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A Research on the Integrated Conservation and Adaptive Reuse of Ancestral Hall Architectural Heritage: A Case Study of the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex in Wuxi

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Abstract. Ancestral hall buildings are an important institutional and spatial connection in China's ancient clan system. They have their own special features in the choice of building places, the way of space arrangement and the playing of social roles. The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex in Wuxi is one of the best-preserved clan building groups in the Jiangnan area of China. It holds extremely great historical value, cultural value and heritage protection value. This study looks into how the complex developed in history, the design of its surrounding scenery and the influence it has on local communities. It also analyzes the effects that modern urban development brings to these heritage buildings and the areas around them. Facing many challenges like the reduction of living space in historic districts and the loss of cultural functions of the halls, this paper points out that heritage protection should not only keep the real building parts safe, but also pay more attention to combining them with urban space and people's daily activities. This study provides useful ideas from theory and practical methods to follow for the protection and suitable reuse of traditional clan-based architectural complexes.

Keywords: Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex in Wuxi, urban–rural heritage conservation, renewal and adaptive reuse, community identity, conservation strategies

1. Introduction

Ancestral halls are important material and spatial carriers of clan culture in traditional Chinese society. They have many different functions, such as worshiping ancestors, teaching family members knowledge and managing clan affairs. And their space layouts and leveled space designs can show the cultural features of different regions. The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex in Wuxi is one of the biggest and best-preserved ancestral hall groups in China. It has more than one hundred halls, from the Huaxiaozi Ancestral Hall of the Tang Dynasty to the Huai–Xiang Zhaozhong Ancestral Hall of the late Qing Dynasty. This shows that it has great historical, cultural and heritage value [1].

People now pay more and more attention to cultural heritage protection, so many ancestral halls have been named as protected cultural relics. In 2006, ten famous historic halls including the Ancestral Hall of King Qian Wusu were listed as National Key Cultural Relic Protection Units. Some well-preserved halls like Ni Yunlin Ancestral Hall and Huai–Xiang Zhaozhong Ancestral Hall

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have been changed into museums or cultural activity places. But many other halls are still closed to the public or not repaired yet. What's more, people's sense of clan identity is getting weaker and traditional folk activities are fading away, which makes the whole complex less important in the daily life of modern local communities.

2. The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex within its historical and geographical context

2.1. Historical background

The origins of ancestral halls in the Huishan area date back to the Warring States period. According to the Yuejue Shu, grand sacrifices were conducted in Wuxi during the time of Chunshen Jun, accompanied by major water-control projects [2]. The Yuan dynasty Wuxi County Gazetteer (Zhizheng edition) records that Chunshen Jun, enfeoffed in the Wu region, devoted himself to water management; in gratitude, local residents established ancestral halls to commemorate him. The Qing dynasty Jinkui County Gazetteer notes that the Temple of Chunshen Jun, initially near Chunshen Ravine and later relocated near Xishan Hill, eventually moved to Suzhou, where traditional sacrificial practices continue [3]. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, construction peaked, with halls such as Gu Kejiu Ancestral Hall, Ni Yunlin Ancestral Hall, Qin Clan Ancestral Hall, and Zhang Clan Ancestral Hall established successively. (see Figure 1).

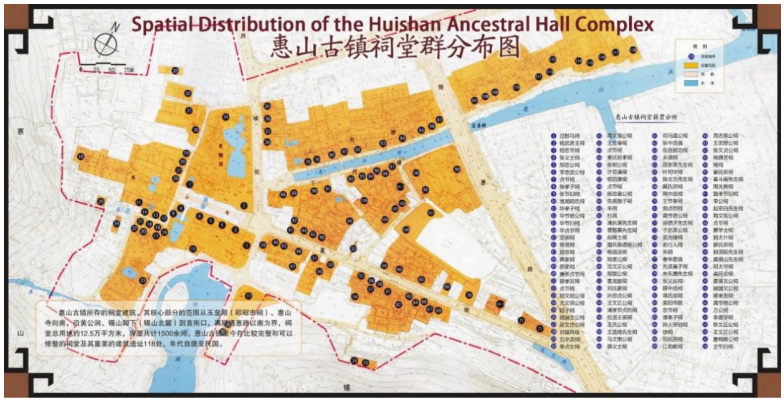


Figure 1. Distribution of ancestral halls in Huishan Town

Source: Wuxi Huishan Town Scenic Area Administration.

