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**JURISDICTION** : CORONER'S COURT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
**ACT** : CORONERS ACT 1996  
**CORONER** : SARAH HELEN LINTON, DEPUTY STATE CORONER  
**HEARD** : 8 FEBRUARY 2022  
**DELIVERED** : 9 FEBRUARY 2022  
**FILE NO/S** : CORC 887 of 2020  
**DECEASED** : HOU, HOK CHEUN

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*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, Deputy State Coroner, having investigated the disappearance of **Hok Cheun HOU** with an inquest held at the **Perth Coroner’s Court, Court 85, CLC Building, 501 Hay Street, Perth** on 8 February 2022, find that the death of **Hok Chen HOU** has been established beyond all reasonable doubt and that the identity of the deceased person was **Hok Chen HOU** and that death occurred on or about **23 March 1989** in the ocean approximately 200 nautical miles from Exmouth, Western Australia as a result of an unknown cause in the following circumstances:*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Hok Cheun Hou was a Hong Kong national who was working as a general steward on an ocean liner, the ‘Coral Princess’, when he disappeared in March 1989. The vessel was in Australian waters when Mr Hou went missing, some 200 kilometres off the coast of Exmouth.
2. On the basis of the information provided by the WA Police in relation to Mr Hou’s disappearance, I determined that pursuant to s 23 of the *Coroners Act 1996* (WA), there was reasonable cause to suspect that Mr Hou had died and that his death was a reportable death. I therefore made a direction that a coroner hold an inquest into the circumstances of the suspected death.<sup>1</sup>
3. I held an inquest at the Perth Coroner’s Court on 8 February 2022. The inquest consisted of the tendering of documentary evidence compiled through the police investigation conducted into Mr Hou’s disappearance, as well as hearing evidence from a police officer, Sergeant Jenny Farman, who had prepared a report in relation to Mr Hou’s disappearance while working at the Missing Persons Unit as part of the Homicide Squad.

## **BACKGROUND**

4. Mr Hou was married and lived in Hong Kong when not working. He was 57 years of age at the time of his disappearance. He was a Chinese National. In 1989, Mr Hou was employed as a General Steward onboard the Coral Princess, which was operated by a Singapore based company, China Navigation Co Ltd. Unfortunately, little more is known about Mr Hou’s personal circumstances, and the shipping company was unable to provide any further information.<sup>2</sup>

## **DISCOVERY THAT MR HOU WAS MISSING**

5. There are conflicting accounts of when Mr Hou was last seen alive. The initial records indicate that he was last seen in his cabin on the evening of 22 March 1989. Another crew member, Hung Wai Ho, had worked with Mr Hou on the evening of 22 March 1989 cleaning the Moonlight room. He also shared a cabin with Mr Hou. Mr Ho last saw Mr Hou sitting in the cabin by himself at about 8.15 pm. Mr Ho finished his duties at about 1.00 am on 23 March 1989 and returned to the cabin to rest, but did not recall seeing Mr Hou in his bed or elsewhere in the cabin. Mr Hou had reported he did not know of Mr Hou being involved in any arguments or having any personal difficulties or financial issues at that time.<sup>3</sup>
6. Another crew member, Sui Ka Mok, also worked with Mr Hou in the Moonlight room that night, and also shared a cabin with him. He had returned to the cabin at about 8.30 pm and did not recall seeing Mr Hou in the room at that time, nor when

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<sup>1</sup> Section 23 *Coroners Act* Direction of Deputy State Coroner Linton dated 2 July 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

he got up to go to work again at 4.30 am. Similarly to Mr Ho, Mr Mok was not aware of Mr Hou being involved in any arguments with other crew or having any personal issues.<sup>4</sup>

7. Che Kwong Lai, who also shared the cabin, remembered seeing Mr Hou asleep in bed at about 7.15 pm but did not remember seeing him later in the night. He recalled Mr Hou often complaining of toothache and feeling uncomfortable due to his dental issues, but no other personal issues.<sup>5</sup>
8. A later report suggested Mr Hou had been seen by another staff member the next morning. Second Steward Yu Wing Kwok, at 8.10 am the following morning, being 23 March 1989, whilst Mr Hou was carrying out his usual duties in the Coral Lounge on the vessel. Mr Hou was said to have been carrying a towel and water bucket at the time.<sup>6</sup> However, there is other evidence to suggest that Mr Hou did not attend work that morning, so it is unclear how much reliance can be placed on Mr Kwok's account.
9. What is clear is that at approximately 9.15 am on 23 March 1989, crew members raised the alarm as Mr Hou was not in his usual place when on duty and did not appear for breakfast in the crew's mess room. He did not respond to any calls made over the public address system.<sup>7</sup>
10. Mr Hou's superior, Choi Fat Tang, who was in charge of Mr Hou's duties, recalled seeing Mr Hou when he completed his duties at 7.00 pm on the evening of 22 March 1989, but did not recall seeing him again. He reported that he found out at 8.15 am that Mr Hou did not report for duty at 7.30 am on 23 March 1989. He thought this was strange, so he reported it to his manager.<sup>8</sup> When Mr Hou did not turn up for his crew meal at 9.15 am, the matter was escalated to the Captain of the ship.
11. At 9.40 am on 23 March 1989, the Captain was advised that Mr Hou could not be found on board the ship. Captain Anderson coordinated a further thorough search of the vessel, but no sign of Mr Hou was found.<sup>9</sup>
12. At that time, the coordinates provided showed the vessel was some 200 nautical miles off Exmouth. The Captain turned the vessel around and they followed a path along a reciprocal track to their previous course, with lookouts posted to search the water for any sign of Mr Hou. The weather at the time was cloudy and visibility was said to be good. The search continued until 1.30 pm but Mr Hou was not located. His personal documents and effects were located.<sup>10</sup>
13. Another vessel, the Liberian ship the 'Alps Highway, was also in the area and assisted in the search from 12.25 pm until 1.30 pm.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 10.

