



NATURAL SELECTIONS

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A model aeroplane with the words Lauda Air Flight 004 at one of the spirit shrines at the site.  
Photos: Tibor Krausz, handout

The ghosts of memory

Felix Wong travelled from Vancouver to visit the remote spot where his young aunt died, one of 223 people killed in 1991 when a flight from Hong Kong crashed in Thailand

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The bumpy, undulating dirt track snakes through a dense bamboo forest in central Thailand's Phu Toei National Park. The powdery dust that covers it billows at the slightest disturbance, stinging the eyes and irritating the throat.

Carved into a hillside, the road zigzags beside steep ravines and is flanked by towering bamboo canes that knock about in the breeze with an eerie clatter. Here and there fallen vegetation blocks the way.

Locals in this rural backwater of Suphanburi province believe that ghosts haunt these woods. Few of them dare stay after nightfall.

It's still well before sunset one recent afternoon when Boonsom Tansiam, a local farmer, navigates the treacherous terrain in his ageing pickup truck.

In the back Felix Wong, a Hong Kong-born Canadian, perches precariously over a wheel in the vehicle's open cargo area with this journalist for company.

This bone-jarring ride is the last leg of a journey that has taken Wong 12,000km from his home in Vancouver to this far-flung location way off any of Thailand's well-trodden tourist trails.

The 25-year-old has travelled here with a mission: to look for clues that will shed light on the last minutes of the life of an aunt he had never met.

It was in this forest that Lauda Air Flight 004 crashed on the night of May 26, 1991. The airliner, part of a fleet operated by a company set up by Austrian Formula One driver Niki Lauda, was bound for Vienna, Austria, from Hong Kong, with a stopover in Bangkok.

Soon after take-off from Bangkok a malfunctioning thrust reverser deployed in flight, causing the Boeing 767-300ER to break up in the air. All 223 people on board, including 52 Hong Kong residents, perished in what

remains Thailand's deadliest air disaster.

One of the passengers was Wong's newlywed aunt Fung Yuk-wan, then aged 35, who worked as a nurse at a psychiatric hospital in Hong Kong. She and her husband were on the way to their honeymoon in Europe.

"I always knew I had an aunt who had died in a plane crash,"

That changed last summer. During a family reunion in Canada, Wong's mother, Fung Yuk-yin, and two of her brothers from Hong Kong began discussing their experiences in Thailand after the plane crash. The three had travelled to Bangkok to identify Fung's remains from dental records.

"We were never able to identify my sister and had to leave it to the Thai forensics team," says Fung Yuk-yin, 56, speaking from Vancouver. "They told us they had found her and would take care of the cremation. We had no way of telling whether we received her real ashes."

To Wong, such uncertainties added to his feeling that his late aunt had somehow been "unpersoned" after her death.

"That same night I decided to visit Thailand," he says. "I thought that by going there I'd learn something about my aunt. I didn't know what that would be."

In late November he landed in Bangkok and set off for Suphanburi province, a two-hour drive from the capital. As he did so, his mother reported from back home that she had just seen Yuk-wan – in a dream.

says Wong, who relocated to Canada with his parents when he was eight. "But she was just a picture to me on a tombstone," he says, referring to the niche in a Hong Kong columbarium that houses Fung's ashes.

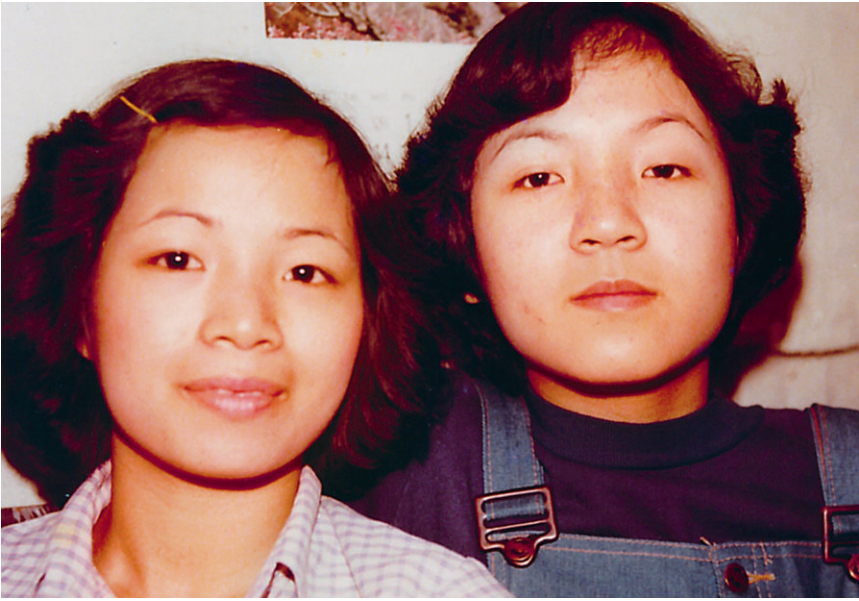
"My mother never said much about her older sister. No one in my extended family did. Chinese people often deal with tragedy by not speaking about it."