2.2. Geographical environment and landscape configuration

The site selection of the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex reflects the traditional Chinese principle of "relying on hills and aligning with water." Backed by the Huishan Hill range and facing the Huishan Creek system, the complex forms a spatial configuration of hills at the rear and water at the front, consistent with the feng shui concept of "sheltering from wind and gathering vital energy." According to the Wuxi County Gazetteer, Huishan Hill and Xishan Hill converge near Yingshan Lake, with Xishan marking the hill range's termination [4]. The northern foothills of Xishan Hill offer gently sloping terrain suitable for construction, along which Huishan Town and the ancestral hall complex developed. Huishan Straight Street runs roughly parallel to the east–west orientation of Xishan Hill, forming a layered spatial pattern (as shown in figure2 and figure 3).

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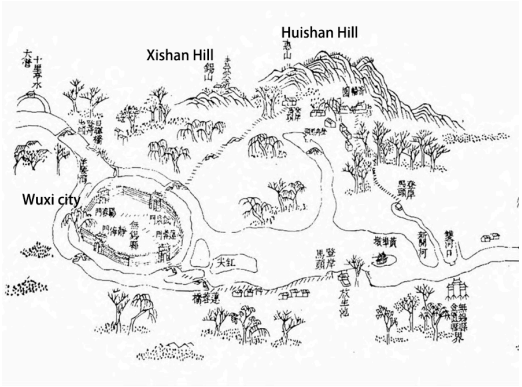


Figure 2. Ancient maps of the area surrounding Wuxi city

Source: Wuxi County Gazetteer, Wanli 2nd year (1574) edition of the Ming dynasty.

2.3. Surrounding settlements and cultural relationships

Huishan has been associated with human settlement since ancient times. Its advantageous hills-and-water setting gained renown after Lu Yu of the Tang dynasty ranked Huishan Spring as the second finest spring under heaven. From the Yuan dynasty onward, Huishan Hill, known as the "Foremost Hill in Jiangnan," became celebrated for its springs [5]. Following the proliferation of ancestral hall construction after the Ming dynasty, the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex formed a mutually dependent relationship with surrounding settlements.



Figure 3. Aerial view of Huishan Town

Source: Huishan Town Scenic Area Guidance System.

Beyond clan culture, Huishan developed a rich religious and intellectual landscape. Huishan Temple, founded during the Southern Dynasties and rebuilt after periods of warfare, became an important Buddhist site in Jiangnan. Yuquan Taoist Temple, established in the Yuan dynasty, represents a significant Daoist center [6].

3. Current conditions of the Ancestral Hall Complex within contemporary urban space

The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex in Wuxi has a long history and a deep cultural background. For more than one thousand years, it has attracted many men of letters, famous clans and visitors from all over the country generation after generation. A lot of historical events and folk stories have happened here and been passed down. But because of the lack of promotion and insufficient

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protection work, many of these precious cultural memories are only recorded in historical books. Even local residents know little about these important cultural contents.

3.1. Impacts of environmental change on the landscape structure

Huishan Hill was originally the core natural part of the whole ancestral hall complex. Its landform and ecological environment provided a complete and connected space for the halls. In the past few decades, people have built a lot of roads and developed the area for tourism. These actions have broken the original landscape of hills and forests, and made the whole visual effect of the area look broken and disconnected. Some construction projects like the Huishan Adventure Park do not combine well with the local historical and cultural background. They weaken the traditional landscape atmosphere of the area and also make the spatial connections between the ancestral halls and the surrounding terrain less close.

3.2. Changes in the relationship with urban space

In modern Wuxi city, ancestral halls are no longer the central part of urban space. Huishan Town has been included in the large-scale urban renewal and tourism development plans, so the ancestral hall complex is now surrounded by commercial streets and tourist facilities. Its original main function centered on clan culture has changed into providing leisure, consumption and sightseeing services for tourists. To attract more visitors, the scenic area management has added many new elements in the entrance plazas, such as "check-in" walls and vendor streets (as presented in figure 4). These elements often conflict with the original architectural style of the town and make the historical atmosphere of the ancestral hall complex even weaker.



Figure 4. Vendor stalls at the entrance plaza of the scenic area

Source: Photograph by the author.

3.3. The weakening of humanistic functions

With the fast development of tourism and urbanization, the original local residents of Huishan have moved away little by little. This makes the connections between local community members much weaker, and also makes ancestral halls lose their steady group of users. Many ancestral halls have become "empty shells" now. They still keep their physical building structures, but they have lost their precious cultural memories and original social functions. Under such circumstances, these halls are no longer living cultural heritage, and they only exist as protected architectural relics. To solve this problem, local government departments have changed some halls into exhibition and display

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places. Though this kind of suitable reuse gives the halls new modern functions, it still has obvious limitations. Most of these efforts pay more attention to using the architectural space, but ignore the continuity of the local cultural content.



