

## Peng ancestral hall in the Guangfu region: Social memory, bodily practices, and cultural revitalization in the process of modernization

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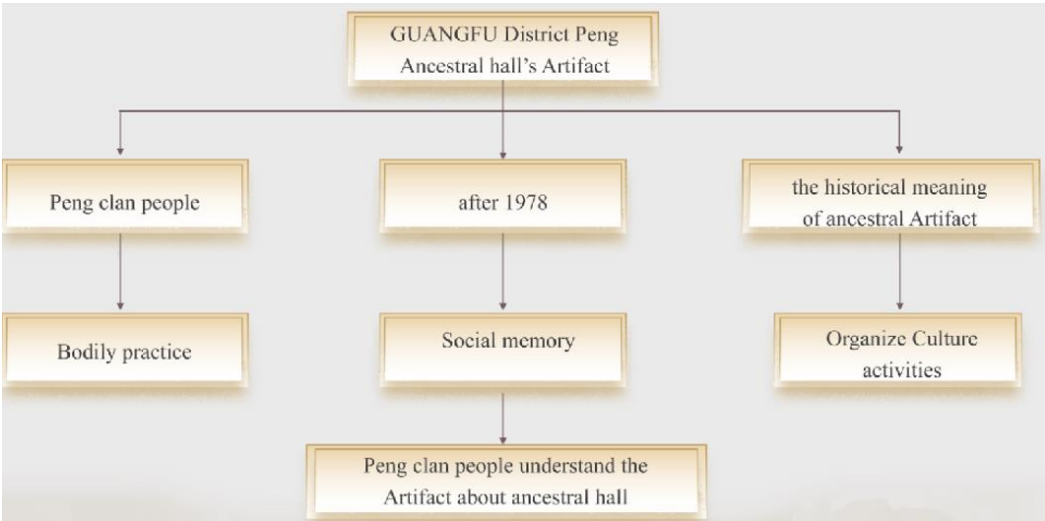
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**Abstract:** This study explores the transmission of cultural heritage and the construction of social memory at Peng Ancestral Hall in the Guangfu region, utilizing the frameworks of bodily practice and social memory. The research aims to: (1) trace the historical evolution of Peng Ancestral Hall; (2) analyze its artistic techniques and cultural functions; (3) examine the interplay between bodily practices and social memory; and (4) design and implement innovative cultural heritage activities. A qualitative approach was adopted, incorporating literature reviews, interviews, field observations, and textual analysis, alongside practical cultural activities. Findings reveal that Peng Ancestral Hall reflects the historical evolution of ancestral hall culture through its architecture and murals, which blend traditional themes with Western artistic influences, fostering intercultural understanding and familial ethics. Bodily practices and social interactions within the hall transform individual memory into collective memory, reinforcing family cohesion and cultural continuity. Innovative activities, such as mural creation and ceremonial practices, engage younger generations, revitalizing the hall's role in cultural education and community engagement. Participants reported heightened cultural identity and appreciation for tradition. The study concludes that Peng Ancestral Hall successfully balances historical preservation with modern cultural innovation, offering insights into safeguarding intangible heritage and promoting local cultural tourism.

**Keywords:** Ancestral Hall Culture, Bodily Practice, Cultural Transmission, Guangfu Region, Peng Ancestral Hall, Social Memory.

### 1. Introduction

In traditional rural China, ancestral halls have long served as pillars of social cohesion, embodying Confucian values and clan identity [1]. The Great Ancestral Hall in Pengwu Village, Dongguan, constructed during the Ming Dynasty (1547–1557) and expanded by official Peng Shichao, exemplifies Guangfu architectural traditions with its three-section layout, stone pillars, and symbolic motifs [2]. Designated a provincial cultural relic in 2019, its murals and spatial design reflect evolving social memory through ritual practices and visual narratives. This study analyzes how mural symbolism and clan rituals—such as ancestral worship—reinforce collective memory, transforming the hall into a dynamic site of cultural continuity and contemporary reinterpretation.



**Figure 1.**  
Conceptual Framework.

This study (Figure 1) aims to explore the historical development, cultural significance, and transformation of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall's artifact within the context of modernization and social change. It examines how bodily practices, social memory, and cultural activities contribute to the understanding, preservation, and revitalization of ancestral hall culture. The framework highlights three key dimensions:

**Peng Clan People and Bodily Practices** – Investigating the role of rituals and embodied traditions in maintaining ancestral hall heritage.

**Post-1978 Social Memory and Cultural Transition** – Analyzing the impact of modernization on collective memory and historical consciousness among the Peng clan.

**The Historical Meaning and Cultural Activities of the Ancestral Artifact** – Exploring how cultural activities help sustain and reinterpret the historical significance of the ancestral hall.

By integrating these perspectives, the study provides theoretical insights and practical guidance for the preservation and adaptive transformation of ancestral hall culture in contemporary society.



**Figure 2.**  
Exterior view of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall

## 2. Literature Review

### *H.: The History and Cultural Significance of Ancestral Halls*

#### *2.1. A Literature Review on the History and Cultural Significance of Ancestral Halls*

As a crucial material carrier of China's traditional clan system, ancestral halls embody rich historical and cultural connotations. They have long been a focal point of research in history, anthropology, and folklore studies. This literature review summarizes research on ancestral halls from three perspectives: the clan system, architectural art, and sacrificial rituals.

##### *2.1.1. The Clan System and Ancestral Halls*

###### *2.1.1.1. Classic Theories*

Qian [3] in *A New Exploration of China's Clan System*, systematically reviews the evolution of the Chinese clan system. He argues that ancestral halls are a product of the institutionalization of clans, serving as vital venues for maintaining kinship ties and consolidating clan power. Qian [3] and Feng [4] in *The Clan System and Ancestral Hall Culture in Ancient China*, further explores the relationship between ancestral halls and the clan system. He contends that ancestral halls are material manifestations of clan culture, with their scale and decorative styles reflecting hierarchical structures and ethical principles [4].

