

# IDENTIFYING STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS AND ANALYZING CULTURAL MECHANISMS OF LINGNAN ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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**Abstract:** As a crucial institutional space within China's clan-based society, ancestral halls in the Lingnan region possess unique cultural ecosystems and social functions. For centuries, these halls have not only served ceremonial and deliberative purposes but also constituted educational domains imbued with profound local knowledge, ethical norms, and symbolic significance. This study employs interdisciplinary perspectives from cultural anthropology, folklore studies, and sociology. Grounded in structural-functionalism, cultural reproduction theory, and symbolic interactionism, it systematically identifies the structural elements of Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs. It further analyzes the mechanisms underpinning their continuity, transformation, and reproduction at the cultural level. Research reveals that Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs comprise six core elements: “spatial structure, ritual system, textual resources, key figures, institutional norms, and emotional bonds,” forming a folk educational system integrating educational content, educational interaction, and cultural symbolism. At the cultural mechanism level, its internal logic manifests as a four-fold cycle: “clan identity formation—moral norm reinforcement—social order stabilization—cultural meaning reproduction.” The article further indicates that against the backdrop of rapid urbanization, ancestral hall educational customs are undergoing transformations: shifting from clan-based to community-based, transitioning from offline to digital, and evolving from standardized to culturally autonomous. This research holds practical significance for understanding the continuity of Lingnan local culture, rural social governance, and intangible cultural heritage education practices.

**Keywords:** Lingnan culture; Ancestral halls; Educational customs; Cultural reproduction; Clan society; Local knowledge

## 1 INTRODUCTION

As the core spatial element of China's traditional clan system, ancestral halls have developed exceptionally rich cultural forms in the Lingnan region since the Ming and Qing dynasties. Lingnan's geo-cultural characteristics—marked by “migratory, commercial, and maritime” traits—have shaped distinct local practices in clan development, regional identity, and educational ethics, setting them apart from those of the Central Plains. Particularly in education, the tradition of “using the ancestral hall as a school and for instruction” persisted for centuries. From ancestral rites and family precepts to scholarship incentives and clan school development, ancestral halls formed a vital educational folk system within Lingnan society.

However, compared to research on clan systems or ancestral hall architecture, the educational customs and folklore of ancestral halls remain a relatively understudied area in academia. Although ancestral hall studies have gained attention in recent years under the backdrop of rural revitalization, most research still remains at the level of “cultural display” or “tourism development,” with insufficient systematic interpretation of their educational structure, cultural elements, and internal mechanisms.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to construct a “structural elements-cultural mechanisms” analytical framework. This framework seeks to systematically identify the core components of Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs, explore their operational logic within local societies, and analyze their transformation pathways amid modern social changes. The study provides theoretical support for clan culture research and rural governance.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Literature Review

As a pivotal architectural element within China's clan system, ancestral halls have long been studied across disciplines including sociology, anthropology, folklore studies, history, and architecture. In recent years, they have garnered increased attention amid rural revitalization and cultural heritage preservation initiatives. Overall, ancestral hall research primarily focuses on five areas: institutional structure, ritual symbolism, rural governance, cultural transmission, and modern transformation. There is a noticeable shift from macro-level institutional studies toward micro-level investigations of cultural mechanisms.

Regarding the institutional structure of ancestral halls, scholars generally view them as central nodes of clan organizations and crucial institutional foundations for the functioning of rural societies. Fei Xiaotong noted that

ancestral halls serve as symbolic centers of clan organizations, maintaining grassroots social order through family systems and ritual frameworks[1]. Freedman further analyzed ancestral halls in South China from a clan sociology perspective, positing them as composite spaces where “symbolic authority” and “family systems” coexist[2]. Building on this, extensive research has revealed ancestral halls' institutional functions in resource coordination, clan property management, and conflict resolution[3].

Regarding ritual and symbolism, studies focus on the ceremonial apparatus, spatial order, and symbolic texts of ancestral halls. Scholars note that ancestral worship, seasonal festivals, and branch-house ceremonies performed in ancestral halls possess not only religious significance but also reproduce social norms and ethical order[4]. Symbolic texts such as genealogies, merit steles, and family precepts occupy central positions within ancestral halls, constituting vital sources of clan historical narratives and cultural values[5].

