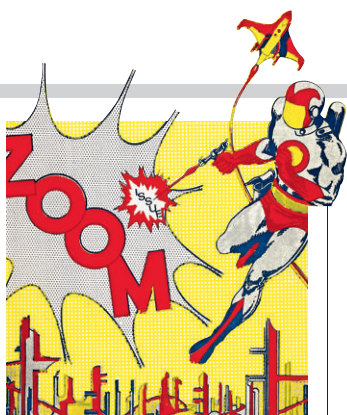


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The skull of an exhumed skeleton lies surrounded by flower petals and Thai baht. Photos: Tibor Krausz

No bone left unturned

In a tradition to set their spirits free, Thai volunteers exhume and then clean and pamper the neglected remains of the unidentified dead at a graveyard in Pattaya

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Thanakorn Theerakarunwong is a traditional Chinese medicine doctor and is handy with suction cups, ear candles and acupuncture needles. Right now, though, he is wielding a different tool: a forked wooden rod used in spirit writing.

Solemn and bespectacled, Thanakorn, 32, a Thai-Chinese, is a *tongji*, or spirit medium, and is ostensibly relaying messages from the Eight Immortals from Chinese mythology through the rod in his hand. The Chinese divinities are about to reveal which graves will need prying open in a small graveyard outside Pattaya, a seaside town in eastern Thailand.

Waiting expectantly for the results on this April morning—when Chinese people elsewhere observe the ancestor festival known as Ching Ming—are hundreds of locals dressed in funereal white. They are queuing at a nondescript graveyard, located next to a well-kept Chinese cemetery with undulating grassy knolls fronted by richly decorated tombstones.

Many of the waiting men and women are wearing surgical masks and latex gloves. That's because they are here to exhume and clean the human remains that lie in regimented rows of small identical graves with breeze block sides and earthen bottoms. Apart from hand-painted numbers on them, nothing sets the graves apart and nothing indicates whose remains they contain.

"We do not know who they are," says Sinchai Wattanasatsaton, a businessman who is vice-president of a Thai-Chinese Buddhist charity that runs humanitarian initiatives and organised today's grave-exhuming event. "They have been neglected since the day they died."

The hundreds of graves here are the temporary resting places of people who died in recent years

without any known next of kin in Chonburi province. They were undocumented foreign migrant workers, unidentified murder and accident victims, homeless derelicts and elderly people shunned by relatives.

Local authorities buried them unceremoniously without coffins in case someone came looking for them, but no one has. Nameless and unmissed, they have been unmissed until now.

The throng of locals have come to lend a helping hand to the dead. The spirits of the departed, they believe, have become stuck in limbo, condemned to linger in the other world as despairing spectres or emotionally tormented poltergeists. They are unable to find solace or move on without the aid of the living. So the men and women are eager to help the spirits by giving their earthly remains a proper send-off.

"These dead people can't get reborn without earning more merit," Sinchai says, referring to the Buddhist belief that karmic merit ensures better prospects for the rebirth of a soul. "They can't do it for themselves so we want to do it for them."



[They] can't get reborn without earning more merit ... we want to do it for them

SINCHAI WATTANASATSATON, VICE-PRESIDENT OF A THAI-CHINESE BUDDHIST CHARITY

A Thai-Chinese spirit medium pinpoints a grave whose occupant will need to be exhumed at a graveyard in Pattaya.

The time for that now isn't just propitious but necessary. The last time an exhumation like this took place here was a decade ago, and since then all the graves have filled up. Their occupants will have to be removed and cremated to make way for other dead bodies.

"People die every day," says Sinchai, whose charity also assists in road accidents, which take a terrible toll on lives in Thailand, not least in Pattaya, a resort town famed for its rowdy goings on. "We need spaces for new victims."

Thailand has one of the world's highest traffic mortality rates. Last year alone, nearly 22,500 people died on Thai roads, or more than 60 a day on average,

according to the World Health Organisation. Violent crime and rampant drug use also claim victims daily. Many of the dead remain unidentified by police.

