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DEATH AT SEA

China has expanded an armada of far-flung fishing vessels. This has come at grave human cost.

BY IAN URBINA

Daniel Aritonang graduated from high school in May, 2018, hoping to find a job. Short and lithe, he lived in the coastal village of Batu Lungun, Indonesia, where his father owned an auto shop. Aritonang spent his free time rebuilding engines in the shop, occasionally sneaking away to drag-race his blue Yamaha motorcycle on the village's back roads. He had worked hard in school but was a bit of a class clown, always pranking the girls. "He was full of laughter and smiles," his high-school math teacher, Leni Apriyunita, said. His mother brought homemade bread to his teachers' houses, trying to help him get good grades and secure work; his father's shop was failing, and the family needed money. But, when Aritonang finished high school, youth unemployment was above sixteen per cent. He considered joining the police academy, and applied for positions at nearby plastics and textile factories, but never got an offer, disappointing his parents. He wrote on Instagram, "I know I failed, but I keep trying to make them happy." His childhood friend Hengki Anhar was also scrambling to find work. "They asked for my skills," he said recently, of potential employers. "But, to be honest, I don't have any."

At the time, many villagers who had taken jobs as deckhands on foreign fishing ships were returning with enough money to buy motorcycles and houses. Anhar suggested that he and Aritonang go to sea, too, and Aritonang agreed, saying, "As long as we're together." He intended to use the money to fix up his parents' house or maybe to start a business. Firmandes Nugraha, another friend, worried that Aritonang was not cut out for hard labor. "We took a running test, and he was too easily exhausted," he said. But Aritonang wouldn't be dissuaded. A year later, in July, he and Anhar travelled to the port city of Tegal, and applied for work through a

manning agency called PT Bahtera Agung Samudra. (The agency seems not have a license to operate, according to government records, and did not respond to requests for comment.) They handed over their passports, copies of their birth certificates, and bank documents. At eighteen, Aritonang was still young enough that the agency required him to provide a letter of parental consent. He posted a picture of himself and other recruits, writing, "Just a bunch of common folk who hope for a successful and bright future."

For the next two months, Aritonang and Anhar waited in Tegal for a ship assignment. Aritonang asked Nugraha to borrow money for them, saying that the pair were struggling to buy food. Nugraha urged him to come home: "You don't even know how to swim." Aritonang refused. "There's no other choice," he wrote, in a text. Finally, on September 2, 2019, Aritonang and Anhar were flown to Busan, South Korea, to board what they thought would be a Korean ship. But when they got to the port they were told to climb aboard a Chinese vessel—a rusty, white-and-red-keeled squid ship called the Zhen Fa 7. That day, the ship set out across the Pacific.

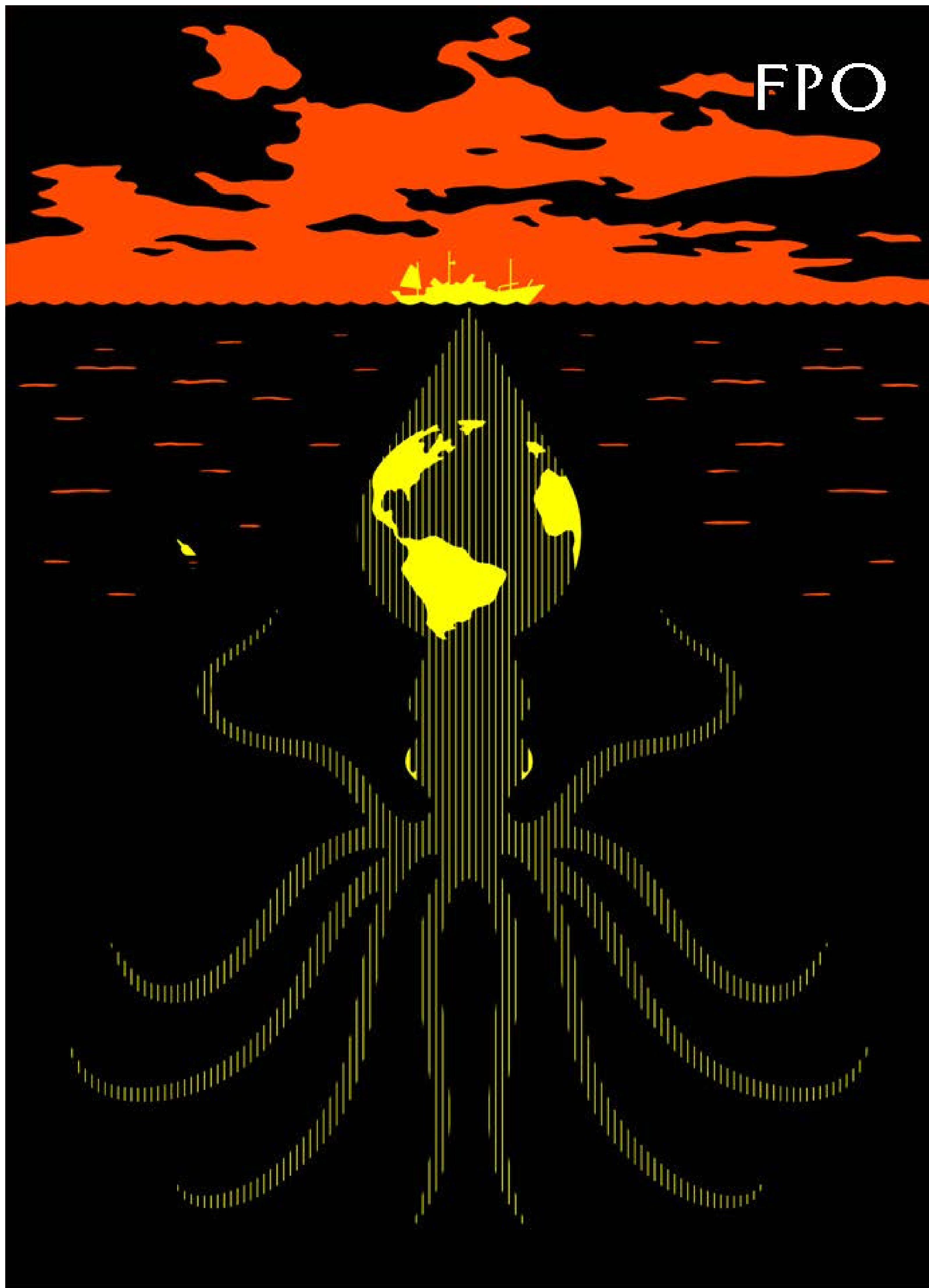
Aritonang had just joined what may be the largest maritime operation the world has ever known. In the past few decades, partly in an effort to project its influence abroad, China has dramatically expanded its distant-water fishing fleet. Chinese firms now own or operate terminals in ninety-five foreign ports. China estimates that it has twenty-seven hundred distant-water fishing ships, though this figure does not include vessels in contested waters; public records and satellite imaging suggest that the fleet may be closer to sixty-five hundred ships. (The U.S. and the E.U., by contrast, have fewer than three hundred distant-water fishing vessels each.) Some ships that appear to be fishing vessels

press territorial claims in contested waters, including in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. "This may look like a fishing fleet, but, in certain places, it's also serving military purposes," Ian Ralby, who runs I.R. Consilium, a maritime-security firm, told me. China's preëminence at sea has come at a cost. The country is largely unresponsive to international laws, and its fleet is the worst perpetrator of illegal fishing in the world, helping drive species to the brink of extinction. Its ships are also rife with labor trafficking, debt bondage, violence, criminal neglect, and death. "The human-rights abuses on these ships are happening on an industrial and global scale," Steve Trent, the C.E.O. of the Environmental Justice Foundation, said.

