

Death education flourishes in Taiwan

By Paul T.P. Wong

When I was lecturing in Taiwan in December, several people told me that America had its Sept. 11, but Taiwan had its Sept. 21, a day in 1999 when earthquakes claimed more than 3,000 lives.

One of the positive outcomes of this horrible natural disaster is the flourishing of life-and-death education in Taiwan, from primary schools all the way to graduate studies.

The Conference on Life and Death Education, hosted by the National Changhua University of Education in Taiwan, is just part of this amazing phenomenon.

I was invited to give the keynote address at the conference in December. People from all over Taiwan came to the conference: teachers, counselors, nurses, graduate students and professors from various disciplines.

They all came for one purpose — to explore the new frontier of human knowledge, the mysteries and the challenges of life and death. They wanted to understand the meaning of living and dying well amidst sufferings and tragedies.

Whenever people ponder such big questions, it is almost inevitable that they will be confronted with issues of religion and spirituality; the pathways to the transcendental cannot be found in scientific equations. Therefore, spirituality was one of the main themes throughout the conference.

Buddhist universities and foundations have played a major role in spearheading the development of life-and-death education in Taiwan. In fact, the first graduate department in life-and-death studies was established in Nanhua University, a Buddhist institute of higher education. The Venerable Hwei Kai, a Buddhist monk with a doctoral degree from Temple University, is chairman of the department.

The theme for the December conference was the prevention of youth suicide, an increasing problem in Taiwanese high schools. Many speakers emphasized meaning, purpose, religious beliefs and family support as major preventive factors. I spoke on the positive role of meaning and spirituality in death acceptance and in the transformation of grief.

I also had the opportunity to speak at the "National Chiayi Normal University on Existential Crisis and the Quest for Meaning," and at the National Taipei

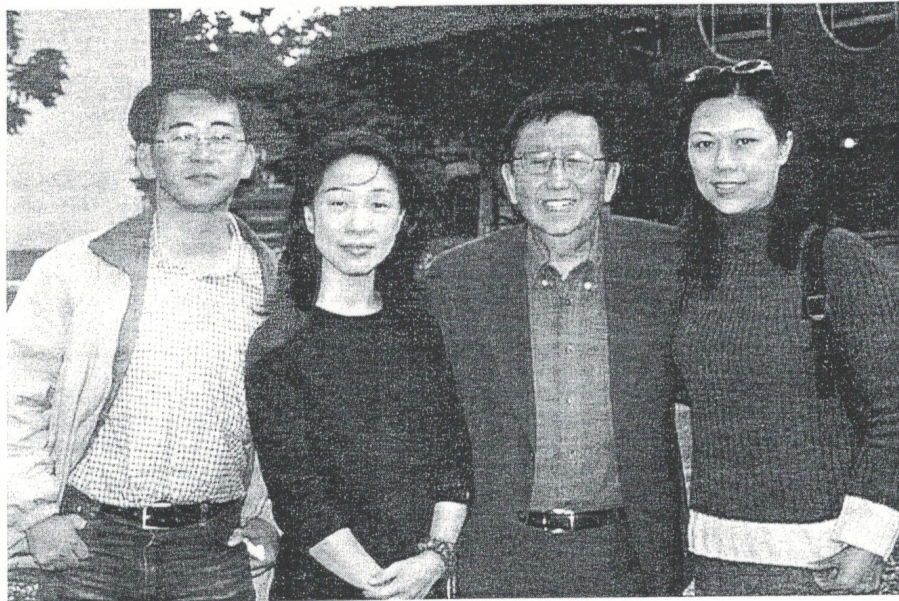


Photo courtesy of Paul Wong

Paul T.P. Wong (third from left) meets with Taiwanese graduate students in death-and-life education. Wong lectured at two universities while researching the field in Taiwan.

College of Nursing on "From Spiritual Care to Spiritual Transformation." Both institutions have graduate programs in life-and-death studies.

