

A detailed illustration of several white magnolia flowers in various stages of bloom, surrounded by vibrant green leaves. The flowers have large, overlapping petals and prominent stamens. The leaves are glossy and have a distinct vein pattern. The background is a plain, light color.

ANGJOLIE MEI

DYING  
TO  
MEET  
YOU

Confessions of  
a Funeral Director

**DYING  
TO  
MEET  
YOU**

ANGJOLIE MEI  
WITH WONG SHER MAINE

DYING  
TO  
MEET  
YOU

Confessions of  
a Funeral Director



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Some names and identifying details have been changed to  
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For all who have lost a loved one  
—may you find solace in insight  
and wisdom.

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## Introduction

“**M**any of my clients are dying to meet me.” That’s the clue I offer to strangers who ask me what I do for a living. Another one-liner that I sometimes throw out to break the ice is: I have the best clients in the world because they never complain.

I’m a funeral director. Some might think it’s bad luck to associate with someone of my profession, but the fact is that everyone will eventually need the kind of services I provide.

The number of deaths in Singapore has been on the rise since 1960, and will not go down any time soon, given the country’s ageing population. About 15,700 Singaporeans died in 2005, and the numbers

have been on a slow but steady upward trend to 20,385 in 2019.

I have written this book, in part, because I want to lift the shroud of mystery that surrounds death in Singapore. There are misconceptions and ambiguity aplenty, but also a lot of curiosity about the topic.

When I take part in panel discussions as part of seminars, forums and talks, I am usually hit with a barrage of questions from the floor. People want to know what funeral directors do with the bodies of the dead, what to do when their loved ones die and how the living should prepare for death. They are innately fascinated with death because it is not something encountered every day.

I also want to dispel stereotypes. Funeral directors—popularly called morticians—are a favourite feature in horror stories, and they are usually pale, grim, cadaverous men. In the past, when one thought of funeral directors in Singapore, the image that came to mind would be that of a Hokkien-speaking, chain-smoking

middle-aged man in a singlet, who had ended up in what was thought of as a dead-end, pantang (inauspicious) job no one else wanted.

But funeral services have evolved over time, from largely ritualistic ceremonies to meaningful, carefully curated events. In essence, funeral directors are event planners. The nitty-gritty of what I do starts when I get a call from a client whose family member has died. I help the family organise the entire funeral event—from making sure the body looks presentable and acceptable to booking the venue for the wake and organising it, and helping family members pick out their loved one's remains (cremated remains) after a funeral, right until their loved one is settled in their final resting place.

People often ask me why I chose to become a funeral director. I love my job. I view every funeral I do as a celebration of someone's life. As we rejoice whenever babies are born, we should celebrate when people have completed their life journeys—remember the things they have done, the people they have touched and the differences

they have made. After all, a funeral is like life's graduation ceremony; it is so very important. A funeral is not a day in a lifetime. It is a lifetime in a day.

I am one of a handful of certified funeral directors in Singapore—of which only a very small proportion are women—and the only certified funeral celebrant, which means that I am trained to organise funerals that reflect the personality and life story of the deceased. The religion of the dead and their families also determines how a funeral is conducted. Apart from Hindu and Muslim funerals, I have organised funerals for Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Taoists, Soka practitioners and freethinkers. In recent years, we have observed many funerals of mixed religions, such as a Muslim–Buddhist funeral we had not long ago. There was an imam and a Buddhist monk at the funeral wake at the same time; at the end of the three-day wake, Buddhist rituals were conducted for the deceased, who was then buried in a Muslim cemetery. So as you see, my

job is incredibly fulfilling—one in which I have learnt many life lessons through the funerals I have organised, and from the interesting people I have met.

Becoming a funeral director as part of my own life journey is a tale in itself. I never set out to become one. What I always say, when asked about my choice of profession, is that “I didn't choose funeral directing. Funeral directing chose me”. As a child, I was scarred by encounters with death. But when my father, Ang Yew Seng, a pioneer in the Singapore funeral industry, died in 2004, I had to quit my job and support my mother in a male-dominated industry.

It is also fitting that a funeral director who talks all day long about remembrance should write her own biography, perhaps to distribute at her own funeral one day.

As you read this book about my life as a funeral director, you will unavoidably think about death. But also, think about your life—make it count and make it last. Because I hope I will not have to meet you for a long time yet.



## I Am Ang Yew Seng's Daughter

**M**y mother is a funeral director. My younger sister, Sarah, is an embalmer and she is married to a funeral director. My older sister, a trained accountant, manages the accounts for both my business and my mother's. Aside from my brother, who is in between jobs, nearly my entire family works in the funeral industry.

