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

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

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

You were 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.

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 honor in death. She was 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 scores show long, dimly lit hallways, staff driving coffins around in gold carts, and clump coffins being transported on hydraulic trolley machines to be stored in a freezing storage space.

At first, Salter thought of following a group of young undertakers, but then realized it would be more meaningful to follow the journey of a single person. She connected with Zhan Yingling, originally from Yangzhou city in Sichuan province, who had never seen a corpse before, and was afraid of the dark and ghosts. "Before her training to work at the funeral home, so she was more vulnerable, but at the same time there was a brevity about her," Zhan says.

Zhan Yingling admits she was terrified of handling the corpses, but also curious. "I overcame my fear gradually, but not entirely. I still feel scared of dead bodies. I would feel most scared when I watched them," she says.

The experience in the funeral home has made her more philosophical about life and death, Zhan says.

Salter spent a lot of time in the funeral parlor, watching and writing for something to unfold. "If in any country where you do not know the language, you do not really know what's going on. There were ten or fifteen I felt 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," Salter says.

"What made it easier (for grieving families) was the young undertakers who filmed the ceremony or the 'spa treatments'. The film was something for them to hold on to," Salter says, adding that she gave her crew permission to show some of the bereaved relatives. The 'spa treatments' are performed by Zhan and her colleagues while family members from having their corpses embalmed as they still looked familiar in their 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 parlor, and Zhan and Nisi riding in a car to collect a corpse from a hospital.

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Before I started as an apprenice, I understood about death was that someone died, he or she was gone forever. However, since I worked in the (funeral home), I got to know a Buddha, and he often shares his belief with me. I came to believe that if someone dies, he or she does not disappear, but enters another world and begins a new life.

Almost Human premiered last year at the Berlin Film festival and was 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 their troubles in many cultures.

"I wanted the film to be really accessible, as the topic isn’t. Even people in the funeral industry had no idea it was here. A huge step in the right direction, as there is a new movement in Britain about how to deal with the aftercare of bodies in funeral homes.

It is the first film Salter has shot in another country. Mopon (2008) is about a young woman in Sri Lanka struggling to gain her independence, while (Trash咸阳 the Pyre) is about a Ugandan boy who wants to become a plumber.

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," Salter says.

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

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

Almost Human was shortlisted at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center in Hong Kong, and is kicking off the festival in New York. Admission is free, tickets available for details at http://asianarts.org/hongkong.