



# Doing the rite thing

A documentary by a British filmmaker follows a 17-year-old Sichuan woman learning to become an undertaker in Hunan, capturing the 'spa treatments' given to the deceased

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Death is not a topic most people tend to dwell on, but it was something British filmmaker Carol Salter wanted to explore in her documentary *Almost Heaven*, which follows a 17-year-old apprentice undertaker in Changsha, Hunan province.

The film, which also depicts "spa treatments" given to the deceased at Chinese funeral homes, will be screened today at the Asia Society in Hong Kong.

"My kind of motivation was to deal with my own fear of death," Salter says, speaking from London, where she is based. "My parents were getting on and I was petrified. I wondered if I could exist without them."

Salter, in her 50s, came across a brief article about young Chinese undertakers who perform beauty treatments on the deceased to bring them respect and honour in death. She was so intrigued that she made her first trip to China in 2013 to see the process for herself.

The documentary was shot at the Changsha Ming Yuan Mountain Funeral Home, reportedly one of the largest of its kind in the country. Opening scenes show long, dimly lit hallways, staff driving coffins around in golf carts, and draped corpses being transported on hydraulic lifting machines to be stored in floor-to-ceiling storage spaces.

At first, Salter thought of following a group of young undertakers, but then realised it would be more meaningful to follow the journey of a single person. She connected with Zhan Yingling, originally from Mianyang city in Sichuan province, who had never seen a corpse before, and was afraid of the dark and ghosts.

"She left home for the first time [to work at the funeral home], so she was more vulnerable, but at the same time there was a bravery about her," Salter says.



**Zhan Yingling (above) and a colleague at a restaurant on their day off; and Zhan at a cemetery (below, right) in a scene from the film.**

"I met some young people who were just beginning their training, and Yingling was so fresh – she looked like a child; she showed every emotion on her face. She had warmth. We had a meal together and we connected," Salter says, adding she felt maternal and protective of her.

Zhan says she was not the first choice for the documentary's main character, but Salter gradually included her in more shots.

**I overcame my fear gradually, but not entirely. I still feel scared of dead bodies**

ZHAN YINGLING, UNDERTAKER

"As we grew closer, she understood I was a beginner [at the funeral home] and asked me if I would like to be her main character, and I said yes, and thought it might be interesting," Zhan says.

"At first, I did not feel comfortable and got distracted from work because of the camera.

"I would look at the camera constantly and feel awkward. So Carol told me to ignore her and her camera, and finally I found ways to concentrate on my work."

The film, which was self-financed by Salter, required six

trips to China because she wanted to make the funeral home story more accessible to audiences by also celebrating life. To do this she focused on Zhan and her life outside work. There are scenes of the teenager talking to her parents on the phone, and hanging out with her colleague, Ni Jinhua, in arcades and restaurants on their days off.

Salter visited several funeral homes and was struck by the warmth and humour of the young workers (most of whom are migrants from other provinces), as is seen in the film. "They are like a family to each other," she says.

A Chinese production company helped Salter approach the Changsha funeral home to ask permission to film the documentary, and after being given approval, she had to deal with a number of ethical questions: is it OK to film the corpses? How do you film corpses so it's not distressing for viewers? How do you film this as a foreigner?

Being in another country and dealing with a different culture and language gave Salter a degree of distance in dealing with the finality of death.

"There's a strange dichotomy in China. There's a tenderness and harshness around death, but there are also strong emotions," she says, referring to how the young undertakers carefully clean the bodies, and afterwards funeral directors demand payment from grieving families.

"I hope I balanced these two things together."

According to press materials for the film, Salter had never seen a corpse before, but when asked about it, she admits she attended the funeral of a friend who died in 2001. "The body was embalmed and the face was made up... it was not the person I knew, so it was shocking," she says. "It was quite sanitised."

So when, in a sad quirk of fate, both of Salter's parents died in the four years she spent working on *Almost Heaven*, she held back

from having their corpses embalmed so they still looked familiar to her in death.

Salter says she used a small camera to be as unobtrusive as possible while filming. It also helped her capture candid moments, such as Zhan passing time in the funeral parlour, and Zhan and Ni riding in a car to collect a corpse from a hospital.

Salter spent a lot of time in the funeral parlour, waiting and watching for something to unfold.

"In any country where you do not know the language, you do not really know what's going on. There were lots of times I felt it was not appropriate to film. I did not want to point the camera at people who were going through the saddest point of their lives," she says.

"What made it easier [for grieving families] was the young undertakers who filmed the ceremony or spa treatment. The film was something for them to hold on to," Salter says, adding that she also gave her own footage to some of the bereaved relatives.

The "spa treatments" are performed by Zhan and her colleagues while family members



**I tried to film it in a respectful way like the young undertakers**

CAROL SALTER, FILMMAKER

of the deceased look on. Zhan may cut the corpse's hair or shave its face. She massages the arms and legs with soap and rinses the corpse with water, all while talking to the lifeless body, saying: "I wash your pain and illness away. I wish you a good journey."

"I tried to film it in a respectful way like the young undertakers," Salter says.

"Before I started as an apprentice, what I understood about death was that when someone died, he or she was gone forever. However, since I worked [at the funeral home], I got to know a Buddhist, and he often shares his beliefs with me. I came to believe that if someone dies, he or she does not vanish, but enters another world and begins a new life."

*Almost Heaven* premiered last year at the Berlin film festival and won the best documentary at the British Independent Film Awards.

"People were touched and moved by it. Some think it was life-affirming," Salter says, glad that she was able to encourage people to talk about a topic that is taboo in many cultures.

"I wanted the film to be easily accessible, as the topic isn't. Even people in the funeral industry watched it and found it fascinating to see this 'spa' approach, as there is a new movement in Britain about how to deal with the aftercare of bodies in funeral homes."

It is not the first film Salter has shot in another country. *Mayomi* (2008) is about a young woman in Sri Lanka struggling to gain her independence, while *Unearthing the Pen* (2009) is about a Ugandan boy who wants to become a literate.

Salter says her films are about young people trying to find their voice in society. "When films give people a voice, they gain confidence and find their place. It does not change the world, but the world around them makes them a better person," she says.

Salter originally trained as a film editor before she started making films. *Almost Heaven* is her first feature-length effort. She also spent time working for aid agency Oxfam as a filmmaker on dramas and short films.

"That experience has informed the way I make films and helps me with my storytelling," she says.

*Almost Heaven* screens tonight at the Asia Society Hong Kong in Admiralty. Admission is free, but online registration is required. For details, go to [asiasociety.org/hongkong](http://asiasociety.org/hongkong)

