

SE Asia
HD **Families wait for President to end silence over flight MH370**
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A few hours after possible debris was sighted in the Indian Ocean, President Xi of **China** phoned the Prime Minister of Australia and explained how “devastated” he was by the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370.

More than 150 **Chinese** citizens disappeared on that flight. Yet, two weeks on, Mr Xi has still not mentioned to **China** that he has been shattered by their loss.

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For families encamped in the stale and suffocating Grand Ballroom of the Lido **Hotel** in Beijing, praying for a miracle, the silence of their President is just one wound of hundreds.

Most painful, of course, has been the 14-day torture of grief postponed and loss prolonged. Among the 450 gathered here some want the plane to be found so that the mourning can start properly; others have found a wretched comfort in not knowing.

Hardest to bear, say the families, has been running over and over the last conversations they had before their relatives boarded MH370. One woman said that her fiancé, Xing Fengtao, was a regular on MH370 as his work took him to Malaysia more than ten times a year.

“On a previous visit, he bought me a watch with a metal strap. I loved the watch, but not the strap. Just before the flight, he called to tell me he had just been to the duty free shop to **buy** a leather strap for the watch. I told him anything was fine if he had bought it,” she said.

In the ballroom, the cruel daily rhythm of conflicting information, of frenetic rumour-mongering, of false dawns and of press conferences where little is divulged has divided the families into factions. Leaders have emerged, as have arch-inquisitors who take it upon themselves to publicly interrogate the representatives of Malaysia Airlines or the Malaysian officials. There have been scuffles and howls and arguments over whether the international press should see their pain or not.

A huge **board** has appeared at the back of the room that families have used – in a strangely un-**Chinese** way – for prayer. “I am waiting for you to come back and have dinner. I call you three times a day, and you have broken your dinner date every day for 13 days. I am waiting for you to come back and see me in my wedding dress,” read one.

Every type of family relationship is represented in the ballroom. And as the mothers, sons, wives and grandchildren have described their loved ones to The Times – many in tears, many in whispers, some in fury – Mr Xi’s silence seems all the more flinty. The lives that vanished into limbo in the small hours of March 8 were the pulsing souls of Mr Xi’s 21st Century **China** – a nation of itchy-footed tourists, of student adventurers, of entrepreneurial chancers, of the financially ambitious and the business failures, of the newly-engaged and the recently retired.

The passenger manifest of MH370 is glorious testament to **China** on the move. There was Zhao Qiwei, the head of his **company**’s environmental materials department taking a well-earned holiday with and his wife and child. There was Wang Rui taking his wife and three other family members on a dream trip abroad. There was a young PhD from Peking University, and another studying for his PhD in

Cambridge. There was a Beijing student travelling abroad for the first time and a young man returning, shattered after being conned into taking a job on a dodgy building **site**. And there was Weng Meiling, the young woman who had lived her life with the misery of having both parents killed in a plane crash.

They include Bian Liangjing, the eldest son of a family from Hebei province who once studied medicine and worked for a few years as an intern in a small clinic. The salary of a junior medic was so poor that he ditched it for the £4,000-per-year job as a construction worker in Singapore.

Some 18 months ago, he kissed goodbye to his eight month old son, and has only ever spoken to him since through the internet. On every call, said his family, he would insist that his son called him “daddy” so the boy would grow up knowing who the man on the computer screen was. Bian had finally saved enough for a visit home to Hebei, and the cheapest flight was MH370.

Elsewhere on the plane was Luo Wei, a truck driver from Zhengzhou. He had worked himself to the bone and scraped together enough money to escape the pollution and take his wife, Li Yan, on a trip that mattered more than anything to them. She had just resigned from a punishing job. “They went to Malaysia for five days. The purpose of this trip was for Li Yan to finally relax a little bit so she could get pregnant,” said Luo’s father, gripping his brother’s arm for support in grief.

CO masys : Malaysia Airline Systems Bhd | khzinv : Khazanah Nasional Berhad

IN i75 : Airlines | iairtr : Air Transport | itsp : Transportation/Shipping

NS gaira : Airplane Accidents | gcat : Political/General News | gdis : Disasters/Accidents | gmmdis : Accidents/Man-made Disasters | grisk : Risk News | gtacc : Transport Accidents

RE china : China | austr : Australia | malay : Malaysia | beijin : Beijing | apacz : Asia Pacific | asiaz : Asia | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | bric : BRIC Countries | chinaz : Greater China | devgcoz : Emerging Market Countries | dvpcoz : Developing Economies | easiaz : Eastern Asia | seasiaz : Southeast Asia

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