In rural governance studies, ancestral halls are increasingly recognized as an “endogenous governance resource.” Li Peilin proposed that ancestral halls stabilize community structures by integrating local power[6]. Recent research integrating rural revitalization emphasizes their role in norm-setting, moral persuasion, and public affairs deliberation[7]. Ancestral halls are viewed as “cultural infrastructure” in rural governance, supplementing deficiencies in formal institutions.

In cultural heritage and education research, ancestral halls are increasingly recognized as carriers of “local knowledge systems.” The family precepts, ethical education, scholarship systems, and ritual education within ancestral halls constitute the folk education system of rural society[8]. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, some scholars view ancestral halls as crucial mechanisms for accumulating symbolic capital, transmitting habits across generations through rituals and texts[9].

Research on modern transformation indicates ancestral halls are transitioning from private clan spaces to public cultural venues. Some ancestral halls now serve as venues for cultural exhibitions, community governance centers, and intangible cultural heritage transmission bases, demonstrating their renewed vitality in modern society[10]. Concurrently, new technologies like “digital ancestral halls” and “online genealogy databases” are reshaping the educational customs and cultural functions of these spaces.

Overall, existing literature offers relatively systematic explorations of ancestral halls from institutional, cultural, symbolic, and governance perspectives, yet significant gaps remain. First, while academic attention has largely focused on the institutional and symbolic functions of ancestral halls, systematic research on their educational customs remains scarce, particularly lacking comprehensive analysis of the structural elements and interactive mechanisms of these customs. Second, most studies concentrate on the perspective of “ancestral halls as centers of clan power,” while research on ancestral hall educational customs as a “folk education system” and “cultural reproduction mechanism” remains insufficient. Third, although preliminary discussions exist regarding the adaptive changes of ancestral hall educational customs in the context of modernization, urbanization, and digital transformation, a systematic theoretical framework has yet to be established. Based on this, conducting structured research on the mechanisms of ancestral hall educational customs will not only enrich related studies but also contribute to theoretical innovation in contemporary rural cultural development and grassroots governance models.

## 2.2 Theoretical Foundations

To deeply understand the essence of Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs, it is necessary to integrate multidimensional theoretical perspectives. Structural-functionalism provides the analytical foundation, viewing ancestral halls and their educational rituals as functional structures maintaining clan social stability. Through cyclical activities, they fulfill core social functions such as moral education, integration, and order maintenance. However, this structure is not static. Cultural reproduction theory further reveals the dynamic process of ancestral halls as fields of power: By transmitting Confucian classics, ritual norms, and genealogical knowledge, it transforms specific cultural capital into symbolic capital within the clan. Through solemn ceremonies, it shapes deep-seated “habitus” among clan members—a reverence for ancestors and a drive to bring honor to the family name—thereby reproducing and reinforcing internal power relations and social hierarchies.

This reproduction process is not abstract but realized through embodied social interaction. Symbolic interactionism interprets the ancestral hall as a vibrant social stage where clan members collectively enact and reinforce the social script of “filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and trustworthiness” through ritual role-playing, observance of rites, and emotional performances. In this process, micro-level chains of ritual interaction generate intense collective emotions and identity, rendering abstract values tangible and perceptible. Ultimately, all these practices are deeply rooted in specific cultural soil. The theory of local knowledge reminds us that the educational customs of ancestral halls transmit far more than universal Confucian ethics; they constitute a system of meaning integrated with the specific historical, geographical, and ethnic logic of Lingnan. Whether through dialect-based ritual prayers, teachings interwoven with maritime commercial culture, or ancestral narratives encouraging descendants to strive outward, these elements collectively form the unique local cultural texture of ancestral hall education customs. This texture serves as a deep cultural code shaping the identity and worldview of Lingnan people.

In summary, these four theories form a comprehensive analytical framework of “elements-mechanisms-reproduction.” Together, they reveal how the ancestral hall education custom functions as a composite mechanism that simultaneously maintains order and replicates power, performs identity and transmits local wisdom, thereby sustaining its complex and enduring vitality within Lingnan society.

