

# TACKLING TABOO TOPICS SO DEATH RITES LIVE ON

BY MAVIS WONG

**W**hen Ms Joanne Goh's grandmother passed away in February last year, it was the first time she had ever attended a funeral.

It was then that the 22-year-old realised she did not know the meanings behind many of the funeral rites, such as what the bags of joss offerings contained, or the differences among the several types of paper money.

So when the Visual Communication student at Nanyang Polytechnic received the theme "deconstruct" for her final-year project, she interpreted it as the erosion of heritage and culture and based her project on Chinese death rituals.

It took Ms Goh about three months to produce a 50-page guidebook titled *Up In The Smoke*.

It offers background information about the Tomb Sweeping Festival (Qing Ming Jie) as well as the various rituals associated with it.

Her target audience: the younger generation of all races as these practices are part of the social fabric here.

For families who practise these rituals, she felt that the context and insight provided by her book could help to unite the younger generation, who are sometimes detached from such traditions, with their families.

The resourceful student even put samples of joss paper into her book to give the reader an idea of how it looks and feels.

The book also includes a step-by-step guide on folding paper money offerings, a calendar detailing the dates of the next few Tomb Sweeping Festivals, and the steps of performing a ritual.

Though her intentions for the project were well-intentioned, she met with resistance during her research phase. As she tried to find out more about funeral rites from shopkeepers of prayer goods stalls, most waved her away impatiently. The older shopkeepers even advised her against accumulating knowledge on the topic.



Though her mother frowned upon her final-year project topic, Ms Goh was determined to preserve the traditional knowledge on Chinese death rites for posterity. ST PHOTOS MAVIS WONG

Unfazed, she approached a younger set of shopkeepers and they agreed to share their knowledge with her.

At home, her mother could not understand why she had decided to choose such a taboo topic, she said.

In fact, her superstitious mother was also the reason why her grandmother's funeral was the first she had ever attended, because she believed they carried a "bad aura".

So as not to upset her mother, Ms Goh kept

her project materials, such as the sample joss paper, in school instead of in her home.

Yet she was determined to stick to her goal of keeping the heritage alive. "It's not that hard to keep a cultural story going," she said.

For her hard work, Ms Goh received an A. The book remains a manuscript prototype for now.

The writer grew up attending Tomb Sweeping Festivals annually, but has fully understood the importance behind the rituals only after writing this story.



## ABOUT THE SHOWCASE

Ms Goh's project was one of the 184 on display at the National Library from March 10 to 11. The 10th graduation show by Nanyang Polytechnic's School of Design showcased work by students across three diplomas: Industrial Design, Space and Interior Design, and Visual Communication. The prototypes ranged from wearable accessories that cool down the user on hot days, to town models that visualise self-sustainable living spaces. See their work at <http://unit.nyp.edu.sg/portfolio.html>.