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The Archaeology of Chinese funerary practices in Colonial Victoria

ABSTRACT

The contribution of archaeology to the understanding of Chinese funerary practices in Victoria – while significant – is largely unknown by members of the public. This report aims to review the archaeological evidence that exists regarding Chinese burial practices in Victoria prior to the 20th century and, thereby, bring such evidence to a wider audience. Evidence uncovered solely through archaeological studies details the specific locations in which a Chinese cemetery may be located (in accordance with *feng shui*). A particular survey by Dr. Hu Jin has provided an abundance of details regarding the everyday lives of Chinese Victorians as well as their personal values. The essay concludes with an examination of various monuments present in Chinese cemeteries throughout Victoria and their significance in Chinese culture.

Chinese migration to Australia began c. 1854 with the discovery of gold in Victoria and New South Wales. A sudden influx of Chinese men seeking wealth to the colony of Victoria, as well as a longer-term occupation of Victoria, has left behind a great deal of archaeological material relating specifically to Chinese burial practices that were observed during the colonial period. Examinations of these materials allows for an in-depth understanding of Chinese religious beliefs and societal values that were present in so-called 'Hung Men' (i.e., the Chinese) society in Victoria.

Archaeology is the study of the human past via examination of the physical remains of past human activity. It is a multidisciplinary affair, involving not only excavation, but translation, the geosciences, anthropology and history. Archaeology shall be defined in a broad sense as such for the purposes of this essay.

Most Chinese migrants to Victoria (particularly those who arrived for the gold rush of the mid-nineteenth century) seem to have migrated from southeastern China. Here, the traditional funerary rituals required a number of activities. First, the deceased was buried (the location of Chinese burial grounds and cemeteries was, ideally, in an area of balance according to *feng shui* (Abraham and Wegars, 2003: 61)), with their worldly goods (such as paper money, important documents and other useful objects) being burned in a small purpose-

built structure (colloquially known as a 'burner') near the burial site. It was believed that this burning of vital documents and objects enabled the deceased to access and use the items in the afterlife. After approximately ten years (once the flesh had rotted away), the deceased was exhumed and the bones reburied in a ceramic urn on a hill near the deceased's hometown (Jack, 1995: 301). Finally, the urn was unearthed and placed in a family vault (Hu Jin, 2002, vol. 2: 80). In Victoria, this process – where relatives were typically unavailable – was undertaken by Chinese associations ('tongs'), but this ideal means of Chinese burial did not always transpire: the logistics of returning the bones of the deceased to their Chinese hometown often meant that such a process never occurred (Lawrence and Davies, 2010: 416). For those fortunate enough to have belonged to a tong, the actual locating of graves presented a second problem: the temporary nature of grave markers placed upon initial burial were usually made of timber, resulting in an inability to locate graves. Consequently, there are numerous cemeteries and graveyards dotted around Victoria containing the remains of deceased Chinese who were never returned to their hometown for reburial. Most of the dead lie in unmarked graves. Conversely, there are those whose remains were exhumed according to custom, and it is believed that a temple known as the 'Joss House' in Bendigo was once used to temporarily store the bones of exhumed Chinese migrants from that area (Hu Jin, 2002, vol. 2: 80); other Chinese temples may have been used for the same purpose.

Unlike some Western family names – such as 'Smith' and 'Butler', which are believed to reflect the occupation of an ancestor – most Chinese names are descriptive of the person themselves. Dr Hu Jin surveyed a wide range of Chinese cemeteries and burial grounds in Victoria and, from the names shown on the gravestones of those buried, was able to produce basic background information regarding individuals buried in the cemeteries (Hu Jin, 2002). In his six-volume compendium, Hu Jin also describes the extant features that were visible at the cemeteries at the time of his surveying them. In addition to detailed descriptions of gravestones, Hu Jin notes the presence of four particular structures in separate cemeteries: an Obelisk monument at the Echuca Cemetery and a second Obelisk at the White Hills Cemetery in Bendigo, a Chinese burner at Campbell's Creek Cemetery (in Castlemaine) and at the Old Ballarat Cemetery (as noted in Abraham and Wegars, 2003: 65) – to name only two of the myriad of examples surviving – and a memorial plaque denoting the location of a former memorial tree (the so-called 'Pomelo Tree') at the Bendigo Cemetery.

The burner at the Old Chinese Section of the Campbell's Creek Cemetery, Castlemaine, is described as a hexagonal-shaped brick monument, found in the southeast corner of the Old Chinese Section (Hu Jin, 2002, vol. 1: 8). Its purpose was to burn paper and other "mundane articles" (ibid.), and was built in a manner designed to prevent the spread of fire to surrounding vegetation (ibid.). It was believed that the burning of money and other objects would allow the deceased to provide the deity/deities with gifts equivalent to the burned objects as well as allowing the re-use of these objects in the afterlife (ibid.).