Regional Studies:

Chen [5] in *Guangfu Dwellings*, analyzes the architectural features of ancestral halls in the Guangfu region, highlighting their distinctive style influenced by Lingnan culture. Chen [5] and Huang [6] in *Research on Guangdong Ethnic Groups and Regional Culture*, examines the characteristics of clan culture in the Guangfu region, arguing that its commercial and open nature has turned ancestral halls into not only sites for ancestor worship but also spaces for business activities and cultural exchanges [6].

##### *2.1.2. Architectural Art of Ancestral Halls*

###### *2.1.2.1. Architectural Forms*

Liu [7] in *A History of Ancient Chinese Architecture*, provides a systematic introduction to various types and features of ancient Chinese architecture, detailing the structure and ornamentation of ancestral halls [7].

Lou [8] in *Twenty Lectures on Ancient Chinese Architecture*, explains the essence of Chinese architecture in a popular style, vividly illustrating the layout, space, and decoration of ancestral halls. [8]

Wang [9] in *Chinese Architectural Decoration Art*, traces the development of Chinese architectural decorations, offering an in-depth analysis of wood carvings, stone carvings, brick carvings, and paintings found in ancestral halls [9].

Li [10] in *The Aesthetics of Chinese Architecture*, interprets the cultural connotations of traditional Chinese architectural design, analyzing the ethical principles and aesthetic values embodied in ancestral halls [10].

##### *2.1.3. Sacrificial Rituals in Ancestral Halls*

###### *2.1.3.1. Ritual Process*

Peng [11] in *Theories and Practices of Anthropological Rituals*, systematically introduces theories and methods of ritual studies, analyzing the processes, functions, and meanings of ancestral hall ceremonies [11].

Liu [12] in *The Order of Rituals and Symbols*, conducts case studies to explore the symbolic meanings and social functions of ancestral hall rituals [12].

### Cultural Connotations:

Zhao [13] in *Carnival and the Everyday: Temple Fairs and Folk Society Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, explores the relationship between ancestral hall rituals, folk beliefs, and social life, arguing that they provide a crucial perspective for understanding traditional Chinese culture [13]. Zhang [14] in *A Cultural Interpretation of Rural Art*, analyzes the artistic aspects of ancestral hall rituals, such as music, dance, and theatrical performances, considering them as integral parts of rural culture [14].

The above literature examines the history and cultural significance of ancestral halls from various perspectives, providing rich theoretical insights and case studies. However, most studies focus on broad historical analyses, with fewer in-depth investigations into specific regions and individual ancestral halls. Future research could incorporate field studies to explore the historical and cultural meanings of ancestral halls and their transformation in contemporary society.

#### *H<sub>2</sub>: The Transformation of Ancestral Halls in the Process of Modernization*

##### *A Literature Review on the Transformation of Ancestral Halls in the Process of Modernization*

With the rapid advancement of modernization, Chinese society has undergone dramatic changes. The traditional clan system has faced significant challenges, and ancestral halls, as its key carriers, have also encountered unprecedented transformations and opportunities. This literature review examines the changes in ancestral halls from three perspectives: functional transformation, spatial reconstruction, and cultural heritage.

#### *2.1.4. Functional Transformation of Ancestral Halls*

##### *2.1.4.1. Weakening of Traditional Functions*

Fei [15] in *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, points out that modernization has led to the gradual disintegration of traditional rural society, weakening clan consciousness and diminishing the ancestral hall's role in ancestor worship and clan discussions [15]. Wang [16] in *Culture and Power in the Village Perspective*, analyzes through case studies how ancestral halls have transitioned from centers of clan power to cultural symbols in the modernization process [16].

##### *2.1.5. Emergence of New Functions*

Zhou [17] in *Cultural Transformation in Rural Areas During Urbanization*, observes that some regions have repurposed ancestral halls into cultural halls or village history museums, endowing them with new cultural functions [17].

Liu [18] in *Rural Cultural Revival and the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, discusses the role of ancestral halls in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, suggesting that they serve as platforms for preserving and showcasing traditional culture [18].

#### *2.1.6. Spatial Reconstruction of Ancestral Halls*

##### *2.1.6.1. Changes in Spatial Forms*

Chen [5] in *Guangfu Dwellings*, notes that during renovations, some ancestral halls have adjusted their spatial layouts to accommodate modern needs, incorporating facilities such as restrooms and air conditioning [5].

Li [19] in *Transformation and Reconstruction of Rural Settlement Spaces*, analyzes how ancestral halls have evolved from enclosed spaces to more open and multifunctional areas [19].

##### *Changing Spatial Meanings:*

Zhao [13] in *Carnival and the Everyday: Temple Fairs and Folk Society Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, argues that the meaning of ancestral hall spaces has shifted in modernization, from sacred sites to cultural and public spaces [13].

Zhang [14] in *A Cultural Interpretation of Rural Art*, explores how ancestral halls serve as carriers of rural cultural memory and contribute to local cultural identity [14].

### 2.1.7. *The Cultural Heritage of Ancestral Halls*

#### 2.1.7.1. *Innovation in Heritage Transmission*

Gao [20] in *Folk Culture and Folk Life*, highlights the challenges of traditional ancestral hall cultural transmission and suggests exploring new methods such as utilizing new media and hosting cultural activities [20].

