

An Exercise in Understanding Distance

I was born and raised in the coastal city of Tianjin. My father is a harbour construction engineer. From when I was two, he worked away from home for long periods of time, only coming back once or twice a year, each time for a brief week or so. The rest of the time he lived on construction sites by the sea. As a child, my favourite pastime was to walk to the coastline a couple of blocks from home and watch the sea for hours on end. Water holds and embodies a distance that one can grow beguiled by, comfortable with, and dependent upon. From there I imagined his surroundings on the other side of the water: the rotational speed of concrete mixers, the way lumber was stacked, the distance between jetty poles, a grey land-sea-scape being slowly outlined into two definite spaces. During those years my father was away, the water united us as much as it separated us. I will always look at the ocean, knowing that many families like mine have worked for, with, and against it throughout their lives.

On 10 June 2013, I initiated a Skype interview with my father about his work. It was our first time talking on Skype, and by then I hadn't seen him for a year. The interview was conducted in Mandarin, which has been transcribed and translated into English.

XINRAN YUAN

Last summer at home, I found this photo that you took in 2002. It caught my attention because this is the type of landscape I always imagined you working in: the intertidal zone, where the sea and the land become one – although I have to say, it looks as if it pre-dates technology. Why are the workers standing in muddy water, passing down stones to each other?

DESHUN YUAN

This was during a land-reclamation project in Xiamen. In the photo, workers are clearing out rocks on what used to be an oyster farm. The rocks had to be picked out by hand before our cutter suction dredger could get in, so the blades wouldn't get damaged. The project was to create new land on which a high-end residential neighbourhood with an ocean view was to be built.

XY *Who are these people in the photo?*

DY They're actually the very farmers who worked on the oyster farms before. They were hired to remove the rocks.

XY *That sounds laborious and sad at the same time: to leave a place their lives depended on – and to abandon the very lifestyle – while participating in the erasure of that place.*

DY As you can imagine, it was an extremely difficult negotiation, and there were a lot of politics involved, which wasn't rare for development projects like this. The residents in the fishing villages were given apartments in urban areas; some were given storefront spaces as well. Most of the fishermen made a good profit at the time. As a matter of fact, the type of fishing and farming they previously conducted was labour-intensive and lacked technology; they were only making enough to support their families. After the port was finished, the city quickly attracted businesses and factories, and a lot of jobs opened up.

XY *How long did it take them to clear out the rocks?*

DY About two months.

XY *Did you ever feel nostalgic about the landscape that was being altered, and about the disappearance of the types of labour dependent upon it?*

DY Well, that's a difficult question to answer. Many types of labour and lifestyles are dependent on the ocean; ports bring opportunities and development to places in a way fishing boats don't. Most of the families that were relocated still worked in related jobs. A former fisherman would open up a seafood store, for example.

XY *What would you do if you no longer designed and built ports?*

DY I don't know! I've never thought about that. I really have no idea.

XY *Can you list all the projects you've worked on over the years, and the timeline of each?*

DY Yes. I was in The Port of Yingkou, Liaoning, from 1984 to 85; Port of Tianjin from 86 to 92. From 92 to 97 I was in Zhuhai, Guangzhou, where I worked on Gaolan Port and its coal terminal, as well as the LPG

terminal and the oil terminal of Shenzhen Port. For the five years afterwards I worked on the expansion of Port of Tianjin. And then from 2002 to 07 I was in Xiamen, designing and building the island's ring road and container port.

Xinran Yuan

Xinran Yuan's artistic inquiry focuses on the ocean, its space, stories, and its industries: harbour construction, fishing, shipping, surveying. These days she is researching the North Atlantic herring crash during the 1950s and 60s, the ecological and geo-political issues that surfaced during the crash, and the deindustrialization of former herring centres. She works closely with the fishermen in Skagatrönd, Iceland, making sculptures and videos in her studio at the University of Illinois, where she is pursuing her MFA.