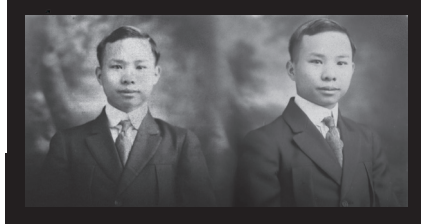
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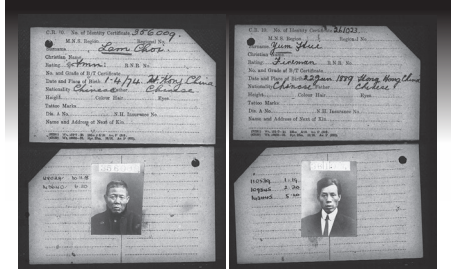
History

Titanic prejudice

In his new book, Steven Schwankert has tried to clear the names of the *Titanic*'s Chinese survivors while also underscoring the fact that immigrant experiences have not changed much since 1912. **Mariella Radaelli** reports.



Above: A photo of *Titanic* survivor Lee Bing, taken around 1920. Lee settled in Galt, Ontario, and ran a thriving restaurant business.



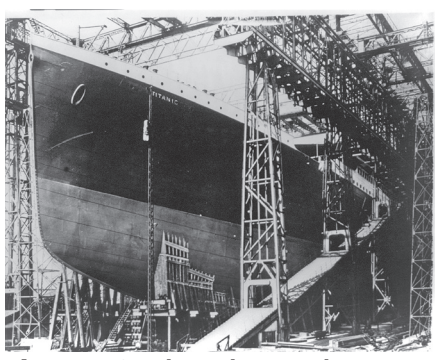
From left: The photos on the crew registration cards of *Titanic* survivors Lam Choi (Ah Lam) and Yum Hui (Ling Hee) give the impression of their being seasoned sailors. The documents are now part of The National Archives of the UK.

Right: *Titanic* survivor Fong Wing-sun is flanked by his sons John (left) and Tom in a photo from the early '70s.





Left: The extraordinary grit displayed by Fong Wing-sun during his fight to survive the *Titanic* disaster shines through in this photo, taken around 1920.



Above: A 1911 photo showing the *Titanic* under construction at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, Ireland.
Below: Fong Wing-sun is seen with his friend, artist Grace Lai, in Chicago, in a photo from the late '70s or early '80s.



Remarkably, six of the eight Chinese passengers who sailed on the *Titanic* survived the disaster on that moonless night of April 15, 1912. Touted as the most luxurious ocean liner ever, the "unsinkable" vessel that had set sail from Southampton, England, sank about 740 kilometers off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, after it hit an iceberg, killing 1,517 of the 2,200 people on board.

The pre- and post-*Titanic* lives of its Chinese survivors have been a bit of an obsession with Steven Schwankert, a Beijing-based American maritime historian. Published in April, his new book, *The Six: The Untold Story of the Titanic's Chinese Survivors*, marks the culmination of a journey that began in 2013. In between then and now, Schwankert was also the lead researcher on the documentary film *The Six* (2021), directed by Arthur Jones.

While they were on board, the Chinese passengers — sailors on their way to start work on a newly opened Caribbean shipping route — went almost unnoticed. Following the disaster, however, the survivors among them began attracting attention for the wrong reasons. It was alleged, by both the public and the press, that they had gained access to lifeboats by unfair means.

"Newspaper articles containing baseless and vile accusations against these men were appearing in New York and elsewhere," says Schwankert, quoting headlines such as "Chinese coolies save their lives by clever hiding" and "Disguised as women they secure places in lifeboats".

It was primarily his wish to clear the names of the *Titanic*'s Chinese survivors that prompted Schwankert to write their story.

Their separate ways

The Chinese sailors traveled as a group on a single third-class passenger ticket that cost a little less than 60 pounds ($292) at the time. It was paid for by their future employer, the Donald Steamship Co. The man who hired them was also on board the *Titanic*.

Though the papers carried by the Chinese seamen identify them as Hong Kong citizens, Schwankert has reason to believe that most of them had roots in Taishan county, Guangdong province. After arriving in Hong Kong, they, or their ancestors, had settled along Des Voeux Road West. "Here they found a series of boarding houses, employment agencies, and remittance offices catering to their needs," he says.

