

# SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute

---

Issue 7 *Modernist mastermind*

Article 13

---

January 2013

## Dead reckoning

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2013) "Dead reckoning," *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute*: Iss. 7, 36-43.

Available at: <http://repository.vtc.edu.hk/ive-de-signed/vol7/iss7/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Design at VTC Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *SIGNED: The Magazine of The Hong Kong Design Institute* by an authorized administrator of VTC Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [csyip@vtc.edu.hk](mailto:csyip@vtc.edu.hk).



A brave man's unflinching attitude to his own mortality swept through the HKDI this autumn, and could have far-reaching influence on the community's attitude toward death. SUMMER CAO reports.

# DEAD RECKONING

**W** If you only have five years to live, what are you going to do?" asks William Outcast Chan, who was born with a rare form of skin cancer and was not expected to live past his 11th birthday. Chan, who is best known to students as "the God of Death", does not expect a definitive answer but poses this question to make people confront their fears. Earlier

this year Chan collaborated with the newly established HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research to conduct a design feasibility study and present a participatory showcase focused on death that encouraged students to accept their mortality as a positive aspect of life.

The 31-year-old author, death educator and anti-cancer campaigner has boyish looks and took the name William Outcast because his condition, which

has dotted his body with painful dark moles, made him feel like an outsider. But he is more of a maverick than a pariah, and rather than turning his back on society he has confronted its neuroses. In July 2012, he held an irony-laden living funeral service at the International Funeral Parlour in Hung Hom to celebrate his 30th birthday and the launch of his autobiography "My Will". Surprisingly, despite having refused chemotherapy and

conventional medical treatment, his condition has not deteriorated, although he has no idea how long he will stay healthy. Birth, life and death are the three acts that define everybody's personal drama and few want the curtain to fall when the second act is still unfolding; even fewer are ready when the curtain inevitably comes down. Chan has wasted no time prepping for death and enjoys every second of his life. Besides holding

All images: Meng Lou HKDI/DESIS Lab and Back Sheep Production



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT WILLIAM OUTCAST CHAN AT HKDI; BONE ASH CONTAINERS MADE BY HKDI STUDENTS; COFFINS ON DISPLAY AT THE HALLOWEEN PARTY HELD BY CHAN AT HKDI ON OCTOBER 31TH



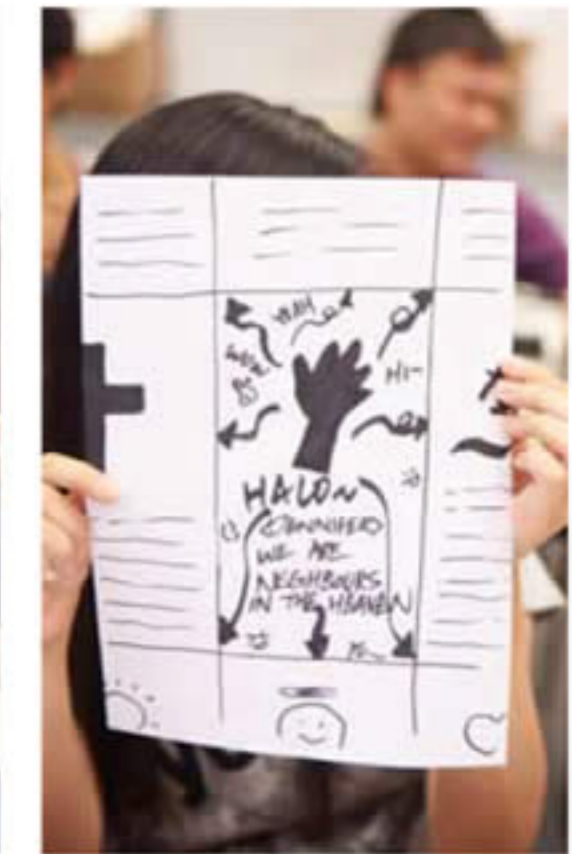
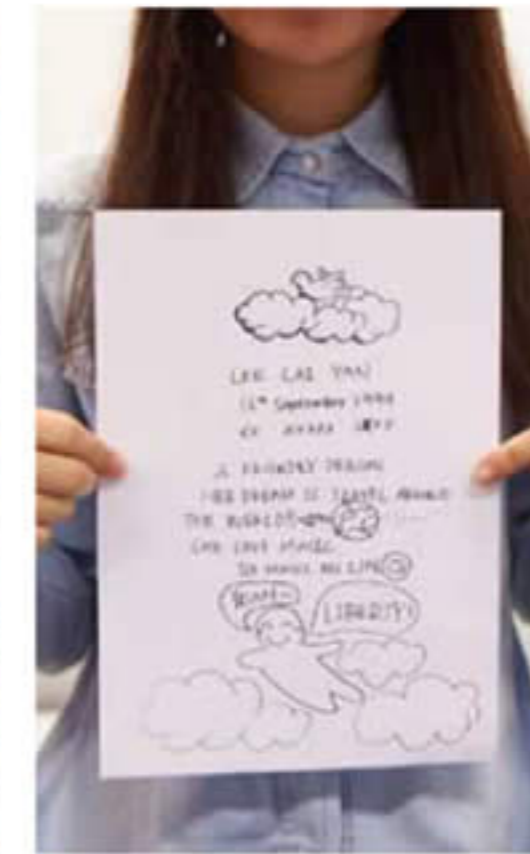