It took a little more than three months for the Zhen Fa 7 to cross the ocean and anchor near the Galápagos Islands. A squid ship is a bustling, bright, messy place. The scene on deck looks like a mechanic's garage where an oil change has gone terribly wrong. Scores of fishing lines extend into the water, each bearing specialized hooks operated by automated reels. When they pull a squid on board, it squirts warm, viscous ink, which coats the walls and floors. Deep-sea squid have high levels of ammonia, which they use for buoyancy, and a smell hangs in the air. The hardest labor generally happens at night, from 5 P.M. until 7 A.M. Hundreds of bowling-ball-size light bulbs hang on racks on both sides of the vessel, enticing the squid up from the depths. The blinding glow of the bulbs, visible more than a hundred miles away, makes the surrounding blackness feel otherworldly. "Our minds got tested," Anhar said.

The captain's quarters were on the uppermost deck; the Chinese officers slept on the level below him, and the Chinese deckhands under that. The Indonesian workers occupied the bowels of the ship. Aritonang and Anhar

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"The human-rights abuses on these ships are happening on an industrial and global scale," the head of a nonprofit said.

ILLUSTRATION BY CLEON PETERSON

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lived in cramped cabins with bunk beds. Clotheslines of drying socks and towels lined the walls, and beer bottles littered the floor. The Indonesians were paid about three thousand dollars a year, plus a twenty-dollar bonus for every ton of squid caught. Once a week, a list of each man's catch was posted in the mess hall to encourage the crew to work harder. Sometimes the officers patted the Indonesian deckhands on their heads, as though they were children. When angry, they insulted or struck them. The foreman slapped and punched workers for mistakes. "It's like we don't have any dignity," Anhar said.

The ship was rarely near enough to land to get cell reception, and, in any case, most deckhands didn't have phones that would work abroad. Chinese crew members were occasionally allowed to use a satellite phone on the ship's bridge. But when Artonang and other Indonesians asked to call home the captain refused. After a couple of weeks on board, a deckhand named Rahman Finando got up the nerve to ask whether he could go home. The captain said no. A few days later, another deckhand, Mangihut Mejawati, found a group of Chinese officers and deckhands beating Finando, to punish him for asking to leave. "They

beat his whole body and stepped on him," Mejawati said. The other deckhands yelled for them to stop, and several jumped into the fray. Eventually, the violence ended, but the deckhands remained trapped on the ship. Mejawati told me, "It's like we're in a cage."

Almost a hundred years before Columbus, China dominated the seas. In the fifteenth century, China's emperor dispatched a fleet of "treasure ships" that included warships, transports for cavalry horses, and merchant vessels carrying silk and porcelain to voyage around the Indian Ocean. They were some of the largest wooden ships ever built, with innovations like balanced rudders and bulwarked compartments that predated European technology by centuries. The armada's size was not surpassed until the navies of the First World War. But during the Ming dynasty political instability led China to turn inward. By the mid-sixteenth century, sailing on a multi-masted ship had become a crime. In docking its fleet, China lost its global preeminence. As Louise Levathes, the author of "When China Ruled the Seas," told me, "The period of China's greatest outward expansion was followed by the period of its greatest isolation."

For most of the twentieth century, distant-water fishing—much of which takes place on the high seas—was dominated by the Soviet Union, Japan, and Spain. But the collapse of the U.S.S.R., coupled with expanding environmental and labor regulations, caused these fleets to shrink. Since the sixties, though, there have been advances in refrigeration, satellite technology, engine efficiency, and radar. Vessels can now stay at sea for more than two years without returning to land. As a result, global seafood consumption has risen fivefold.

Squid fishing or jigging, in particular, has grown with American appetites. Until the early seventies, Americans consumed squid in tiny amounts, mostly at niche restaurants on the coasts. But as overfishing depleted fish stocks, the federal government encouraged fishermen to shift their focus to squid, whose stocks were still robust. In 1974, a business-school student named Paul Kalikstein published a master's thesis asserting that Americans would prefer squid if it were breaded and fried. Promoters suggested calling it "calamari," the Italian word, which made it sound more like a gourmet dish. ("Squid" is thought to be a sailors' variant of "squirt," a reference to squid ink.) By the nineties, chain restaurants across the Midwest were serving squid. Today, Americans eat a hundred thousand tons a year.

China launched its first distant-water fishing fleet in 1985, when a state-owned company called the China National Fisheries Corporation dispatched thirteen trawlers to the coast of Guinea-Bissau. China had fished its own coastal waters aggressively. Since the sixties, its seafood biomass has dropped by ninety per cent. Zhang Yanxi, the general manager of the company, argued that joining "the ranks of the world's offshore fisheries powers" would make China money, create jobs, feed its population, and safeguard its maritime rights. The government held a grand farewell ceremony for the launch of the first ships, with more than a thousand attendees, including Communist Party elites. A promotional video described the crew as "two hundred and twenty-three brave pioneers cutting through the waves."

Since then, China has invested heavily in its fleet. The country now catches more than five billion pounds of sea-



food a year from distant-water fishing, the biggest portion of it squid. China's seafood industry, which is estimated to be worth more than thirty-five billion dollars, accounts for a fifth of the international trade, and has helped create fifteen million jobs. The Chinese state owns much of the industry—including some twenty per cent of its squid ships—and oversees the rest through the Overseas Fisheries Association. Today, the nation consumes more than a third of the world's fish.

China's fleet has also expanded the government's international influence. The country has built scores of ports as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure program that has, at times, made it the largest financier of development in South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. These ports allow it to shirk taxes and avoid meddling inspectors. The investments also buy its government influence. In 2007, China loaned Sri Lanka more than three hundred million dollars to pay for the construction of a port. (A Chinese state-owned company built it.) In 2017, Sri Lanka, on the verge of defaulting on the loan, was forced to strike a deal granting China control over the port and its environs for ninety-nine years.

Military analysts believe that China uses its fleet for surveillance. In 2017, the country passed a law requiring private citizens and businesses to support Chinese intelligence efforts. Ports employ a digital logistics platform called LOGINK, which tracks the movement of ships and goods in the surrounding area—including possibly American military cargo. Michael Wessel, a member of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, told me, "This is really dangerous information for the U.S. to be handing over." (The Chinese Communist Party has dismissed these concerns, saying, "It is no secret that the U.S. has become increasingly paranoid about anything related to China.")

China also pushes its fleet into contested waters. "China likely believes that, in time, the presence of its distant-water fleet will convert into some degree of sovereign control over those waters," Ralby, the maritime-security expert, told me. Some of its ships are disguised as fishing vessels but actually form what experts call a "maritime mi-

litia." According to research collected by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Chinese government pays the owners of some of these ships forty-five hundred dollars a day to remain in contested areas for most of the year. Satellite data shows that, last year, several dozen ships illegally fished in Taiwanese waters and that there were two hundred ships in disputed portions of the South China Sea. The ships help execute what a recent Congressional Research Service study called "'gray zone' operations that use coercion short of war." They escort Chinese oil-and-gas survey vessels, deliver supplies, and obstruct foreign ships.