Though they were lumped together as a bunch of undistinguished sailors during the voyage, Schwankert has tried to reconstruct their lives as individuals in his book. He says that group leader, Ah Lam, might have been born in Hong Kong. Lam, who was 38 at the time, had already spent several years as a sailor and yet "was no more than a fireman, condemned to working in the engine room". Available documents suggest that he was contracted to earn 1 pound more per month than the rest of the group on his new job.

Schwankert draws attention to the fact that Lam "looks healthy but older than his age", in the photo on his crew registration document. "The lines on his face could be waves upon the ocean. He is not smiling."

Not much is known about Lam's life in the aftermath of the *Titanic* disaster, as indeed is the case with another survivor, Cheong Foo.

By comparison, the story of another Hong Kong native, Ling Hee, who was traveling under the alias of Yum Hui, is more fleshed out. His crew registration card says he was born on Jan 22, 1889, and that his position was that of a fireman. The photo on the card shows a young man wearing a suit and tie — a scar streaking across his left cheek. In the early '40s, he resurfaced in the state of California, living in San Francisco's Chinatown for some years before joining the fishing and canning industry in Monterey. He is buried in the Chinese Six Companies Cemetery in Colma.

Lee Bing, from Hengtang village in northeastern Taishan and 32 at the time of the disaster, eventually settled in Galt, Ontario, where he opened restaurants and prospered.

The ashes of the fifth survivor, Chang Chip, are entombed in a London cemetery.

The central character in Schwankert's narrative is Fong Wing-sun, a native of Xiachuan Island in the South China Sea. On board the *Titanic*, he went by the name of Fang Lang and gave his age as 26, although he was probably 18. Fong saved his life by clutching onto a floating door. By the end of that fateful night, he was half-frozen and calling out for help in Cantonese, per observers' accounts.

James Cameron, who filmed a scene inspired by Fong's fight to save his life in his 1997 blockbuster hit *Titanic*, but deleted it from the final cut, writes in his introduction to *The Six*: "That man's grit and determination to survive and my admiration for him inspired the now-famous Jack and Rose ending to *Titanic*," in which Rose, like the real-life Fong, survives by clinging to a floating door.

The American Dream

Fong was chasing the American Dream when he boarded the *Titanic*. The plan was to eventually ditch the sailor's life and start a small business together with colleagues Lee Ling, 28, and Len Lam, 23, in Ohio. But on the night of the shipwreck both his mates died from hypothermia. Len and Lee had followed their would-be-employer, and when either of them failed to get onto a lifeboat, all three ended up in the freezing water.

After spending years in the United States as an undocumented migrant, Fong earned his right of abode in the country and became an entrepreneur in Chicago. When he was 62, his Hong Kong friends introduced him to Marie, a 23-year-old Hong Kong resident, originally from Guangdong. The two married in Hong Kong, where their first child, John, was born. In 1959, the family returned to the USA and settled in Milwaukee, welcoming their second son, Tom, soon afterward.

The couple got divorced in 1966. Fong moved back to Chicago in 1973, and soon went on to acquire Cozy Inn, Wisconsin's oldest Chinese restaurant, located in Janesville. He passed away in 1986, and is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Stickney, Illinois. The Janesville eatery is run by his son Tom.

When Schwankert visited Tom in Janesville, the latter revealed that his father always carried a notebook. Fong's sons were told that they would be free to read it only after his death. Unfortunately, the notebook is lost, but a poem in which Fong recalls the miraculous moment of realizing that he had survived the disaster, remains.

"A great-nephew of Fong's shared the poem with us during our visit to his native village," Schwankert says. "Fong had sent it to him and his mother."

Reconstructing history

Tracking down the survivors' descendants turned out to be a long and arduous process for Schwankert. Going by what he has pieced together on the basis of archival materials and interviews, here's how the story of the *Titanic*'s Chinese passengers might have unfolded on that fateful night.

They stuck together until the *Titanic* was almost totally submerged. Ah Lam, Chang Chip, Lee Bing and Ling Hee managed to get on a collapsible lifeboat marked C.

Schwankert has built a full-scale model of lifeboat C to illustrate his case that given the boat's structure and size, it would not have been possible for anyone, let alone four grown-ups, to sail away in it while remaining hidden.

