

Ancestral Hall Architecture as Cultural Heritage Education: Preservation of Traditional Decorative Elements in Chinese Clan Buildings

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Abstract: This study examines the architecture of ancestral halls as a form of cultural heritage learning by analyzing how this form aids in the passing of cultural information and identity outside the classroom. A qualitative interpretivist methodology was used to study the Chen Clan, Wang Family and Huizhou ancestral halls through a multiple case study design where architectural observation, visual analysis and thematic analysis were utilized. The results indicate that spatial organisation, ornament, and user interaction are effective as a group, whereby implicit and experiential learning is facilitated. Nevertheless, the practices of preservation tend to ignore intangible cultural meanings. The paper concludes by finding that ancestral halls were structured school systems. It suggests comprehensive conservation plans, better interpretive programs, incorporation of technology and involvement of communities to keep them educational and cultural.

Keywords: Ancestral Hall Architectural Heritage Preservation, Traditional Architectural Decoration and Interior Design, Cultural Heritage Education, Ancestral Hall Architecture.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Cultural heritage is a core mechanism of facilitating social identity and continuity of

collective memory generation across generations. It represents the values, traditions, and past experiences of communities, thus it serves as a fundamental tool by which societies exercise a historical record of their past and develop present identities. According to Heersmink (2023), material artefacts and built environments can be discussed as the sites of the collective memory, allowing people to interact with cultural discourses or to touch on the shared cultural stories in a material manner. Similarly, according to Freja (2025), cultural heritage is not a passive document of the past, but rather a process that is in motion, and which constantly influences at the material level the formation of social bonds and identity.

Over the past years, cultural heritage has begun to gain acknowledgment as a much needed learning tool. As opposed to being limited to formal classroom experiences, education is now seen to be an extended, lifelong experience that incorporates the experience of cultural environments and historical artefacts. The literature on heritage education states that exposure to cultural heritage may make critical thinkers, culturally aware, and develop an identity (Achille & Fiorillo, 2022; Rosser & Soler, 2024). The use of museums, heritage sites, and historical environments as an experiential learning platform, where individuals get to engage with cultural materials directly and gain more insight, is being used more often (Moseykina et al., 2022).

In this context, built environments especially architectural spaces have become important informal learning environments. Architecture is not only a physical facility but also a medium through which cultural meaning, social values as well as historic stories are explained. It has been revealed through studies on architecture and education that spatial structure and environmental constructions can determine learning and their cognitive attention (Marques da Silva, 2023; Salih et al., 2024). The theories of experiential learning also underpin the notion that people can learn more when they can interact with the physical environment, where sensations experience and situational knowledge are combined (Pak & De Smet, 2022). In turn, the concept of architectural heritage may be viewed as a form of “silent pedagogy”, where this knowledge is reflected in the spatial organization and material shapes.

Chinese ancestral halls are a unique architectural heritage that was heavily based on politics and socio-cultural organization of the traditional Chinese society. Traditionally, the buildings were at the centre of the clan systems, where they could perform the role of the ancestor worship as well as communal decision-making and social organisation. Li et al. (2023) point out that ancestral halls are firmly associated with kinship politics and mirror the system of hierarchies and familial arrangement that Chinese cultural customs are based on.

The purposes of ancestral halls are not limited to the religious or ceremonial purposes. They serve as multipurpose areas enabling rituals and social control on civilization and continuity of culture. Moral values that are central to Confucian philosophy including filial piety, loyalty, respect of the hierarchy are reinforced through ritual practices that take place in these halls. What is more, in many cases, ancestral halls are used as the location of community activities, dispute resolution, and education, which means that they play a crucial role in ensuring social cohesion (Yingrui, 2023).

One of the distinctive features of the ancestral hall architecture is the availability of complex and detailed decorative features such as wood carvings, stone carvings, murals and the inscriptions in calligraphy. These are not aesthetic features and have a symbolic meaning that conveys cultural values, historical stories and moral lessons.

In an example, classic themes tend to employ tales of honor, triumph and ethical behavior which may be in visual symbols of cultural ideals. According to Saburovna (2025), the use of symbolic elements in architectural ornamentation can serve as an interpretative tool so that the observer can interact with complicated cultural implications using visual rhetoric. This way, the ancestral halls may be perceived as the places that seek to reward culture informally through a combination of architecture and decoration.

1.2. Problem Statement

Existing literature on the architecture of the ancestral hall concentrates largely on the structural design, its historical evolution and aesthetics without paying much attention to its general social and educational use. This limited perspective fails to acknowledge that such spaces actively facilitate cultural transmission and learning. Specifically, the educational function of decorative aspects has not been studied in detail as they are generally discussed as elements of artistic importance and not of symbolic representation and ethical teaching. Moreover, the preservation practice is also inclined towards focusing more on physical restoration and neglecting the intangible cultural significance. As a result, heritage sites are at risk of disappearing their interpretative text, thus the concern to adopt a more holistic strategy that involves a combination of both the tangible and intangible cultural aspects.