CLOCKWISE  
OBITUARIES DESIGNED  
BY HKDI STUDENTS

« I WANT PEOPLE TO HAVE NO REGRET WHEN THEY FACE DEATH BECAUSE THEY HAVE FULLY ENJOYED EVERY MOMENT OF THEIR LIFE. »



“There are too many people leading a life planned by others,” he says. “They study hard, find a stable job, get married and have children... they don't have a goal or passion for life.” Having dedicated himself to life and death education, Chan finds much of it futile and has been seeking ways to teach people more effectively. “The so-called ‘life and death education’ that has become popular is largely passive and conducted through lectures,” says Chan. “The coolest approach might be to lie in a coffin to feel death. But the time allowed by most education courses that offer this service – usually two to three minutes in the box – is not enough, given the importance of the topic.”



Earlier this year Chan decided to create an enveloping environment where students could be involved in meaningful discussions about death. Dr Yanki Lee, the director of HKDI DESIS Lab, which is part of the Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability International Network, was among the first who saw the importance of the idea, and she won support from the institute's management. Before long, the idea of making students think about death through what they know best – design – was approved by the school, and the project got under way. The first phase of the “Design.

his own funeral and refusing medical treatment, the iconoclast quit school, denouncing the “rapacious nature” of formal education and pretended to be a beggar in order to observe passers-by. “Until the last second we tend to be dishonest with the world and with ourselves, thus missing opportunities to do the things we want to do most,” says Chan, having found his life's passion in embracing mortality and living in the moment.



Living & Dying” study has lasted four months (July – October 2013) and gathered about 300 students from seven departments. Chan is grateful to HKDI for taking up the project. “There are few, if any educational institutions in the world that have involved the whole school in an examination of death,” he says. “Death is a taboo around the globe and in most cultures. It needs courage to face up to this challenge and prejudices about death that are

nourished by the mass media, our families and the conventional death-related industry.” As might be expected, the project faced obstacles. “The challenges came from everyday life,” says Lee. “Some colleagues worried that the topic was beyond what students could bear. And the two coffins we placed in our office were disturbing to many. I had to explain that death is a very ordinary thing that everybody has to go through,

and there was no dead body in the coffins. This kind of conversation and communication is very necessary, especially in a design institute.” The conversation and challenges that the project unleashed are exactly what Chan wanted to achieve. “When I came to HKDI, I could hear students call me ‘the God of Death,’” he recalls. “I don't know whether the term is derogative or complimentary, but I am sure that I have made them think and my

« DEATH CAN BE A NORMAL SUBJECT FOR CONVERSATION AND TALKING ABOUT IT CAN BRING PEOPLE CLOSER. »



OPPOSITE FAR LEFT HKDI STUDENTS INTERVIEWING THE ELDERLY FOR 'LIFE HISTORY BOOKS'  
 OPPOSITE BELOW AN IMAGE FROM THE PHOTO SHOOT OF THE ELDERLY BY PHOTOGRAPHER ROBERT TRAN AND STUDENTS FROM HKDI'S FASHION AND IMAGE DESIGN DEPARTMENT  
 MAN A SENIOR GUEST AT THE HALLOWEEN PARTY VIEWING HIS FASHION SHOOT PHOTO



presence has made death a part of their lives, creating a less undesirable environment to talk about it."

