



A birdview of Yujiapu Train Station

# YUJIAPU

## DESTINATION OF THE FUTURE

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I'd just returned to Tianjin after an absence of 18 months. Long enough time to be missing the noise and smells of the city, for my skin and lungs to have lost their immunity to life in the dry dusty air and to have forgotten how fast things change in this country. I am looking for the new shopping mall of Global Go out in Yujiapu Finance Centre in the Binhai area. Trying not to be awed by the experience. I reason it isn't the scale, the size, the extravagant cost of this new born area, but that it had appeared, seemingly unnoticed, just a few minutes drive from my regular watering holes of 2nd Avenue.

### China's Manhattan

Of course, its sudden appearance is an illusion. Construction began, in a frenzy, back in 2008 in what was then being described as 'China's Manhattan'. When construction halted

during the global recession there were predictions of the area becoming one of China's ghost cities. As I approached today, the towering skyscrapers materialised from out of the New Year smog like a spooky apparition of a future city. The tired and shabby streets of TEDA behind me faded into this utopian dream of the future.

The Yujiapu Finance Center is located on a peninsular of land formed by a large loop of the Hai He near the port of Tianjin. On a brighter day, the view from Kaiqi bridge, of the waterfront, must be as spectacular as the New York skyline it emulates. Even in the heavy haze the greys of straight cut concrete and glass provide dramatic edges to the dead still waters at its feet and the ashen sky above their roofs.

### Starting at the station

The taxi drops me in front of Yujiapu

station, a low dome of woven concrete and crystal panels. Twenty year old trees line the entrance, their leafless branches swathed in thick, sterile plastic, as though they've been placed in suspended animation. The station building is starkly beautiful. You descend beneath the surface of the streets into a cavernous interior of polished stone and dull metallic sheens. Its gloss and gleam is accentuated by the contrast to the muted hues of the world above. Here, from Beijing South, 7 high speed trains arrive daily and from Tianjin Zhan there are another 8. In the future, the halls and escalators will be packed by executive commuters and wealthy shoppers, but today there is only the echo of bored security guards playing on their phones and cleaners pointlessly pushing brooms across the untouched floors. I try to capture the scale of the empty interior on my camera and study the train and ticket information which, unusually, is in Chinese only.

Somewhere down here an exit leads to the shopping mall, but I can't find a map or any directions to it. Most of the exits are closed anyway and in the end I ascend to the surface through the same doors I entered, looking for another route.

### Searching for the mall

Above, the area is still under construction.

## SOMEWHERE IN THIS POST APOCALYPTIC FUTURE IS THE SHOPPING CENTRE, THE SPARK OF LIFE THAT WILL, ONE DAY, ANIMATE THE EMBRYONIC BODIES OF THIS FINANCE CENTRE.

One brave building has been designed so its supporting girders are on the outside. It stands near others whose inside structures still show like bones in an x-ray. The wide roads however are complete. Their street furniture of signs, lights and neon displays inform and direct its city traffic. Today, that's just me, the odd prowling taxi and a gang of woolly hatted construction workers. It's all slightly creepy, like the vacant set of a zombie movie. Somewhere in this post apocalyptic future is the shopping centre, the spark of life that will, one day, animate the embryonic bodies of this finance centre. Father the bustling metropolis showing in the images on the building site barriers.

I scan the skeletal buildings for the signs of commerce and find a low building whose roof line is titled the 'Pilot free trade zone'. I'm not sure if 'pilot' refers to its nautical location or some tentative consumer experiment, but the state of completion gives me hope that inside could be the elusive mall. I find an unlocked door next to a plaque that reads 'Special entrepreneurial zone of Tianjin' and with growing anticipation push inside. The interior is an empty room occupied by a group of surprised police and thick, stale, tobacco smoke.

Finally, after half an hour I find a stairway inside a glass box labelled 'exit 2'. By now I've developed a robotic walk that, though unsure

if I'm allowed down here, can't seem able to stop. I pass two grunting security guards, tramp down the unmarked stairs and come to a pair of plain fire doors. There is no sign of what might be behind them and I expect to find a dark passageway of unpainted concrete and a pile of rubbish. Surprisingly, they open into an opulent hall, furnished with photographs of iconic landmarks from around the world and a moving pavement. I feel like Howard Carter opening the hidden door to Tutankhamun's tomb.

