

Study on the Influencing Factors and Mechanisms of the Evolution of the Architectural Characteristics of Guangfu Ancestral Halls in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: This paper discusses ancestral hall architecture within the context of the Cantonese folk lineage in the Pearl River Delta. Using a typological research approach and chronological analysis, various factors that have influenced the evolution of ancestral hall architecture are analyzed. The study specifically investigates the features of ancestral halls during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Three periods of ancient China are analyzed: The transition from Ming to Qing, the mid-Qing dynasty, and the late Qing dynasty. The variables of each period and how they influence the evolution of architectural typological features are identified. Based on our analysis, architectural features are related to economic and social factors, materials available, and craftsmanship of the construction workers.

Keywords: Guangfu ancestral halls; Architectural type characteristics; Evolutionary influences; Evolutionary impact mechanisms

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1. Introduction

Ancestral halls are temples where clansmen worship their ancestors and manage their clans^[1]. The formation of ancestral halls is due to the long history of feudal patriarchal society. The family temple system was born in the Zhou Dynasty, only the royal family and nobility could build family temples and ancestral halls. In the Song Dynasty, *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals* advocated for the establishment of ancestral halls within families. During Ming Jiajing's reign, the *Tui En Decree* and the popularization of the *Book of Rites* made ancestral halls more accessible to commoners. Ancestral halls are also an abstract concept, encompassing both the architecture and cultural significance associated with them. The architectural characteristics of ancestral halls primarily encompass the building's size and spatial arrangement. Architectural elements encompass the building's appearance, form, and decorative features, all of which reflect the cultural significance of the structure. Additionally, architectural

materials and craftsmanship contribute to the texture and overall aesthetic of the building.

The term “Guangfu” was first used in the Ming dynasty, it refers to present-day central and western Guangdong Province and southeastern Guangxi Province ^[2]. In the socio-cultural context, Guangfu also refers to the Han Chinese people in the Lingnan region who use the Cantonese dialect ^[3]. In this paper, Guangfu refers to the Pearl River Delta (PRD) region centered on Guangzhou, and the main area of study is the “Nanfanshun Guangfu Core Area,” the economic and cultural center of the PRD, i.e., the historical Nanhai, Panyu, and Shunde counties. The design of Guangfu ancestral halls is an art that combines local geography and climatic conditions for site selection, layout, and styling. According to their different functions and nature, they can be divided into four categories: ancestral halls, historical figure memorial halls, temples named after academies, and private temples or study rooms named after schools or study rooms ^[4]. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Guangfu ancestral halls underwent three peaks of construction, which can be divided into a period of shaping (late Ming and early Qing Dynasty), maturing (mid-Qing Dynasty), and mechanizing (late Qing Dynasty). The architectural type characteristics of Guangfu ancestral halls in different periods are obvious and follow certain evolution laws. This paper summarizes the epochal variables of the three periods, analyzes the factors affecting the evolution of the architectural characteristics of ancestral halls, and sums up the mechanism of the evolution of the architectural characteristics in each period.

2. Analysis of factors influencing the evolution of architectural characteristics of Guangfu ancestral halls in Ming and Qing dynasties

2.1. Late Ming and early Qing dynasties (shaping period)

(1) Social factors

In the third year of Ming Hongwu, the *Daming Rites* was repaired, and the system of ancestral halls in *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals* was generally accepted by the scholars, and the phenomenon of unauthorized building of ancestral halls had already appeared in the civil society. In the same period, the court through nomination, examination, and other ways to create the local gentry class, the local elders were included in the power system of the dynasty and made them become the main force of the management of the local ^[5]. With the promulgation of the *Book of Rites* and *Tui En Decree* during the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, the ancestral halls of commoners were legalized. Consequently, many scholars in the Guangzhou region, while supporting the *Book of Rites* and Confucian rituals, also actively practiced the idea of respecting their clans in their hometowns. As a result, the number of ancestral halls increased significantly, giving rise to the first folk ancestral halls. This led to a peak in the construction of ancestral halls, with many featuring three halls and three openings ^[6,7]. Officials and eunuchs vigorously promoted the construction of the family system, and ancestral halls became a strong bond between clans, seen as a symbol of the “noble and prestigious families.” The construction of ancestral halls was prioritized over residential buildings, and the establishment of family temples and the editing of genealogies were regarded as the embodiment of the importance of the clan. Ancestral halls played a dominant role in the pattern of villages, which to a certain extent helped villages form a relatively stable morphological pattern ^[1]. As the local gentry in Guangzhou Province dominated the social order of the countryside, the integration of family traditions and township covenants prompted the ancestral halls to take on the functions of ancestor worship and the preaching of sacred edicts and township covenants ^[8]. The *Sixteen Articles of the Oracle* promulgated during the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty and the *Sacred Oracle of the Guangxun* promulgated during the Yongzheng period both emphasized the clan as the basic institutional unit of the state and determined that the ancestral halls needed to take on the

functions of clan rituals, education, almsgiving, and the establishment of social ties.