Part of the study involved creating "Life History Books" for the elderly from the local community. The books are biographies that complete and embrace their lives – one of the key goals of the project. "You can be irresponsible to yourselves, but not to the elderly," Lee once told the students. "The books represent

them, and in a way the books are them. They will take the books out to tell their life stories. Imagine how upset they will feel if the name is spelt wrong, or a picture is mistakenly placed in the book."

To her delight, as students overcame the initial uneasiness and grew more attached to the project, they became more dedicated, coming up with the idea to design the "Life History Books" in the form of a calendar, which is more

convenient for the elderly to show to friends and neighbours.

"I am happy to see that students were also inspired to promote the 'Life History Books' project to the Hong Kong public," Lee says. "The ordinary lives appear to consist of small trivialities – eat, sleep, work – but by writing one's life down, it becomes more meaningful and distinctive."

Ten elders were also invited to take part in photo shoots

in collaboration with Fashion and Image Design Department students who chose clothing and accessories based on their life stories and preferences. The images are in hippie style, some in futuristic style, and some in Manchu princess style – an eclectic dream-weaving approach developed with the elders, photographer Robert Tran and HKDI visiting fellow Lampros Faslis that reflect the elders' perspectives on style and image, a

concept that is mostly absent from their real lives.

Creativity was also seen in graveyard and funeral designs, such as a contraption for sea-burials during which ashes are sprinkled into the ocean by the deceased's relatives. "The students, after considering the tides, timing, the overall experience and the environment, designed a lotus-flower like device made from paper that decomposes rapidly and disperses the ashes into the water little by little, over five hours. For the family-oriented Chinese, the students have also explored the possibility of family joint burials by designing the Family Tree, a tree cinerarium where ashes of family members could be placed in the "tree branches" that are communicable with each other once occupied.

The public's first encounter with the study's work was at a showcase called "Fine Dying: Design. Living & Dying" and a Halloween party held by Chan at the HKDI on October 31st to make the showcase's opening. "I invited DJs to remix sounds extracted from different funerals and dancers to imitate the moves of the Daoist 'back from hell' ceremony", says Chan. "After seven weeks of designing for death, the party enabled students to think about death as something to be celebrated."

However, while first design experiment of the study may have ended, its influences have not. Besides creating a less disagreeable atmosphere for students to reflect about death and making innovative contributions to the community, another long-term ambition of the study is to change the practices of the funeral industry. "Current industry



«THE TWO COFFINS WE PLACED IN OUR OFFICE WERE DISTURBING TO MANY.»



practices radiate a depressing atmosphere," says Chan. "That's the reason a lot of people don't like to talk about death. I want people to have no regret when they face death because they have fully enjoyed every moment of their life." According to Chan and Lee, some changes are already under way. "I have seen people change their views about death as the project went on," says Lee. "The more people talk about it, the less of a taboo it becomes.

Death can be a normal subject for conversation and talking about it can bring people closer. The ideal would be like in countries such as Japan, where funeral businesses are located in the high street next to the shops selling daily necessities. That is a healthier ambience we should strive for which shows death is as normal as any other activities of life." According to the project's industry partner, SAGE International Group Limited, a

company specialised in deathcare and funeral service which provided students with real-world knowledge, there are a lot of new inventions and technologies available in the industry but people are not willing to use them, thinking them not pretty, traditional or respectable enough. Lee agrees. "Donating one's body to the hospital is the best way, because it contributes to medical research and advance, but few sons or daughters would send

their parents' body to be dissected – innovation and understanding is needed to encourage that decision. "Another example is a newly invented technology to turn bone ashes into gemstones or even decorative man-made diamonds that can be placed at home, but the Chinese don't accept the idea of putting the ashes at home or the idea that somebody they used to know has become a stone." Much needs to be done to make

people accept new ideas but SAGE believes that with better design, the Hong Kong funeral industry can be overhauled, becoming more environmentally friendly and causing less stress. Designs with potential will be helped into reality, and internship opportunities given to students who are interested in designing a better way of death. After seeing "an outcast's" maverick idea changed attitude towards death, it is tempting to imagine a society in

OPPOSITE ABOVE VISITORS AT THE "FINE DYING" EXHIBITION OPPOSITE BELOW A CEMETERY MODEL DESIGNED BY HKDI STUDENTS THIS PAGE PARTICIPANTS LYING IN COFFINS TO EXPERIENCE DEATH AT FINE DYING HALLOWEEN PARTY

which death becomes an advert for life rather than cause for despondency. If that happens, Chan might consider dropping Outcast from his name. ©