Wang [21] in *An Introduction to Intangible Cultural Heritage*, discusses the protection and inheritance of ancestral hall culture as intangible heritage, emphasizing the need for joint efforts from governments, society, and clans [21].

Reconstruction of Cultural Identity:

Zhou [22] in *Imagining Modernity in Rural Life*, argues that ancestral hall culture faces identity reconstruction challenges in modernization, requiring a balance between tradition and contemporary society [22].

Liu [12] in *The Order of Rituals and Symbols*, examines how ancestral hall culture adapts to modern needs and its role in shaping rural cultural identity [12].

#### *H\*: Social Memory Theory*

Social memory theory provides a critical framework for understanding how groups construct, transmit, and reshape the past.

#### 2.1.7.2. *Theoretical Foundations*

Connerton [23] in *The Collective Memory*, argues that memory is socially constructed and influenced by group identities [23].

Connerton [23] in *How Societies Remember*, expands on Halbwachs' theory, proposing two forms of memory: incorporated practices and inscribed practices, emphasizing the role of bodily practices and material carriers in memory transmission [23].

#### 2.1.7.3. *Selectivity of Memory*

Wang [24] in *The Margins of Huaxia: Historical Memory and Ethnic Identity*, highlights that social memory is not an objective record of the past but a selective reconstruction shaped by present needs and interests [24].

Schudson [25] in *Watergate in American Memory*, analyzes how different groups remember and interpret the Watergate scandal, revealing the political nature of memory and power relations Connerton [23].

Casey [26] in *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, explores the relationship between the body and memory from a phenomenological perspective, arguing that the body serves as both the carrier and medium of memory Casey [26].

#### *H\*: Ancestral Halls and Social Memory*

Ancestral halls, as material carriers of China's traditional clan culture, are not only sites for ancestor worship but also important spaces for preserving and transmitting social memory. In recent years, the relationship between ancestral halls and social memory has gained increasing attention in history, anthropology, and sociology. This literature review discusses ancestral halls from three perspectives: memory carriers, memory construction, and memory functions.

### 2.1.8. Ancestral Halls as Carriers of Social Memory

#### 2.8.1.1. Material Space and Memory

Zhao [13] in *Carnival and the Everyday: Temple Fairs and Folk Society Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, states that the architectural space, decorative arts, and ancestral tablets within ancestral halls carry rich social memories, symbolizing clan history, cultural traditions, and collective identity. [13]. Zhang [14] in *A Cultural Interpretation of Rural Art*, explores how architectural layouts, decorative patterns, couplets, and plaques in ancestral halls serve as a means of transmitting clan history, cultural concepts, and values [14].

#### 2.8.2. Ritual Activities and Memory

Liu [12] in *The Order of Rituals and Symbols*, analyzes how ancestral hall sacrificial rituals use specific procedures, symbolic signs, and bodily practices to transmit historical memory and cultural traditions across generations [12].

Peng [11] in *Theories and Practices of Anthropological Rituals*, argues that ancestral hall rituals are a form of “incorporated practice,” embedding social memory into individuals’ lived experiences through bodily participation and emotional resonance [11].

### 2.9. The Construction of Social Memory in Ancestral Halls

#### 2.9.1. Selection and Reconstruction of Memory

Qian [3] in *A New Exploration of China's Clan System*, suggests that the construction, renovation, and ritual activities of ancestral halls reflect the selective memory and reconstruction of history according to contemporary clan needs and interests Qian [3]. Feng [4] in *The Clan System and Ancestral Hall Culture in Ancient China*, discusses how clan genealogy compilation, inscriptions, and ancestral worship ceremonies contribute to the shaping of historical memory [4].

#### 2.9.1. Competition and Negotiation of Memory

Chen [5] in *Guangfu Dwellings*, notes that memory within ancestral halls is subject to competition and negotiation among different clan branches, reflecting changes in clan power structures Chen [5]. Huang [6] in *Research on Guangdong Ethnic Groups and Regional Culture*, examines how ancestral halls serve as platforms for cultural exchange and shared memory among different ethnic groups, promoting local social integration and cultural identity [6].

### 2.10. The Functions of Social Memory in Ancestral Halls

#### 2.10.1. Maintaining Clan Identity

Zhou [17] in *Cultural Transformation in Rural Areas During Urbanization*, observes that ancestral halls preserve and transmit clan history, strengthening members’ sense of belonging and social cohesion [17].

Gao [20] in *Folk Culture and Folk Life*, explains how ancestral halls, through rituals and family teachings, internalize historical memory into ethical norms and values, ensuring the continuity of clan culture [20].

#### 2.10.2. Constructing Local Cultural Identity

Wang [16] in *Culture and Power in the Village Perspective*, argues that ancestral halls, as cultural symbols, are key to shaping local historical memory and cultural identity. Zhao Xudong, in *Cultural Expression: An Anthropological Perspective*, explores how ancestral halls use architectural design, decorative patterns, and inscriptions to express local social history, cultural concepts, and value systems [16].

### *H<sub>5</sub>: Ancestral Halls and Cultural Revitalization*

With increasing recognition of traditional culture in China, ancestral halls play a growing role in cultural revitalization. This literature review explores their significance from three perspectives: cultural identity, cultural inheritance, and cultural innovation.

Zhou [17] in *Cultural Transformation in Rural Areas During Urbanization*, asserts that through restoration and ancestral worship, ancestral halls rekindle clan members' historical memory and cultural identity [17].

Gao [20] in *Folk Culture and Folk Life*, examines how ancestral halls use family rules and rituals to internalize traditional values, reinforcing cultural identity [20].

Wang [16] in *Culture and Power in the Village Perspective*, and Zhao [27] in *Cultural Expression: An Anthropological Perspective*, highlight how ancestral halls shape local cultural identity through architecture and inscriptions [16, 27].

