

Return: Memorial Significance of a New Ancestral Temple

Taking Duan's Ancestral Hall, Yingshan, Hubei as an Example

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Abstract—The memorial significance of newly-built ancestral temples is mainly reflected in such aspects as the site, scale, shape and structure, decoration, and couplets of these buildings. With the rising phenomena of recompiling genealogical trees and building ancestral temples, the scale of ancestral temples, as single buildings, is continuing to be enlarged. Compared with traditional ancestral temples, the memorial significance of these newly built are continuously enhanced.

Keywords—return; newly-built ancestral hall; memorial significance

I. INTRODUCTION

The organization structure of traditional Chinese village society is a village elite-led, clan-like spontaneous order. The internal balance of such order is maintained by symbolic cultural signs like etiquette and custom, and rituals. This makes ancestral temples a center evolving various rural cultural phenomena. Since the modern times, the emerging sovereign nation has achieved its covering and restructuring at all levels of society. Especially, the political model of “totalitarian states” in late 1970s has driven the traditional spontaneous village order mentioned above to gradually emerge from decadence. After the reform and opening up, the adjustment of the relations of production and the withdrawal of the power of state to an extent allow the traditional blood-based ties revive once again, the phenomena of recompiling family trees and building ancestral temples reappearing in vast rural areas. However, the structure of rural culture has seen tremendous changes now. The traditional self-governing culture, the national ideology, and the rising consumer culture of market economy have formed three ripping forces, “public life having fallen, social order having deteriorated, and rural communities having collapsed in village society since 1980s.”^[1] Meanwhile, “no matter how disordered villages are, there is a natural law at work.”^[2] More than 30 years’ reform and opening up brings about changes in the political and cultural structure of rural community. The grass-roots organization of rural areas is no more a simple organ of

political power. “Once political power gets slackened, peasants will soon go back to the old road tracing back to thousand years ago.”^[3] The “old road” finds its expression mainly in building ancestral temples, especially by the clans who possess strong economic power, and those who protect their own economic interests.

However, the newly built ancestral temples have great dramatic differences in their sites, forms, materials, and functions, for example, the Duan's Main Ancestral Hall, Wasiqian Village, Nanhewa Town, Yingshan County, Hubei Province, completed in October, 2011. Before liberation the Duan clan had built a main ancestral hall and more than ten branches, which are destroyed in 1969 in a concentrated way. While selecting a site, the newly built Duan's Main Ancestral Hall is considered rebuilt in situ. As there has been built a village committee, it had to abandon the geomantic omen of its former site to select the site of a branch. In terms of the design of the architectural form, the spatial arrangement of the hall was from the memory of the elders in the clan, and the overall design was completed by a design company well-known for ancestral temple rebuilding by reference to Hui-style architecture rather popular nationwide. In terms of the building material, the hall basically employed reinforced concrete instead of original blocks and wood, and then was furnished with painting and some colored patterns. The changes in the functions of the ancestral hall are particularly remarkable. In the field investigation, I learned from the interviews of 7 members of the ancestral hall family tree compilation committee that, in addition to worship for ancestors and tracing lineage, the main goal of rebuilding the ancestral hall and recompiling the generation tree, more important, is to gain contact with the relatives of all circles of the clan to drive the Duan clan to economically grow and flourish. Besides, the newly-built hall also envisaged to be a village library, a museum of ethnology, and a public activity center. After investigating the functions of some other newly-built ancestral halls in east Hubei, I find nothing more than these.

Compared with traditional ancestral temples, newly-built ones are different. However, the memorial significance or “the monumentality”^[4] of traditional ancestral temples is manifested in the new ones. This paper will give a discussion to this characteristic in the following respects.

Research funds for this paper:

Research projects of humanities and social sciences of Ministry of Education (No. 14YJC760009): Return and Transformation-Investigation into the Construction of Ancestral Temples in East Hubei in the Perspective of Anthropology of Art

Research projects of humanities and social sciences of Hubei Provincial Department of Education (No. 13g410): From Worship for Ancestors to Cultural Consumption-Study on Functions of the Ancestral Temples Built in East Hubei.