Sometimes these vessels are called into action. In December, 2018, the Filipino government began to repair a runway and build a beaching ramp on Thitu Island, a piece of land claimed by both the Philippines and China. More than ninety Chinese ships amassed along its coast, delaying the construction. In 2019, a Chinese vessel rammed and sank a Filipino boat anchored at Reed Bank, a disputed region in the South China Sea that is rich in oil reserves. Zhou Bo, a retired Chinese senior colonel, recently warned that these sorts of clashes could spark a war between the U.S. and China. (The Chinese government declined to comment on these matters. But Mao Ning, a spokesperson for its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has previously defended her country's right to uphold "China's territorial sovereignty and maritime order.") Greg Poling, a senior fellow at C.S.I.S., noted that taking ownership of contested waters is part of the same project as assuming control of Taiwan. "The goal with these fishing ships is to reclaim 'lost territory' and restore China's former glory," he said.

China's distant-water fleet is opaque. The country divulges little information about its vessels, and some stay at sea for more than a year at a time, making them difficult to inspect. I spent the past four years, backed by a team of investigators working for a journalism nonprofit I run called the Outlaw Ocean Project, visiting the fleet's ships in their largest fishing grounds: near the Galápagos Islands; near the Falkland Islands; off the coast of the Gambia; and in the

Sea of Japan, near the Korean peninsula. When permitted, I boarded vessels to talk to the crew or pulled alongside them to interview officers by radio. In many instances, the Chinese ships got spooked, pulled up their gear, and fled. When this happened, I trailed them in a skiff to get close enough to throw aboard plastic bottles weighed down with rice, containing a pen, cigarettes, hard candy, and interview questions. On several occasions, deckhands wrote replies, providing phone numbers for family back home, and then threw the bottles back into the water. The reporting included interviews with their family members, and with two dozen additional crew members.

China bolsters its fleet with more than seven billion dollars a year in subsidies, as well as with logistical, security, and intelligence support. For instance, it sends vessels updates on the size and location of the world's major squid colonies, allowing the ships to coordinate their fishing. In 2022, I watched about two hundred and sixty ships jigging a patch of sea west of the Galápagos. The armada suddenly raised anchor and, in near simultaneity, moved a hundred miles to the southeast. Ted Schmitt, the director of Skylight, a maritime-monitoring program, told me that this is unusual: "Fishing vessels from most other countries wouldn't work together on this scale." In July of that year, I pulled alongside the Zhe Pu Yuan 98, a squid ship that doubles as a floating hospital to treat deckhands without bringing them to shore. "When workers are sick, they will come to our ship," the captain told me, by radio. The boat typically carried a doctor, and maintained an operating room, a machine for running blood tests, and video-conferencing capabilities for consulting with doctors back in China. Its predecessor had treated more than three hundred people in the previous five years.

In February, 2022, I went with the conservation group Sea Shepherd and a documentary filmmaker named Ed Ou, who also translated on the trip, to the high seas near the Falkland Islands, and boarded a Chinese squid jigger there. The captain gave permission for me and a couple of my team members to roam freely as long as I didn't name his vessel. He remained on the bridge but had

an officer shadow me wherever I went. The mood on the ship felt like that of a watery purgatory. The crew was made up of thirty-one men; their teeth were yellowed from chain-smoking, their skin sallow, their hands torn and spongy from sharp gear and perpetual wetness. The scene recalled an observation of the Scythian philosopher Anacharsis, who divided people into three categories: the living, the dead, and those at sea.

When squid latched onto a line, an automated reel flipped them onto a metal rack. Deckhands then tossed them into plastic baskets for sorting. The baskets often overflowed, and the floor filled shin-deep with squid. The squid became translucent in their final moments, sometimes hissing or coughing. (Their stink and stain are virtually impossible to wash from clothes. Sometimes crew members tie their dirty garments into a rope, up to twenty feet long, and drag it for hours in the water behind the ship.) Below deck, crew members weighed, sorted, and packed the squid for freezing. They prepared bait by carving squid up, separating the tongues from inside the beaks. In the galley, the cook noted that his ship had no fresh fruits or vegetables and asked whether we might be able to donate some from our ship.

We spoke to two Chinese deckhands who were wearing bright-orange life vests. Neither wanted his name used, for fear of retaliation. One man was twenty-eight, the other eighteen. It was their first time at sea, and they had signed two-year contracts. They earned about ten thousand dollars a year, but, for every day taken off work because of sickness or injury, they were docked two days' pay. The older deckhand recounted watching a fishing weight injure another crew member's arm. At one point, the officer following us was called away. The older deckhand then said that many of the crew were being held there against their will. "It's impossible to be happy," he said. "We don't want to be here, but we are forced to stay." He estimated that eighty per cent of the other men would leave if they were allowed. "It's like being isolated from the world and far from modern life."

Looking nervous, the younger deckhand waved us into a dark hallway. "Our passports were taken," he said. "They

won't give them back. Can we ask you to help us?" He began typing on his cell phone. "I can't disclose too much right now given I still need to work on the vessel, if I give too much information it might potentially create issues on-board," he wrote. He gave me a phone number for his family and asked me to contact them. "Can you get us to the embassy in Argentina?" he asked. Just then, my minder rounded the corner, and the deckhand walked away. Minutes later, my team members and I were ushered off the ship.

When I returned to shore, I contacted his family. "My heart really aches," his older sister, a math teacher in Fujian, said, after hearing of her brother's situation. Her family had disagreed with his decision to go to sea, but he was persistent. She hadn't known that he was being held captive, and felt helpless to free him. "He's really too young," she said. "And now there is nothing we can do, because he's so far away."

In June, 2020, the Zhen Fa 7 travelled to a pocket of ocean between the Galápagos and mainland Ecuador. The ship was owned by Rongcheng Wangdao Ocean Aquatic Products, a mid-size company based in Shandong. On board, Aritonang had slowly got used to his new life. The captain found out that he had mechanical experience and moved him to the engine room, where the work was slightly less taxing. For



meals, the cook prepared pots of rice mixed with bits of fish. The Indonesians were each issued two boxes of instant noodles a week. If they wanted any other food—or coffee, alcohol, or cigarettes—the cost could be deducted from their salaries. Crew photos show deckhands posing with their catch and gathering for beers to celebrate.

One of Aritonang's friends on board was named Heri Kusmanto. "When we boarded the ship in the first weeks, Heri

was a lively person," Mejawati said. "He chatted, sang, and joked with all of us." Kusmanto's job was to carry hundred-pound baskets of squid down to the refrigerated hold. He sometimes made mistakes, and that earned him beatings. "He did not dare fight back," a deckhand named Fikran told me. "He would just stay quiet and stand still." The ship's cook often struck Kusmanto, so he avoided him by eating plain white rice in the kitchen when the cook wasn't around. Kusmanto soon got sick. He lost his appetite and stopped speaking, communicating mostly through gestures. "He was like a toddler," Mejawati said. Then Kusmanto's legs and feet swelled and started to ache.

Kusmanto seemed to be suffering from beriberi, a disease caused by a deficiency of Vitamin B1, or thiamine. Its name derives from a Sinhalese word, *beri*, meaning "weak" or "I cannot." It is often caused by a diet consisting mainly of white rice, instant noodles, or wheat flour. Symptoms include tingling, burning, numbness, difficulty breathing, lethargy, chest pain, dizziness, confusion, and severe swelling. Like scurvy, beriberi was common among nineteenth-century sailors. It also has a history in prisons, asylums, and migrant camps. If untreated, it can be fatal.

