
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, ACTING STATE CORONER
HEARD : 8 JANUARY 2025
DELIVERED : 10 JANUARY 2025
FILE NO/S : CORC 3239 of 2024
DECEASED : HUANG, TANGHUI

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Senior Constable C Robertson assisted the Coroner.

Case(s) referred to in decision(s):

Nil

Coroners Act 1996
(Section 26(1))

RECORD OF INVESTIGATION INTO DEATH

I, Sarah Helen Linton, Acting State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of Tanghui HUANG with an inquest held at the Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 85, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth on 8 January 2025, find that the death of Tanghui HUANG has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was Tanghui HUANG and that death occurred on or about 21 April 2012 in the waters of the Indian Ocean, approximately 200 nautical miles west-northwest of Dampier, Western Australia, as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:

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INTRODUCTION

1. Tanghui Huang was a Chinese National working on a Chinese bulk carrier vessel in April 2012. The vessel was travelling from China to Esperance, Western Australia. When the vessel was sailing in waters off Dampier, Western Australia, Mr Huang disappeared. He was last seen alive by other crew members on 21 April 2012 at 11.30 am when he was painting the mooring winch on the forward deck. He was wearing a yellow hard hat at the time. Mr Huang was identified as missing around noon when he failed to appear at the ship's mess for lunch. An air and sea search failed to locate Mr Huang, although a yellow object believed to be his hard hat was sighted from the air in the water, which supported the conclusion he had fallen into the water.
2. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Mr Huang's disappearance, I determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Mr Huang had died and his death was a reportable death. I therefore made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.¹
3. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner's Court on 8 January 2025. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled during the police investigation conducted into Mr Huang's disappearance, as well as hearing evidence from Detective Senior Constable Paul Ayton.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISAPPEARANCE

4. As Mr Huang was a crew member on an international vessel, there is limited information available about his background. All that is known is that he was born in Chengfeng Village in the Fujian Province, China, on 4 January 1971 and he was 41 years old at the time of his disappearance.² He was believed to be married with two daughters aged 17 years and 21 years. He was said to be able to swim.³
5. Mr Huang was working as an Able Seaman on the Chinese bulk carrier vessel *Cape Mercury/S6PG* at the time of his disappearance. He was part of a crew of 24 people when the vessel departed Jingtang Port, China, on 8 April 2012. The vessel was headed to Esperance, Western Australia.⁴
6. During the voyage, the crew members were directed to conduct general cleaning and maintenance on the ship. Mr Huang was given the task of painting equipment throughout the voyage.⁵
7. A number of reports indicate that Mr Huang was experiencing some personal problems and related mental health issues at the time of this voyage. On the day the ship left port, he approached the Chief Mate and said he had been having difficulty

¹ Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of Deputy State Coroner.

² Exhibit 1, Tab 1 and Tab 2.

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 5 and Tab 9.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

sleeping. He asked for some holiday leave when his service period ended and the Chief Mate promised to pass on his request to the Captain so that the shipping company could process it. He initially appeared happy with the answer, but returned a few hours later to the bridge to request immediate leave. The Chief Mate told Mr Huang that he had adjusted his duty roster to day shift only for the month so that he could have a better rest.⁶

8. A few days later, Mr Huang spoke to the Ship's Assistant Bosun and asked for sleeping tablets. He was given a limited amount as there were concerns it might adversely affect him. After being informed of this, the Chief Mate went and saw Mr Huang on the night of 11 April 2012 to check in on him. He was noted to be drinking alcohol and when the Chief Mate suggested he drink less, Mr Huang said that without alcohol he couldn't sleep. He seemed very concerned about getting a good night's rest and drank the rest of a bottle of alcohol in front of the Chief Mate before he left. The Chief Mate then asked another member of staff to keep an eye on Mr Huang. Mr Huang was seen on deck the next morning. He seemed fine and he said he had slept for 6 to 7 hours.⁷
9. A week later, on 18 April 2012, the Chief Mate and Captain became aware that Mr Huang had requested the telephone number of the Chinese Embassy in Australia as he said he needed to redress an injustice (he asserted his grandfather had allegedly been decapitated), and he also didn't want to work that afternoon. The Chief Mate tried to find out more information from Mr Huang but Mr Huang only made the same request. The Chief Mate asked the Bosun to keep a close eye on Mr Huang, to give him some easy jobs to keep him occupied and try to ensure he didn't become agitated. The Chief Mate also gave permission for Mr Huang not to work his shift if he needed more rest.⁸
10. Other crew members later confirmed Mr Huang seemed to have been experiencing some personal issues, as he spoke of having trouble sleeping, was observed to consume excessive amounts of alcohol and appeared depressed.⁹
11. Mr Huang attended for work on 19 April 2012 and seemed fine. He worked with some other crew members in the ship's bow and the Bosun gave him the task of painting the winch. At 4.18 pm, the manager of the shipping company rang up and asked to talk to Mr Huang. The manager asked him if he could hold on until the ship had returned to China. Mr Huang reportedly said that he could. He was given another sleeping tablet that night to help with his ongoing insomnia.¹⁰
12. Mr Huang also attended work the following day and continued painting the winch. Nothing of note seems to have occurred during that shift.¹¹

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 8 and Tab 11.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