### 3 IDENTIFYING STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF LINGNAN ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Lingnan ancestral hall educational practices form an organic whole, with six core elements interwoven to collectively construct a localized educational system integrating cultural transmission, social governance, and identity formation. This system not only sustains clan stability and continuity but also profoundly shapes the cultural character and ethical order of Lingnan society[11].

#### 3.1 Spatial Element: The Ancestral Hall as a “Symbolic Classroom”

The ancestral hall space transcends mere physicality, functioning as a three-dimensional textbook imbued with ritualistic principles. Its meticulously symmetrical central axis and clearly defined hierarchical architecture subtly instill ethical concepts of age-based order and distinctions of rank. Highly suspended plaques bearing hall names like “Hall of Enlightened Virtue” and “Hall of Reverent Contemplation,” couplets inscribed with admonitions such as “Loyalty and filial piety ensure a family's enduring legacy; poetry and scholarship perpetuate a lineage's prosperity,” along with steles commemorating clan members' academic and official achievements and flagpole stones, collectively form a visual system of value symbols. Educational activities like the Spring and Autumn sacrifices, lectures, and deliberations unfolded here, merging space, ritual, and instruction into a unified whole—achieving the cultural immersion of “place as education.”

#### 3.2 Ritual Elements: The “Emotional Practice” of the Educational Process

Rituals serve as the dynamic core of ancestral hall educational customs, transforming static textual norms into embodied collective experiences. Solemn ancestral worship ceremonies reinforce bloodline ethics through rituals like kowtowing, offering sacrifices, and reciting prayers. Grand scholarship ceremonies publicly honored descendants who attained academic honors, awarding “steamed offerings” scholarships that highlighted the clan's emphasis on education. Rites of passage like the first writing ceremony and coming-of-age rites marked an individual's formal induction into the clan's ethical order. These cyclical, dramatic rituals created what Victor Turner termed “communion” moments, consolidating clan identity and cohesion through emotional resonance.

#### 3.3 Textual Elements: The “Systematic Encoding” of Clan Knowledge

The ancestral hall education customs relied on a self-contained textual tradition to achieve systematic cultural transmission and legitimization. The genealogy served as the core text, constructing the clan's shared historical memory and identity through lineage charts, biographies, and clan regulations. Family precepts and clan rules, in concise form, defined moral standards and behavioral norms for clan members. Additionally, stele inscriptions and ritual documents inscribed clan values and collective achievements in public, material forms. These texts formed a knowledge repository for repeated transmission, citation, and interpretation—the key mediators of cultural reproduction as described by Bourdieu.

#### 3.4 Personal Elements: The “Personified Manifestation” of Educational Authority

Education was vividly realized through the exemplary conduct and interactions of key figures. Clan heads and house elders embodied patrilineal authority, presiding over rituals, adjudicating disputes, and proclaiming ancestral precepts. Retired officials and distinguished local scholars served as models of morality and erudition, their words and deeds functioning as living textbooks. Private tutors or clan school masters were responsible for knowledge transmission, integrating Confucian classics with local wisdom. Meanwhile, honored outstanding students became immediate role models to inspire younger generations. These figures formed an educational network within a hierarchical structure, enabling abstract principles to be concretely transmitted through personified authority, thereby enhancing the credibility and persuasiveness of instruction.

#### 3.5 Normative Elements: The “Institutional Cornerstone” of Rural Governance

The ancestral hall educational customs relied on a system of written and unwritten norms, transforming ethical requirements into binding institutions. Ancestral hall regulations and clan covenants clearly defined members' rights, obligations, and rewards/punishments; systematic scholarship systems implemented the principle of valuing education; and sanctions against unethical behavior upheld the rigor of norms. These norms interlocked with village covenants and national laws, forming a trinity of governance—family rules, village regulations, and state laws—making ancestral halls vital order maintainers at the grassroots level.

#### 3.6 Emotional Elements: The “Endogenous Driving Force” of Cultural Transmission

All moral education ultimately requires emotional resonance to take root. Reverence and gratitude toward ancestors form the psychological foundation for ritual participation; sharing offerings and feasting during festive sacrifices reinforced the sense of belonging and unity as “one family”; and shared hatred toward external threats ignited a strong

sense of responsibility to protect the clan community. This emotional bond rooted in kinship and culture enables clan members to internalize clan norms as “second nature,” transforming external discipline into self-regulation and ensuring the intergenerational continuity of cultural transmission.