Beriberi is becoming prevalent on Chinese vessels in part because ships stay so long at sea, a trend facilitated by transshipment, which allows vessels to offload their catch to refrigerated carriers without returning to shore. Chinese ships typically stock rice and instant noodles for extended trips, because they are cheap and slow to spoil. But the body requires more B1 when carbohydrates are consumed in large amounts and during periods of intense exertion. Ship cooks also mix rice or noodles with raw or fermented fish, and supplement meals with coffee and tea, all of which are high in thiaminase, which destroys B1, exacerbating the issue.

Beriberi is often an indication of conditions of captivity, because it is avoidable and easily reversed. Some countries (though not China) mandate that rice and flour be supplemented with B1. The illness can also be treated with vitamins and when B1 is administered intravenously patients typically recover within twenty-four hours. But

few Chinese ships seem to carry B1 supplements. In many cases, captains refuse to bring sick crew members to shore, likely because the process would entail losing time and incurring labor costs. Swells can make it dangerous for large ships to get close to each other in order to transfer crew members. One video I reviewed shows a man being put inside a fishing net and sent hundreds of feet along a zip line, several stories above the open ocean, to get on another ship. My team and I found two dozen cases of workers on Chinese ships between 2013 and 2021 who suffered from symptoms associated with beriberi; at least fifteen died. Victor Weedn, a forensic pathologist in Washington, D.C., told me that allowing workers to die from beriberi would, in the U.S., constitute criminal neglect. "Slow-motion murder is still murder," he said.

The contract typically used by Kusmanto's manning agency stipulated heavy financial penalties for workers and their families if they quit prematurely. It also allowed the company to take workers' identity papers, including their passport, during the recruitment process, and to keep the documents if they failed to pay a fine for leaving early—provisions that violate antitrafficking laws in the U.S. and Indonesia. Still, as Kusmanto's condition worsened, his Indonesian crewmates asked whether he could go home. The captain refused. (Rongcheng Wangdao denied wrongdoing. The captains of Chinese ships in this piece could not be identified for comment. A spokesman for the manning agency blamed Kusmanto for his illness, writing, "When on the ship, he didn't want to take a shower, he didn't want to eat, and he only ate instant noodles.")

The ship may have been fishing illegally at the time, possibly complicating Kusmanto's situation. During this period, according to an unpublished intelligence report compiled by the U.S. government, the Zhen Fa 7 turned off its location transponder several times, in violation of Chinese law. This generally occurred when the ship was close to Ecuadorian and Peruvian waters; captains often go dark to fish in other countries' waters, like those of Ecuador, where Chinese ships are typically forbidden. "Short of catching them in the act, this is as close as you can get to



firm evidence," Michael J. Fitzpatrick, the U.S. Ambassador to Ecuador, told me. (Rongcheng Wangdao's vessels have been known to fish in unauthorized areas; one of the Zhen Fa 7's sister ships was fined for unlawfully entering Peruvian waters in 2017, and another was found illicitly fishing off the coast of North Korea. The company declined to comment on this matter.) Transferring Kusmanto to another vessel would have required disclosing the Zhen Fa 7's location, which might have been incriminating.

By early August, Kusmanto had become disoriented. Other deckhands demanded that he be given medical attention. Eventually, the captain relented, and transferred him to another ship, which carried him to port in Lima. He was taken to a hospital, where he recovered; afterward, he was flown home. (Kusmanto could not be reached for comment.) Meanwhile, the rest of the crew, which had by then been at sea for

a year, felt a growing sense of isolation. "They had initially told us that we would be sailing for eight months, and then they would land the ship," Anhar said. "The fact was we never landed anywhere."

China is the worst perpetrator of illegal fishing on the planet, according to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Operating on the high seas is expensive, and there is virtually no law-enforcement presence—which encourages fishing in forbidden regions and using prohibited techniques to gain a competitive advantage. Aggressive fishing comes at an environmental cost. A third of the world's stocks are overfished. Squid stocks, once robust, have declined dramatically. More than thirty countries, including China, have banned shark finning, but the practice persists. Chinese ships often catch hammerhead, oceanic whitetip, and blue sharks so that their fins can be used in shark-fin

soup. In 2017, Ecuadorian authorities discovered at least six thousand illegally caught sharks on board a single reefer. Other marine species are being decimated, too. Vessels fishing for totoaba, a large fish whose swim bladder is highly prized in Chinese medicine, use nets that inadvertently entangle and drown vaquita porpoises, which live only in Mexico's Sea of Cortez. Researchers estimate that, as a result, there are now only some ten vaquitas left in existence. China has the world's largest fleet of bottom trawlers, which drag nets across the sea floor, levelling coral reefs. Marine sediment stores large amounts of carbon, and, according to a recent study in *Nature*, bottom trawlers release almost a billion and a half tons of carbon dioxide each year—as much as that released by the entire aviation industry. China's illicit fishing practices also rob poorer countries of their own resources. Off the coast of West Africa, where China maintains a fleet of hundreds of ships, illegal fishing has been estimated to cost the region more than nine billion dollars a year.

The world's largest concentration of illegal fishing ships may be a fleet of Chinese squidders in North Korean waters. In 2017, in response to North Korea's nuclear- and ballistic-missile tests, the United Nations Security Council, with apparent backing from China, imposed sanctions intended to deprive Kim Jong Un's government of foreign currency, in part by blocking it from selling fishing rights, a major source of income. But, according to the U.N., Pyongyang has continued to earn foreign currency—a hundred and twenty million dollars in 2018 alone—by granting illicit rights, predominantly to Chinese fishermen. An advertisement on the Web site Zhihu offers permits issued by the North Korean military for “no risk high yield” fishing with no catch limits: “Looking forward to a win-win cooperation.” China seems unable or unwilling to enforce sanctions on its ally.

Chinese boats have contributed to a decline in the region's squid stock; catches are down by roughly seventy per cent since 2003. Local fishermen have been unable to compete. “We will be ruined,” Haesoo Kim, the leader of an association of South Korean fisher-

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Get a room, the dude in the blue Camaro yells. He's made of rage and tinted glass, and we're made of desire and what if and what I want to say is, Dude, we have a room, but we got hungry. Every three days we have to eat or get mimosas or get yelled at by you. Get a room, he yells again, maybe because he thinks we're hard of hearing, or because it pains him to see our affection. Maybe he thinks: what a waste—two women who could have loved him instead. Instead, we get sandwiches to go and go back to the room we call our room, which could be in any motel near any off-ramp in any Springfield, with its anonymous white walls and towels, with the empty drawers you love, and the flat-screen TV that seems to keep getting bigger and flatter. And since we're taking inventory, let's don't forget the bedside Bible and the red pen tucked inside, as if we might be inspired to make corrections. And come to think of it, I would like to make some changes in how things turn out, how they turn on a dime, or over time crumble. Instead, I listen to you read aloud from the pamphlets you found in the lobby. Fun fact: basketball was invented in Springfield, Mass., as was vulcanized rubber. The man who wrote “The Cat in the Hat” was born here, and perhaps

men on Ulleung Island, which I visited in May, 2019, said. North Korean fishing captains have been forced to head farther from shore, where their ships get caught in storms or succumb to engine failure, and crew members face starvation, freezing temperatures, and drowning. Roughly a hundred small North Korean fishing boats wash up on Japanese shores annually, some of them carrying the corpses of fishermen. Chinese boats in these waters are also known for ramming patrol vessels. In 2016, Chinese fishermen rammed and sank a South Korean cutter in the Yellow Sea. In another incident, the South Korean Coast Guard opened fire on more than two dozen Chinese ships that rushed at its vessels.

