



Jiajia Zhang  
*Sinking Water*, ©2020  
 Acrylic, marker, graphite, and painter's tape

Part of a series that tells maritime stories of Chinese people in Britain, *Sinking Water* memorializes the twenty-three undocumented Chinese migrant workers who drowned in the Morecambe Bay disaster. These twenty-one portraits directly reference the ID photos that the migrants used during their journey to Britain. The two spaces in the last row are intentionally left blank for the two women whose bodies were never found. The title comes from the final words of Guo Bing Long, who called emergency services while keeping himself afloat, repeating the only English phrase he knew: “sinking water, sinking water, sinking water.”

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# "Sinking Water": A Cultural Analysis of the Morecambe Bay Tragedy

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“They headed in waves,” writes Hsiao-Hung Pai on Fujianese who migrated overseas in the last century.<sup>1</sup> Situated along China’s southeastern coast, Fujian Province has historically been defined as imperial China’s maritime capital and the epicenter of the maritime silk road. Fujianese folk religion holds that the province was founded by oceangoing refugees, who sought help from Mother Ocean—Mazu—in fleeing invaders. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*—a foundational ancient Chinese mytho-geography compiled in the first millennium BCE—makes the province’s maritime identity clear when it refers to Fujian as “within the ocean.”<sup>2</sup> Skilled Fujianese mariners would ultimately ply the high seas for a living, settling in and traveling between major port cities across Southeast Asia and later, significantly, to Europe and the Americas. With its fishermen, shipbuilders, clam-pickers, and seamen, it continues to serve as China’s largest maritime economy. Pai’s article talks about “waves” of migrants, but it speaks to me another kind of truth. Wherever the Fujianese headed, they must have, necessarily—I think to myself—headed in great ocean waves.

Since the early twenty-first century, Fujian has gained a new kind of reputation as a port of departure for immigrants trafficked worldwide in the cargo holds of merchant vessels. Some of these people have come to the public’s attention only after meeting watery deaths on Western shores. One such tragic incident occurred in 2004, when twenty-three individuals drowned while picking shellfish (cockles) on the notoriously treacherous (and incredibly productive) broad tidal sand flats of Morecambe Bay on the west coast of England.<sup>3</sup> Two Englishmen had allegedly arranged through a Chinese intermediary to smuggle thirty undocumented individuals into Liverpool to work the cockle beds. This tragic incident serves as a potential template to analyze public attitudes and awareness of the lives of trafficked Chinese immigrants. It has evolved into a cautionary tale about how unbridled, undocumented, and unregulated immigration leads to what has been described as modern slavery, a narrative that is colored by racism and other forms of social bigotry.

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The Morecambe Bay incident was so impactful that it led indirectly to the passage of Britain's Illegal Migration Act 2023.<sup>4</sup> In the twenty years since the incident, blame has landed upon a single Chinese "triad" leader, who is said to have smuggled thirty Fujianese migrants to Liverpool against their will, then left them to drown without fully informing them about the fast-rising tides of Morecambe Bay.<sup>5</sup> The two Englishmen were cleared of any wrongdoing. Given this singularly criminological focus around the incident, two dangerous misconceptions about its Fujianese victims have been enabled: namely, that the Fujianese were fundamentally "unfamiliar" with the sea and its economies because they were "modern slaves" trafficked to perform an unfamiliar task against their will. Of supreme importance in this analysis, however, is the consideration of the maritime identities and migratory cultures of the Fujianese. Consider, for instance, the lifeways they represent and how these lifeways have become criminalized for their incompatibility with the modern logics of the nation-state. Throughout Chinese American and British Chinese history, subliminally thin lines run between the categories of "modern slave," "illegal immigrant," and "refugee." British and American immigration restrictions historically professed to prevent the trafficking of "coolies" and "prostitutes"; in practice, however, these laws have at times resulted in a blanket ban on working-class Chinese migrants seeking entry through legal means.