At Sarah's wedding in 2015, probably half of those from Singapore's funeral industry were present. Many of the guests, chain-smokers who work in the business, flooded the toilet for their smoke breaks, drawing the ire of the hotel manager who threatened to call the fire department upon witnessing the clouds of smoke coming from the loo.

While we make a living off death—and we do have a tendency to pore over obituaries—ours is a normal,



happy four-generation family with plenty of babies and children to play with at our social gatherings. We don't usually talk about work. At most, we exclaim over coincidences, like when I discovered that my company had embalmed my mother's former teacher and organised her funeral. Or if someone I knew had died and I found out via our family WhatsApp group chat that my mother or brother-in-law was taking up the case, I might ask them to give a goodwill discount. My sister, when she was pregnant, was also "allowed" by our family to continue her embalming work well into her third trimester despite the superstition that expectant women should keep away from the dead. Her husband, mother and sister all needed her skills. Likewise, when I was pregnant, my family had no objections to my conducting funerals and seminars up till one week before my expected due date.

My siblings and I would likely have ended up in "normal" salaried professions—perhaps in office-bound jobs, sales or marketing—had it not been for my father, Ang Yew Seng. He was the second in a family of 10 children born to immigrants from China. In post-war Singapore, families were typically large, and children were not pampered or nurtured. My father, like most children in working-class families

then, didn't stay long in school because he had to work to help feed his siblings. At 12, he started doing odd jobs, like selling bee hoon as a street hawker.

Fortuitously, his uncle, who had migrated from China, started a funeral business. My father decided to join him in the trade at a young age, making caskets by hand. In those days, when Singapore had enough land for people to be buried rather than cremated, the heavy caskets were painstakingly fashioned from actual tree wood. The tools he used are still kept in the family.

In the 1970s, the government, realising that the dead were taking up space in land-scarce Singapore, started to clear cemeteries and redevelop the land by constructing roads and buildings. The biggest cemetery landowners at the time were the Chinese clan associations, who altogether owned over 1,000 acres of land.

The Chinese had to quickly get used to the idea of cremation. At the time, the Hindus were already cremating their dead. Muslims did not, as the practice is forbidden in Islam. Cremation, however, caught on amongst the Buddhists and Christians who, up till then, had mostly buried their dead.

Cremation called for a different sort of casket from those used in burials. It had to be light, and it had to burn easily. My father was then an active volunteer at

the Bright Hill Temple, also known as the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery. The Reverend there suggested that he create thinner, lighter caskets with traditional motifs, such as lotus flowers and swastikas, so Buddhists might find it easier to support the idea of cremation. In response, my father produced these caskets and started his business, Ang Yew Seng Cremation and Undertaker, which was located at Thomson Road. The Reverend directed the temple devotees to my father to organise the funerals of their family members, and his business took off. He moved to Sin Ming Drive in 1984 when the Singapore government took back the land where his first office was located, and the company's name was changed to Ang Yew Seng Funeral Parlour.

Pa, who was tall and lean, cut a suave presence in the funeral industry. Back in the day, he stood out in a sea of Bermuda shorts and slipper-clad funeral workers as he always insisted on being properly dressed in a formal button-down shirt or a neat polo shirt. He wore sunglasses because he wanted to look good, and because he had cataracts and wanted to protect his eyes. The sunglasses became part of his corporate image. It was so much a part of his identity that we placed them in his casket after he had passed away.

While my father was street-smart, he wasn't what you would have called a paragon of virtue. He had once been arrested for allegedly murdering a cashier in 1962, although he was later acquitted. Throughout his life, he was a gambler and a heavy drinker. He regularly imbibed Martell from a glass neat. Luckily, his business star shone bright and he was always able to fund his vices. Publicly, he was better known as a philanthropist of sorts. He provided many free funerals to the poor and needy in the Chinese Buddhist community. That earned him the title of "The Coffin King".

His work occupied him 24/7, as people die at any time of the day. Funeral directors don't enjoy regular working hours. The dead saw a lot more of him than we did at home. He worked hard to ensure that his family was well provided for, and his hours were long and erratic. He came home when we were already asleep, sometimes as late as 3am, and he would still be sleeping when we left for school the next day. He was so preoccupied with his work that he was mostly oblivious to his family.

Once, when my elder sister was 12, he was asked, "How old is your daughter?"

"Oh, she is 16," he replied, glancing up at my sister, who was tall for her age.

He placed no importance on birthday celebrations—not even his own. We once organised a surprise dinner for him, luring him to the restaurant on the pretext that he was having dinner with my mother's relatives. When we brought out the cake and sang "Happy Birthday" to him, he looked around in confusion before whipping out his wallet to check the birth date on his identity card.

As someone who had dealt with death his entire working life, my father was surprisingly not better equipped to meet it than everyone else. He did not make any provisions for death—he did not prepare his family for after his death, and he did not specify the kind of funeral he wanted. Perhaps he had not imagined that he would be dying quite so soon.