In 2019, I went with a South Korean squid ship to the sea border between North and South Korea. It didn't take us long to find a convoy of Chinese squidders headed into North Korean waters. We fell in alongside them and launched a drone to capture their

identification numbers. One of the Chinese captains blared his horn and flashed his lights—warning signs in maritime protocol. Since we were in South Korean waters and at a legal distance, our captain stayed his course. The Chinese captain then abruptly cut toward us, on a collision trajectory. Our captain veered away when the Chinese vessel was only thirty feet off.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me that “China has consistently and conscientiously enforced the resolutions of the Security Council relating to North Korea,” and added that the country has “consistently punished” illegal fishing. But he neither admitted nor denied that China sends boats into North Korean waters. In 2020, the nonprofit Global Fishing Watch used satellite data to reveal that hundreds of Chinese squid ships were routinely fishing in North Korean waters. By 2022, China had cut down this illegal armada by seventy per cent from its peak. Still, in unregulated

most importantly, this is the birthplace of interchangeable parts—or at least where they first caught on. Think assembly lines, think mass production. I'm thinking about the fun fact of you, about how much I love origin myths, about how people aren't things. We can't be vulcanized, we can't, like faulty chains, be replaced. And I'm thinking about that guy in the Camaro, how what really drives him is loneliness, how we see iterations of him in all the Springfields we find ourselves in, because that's your fantasy: you and me in every Springfield in America, in Nebraska and Ohio and North Dakota, in townships in Jersey and Michigan, always in a motel bar, pretending we've never met. And after a while, after Idaho and Maine, after that Springfield in Kentucky and the one in East Texas, the myth rings true: it's old hat, old cat in the hat: the white walls and small bars of soap, the falling asleep in the middle of a life, the waking to one place named for another—not a fun fact exactly, just what the Russian novelist not immune to Springfields knew about unhappiness.

—*Andrea Cohen*

waters, the hours worked by the fleet have increased, and the size of its catch has only grown.

Shortly after New Year's Day, 2021, the *Zhen Fa 7* rounded the tip of South America and stopped briefly in Chilean waters, close enough to shore to get cell-phone reception. Aritonang went to the bridge and, through pantomime and broken English, asked one of the officers whether he could borrow his phone. The officer indicated that it would cost him, rubbing his forefinger and thumb together. Aritonang ran below deck, sold some of his cigarettes and snacks to other deckhands, borrowed whatever money he could, and came back with the equivalent of about thirteen dollars, which bought him five minutes. He dialled his parents' house, and his mother answered, excited to hear his voice. He told her that he would be home by May and asked to speak to his father. "He's resting," she told him. In fact, he

had died of a heart attack several days earlier, but Aritonang's mother didn't want to upset her son while he was at sea. She later told their pastor that she was looking forward to Aritonang's return. "He wants to build a house for us," she said.

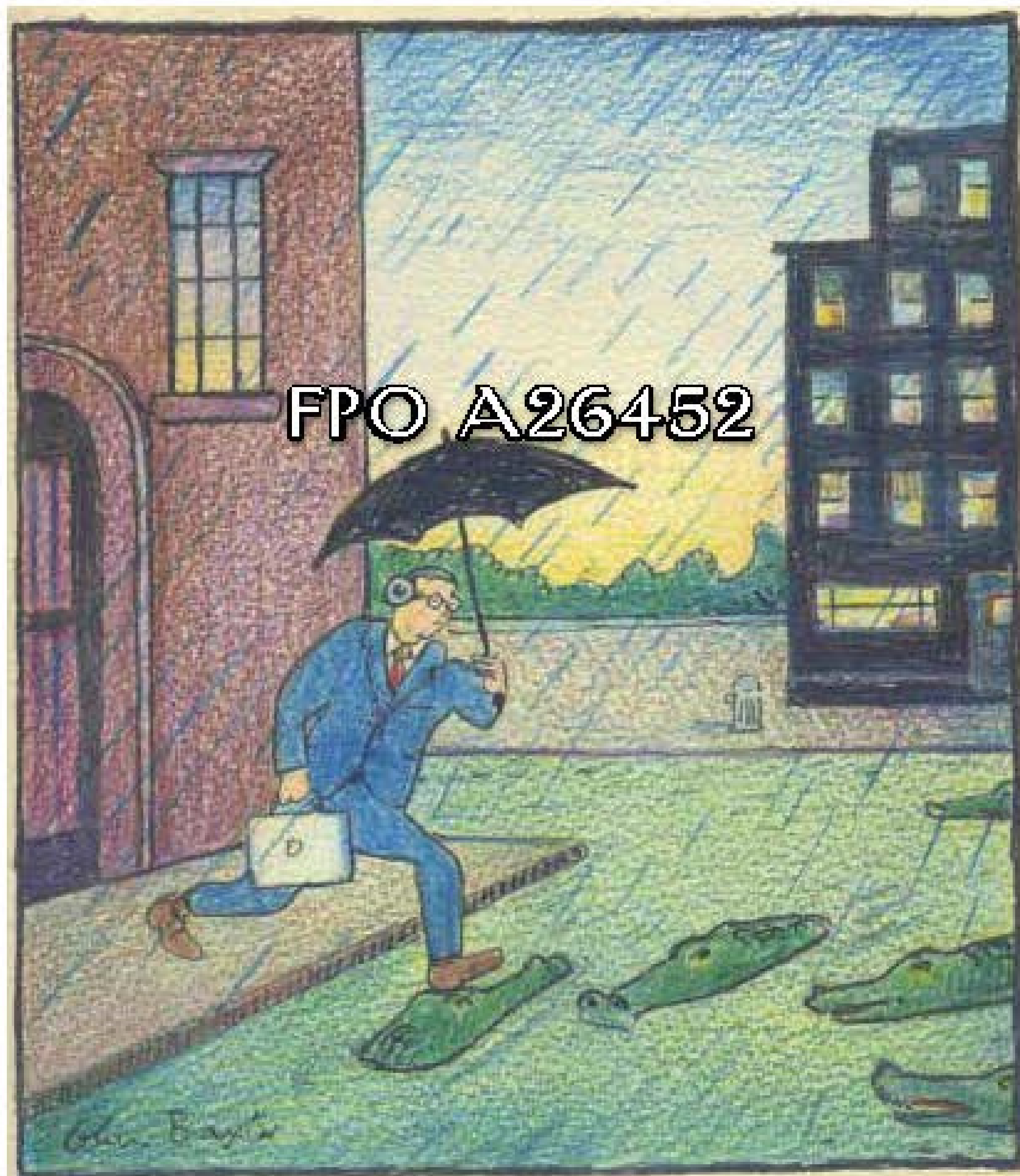
Soon after, the ship dropped anchor in the Blue Hole, an area near the Falkland Islands, where ongoing territorial disputes between the U.K. and Argentina provide a gap in maritime enforcement that ships can exploit. Aritonang grew homesick, staying in his room and eating mostly instant noodles. "He seemed to become sad and tired," Fikran said. That January, Aritonang fell ill with beriberi. The whites of his eyes turned yellow, his legs became swollen, and he couldn't walk. "Daniel was in pretty bad shape," Anhar told me. The captain refused to get him medical attention. "There was still a lot of squid," Anhar said. "We were in the middle of an operation." In February, the crew unloaded their catch onto a

reefer that carried it to Mauritius. But, for reasons that remain unclear, the captain refused to send Aritonang to shore as well.

