“The Defunct Celestial:” Chinese Funerary Practices in Nineteenth Century Australia

Abstract:

The horse-drawn hearse topped by black plumes is an enduring image of the Victorian era funeral even in nineteenth century rural Australia. However, occasionally the deceased being conveyed to the cemetery originated in China. Chinese funerals from this period ranged from being indistinguishable from the norms of the dominant British burial culture exported to Australia, to those which mirrored contemporary Chinese practices as far as the local conditions allowed. The funerals of the latter group were described in great detail by the newspapers of the day. To satisfy the curiosity of observers, the scribes attending these funerals described, in as much detail as possible, the rituals performed in the obsequies, and left behind a rich, but previously unexploited archival resource. The funerals of the “defunct celestials” (a phrase often employed by Australian newspapers) varied greatly according to the social standing of the deceased, and mirrored the social classes of the communities where they lived, allowing direct comparison between Chinese funerals and those of the broader community.

Keywords: *Australia, nineteenth century, Chinese, funerals, burials.*