Pa died of renal failure after a failed operation in February 2004, further complicated by the fact that he had been diagnosed with stage four colon cancer in late 2003.

Prior to his diagnosis, we did not see much of him as he was busy with work all the time, but during those last few months of his life, I grew much closer to him. I looked after him, changed his colostomy bag in the wake of his colon removal, and chauffeured him to his medical appointments as he was too weak to drive.

At that time, I was working in my first job as a management trainee in a logistics company.

He wanted people to remember him as he was when he was healthy; he did not like people to see him in his sickened state. Very few were allowed near him. From being the emotionally distant, capable breadwinner of the house, he became someone who depended on me and the rest of his family.

One of the last happy memories we had of him was at our traditional Chinese New Year reunion dinner that took place 18 days before he died. It was bittersweet because it was the first and, though we did not know it then, the last time our family would be enjoying the reunion dinner together. In the past, he had always been too busy to join us for the duration of the entire meal.

As he wanted to avoid being seen by relatives, the steamboat dinner was held at our home instead of my grandmother's. Instead of the noisy gathering of multiple families crowding into one flat, it was just the six of us—my father, mother, three siblings and me. The food was simple and Pa, who rarely ate sweet things, made a special request for my mother's homemade jelly. It was the best Chinese New Year reunion dinner I had ever had because for the first time, Pa did not have to

rush off to work. Little did I expect that this first time would be our last.

About two weeks later, he had what was meant to be a minor operation to close his stoma—an artificial opening in his skin which had been created to allow faeces to pass through—but because of complications, the procedure ended up taking eight hours. His kidneys failed and his blood pressure plunged over the next three days. As his condition rapidly deteriorated, the doctors quickly summoned my family—I still remember it was on 7 February 2004 at 8am—and we rushed down to the Singapore General Hospital. We were delayed by rigorous temperature checks—that was the year SARS had hit Singapore—before we saw him in the chilly intensive care unit. There were no chairs in his room as the ICU is not a place for visitors to linger. All of us crowded around his bed, which was heated for his comfort.

When he saw my mother, he didn't say a word, but he raised his fist, lifted his second finger and curled it downward—a gesture that symbolises death. He knew that he was dying, and he realised that there were matters he had left unattended. In the last few hours they spent together, before he became unresponsive, Ma and Pa discussed his debts. They thought I didn't

understand as they spoke in Hokkien, but I knew that he owed people money.

Pa also wanted to see his only son and youngest child. Up until then, we had not brought my nine-year-old brother Zachary to the hospital because of fears over SARS. When Zachary arrived, he was bewildered to see us all crying as he did not understand what was happening. In all his naivety, he asked, “When can we go home?” We bade him to hold Pa's hand, and Pa silently clasped back in response, his eyes shut as life slipped away.

Pa's blood pressure dropped throughout the day. Gradually, he slipped into a deep slumber. Sometimes he would hum a tune, although I could not figure out what he was humming. I kept telling him, “Let's go home, Pa. You will get better and let us go home.” I was still in denial of the fact that my Pa, the patriarch, the breadwinner of my family, was slowly slipping away from this realm. When his heart rate fell sharply to about 30 beats per minute in the evening, I was alone with him as the rest of my family had just stepped out to rest on the chairs outside the ICU ward. I quickly rushed out to the nursing station and asked the nurses, “Is my father dying?” They replied nonchalantly, “Yes, he is.”

I desperately herded the rest of my family back into the room to say goodbye. Because of what I had heard Pa and Ma talking about earlier, I assured Pa, “I will take care of the family. You do not need to worry, Pa.” He died that day at 8pm, 12 hours after the doctors had first gathered us together.

As I gently stroked his arm, I realised that his was the first dead body I had ever touched. He was still warm. Then, even though his heart had stopped beating, a tear slipped from under his closed eyelid. I was still in disbelief that he had left us at age 64. I was not ready to bid him farewell. I was wailing so loudly in the ward; I kept asking my Pa to go home with us and not leave us. I started bargaining with him—I will take care of the family if he woke up. He still had to watch me get married. I realise that when we lose someone who is dear to us, it is never an easy process to go through, as we experience different stages of grief. I kept holding on to his hand; I did not want to forget the feeling.

It also felt completely natural for me to continue talking to him, telling him to rest in peace. Even though he had passed away, I still wanted to tell him so many things that I wished I had told him before. It was only later in the course of my work as a funeral director that I found out that a person's hearing is the last of

the senses to go in the dying process, which is why we should continue talking to our loved ones when they are on their deathbed, even if they are unconscious or unable to respond.