Eventually, Aritonang could no longer walk. The Indonesian crew went to the bridge again and confronted the captain, threatening to strike if he didn't get Aritonang medical help. "We were all against the captain," Anhar said. Finally, the captain acquiesced, and, on March 2nd, transferred Aritonang to a fuel tanker, the *Marlin*, which agreed to carry him to Montevideo, Uruguay. The *Marlin's* crew brought him to a service area off the coast, where a skiff picked him up and took him to the port. A maritime agency representing Rongcheng Wangdao in Uruguay called a local hospital, and ambulance workers took him there.

Jesica Reyes, who is thirty-six, is one of the few interpreters of Indonesian in Montevideo. She taught herself the language while working at an Internet café that was popular among Indonesian crews; they called her *Mbak*, meaning "Miss" or "big sister." From 2013 to 2021, fishing ships, most of them Chinese, have disembarked a dead body in Montevideo roughly every month and a half. Over a recent dinner, Reyes told me about hundreds of deckhands in need whom she has assisted. She described one deckhand who died from a tooth infection because his captain wouldn't bring him to shore. She told me of another ailing deckhand whose local agency neglected to take him to a hospital, keeping him in a hotel room while his condition deteriorated; he eventually died.

On March, 7, 2021, Reyes was asked by the maritime agency to go to the emergency room to help doctors communicate with Aritonang; she was told that he had a stomach ache. When he arrived at the hospital, however, his whole body was swollen, and she could see bruises around his eyes and neck. He whispered to her that he had been tied by the neck. (Other deckhands later told me that they hadn't seen this happen, and were unsure when he sustained the injuries.) Reyes called the maritime agency and said, "If this is a stomach ache . . . You're not looking at this young man. He is all messed up!" She took photographs of his condition, before



THE 40-MINUTE DAILY COMMUTE
TO THE OFFICE RESUMED AS IF
NOTHING HAD EVER CHANGED

doctors asked her to stop, because she was alarmed.

In the emergency room, physicians administered intravenous fluids. Aritonang, crying and shaking, asked Reyes, "Where are my friends?" He whispered, "I'm scared." Aritonang was pronounced dead the following morning. "I was angry," Reyes told me. The deckhands I reached were furious. Mejawati said, "We really hope that, if it's possible, the captain and all the supervisors can be captured, charged, or jailed." Anhar, Aritonang's best friend, found out about his death only after disembarking from the Zhen Fa 7 in Singapore, that May. "We were devastated," he said, of the crew members. When we reached him,

he was still carrying a suitcase full of Aritonang's clothes that he'd promised to take home for him.

Fishing is one of the world's deadliest jobs—a recent study estimates that more than a hundred thousand workers die every year—and Chinese ships are among the most brutal. Recruiters often target desperate men in inland China and in poor countries. "If you are in debt, your family has shunned you, you don't want to be looked down on, turn off your phone and stay far away from land," an online advertisement in China reads. Some recruits are lured with promises of lucrative contracts, according to court documents and inves-

tigations by Chinese news outlets, only to discover that they incur a series of fees—sometimes amounting to more than a month's wages—to cover expenses such as travel, job training, crew certifications, and protective workwear. Often, workers pay these fees by taking out loans from the manning agencies, creating a form of debt bondage. Companies confiscate passports and extract fines for leaving jobs, further trapping workers. And even those who are willing to risk penalties are sometimes in essence held captive on ships.

For a 2022 report, the Environmental Justice Foundation interviewed more than a hundred Indonesian crew members and found that roughly ninety-seven per cent had their documents confiscated or experienced debt bondage. Occasionally, workers in these conditions manage to alert authorities. In 2014, twenty-eight African workers disembarked from a Chinese squidder called the Jia De 1 that was anchored in Montevideo, and several complained of beatings on board and showed shackle marks on their ankles. Fifteen crew members were hospitalized. (The company that owned the ship did not respond to requests for comment.) In 2020, several Indonesian deckhands reportedly complained about severe beatings at sea and the presence of a man's body in one of the ship's freezers. An autopsy revealed that the man had sustained bruises, scarring, and a spinal injury. Indonesian authorities sentenced several manning-agency executives to more than a year in prison for labor trafficking. (The company did not respond to requests for comment.)

In China, these labor abuses are an open secret. A diary kept by one Chinese deckhand offers an unusually detailed glimpse into this world. In May, 2013, the deckhand paid a two-hundred-dollar recruitment fee to a manning agency, which dispatched him to a ship called the Jin Han Yu 4879. The crew were told that their first ten days or so on board would be a trial period, after which they could leave, but the ship stayed at sea for a hundred and two days. "You are slaves to work anytime and anywhere," the deckhand wrote in his diary. Officers were served meat at mealtimes, he said, but deckhands got only bones. "The bell rings, you must

be up, whether it is day, night, early morning, no matter how strong the wind, how heavy the rain, there are no Sundays and holidays.” (The company that owns the ship did not respond to requests for comment.)

The broader public in China was forced to reckon with the conditions on ships when the crew of a squid jigger called the Lu Rong Yu 2682 mutinied, in 2011. The captain, Li Chengquan, was a “big, tall, and bad-tempered man” who, according to a deckhand, gave a black eye to a worker who angered him. Rumors began circulating that the seven-thousand-dollar annual salary that they had been promised was not guaranteed. Instead, they would earn about four cents per pound of squid caught—which would amount to far less. Nine crew members took the captain hostage. In the next five weeks, the ship’s crew devolved into warring factions. Men disappeared at night, a crew member was tied up and tossed overboard, and someone sabotaged a valve on the ship, which started letting water in. The crew eventually managed to restore the ship’s communications system and transmit a distress signal, drawing two Chinese fishing vessels to their aid. Only eleven of the original thirty-three men made it back to shore. The lead mutineer and the ship’s captain were sentenced to death by the Chinese government. (The company that owns the ship did not respond to requests for comment.)

Labor trafficking has also been documented on American, South Korean, and Thai boats. But China’s fleet is arguably the worst offender, and it has done little to curb violations. Between 2018 and 2022, my team found, China gave more than seventeen million dollars in subsidies to companies where at least fifty ships seem to have engaged in fishing crimes or had deaths or injuries on board—some of which were likely the result of unsafe labor conditions. (The government declined to comment on this matter, but Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recently said that the fleet operates “in accordance with laws and regulations,” and accused the U.S. of politicizing “issues that are about fisheries in the name of environmental protection and human rights.”)

In the past few years, China has made

a number of reforms, but they seem aimed more at quelling dissent than at holding companies accountable. In 2017, after a knife fight between Filipino and Chinese crew members ended in one worker dying, the Chinese government created a Communist Party branch in Chimbote, Peru—the first for fishing workers—intended to bolster their “spiritual sustenance.” Local police in some coastal cities have begun using satellite video links to connect to the bridges of some Chinese vessels. In 2020, when Chinese crew members on a ship near Peru went on strike, the company contacted the local police, who explained to the workers that they could come ashore in Peru and fly back to China, but they would have to pay for the plane tickets. “Wouldn’t it feel like losing out if you resigned now?” a police officer asked. The men returned to work.