(2) Economic factors

From the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty onwards, the commercialization of agricultural production in the Guangfu area of the Pearl River Delta, the prosperity of town markets ^[9], the development of maritime trade, the massive accumulation of wealth, and the proliferation of ancestral hall construction activities. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Guangzhou Province was plagued by wars and natural disasters. During the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, the boundary was moved several times and the sea ban was enforced, so the Guangzhou Prefecture lacked the motivation and conditions to build ancestral halls in the turbulent situation, and the pattern of clan villages was destroyed, and the construction of ancestral halls was mainly repaired. In the middle of the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty, the government adopted a soft policy to restore economic development, redevelop coastal land, and reconstruct villages with issues related to settlement rights and development rights. In this event, large clans chose to gather together to proclaim the development rights of the Shatian, to rebuild or expand their ancestral halls, and to demonstrate the cohesion and prestige of their clan with one road with three entrances and five bays ^[1].

(3) Cultural factors

Before Zengde's reign during the Ming Dynasty, society was dominated by a culture characterized by frugality, childishness, melancholy, and conservatism. However, after the first year of Zhengde, there emerged a trend towards seeking variety and advocating novelty, with life becoming increasingly luxurious and extravagant. Consequently, ancestral halls expanded in scale, with decorative carvings such as scroll-like patterns and swirling clouds appearing on wooden and stone components ^[10]. Red was the most popular color at the end of the Ming Dynasty ^[11], and was therefore seen in many of the ancestral halls.

(4) Construction factors

During the Ming Dynasty, red sandstone from the Pearl River Delta was rich in resources, and mining techniques were developed, and it was widely used in architecture. Saltwater stones, consumable shells, and sea moons were easily accessible in the coastal areas and were also found in architecture ^[12]. Large quantities of hardwoods were procured from overseas to Guangfu for the production of supportive or decorative wooden elements. In the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty, the fire brick technology was not yet fully developed. However, in economically advanced regions like Shunde, the quality of bricks was relatively high. During this era, the art of Guangpai woodcarving evolved into single-layer hollow carving and began to be widely used in architectural ornamentation and furniture decoration. Wars during the Ming and early Qing dynasties led to the advancement of iron smelting, the improvement of tools; and processing technologies for granite, green bricks, and other hard construction materials were developed. During the Kangxi period, the mining of red sandstone and saltwater stone, so granite was used instead for building construction.

2.2. Mid-Qing dynasty (maturing period)

(1) Social factors

During the Kangxi and Qianlong periods, the traditional clan-son system faced challenges in its implementation. Clans began to assess their status based on their social accomplishments ^[13]. Some smaller clans, residing nearby and sharing the same or different surnames, resorted to lotteries and divination to decide on common surnames. They organized virtual blood ties through cross-regional

temples^[14]. The emergence of cross-regional temples led to the second climax of ancestral hall construction. With lenient state management, ancestral halls became more diverse in their layout, featuring structures like single-entry, triple-entry, and triple-ancestral halls.

(2) Economic factors

With the stable political situation during the Kangxi and Qianlong years, the development of the clan ancestral halls in the Shatian district brought the clans a stable income, and Guangzhou was in a position to monopolize foreign trade because of the Canton System, leading to the prosperity of the commodity economy^[15]. The rapid population growth in the same period prompted the division of clan houses and the redistribution of property. Additionally, the increasing prosperity of small family economies led to the disintegration of large ancestral hall organizations, giving rise to a form dominated by small ancestral halls among the common people^[16]. As the sizes of ancestral halls shrunk and shifted towards popularization and populism, the system of small ancestral halls became dominant^[9]. The widespread popularity of three-room halls and gate schools led to the emergence of more complex social forms and spatial structures in clan villages. The revival of commerce promoted the development of handicrafts and modern industry, increased social mobility, strengthened the connection between rural and urban areas, and led to the appearance of cross-domain temples in cities, known as academies, examination halls, villas, and so on^[8].