<sup>5</sup> Exhibit 1, Tabs 4, 7 and 9.

<sup>6</sup> Exhibit 1, Tabs 4 - 6.

<sup>7</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 5.

<sup>8</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 8.

<sup>9</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 5.

<sup>10</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 5.

<sup>11</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 5.

14. At 2.00 pm, Captain Anderson made the decision to abandon the marine search as it had been unsuccessful. Captain Anderson sent a series of messages to the shipping company, advising that Mr Hou was missing at sea and the details of the search that had been conducted. He requested that Mr Hou's next of kin be notified. The shipping company sent a telex to the Hong Kong Marine Department advising that Mr Hou was missing at sea, presumed to have drowned.<sup>12</sup>
15. The Australian Sea Safety were notified by telephone and a radio broadcast was released advising other vessels in the vicinity to keep a lookout for a man overboard.<sup>13</sup>

### **POLICE INVESTIGATION**

16. On 25 March 1989 at about 8.10 am, Fremantle Police acknowledged receipt of notification that Mr Hou was missing, and that he was believed to have fallen overboard approximately 200 nautical miles off the coast of Western Australia.<sup>14</sup> Sergeant Austin from Fremantle Police Station took a missing person report from Captain Anderson.<sup>15</sup>
17. The shipping company provided police with a medical report in relation to Mr Hou, which indicated that between 21 December 1988 and 4 February 1989, Mr Hou saw a doctor 11 times. All of the visits related to dental issues. Mr Hou had teeth extracted in Penang but expressed ongoing concern that there was another tooth that required extraction. It was felt the tooth looked good and it was suggested he might be suffering from trigeminal neuralgia, which is a chronic pain condition that affects the face. It can be triggered by dental procedures. The doctors he saw tried to reassure Mr Hou that there was nothing wrong with his remaining teeth and prescribed pain medication, but he remained distressed. This provided some insight into his mental state at the time of his disappearance. One of the crew members recalled his ongoing complaints about toothache and discomfort as well.<sup>16</sup>
18. Mr Hou's disappearance was referred to the Missing Persons Bureau in due course. On 19 April 1989, Constable Carter from the Missing Persons Bureau forwarded a report to his superior, Sergeant Johnson, advising that all normal avenues of inquiry had been completed in relation to Mr Hou, and he was still missing. Constable Carter recommended that the case be filed, pending any further information.<sup>17</sup>
19. In 2009, police made further inquiries and uploaded Mr Hou's disappearance to the National Missing Person database to ensure police in other jurisdictions could compare Mr Hou's details with any unidentified human remains.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>13</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>14</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>15</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>16</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4 and Tab 19.

<sup>17</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>18</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

**RECENT POLICE REVIEW**

20. A recent police review has found no additional evidence since the original police investigation. Between May 2019 and February 2020, ‘proof of life’ checks were made with relevant government agencies within Australia, which found no evidence Mr Hou had been in contact with any of them. There is no DNA or fingerprint evidence available in relation to Mr Hou, which makes identification of remains difficult, but at this stage there are no unidentified remains located that match Mr Hou’s description or circumstances.<sup>19</sup>
21. Unfortunately, recent enquiries with the China Navigation Co Ltd, which owned the vessel, did not produce any useful information in relation to current contact details of Mr Hou’s next of kin. However, there is nothing to suggest that he has made any contact with his family.
22. At the conclusion of the police review, it was suggested that the most likely possible reason for Mr Hou’s disappearance was that he fell into the sea by accident while carrying out his duties as a general steward and drowned. It was also suggested that it could not be ruled out that Mr Hou intentionally entered the water and drowned, noting he had been suffering ongoing toothache and had complained of pain and discomfort to doctors and his colleague. There was no evidence of any criminality in relation to Mr Hou’s disappearance, based upon the known evidence.<sup>20</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

23. Sadly, the evidence in relation to this matter is limited, given the vessel did not return to Australian shores after Mr Hou’s disappearance was discovered, which necessarily limited the extent of the police investigation. However, I am satisfied there are no suspicious circumstances in relation to his disappearance. I am also satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that Mr Hou died around the time his disappearance was discovered on 23 March 1989.
24. The death was likely due to drowning or injuries sustained when he hit the water, on the basis it appears he either accidentally fell or deliberately went overboard, but there is insufficient evidence for me to be able to be satisfied of a cause or manner of death and the manner must therefore remain open.

S H Linton  
Deputy State Coroner  
9 February 2022

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<sup>19</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.

<sup>20</sup> Exhibit 1, Tab 4.