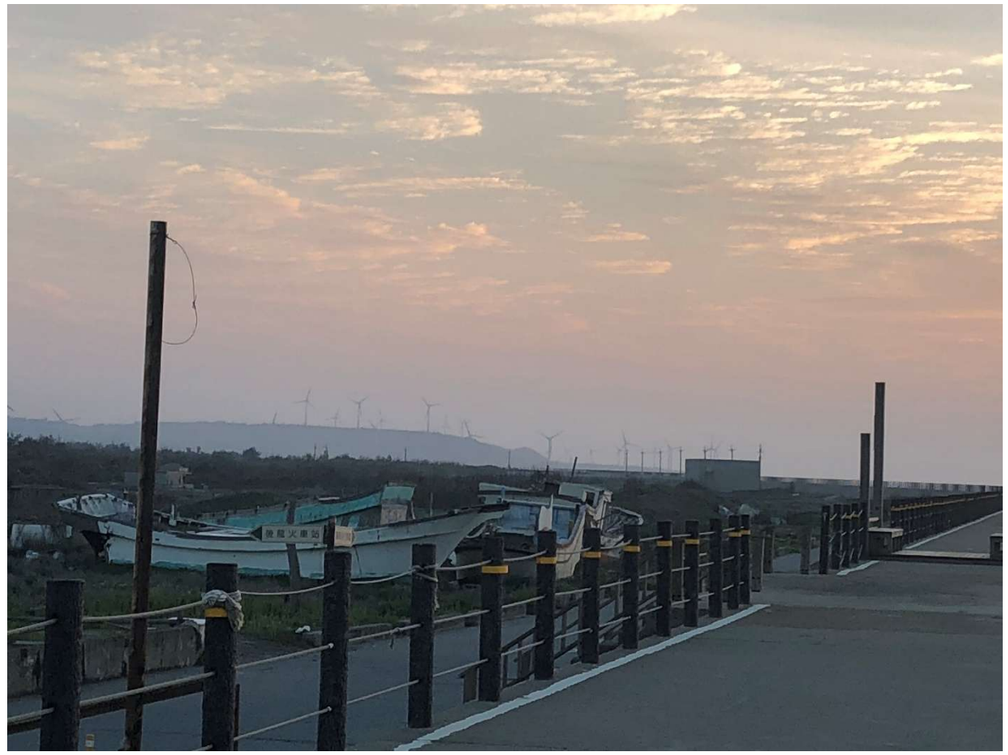
Stone Waves and Reef Sorrows: Sisyphus by the Sea

Xiyu Village

The blades of the wind turbines showed no sign of stopping; a forest of metallic needles crawled across the coastline, sand dunes, and hills. This had become the customary landscape of the western coast. The waves along the shore were unfriendly, their roar abnormally loud. A stretch of stone-built *shihu* (intertidal stone weir), like the spine of a dragon, lay coiled and sleeping at the edge of these treacherous waters.

Stung by the twelve-degree sea breeze atop the concrete embankment, Wang Zhuo-yi sipped rice wine bought from the grocery store in front of Hexing Temple. Perhaps out of exhaustion, he propped his rough cheek with his right hand, seemingly looking at something yet looking at nothing. Was he daydreaming? Not entirely. He stared straight at the breaking waves thirty meters away, crashing against oval cobstones whose surfaces were scarred by the traces of oysters. A buzzing vibration pulled him back from the void. The ceiling of the temple's restroom had collapsed. Foreman Chen was recruiting people in the group chat to fix it tomorrow. Zhuo-yi thought for a moment and sent an animal sticker giving a thumbs-up. Seven years. Life was bitter, but not unbearably so. Living in his old family home and relying on the formwork skills he'd honed over the years, his income was decent. But in truth, he was just drifting through the days.



The Wang family was considered an old clan in Xiyu Village. Their ancestors had crossed over from Quanzhou, Fujian, during the Qing Dynasty, among the first Han Chinese to develop Taiwan. They claimed land and settled in Xiyu during the frontier period, a lineage continuing to this day. Xiyu used to be a fishing village, but they didn't rely on boats; they relied on *shihu*. A stone weir is a fishing tool that depends on the tidal range. The principle is simple: build a long circular arc of stones on the coastline, with heights varying by location. At high tide, fish swim into the weir to feed; as the tide ebbs, the fish that fail to escape become "trapped in a jar." Maintaining a stone weir is backbreaking work because of its scale. Every stone must be laid manually, requiring a division of labor. Over time, this evolved into "family weirs," where each family adopted and maintained a specific segment. During the Japanese colonial period, the town was connected by rail, and advanced refrigeration made the local stone weir industry flourish; the coastline once stretched with nearly ten kilometers of continuous weirs. However, as time passed, the youth were no longer willing to carry the "ancestral foolishness" required for laying cobstones. One by one, the weirs were breached by waves. Collapsed weirs became piles of cobbles, then pebble beaches, stretching across Xiyu's fifteen-kilometer coastline.