(3) Cultural factors

During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, the hierarchical division of ancestral halls and the rise of the commodity economy led to a growing self-awareness among the people. They began establishing “private taikongs” in their own names to showcase their achievements. Prevailing secular beliefs emphasized the importance of using the finest materials and techniques to erect grand shrine buildings, seen as a symbol of success for future generations. This mindset resulted in the construction of numerous intricately decorated shrines and mansions. Concurrently, Guangpai wood carving reached its pinnacle during this period, with noblemen’s fondness for “gold and blue” encouraging the widespread use of gold lacquer wood carving. This artistic expression combined painting and wood carving, featuring colors predominantly in yellow, green, and blue hues.

(4) Construction factors

Influenced by the ban on red sandstone and saltwater stone mining during the Kangxi dynasty and the advancement of granite mining and processing techniques, granite emerged as a popular alternative to wooden beams, which were vulnerable to erosion from rain. Granite became widely utilized in building construction. The maturity of hemp stone mining and processing technology followed later than that of granite, providing a basis for dating the construction periods of ancestral halls. Qing brick firing technology experienced further development, resulting in uniform color, relatively smooth surfaces, and smaller holes in the bricks. Brick carving techniques were introduced from northern regions and quickly adopted by the Guangfu Ancestral Halls. Additionally, Shiwan tiles, manufactured in Shiwan Town, were integrated with theatrical elements in their production, resulting in ceramic sculptures with striking decorative effects. The technique of crafting grey sculptures using lime emerged, primarily employed in the creation of roof ridges and walls.

2.3. Late Qing dynasty (mechanizing period)

(1) Social factors

In the first year of Xianfeng, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement swept across the country, and

the Taiping army burned down Confucian temples and palaces, denounced the Confucian scriptures as demonic, reduced the role of Confucianism as a rite of passage, which severely impacted the feudal landlord class and clan system. In order to reorganize the grassroots organizations and restore the order of local administration, the Qing government worked together with the people to revive the construction of ancestral halls based on blood relations and geography, leading to the third climax in the construction of ancestral halls ^[16]. In the first year of Guangxu's reign, the court relaxed its control over cross-regional temples, and there was no punishment for the construction of these temples, indirectly acknowledging their legitimacy, thereby increasing their number. Temples within the city expanded across regions, with grander scales and lavish decorations, featuring layouts such as "five halls, five corridors, three entrances," and various decorative crafts, displaying rich and colorful decorations. Some social charity schools established by clans, gentry, merchants, and overseas Chinese appeared in the form of cross-regional temples, with ancestral halls undertaking the function of local education ^[16].

(2) Economic factors

Stimulated by the Opium War and the Foreign Affairs Movement, the birth of national capitalist industries, the shift in the economic model drove a shift in urban-rural relations, with cities becoming centers of social and political influence, and geopolitical ties and interests drove the emergence of cross-regional temples in large numbers in the cities. Ancestral halls appeared in forms like "one hall, three corridors, three entrances" and "three halls, three corridors, three entrances," with extraordinary scales and distinctive architectural styles compared to the past ^[1].

(3) Cultural factors

The introduction of new Western ideas and the criticism of Confucian traditions led to many traditional rituals no longer being strictly observed in folklore, resulting in the emergence of numerous cross-regional temples with Western architectural elements and new materials such as cast iron ^[1]. The shift in social aesthetics during the same period drove the wooden beams to evolve from moonbeams to set panels for carved paintings, realizing the transition from the poetic to the mundane.

(4) Construction factors

The development of architectural technology led to the emergence of mechanized production, and ancestral halls began to be constructed more systematically. The technology for firing blue bricks had become increasingly mature, and regions with developed economies and commerce had better-quality blue bricks. Brick carving technology experienced unprecedented development. Stone carving technology became increasingly mature, and stone components featured special carving techniques, with stone figures on the front eaves becoming fashionable.

3. Analysis of the mechanisms influencing the evolution of building-type characteristics

3.1. The impact of economic and social factors on architectural forms

Economic conditions are the material basis for the construction of ancestral halls. When society and the economy are stable, the construction of ancestral halls is frequent, the scale is enlarged, and the decorations are gorgeous; when economic development is hampered, the construction of new ancestral halls becomes stagnant, and repair work becomes the focus. Dynastic and social changes affect the state of economic development to a certain extent, when the country is in a period of war and turmoil, economic development halts; when the country is in a period of rest and recuperation, the imperial court promulgates many policies to promote economic development, which will in turn drive the construction of the ancestral halls. At the end of

the Qing Dynasty, the development of national industry and the revival of commerce led to the prosperity of the commodity economy, which on the one hand promoted rapid population growth and the prosperity of the small family economy; on the other hand, it changed the relationship between the urban and rural areas, and the development of the cities led to the birth of cross-regional temples. Therefore, it is clear that economic and social factors contribute to the development of ancestral halls in terms of scale and morphological features of ancestral halls.