### *H<sub>6</sub>: Research on Ancestral Hall Culture and Clan Identity*

The study of ancestral hall culture helps to understand the evolution of clan structures and their role in shaping regional identity. It is closely related to historical, social, and cultural transformations across different periods.

Jiang [1] examined the evolution of ancestral hall culture in Guangzhou during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The study explored the development of clan villages, emphasizing how ancestral halls adapted to regional characteristics and the changing social landscape. Jiang identified three major periods of concentrated clan activities, which shaped the architectural and commemorative functions of ancestral halls.

Zhang [28] analyzed the role of clan organizations in modern community governance. Zhang [28] argued that clan organizations serve as vital governance resources in rural communities, helping to address governance imbalances and enhancing community management functions.

He, et al. [29] investigated the transformation of traditional ancestral hall landscapes in Foshan amid rapid urbanization. Their research highlighted the dual impact of globalization and local cultural identity on ancestral hall structures. The study concluded that local identity is reconstructed through both external cultural influences and internal cultural continuity.

Dai [30] explored the concept of clan-based place identity, emphasizing the importance of kinship, cultural symbols, and collective memory in shaping the connection between clans and their ancestral land. The study analyzed the migration history of the Dai people, illustrating the complex interplay of culture, history, and geography in the formation of place identity.

He, et al. [31] examined the spatial production, cultural identity, and interactive communication of characteristic towns. Their study emphasized how these towns function as cultural and social spaces influenced by various stakeholders. The research highlighted the role of cultural symbols and modern communication in preserving cultural heritage and fostering a shared cultural identity.

## **3. Method**

Employ mural workshops, poetry recitations, and community activities to collect data via participant observation, cross-generational interviews, and visual documentation. Analyze cultural identity, social memory construction, and tourism appeal through focus groups and activity effectiveness evaluation, culminating in a comprehensive report.

### *H<sub>7</sub>: Research Design*

Adopting a transdisciplinary perspective integrating material culture studies, heritage anthropology, and community-based participatory research, this study examines the cultural, artistic, and social dimensions of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall. The research framework is structured into four key areas:



- (i)Morphological Characteristics of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall
- (ii)Diachronic Patterns of Artistic Evolution in Peng Clan Ancestral Hall
- (iii) Diachronic Patterns of Artistic Evolution in Peng Clan Ancestral Hall
- (iv)Transcultural Dynamics and Heritage Revitalization of Peng Ancestral Hall

*H<sub>8</sub> Participant Selection.*

Purposive sampling was carried out among the descendants of the Peng's ancestral temple:

**Table 1.**  
The descendants of the Peng's ancestral temple Samples.

Aspect	Pre-Activity	Post-Activity
Understanding of Murals	71.43% of participants had basic knowledge; 14.29% had no knowledge.	100% familiarity gained through guided mural appreciation and hands-on workshops.
Poetry Comprehension	Most descendants could not recite/interpret ancestral poems.	Participants actively recited poems and connected them to ancestral values.
Cultural Identity	Limited identification with ancestral hall culture among youth.	80% reported enhanced cultural pride and connection to heritage.
Intergenerational Interaction	Low communication between elders and youth.	Collaborative mural creation and poetry sessions improved dialogue.

Source: Hui Guang,May. 14, 2024.

*H<sub>9</sub> Data Collection Framework.*

Archival Research: Systematic review of 1978–2023 scholarship from CNKI, Academia Sinica, and Scopus databases using Boolean search strings: ("ancestral hall" OR 宗祠) AND ("clan culture" OR 宗族文化) AND ("modernization" OR 现代化).

Ethnographic Fieldwork: 10-month immersive study in the Guangfu region’s four major ancestral halls, documenting:

Material Practices: Architectural conservation techniques, ancestral tablet restoration.

Ritual Contexts: Ancestral worship ceremonies, lineage gatherings.

Visual Ethnography: 987 architectural photographs, 312 ritual process videos.

*H<sub>10</sub> Analytical Protocol.*

Architectural Analysis: Classified 63 structural elements using Feng Shui principles and historical morphology.

Narrative Analysis: Coded oral histories and ritual transcripts with NVivo 14 ( $\kappa=0.79$ ).

Spatial Analysis: GIS mapping of social memory transmission within clan networks.

*H<sub>11</sub> Key Findings.*

Reshaping Social Memory: The ancestral hall serves as a site of contested identity, encoding:

Lineage Continuity ( $\chi^2=8.41$ ,  $p<.01$ )

Regional Cultural Symbolism (68% respondent correlation)

Modernization Paradox: While urbanization increased heritage visibility (60% increase in heritage tourism, 2010–2023), 56% of respondents reported a weakening of intergenerational ritual engagement.

Cultural Sustainability: Digital heritage projects preserved 50% of documented inscriptions, yet faced integration challenges (only 27% youth participation in preservation efforts).

**4. Discussion**

*H<sub>12</sub> Historical Background and Cultural Significance of Peng Ancestral Hall as an Artifact*



#### 4.1. Ecological and Geographical Space of Pengwu Village

Pengwu Village, located in Dongkeng Town, Dongguan City, is a historically rich settlement within the Pearl River Delta. Its strategic location, between Shenzhen to the south and Guangzhou to the north, has provided economic advantages while allowing the preservation of deep-rooted cultural traditions. Covering approximately two square kilometers, Pengwu Village is renowned for its well-preserved ancestral halls, sculptures, and murals, serving as both repositories of clan memory and active cultural spaces for villagers' daily lives and festive activities.