Figure 5. Outdoor tables and chairs placed in front of an ancestral hall

Source: Photograph by the author.

4. Conservation and renewal strategies for the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex

As an important part of Wuxi's cultural landscape, the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex not only records the historical development of local clan culture, but also embodies the humanistic spirit that is closely connected with the city's hill and water space structure. Under the double pressures of urbanization and tourism-driven commercialization, the protection and renewal of the complex can no longer only focus on repairing the building structures. Instead, it needs to rebuild the cultural space of the area and guide the renewal of social relationships among local people.

4.1. Conservation of architectural fabric and adaptive reuse

4.1.1. Structural reinforcement and roof restoration

Most of the ancestral halls in Huishan were built during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and they have been repaired many times in history. This leads to different levels of structural aging of the buildings. The protection work of these halls should follow the basic principles of heritage protection, and put traditional reinforcement and restoration techniques in the first place. Huishan is in an area where wood is easy to rot and termites are common, so the ancestral hall buildings here are especially easy to be damaged by wet air and harmful insects. The protection measures should include strengthening the key wooden structural nodes of the buildings, replacing the building parts that are seriously damaged, and setting up a standardized maintenance system with regular inspection and pest control work.

4.1.2. Color harmonization and preservation of architectural character

The restoration work of the ancestral halls should pay attention to using the same materials as the original ones and keeping the historical style of the buildings. At the same time, it can also add some sustainable modern technologies in a selective way. At present, Huishan Town does not have a unified planning plan for the color schemes of the ancestral halls. This makes the wall colors of different halls look uncoordinated and the decorative styles not match with each other. Heritage

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protection departments should rebuild the original color systems of the halls according to historical records and on-site investigations. They should avoid using the visually obtrusive "internet celebrity–style" decorations (seen in figure5&6) and make the building colors match well with the local hill and water environment again.



Figure 6. Incongruous commercial signage

Source: Photograph by the author

4.1.3. Moderate display and adaptive activation

The final goal of protecting the ancestral hall complex is to activate the halls and make them be used continuously, not to isolate them as static heritage objects. We can learn from the experience of other countries, for example, the suitable reuse of historic buildings in Mantua, Italy. It shows that opening historic spaces for the daily activities of local communities can effectively combine heritage with contemporary life. In Huishan Town, several ancestral halls have already been changed into clan culture exhibition halls or venues for intangible cultural heritage activities. But the overall participation of the public in these activities is still very limited. To increase the vitality of the ancestral halls, we need to make them more accessible and let people use them more often. The courtyard spaces inside the ancestral halls can be activated in a proper way to hold different activities, such as exhibitions about local literati, workshops for making Huishan clay figurines or traditional performances of playing erhu.

4.1.4. Restoration of the traditional street network and visual corridors

In history, the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex and the town's streets, waterways as well as the surrounding hill terrain formed a complete and integrated spatial order. Modern road expansion and tourism development have broken these close relationships. The Master Plan for the Conservation of Wuxi as a Historic and Cultural City (2025–2035) and the Conservation Plan for the Huishan Historic and Cultural District (2025–2035) have set clear protection requirements for the ancestral hall complex and its surrounding hill and water landscape. The protection work should put the restoration of traditional street scales and a coherent pedestrian system in the first place, including restoring the visual corridors and pedestrian paths that connect different ancestral halls. To solve the problems caused by modern construction intrusions, the entrance plaza of the scenic area should be redesigned to strengthen the visual guidance along the primary spatial axis of the whole complex.

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4.1.5. Establishing a "cultural landscape touring system"

Field research shows that Huishan Town is often regarded as a single tourist spot, and it lacks close cultural connections with other areas around it. Local cultural and tourism departments should look at the area from an integrated urban and landscape perspective to build a coherent cultural corridor. With the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex as the center, this corridor can connect many important cultural sites in Wuxi, such as Huishan Temple, the Donglin Academy and Xue Fucheng's former residence. The department can also coordinate with the public transportation system and launch combined admission tickets for all these cultural sites.

