
JURISDICTION : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
ACT : CORONERS ACT 1996
CORONER : SARAH HELEN LINTON, ACTING STATE CORONER
HEARD : 18 AUGUST 2026
DELIVERED : 24 AUGUST 2026
FILE NO/S : CORC 1849 of 2026
DECEASED : ZHENG, ZHONGXIAN

Catchwords:

Nil

Legislation:

Nil

Counsel Appearing:

Acting Sergeant 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 suspected death of Zhongxian ZHENG with an inquest held at **Perth Coroners Court, Central Law Courts, Court 85, 501 Hay Street, PERTH**, on 18 August 2026, find that the death of Zhongxian ZHENG has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Zhongxian ZHENG** and that death occurred on or about **17 October 2024** in the waters of the Indian Ocean approximately 240 nautical miles north of Port Hedland, Western Australia from an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	3
KNOWN EVENTS	4
DISCOVERY MR ZHENG WAS MISSING	5
THE MARINE SEARCH	6
WA POLICE INVESTIGATION	7
CONCLUSION	10

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Zhongxian Zheng was employed as a ship's cook on the Hong Kong registered bulk carrier vessel, Pacific Resource, in October 2024 when he went missing from the vessel during its journey from Zhoushan, China, to Port Hedland, Western Australia.¹
- 2 Mr Zheng was last confirmed to be alive on the evening of 17 October 2024 at around 8.00 pm when he was seen by a crew member leaving the laundry room on the vessel. Mr Zheng was carrying his laundered uniform and there was nothing unusual about their interaction.
- 3 The next morning, the same crew member knocked on Mr Zheng's cabin door after Mr Zheng did not present to work at the ship's galley. Mr Zheng was not in his cabin. The alarm was raised and a thorough search of the ship was conducted but no sign of Mr Zheng was found. It was assumed that Mr Zhen must have fallen from the vessel during the night.
- 4 The ship's master advised the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in Canberra and the ship turned around and commenced a grid search for Mr Zheng, focussed on the most likely area based on JRCC drift pattern modelling. Other vessels in the area joined the search and the Australian Maritime Authority (AMSA) jet searched the water by air. The search was eventually called off after no sign of Mr Zheng was found and the likely timeframe for survival had expired.
- 5 The ship arrived in Port Hedland on 22 October 2024 and a police investigation into Mr Zheng's disappearance commenced. At the conclusion of that investigation, the WA Police concluded there was a reasonable suspicion Mr Zheng was deceased and that his death was a reportable death. A report was compiled and submitted to the State Coroner.
- 6 On 20 July 2026 I made a direction pursuant to s 23(1) of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA) that Mr Zheng's suspected death be investigated by way of an inquest.
- 7 I held an inquest on 18 August 2026. A significant amount of documentary evidence compiled as part of the police investigation into Mr Zheng's disappearance was tendered.² One witness, Senior Constable James Dean from Port Hedland Police Station, was called to give

¹ Exhibit 1, Tabs 1 to 2.

² Exhibit 1.

evidence at the inquest. Senior Constable Dean was involved in the investigation into Mr Zheng's disappearance and compiled the report for the attention of the State Coroner.³

KNOWN EVENTS

- 8 Mr Zheng was born in the Chinese province of Fujian on 21 November 1969. He completed junior high school before training as a chef. He was 54 years old and was married with an adult son in 2024. Mr Zheng was said to have a happy and stable marriage, and he was described by his son as a generally cheerful person who got on well with others. His hobbies included fishing and making tea.⁴
- 9 Mr Zheng was not known to have any drug or alcohol issues and he was generally in good physical and mental health for a man of his age. He had recently received a certificate of health examination on 24 July 2024, as part of his new employment contract, which did not identify any health concerns.⁵
- 10 Mr Zheng was registered as a Seafarer with the Fujian Maritime Safety Administration of the People's Republic of China and worked in the shipping industry. Mr Zheng signed a Seafarer's Employment Agreement on 13 September 2024 with the Hong Kong Ming Wah Ship Management Company Ltd to work on the Hong Kong flagged commercial bulk carrier ship *Pacific Resource* for a period of eight months, with his employment to commence on 17 September 2024. Mr Zheng was employed as the ship's Chief Cook.⁶
- 11 The ship departed the port in Zhoushan, China, on 7 October 2024, bound for Port Hedland, Western Australia. The ship had no cargo on the journey to Australia. The plan was for the ship to collect a cargo of iron ore in Port Hedland and return it to China. It appears this was Mr Zheng's first journey on the vessel.⁷
- 12 Mr Zheng worked in the ship's galley with some other crew members. There is no evidence to suggest Mr Zheng had experienced any issues with other members of the ship's crew in the short time he was on board. He had apparently also seemed generally well.⁸