As I reported on these ships, stories of violence and captivity surfaced even when I wasn’t looking for them. This year, I received a video from 2020 in which two Filipino crew members said that they were ill but were being prevented from leaving their ship. “Please rescue us,” one pleaded. “We are already sick here. The captain won’t send us to the hospital.” Three deckhands died that summer; at least one of their bodies was thrown overboard. (The manning agency that placed these workers on the ship, PT Puncak Jaya Samudra, did not respond to requests for comment. Nor did the company that owns the ship.) On a trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2020, I met a half-dozen young men who told me that, in 2019, a young deckhand named Fadhil died on their ship because the officers had refused to bring him to shore. “He was begging to return home, but he was not allowed,” Ramadhan Sugandhi, a deckhand, said. (The ship-owning company did not respond to requests for comment, nor did his manning agency, PT Shafar Abadi Indonesia.) This past June, a bottle washed ashore near Maldonado, Uruguay, containing what appeared to be a message from a distressed Chinese deckhand. “Hello, I am a crew member of the ship Lu Qing Yuan Yu 765, and I was locked up by the company,” it read. “When you see this paper, please help me call the police! S.O.S. S.O.S.” (The owner of the ship, Qing-

dao Songhai Fishery, said that the claims were fabricated by crew members.)

Reyes, the Indonesian translator, put me in touch with Rafly Maulana Sadad, an Indonesian who, while working on the Lu Rong Yuan Yu 978 two years ago, fell down a flight of stairs and broke his back. He immediately went back to work pulling nets, then fainted, and woke up in bed. The captain refused to take him to shore, and he spent the next five months on the ship, his condition worsening. Sadad’s friends helped him eat and bathe, but he was disoriented and often lay in a pool of his own urine. “I was having difficulty speaking,” Sadad told me last year. “I felt like I’d had a stroke or something. I couldn’t really understand anything.” In August, 2021, the captain dropped Sadad off in Montevideo, and he spent nine days in the hospital, before being flown home. (Requests for comment from Rongcheng Rongyuan, which owns the ship Sadad worked on, and PT Abadi Mandiri International, his manning agency, went unanswered.) Sadad spoke to me from Indonesia, where he could only walk with crutches. “It was a very bitter life experience,” he said.

Like the boats that supply them, Chinese processing plants rely on forced labor. For the past thirty years, the North Korean government has required citizens to work in factories in Russia and China, and to put ninety per cent of their earnings—amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars—into accounts controlled by the state. Laborers are often subjected to heavy monitoring, and strictly limited in their movements. U.N. sanctions ban such uses of North Korean workers, but, according to Chinese government estimates, last year as many as eighty thousand North Korean workers were living in one city in northeastern China alone. According to a report by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, at least four hundred and fifty of them were working in seafood plants. The Chinese government has largely scrubbed references to these workers from the Internet. But, using the search term “North Korean beauties,” my team and I found several videos on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, that appear to show female seafood-plant workers, most posted by gawking male employees. One Chinese commenter observed that the women

“have a strong sense of national identity and are self-disciplined!” Another argued, however, that the workers have no choice but to obey orders, or “their family members will suffer.”

In the past decade, China has also overseen a crackdown on Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, a region in northwestern China, setting up mass detention centers and forcing detainees to work in cotton fields, on tomato farms, and in polysilicon factories. More recently, in an effort to disrupt Uyghur communities and find cheap labor for major industries, the government has relocated millions of Uyghurs to work for companies across the country. Workers are often supervised by security guards, in dorms surrounded by barbed wire. By searching company newsletters, annual reports, and state-media stories, my team and I found that, in the past five years, thousands of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been sent to work in seafood-processing plants. Some are subjected to “patriotic education”; in a 2021 article, local Party officials said that members of minority groups working at one seafood plant were a “typical big family” and were learning to deepen their “education of ethnic unity.” Laura Murphy, a professor at Sheffield Hallam University, in the U.K., told me, “This is all part of the project to erase Uyghur culture, identities, religion, and, most certainly, their politics. The goal is the complete transformation of the entire community.” (Chinese officials did not respond to multiple requests for comment on Uyghur and North Korean forced labor in the nation’s seafood-processing industry.)

The U.S. has strict laws forbidding the importation of goods produced with North Korean or Uyghur labor. The use of such workers in other industries—for example, in solar-panel manufacturing—has been documented in recent years, and the U.S. has confiscated a billion dollars’ worth of imported products as a result. We found, however, that companies employing Uyghurs and North Koreans have recently exported at least forty-seven thousand tons of seafood, including some seventeen per cent of all

squid sent to the U.S. Shipments went to dozens of American importers, including ones that supply military bases and public-school cafeterias. “These revelations pose a very serious problem for the entire seafood industry,” Martina Vandenberg, the founder and president of the Human Trafficking Legal Center, told me.

China does not welcome reporting on this industry. In 2022, I spent two weeks on board the *Modoc*, a former U.S. Navy boat that the nonprofit Earthrace Conservation uses as a patrol vessel, visiting Chinese squid ships off the coast of South America. As we were sailing back to a Galápagos port, an Ecuadorian Navy ship approached us, and an officer said that our permit to reenter Ecuadorian waters had been revoked. “If you do not turn around now, we will board and arrest you,” he said. He told us to sail to another country. We didn’t have enough food and water for the journey. After two days of negotiations, we were briefly allowed into the port, where armed Ecuadorian officers boarded; they claimed that the ship’s permits had been filed improperly and that our ship had deviated slightly in its approved course while exiting national waters. Such violations typically result in nothing more than a written citation. But, according to Ambassador Fitzpatrick, the explanation was a bit more complicated.



He said that the Chinese government had contacted several Ecuadorian lawmakers to raise concerns about the presence of what they depicted as a quasi-military vessel engaging in covert operations. When I spoke with Juan Carlos Holguín, then the Ecuadorian Foreign Minister, he

denied that China was involved. But Fitzpatrick told me that Quito treads carefully when it comes to China, in part because Ecuador is deeply in debt to the country. “China did not like the *Modoc*,” he said. “But mostly it did not want more media coverage on its squid fleet.”

The day after Aritonang’s death, Reyes filed a report with the Uruguayan coast guard, and showed officers her photographs. “They seemed pretty uninterested,” she said. The fol-

lowing day, a local coroner conducted an autopsy. “A situation of physical abuse emerged,” their report reads. I sent the report to Weedn, the forensic pathologist, who told me that the body showed signs of violence and that untreated beriberi seems to have been the cause of death. Nicolas Potrie, who runs the Indonesian consulate in Montevideo, remembers getting a call from Mirta Morales, the prosecutor who investigated Aritonang’s case. “We need to continue trying to figure out what happened. These marks—everybody saw them,” Potrie recalled her saying. (A representative for Rongcheng Wangdao said that the company had found no evidence of misconduct on the ship: “There was nothing regarding your alleged appalling incidents about abuse, violation, insults to one’s character, physical violence or withheld salaries.” He added that the company had handed the matter over to the China Overseas Fisheries Association. Questions submitted to the association went unanswered.)