The court's attitude towards the patriarchal system and the measures taken to manage it also had a greater impact on the evolution of ancestral halls. The legalization of ancestral halls for the common people was promoted by the *Book of Rites* of the Jiajing period, the weakening of state control during the Kangxi and Qianlong periods contributed to the drastic changes in the form of ancestral halls, and the government's strategy of not penalizing the construction of previous cross-regional temples in the first year of the Guangxu period reflected the legitimacy of the cross-regional temples. Hence, this shows that ancestral halls' forms are influenced by economic and social transformations, and also imperial administration.

3.2. The impact of construction and social factors on the architectural materials and craftsmanship used in ancestral halls

The selection of the main building materials for ancestral halls is related to the type of local resources and the maturity of mining and processing technology in the area where the ancestral halls are located. Considering the cost of manpower and material resources, most of the materials used for construction are mainly from local resources that are large in quantity, easy to obtain, and have mature processing technology, and only a very few influential clans can purchase and transport expensive building materials from overseas.

Social factors also influence the choice of building materials and craftsmanship for ancestral halls during special periods. Red sandstone and Saltwater stone are indigenous geological resources of the Pearl River Delta and are widely used in building construction. However, under the influence of the Kangxi dynasty ban, granite and hemp stone successively replaced these two materials. During the Daoguang period, with the defeat of the Opium War and the spread of the Western Movement, Western architectural ideas and techniques were introduced to traditional ancestral halls, leading to the adoption of Western-style building materials and construction methods in the halls.

3.3. The impact of cultural and construction factors on architectural decorative features involving cultural significance

The decorative patterns and colors of the buildings reflect the social culture, prevailing customs, and aesthetic trends of the time. In the traditional concept, the richness and splendor of ancestral halls is a reflection of the talent and social status of the descendants. In the middle of the Qing Dynasty, the development of Guangpai woodcarving reached its peak, and the love of the dignitaries for "splendor" promoted the use of gold lacquer woodcarving on a large scale. In the late Qing Dynasty, after the return of Chinese sons and daughters who had left their ancestral land to stay in the ocean, the sons and daughters of overseas Chinese, in order to show off their noble status, constructed ancestral halls that embodied the shape of beautifully decorated ancestral halls that were rich in cultural connotations. On the whole, as the social atmosphere gradually tended to be more certain and extravagant, the decorations of ancestral halls became more and more complex and rich in variety.

The development and maturity of decorative crafts such as wood carving, brick carving, and stone carving also promoted innovation in architectural decoration. Wood carving craft in the Ming and Qing dynasties has been developed many times, from the simple door, and window decorative wood carvings to bright-colored camel dun figures and gold lacquer wood carvings, it can be seen that the architectural decorative craftsmanship

technology of the growing mastery of the ancestral halls affect the degree of exquisite architectural decoration.

Cultural and construction factors complement each other and jointly influence the characteristics of the decoration of ancestral halls, making the decorative elements of the Guangfu ancestral halls architecture of the late Qing Dynasty of high aesthetic and artistic value.

4. Retrospect and prospect

The Ming and Qing Guangfu ancestral halls can be divided into three main stages of development: the forming period in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, the maturing period in the mid-Qing Dynasty, and the programming period in the late Qing Dynasty, with distinctive characteristics of the times. The evolution of the architectural form of Guangfu ancestral halls is tied to the characteristics of the region and the era, and the joint influence of social, economic, cultural, and construction factors. This study clarifies the influence of specific variables on the architectural features of ancestral halls in the three periods of the Ming and Guangfu clans and concludes that the architectural form features are mainly influenced by economic and social factors, the architectural material and craftsmanship features are mainly influenced by construction and social factors, and the architectural decorative features are mainly influenced by cultural and construction factors.

The Pearl River Delta, as an economically developed region, saw traditional ancestral halls suffer destruction and neglect during the rapid process of urbanization. In recent years, with the increasing attention to the protection of historical and cultural heritage by the state, restoration activities for ancestral halls have reached their peak. The results of this study, which analyze the factors and mechanisms influencing the architectural evolution of Guangfu ancestral halls during the Ming and Qing dynasties, have theoretical significance for guiding the preservation and restoration of traditional Guangfu ancestral halls in different periods. They provide support for the revitalization and utilization of traditional Guangfu ancestral halls.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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