These six elements are not merely parallel components but form an interdependent, dynamically co-constructed ecosystem. Space provides sacred venues for rituals and education; rituals enliven texts and stir emotions; texts provide the basis for norms and establish standards for figures; figures execute norms and lead rituals; norms solidify values and maintain order; while emotions provide psychological identification and enduring motivation for the entire system. It is through this complex and sophisticated operational mechanism that the Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs have successfully achieved cultural reproduction, social integration, and the shaping of local identity over centuries, becoming a crucial window for understanding the resilience of traditional Chinese society and its modern transformations.

#### **4 CULTURAL MECHANISMS OF LINGNAN ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES**

As a profound and self-consistent cultural system, the core mechanism of Lingnan ancestral hall educational practices lies in its organic integration of multiple pathways to achieve systemic functions—from individual moral cultivation to social order maintenance and cultural continuity[12]. These interwoven mechanisms collectively construct a stable, sustainable local cultural reproduction system.

##### **4.1 Clan Identity Formation Mechanism: Spatial, Ritual, and Narrative Identity Construction**

Ancestral hall educational customs systematically construct and reinforce clan identity through a trinity of spatial symbolism, ritual participation, and textual narratives. The solemn architectural layout, plaque inscriptions, and ancestral tablets form a continuously present visual ethical field; Periodic rituals like ancestor worship, festivals, and scholarship awards foster a strong sense of communal belonging and moral cohesion through collective practice and shared emotions; while genealogies and family histories weave a continuous narrative of bloodline and values, providing members with stable identity anchors and intergenerational role confirmation. These three mechanisms collectively elevate the ancestral hall beyond a physical space, transforming it into a symbolic core and boundary marker that continuously produces clan identity and emotional bonds.

##### **4.2 Mechanism for Reinforcing Virtue Norms: From Textual Instruction to Habitual Internalization**

Ancestral hall educational customs internalize ethical norms into the deep-seated habits of clan members through multidimensional reinforcement via texts, rituals, evaluations, and role models. The persistent presence and recitation of family precepts and clan rules achieve the daily instillation of norms. Within ritual contexts like ancestor worship and weddings/funerals, norms merge with sacred experiences to gain emotional resonance. As a public forum for discourse, the ancestral hall generates powerful social evaluative pressure through public commendation and censure. Meanwhile, local sages and accomplished figures are shaped into personified moral symbols worthy of emulation. Ultimately, this composite mechanism transformed external discipline into what Bourdieu termed “habitus”—a pattern of behavior and value judgments internalized within the body and mind, consciously adhered to.

##### **4.3 Mechanisms for Social Order Stability: The Integration of Folk Jurisprudence and Autonomous Practices**

Ancestral hall education customs form a pivotal component of traditional rural self-governance, maintaining social order through four interlinked pathways: norms, rewards and punishments, mediation, and symbolism. Codified clan regulations serve as the basis of folk jurisprudence, providing guidelines for dispute resolution. Scholarships and disciplinary measures implemented through clan assets uphold the effectiveness and authority of these regulations. Periodic ceremonial rituals provided structural opportunities for conflict resolution and relationship restoration. The ancestral hall itself, as the physical space for deliberating clan affairs and enforcing regulations, served as both a symbol and a venue for the practice of rural self-governance, effectively filling the governance gap at the grassroots level where state administration was absent.

##### **4.4 Mechanisms for Reproducing Cultural Meaning: Intergenerational Transmission and Continuity of Local Knowledge**

Ancestral hall educational customs achieve intergenerational reproduction of cultural meaning through cyclical repetition, textual transcription, memory reconstruction, and knowledge adaptation. The periodic performance of rituals reinforces the underlying cosmology and ethics; the continuous revision and reinterpretation of genealogies and family precepts enable organic renewal and adaptive transformation of tradition; Collective activities continually reconstruct shared ancestral memories and narratives of honor, preserving the emotional resonance and continuity of culture. Simultaneously, it integrates Confucian ethics with Lingnan's unique geographical environment, migration history, commercial spirit, and other local knowledge, constructing survival wisdom adapted to the local context. This sustains the distinctive character and inherent resilience of Lingnan culture amidst change.