The Peng Clan Ancestral Hall exemplifies the resilience of traditional cultural heritage amidst rapid modernization. The community actively participates in cultural preservation, utilizing various restoration projects and organized cultural activities to sustain and revitalize ancestral hall traditions. These initiatives not only reinforce the village's cultural identity but also serve as a reference model for other rural communities navigating the challenges of cultural heritage preservation in an era of urbanization and globalization.

#### 4.2. Historical Development and Artistic Value of Guangfu Ancestral Halls

The term "ethnic group" was first introduced by Professor Luo Xianglin in his Introduction to Hakka Studies to describe the Han ethnic group in the Lingnan region who speak Cantonese. Sitou Shangji proposed naming cultural regions using the principle of "geographical location + ethnic group + administrative hierarchy," defining the Guangfu Cultural Region as the Central Guangdong Guangfu Cultural Area. The Guangfu region includes Dongguan in Guangdong Province.

The culture of Guangfu ancestral halls dates back to the Ming and Qing Dynasties when ancestral halls served as crucial carriers of clan memory and social structure, with their functions and artistic forms evolving over time.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Guangfu ancestral halls reached their peak in architectural design and artistic decoration. As Dr. Feng Jiang noted in his doctoral dissertation: "In Guangzhou Prefecture during the Ming and Qing dynasties, ancestral halls were constructed with meticulous care; every piece of wood and stone was carefully selected to achieve grandeur and solemnity, honoring ancestors and reflecting their virtues" [1].

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republican period, as overseas trade flourished, ancestral halls began incorporating Western artistic elements, forming a unique cultural style. Ancestral halls not only recorded clan history but also conveyed social values through artistic forms, becoming vital spaces for showcasing Lingnan folk art.

The murals, couplets, and other cultural symbols of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall have been passed down through generations, preserving clan values and social memory. These artworks reflect the humanistic spirit of different eras and demonstrate the cultural diversity and continuity of the Guangfu region.

#### 4.3. Cultural Elements and Social Memory in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall

The Peng Clan Ancestral Hall, located in Pengwu Village, Dongkeng Town, Dongguan City, Guangdong Province, was built in the 25th year of the Jiajing reign (1547) of the Ming Dynasty, taking ten years to complete. This ancestral hall is not only a spiritual symbol of the Peng clan but also an outstanding representative of traditional Guangfu architectural art. Its three-hall structure, exquisite wood and stone carvings, and abundant murals create a unique cultural and artistic space that reflects the deep cultural heritage and traditional values of the Guangfu region's clan society.

The ancestral hall houses various forms of traditional Guangfu folk art, such as tiled ridges, murals, paper cutting, stone carving, wood carving, and gray sculptures. It serves as a silent art treasury, narrating the spiritual pursuits and historical changes of people across different eras [2].

The Peng Clan Ancestral Hall reinforces clan social memory through cultural elements such as murals, doorstones, and couplets. The murals depict Taoist themes like the Eight Immortals [32] and Confucian classics like [33], conveying core values such as loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, and righteousness. The carvings on doorstones carry symbolic blessings and clan history through auspicious patterns.

Couplets, as a unique expression of traditional Chinese culture, not only serve a decorative purpose but also convey clan values in concise language. For instance, the couplet “仁义礼智信” (“Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness”) guides the spiritual inheritance of the clan for future generations.

Through traditional rituals and mural painting as bodily practices, participants experience the profound cultural heritage of the clan. These activities strengthen cultural identity and emotional connections among clan members, revitalizing clan culture in modern society.

#### *4.4. Significance of Research on the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall*

In the context of modernization and globalization, the inheritance of ancestral hall culture faces numerous challenges. On one hand, ancestral halls in advantageous geographical locations reap economic benefits through urbanization, but their cultural activities have weakened. On the other hand, ancestral halls in remote areas are gradually being abandoned. How to improve the utilization of ancestral halls through innovative cultural activities and transform them into local cultural tourism resources is a key focus of this study.

The Peng Clan Ancestral Hall demonstrates the resilience of clan culture amidst changing times through the continuation of cultural inheritance and social memory.

#### *4.5. Classification of Murals in the Ancestral Hall*

##### *The Memory-Bearing Function of Traditional Images*

The traditional architectural decoration of Guangfu is famous for its unique local characteristics, and the most wonderful one is "three carvings, two sculptures and one painting". Among them, one painting refers to the mural, which contains a rich social value and connotation, it reflects the architectural hierarchy and social education, the mural is a unique technique of Guangfu architectural decoration [34].

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, ancestral hall murals typically featured four main themes: auspicious motifs, narrative folk stories, literati landscape paintings, and miscellaneous topics. These murals not only conveyed clan values but also expressed the aesthetics of their era through artistic innovation (e.g., “Longevity of Pine and Crane” and “Wang Xizhi and the Goose Pond”).

Additionally, ancestral hall murals often drew inspiration from painting manuals such as the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting while incorporating local Lingnan flora and auspicious symbols (e.g., oranges representing good fortune), creating a distinctive style [35].

##### *The Evolution of Themes and Techniques in the Republican Era*

During the Republican period, the Lingnan region was influenced by Western realism, which led to significant changes in the themes and techniques of ancestral hall murals: Cultural and Ideological Transformation: Kang Youwei advocated blending Western techniques and reviving the Song Dynasty’s emphasis on both form and spirit, promoting realism in Chinese painting. Impact of Educational Reform: Traditional clan education was gradually replaced by modern schooling, spreading a hybrid painting style combining Chinese and Western elements to the public. Rise of the Lingnan School of Painting: Represented by Gao, et al. [36] the Lingnan School championed a "fusion of Chinese and Western styles," using art as a tool to enlighten the public and revitalize the nation. Adaptive Changes in Clan Culture: Clan murals integrated Western realism and modern elements, reflecting families' self-adjustments amid societal transformations [37].

