

INTERPRETATION AND ACTIVATION PATHS OF ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL CUSTOMS IN BIJIANG

Wei Tang

School of Tourism and Historical Culture, Zhaoqing College, Zhaoqing 526061, Guangdong, China.

Abstract: Traditional Lingnan ancestral halls serve not only as physical vessels for clan rituals and lineage cohesion, but also as core educational fields that nurture rural educational traditions and local cultural identity. Taking the ancestral hall clusters and their associated educational customs in the historic village of Bijiang as a research object, this paper adopts the perspectives of field theory and embodied cognition to systematically analyze the formation mechanisms of historical memories surrounding clan and charity schooling. It extracts the cultural values and symbolic expressions embedded in educational customs such as the Enlightenment Ceremony, clan rules and admonitions, and elder-respecting scholarship awards. The findings demonstrate that Bijiang ancestral hall educational customs achieve the intergenerational transmission of clan memory and the continuous shaping of a sense of place through the triple intertwining of physical space, ritual behavior, and bodily memory. Facing the challenges of rural spatial reshaping and community structure deconstruction in contemporary society, this paper proposes living activation paths encompassing spatial micro-renovation, ritual behavior re-structuring, and contemporary community governance embedding. This study aims to provide an embodied paradigm and theoretical support for the transmission of traditional village culture, the improvement of human settlement quality, and rural cultural revitalization in the Lingnan region.

Keywords: Lingnan ancestral halls; Clan education memory; Educational customs; Local identity; Activation paths; Bijiang of Shunde

1 INTRODUCTION

Under the dual impacts of rapid urbanization and globalization, traditional rural settlements in coastal southeast China universally face deep crises of community depopulation, cultural memory fracture, and spatial homogenization. As a concentrated manifestation of Lingnan water-town architecture and lineage institutions, the historic village of Bijiang, located in Beijiao Town, Shunde District, Foshan, possesses an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Bijiang has been renowned for its flourishing imperial examination successes and vibrant academic atmosphere, preserving a vast array of ancestral hall structures including the Jinhua Hongmen Hall, Jing'an Hall. These ancestral halls record not only the genealogical lineage of local clans, but also a distinctive educational system of clan and charity schooling along with folk traditions that revere education and scholarship.

However, amidst the dissemination of modern standardized public education and shifts in rural social structures, the traditional educational functions of ancestral halls have gradually detached. Many ancestral halls once degenerated into static architectural heritage sites or isolated tourist attractions, leaving their profound educational value and community cohesion mechanisms at risk of marginalization. In recent years, with the deep implementation of the national Rural Revitalization strategy and the development of the "Humanistic Bay Area" in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, activating the spatial heritage of traditional villages, reconstructing folk educational fields, and awakening local cultural self-awareness have become vital subjects of common concern in both academia and practice [1].

Taking the educational customs of Bijiang ancestral halls as an entry point, this paper examines how clan education memory translates through institutional, spatial, and ritual embodiments into contemporary local identity among rural communities. This study aims to transcend the binary opposition between static conservation and predatory development, constructing a living protection and educational reconstruction framework based on "field, body, and memory," thereby offering theoretical references and practical guidance for the cultural transmission and spatial regeneration of traditional Lingnan villages.

2 THE FORMATION MECHANISM AND ELEMENT IDENTIFICATION OF BIJIANG CLAN EDUCATION MEMORY

2.1 The Spatial-Social Network and Educational Evolution of Bijiang Ancestral Halls

Situated in the alluvial plain of the Pearl River Delta, Bijiang in Shunde features a dense river network. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it accumulated a formidable economic foundation through the dike-pond agriculture system and commercial trade. Accompanied by local economic prosperity, major family surnames in Bijiang, such as the Su, Wu, and Liang lineages, established ancestral halls and temples, giving rise to a magnificent landscape characterized by "hundreds of ancestral halls and thousands of residences." Distinct from northern Chinese ancestral halls that primarily emphasize bloodline ancestor worship, ancestral halls in the Cantonese region often exhibit

prominent characteristics of rich clan assets and dedicated educational provision.

In Bijiang, lineages allocated clan land and established clan schools and charity schools, directly transforming ancestral hall spaces into educational bases for lineage youth to study, cultivate etiquette, and prepare for imperial examinations. For instance, structures such as the Jinhua Hongmen Hall and Jing'an Hall preserve typical features of Lingnan three-entry green-brick houses and high wok-ear gable walls, while incorporating specialized side halls and wing rooms for lectures, book storage, and examination preparation. This spatial configuration of “integrating ancestral hall with school” facilitated a deep convergence of lineage rituals and Confucian education within a concrete physical field.

2.2 Extraction of Core Elements of Educational Customs in Bijiang Ancestral Halls

Through a historical literature review and oral history collection regarding traditional rural society in Bijiang, the elements of ancestral hall educational customs can be categorized into three mutually supporting dimensions.

The first dimension involves institutional and regulatory elements. This encompasses clan rules, family admonitions, school land management regulations, and scholarship award charters. These regulations clearly defined behavioral guidelines for lineage youth, financial aid standards for examinations, and disciplinary penalties for infractions, establishing a normative foundation for ancestral hall education.