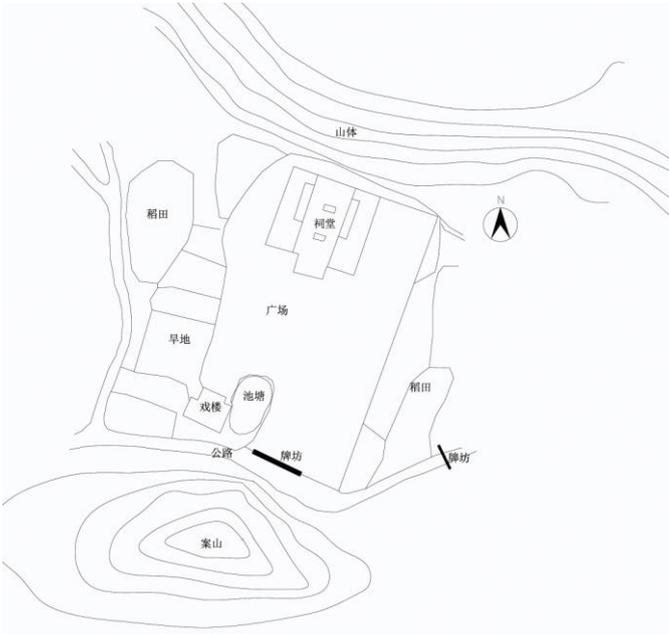


Fig. 1. Duan's Ancestral Hall Site

II. SITE

As stated above, although located at the original site of a branch ancestral hall, the newly built Duan's Ancestral Hall is fastidious about geomantic omen, a phenomenon fairly popular in ancestral temple construction in the south, and the consequence of "the combination of natural worship and ancestor worship"^[5]. In terms of the layout of the space and the surroundings of the hall, the hall is a conical hill, roads and paddy fields extending around it, and the Anshan Mountain standing in the southeast. Together with the pond dug in the east of the Grand Stage, these parts combine for a Chinese character of "Fu" (Fig. 1). In addition, the conical hill, the Anshan Mountain, is compared to a "Writing Brush Peak", and the pond just opposite the mountain is likened to an "inkstone pond", both of them forming a geomantic pattern "a writing brush dipping ink". Though geomancy has long been labelled a "superstitious" theory, it has always a profound impact on the behavior ethics and esthetic consciousness of compatriots.

III. SCALE

The newly-built Duan's Ancestral Hall Complex covers an area of about 3,500m², of which, the principal ancestral hall take up 781.5m². To the south of the hall is a village road joining to the county road to the southeast. At the intersection of both roads stands a memorial archway, about 150m distant from the hall. The southeast corner is the entrance to the ancestral hall complex, with another memorial archway built here. To the due south of the principal hall stands an unattached opera stage, covering an area of 75m² and immediately neighboring on the elliptic "inkstone pond" of a similar area to its east. The whole complex, costing more than RMB 1.5 million and financed by the householders in the clan and Duan's daughters married off, is now the largest and most expensive building in Wasiqian Village. "Fig.2", "Fig.3".