A second burner may be found in the Chinese Section at the Old Cemetery at Echuca (ibid., vol. 3: 33). The burner is a cuboid brick structure, with external cement rendering, sitting atop a square-based platform. An arch opening on one side of the cube allows access into an internal cavity that housed the flame; it is through this hole that money and other goods were entered into the burner. Above the flame, four layers of slate were arranged in a terraced fashion, with a small gap left in the centre of each layer, creating a chimney through which the smoke could exit the internal area. A Chinese inscription above the arch opening on the exterior of the burner may be translated as 'Assembled treasures burner' (ibid.).

Hu Jin reports the presence of an obelisk monument in both the Old Cemetery at Echuca and the Bendigo Cemetery (ibid., vol. 3: 31 and vol. 5: 174, respectively). Both these obelisks were erected in 1961 and fall outside the scope of this report. However, their presence may reflect practices in China at the time of the interment of Chinese people at both cemeteries, and their inscriptions most certainly describe those buried at the site during the colonial period. Both monuments are described as a "square base pointed tip stone pagoda" (ibid.) and the Echuca monument was carved from 'blue' granite (which refers to ordinary, Victorian granite). Both obelisks feature the symbol of the 'Hung Men Zhi Gong Dang' (that is, the Chinese Masons): two compasses facing each other. The Bendigo obelisk features an inscription that dedicates the monument to the "deceased members of the brotherhood of Big Gold Mountain", where the term 'brotherhood' refers to the Chinese Masons and the 'Big Gold Mountain' refers to the gold-bearing alluvium deposited on hills in the Bendigo region (ibid., vol. 5:174). A similar message is to be found on the Echuca obelisk (ibid., vol. 3:32).

A plaque may be observed outside the Chinese section at Bendigo Cemetery. The plaque was placed at the former location of a Pomelo tree, planted in 1996. The tree served as a memorial to those buried in

the Chinese section of the cemetery: the Pomelo tree was known to the Chinese as the "tree of life" (ibid., vol.2: 8). Like the obelisk monuments, the tree was presented after the period under study, but refers to the Chinese who died during the colonial period. A cutting taken from another Pomelo tree (a second cutting from which the tree in the Cemetery grew) resulted in another tree growing behind a shop in Bridge Street, Bendigo. The shop was eventually demolished, but the tree survived and is now the centre of the Golden Dragon Museum (which was built on the site in 1990) (ibid.). The cultural significance of the tree cannot be over-emphasised: cuttings from this tree in Bridge Street were planted in the Joss House temple and in Chinese cemeteries throughout Victoria.

Leaves from the trees in the various cemeteries are placed in a basin of water near or upon an altar during a funeral, and the portion of the water taken home by mourners following burial, with the water being used to wash the mourner's hands and face upon arrival at their residences (ibid.). The water, having been filtered by the Pomelo leaves, is believed to be in its purest form at such a time. While Hu Jin only records this practice as having transpired in the Bendigo region in the late twentieth century, it is possible that the tradition would have been undertaken during the colonial period if such a tree were present at the time. However, no evidence of such has been documented in the archaeological record. In addition to Dr Hu Jin's observations, Abraham and Wegars (2003:63) describe the existence of altar monuments in both the Old and New (Chinese) Ballarat Cemeteries. They argue that the altar was merely a collective grave marker and memorial, rather than serving any specific ritual purpose: they do not mention the existence of any basin being extruded into the altar for placing water (ibid.). However, it is possible that Hu Jin was referring to a portable, ceramic basin, rather than a basin cut into the altar itself. If such were true, there may not be any archaeological evidence to be found in support of this view. Such a ceramic dish may be present in museum collections or may also be considered an everyday item to be found in any Chinese household.

At the Campbell's Creek Cemetery in Castlemaine and the Beechworth Cemetery, Hu Jin uncovered symbolism in the layout of the cemeteries: in the northern sections of both cemeteries, two groups of gravestones – separated by a creek – were arranged to face each other. It is believed that the creek in either cemetery represented the Yangtze River, while the two opposing groups of graves represented the two opposing factions in control of roughly half of Chinese territory each: the Tartar Qing faction and the Ming faction. To the south, the graves faced away from the northern groups,

resulting in a layout similar to the *pin* character of the traditional Chinese alphabet (which refers to conduct)(Hu Jin, 2002, vol. 1: 70). This reference to personal conduct reflects the importance of personal behaviour in Chinese society.

Historic records from cemeteries and from the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages are able to provide approximate numbers and intimate details regarding deceased individuals buried in Victoria. However, in cases where such records are lost or were never created, archaeology – especially in the case of Chinese burials – can be a particularly effective method of gaining greater knowledge of deceased individuals and the societies to which they belonged. Dr Hu Jin's study of Chinese cemeteries throughout Victoria and New South Wales has provided archaeologists with a wealth of knowledge: the meaning of translated names has provided a second means of obtaining a basic understanding of the occupation of individuals buried in Chinese cemeteries (which can assist to either confirm or reject information provided by death certificates); examinations of monuments in cemeteries has provided insight into the religious values of Chinese migrants to colonial Victoria; observations of the layout of two cemeteries have revealed symbolism that reflect societal values. While much may be learned from historical records, it is also true that a great detail of information may be gleaned simply through non-intrusive archaeological surveys of what remains of Chinese cemeteries today.

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