The four cultural mechanisms of Lingnan ancestral hall education customs are not linearly arranged but form an

interdependent, dynamically cyclical ecosystem: identity formation legitimizes norms; internalized norms sustain order stability; the orderly environment ensures cultural reproduction; and the cultural significance of this reproduction continually nourishes and renews identity. Through this intricate and resilient composite mechanism, Lingnan ancestral halls have simultaneously served as spiritual beacons, cornerstones of order, and repositories of cultural genes throughout history. They stand as pivotal keys to understanding the logic of grassroots governance and cultural transmission within traditional Chinese society.

## **5 TRANSFORMATION OF ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES AMID MODERN SOCIAL CHANGE**

Amid rapid urbanization and modernization, Lingnan's ancestral hall educational traditions face profound transformation. This process is not mere extinction, but rather an evolution from traditional clan-centered practices toward modern public cultural forms through impact, adaptation, and reinvention[13].

### **5.1 The Impact of Urbanization and the Decline of Traditional Functions**

Traditional clan hall education practices, rooted in blood ties and local connections, face fundamental challenges from urbanization. The mass migration of young and middle-aged adults for work has hollowed out and aged the core participants in rituals; The fast pace of urban life dissolves the intricate temporal and spatial dimensions of traditional rituals, simplifying their forms and suspending their meanings. More significantly, under the influence of individualism and multiculturalism, the younger generation's sense of clan identity has generally weakened. This severely undermines the social foundation of the ancestral hall education custom's core function—the construction of the clan community. Consequently, the traditional educational and order-maintaining functions of these customs naturally diminish.

### **5.2 Cultural Revival and Functional Reinvention in Rural Revitalization**

Simultaneously, under the national strategies of “Rural Revitalization” and “Cultural Confidence,” ancestral halls have encountered a historic opportunity for functional transformation and value reassessment. Their physical spaces have been imbued with new significance: evolving from closed clan sanctuaries into open rural cultural exhibition halls, village history museums, or folk activity centers, becoming public landmarks that preserve local memory. Incorporated into intangible cultural heritage protection systems, their architectural techniques and ritual practices gain institutional safeguards and resource support. Furthermore, as historically formed public deliberation spaces, ancestral halls see their authority and cohesive power rediscovered, evolving into new collaborative platforms for rural governance—integrating local elites, mediating public affairs, and fostering community harmony.

### **5.3 Future-Oriented Pathways to Modern Development**

In future-oriented modern development, Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs are undergoing adaptive transformation through multiple innovative strategies. Their spatial functions are expanding from traditional clan venues to community-wide public cultural centers; educational models achieve modern transformation of traditional culture by developing family precepts and local knowledge into school-based curricula and community education programs; Technologically, digital ancestral halls, cloud-based genealogies, and online memorial platforms are being developed to preserve cultural memory through digital means. Simultaneously, on the social integration front, ancestral halls are being transformed into cross-ethnic, cross-generational resources for community governance and emotional bonding[14]. Collectively, these practices signal the evolution of ancestral hall education customs from blood-related communities to cultural communities, positioning them as open cultural hubs with both historical depth and social engagement in the new era[15].

In summary, the modern transformation of ancestral hall educational customs represents a journey from “private clan domains” to “public social domains.” It is shedding its feudal patrilineal connotations while preserving and elevating its core functions—historical memory, cultural identity, collective deliberation, and moral education—through more open, inclusive, and contemporary approaches. Ancestral halls are no longer merely sites for ancestral worship; they are transforming into “modern public cultural spaces imbued with historical warmth” that foster community identity, preserve local knowledge, and engage in grassroots governance. This transformation vividly exemplifies the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

This paper systematically analyzes Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs from two dimensions: structural elements and cultural mechanisms. Research indicates that Lingnan ancestral hall educational customs constitute a comprehensive cultural system integrated by spatial arrangements, rituals, texts, participants, norms, and emotions. Its cultural mechanisms manifest as a cyclical system of clan identity, moral norms, order maintenance, and cultural reproduction. Amidst modern societal transformations, while the functional role of ancestral hall education customs has diminished, its cultural value is being revitalized in new forms.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

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