Hexing Temple

A crowd gathered in front of Hexing Temple; the sound of the collapse had been significant. The temple worshipped Mazu. To pray for safety at sea, the early settlers enshrined her image as soon as they settled. Over the years, like most coastal towns, the temple plaza transitioned from a religious center to a village gathering spot.

Wang Fu-hai, the Village Chief, rushed over from his house. "Make way, make way!" he shouted. He asked the temple keeper, "What happened?" "A loud bang! It woke me up this morning," the keeper replied. "It’s alright, the restroom roof suddenly collapsed. Luckily no one was inside, or it would have been a disaster. Come, let me show you." The keeper led the Chief to the back. The restroom had originally been the west wing of the Duan family’s ancestral home. The Duans were once prominent fishers here, but they later moved to Taichung to do business with the Japanese, and the house was left frozen in 1915. When tap water came to the village in the early Republic era, the temple added a toilet, and the pipes were naturally connected to this 200-year-old courtyard house, though only the west wing remained.

Wang Fu-hai looked up. Half the roof had caved in; shattered grey tiles and ceiling debris were scattered across the white floor tiles. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "This looks serious. How did it collapse like this?" He stepped closer. The wooden beams were riddled with rot. "Fixing this will take time," the Chief said. "Then I’ll need your help, Chief," the temple keeper said, rubbing his hands. "Wait! What do you mean 'help'?" Wang Fu-hai turned, his eyes filled with wary suspicion. "You know, and the villagers know... didn't you apply for that cultural preservation fund from the government? Our village only has a thousand people. If we don't help each other, how do we survive?" the keeper pleaded.

Memories

Zhuo-yi rode his grey-white Dio scooter along the sea embankment toward town. The two-stroke engine mixed white smoke with the smell of burning oil. Through the sluiceways of the embankment, the half-submerged stone weirs flickered in his vision. The sea rose layer by layer with the tide, and the weirs slowly vanished into the grey-green surf.

He remembered as a child, every winter, the men who repaired the weirs would set up portable stoves in front of Hexing Temple to cook "Shao-jiu" (rice wine) rice with red dates and ginger. The aroma would fill the air—a signal to the villagers that the weir workers were ready to move. His father was one of them. Usually aimless and casual, his father transformed when he gripped his sledgehammer and stepped onto the weir. Under the sun, wearing a conical hat, he would lay flat cobstones one by one, wedging and ramming them tight in a repetitive, rhythmic dance. His eyes were always tired but spirited. Repairs took at least four or five days, scheduled strictly by the tides. Sometimes, if the waves were fierce, they worked through the night with headlamps. This was the daily life of the weir workers.

"Why?" Zhuo-yi never understood. Whenever he asked why his father did such exhausting, unprofitable work, his father would just look at him—just look—and say nothing. One year, after a typhoon destroyed half the weir, the whole village and the soldiers from the Coast Guard joined the repairs. Zhuo-yi was there too. But the youth were useless for anything but basic labor—carrying stones, delivering tea. Only the elderly workers knew how to actually build the weir body. At home later, his father teased him as the table was covered with medicated patches for sore muscles. Zhuo-yi had silently taken two for himself.

The Roof

The gaping hole remained. The Village Chief shone his flashlight upward; torn fibers of the wood lining hung from the edge of the breach. He sat on the small steps of the restroom, staring at a scorched incense burner behind the temple.

He hesitated. It was true that officials from the Ministry of Culture had taken an interest in Xiyu's stone weirs and sent scholars to study them. Eventually, the large offshore weir was listed as cultural heritage, and maintenance funds were granted. But this wasn't the first time villagers pressured him to divert those funds for unrelated matters. *To fake the expenses, rename the items, and deceive the government... I just can't do it,* Wang Fu-hai thought bitterly. But this was the temple keeper—a man of status in the village. If he couldn't even fix a small temple toilet, he'd lose face.

Exhausted by the dilemma, he opened his phone and clicked on Foreman Chen's profile. "Hello? Chen? It's Ah-Hai. The roof behind the temple collapsed... yeah, the main beam was rotted. Can you bring men tomorrow? Yes... I'll pay you on-site. Thanks, I appreciate it. Click."

Among the shattered tiles on the floor, the Chief noticed a flat, round cobstone. Quartz crystals within it glinted in the light. He picked up the stone and walked slowly back to his house.

The Embankment

Zhuo-yi parked his scooter by the embankment to urinate in the bushes. The sea was so rough that the wind nearly blew the urine back onto his shoes. Afterward, he took his rice wine and walked up the embankment. Regret began to seep in. At high tide in Xiyu, the water could reach the top of the tetrapods, yet many sea anglers still visited. There were simple wooden pavilions where city families would picnic on good days. Zhuo-yi sat on the seaward slope of the embankment.

