

**Title:** ‘Humanscape’ as a Placeholder: A Geopoetic Diagnosis of Reclaimed Landscapes

**Abstract**

This practice-based artistic research examines my hometown Tianjin’s reclaimed coast, one of the world’s largest land reclamation projects, through a methodological framework informed by geopoetics and diagnostic principles from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Grounded on the fieldwork between 2021 and 2026, the project introduces ‘Humanscape’ as a concept to understand how new artificially manufactured terrain is represented while it remains culturally rootless, ecologically unstable, and emotionally unresolved. Responding to “Placeholders”, this research investigates how newly reclaimed lands become a speculative and promising ‘stand-in’: a physical site that appeared in images before it became a lived landscape; an ambiguous terrain that takes up crucial space, yet “does not make literal sense” in the way functional landscapes do.

Reclaimed land is peculiar in that it begins as an idea, an intention, an economic projection, a promise of what could be. It is a new geography that exists more in documentation, planning images, and remote-sensing data than in lived experience. In this context, how do photographic technologies produce space and place? How do images uphold, complicate, or contest orientation and belonging? And crucially, what can artistic practice contribute to unsettling the infrastructures and assumptions that underpin the production of place, displacement, and speculative geographies? These lead specific questions to explore new knowledges emerging from the new lands.

- Research Questions

1. How can ‘Humanscape’ be defined and represented visually through experiential and multisensory practice?
2. Can diagnostic principles from TCM be adapted for photographic and walking-based artistic research?
3. How might such methods illuminate the dynamic boundaries, imbalances, and relational tensions between natural environment and engineered terrain?
4. How can geopoetics — as earth-writing, as embodied enquiry — help imagine the relation between human intention and material landscape?

- Methodology

To address the research questions, my practice develops a diagnostic–geopoetic methodology that integrates TCM-derived perceptual modes with walking-based fieldwork. The four diagnostic principles (watching, listening, asking, feeling) are integrated as a perceptual approach that foregrounds attentiveness, embodiment, and relationality. This approach is particularly suited to reclaimed land, which functions as an ongoing placeholder — physically present yet experientially suspended, lacking stable meaning, and continually deferred within planning narratives.

Onsite experience becomes essential. While remote-sensing technologies promise total visibility, they often generate an epistemic distance that obscures sensory and emotional experiences. This research therefore insists on the irreplaceable role of **being there**: of walking, sensing, and returning repeatedly to the same unstable edges. Onsite photography registers what aerial or computational images cannot do: the textures of dust and sediment, shifting surfaces, wind patterns, artificial shorelines, restricted access zones, and the evolving sonic dialogue between waves and concrete.

Walking forms the spatio-temporal spine of the project, enabling a durational encounter with the land's instability. These embodied encounters are complemented by a constellation of imaging techniques — drone photography, cyanotypes made with site materials and seawater, microscopic imaging of sediment, sound recording, and videography. Together they offer a multi-scalar diagnostic reading of the reclaimed coast, exposing the contradictions between representational regimes and material realities. Rather than reinforcing an extractive aerial gaze, this assemblage reveals reclaimed terrain as dynamic, uneven, and resistant to the placeholder logic that frames it as coherent or complete.



Sample work: 39° 5' 33.043" N, 117° 44' 3.246" E, 2025

- Findings

The research shows that Tianjin's reclaimed coast is neither blank nor neutral but a materially and sensorially complex environment shaped by geological residues, infrastructural intervention, emergent ecologies, and lived affect. Its representation as a coherent "new city" in technical images contrasts sharply with onsite encounters that reveal instability, precarity, and continual transformation.

By juxtaposing drone imagery with ground-level photographs, cyanotypes, microscopic scans, and sound recordings, the project demonstrates how technical images flatten this complexity, stabilising reclaimed land within speculative futures while obscuring the shifting, indeterminate qualities perceived through embodied experience. These findings highlight reclaimed terrain as unfinished ground whose meanings are still forming and emphasise the necessity of onsite presence and multisensory methods as correctives to representational regimes functioning as placeholders.

- Contribution

The project introduces 'Humanscape' as a concept for engaging with reclaimed landscapes. Humanscape foregrounds the interplay between human intention, ecological process, sensory encounter, and imagination, offering an alternative to the reductive spatial imaginaries shaped by technical imaging.

Methodologically, it advances a diagnostic–geopoetic approach that integrates TCM perceptual modes with walking-based fieldwork and multi-scalar image-making. This provides a transferable framework for studying transitional or engineered terrains, emphasising embodied attention and ecological sensitivity.

The project generates a multi-layered visual archive that reveals how instability, sedimentation, and absence shape the meaning of new land and expands the concept of latent geography to describe what is still forming or concealed in reclaimed terrain. It contributes to debates on how images produce place and how artistic practice can offer alternative ways of knowing landscapes in flux.

- Summary

The research argues that reclaimed landscapes often function as placeholders—spaces projected into being through technical images before they are lived or sensed. By working against this speculative detachment, Humanscape treats reclaimed land as present, material, and relational. Through diagnostic–geopoetic practice, the project reintroduces opacity, texture, and care into a landscape frequently abstracted by infrastructural vision, demonstrating how photography can diagnose and interpret territories in transition.

**Key words:** photography, research practice, geopoetics, land reclamation, landscape