The second dimension involves ritual and behavioral elements. This includes the First Writing Ceremony, Wenchang worship, village drinking rituals, and ancestor-informing rituals upon passing imperial examinations. These rituals emphasize bodily participation and standardization of movements, such as kneeling, adjusting attire, and marking cinnabar dots on the forehead to unlock wisdom, thereby internalizing abstract Confucian ethics into individual habitus.

The third dimension involves symbolic and spatial elements. This comprises honorific plaques, examination accomplishment flagstaff stones, honorific arches, and decorative wood and stone carvings depicting auspicious allegories such as Dragon Boats Breaking Waves and Plucking the Laurel Branch. These visual and architectural symbols provided powerful cultural cues, continuously conveying values that revere scholarship to community members.

3 VALUE EXTRACTION BASED ON EMBODIED COGNITION AND FIELD THEORY

3.1 From Bloodline-Enclosed Spaces to Community Public Educational Fields Reconstruction

According to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, a field is a network or configuration of objective relations between positions [2]. As centers of lineage governance, traditional ancestral halls in Bijiang possessed an educational field characterized by strong lineage exclusivity and hierarchical stratification. However, within contemporary rural social contexts, accompanied by an influx of migrant populations and the integration of new and longtime residents, the educational function of ancestral halls is undergoing a transition from a private clan field to a public community field.

The educational customs of Bijiang ancestral halls concern not merely the bloodline continuation of specific surnames, but also the cultivation of public morality across lineages and geographic origins. Introducing clan education memory into modern community life enables the translation of family ethics—once dormant in historical archives—into public moral norms for modern rural governance, thereby achieving a reconstruction of the educational field at both functional and value levels [3].

3.2 Identity Construction Mechanisms of Educational Customs

Embodied cognition theory posits that human cognition and emotion rely not merely on abstract symbolic computations within the brain, but are deeply dependent upon the body's physiological structures, experiences, and interactive processes with the environment [4]. The educational customs of traditional Bijiang ancestral halls could profoundly shape lineage identity precisely because they relied heavily on embodied ritual practices.

On the one hand, there is the habituation of bodily actions. During the First Writing Ceremony, young pupils don Hanfu attire, adjust their clothing, kneel attentively, and hold brushes to write the character Person. Through repeated physical experience, this sequence of highly ritualized actions deeply imprints cultural values such as respecting knowledge and upright character formation into bodily memory.

On the other hand, there is emotional resonance. During ancestor-informing ceremonies for academic honors and Respecting-Elders rites on the Double Ninth Festival, villagers gather under the lofty halls of green-brick architecture. Amidst burning incense and echoing drums and gongs, they jointly witness the growth of younger generations and the honoring of elders. This ritual setting of collective effervescence triggers intense emotional resonance among community members, tightly binding individual life trajectories to the collective destiny of the local community [5].

3.3 Regeneration of Sense of Place and Awakening of Cultural Self-Confidence

Yi-Fu Tuan notes that a place is a space endowed with human emotion and meaning [5]. The granite-paved alleys, ancient wells, old banyan trees, and historical honorific plaques inside Bijiang ancestral halls constitute a highly distinctive place identity. When Bijiang residents and their descendants re-engage in educational folk activities centered around ancestral halls, nostalgic memories once diluted by modernization are reactivated.

This rediscovery of local historical textures and educational customs effectively resists the homogenization crisis of

rural landscapes and cultures under globalization. Moreover, it awakens a sense of dignity and confidence in cultural identity among local villagers, including overseas Cantonese diasporas, establishing a solid psychological foundation for the shared cultural development of the Humanistic Bay Area [6].

4 PRACTICAL DILEMMAS IN TRANSMITTING BIJIANG ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL CUSTOMS

Despite possessing rich ancestral hall heritage and educational traditions, Bijiang faces multiple practical dilemmas in preserving and transmitting its educational customs during the current period of rural social transition.

The first issue is the decoupling of educational functions from physical space. Modern standardized schools, such as Bijiang Primary School and nearby secondary schools, assume the vast majority of knowledge transmission functions. Consequently, ancestral halls have lost their utility as physical educational venues, with some falling into disuse or remaining in a singular state as elderly activity centers.

The second issue is the fracture and superficiality of ritual behaviors. As older generations of village elders who understand folk customs and history gradually step back, some ancestral hall educational rituals suffer from simplification or loss. In certain tourism development projects, educational customs are reduced to commercial performances tailored for tourist consumption, stripping away their inherent core of community self-education and moral restraint [7].

The third issue is generational misalignment between primary stewards and participating subjects. Rural youth labor migrates to urban centers, leaving behind children and migrant workers' children as the primary rural demographics. Non-native populations lack an innate emotional bond with Bijiang's clan education history, making the integration of new residents into the ancestral hall educational field a fresh challenge for community governance.