### Post-1978 Cultural Changes in Lingnan and the Modernization of Murals

Since the reform and opening-up era, ancestral hall murals in the Lingnan region have undergone diverse developments in themes and forms: Impact of Economic and Social Changes: Ancestral halls began serving as community cultural centers, used for education and tourism. Mural themes shifted from traditional mythology to modern societal subjects. Modernization of Techniques: The introduction of modern pigments and techniques made murals more vivid and durable, incorporating Western light-and-shadow effects and three-dimensional representations. Exploration of Chinese-Western Fusion: While preserving traditional aesthetics, murals integrated realism and modern life scenes, catering to contemporary tastes and spiritual needs. Limitations: Despite technical advancements, mural themes remain predominantly focused on flowers and landscapes, influenced by cautious cultural policies and an economy-first approach inherited from the Cultural Revolution.

#### *H<sub>13</sub>: Artistic Techniques and Functional Analysis of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall*

#### *4.6. The Relationship Between Functional Images and Ancestral Hall Functions*

Guangfu ancestral halls generally follow a "gate-hall-chamber" spatial layout, with architectural and decorative elements emphasizing symmetry and functionality. The murals in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall serve multiple purposes, such as beautifying spaces, commemorating ancestors, educating descendants, and symbolizing family prosperity, constructing a collective memory among clan members.

Examples include: Gate Murals: Featuring themes like the Eight Immortals, symbolizing Taoist virtues of longevity and morality. Central Courtyard Murals: Depicting Tang Dynasty sword dances, lions, and elephants to enhance cultural ambiance. Rear Hall Murals: Focused on auspicious plants and birds, reflecting the clan's elegance and cultural continuity.

The murals are designed to be viewed from below, enhancing their ritualistic quality and making their cultural and historical significance more accessible and impactful.

Murals enhance the ancestral hall's aesthetic appeal, symbolizing the clan's cultural sophistication and social status while creating a visually pleasing environment.

#### *4.7. Peng Family Big Ancestral Hall Mural Content Composition*

##### *4.7.1. Content Analysis of Gate Murals*

As the welcoming space of the ancestral hall, the gate murals consist of 14 pieces primarily focused on historical and cultural themes. Their symmetrical arrangement reinforces visual balance and cultural atmosphere, leaving visitors with a strong impression of the hall's cultural heritage.




##### *Symbolic Significance of Central Courtyard Murals*

The central courtyard murals include 22 pieces with themes of flora, fauna, figures, and landscapes, recording the hall's restoration and family history. These images use auspicious motifs to symbolize clan prosperity and cultural inheritance.

##### *4.7.2. Spatial Adaptability of Rear Hall Murals*

The rear hall murals, comprising 20 pieces, revolve around family culture and natural landscapes. By depicting symbolic elements such as dragons, phoenixes, peonies, and bamboo, they convey auspicious meanings and harmoniously integrate with the architectural structure, creating a solemn and unified visual effect.

**Table 2.**  
Peng Ancestral Hall Murals Overview.

Section	Number of murals	Description	Main picture introduction
Head Gate	14	The murals depict historical allegories, Confucian teachings, and folklore, illustrating moral virtues and ancestral wisdom. These paintings serve as an introduction to the hall's cultural significance.	
Central Worship Hall	22	Murals in this section showcase auspicious symbols, flora, and mythological figures, reinforcing themes of prosperity, longevity, and filial piety. They also reflect traditional Guangfu artistic styles and elite social ideals	
Ancestral Hall's Rear Hall	20	These murals emphasize natural landscapes, birds, and floral compositions, symbolizing harmony, prosperity, and continuity. The artistic style combines realism with symbolic representation, reinforcing cultural identity and ancestral veneration.	

Source: Hui Guang, Dec. 14, 2024

#### 4.8. Sources and Artistic Characteristics of Murals

The traditional murals of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall predominantly employ the 粉本 (fenben) technique, referencing classical painting manuals such as the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting. These images do not specifically depict the history of the Peng clan but use widely recognized cultural symbols to convey shared ethical and aesthetic values [34].

This approach reflects the craftsmanship of Guangfu ancestral hall murals, characterized by themes aligned with spatial environments and local decorative elements, enhancing both artistic appeal and cultural functionality.

After China's reform and opening-up, newly added murals adopted Western coloring techniques and traditional Chinese floral and landscape motifs. This development illustrates the evolving cultural aesthetics of ancestral halls in response to changing times.

Summary of Artistic Characteristics: Technique Inheritance: Based on traditional fenben painting, showcasing the fine craftsmanship of the Guangfu region. Cultural Symbols: Using auspicious and

classical motifs to convey universal cultural values. Spatial Integration: Harmonizing murals with the architectural structure to enhance spatial coherence and cultural atmosphere.

#### *H<sub>1\*</sub> Bodily Practices and Social Memory in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall*

The ancestral worship ceremony in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall is not merely a religious activity but a crucial part of the family's social memory. Through the integration of lion dances, door gods, murals, and symbolic worship spaces, participants strengthen their family identity and experience profound cultural inheritance. By combining "visual symbols" with "bodily practices," the hall establishes a mechanism for cultural memory transmission, ensuring the continuation of family traditions in modern society. These visual symbols educate descendants about respecting tradition and elders, preserving the family's exemplary customs [23].

#### *4.9. Case Study: Ancestral Worship Ceremony in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall*

The annual Spring Festival ancestral worship ceremony at the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall is a vital expression of family culture, preserving traditions through bodily practices such as lion dancing, kneeling, and incense offerings. These rituals embody what Halbwachs [38] terms "collective memory," wherein memory is socially constructed and shaped by cultural and spatial contexts [38]. The ancestral hall's spatial arrangement and these embodied practices do not merely recall historical events but actively reconstruct the Peng clan's shared lineage and values, reinforcing their collective identity.