Thanakorn and an assistant wield the forked divining rod to relay an auspicious message from the Eight Immortals. It's spelt out in Chinese characters with spirited tap-tap-taps on a powdered round board placed before a portable Taoist shrine.

Then the wooden implement seems to come alive, like an out-of-control dowsing rod. It writhes and squirms in the hands of the two men, who begin sprinting among the breeze block graves. Zigzagging and stumbling, they keep doubling over to tap on various graves that are then marked with red pennants.

"The gods have chosen me for this task," Thanakorn says between two spirit runs. "If you are selected, the rod will react to your touch. It pulls me and I follow it."

Once 40 graves have been identified this way, small teams of men and women spring into action. What comes next isn't for the faint of heart.

They remove the stone slabs sealing the graves, whereupon a stench of decay fills the air. They set about picking out the dirt-covered contents painstakingly by hand, depositing them gingerly onto rattan mats: skulls, clavicles, femurs and other bones. Some are still wrapped in fraying bits of soiled clothing, which are also meticulously collected.

Only random objects provide a few clues. In one grave lies a vinyl wristband that was once attached by a hospital with details of prescribed medications for a patient who did not make it. From another grave emerges a woman's disc-shaped pendant, which was worn as a good-luck charm.

Locals remain unperturbed as they go about their macabre tasks.

"We do not turn up our noses at these dead people no matter their condition," says Sompis Saejew, a middle-aged woman who owns a restaurant in Pattaya and is now handing out refreshments. Like many people here, she's ethnic Chinese.



Human remains are exhumed (above); then sprinkled with talcum powder and petals (below).



"Showing disgust would be disrespectful."

Then the fun begins—for both the living and the dead. Clustering around heaps of bones, the men and women clean the dirt off them with toothbrushes and assemble them into individual skeletons on mats laid out on the ground. Now cheerful, they proceed to pamper the spirits of the dead they believe still inhabit the human remains.

They do so by engaging in a fusion of Buddhism, folk religion and Chinese ancestor worship with elements borrowed from Thai funerary traditions and the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival.

We do not turn up our noses at these dead people no matter their condition

SOMPIS SAEJEW, VOLUNTEER

They dab gold leaf on skulls and cover them with scented talcum powder. They spray bones with perfume and sprinkle them with marigold petals. Then they cover the skeletons in banknotes and burn joss paper to bequeath new wealth to the departed.

Halfway through the proceedings, a thunderstorm erupts. People carry on undaunted, exhuming yet more graves in pouring rain and attending to new skeletons under leaky awnings.

A bolt of lightning strikes a nearby transformer with an almighty bang and a crackling sizzle. It does so just as a stylishly dressed woman has picked up a skull to pose for a photo with it. Startled, she hurriedly puts it back down and bows her head, pressing her palms together apologetically. "Forgive me! Forgive me!" she begs the skull.

It's assumed to be a karmic quid pro quo: a good deed from the living for the dead deserves another from the dead to the living. "Lots of people have won the lottery after doing this," the man says. "Digging for human remains is like digging for gold."

Many of those gathered want to hit the jackpot, too. They are hoping to divine winning numbers by various methods. One involves adding up the many Thai banknotes that people have put randomly on a skeleton.

One such tally yields 3,454 baht on remains recovered from Grave #4. "It's a beautiful number," a woman enthuses. "It must be a winner."

Each skeleton is then placed in a sack and groups of people parade around with it under oiled-paper umbrellas mounted on long bamboo poles. The men bang drums and the women ululate excitedly in the style of traditional merry-making at ordination ceremonies for novice monks.

"The dead are happy we are doing this for them," says Tanee Yindeept, a small man with a shaven head who wears a cascade of protective amulets around his neck.

"Now they are at peace in the afterlife, or they can move on to their next life," he adds.