He regretted it. That morning at dawn, he had taken a base stone from the stone weir and hurled it at the restroom behind Hexing Temple, smashing a hole in the roof. He had wanted to argue with the temple keeper in a milder way, but he lacked the courage and knew he couldn't out-talk him. It was a clumsy act of venting—a warning the keeper probably didn't even realize was intentional.

Zhuo-yi rubbed his eyes, his face contorted in pain. He was so angry. His father's hundred-day funeral service had just finished, and the temple keeper had come to collect "fees." His mother, fooled by the man, gave away most of the funeral donations. Their financial situation was already dire; this was adding insult to injury. Thinking of the scam, his indignation flared up again, overriding his regret.

The Base Stone

Wang Fu-hai sat in his rattan chair, stroking the melon-sized cobstone he'd found as if it were a pet cat. He knew this didn't belong in a house. It was clearly a base stone from a *shihu*. Although stone weirs didn't use cement, relying on friction, they still had foundations. This stone—flat, wide, and heavy—was meant for that. Being hit by this would be more than just a trip to the hospital for stitches.

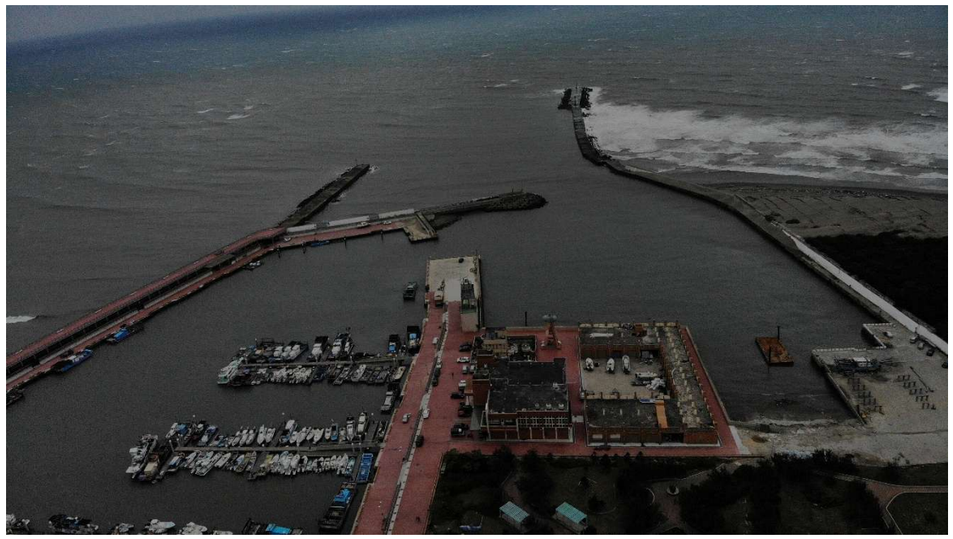
The Chief put on his glasses and pulled out the stone weir logbook from under the long table. It was actually a farmer's almanac, marked with the twenty-four solar terms and various shift rotations. His finger slid down the list. "Old Wang," who held forty "shares" (*liu*), had passed away last week, his name crossed out in red. Old He and Old Li remained in last year's book, never making it to this one. The more he flipped, the more melancholy he felt. How could they continue? Only a few were willing to repair the weirs, and most were elderly. The children of those who had passed refused this profitless labor.

His thoughts returned to the stone. Whoever threw this heavy thing couldn't be one of the "old bones" in the crew. If a fifty-year-old exerted that much force, their own bones would crumble before the stone flew. Logic dictated it was a young person.

The Typhoon

"And now for the weather report. Super Typhoon Soudelor is moving northwest at 15 km/h east of Hualien... please take precautions..." Zhuo-yi sat in the living room eating melon seeds. "Zhuo-yi! I’m going out to the weir. The wind is fierce; I need to check its status," his father said, donning a raincoat.

Stone weirs rely on friction and weight. As waves wash over them, stones are gradually displaced. To solve this, villagers divided the weirs into segments—like shares in a company—allocating maintenance duties and catch rights. The Wangs were a large family and bore a heavy share. But where a thousand people once worked the weirs, now only forty remained. In the late 50s, there were twenty-four weirs; by 2015, only two.



Despite the howling wind, Old Wang, tied to his sense of family mission, headed out. The sound of his scooter faded into a wheeze. Zhuo-yi, worried and curious, grabbed his own raincoat and rode his rusty bicycle into the storm. The wind was a physical wall. The plastic hood of his raincoat slapped his face until, frustrated, he pulled it down, letting the rain sting his skin directly. A mile and a half away lay the straight embankment, lined with earth mounds—the graves of the villagers, facing southwest.