Chinese people often deal with tragedy by not speaking about it

FELIX WONG, WHOSE AUNT DIED IN THE DISASTER

Fung Yuk-wan (left) who died in the crash, with her sister, Yuk-in, Felix's mother, in Hong Kong in the 1980s.



"Many Chinese people think dreams are a way for ancestors to contact living relatives," Wong says. Was his aunt sending a message from beyond the grave?

"In life, my sister was an independent, self-reliant, fun-loving person. In my dream, she was still alive and I was happy to see her," Yuk-yin says. "I don't know if it was a spirit message, but the timing of it coincided with Felix's arrival in Suphanburi."

Inside Phu Toei's bamboo forest, another two-hour drive from Suphanburi's provincial capital through verdant countryside, Boonsom stops his truck and points up into the branches of a cluster of bamboo, beyond which the ground falls away into a gully.

This is where, after the plane crash, he saw the bodies of two Caucasian men. They were in their underwear, Boonsom says.

"They were up there," explains the farmer, a spirited 65-year-old with several missing teeth, and the English word "Cobra" tattooed on a forearm. "Their guts were hanging out."

Wong listens silently as an interpreter translates the Thai man's words.

"There were bodies lying all around there, both men and women. Some were badly burned. The smell of blood was overwhelming."

On the night of the disaster Boonsom heard "a loud boom in the sky," he says. "I looked up but couldn't see anything in the dark. Then there was another boom."

At first light he set out to investigate. When he got to the crash site a large crowd had already gathered.

With an outstretched palm Boonsom animatedly traces a path in the air, charting the way Lauda Air Flight 004 crashed, its nose barrelling through the jungle. Bits and pieces of its fuselage were scattered far and wide, along with contents of its passenger cabin.

"The front of the plane landed there," he says, indicating a spot in the forest. "There was a large refrigerator here. I opened it and there was lots of food inside."

Boonsom says many locals were picking through the smoul-



Boonsom Tansiam, one of the first people to reach the site; and debris from the crash.



We're meant to honour our ancestors. I feel I had to do this for my aunt

FELIX WONG

dering wreckage. They were looting anything valuable they could find – watches, jewellery, banknotes, travellers' cheques, cameras, electronic devices. Even passports and other documents were taken.

"Did someone take my aunt's wedding band?" Wong asks. "Probably," Boonsom says.

Some villagers even carried away parts of the plane to sell as scrap metal in what an English-language Thai newspaper at the time described as a "ghoulish looting spree".

Nearly three decades on, some locals still hope to benefit from the crash. They do so by playing number combinations associated with the doomed airliner on Thailand's underground lottery, a clandestine version of the government-run variety. Several villagers have recently lucked out by playing 223 – the number of victims on Flight 004.

Another short ride around a sharp bend in the road takes Wong to his final destination. Words painted in mangled English on a wooden sign announce the location: "Falled aeroplaned point." This is where the bulk of the plane hit the ground.

Propped up against tall canes of bamboo is a horizontal stabiliser with stripes of blood-red paint on it.

Lying around on the ground covered in dry leaves are broken pieces of the plane: its tail cone, ailerons, parts of its fuselage. Some have been charred by heat.

Amid the wreckage, colourful spirit houses, erected for the disaster's victims, stand in a row with votive flower garlands dangling from them. On one shrine someone has left a white model plane with "Lauda Air 004" scrawled on it in a red marker.

Exposed to the elements, the paper toy has begun to disintegrate in poignant imitation of the real aircraft.

"I'm glad I've come here," Wong says as he surveys the wreckage. "In Chinese culture we're meant to honour our ancestors. I feel I had to do this for my aunt."

Few outsiders come to this site or even know it exists. Yet some villagers keep bringing fresh offerings to placate the spirits of the people who died in the crash. Local Buddhists believe the souls of the dead passengers are tormented by their violent deaths, but regular obeisance from the living can mollify their spirits.

Wong kneels before a spirit shrine and bows his head.

"If I died in some remote forest I'd love someone from my family to come and visit me," he says. "I told my aunt at the shrine, 'I'm here for you. You're no longer alone.'"