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Business of dying

WITH PERSONALIZED CEREMONIES IN VOGUE THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY HAS BECOME A MONEY-SPINNER

By JENNIFER LO in Hong Kong
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No tears but applause, no paper offerings but hand-written cards, no tear-jerkers but her favorite light jazz. Instead of a hysteric outpouring of sorrow, after a short bio on a projector screen, the well wishers in attendance queue to gently touch hands with her.

It could have been any farewell but the occasion was in fact the funeral for an 86-year-old woman from Shanghai, organized by Chinese funeral service giant Fushouyuan.

This new type of personalized funeral, miles away from the traditional black-hearse-and-suit affair, is an example of how the funeral industry in Asia is trying to tap into a growing market and changing consumers' preferences.

Asians may be living longer than ever before but they are also aging fast. With 60 percent of the world's population, Asia is set to be home to some of the largest concentrations of the elderly, the World Health Organization notes. By 2050, one in four people in

Asia will be 60 or older, up from one in 10 in 2010, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

In China and India, the over-60 population will surge nearly threefold to 439 million and 323 million respectively in 40

years. Japan, with the oldest population of all countries in Asia, can expect to have almost one-third of its population aged 65 or over by 2050.

A 2008 study by Swiss banking giant UBS



VIDEO: Eco-friendly, bespoke funerals?

View caskets bearing designs of Chinese dim sum, teddy bears or effigies of sophisticated doll houses, miniature bakeries or ice-cream carts that can be custom-made from paper and light wood.

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shows four of the world's 10 fastest aging populations to be in Asia: Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong. Developing economies such as China and Thailand are aging at a faster pace than Spain, France and the US.

Because of this, dealing with death will be a major occupation. Businesses catering to the families of the bereaved, such as those that arrange funerals, supply materials for ceremonies and memorialize the dead, can

reap long-term benefits, says Simon Smiles, researcher of the UBS report.

The funeral industry is expected to pick up on the back of Asia's millions of baby boomers born in the late 1940s and 1950s, says Kong Hon Kong, founder of Malaysia-based NV Multi Asia, a bereavement services provider which owns cemeteries across Singapore, Indonesia, Taiwan and Vietnam.

The demand for pre-arranged funeral services from those who are now in their 60s is growing. People hire wedding planners for nuptials, consultants for retirement plans and personal trainers for keeping fit. Now they are planning their own personalized funerals.

"We're seeing funerals deviating from religious beliefs, structure and rituals, moving towards personalized and unstructured events that reflect the beliefs of the deceased and his or her family," says Martin Tobin, founder of OutLore Consulting, a funeral adviser in Melbourne, Australia.

For example, a die-hard cyclist's casket is carried not by a hearse, but a four-wheel bicycle, says Tobin. Also, it is not only after death that a funeral is held. Twenty-five-year-old David Tseng of Taiwan, who was in the terminal stage of a muscular disease that had paralyzed him since childhood, held a "living funeral" to bid farewell to his family and doctors.

The event was reminiscent of Mitch Albom's bestselling novel *Tuesdays with Morrie*, in which an aged professor gathers friends and family in his home to hold a "living farewell." His argument is that it would do him no good if his funeral was held after his death.

"What a waste," Morrie says in the book. "All those people saying all those wonderful things, and I never [get to] hear any of it."

The tradition of splashing out on funerals in Asia means the industry is a lucrative one. In Chinese culture, it is believed that elabo-

rate ceremonies not only honor the deceased and ancestors, but also bring good fortune to his or her extant descendants.

It is not unusual for a family to spend several years' income on a lavish send-off. The Japanese spend an average of 1.2 million yen (\$15,072) on funerals, including flowers, caskets and urns. Japan's funeral market is worth \$21 billion a year, twice that of the US.

The 200 billion yuan (\$31 billion) funeral industry in China is one of the country's most lucrative businesses, with an average Chinese spending 2,000 yuan on funerals, official figures show.