After ten minutes, he reached the sluiceway. The indigo-green waves were merciless, surging into the channels. Two hundred meters ahead, he saw his father’s scooter lying on its side on the embankment. Panic set in. He ran, leaving his bike. He climbed the stairs to the top of the embankment. The submerged weir was only a faint outline in the crashing waves. His father was gone.

Repair

In front of the Houlong Township Farmers' Association, the Village Chief met Foreman Chen. It was convenient since the Chief’s account was there. "Hey, Chief!" Chen called out, appearing from nowhere. "We saw the site. We can fix it for about 300,000 to 400,000 TWD. Luckily the toilets weren't smashed." Chen pulled out the budget and contract. "I’ll start tomorrow. Standard terms: down payment now, the rest after inspection." The Chief signed.

The next morning, Chen brought three or four young men to the temple. Zhuo-yi was among them. Fixing the hole he had personally made—and getting paid for it—filled him with shame, yet he stubbornly felt it was the compensation the temple owed his family.

During the cleanup, Zhuo-yi noticed the stone he had thrown was gone. His heart skipped. Had someone realized the damage was intentional? A piece of calcium silicate board fell from the ceiling and hit him on the head. "Hey! Pay attention! What’s wrong with you?" a coworker shouted.

At lunch, Zhuo-yi smoked in silence. Foreman Chen sat beside him, handing him an oolong tea. "What’s with the poker face? You’ve worked for me for seven years, and I’ve never seen you this distracted." "Sorry... a lot has happened at home... my father's ceremony..." Zhuo-yi muttered, feeling ashamed in front of the newer workers.

Later, Chen decided to replace the rotted wood beams with C-channel steel for durability. He called the Village Chief to confirm. The Chief, living right next door, jogged over. He saw Zhuo-yi. "You’re Old Wang’s son, aren't you? Didn't expect to see you here today." "The temple is important to the village," Zhuo-yi replied stiffly. "It’s good to have young people helping," the Chief smiled. "Do you have time after work? I’d like

to talk." Zhuo-yi saw the look in the Chief’s eyes. He knew. "Fine," he said.

Curling

"When Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita, he illuminated the five skandhas and saw that they are all empty... Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha."

Dressed in mourning clothes, Zhuo-yi and his mother sat on red plastic chairs, chanting the sutras. The temple keeper and the Chief had already paid their respects. The ritual was proceeding "properly." But Zhuo-yi’s time was frozen on that stormy day—the wet plastic against his skin, the floating joss paper in the surf. His eyes drifted to a black dot by the chair leg—a millipede, dried and dead, curled into a perfect circle.

The Promise

7:30 PM. The sky was black but the stars were clear. The air was cold. The Village Chief sat on a temple bench with a thermos of hot tea and the cobstone resting beside him. A large figure approached through the dim streetlights.

"Why did you smash the roof?" Wang Fu-hai asked directly. "I know you're like your father—quiet, but a good man. That’s why I didn't report you. The village thinks it was just old age." Zhuo-yi, moved by the Chief's leniency, told him everything.

The Chief nodded in silence. He explained that he had paid the 300,000 TWD out of his own pocket, and technically, Zhuo-yi owed it. But the Chief had a plan. One category of the government subsidy was for "talent development," paying 1,500 TWD a day. Zhuo-yi would have to work 200 days to repay the debt. The Chief suggested Zhuo-yi take over his father’s forty "shares" of the weir, paying off his debt through labor. Furthermore, with an upcoming festival bringing in extra temple revenue, the Chief would negotiate for the temple to cover part of the cost, since the keeper's original proposal was illegal anyway. Zhuo-yi agreed.

That dawn, he woke to the sun filtering through the blinds. He never thought he’d follow his father’s footsteps into the sea. Since his father died, he hadn't gone near the weir. The memories were too sharp. He sat for a moment, then went to the storage room.

10:30 AM. The straight embankment pointed toward the radar station. At the tip of a stone arc, five or six people stood. Some held hammers, some held stones, some mixed mortar. Nearby, a grey-white Dio scooter was parked.

Sisyphus by the Sea

Sisyphus was a figure from Greek mythology punished for his trickery. He was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down every time it reached the top—day after day, year after year.

As the tide recedes, wrinkled old men in work gloves wander the weir. Their eyes are sharp, searching the gaps between stones for any sign of shifting. Are they ghosts of the weir? They march in a ritualistic circle with no malice. They are the sentinels of the gate. As the sun sinks into the Taiwan Strait, they sit on the embankment. They never tire of the view; the sunset is never the same color twice.

The workers of Xiyu have committed no crime, yet they repeatedly pick up stones washed down by the waves and plug the holes in the weir. This is no divine curse; rather, it is a way to remind themselves of the responsibility they inherited through the exhaustion of their own bodies. They are the ghosts of the stone weir, the sentinels of the gate, the Sisyphus of the sea.