Apart from coping with the grief of losing my father, I was also dealing with the fallout from a break up with a man whom I was to have married on 6 February 2004, the day before Pa died. My ex-fiancé was four years older than I was, and I had dreamt of getting married and giving my parents grandchildren. I had chosen to overlook the fact that he often dictated many aspects of my life, including enforcing a curfew, and that in the four years we were dating he had only deigned to meet my father twice.

My mother had often asked if I was sure he was the one for me. But it was Pa's sickness that forced me to see the light. The moment I found out that Pa's surgery would take place just a day before our ceremony at the Registry of Marriages, I called my then-boyfriend.

“My dad needs to go through a crucial surgery the day before our marriage registration. We need to postpone the wedding.”

My ex-fiancé coldly responded, “It's me, and not you, who gets to decide if the wedding will be postponed.” In what would be my first act of defiance against

him during the entire four years we had been dating, I retorted, "I don't care!" and hung up the phone. Subsequently, in my second and final act of defiance, I called off the wedding and ended our relationship.

The emotional stress from the break-up and Pa's death caused my weight to plunge. I lost 10kg within two months.

When Pa's body was brought back to his own funeral parlour, his friends and long-time colleagues, who had weathered the industry with him for decades, broke down and cried. The usual embalmer, one of Pa's buddies, could not bring himself to perform his task. It had to be outsourced to a third party, and she did a wonderful job.

Pa's funeral was organised by my mother. She had been helping him in his business and was in the best position to do so. His friends and colleagues also made sure that the man for whom they had the greatest respect had a send-off worthy of a veteran funeral director. Pa's wake lasted seven days, which is considered relatively long and is usually for those who have a multitude of family and friends wanting to say goodbye.

Because of Pa's lifelong work with the Buddhist temple, many monks from Myanmar, Sri Lanka and

Thailand came to chant prayers throughout the funeral. Donations were received from far-flung Buddhist temples, including one from Sri Lanka.

His funeral and cremation were held on 13 February 2004. All the funeral directors who ran their businesses along Sin Ming Drive gathered to say goodbye to one of their own.

The day after the funeral, my siblings, Ma and I all went together to collect Pa's remains. As we picked his cremains from the tray with chopsticks and placed them into an urn, Ma joked, "Your dad never bought me flowers or chocolates on Valentine's Day. The first gift he gave me was his cremains."

The end of my father's life would mark the start of my "accidental" career. That was also my first official day in the funeral industry. I had to support my mother. There were debts to be repaid and a business to run. If Pa had known I was joining the business, I imagine he would have reacted the same way he had when I had taken over the wheel of his beloved car for the first time.

I had asked him then, "Pa, may I drive your car?"

He hesitated, unwilling to let go of the wheel, unsure if I would be able to handle the large Jaguar. But, aware that he was too ill to drive, he relented. Thereafter, I did all the driving.

Even now, 16 years after his death, I still soar on my father's reputation. Old hands in the funeral industry still know me as “Ang Yew Seng eh za bor gia”—“Ang Yew Seng's daughter” in Hokkien—which compels them to trust me and work with me.

Some people resent being known as so-and-so's child. They struggle with the patriarchal legacy. Do I mind riding on my father's coat-tails? To me, it is an honour—I am proud to be Ang Yew Seng's daughter.

## 2



### A Man's World

I was having dinner with nine men, in their forties and fifties, at a restaurant in Vietnam. There were only two ladies present—me and the quiet wife of one of the men. At 29, I was quite a bit younger than my companions.

Dinner conversation—painstakingly conducted through interpreters—centred around plans to transform a plot of land in Vietnam into a memorial garden where people could go to pay respects to their loved ones. I was there as one of four partners of TransLifeCare, a funeral consultancy that I had started in 2010 with three men: a Canadian embalmer, a Malaysian funeral home and memorial garden owner, and a Filipino owner of over 20 funeral homes. Outside of Singapore, there aren't many women in the industry either. I was accompanied by the Canadian

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANGJOLIE MEI, formerly a financial advisor, is a certified funeral celebrant and certified funeral director at The Life Celebrant, a provider of boutique funeral services. She is one of the few women in the funeral services industry in Singapore and provides fascinating insights into this little-known profession. This is the second edition of her first book, which has also been translated into Chinese (爱的告别).



# Why would someone leave a promising career in finance to work among the dead?

Angolie Mei, funeral director and life celebrant, recounts how the death of her father—a veteran known as “The Coffin King” in the funeral industry—prompted this dramatic choice.

What exactly happens during embalming? What kind of post-death restoration is needed for second-degree burn victims? What are the little-known facts surrounding suicide in Singapore? How did the Covid-19 pandemic change funerals and rituals as we know them?

In this revised and updated edition, Angolie offers the insider’s view on these and other aspects of an industry usually shrouded in mystery, and reflects on how her perceptions of death, and life, have changed since she chose this extraordinary profession.



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