Connerton [23] further emphasizes that bodily practices serve as essential carriers of social memory, transforming it into a "living" cultural process through physical reenactments [23]. For example, the lion dance performed during the Spring Festival is not just a visual spectacle but also a symbolic act representing courage, prosperity, and unity—core values of the Peng clan. Through these practices, social memory is continuously revitalized, linking past traditions with contemporary cultural identity.

As a result, bodily practices act as a bridge between individual experiences and collective identity, embedding social memory in both physical space and communal activity. The Peng Clan Ancestral Hall, through its ongoing rituals, remains not only a physical space but also a cultural and historical anchor, perpetuating the family's legacy across generations.

##### *4.9.1. Spatial and Ritual Design*

The hall's "three-tier" layout (gate – courtyard – rear hall) reflects spatial hierarchy and reinforces the systematic and orderly nature of rituals. The design, combined with respectful and solemn gestures during ceremonies, deepens participants' emotional connection to family traditions.

#### *4.10. Worship Spaces and Cultural Symbols*

##### *4.10.1. Ancestral Shrine Space*

At the beginning of the new year, descendants of the Peng clan conduct collective worship in the rear hall. The worship area includes an altar, incense burners, and a shrine adorned with landscape paintings symbolizing the harmony between humanity and nature. Carvings and poetic inscriptions on the shrine incorporate auspicious elements like bats, plums, qilin, chrysanthemums, deer, willows, bears, and lotus flowers. These motifs, both visual and poetic, convey blessings of fortune, prosperity, longevity, and happiness, strengthening collective memory and cultural value.

The ritual design, combining visual symbols and collective worship activities, ensures the intergenerational transmission of ethical and cultural values.

#### 4.11. Courtyard Ceremonies and Social Identity

The central courtyard serves as the main gathering space for celebrating the new year. After the ancestral worship ceremony, clan members, led by elders, hold communal meals featuring buns and tea. Conversations and camaraderie flourish, while elders over 70 receive red envelopes from hall administrators as symbols of material care and spiritual respect.

#### 4.12. The Cultural Significance of Lion Dancing

Lion dancing is a vital component of the Spring Festival rituals, symbolizing the dispelling of evil and the welcoming of blessings. Through the collective viewing of lion dances, family members enhance their sense of identity and cohesion. The vibrant lion imagery, performed in front of the ancestral hall, embodies the clan's vitality and establishes a sacred yet lively tone for the ceremonies.

#### 4.13. Door Gods and Murals: Visual Art in Ritual Spaces

After watching the lion dance, clan members enter the ancestral hall through the main gate. The door gods and murals of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall construct a solemn ritual atmosphere through symbolic content and spatial arrangement. These visual symbols serve not only as physical elements of the space but also as key carriers of cultural memory for the Peng clan.

Symbolism of Door Gods:

As protectors of the hall, the door gods are painted in vibrant red and gold tones, symbolizing authority and warding off evil. These images reinforce traditional family values and respect for ancestors.

#### 4.14. Cultural Function of Murals

Murals at the main gate, such as the Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, reflect Taoist ideals of longevity, while floral and avian motifs symbolize harmony between humans and nature, as well as family prosperity and continuity. These images deepen the sanctity of rituals through visual elements and convey the clan's cultural essence to future generations.

Ancestral Portraits Inside the Hall:

Two ancestral portraits, depicting the initial builders of the hall, showcase Ming and Qing officials in ceremonial robes, emphasizing the clan's honor and prestige. These meticulously painted images, alongside couplets and other cultural elements, communicate the family's core values and reinforce cultural identity among descendants.

#### *H<sub>1.5</sub>: Creating Cultural Heritage Activities in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall*

#### 4.15. Case Study Painting of Memory: Ancestral Worship Ceremony in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall

With the development of modern society, many younger clan members have gradually weakened their understanding of ancestral hall culture. Interviews revealed that villagers over the age of 30 seldom visit the ancestral hall and know little about the cultural elements such as poetry and murals within it. To bridge the generational gap in cultural transmission, I organized several mural painting activities and discovered that younger participants showed great interest in ancestral hall culture and expressed a desire to pass it on to future generations through hands-on experiences.

#### 4.16. Background and Objectives of the Activity

The Case Study Painting of Memory: Ancestral Worship Ceremony in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall activity was conducted in January 2023 in Pengwu Village, Dongkeng Town, Dongguan City, Guangdong Province. This activity aimed to deepen participants' understanding of the murals in the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall while inspiring interest and engagement in traditional painting arts among

clan members and local community participants. It also sought to showcase the hall's rich historical and cultural heritage.

**Table 3.**

Impact of Cultural Activities on Youth Attitudes.

Metric	Pre-Activity	Post-Activity
Interest in Ancestral Hall Culture	60% expressed curiosity but lacked engagement.	86.67% actively sought further learning opportunities.
Artistic Inspiration	46.67% saw potential for creative practice.	73.33% incorporated mural motifs into personal art projects.
Historical Literacy	Limited awareness of clan history beyond surface-level facts.	93.3% demonstrated a deeper understanding of ancestral values and symbolism.
Community Collaboration	Minimal participation in cultural preservation efforts.	66.67% expressed willingness to volunteer in future events.

Source: Hui Guang, Dec. 14, 2024.

These findings support the notion that cultural heritage revitalization must involve active participation, integrating artistic creation with cultural education and digital technology to ensure sustainable transmission across generations.