"It was important for us to move from the realm of legend and myth to where we could test what was possible … so that the laws of physics could be the final arbiter," the author says.

Titanic expert Tad Fitch says that Schwankert's research solves the identity of the *Titanic*'s Chinese survivors and offers invaluable cultural context that brings their lives into sharp focus.

Xu Guoqi, a professor of history and founder of the Institute of Transnational History of China at the University of Hong Kong, however, contends that *The Six* might only have skimmed the surface of "a story of transnational significance", waiting to be unearthed. "The book and the documentary are still insufficient for us to know the whole story. They are just the beginning."

Schwankert hopes other researchers will pick up the story from where he and his team have left off. He points out that the problems faced by the *Titanic*'s Chinese passengers continue to exist, though it is time that "we can begin to understand them, recognize them, and then begin to address them".

"I'm talking about prejudice and our attitude toward immigrants."



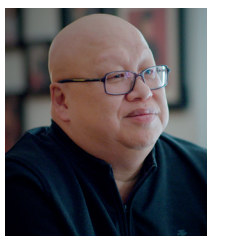
Above: *Titanic* survivor Fong Wing-sun's descendants gather for a Thanksgiving dinner at the family home in Janesville, Wisconsin.



Above: Steven Schwankert, author of *The Six: The Untold Story of The Titanic's Chinese Survivors*, inspects a full-scale model of the lifeboat used by four of the *Titanic*'s Chinese survivors.



Left: Schwankert has put 12 years of research and writing into reconstructing the stories of the *Titanic*'s six Chinese survivors.



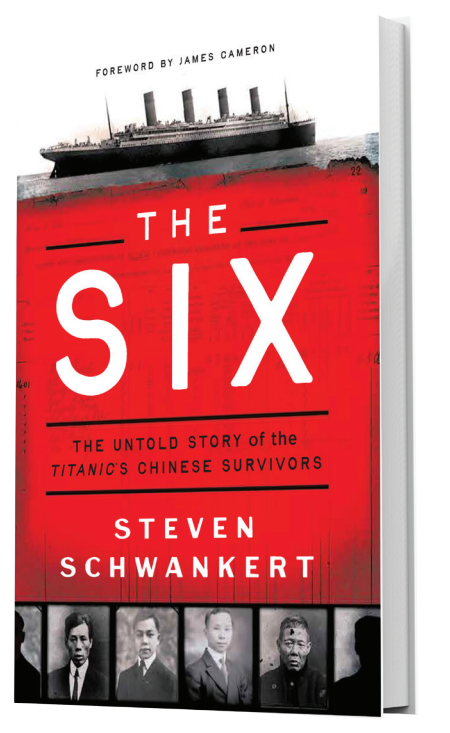
Right: Today, Fong Wing-sun's son Tom runs Cozy Inn, the oldest Wisconsin Chinese restaurant, which his father acquired in the '70s.

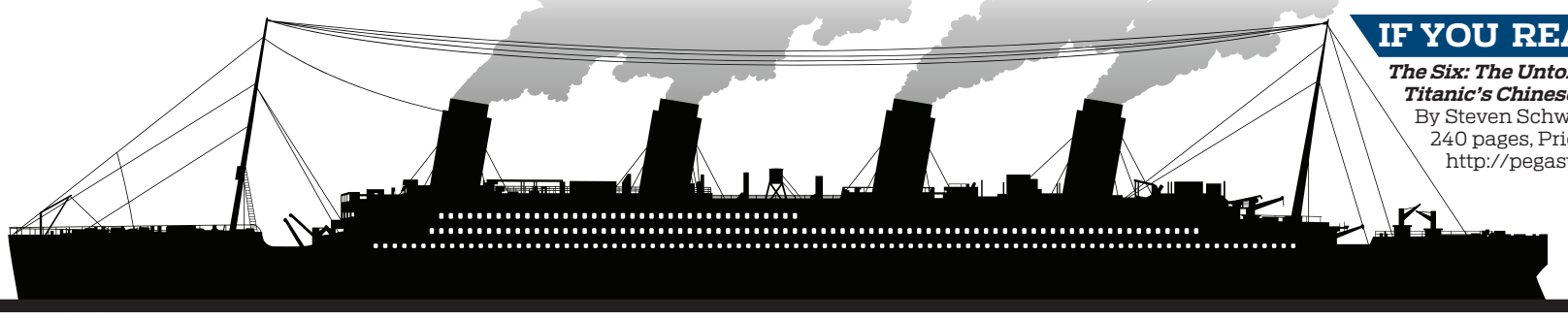


Top: Schwankert scouts around for the burial spot of one of the *Titanic*'s Chinese victims at a cemetery in Halifax, Canada.