³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 1, Tab 2 and Tab 4.

⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 1, Tab 2 and Tab 4.

⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 2, Tab 4, Tab 13, Tab 14 and Tab 17.

⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 4.

- 13 Mr Zheng had been working in the ship's galley with Tianbai Zhou, who was employed as the 'Mess Boy' helping to prepare food and clean the ship. Mr Zhou saw Mr Zheng at 8.05 pm on the evening of 17 October 2024 on the 'C' deck at the Officers' laundry. They spoke briefly and Mr Zheng indicated he had just finished washing some clothes. He was wearing a plain white cook's uniform at this time and left soon after with his clean clothes.⁹
- 14 The weather was apparently good and the ship was generally travelling at around 10 to 11 knots at this time.¹⁰

DISCOVERY MR ZHENG WAS MISSING

- 15 Mr Zhou attended the galley at 6.50 am the next morning to start his shift but found the galley was locked. This was unusual, as Mr Zheng would ordinarily be there first, as per their daily routine. Mr Zhou went to Mr Zheng's cabin and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. He then opened the door and looked inside the cabin. Mr Zhou found the cabin was empty. It looked to be in a normal, tidy state.¹¹
- 16 After being unable to locate Mr Zheng, Mr Zhou went to the ship's office and called the Chief Officer using the ship's phone. He believes he made the call at around 7.00 am. He advised the Chief Officer that the galley was locked and the ship's cook, Mr Zheng, wasn't in his cabin. In response, the Chief Officer came down and opened the galley with a master key. Mr Zheng was not inside the galley. They checked the provision store and confirmed Mr Zheng was also not there. Mr Zhou returned to Mr Zheng's cabin with the Chief Officer and they confirmed his cabin was still empty.¹²
- 17 The Chief Officer returned to the ship's office with Mr Zhou and the Chief Officer then made a call over the ship's PA system, calling Mr Zhen to attend the ship's office. They waited together at the office for a few minutes but Mr Zheng did not attend in response to the callout.¹³

⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

¹⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

¹¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 10.

¹² Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 5.

¹³ Exhibit 1, Tab 3.

- 18 The Chief Officer informed the Master of the vessel that Mr Zheng was missing at 7.05 am on 18 October 2024 and the ship's crew commenced a search of the ship soon after.¹⁴
- 19 All 27 crew members assisted with the search the ship. The first search was completed at 7.40 am with no sign of Mr Zheng being found. A second search was conducted between 8.00 and 9.00 am, but again no sign of Mr Zheng was found. It was then concluded that Mr Zheng must have fallen from the vessel. The Master of the ship directed the crew to seal Mr Zheng's cabin at around 11.00 am and the Master checked the footage from all of the 12 CCTV cameras on the vessel from the hours of 8.00 pm on 17 October 2024 until 8.00 am on 18 October 2024, but there was no vision captured of Mr Zheng. The vision does not capture all parts of the deck and it was also nighttime, so the vision footage was at times poor. Therefore, it was quite possible Mr Zheng had gone on deck and not been captured by the cameras.¹⁵