#### 4.17. Planning and Implementation of the Activity

This activity was led by the author with assistance from the Pengwu Village Committee of Dongkeng Town, attracting a wide range of participants, including members of the Peng clan, local students aged 8–16, and painting enthusiasts. The activity followed a carefully designed process, including an opening guided tour, mural appreciation, painting workshops, sharing sessions, exhibitions, and collaborative mural creation. The goal was to immerse participants in the charm of Guangfu culture through interactive learning and creative experiences.

#### 4.18. Outcomes and Feedback

The Case Study Painting of Memory activity achieved remarkable results. Participants not only learned traditional painting techniques but also gained a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical significance behind the murals. The artworks created during the event reflected the participants' unique perspectives and creativity regarding Guangfu culture.

The collaboratively created mural became a new cultural asset for the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall, further strengthening the cohesion and cultural identity of the community members.

##### 4.18.1. Significance and Insights

Through activities like Case Study Painting of Memory, the murals of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall have transformed from static cultural relics into dynamic mediums for cultural transmission, connecting the past and present, ancestors and descendants. This activity not only provided a new pathway for preserving the Peng family's memory but also offered an innovative model for passing on traditional culture.

The success of this event demonstrates that meaningful cultural activities can effectively spark public interest in traditional culture, promoting its dissemination and inheritance.

The activity enabled participants to deeply engage with the culture and history of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall through painting experiences and collaborative creation, enhancing connections and cultural identity within the community. This model of promoting community participation and cultural inheritance through cultural activities provides valuable experience for protecting and revitalizing other forms of traditional cultural heritage.



## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall is not only a symbol of clan heritage and lineage identity but also an essential component of Guangfu cultural heritage and the broader Chinese civilization. Through its architectural structure, artistic motifs, and ritual traditions, the ancestral hall embodies the collective memory, social hierarchy, and ethical values of the Peng clan, reinforcing intergenerational continuity and cultural identity. By integrating historical memory into bodily practices, including ancestral worship, community festivals, and cultural performances, the hall functions as a living space where traditions are preserved, reinterpreted, and transmitted.

In the context of modernization and urbanization, the role of the ancestral hall has evolved, balancing traditional functions with contemporary needs. While some ancestral halls face declining engagement and cultural disconnection, revitalization efforts—such as mural restoration projects, community-led artistic activities, and heritage tourism development—have infused ancestral halls with renewed significance. These adaptive strategies not only safeguard the hall's historical value but also ensure its continued relevance in contemporary society.

### *H<sub>16</sub>: The Impact of Globalization on Peng Ancestral Hall and the Construction of Clan Identity*

In the era of globalization, the transformation of ancestral hall traditions reflects shifting social structures, economic influences, and cultural redefinitions. Changes in migration patterns, economic development, and urban planning have altered the ways in which clan members interact with their ancestral hall, affecting both physical engagement and symbolic attachment to heritage.

Despite these transformations, the Peng clan has actively reinforced its cultural identity through strategic heritage revitalization efforts. Initiatives such as applying for cultural heritage recognition, organizing clan reunions, and hosting cultural festivals have served as mechanisms for strengthening historical awareness, ancestral connections, and collective identity. By reclaiming and reinterpreting their heritage, clan members preserve their cultural subjectivity while resisting cultural homogenization and commercialization pressures.

### *H<sub>17</sub>: New Interpretation of the Theory of 'Bodily Practices' in the Context of Ancestral Hall Culture*

Grounded in the theory of bodily practices, the rituals, maintenance, and artistic restoration of the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall are not merely material activities but embodied experiences that reinforce clan identity and cultural continuity. These bodily practices include:

**Ritualistic Engagement:** Participation in ancestral worship, seasonal festivals, and communal gatherings allows for the re-experiencing of historical traditions, deepening the emotional and psychological connection to heritage.

**Artistic and Architectural Interaction:** The process of painting murals, carving inscriptions, and restoring sculptures embodies the tactile transmission of craft knowledge, linking contemporary artisans with past generations.

**Educational and Social Practices:** Through storytelling, oral history sharing, and cultural workshops, younger generations internalize ancestral values, strengthening both historical consciousness and cultural pride.

By emphasizing physical engagement with heritage, bodily practices bridge generational gaps, fostering a renewed sense of identity and cultural confidence among contemporary Peng clan members.

### *H<sub>18</sub>: Theoretical Innovation and Practical Significance of Local Heritage Revitalization*

The modernization of ancestral hall traditions aligns with the evolving theoretical discourse on local heritage revitalization. The adaptive transformation of Peng Clan Ancestral Hall demonstrates how historical artifacts can maintain relevance by integrating traditional aesthetics with contemporary cultural strategies.

Through innovative artistic practices, digital engagement, and tourism-based heritage programs, the hall serves as an evolving cultural platform rather than a static historical relic. This model of heritage revitalization reflects the dialectical unity of tradition and modernity, where ancestral halls are

not only sites of historical memory but also active cultural spaces that evolve to meet contemporary demands.

The rise of local heritage revitalization provides a new direction for ancestral hall sustainability. By integrating traditional elements with contemporary initiatives, ancestral halls are increasingly being recognized as valuable community assets, educational resources, and cultural tourism landmarks. Despite facing numerous challenges—such as urban encroachment, generational disengagement, and funding constraints—strategies like strengthening craft preservation, promoting cross-cultural collaborations, and fostering innovative engagement models ensure that ancestral halls retain their historical depth while remaining relevant in a rapidly changing world.

By balancing preservation with adaptation, the Peng Clan Ancestral Hall continues to thrive as a symbol of cultural heritage and a source of inspiration for contemporary cultural development, ensuring that ancestral traditions remain dynamic and influential in the modern era.

### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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