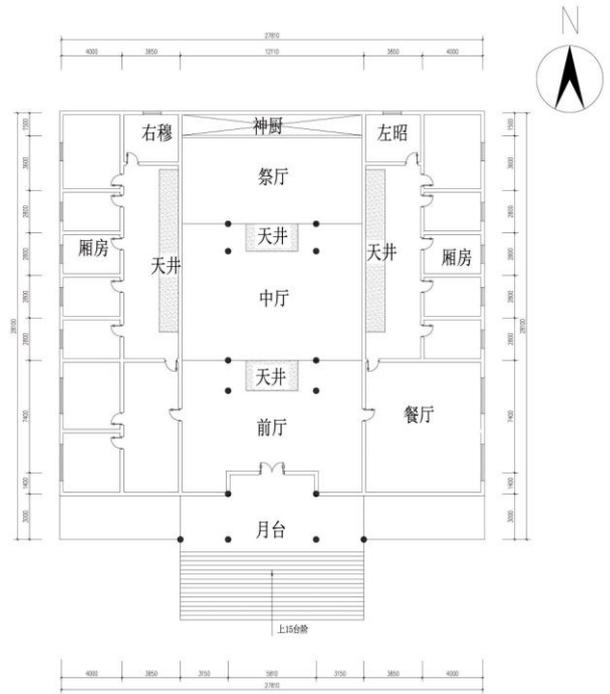


Fig. 2. Newly-built Duan's Ancestral Hall Complex



Fig. 3. Newly-built Duan's Ancestral Hall Complex

IV. ARCHITECTURAL FORM

Ancestral halls are a solemn ritual structure with so strong functions that the architectural form of traditional ancestral shrines maintains, all the time, stylized space and a somber, neat style. The principal part of the Duan's Ancestral Hall also preserves such architectural form. In the investigation, I queried the clansmen participating in the design about whether they had ever thought of following modern architectural style to design a new type of ancestral hall because of cost saving or others while maintaining the functions. "Never," said they, "is it still a shrine if built in modern architectural style?" Their concern is that without the form and decoration of a traditional ancestral hall, new ancestral halls will lose their memorial significance. Therefore, the form and decoration of the newly built Duan's Ancestral Hall are of ancient style.

The principal building of Duan's Ancestral Hall is a three-courtyard structure. The gate is really a three-room, three-storied porch, built as a wooden structure, with elaborate workmanship, luxurious decoration, and many colored drawing. A pair of stone lions, together with two drum-shaped bearing stones, stands at both sides of the porch, above which, a great tablet bearing four Chinese characters meaning "Duan's Ancestral Hall" is fixed. The second story is a theater facing the sacrificial hall, where the plays about sacrificial activities on a small scale or in rainy and snowy days would be on, while the separate stage is for plays on a large scale. To the north of the stage are the middle hall, the sacrificial hall, and the shrine. Against the east wall of the middle hall are set up merit monuments, on which, the names of those who subscribed more than 5000 yuan to the building of the ancestral hall are carved to praise them. The shrine enshrines the statues of 7 most important ancestors in Duan clan, who had their biographies briefly written down. On every occasion of offering sacrifices, there would be a sight of "bowing down before the ancestors and rising to see the theatre". The hall has an east wing and a west wing, following the patriarchal system that the men stand on the east and the women on the west. In the south of the east wing is a dining hall for gathering, and to the north of the dining hall is a kitchen; in the south of the west wing is now the office of the "15th Duan's General Council of Genealogy Compilation", and the west wing serves also as an abode for the custodian of the ancestral hall. According to some Duan's clansmen, after compiling the genealogy, the east and west wings will serve as Duan's data rooms, folk-custom material storerooms, or village library.

V. COUPLETS AND INSCRIBED TABLET

The lintel tablet saying "Hereditary Laurels by Your Imperial Majesty" is established as a result of the bestowal of a sumptuous lifestyle and benefice fields and the special permission to play spring opera by the Hongwu Emperor for the eighth great grandfather Duan Bojian's suppression of the roving bandits haunting the Yingshan Mountains. There are tablets of congratulations saying "Reputation Immortal Forever" and "Renascent Forever" presented by the Duan's in Xinhua, Hunan and the Duan's in Wuning, Jiangxi, and "Prosperous Forever" by the Jin's in Yingshan County. On the shrine the tablet saying "Flourishing for Generations" corresponds to the statues of the ancestors "Fig.4".