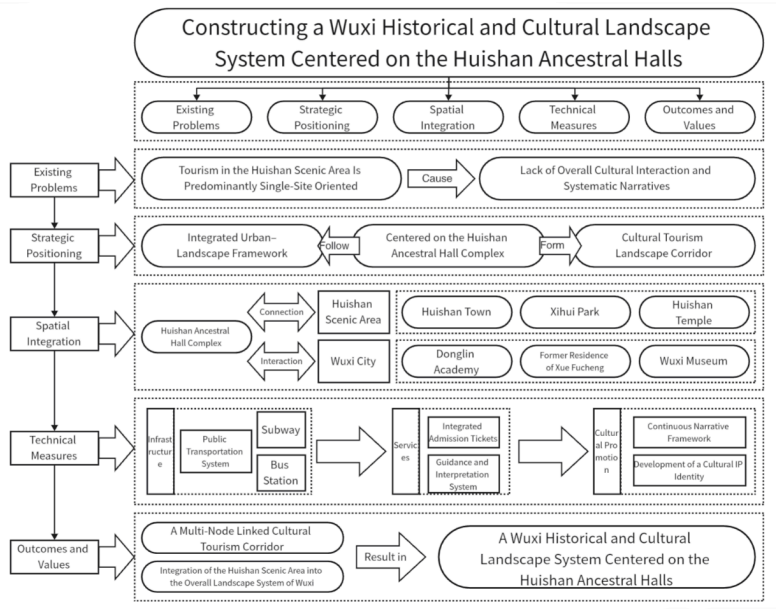


Figure 7. Technical framework for constructing a Wuxi and cultural landscape system centered on the Huishan Ancestral Halls

Source: Drawn by the author.

It can also set up the same kind of signboards and interpretive maps for the whole cultural corridor. All these measures can create a continuous travel route that integrates local clan culture, religious belief and academy tradition. This cultural landscape touring system can be made even better by designing a special and recognizable cultural IP image for it (the overall technical process is summarized in figure 7).

4.2. Social participation and cultural reconstruction

4.2.1. Revitalizing traditional festivals and rituals

The cultural revitalization of ancestral halls cannot be separated from the participation of local social groups. With the support of government policies and the guidance of related institutions, local government and cultural tourism departments can provide activity venues and related resources for the local people. They can also encourage the co-construction of the local community and help bring back traditional festivals and rituals in the ancestral hall spaces. Field investigations show that besides the clan sacrificial activities during the Qingming Festival and the Winter Solstice, the ancestral halls in Huishan also held a large-scale communal ritual called the "Eight Thanksgivings"

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(Baxie) in history. With the relocation of original residents and the changes of social structure, such traditional rituals have almost disappeared from people's daily life. Now they only exist in symbolic forms in a few clans. So the future revitalization work can focus on restoring these traditional rituals, which can help strengthen the passing on of sacrificial culture in people's daily life.

4.2.2. Establishing partnerships with educational institutions

The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex is a valuable place for education about historic architecture, ritual culture and social practice. Local administrative bodies can work together with primary and secondary schools in Wuxi, as well as local universities like Jiangnan University. They can jointly set up "Ancestral Hall Culture Study Bases" and "Traditional Culture Education Bases" in the complex. These bases can provide regular visit opportunities for students and hold various experiential learning activities for them. They can also hold ceremonies related to the "Eight Etiquettes and Four Rituals" together with teachers, local elders and community representatives. Letting students take part in these ritual practices in the solemn spatial environment of ancestral halls can make them understand traditional Chinese ritual culture and its basic ethical ideas more directly.

4.2.3. Building a community-based co-governance system

The long-term protection of ancestral halls does not only depend on the support of government policies and funding, but also on the establishment of a management mechanism centered on the local community. Local governments and residents can jointly set up a "Huishan Ancestral Hall Conservation Council". This council can include original local inhabitants, cultural scholars, volunteers and business representatives, and let them take part in the daily decision-making and maintenance supervision of the ancestral hall protection work. Community members can take part in the work by taking turns to do inspection, interpretation and routine management jobs. At the same time, the younger generations who have ancestral ties to Huishan can be encouraged to take part in the protection work through volunteer service and cultural promotion activities. Besides, the local government can also develop an "Internet + Culture" strategy to expand the influence of the ancestral hall culture through short videos, online guided tours and virtual exhibitions on the Internet.

5. Conclusion

The Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex embodies the special clan traditions and the humanistic spirit connected with hills and water in the Jiangnan area. It is an important part of Wuxi's historical and cultural symbol. Its unique space layout and architectural forms are precious cultural assets of the city. This study puts forward a multi-level plan for the protection and renewal of the Huishan Ancestral Hall Complex. At the architectural level, the protection strategies focus on repairing the building structures and doing protection work that adapts to the climatic features of this area. At the spatial level, it is suggested to restore the traditional street networks and visual corridors of the town, rebuild the cultural atmosphere of the whole area and set up an integrated cultural touring system. All these can make the historic buildings harmonize with the urban development of Wuxi. At the social level, the government can support community-centered activities, such as bringing back traditional rituals, combining the ancestral hall culture with educational programs and

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developing a co-governance mechanism for the local community. These activities can promote the renewal of local social connections and the continuous passing on of local cultural heritage.

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