement.

In summary, while traditional views and fear of discussing death still exist, more individuals are starting to see the value of planning for death thoughtfully and peacefully. This shows a slow but important shift in how people think about death, encouraging more open and prepared conversations in the future.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that living funerals hold potential as instruments of life education and psychosocial support within Malaysian Chinese communities, particularly among younger generations. Counselling, gerontology, and funeral service practitioners may consider incorporating advance emotional preparation and personalized formats that prioritize relational closure over ritual formalities. Policymakers and nonprofit providers of death education could pilot community programs that incorporate living funerals into broader end-of-life planning initiatives while addressing cultural sensitivities and safeguarding against potential adverse effects, particularly for vulnerable individuals. Further translational work should evaluate scalable, culturally adapted models that combine counselling, family mediation, and affordable service options.



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