Fig. 4. Couplets and Inscribed Tablet of the Duan's Ancestral Hall

There are a total of 6 pairs of couplets inside and outside the ancestral hall, all gold stamping characters on black backgrounds. The gatepost couplet saying "people of talent come forth in large numbers, deeds of merit go on for long", narrates the merits and achievements of the ancestors and the history of Yingshan Duans moving and taking root here. In the lower hall down the stage the couplet on the posts, saying "Worshipping for ancestors carries on the Chinese virtues, running school trains elite of the clan", is a common one, which instructs and encourages later generations in a macroscopic perspective. In the middle hall there are two pairs of couplets, saying, respectively, "sacrifices in generations are looking forward prosperous offspring come to see the ancestral hall, people of the same clan benefited consider the past great cause rests on a solid foundation" and "gather elite of the whole clan to give a new look to the ancestral hall of hundreds of years, preserve Chinese quintessence to reboot the hereditary laurels of tens of generations". In the upper hall there is a couplet saying "Bojian's righteous act undertaken for the public good gained him the hereditary laurels from the emperor, Chaoli's innovation in the governance of the state makes Yingshan well-known in the county, praising the morality and conduct of Gongshu, the first ancestor of Duan, and Yangong, the first ancestor of Duan in Yingshan. In addition, on the background wall of the small stage in the ancestral hall are written two rows of big characters, saying "carry forward the Chinese culture, push forward social harmony."

To better understand the "memorial significance" of such a newly-built ancestral temple, we can sense it in a way of construction roaming. While we are walking into Wasiqian Village along the county road, a magnificent complex modeled after the ancient jumps into our eyes across the village road in the west. Among the pragmatic village buildings around, such extravagance and unserviceability is really shocked. The characters of "Duan's Ancestral Hall" on the gateway and the porch, together with the geomancy shown by the "mountain" behind the hall, the pond in the garden, and the "Writing Brush Peak" opposite it, make visitors immediately know the value and significance of the complex. Striding over the porch of the hall and passing by the red posts standing neat and symmetric, you will sense an atmosphere that is getting more and more stately and mystical. The significant gold stamping couplets on the posts are soundlessly talking about the history and honors of the Duan clan, and the earnest teachings for later generations. The shrine, the memorial tablets, and the incense burner table in the upper hall make us "find ourselves in a mystical world and at the destination of our tour, where we will meet the 'beginning'".

Architectural art is generally recognized as a combination of autonomy and heteronomy, especially the sense of architecture design under the direction of the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept of "heaven-man unity". However, in terms of the design of the newly-built ancestral hall discussed in this paper, I think, in order to express the memorial significance of the ancestral hall, the designer and sponsor considered more about the demand of the building in ceremony functions, commemorative significance, magnificence, etc. Therefore, the treatment in such aspects as

the site selection, scale, material, decoration, and spatial layout is not obedient to heteronomy (natural), but focuses on autonomy (the subjective will of artists or sponsors) to create autonomous space.

VI. CONCLUSION

At present, while we traveling in the motherland, now and then newly built ancestral temples will come into sight just like exquisite handicrafts. Influenced by the approval of land use, especially in the plains where arable land may be used, newly built ancestral halls are continuously being shrunk in floor space. This, however, cannot stop people's comparison and "extravagance" in ancestral hall construction. Casting aside the restraints of traditional architectural form on feudal etiquette, the newly built ancestral halls are developing to be a "high-end, magnificent, and high-grade" single building, almost equal to an imperial palace. The expression of memorial significance is continuously being reinforced compared with traditional ancestral hall buildings.

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- [3] Huang Shumin. The Story of Lincun Village: Chinese Rural Reform since 1949 [M]. Translated by Su Lan, NaranBilik. Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2002:21
- [4] The concepts and theories about the "monumentality" of Chinese ancient art and architecture are mainly seen in Wu Hong's article of The Nine Tripod Cauldrons and Chinese Ancient "Monumentality". "'Monumentality' is related to memory, continuance, and politics, races or religious duties, and its concrete implication determines the significance in society, politics, ideology, etc." He believes public monumental art has transformed into individual behaviors with the appearance of independent artists since the Han Dynasty, and the monumentality in earlier Chinese art died accordingly. I think the folk ancestral hall buildings under the clan system still retain strong "monumentality".
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