Some funeral and cremation businesses are turning a handsome profit in Asia, metamorphosing from mom-and-pop affairs into listed companies. A search on Bloomberg shows that a quarter of the 40 listed funeral companies worldwide are in the Asia Pacific. Of these, half are based in Japan, with the rest in Australia, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Changing attitudes towards death are giving the industry a boost. Talking about funerals is no longer as much of a taboo. Also limited burial space and the often astronomical cost of funeral services mean many are opting for simplicity and going green.

The Australia-based LifeArt International is among those cashing in on the emerging eco trend in Asia. The company's catalogue features caskets bearing designs of Chinese dim sum, teddy bears or other personalized preferences.

Since 2004, the company has started to make coffins that are friendlier to the environment.

"(Concern for) the environment is now everywhere. It (touches) every single industry, whether it's food or clothing. We can't avoid it anymore," says Eckhard Kemmerer, managing director of LifeArt.

SEE "BURIALS" P5



CoverStory

A GRAVE ISSUE

CHINA IS RUNNING OUT OF BURIAL SPACE AS RELATIVES REFUSE TO ACCEPT OTHER OPTIONS FOR LOVED ONES

By JENNIFER LO

You might recycle plastic bottles, reuse shopping bags and write on both sides of a sheet of paper in an effort to be kind to the environment. But unless you pay attention to how your burial and funeral are conducted, your green record could lie in tatters.

Death can have substantial environmental downsides. Nine million burials in China a year take up valuable space. Cremation too is problematic as human bodies are full of chemicals that can turn into pollutants. Moreover, 1,000 tons of paper offerings (costing a whopping \$1.5 billion) are burnt every year on China's Tomb-Sweeping Day.

Many people in China are giving traditional ceremonies a rethink. If one chooses to live green, why not die green?

Fushouyuan in Shanghai has joined the bandwagon. Not so much a cemetery as an eternal resting place for 30,000 people, the memorial garden, surrounded by rolling hills and lakes, features pavilions and bridges, sculptures and calligraphy.

Since 2006, worshippers have been encouraged to use non-polluting offerings like flowers, yellow ribbons and greeting cards, rather than traditional paper offerings, candles and joss sticks.

"Nowadays, those from big cities are less convinced of traditional rituals," says Yi Hua, vice-president of Fushouyuan, which has five branches across China. "Burning paper offerings is considered not only old-fashioned, but also dangerous and hazardous to the environment. This explains why there's a huge market for green funerals out there."

Fushouyuan and the Ministry of Civil Affairs have in recent years hosted massive worshipping services on March 22, on the eve of Tomb-Sweeping Day. Those who opt for their ashes to be scattered have their names carved onto a cenotaph which saves burial space.

There is also a practical reason for going green in China. Housing prices are skyrocketing; and costs of funerals and burial plots are also ascending. The absurdly high costs have given rise to "grave slaves" — a term coined to describe those having to work hard to cover the costs of their own burials.

Chinese people have traditionally opted for ostentatious funerals. Emperors spent decades building mausoleums for themselves at tremendous cost.

The average funeral cost in China was 1,045 yuan (\$154) in 2010, according to the Ministry of Civil

Affairs. To show respect to the deceased, most people spend tens of thousands of yuan on exquisite caskets, not to mention expensive burial plots.

A square meter of burial space in Beijing might be much more expensive than a fancy downtown apartment. A less than 1 sq m plot can command 70,000 yuan (\$10,254).

The price rise is largely the result of land scarcity — competition for space between the dead and the living. In China, nearly 70 sq km of land (the size of 9,800 standard football pitches) is used annually for burials.

For decades, authorities have advocated eco-burials, including tree burials, flower burials, grass burials and water burials. In the first green book on funeral development issued in 2011, the Ministry of Civil Affairs unveiled plans to curb excessively high funeral charges and lavish expenditures.

In the early decades of the People's Republic, frugality was the norm. Elaborate funerals were discouraged and regarded as superstitious, caskets a waste of wood and fancy tombs a waste of land and a sign of feudalism.