Everywhere I went, students seemed to be very interested in meaning and spirituality, much more so than the typical student in North America. I have been told that in many universities in Taiwan, the most popular undergraduate course is not psychology but life-and-death studies.

They wanted to understand the meaning of living and dying well amidst sufferings and tragedies.

The new discipline of life-and-death studies is truly interdisciplinary. Professors active in this field come from a variety of academic backgrounds, including sociology, psychology, counseling, education, management, philosophy, comparative religion, nursing, biology, and biomedical ethics. Thus, integration between science and religion is very natural in life-and-death studies.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan has mandated curricula of life-and-death education for both primary and secondary schools. As a result, life-and-death education becomes important for both teachers and students in training.

Most of the textbooks used in the courses are edited, interdisciplinary volumes. The text used in

the Institute of Life and Death Studies and Counseling at the National Taipei College of Nursing consists of chapters covering education, medical ethics, hospice care, sociology, psychology and religion with respect to life and death.

The book used for similar courses at the National Chiayi Normal University was edited by Tse-Jiang Wu, dean of education at the university. The work includes chapters on death educa-

tion, grief counseling, end-of-life care, rituals for life and death, ethics of life and death and alternative perspectives on life and health.

The Association of Life and Death Studies is primarily responsible for spreading life-and-death studies to all levels of formal education in Taiwan. Chieh-Fang Chi, Hwei Kai, Chi Yun Lin, Shu-Mei Chang, Harriet Wu and Fan-Ling Chan are professors who are some of the leaders of this movement. The new *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*, published by the International Network on Personal Meaning, will provide a forum for life-and-death studies.

In many ways, the rapid development of life-and-death education in Taiwan has overtaken the death education movement in North America, which is much older, but has a narrower focus. I favor Taiwan's broader and more positive approach to death education. After all, death and life studies should be intertwined. The best way to be prepared for death is to live life to the fullest. To contemplate one's death is to contemplate the life that leads to that death.

Konosuke Matsushita, founding president of Matsushita Electronics, once said, "To be prepared for death is to be prepared for living; to die well is to live well." This seems to be part of the impetus to life-and-death education.

After the Taiwan conference, I was more convinced than ever about the urgent need to research how to live and die well. When young people understand the meaning and purpose of being alive, they are more likely to live a productive and fulfilling life. When the sick and the dying understand the meaning of suffering and death, they are more likely to engage life in a positive way, no matter how limited. ❖

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For more information on meaning-management and the *International Journal of Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy*, visit www.meaning.ca or contact Paul Wong at wong@twu.ca.

News in brief

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Graduate student opportunity in evolutionary psychology

David Sloan Wilson of Binghamton University is seeking a graduate student to assist him on a project researching human altruism and other prosocial behaviors from an evolutionary perspective.

The student should be interested in earning a doctoral degree in human evolutionary biology. The project will involve working with a large computer database as well as experimentation on human subjects.

Experience working in evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, database management and statistical analysis is preferred, but not required.

For more information on Binghamton University, visit www.binghamton.edu. For more information on Wilson and his research, visit <http://biology.binghamton.edu/dwilson/>. For more information, e-mail Wilson at dwilson@binghamton.edu.

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Centre for Islam and Science releases journal

The Centre for Islam and Science recently launched a bi-annual journal, *Islam and Science*, which will be edited by Muzaffar Iqbal.

This journal approaches the philosophical and religious connections to the newest data in the areas of physical, biological and social sciences from an Islamic perspective. Articles published in the journal will focus on the Islamic intellectual tradition, with a focus on the scientific aspects of this tradition.

For more information, visit www.cis-ca.org/journal/.

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Science and Religion Forum seeks volunteers

The Science and Religion Forum in England is in need of volunteers to assist the organization in routine office tasks such as bookkeeping or database entry. For more information, e-mail Phil Edwards at info@srforum.org.

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