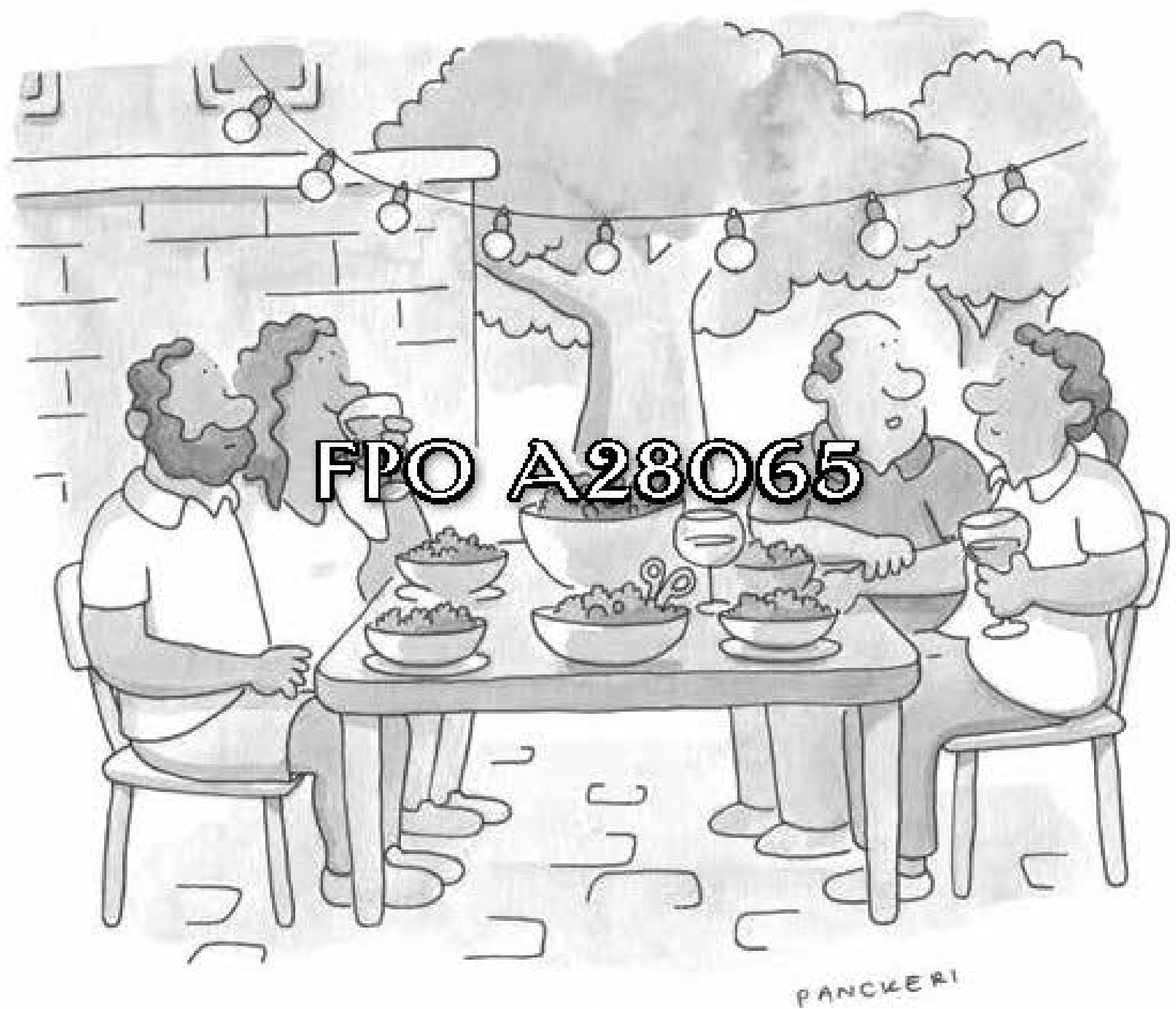
Potrie pressed for further inquiry, but none seemed forthcoming. Morales declined to share any information about the case with me. In March of 2022, I visited Aldo Braidá, the president of the Chamber of Foreign Fishing Agents, which represents companies working with foreign vessels in Uruguay, at his office in Montevideo. He dismissed the accounts of mistreatment on Chinese ships that dock in the port as “fake news,” claiming, “There are a lot of lies around this.” He told me that, if crew members whose bodies were disembarked in Montevideo had suffered physical abuse, Uruguayan authorities would discover it, and that, when you put men in close quarters, fights were likely to break out. “We live in a violent society,” he said.

Uruguay has little incentive to scrutinize China further, because the country brings lucrative business to the region. In 2018, for example, a Chinese company that had bought a nearly seventy-acre plot of land west of Montevideo presented a plan to build a more-than-two-hundred-million-dollar “megaport.” Local media reported that the port would be a free-trade zone and include half-mile-long docks, a shipyard, a fuelling station, and seafood storage and processing facilities.

The Uruguayan government had been pursuing such Chinese investment for years. The then President, Tabaré Vázquez, attempted to sidestep the constitution, which requires a two-thirds vote by both chambers of the General Assembly, and authorize construction of the port by executive order. "There's so much money on the table that politicians start bending the law to grab at it," Milko Schwartzman, a marine researcher based in Argentina, told me. But, following resistance from the public and from opposition parties, the plan was called off.

The seafood industry is difficult to police. A large portion of fish consumed in the U.S. is caught or processed by Chinese companies. Several laws exist to prevent the U.S. from importing products tainted by forced labor, including that involved in the production of conflict diamonds and sweatshop goods. But China is not forthcoming with details about its ships and processing plants. At one point, on a Chinese ship, a deckhand showed me stacks of frozen catch in white bags. He explained that they leave the ship names off the bags so that they can be easily transferred between vessels. This practice allows seafood companies to hide their ties to ships with criminal histories. On the bridge of another ship, a Chinese captain opened his logbook, which is supposed to document his catch. The first two pages had notations; the rest were blank. "No one keeps those," he said. Company officials could reverse engineer the information later. Kenneth Kennedy, a former manager of the anti-forced-labor program at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said that the U.S. government should block seafood imports from China until American companies can demonstrate that their supply chains are free of abuse. "The U.S. is awash with criminally tainted seafood," he said.

Nothing is likely to change as long as American consumers are willing to look the other way. To document the gaps in the system, my team tracked vessels by satellite and watched them transfer their catch to refrigerated ships. We followed those ships back to their ports and, with a team of investigators in China, filmed the catches being transferred to trucks, which then delivered



"O.K., I'll tell it, but you jump in and correct me every few seconds."

their cargo to processing plants. We found that the Zhen Fa 7 transhipped with a company that has employed at least a hundred and seventy Uyghur or other minority workers relocated from Xinjiang. At least six plants that seem likely to have processed the Zhen Fa's catch exported large volumes of seafood to hundreds of American restaurant chains, grocery stores, and food-service companies, including Costco, Kroger, H Mart, Performance Food Group, and Safeway. (These companies did not respond to requests for comment.)

On April 22nd, Aritonang's body was flown from Montevideo to Jakarta, then driven, in a wooden casket with a Jesus figurine on top, to his family home in Batu Lungun. Villagers lined the road to pay their respects; Aritonang's mother wailed and fainted upon seeing the casket. A funeral was soon held, and Aritonang was buried a few feet from his father, in a cemetery plot not far from his church. His grave marker consisted of two slats of wood joined to make a cross. That night, an official from Aritonang's manning agency visited the family at their home to discuss

what locals call a "peace agreement." Anhar said that the family ended up accepting a settlement of some two hundred million rupiah, or roughly thirteen thousand dollars. Family members was reluctant to talk about the events on the ship. Aritonang's brother Beben said that he didn't want his family to get in trouble and that talking about the case might cause problems for his mother. "We, Daniel's family, have made peace with the ship people and have let him go," he said.

Last year, thirteen months after Aritonang's death, I spoke again to his family by video chat. His mother, Regina Sihombing, sat on a leopard-print rug in her living room with her son Leonardo. The room had no furniture and no place to sit other than the floor. The house had undergone repairs with money from the settlement, according to the village chief; in the end, it seems, Aritonang had managed to fix up his parents' home after all. When the conversation turned to him, his mother began to weep. "You can see how I am now," she said. Leonardo told her, "Don't be sad. It was his time." ♦