Nevertheless, old traditions die hard on a local level. Families still resist the idea of laying loved ones to rest without a mark.

"It's right to advocate other ways of burial as land is becoming scarce. But I can't accept a sea burial for my relatives," a Beijing resident named Dong told *China Daily*. "After all, the Chinese traditionally believe a deceased person cannot get peace unless he is buried underground."

In Hong Kong, a cosmopolitan city of 7.1 million with a rapidly aging population, just 660 people chose to scatter the ashes of their kin in 2011.

In Shanghai, despite the city government's 10-year effort to promote eco-burials, the green concept is yet to take hold. Fewer than 20 percent have turned to bio-degradable burials, while sea burials account for just one percent.

"We don't inherit this land from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children," says Yi Hua of Fushouyuan, quoting an old saying. "If this trend goes on, Shanghai will run out of burial space in two decades and become a city of tombs."



JENNIFER LO / CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY
Traditional caskets.



A young casket designer at work.

LIFEART / FOR CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY
A dim sum casket and a Chinese-style casket

Keeping memories virtually alive

IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND WEIBO, BEREAVED FAMILIES TURN TO ONLINE FUNERALS AND MEMORIALS

By JENNIFER LO

"Had problems sleeping last night because it was too hot! Did I tell you your orchids are budding? Come see them," writes Nellie.

"Hopefully these 1,700 candles will keep you warm this winter," writes Alex.

"Ding bought us dinner at Albee's in Cabramatta last night. We had too much... Passed the shop where you used to buy roast pork. Love you ma," Sally writes.

These are neither diary excerpts nor blog entries, neither routine Tweets nor Facebook status updates.

These messages, updated every few hours on a memorial website HeavenAddress.com, are part of the Chan family's attempt to remember Yokechan Wong Chong, who died October 2, 2010 at the age of 84 in Carlingford, New South Wales, Australia.

"Visiting her daily at the site and 'talking to her' keeps her alive in our hearts," says Sally Chan, Chong's daughter, who describes her moth-

er's death as leaving a "large gaping hole" in her life. "It gives us an outlet to express and release our emotions."

The concept of online memorials is not new. Memorial site babaoshan.com.cn was launched by the Beijing Funeral Administration as early as 2005, allowing members the chance to offer virtual flower bouquets, upload photos and write eulogies.

Similar sites and mobile apps were introduced in Asia's most wired places — Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand — enabling bereaved relatives to set up free online profiles for the dead. A Chinese version launched in April allows worshippers to deliver bowls of rice, chopsticks and moon cakes with just a click of the mouse.

But HeavenAddress is among the few that experiment with social networking, allowing the living to connect with the living, as well as the dead.

"We prefer to think of HeavenAddress as much more than an obituary or death notice site. Your listing

is intended to be a lasting record of the life of your lost friend or loved one," says Derek Goh, founder of the site, which now has half a million registered users.

Not only has it become a platform for the Chan family to remember Chong, it is also a bulletin board for them.

"When we read one another's posts, we have a sense of what each of us are going through and are able to support one another," Chan says.

Registered users can browse through the lists of friends and relatives subscribed to a dead person's profile, and "get in touch" with them. "You'd be surprised by the number of mutual friends out there via this site," Goh says.

The website has settings similar to social networking sites such as Facebook with some modifications. There is no "like" button, but users can send "misses" and "love" with a click. Families and friends can share and exchange exclusive photos and videos of the deceased.

Technology has changed the way

the living pay final respects to those who've passed away. At a time when people are celebrating birthdays and weddings via Facebook, Twitter and Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter), it is no surprise that there is increasing recourse to online funerals in Asia, which has 44 percent of the world's Internet population.

Funeral services of celebrities such as Michael Jackson are broadcast live around the globe. So, too, are the once-private memorials of ordinary citizens. The Philippines-based St Peter Memorial Chapels is among the first in Asia to tap this trend.

