

# China to improve palliative care – with some help from Singapore

Programme led by TTSH, Lien Foundation to train over 1,000 healthcare staff in Beijing

Michelle Ng  
China Correspondent

BEIJING – When Ms Zhou Jiayi's father was diagnosed with cancer in October 2024, her family thought they had some time to explore treatment options.

Instead, his condition deteriorated rapidly, forcing Ms Zhou, her mother and her brother into a series of difficult conversations not only about treatment but also his final wishes. Differing opinions prompted the daughter to seek professional help from a palliative care team she found on Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu.

"They taught me how to ask my dad questions in a way that doesn't agitate him or make him emotional, such as what he would want us to do if there's a need for emergency resuscitation," said Ms Zhou, 44, a counsellor by training.

"We didn't know how to bring it up because there's no room to talk about death in Chinese culture, especially in my family, where we are more introverted. We simply don't cry. The only time tears are allowed is in the crematorium," she said.

Her father died in March 2025 from left adrenocortical carcinoma, an aggressive cancer that develops in the outer layer of the adrenal glands. He was 67 years old.

Ms Zhou's experience reflects a wider reality in China where discussions about death remain deep-

ly uncomfortable.

But as the population ages, the authorities have begun to expand and improve palliative care so as to make the end-of-life journey more comfortable for patients and their families.

In many Chinese families, particularly when the patient is elderly, relatives often shield loved ones from terminal diagnoses, believing that it is kinder to keep them in the dark. Talking openly about death is often seen as extinguishing hope, rather than preparing for what lies ahead.

This reluctance is one of many obstacles to expanding palliative care, which focuses on managing pain and symptoms along with providing emotional support, in China.

Beijing Songtang Care Hospital, the country's first dedicated hospice and palliative care facility, was opened in 1987. But expansion has been slow, even after the National Health and Family Planning Commission released a set of standards for palliative care in 2017.

The field is not yet established as a formal medical speciality like cardiology and geriatrics, and doctors typically have to cross-train from other disciplines.

China recorded 11.31 million deaths in 2025, yet by the end of 2023, only about 185 cities and districts nationwide had pilot hospice care programmes. Hospice care is a subset of palliative care and focuses on the final phase of life.



Ms Zhou Jiayi sought palliative care help after her father was diagnosed with cancer and the family had to have difficult conversations about treatment and his final wishes. PHOTO: COURTESY OF ZHOU JIAYI

China has over 700 cities. International comparisons suggest that China still lags behind many countries in end-of-life care, even as it makes gradual progress.

A 2021 Quality of Death and Dying study by the Lien Centre for Palliative Care ranked mainland China 53rd out of 81 countries and territories, an improvement from the 71st place it had occupied in a similar study in 2015, but still behind Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Doctors and social workers, however, say attitudes towards palliative care in China are beginning to shift, driven by growing awareness, pilot palliative care programmes and some policy efforts to introduce end-of-life care earlier.

Singapore is helping to drive efforts in Beijing through a three-year mentor training programme launched in January, spearheaded by Singapore's Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) and the Lien Foundation, in partnership with hospitals and social work agencies in the Chinese capital.

The \$1.3 million programme, including funding by Lien Foundation and training support from TTSH, is expected to train more than 1,000 healthcare professionals in Beijing, focusing on both clinical skills and navigating conversations around end-of-life care.

Dr Neo Han Yee, who heads the department of palliative medicine at TTSH, said the aim is to introduce palliative care earlier in the course of illness to improve symptom control and allow families to plan in advance rather than scrambling to make decisions in crisis during a patient's final moments.

In China, as in Singapore and other Asian societies shaped by Confucian values, filial piety can hinder conversations about death, but the hurdle is not insurmountable, he said.

"In these societies, the idea of a good death is equally important," said Dr Neo. "We can change the conversation and start talking about death earlier, so that the dying process is better planned and

families have greater clarity."

Dr Neo said Singapore's experience shows what sustained institutional commitment can achieve.

Palliative care started gaining traction in the 1980s and has since been integrated into mainstream healthcare, supported by clearer financing structures that have led to lower out-of-pocket costs for patients, he said.

Chinese doctors involved in palliative care say the challenge at home is less about intent than system maturity, citing gaps such as the lack of standardised training pathways and a shortage of specialised professionals.

Dr Qin Yuan, who heads the palliative care department at Beijing Haidian Hospital, was among the first group of doctors in the capital city to pioneer such services nearly a decade ago. Her hospital was one of the first in Beijing to officially establish a hospice care ward in 2017.

"At that time, my colleagues and I were unsure if we were doing it right. But we knew this was work that provided help when it was most urgently needed, like delivering coal in the middle of winter," said Dr Qin.

While awareness of palliative care has improved since then and the government has expanded the palliative ward pilot programme to more cities and districts nationwide, Dr Qin said the overall system remains insufficiently structured as doctors largely depend on themselves to transition across disciplines to practise palliative care.

Financing is another major constraint. Although some programmes allow certain palliative services to be subsidised by the go-

vernment, the coverage remains uneven and non-medical support such as counselling is often excluded.

Doctors said this discourages hospitals from expanding services and reinforces the perception that palliative care is optional rather than essential.

As medical services struggle to keep pace, social service organisations have stepped in to fill critical gaps, particularly in emotional support and family decision-making.

Ms Yang Jie, director of social work agency Sereniturn Palliative Care, says her team often works not just with patients but also with entire families to navigate complex decisions.