Above: Fong Wing-sun's childhood home in Xiachuan Island, Guangdong province, gets a visit from the author of *The Six*. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY





IF YOU READ

The Six: The Untold Story of the Titanic's Chinese Survivors
By Steven Schwankert
240 pages, Price: HK$288
http://pegasusbooks.com/books

Exhibition

Filling plot holes in the lost-relics story

By **AMY MULLINS**

When we look at a painting, sculpture or historical artifact in a gallery or museum, most of the time we share a collective confidence in where the object came from. We know Michelangelo's *David* was commissioned by the church in Florence during the Renaissance and then moved, with permission, to the Galleria dell'Accademia, where it stands today. A new exhibition at JC Contemporary in Tai Kwun, however, draws attention to the countless artifacts in museums worldwide whose provenance isn't quite as clear and raises questions of cultural displacement.

"My great-grandfather was an archaeologist and architect based in Palestine for 20 years. Through him and also having lived in Palestine and Lebanon for some years, I became interested in the history of archaeology and how it's entwined with the histories of colonialism," says British artist Maeve Brennan, setting the scene for her eponymous show, *Maeve Brennan: Records*.

After moving back to London, Brennan continued to nurture her interest in the architectural relics of West Asia, especially "the global demand for these objects". It is estimated that the illicit trade of cultural heritage items is the third-largest contraband market in the world, trailing only weapons and drugs.

"We find ourselves at a moment in history where museums and institutions are reflecting on their collections and how they were formed," Brennan says. "There are rampant debates around the repatriation and restitution of cultural objects, and this is the context within which this exhibition is framed."

The artist's first solo exhibition in Asia combines forensic investigation and storytelling through traditional art and film to interrogate how we consume physical history. She draws on science and existing documentation, collaborating with geologists and archaeologists — including forensic archaeologist Christos Tsirogiannis — aiming to upset the balance and challenge so-called "common knowledge" and dominant narratives by uncovering the hidden layers in the history of heritage trafficking.

Alongside sculpture and works on paper, *Siticulosa* (2025), commissioned for the Tai Kwun exhibition, is a companion to Brennan's 2022 film *An Excavation*. The film gives both smugglers of precious artifacts as well as the people trying to stop them a voice. She traces a stolen object's journey from the source until it lands in a private collection, exposing the network that supports the trade.

The films in the exhibition are complemented by *Box 29_01* (2022), a reproduction of a Polaroid photograph discovered alongside looted objects in Italy, and *Slow Photos* (2023), a series of blank pictures. The seemingly harmless Polaroid represents a sinister side of the trade — stolen artifacts were usually documented by the perpetrators, a bit like proof-of-life pictures from hostage takings. Brennan says that the empty photos represent the "gaps and holes that open up where these objects are stolen from".

Though the focus of the films is an excavation in Puglia, Italy, *Records* has wider resonances, particularly in the light of the 2024 repatriation of several Cambodian sculptures from New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. These were illegally trafficked in the '70s, just one of dozens of instances of looted items going home in the last few years.

Records is part of a larger investigation Brennan has been working on since 2018. Called *The Goods*, the multidisciplinary project distills massive archives down to their essence in its examination of looted antiquities and the moral crossroads the world currently finds itself at. In making connections between objects, places and history, *Records* turns a spotlight on colonial violence, of which looting is an element, and invites viewers to consider issues of ownership and the ethics of preservation.

"People often think this is something from the past, that objects aren't stolen and delivered to museums any longer," says Brennan. "It's still very much an issue."





Top: *Box29_01* is a reproduction of a Polaroid photo found next to looted objects in Italy. **Above:** *Maeve Brennan: Records* at Tai Kwun features sculptures representing stolen pieces of architecture.

IF YOU GO

Maeve Brennan: Records
Dates: Through June 8
Venue: JC Contemporary, Tai Kwun, 10 Hollywood Road, Central
www.taikwun.hk