Rather than worrying about costly airfares and catching a flight, people can avail the services of e-Buro, a program launched in 2008, which offers live web-streaming of funerals for people around the world to participate in the wake of loved ones.

The idea began when a programmer from the company turned a simple WiFi project into a webcasting program. The 24-hour online viewing facility, with web cameras

installed on the ceiling and near the casket, gave a real-time, 180-degree view of the funeral parlor.

Online memorials and the technology to broadcast funerals live have been around for half a decade in Asia but their popularity is advancing slowly. Part of the reason for this is the dilemma of whether to replace a communal experience with a digital one.

"The market [for online memorials] is still in its infancy," Goh says.

As of now, HeavenAddress claims a 53 percent market presence in Australia, 18 percent in New Zealand and 12 percent in Singapore.

But Goh stresses that online memorials are not meant to replace traditional forms of mourning but to add to them.

"They complement physical memorials, so you can opt to visit an online memorial when you are unable to visit the [actual] memorial park," Goh says. "It's an outlet specially designed to help families move through their grief and preserve a shared memory."

Burials: Changing choices create a new market

FROM PAGE 1

The company's lightweight, low-emission caskets are made from almost 100 percent bio-degradable materials, including wood fiber and recycled cardboard.

Burial caskets can be a drain on the environment, Kemmerer says: "(It) doesn't make sense when we are trying to reduce [our daily] emissions."

For centuries, burning paper effigies for the deceased has been an important part of ancestor worship in most Chinese communities in Asia. But rather than burning substandard paper iPhones, Ferraris, eerie pink-faced paper servants or hell bank notes, Taiwan paper art company Skea is taking effigies to a new level with its sophisticated doll houses, miniature bakeries and ice-cream carts that can be custom made using paper and light wood.

Skea's handmade creations don't come cheap. A paper villa costs NT\$30,000 (\$1,000), while jets and sports cars are priced from NT\$4,000. But the growing affluence and influence of Asia and the changing taste of consumers have created a new market for Skea. The company receives orders from Singapore, Japan — even New York.

Yean Han, founder-director of Skea, says her move into the "death" business was unexpected. The idea was born in 2007 following the death of her grandfather who died without realizing his dream of visiting Japan. Han's grandmother wept for days, frustrated with the lack of suitable paper effigies to burn for him.

"They looked awful," says Han about the stereotypical offerings on the market. Upon her grandma's request, she crafted a two-storey spa villa. On seeing it, the family saw the widow smile for the first time since her husband had passed away.

"We were so surprised when she announced that she'd been afraid of dying, but now that she knew she'd be getting one of these offerings, life in the spirit world would be fabulous," Han says.

One of the biggest challenges for industry players, even the well-established, is to incorporate new technology, from social media to digital tools, into the antiquated industry.

Tech-savvy baby boomers are



SKEA / FOR CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

A paper artist at work. Taiwan's Skea makes custom-made, sophisticated products taking effigies to a new level.

already competent users of the Internet. Everything can be done in just a few clicks, from greeting friends on their birthdays to paying bills, ordering air tickets and watching live soccer matches.

"Who doesn't want more convenience when it comes to dealing with the dead?" says Derek Goh, founder of HeavenAddress, an online memorial that resembles a social networking site.

As Asia boasts a fast-growing Internet population, industry play-

ers are offering webcast funerals, online memorials and mobile apps with enabling functions.

"If you're not devoting enough resources to the web, you're missing out on major trends in the physical world," says Tobin of OutLore. "Don't be afraid to hire information technology gurus, social media experts and graphic designers for your organizations."

However, changing technology and modern lifestyles in Asia pose no threat to traditional practices

such as the actual funeral. There is tremendous business potential out there, say industry players.

"The prospect for the funeral industry in Asia is very exceptional," says Craig Caldwell, vice-president of business development of The Dodge Company, a US supplier for embalming cosmetics.

"Funerals are still very important in Asia. This is one of the traditions we seem to be losing in other parts of the world where [the view is just] getting a funeral done."

