

Breathing new life into funeral business

Young undertaker seeks to promote innovation and training in sector

By STACEY CHIA

HE HAS helped more than 3,000 families with funeral arrangements but fourth-generation undertaker Ang Ziqian is undecided about his own resting place.

The 32-year-old director of Ang Chin Moh Casket envisions having his ashes separated into two parts, half in a diamond and half scattered at sea.

“But that may well change. In the future, sending ashes to space may even be possible,” he said.

Death is a topic that Mr Ang discusses with ease. His memories of childhood include accompanying his father, Mr Ang Hong Hin, on visits to “dark places”.

“We were on our way to Sentosa as a family but a phone call came and, in the end, we made a trip to the mortuary instead,” said Mr Ang, who has two younger brothers. The youngest, Zisheng, 26, has also followed in their father’s footsteps.

Their father, now 63, is still involved in the business.

“He always placed other peo-

ple’s grief over our happiness, but I saw the way families thanked him after the funeral... and knew that this was what I wanted to do,” said Mr Ang.

He started learning the ropes at 13 and took over the reins from his father at 22.

The public’s attitude towards his profession has changed somewhat since then, he said. He recalled talking about his dad’s occupation at school only to be ostracised for years afterwards.

He said people today are more likely to be curious about the profession: “They often ask questions like, ‘Do you see ghosts?’ ”

But the industry still faces an immense manpower shortage as it has few young workers.

The median age of his 30 employees is about 38, which Mr Ang said is young compared with those of some rival companies.

“People tend to associate death and dying with bad luck,” said the polytechnic graduate, who has a diploma in mechatronics engineering.

On average, he said, only one



Mr Ang Ziqian, the 32-year-old director of Ang Chin Moh Casket, aims to improve the industry’s image. In 2010, he turned the run-down Mount Vernon Columbarium into Mount Vernon Sanctuary, a modern funeral parlour. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

in five applicants turns up for a job interview.

A lack of training options here means that essential funeral services such as embalming have to be carried out by foreigners.

Last week, Mr Ang, whose funeral business is one of the largest in Singapore, pumped in \$1 million to launch the ACM Foundation. This aims to reduce the stigma of death, promote innovations

and philanthropy and provide training for the sector.

“I want funeral directors to have the same social standing as bankers and lawyers,” said Mr Ang.

Believing that unique designs for caskets, urns or funeral parlours can reduce the fear of death, Mr Ang has also teamed up with the Lien Foundation to organise international design competitions to transform death care practices.

It is Mr Ang’s latest attempt to boost the industry’s image.

In 2010, he turned the run-down Mount Vernon Columbarium into Mount Vernon Sanctuary, a funeral parlour offering modern funeral halls.

Although Mr Ang is far from retirement, he has started looking for a successor – and may break away from tradition.

His great-grandfather started the business in 1912 and it has been passed down since then.

“We shouldn’t be like the old Chinese families who will pass the business down only to a son or family member,” said Mr Ang, who is married but has yet to have children.

“If my children don’t have the aptitude or attitude, they will ruin the business.”

As part of his search for a successor, Mr Ang is open to taking in interns. “They need the resolve to face the reality of dealing with funerals and grieving families.”

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