5 ACTIVATION PATHS OF BIJIANG ANCESTRAL HALL EDUCATIONAL CUSTOMS

Addressing these dilemmas, this paper proposes three operational activation paths based on a living preservation philosophy of micro-renovation, re-structuring, and deep integration.

5.1 Building Living Study-Tour Fields under Low-Intervention Principles

At the architectural and spatial preservation level, real estate logic driven by mass demolition or the indiscriminate creation of uniform faux-antique structures must be firmly rejected in favor of micro-renovation strategies [8].

On the one hand, low-intervention restoration should preserve historic character. For the Jinhua Hongmen Hall, surrounding vacant residences, and disused sericulture workshops in Bijiang, restoration should follow the principle of "repairing the old as old," carefully retaining green-brick moss, weathered wood carvings, and other traces of time. Through concealed upgrades to internal lighting, moisture proofing, and ventilation, spaces can meet modern comfort standards required for public teaching and study-tour activities.

On the other hand, dynamic adaptation and functional reconfiguration should be promoted. Side rooms and vacant courtyards of ancestral halls can be transformed into Bijiang Rural Landscape Exhibition Halls, Sinology Study Bases, and Community Children's Reading Rooms. Incorporating rural landscape generation concepts from regional lineage perspectives [9], digital interactive screens can display stories of Bijiang's historical scholars, allowing historic structures to maintain exterior integrity while reconnecting functionally with modern public education spaces [10].

5.2 Developing Embodied Contemporary Expressions and Curriculum

The vitality of heritage lies in use and participation. Traditional educational customs in Bijiang require contemporary re-structuring to preserve their cultural essence while aligning with the psychological and cognitive patterns of contemporary youth [11].

On the one hand, modern reconstructions of the First Writing Ceremony and Coming-of-Age rituals should be implemented. Partnering with local schools and community committees, annual entrance ceremonies for elementary students and coming-of-age rites for secondary graduates can be anchored within Bijiang ancestral halls. Standardizing embodied steps—such as adjusting attire, marking cinnabar dots, beating drums to declare aspirations, and tracing fundamental characters—enables students to experience a sense of etiquette regarding teacher respect and character development through genuine spatial interaction.

On the other hand, intangible culinary heritage can be deeply integrated with study-tour experiences. Shunde's culinary arts as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, such as boneless fish preparation and double-skin milk crafting, can be combined with the ancestral hall educational philosophy of tailored instruction and respect for nature [12]. Establishing somatic knowledge workshops in rear kitchens and front plazas allows veteran chefs and artisans to guide youth through oral and physical instruction, realizing a dual intergenerational continuity of culinary heritage and educational customs.

5.3 Constructing an Ecosystem of Co-creation among New and Longtime Residents

The ultimate anchor of cultural preservation lies in human flourishing and the enhancement of community cohesion. A symbiotic operating mechanism involving enterprises, village committees, local residents, and new migrant residents

must be established [13,14].

On the one hand, rural community academies and scholarship co-governance councils can be established. Reviving the ancestral hall tradition of school-land scholarships, the Bijiang Village Committee can partner with local enterprises to establish a Bijiang Rural Education Fund. Hosting lectures and joint study classes for new and longtime residents inside ancestral halls allows the community to celebrate high-achieving local youth while opening study-tour opportunities to children of migrant workers, fostering social integration through shared cultural identity [15].

On the other hand, endogenous motivation can be activated alongside the identity reconstruction of residents, artisans, and masters. Local villagers should be encouraged to participate as docents for educational customs, instructors for study tours, and craftspeople for ritual props. Through this identity shift—from ordinary residents to cultural communicators—villagers share directly in the economic returns and social respect generated by heritage preservation, spontaneously becoming dedicated guardians of Lingnan ancestral hall culture.

6 CONCLUSION

The exploration of educational customs in Bijiang ancestral halls in Shunde transcends conventional paradigms of architectural preservation or commercial tourism development. It presents a living heritage governance practice that harmonizes humanistic values, educational responsibilities, and community wisdom. This study demonstrates the following: First, clan education memory serves as a vital spiritual source for rural local identity. The institutional norms, bodily rituals, and spatial symbols embedded in ancestral hall educational customs constitute a resilient bond connecting individual memories with collective identity. Second, embodied practice is the core mechanism for activating traditional educational customs. Only when youth and community members genuinely enter ancestral hall spaces—experiencing repeated physical movements, emotional gatherings, and ritual immersion—can static cultural heritage transform into living educational resources. Third, culture and commerce, as well as heritage and modernity, can achieve harmonious symbiosis. Through micro-renovation strategies and community co-governance mechanisms, embedding traditional educational customs into contemporary daily life and rural governance provides traditional villages with a continuous capacity for self-sustainability. The enduring vitality of traditional Lingnan culture resides within modest everyday life and local practices. Looking ahead, within the broader frameworks of Rural Revitalization and the Humanistic Bay Area development, further deepening value extraction and digital translation of ancestral hall educational heritage in Bijiang and across the Cantonese region will provide an expanded blueprint and reference for the cultural empowerment and spatial regeneration of traditional Chinese villages.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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