13. On the morning of 21 April 2012, the sailors, including Mr Huang, resumed painting the bow. Mr Huang told the group that he hadn't brought water with him and asked if he could go back to get a drink of water. The Chief Mate gave him permission to go and told Mr Huang to have a rest. That was the last time the Chief Mate spoke to Mr Huang.
14. Crew members saw Mr Huang return to his cabin to get some drinking water and then he returned to work. He stopped for a rest around 10.00 am and had a cigarette and returned to his cabin again. He was seen by one crew member coming out of his cabin at 11.00 am holding a bottle of water. The crew member spoke to Mr Huang, who said he had to go to work. Nothing unusual was noted about his demeanour at that time.¹² He was wearing orange overalls, a yellow safety/hard hat and work boots when last seen alive.¹³
15. The ship's crew stopped work at about 11.30 am and then went to the ship's mess for lunch. The Bosun didn't see Mr Huang at the time when the rest of the crew were finishing work, so he went to Mr Huang's cabin, but it seems he wasn't there. When it was noted that Mr Huang had not attended for lunch, the alarm was raised.¹⁴
16. At 11.50 am, the Chief Mate was doing paperwork in his cabin when the Bosun approached him and told him that Mr Huang was missing. The Chief Mate stated he was upset at the news and asked the Bosun to commence a search immediately. The Chief Mate informed the Captain, who also joined in the search. Despite a thorough search of the vessel, no sign of Mr Huang was found.¹⁵ The ship's Captain identified that there were no missing flotation devices, including lifejackets.¹⁶
17. At 12.25 pm, after receiving the report that Mr Huang was missing, the Captain turned the vessel around to retrace its path. At 12.48 pm, the Captain of the *Cape Mercury* vessel contacted the Dampier Port Authority by way of a MAYDAY call to advise that they had lost a man overboard. The Australian Rescue Co-ordination Centre (RCC) was informed, and they tried unsuccessfully to contact the *Cape Mercury* via radio. Eventually the *Cape Mercury* contacted the RCC at 1.48 pm and reported Mr Huang missing. It was noted the vessel had turned around and done a search as it retraced its track but there was no sign found of Mr Huang.¹⁷
18. A coordinated search was commenced by aircraft and other vessels in the area. The search conditions were good, but no person was seen in the water. However, a yellow object was spotted in the water by an observer from the aircraft, which appeared to be Mr Huang's yellow hard hat. The object was not able to be recovered, so this could not be confirmed. The search efforts were suspended on the evening of 22 April 2012 when it was determined there was no chance of finding Mr Huang alive. Survival expert Dr Paul Luckin had been consulted and he had expressed the opinion

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 6.

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 5.

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 8.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 5.

¹⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 5.

that it was unlikely that Mr Huang would have survived the fall of 16 metres from the vessel's deck to the water below.¹⁸

19. On 22 April 2012, the RCC contacted Fremantle Water Police to advise of the incident and the search efforts that had been undertaken.¹⁹

INITIAL POLICE INVESTIGATION

20. On 28 April 2012, the *Cape Mercury* docked at Esperance Port. Officers from Esperance Police Station boarded the vessel and obtained more details about the missing person. The officers also obtained a photocopy of Mr Huang's Chinese passport and the *Cape Mercury's* ship's log, medical log and crew list. Statements or questionnaires were obtained from 22 members of the crew.²⁰
21. A very detailed report obtained from the Chief Mate set out a clear timeline of Mr Huang's last known whereabouts and a good history of the mental health concerns he had been experiencing during the voyage. It seems clear the other crew were deeply affected by Mr Huang's disappearance and they cooperated fully with the WA Police investigation. The crew members told police they believed Mr Huang had gone overboard but they weren't sure if his mental health was bad enough for him to have deliberately jumped or if he had just fallen.²¹
22. A Missing Persons Report was completed, which identified that Mr Huang had recently been upset about the death of his grandfather and younger sister. A letter was found in his cabin. A translation reveals it was addressed to the Ambassador of China and indicated that the government did not believe that Mr Huang's grandfather was a member of the Communist Party of China. It was also noted that his sister had died for reasons that were unclear, but the family had no money for an investigation.²²
23. Attempts to obtain more information about Mr Huang through Interpol Canberra were unsuccessful as the response from Interpol Beijing was that no further action was able to be undertaken as the investigation was not a criminal investigation.²³
24. The investigating officer, Senior Constable Brad Stephen from Esperance Police Station, found no evidence of suspicious circumstances in relation to Mr Huang's disappearance. It was suspected at the time that he had fallen into the ocean, but there was no conclusive evidence and no eyewitnesses to this event.²⁴

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 5.

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 8, Tab 10.

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 21.

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

RECENT POLICE REVIEW

25. A recent police review conducted by officers from the Homicide Squad Missing Person Team included proof of life checks, which found no evidence of Mr Huang's existence in Australia. Inquiries with Interpol did not elicit any additional information.²⁵
26. Based on the information available, Detective Senior Constable Paul Ayton concluded that Mr Huang appeared to be deceased, having died on or soon after 11.30 am on 21 April 2012 when he fell overboard from the Cape Mercury. No evidence of criminality or suspicious circumstances was identified. Det S/C Ayton noted that given Mr Huang's reported insomnia, excessive consumption of alcohol and prescription for Triazolam, as well as concerns about his mental health, he may have had issues with alertness that compromised his safety on board.²⁶

CONCLUSION

27. I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Mr Huang died on or soon after 11.30 am on 21 April 2012 in the Indian Ocean approximately 200 nautical miles west-northwest of Dampier.
28. There is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied of a cause of death as he may have died from injuries sustained in the fall from the vessel or from drowning once in the water. Accordingly, the cause of death remains unascertained.
29. It is possible Mr Huang deliberately jumped into the water with an intention to end his life, but it is equally possible that he fell from the vessel by accident. Accordingly, I make an open finding as to the manner of death.

S H Linton
A/ State Coroner
10 January 2025

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.