THE MARINE SEARCH

- 20 The Master had made the shipping company aware at 7.45 am that Mr Zheng had been reported missing and advised the JRCC at 8.00 am. At this time, the Master turned the ship around and commenced a search of the water for Mr Zheng.¹⁶
- 21 The JRCC gave the Master a suggested grid area to search where it was predicted there was the greatest chance of finding Mr Zheng if he was still on the water's surface. Additional lookouts were posted on both bridge wings. An emergency message was broadcast to all other vessels in the vicinity to keep a sharp lookout for Mr Zheng and to assist in the search and rescue, coordinated by AMSA. Another twelve merchant vessels responded to the JRCC request.¹⁷
- 22 The AMSA Perth based Challenger jet aircraft was also despatched to conduct an aerial search of the grid area. The route the ship had taken in the 12 hour period when Mr Zheng had gone overboard was approximately 122 nautical miles long and drift modelling indicated a general easterly drift from the track. The rescue aircraft conducted a visual search of around 1300 square nautical miles, completed over three hours, with no sighting of Mr Zheng. The probability of detection was

¹⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

¹⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 3 and Tab 17; *Transcript*.

¹⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 6.

¹⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 6.

acknowledged to be very small given the size of the search area, but the search conditions were assessed to be good and there were numerous sightings of flotsam reported, which gave greater hope.¹⁸

- 23 Unfortunately, there was no sighting of Mr Zheng either by air or sea. The search of the JRCC's suggested grid area was completed at 10.00 am on 21 October 2024. At that time, the Master of the vessel advised the JRCC and the other ships involved in the search that Mr Zheng had not been located and the search was concluded.¹⁹
- 24 AMSA had consulted a medical expert to discuss the incident and the assessment of survivability based upon a number of possible scenarios.
- 25 It was noted that the vessel had no cargo at that time, so it was sitting much higher in the water than when loaded. It was estimated that the deck was 25 to 30 metres above sea level. If Mr Zheng had fallen from the deck at that height into the water, it was very likely he would have been injured in the fall. If Mr Zheng had sustained significant injury falling overboard and was not wearing a flotation device (which was considered likely), then his estimated time for survival was less than half an hour. Therefore, he would have been deceased long before his disappearance was noted.²⁰
- 26 If he had not sustained an injury, but was not wearing a flotation device, his estimated time for survival was 1 to 6 hours, which would still have meant Mr Zheng was unlikely to be alive when the search for him first commenced.²¹
- 27 On the best case scenario, if Mr Zheng had not suffered significant injury in the fall from the deck and was wearing a flotation device (which was thought to be unlikely), he may have survived for 24 to 36 hours. The search continued for longer than this period, with no sign of Mr Zheng being found.²²

WA POLICE INVESTIGATION

- 28 After the marine search had concluded on the morning of 21 October 2024, the Master redirected the ship towards Port Hedland

¹⁸ Exhibit 1, Tab 7.

¹⁹ Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 7.

²⁰ Exhibit 1, Tab 7; *Transcript*.

²¹ Exhibit 1, Tab 7.

²² Exhibit 1, Tab 7.

and they completed their journey to Western Australia on the morning of 22 October 2024. The vessel dropped anchor at 8.30 am.

- 29 Port Hedland Police Station was notified by AMSA at 9.18 am on 21 October 2024 that a foreign sailor, Mr Zheng, was missing from the vessel Pacific Resources and a search was underway. After the vessel eventually dropped anchor off the coast of Port Hedland, a number of police officers travelled out by helicopter and boarded the Pacific Resources to commence their investigation. Senior Constable Dean, Acting Sergeant Winikerei and Detective Senior Constable Gonzalez boarded the vessel along with three officers from Australian Border Force.²³
- 30 The police officers went to Mr Zheng's cabin, which was still secured. Mr Zheng was allocated his own cabin, which contained a bed, lounge, small eating area and desk, as well as an ensuite. Senior Constable Dean noted the cabin was in a generally neat and tidy state, which is demonstrated by the photos taken by the police. There was no sign of a disturbance and nothing to raise any suspicion. Senior Constable Dean noted there were life jackets located in the cabin, suggesting Mr Zheng had not taken his allotted life jacket with him up on deck. Mr Zheng's personal belongings all appeared to be present, including five mobile telephones, which were seized by police.²⁴
- 31 The seized telephones were later successfully downloaded and the contents showed Mr Zheng's last contact was with his son on 18 October 2024 at 8.29 pm in relation to a transfer of money. Mr Zheng's son confirmed he had received the money transfer and it was a very normal thing for Mr Zheng to send money to his family assist with their daily living expenses. Senior Constable Dean explained at the inquest that it was quite usual for a seaman to own a number of mobile telephones, as they will often have different SIM cards in them to make it easier and more cost effective to use in various international locations.²⁵
- 32 The Shipping Management company and the Australian agents for the company, Aus Ship Fremantle, were in contact with Mr Zheng's son, Zheng Zhenan, and communicated information from the WA Police to Mr Zheng's family in China as the police investigation continued. Mr Zheng's family have confirmed they have not had any contact from

²³ Exhibit 1, Tab 2.