Forced to rely on transnational migrant networks to smuggle them into the employ of Western capitalists ever on the lookout for cheap labor, hundreds of thousands of Chinese continued to cross the oceans in hopes of supporting their families. Their villages in Fujian have fallen into relative destitution, in which colonization and global income inequality played no small part. Given their long-standing mastery of the seas and myriad connections across global ports, Fujianese migrant

networks became prolific in smuggling the undocumented, often into regions where their maritime skills were valued. With the tightening of global immigration regimes, what was once a legitimate migratory culture was driven underground. The leaders of smuggling rings, commonly termed "snakeheads," have complicated legacies: some have been called heroes by their "clients," and others, extortionists; many have been called both. Drawing connections between undocumented Chinese and the "triads," however, is a tired historical trope, and there is no evidence that Lin Liang Ren, the Morecambe Bay gang master, was one. More plausibly, Lin was a "snakehead" opportunist functioning in a modern system of undercover human migration.

In many ways, the discourse surrounding Morecambe Bay mirrors historical patterns of xenophobia across the Anglosphere. British scholars and civil liberties advocates argue that the tragedy was co-opted by an anti-immigrant Right more interested in migrants' "mobility" than their "rights."<sup>6</sup> Of the sixteen cockle pickers who survived that night, only one was interviewed in mainstream news outlets in 2004. These news reports perpetuated a misconception that Li Hua was the "sole survivor." But court testimonies reveal that fourteen Chinese actually made it out alive; at least nine of them swam to shore on their own. Autopsy reports show that those who drowned did not drown because they could not swim but because they were unfamiliar with the location and swam in the wrong direction, where a circular current, "like being inside a giant washing machine," sucked them under. The mainstream media reports themselves at the time reflected a certain bias. Not only were the migrants able to swim, they were unfathomably skilled swimmers who took on a force of nature that locals either avoided or approached with the benefit of local, skilled knowledge accumulated over generations. In discounting the Fujianese migrants' mastery of



the sea and its industries, reporters have robbed them of a certain agency. It was not the ocean that killed them.

From its folkloric beginnings, Fujianese culture, much like other oceanic cultures, has transcended the boundaries of the nation-state. The ancient story of Mazu the Sea Goddess and the founding of Fujian, like the lore of many maritime cultures, was never about borders; it was, and remains, a story of mobility, migration, and taking to the sea in refuge, and it is worth remembering when we think of those who continue to cross borders.

### Endnotes

1 Hsiao-Hung Pai, "What Happened to the Families of the Drowned Cocklepickers of Morecambe Bay?," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/22/drowned-chinese-cockle-pickers-morecambe-bay>.

2 The phrase "闽在海中" (*min zai hai zhong*) means "[Min is] within the ocean" (my translation). In ancient times, Fujian was known as the kingdom of Min.

3 A cockle is a species of edible bivalve mollusk generally in the family Cardiidae.

4 The Illegal Migration Act of 2023 changed the law so that those who arrive in the UK illegally will not be able to claim asylum but will instead be detained and deported.

5 *Triad* is a term that originated in eighteenth-century China, referring to a secret society of organized crime.

6 Hsiao-Hung Pai, "The Lessons of Morecambe Bay Have Not Been Learned," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/03/morecambe-bay-cockle-pickers-tragedy>; David Tang, "Heed the Chinese Ghosts of Morecambe Bay," *The Spectator*, January 31, 2009, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/heed-the-chinese-ghosts-of-morecambe-bay/>; The Monitoring Group, with multiple authors from the University of Hull, University of Leeds, and Nottingham Trent University, *Hidden from Public View? Racism Against the UK Chinese Population* (London: Monitoring Group, 2009), 7, 32; Sue Adamson and Bankole Cole, *UK Chinese People's Experiences of Racially Motivated Crimes: A Pilot Study in West Yorkshire and Humberside*, Sheffield Hallam University, available via Leeds Chinese Community Association, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://lcca-uk.org/news%20reports/UK%20Chinese.html>; Ian Herbert, "Racism Blamed for Cockle Deaths," *The Independent*, February 13, 2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/racism-blamed-for-cockle-deaths-69277.html>; Harmit Athwal, "Are Chinese Lives Cheaper?," Institute of Race Relations, July 8, 2004, <https://irr.org.uk/article/are-chinese-lives-cheaper/>; Josie Appleton, "After Morecambe Bay," *Spiked*, February 12, 2004, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2004/02/12/after-morecambe-bay/>; Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "The Deadly Silence of Britain's Chinese Minority," *The Independent*, February 9, 2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/the-deadly-silence-of-britain-s-chinese-minority-569316.html>.



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