### The world below

Here is Global Go. A mall, themed around the products of the world. It's a 700 meter corridor running north to south with a second of 400 meters aligned east to west. Together they provide a commercial cross of 20,000m<sup>2</sup>, all below the earth's surface. The two passageways are lined with shops, arranged by country, selling the products each place is famous for; Danish furniture, Australian wine, Italian Ice cream and the lesser known; wines of Turkey and Chinese books of Switzerland. No other shopping centre is as planned, or as suggestive of an idea from a brainstorming session. Most of the shopping space is still unoccupied, so for long stretches the mall is just a corridor, unheated towards its dead ends. In the centre section, I'm a solitary shopper scanning the sparsely stocked exhibits and clumsy English translations of the world above.

### Ending in the future

The Yujiapu Finance Centre is planned to be completed in 2017, but it's likely to be far longer before its station, streets and stores throb with any life. I purchase a coffee in the Turkish area and sit on a bench of scattered kilim cushions while making sense of what I'd seen. The visually stunning and pristine modernity of the architecture, the autistic

detail and logical layout, the unimaginable confidence in its need and eventual viability. It's a photographic backdrop of the future, a monument to hubris, a metaphor. It's meant to be the vision of a bustling Manhattan, but its emptiness and sub surface caverns could just as easily be a premonition of, or a readying for, a nuclear holocaust. Either way, the train to Yujiapu is the destination for the future.

## 下一站——于家堡

我已经离开天津 18 个月了，这次回来，我又感受到这个城市熟悉的气息，同时惊讶于一些新的变化。我依然住在泰达开发区，我听说离我不远的地方新建成了一个于家堡火车站，同时新开了一个大的购物中心，所以我决定去看一看。

于家堡位于天津港附近一个海河环状半岛上。天气晴好的日子，从海河开启桥上望过去，会看到如纽约曼哈顿一样的天际线，这也是于家堡一直着力打造的。

出租车司机把我拉到了于家堡火车站的正门，这是一个拥有贝壳型穹顶的巨型建筑，穹顶上是骨架编织结构，外观通透且极具现代感。我顺着入口通道进入地下车站，每天有 7 趟城际高铁从北京南站开往于家堡，还有 8 趟高铁从天津站始发开往于家堡。未来，这里每天都会聚集很多往来于京津之间以及于家堡和市区之间的通勤者以及来此购物的消费者。但此时，这里依然十分沉寂，只有零星几个保安聚在一起玩着手机，清洁人员在已经干净如镜的地面拖着拖把走过。我想在信息牌上查询一下火车信息，可惜只有中文。

据说车站的一个出口直通一个购物中心，但是并没有明显的路标指示。我试了几个出口但都关闭了，所以我只能重回地上找其他的路径。

车站周边的很多建筑都还在施工中，从目前的骨架来看，建成后一定是个雄伟的建筑。这里的交通设施还是很发达的，马路很宽，指示牌清晰可见，只是这天只有我一个孤独的老外，在附近兜圈子的出租车和一群建筑工人。虽然此时空空如也的景象有点恐怖，但既然有一个购物中心存在，总有一天会给这里带来勃勃生机。

在重重钢筋支架中寻找购物中心的影子，我发现有一栋矮楼，上面写着“自由贸易试验区”，既然是唯一一栋建成竣工的楼，我想那个商场一定在里面。我找到一扇没有上锁的门，满怀希望地推门进去，却发现里面空空如也，烟雾缭绕，几个警察正在抽烟，我的出现显然吓他们一跳。

半个小时过去了，我终于再次找到一段通往地下的楼梯，上面写着“2 号出口”。我也不确定这里是否允许进入，我只是机械地走着。又是一段毫无指向性的路程，经过两个窃窃私语的保安后，我来到一扇防火门，我也不知道门后面是什么，也许只不过是一团漆黑的通道，未经粉刷的水泥墙和一些垃圾。出乎意料的是，门开后居然豁然开朗，我看到一个通透明亮的大厅，墙上挂着世界各地标志性建筑的装饰画和一个自动通道。我顿时感觉自己像开启法老陵墓神秘之门的考古学家！

我终于找到目的地——全球购！这个购物中心是由南北长 700 米，东西长 400 米的通道组成，商业面积共两万平方米。通道两边全部是按照国家标准分类的店铺，售卖该国最著名的特色商品，比如来自丹麦的家居、澳大利亚红酒、意大利冰淇淋等，如此细分规划的商场我还是第一次见到。不过可惜的是大部分商铺还是空置的，所以这个商场不过是两个没有暖气的狭长通道，而我是唯一的顾客。

于家堡金融中心预计在 2017 年才能完全竣工，而等到这里聚集到足够多的人气则需要更长的时间。不管如何，目前已经开通的高铁就是通往未来的钥匙。



On the passage to Global Go