She said the legacy of China's one-child policy has reduced family sizes, often placing the burden of decision-making on a single adult responsible for two elderly parents.

"As family structures weaken, that responsibility can become overwhelming," she said. Her team provides emotional counselling on top of helping families access services such as the doing up of wills and financial support.

At the same time, Ms Yang said she sees signs of change. The Covid-19 pandemic, she said, made death "more visible and real" while increased media discussion around life and death education has begun to make conversations about dying less taboo and less delayed.

For Ms Zhou, the support her family received did not end with her father's death. Social workers continued to check in, offering counselling and group activities with other families that had faced similar losses which she said helped her process grief over time.

It has also shaped her own plans as Ms Zhou now volunteers with a palliative care team and plans to receive formal training in this area.

"My experience made me realise that what seems like filial piety on the surface was in fact avoidance. I hope I can help more families come together and comfort each other," she said.

ngnich@sph.com.sg

## Sad horse, born of a factory mistake, captures China's mood

Joy Dong  
and Max Kim

When Ms Vivian Hao, a 39-year-old editor in China's Anhui province, came across a red horse plushie on social media, she felt a pang of recognition. The toy, meant to spread holiday cheer, seemed to capture something deeper about modern life.

The plushie first appeared in 2025 in a shop in eastern China. It has stumpy legs, a bell around its neck and lettering on its side that reads, "wishing you instant wealth". It also bears a conspicuous manufacturing error: Its mouth is sewn upside down, turning what should have been a content smile into a picture of melancholy.

Known as the "crying horse", the glum toy has become an online sensation in China ahead of Chinese New Year, the country's biggest holiday, which begins on Feb 17. The "crying horse" hashtag has appeared over 190 million times on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, and inspired a winking joke: Take the crying version to work, leave the smiling one at home.

The toy's sudden popularity has resonated beyond novelty. Many young Chinese workers have embraced it as a symbol of their exhaustion and disillusionment.

"Its expression perfectly reflects the helplessness of an office worker," Ms Hao said. She bought four, two sad and two smiling.

Such is the horse's relatability that Ms Zhang Huoqing, the 46-year-old shopkeeper who first sold it, has struggled to meet demand – both domestic and overseas – of around 15,000 units a day, even after adding a dozen production lines to make both the crying and smiling versions, China's state broadcaster said.



A sad horse plushie among other soft toys at the Happy Sister toy shop in Yiwu, China's Zhejiang province. Known as the "crying horse", the glum toy has become an online sensation in China, with many young workers embracing it as a symbol of their exhaustion and disillusionment. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ms Zhang, who runs her shop from the world's largest wholesale small-commodities market in Yiwu, sells most of the toys through offline channels but has started selling them directly via social media video streams. She declined an interview, citing exhaustion.

In the Chinese zodiac, 2026 is the Year of the Fire Horse, a cycle that comes around once every 60 years and symbolises ambition, growth

and intensity. Many young Chinese workers have embraced the crying horse as a symbol of the opposite.

In past decades, China's rapid economic growth lifted 800 million people out of poverty and gave rise to a flourishing middle class. But analysts say growth and wages have since stagnated, and prospects for social mobility have dimmed. For many young people, the once-idealised life of striving now

evokes drudgery, exhaustion and disappointment.

Those sentiments are reflected in the backlash to "996" culture – the expectation of working from 9am to 9pm, six days a week, promoted by prominent figures in China's tech sector. They can also be seen in online descriptions of modern life as "garbage time", a US sports term for the final minutes of a game, when the outcome is al-

ready decided but players must still go through the motions.

The crying horse joins a growing list of cultural symbols, from "lying flat" to memes about burnout, that reflect a generation questioning the value of relentless work.

Spending and lifestyle habits reflect that disaffection, too. Many Chinese youth now seek relief through rural escapism or by simply staying in bed. They are less in-

clined to spend money flaunting wealth or material success, and are more likely to seek out items that offer emotional comfort or immediate pleasure – like the sad horse.

Ms Jessica Lan, who works at a travel agency in Guangdong province, said she keeps one on her office desk for company during long workdays. "I'm a donkey, actually," she said. "A horse is less tired than me." NYTIMES

## Truck in Thailand hits power lines, causing widespread blackout

A container truck in Thailand struck power lines while driving onto a bridge on Jan 30, causing a power outage stretching 2km.

The accident happened at 1am local time, near the entrance to an

industrial estate in the city of Samut Prakan.

The immense force caused over 70 power poles to collapse like a domino effect, resulting in a power outage along a 2km stretch, from



The damage from the accident, which toppled more than 70 power poles, is estimated to cost millions of baht. PHOTO: SUSTAINABLEBANGPOOCITY/FACEBOOK

the curve in front of Samut Songkhram Hospital to the entrance of Nuan Net Alley.

The incident caused widespread power failure, affecting many households and businesses in the area. There were no reports of injuries or fatalities, and traffic along the main Sukhumvit Road remained unaffected.

Initial investigations revealed that the driver, who was using this route for the first time, did not see the overhead power lines due to poor lighting in the area. As a result, the truck became entangled with the power lines, causing the

poles to fall.

The Metropolitan Electricity Authority (MEA) deployed a rapid response team to the site and confirmed that power had been partially restored in some areas. However, extensive damage to the electrical equipment and poles is expected to take time to repair. The initial damage is estimated to cost millions of baht.

The MEA apologised for the inconvenience and reassured the public that it was working at full capacity to restore power as quickly as possible. THE NATION/ASIA NEWS NETWORK