²⁴ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 16; *Transcript*.

²⁵ Exhibit 1, Tab 2; *Transcript*.

him since his disappearance on the vessel in October 2024. Standard proof of life checks with Australian government agencies have also not shown any record of contact with Mr Zheng.²⁶

- 33 Police officers interviewed the Ship's Master, Chief Officer and Mr Zhou, who was the last person on board to see Mr Zheng alive and the first person to raise the alarm. None of them had any reason to suspect that Mr Zheng may have had an issue with anyone else on board, and they all immediately assumed that Mr Zheng had likely fallen overboard, once he was unable to be found on the ship.
- 34 The police investigation concluded that Mr Zheng appeared to have gone overboard from the Pacific Resources deck sometime after 8.30 pm on 17 October 2024. It appeared he had made his way back to his cabin after finishing his laundry, as his laundered uniform was found in his cabin, then gone up on deck for an unknown reason. It was suggested at the inquest Mr Zheng may have gone up on deck to do some fishing, as Mr Zheng was known to enjoy fishing and some hand reels were found amongst his possessions. The Master confirmed that fishing was not allowed on the vessel, so if Mr Zheng had planned to fish, he would likely have done it in an out of the way spot. That is, however, speculative, and it may be he simply went up on deck to take some fresh air. Stills from the CCTV footage show it was dark on deck and the lighting is poor. While there is fencing, there are gaps in the fence in certain spots, so Mr Zheng could simply have lost his footing and gone overboard by accident.²⁷
- 35 It was also suggested that given his age and the fact he was described as slightly overweight, he could also have suffered a medical event and fallen overboard, although I do note his recent health check had not identified any concerning health conditions.²⁸
- 36 The possibility that Mr Zheng might have gone overboard intentionally was also considered, but there was no evidence that Mr Zheng had any personal, financial or work concerns and he was generally described as cheerful and in a good mental state. Nothing in the form of a suicide note was found in his cabin and his colleague had not noticed anything out of the ordinary in Mr Zheng's behaviour when he saw him on the last night he was confirmed to be alive.

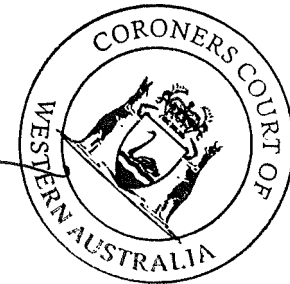
²⁶ Exhibit 1, Tab 15.

²⁷ Exhibit 1, Tab 2 and Tab 16; *Transcript*.

²⁸ *Transcript*.

CONCLUSION

- 37 I am satisfied beyond reasonable doubt on the evidence before me that Mr Zheng is deceased and that he died on or about 17 October 2024 when he went overboard from the Pacific Resources vessel.
- 38 There is no evidence before me to support a conclusion of suicide, and in my view the weight of the evidence supports Mr Zheng has fallen overboard as a result of accident, and dying as a result of either injuries suffered from the fall and/or drowning while immersed in the ocean. As there is no information as to the exact cause of death, I leave the cause of death as unascertained and I find that Mr Zheng died by way of accident.
- 39 Sadly for Mr Zheng's family, the search for his body was unsuccessful, but I hope these findings at least provide them with some closure.

The seal of the Coroners Court of Western Australia is circular. It features the text "CORONERS COURT OF" at the top and "WESTERN AUSTRALIA" at the bottom. In the center is the coat of arms of Western Australia, which depicts a shield supported by a kangaroo and a swan, with a crest above the shield.

S H Linton
Acting State Coroner
24 August 2026