1.3. Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to analyze the role of the ancient hall architecture as a cultural heritage education tool, and how the successive decorative features were preserved and interpreted. The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To analyse the educational role of architectural space in ancestral halls
2. To interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional decorative elements
3. To evaluate how preservation practices support the transmission of cultural knowledge

1.4. Research Questions

1. How do decorative elements in ancestral halls communicate cultural values?
2. In what ways do ancestral halls function as informal educational spaces?
3. How does preservation influence the transmission of cultural knowledge?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The research paper has various implications in various academic disciplines such as heritage education, architectural conservation, and cultural sustainability. Through exploring ancestral halls as learning spaces, it extends the knowledge on how the built heritage can be used to promote informal learning and cultural transmission. The findings are insightful to educators, architects and policy makers that aim at attaching the role of cultural heritage to educational systems. In addition, the research offers the interdisciplinary approach tying together architecture, education, and cultural studies. It emphasises that not only the physical constructions of the places of heritage themselves but the meanings that are embodied in them should be preserved. In doing so it helps to establish more detailed conservation plans which acknowledge the learning power of the cultural heritage. Conclusively, this study highlights how architectural heritage is an active tool that still defines identity, memory and knowledge in modern civilization.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Heritage and Education

Cultural heritage is generally defined as the heritage of material objects and immaterial qualities left by past generations, being preserved in the present, and being passed to future generations (Bihari, 2023). It is not confined to monuments and architectural buildings but also traditions, values, and shared memories that define the identity of a society. Heersmink (2023) states that cultural artefacts and built environments are characterized as external memory systems as they are used to preserve and convey common cultural knowledge. This view has drawn its focus to the inseparability of material heritage and shared identity and existence, with physical structures as sources of social meaning and historical continuity.

The impact of cultural heritage on the development of identity is established in the literature. The heritage sites and artefacts add to the embodiment of the individual and collective identities through offering a sense of belonging and rootedness in the historical sense (Chng & Narayanan, 2017). Freja (2025) goes ahead to stress that collective memory that is embedded in cultural heritage is important in the process of forming social cohesion, since it enables different communities to understand their past and match their current values with the inherited traditions. Cultural heritage in this sense can serve as a knowledge-sharing system, connecting the business with the sharing of knowledge across generations and knowledge continuation.

In recent years, the importance of cultural heritage as a source of education has gained increased acceptance. Education about heritage moves beyond the traditional academic context, encompassing experiential and context-based methods of education, which help the individual to directly experience historic surroundings. According to Achille and Fiorillo (2022), cultural heritage offers active learning opportunities, as interaction with real cultural material helps people sharpen their thinking skills and understanding of cultural material. In the same vein, Rosser and Soler (2024) indicate that new methods like gamification have the potential to increase the interaction with the heritage to make learning more accessible and meaningful.

The role of cultural heritage as a source of educational value is also supported by the viewpoint of such organizations as UNESCO. UNESCO encourages the use of heritage-based education as a channel of creating cultural awareness, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development. It also provides the fact that the heritage sites are the storage of not only the past but also the learning facilities which help to form the global citizenship and cultural literacy. This method highlights the need to incorporate the heritage into the educational systems in the attempt to make it more applicable in the modern world.

2.2. Informal Learning and Built Environments

Informal learning is the concept that is increasingly becoming a subject of attention in educational research, especially concerning learning in non-traditional settings. Informal learning is also defined as the acquisition of knowledge that takes place outside of formal institutional context and is frequently associated with the day to day experience, our interactions and interactions with physical spaces (Carliner, 2023). Experiential learning theory hypothesizes that people learn better in an environment

where they can actively engage in sensory learning and combine both sensory experiences and mental activity (Pak & De Smet, 2022).

Architectural spaces are built environments, which play a major role in informal and experiential learning. Architecture is not only a practical or aesthetic structure, but it is also a medium that determines human behaviour, perception and understanding (Sussman & Hollander, 2021). Salih et al. (2024) explain that architectural context can be a source of informal learning and greater engagement and learning retention through the context-rich environments offered by informal learning spaces that support exploration and interaction. Likewise, Marques da Silva (2023) points out that civic spaces and constructed environments are part of learning processes that incite cultural texts and social connotations in the layout.

The concept of architecture as pedagogical medium is reinforced by the spatial learning theory that focuses on the connection between physical space and cognitive growth. The locations and circulatory patterns as well as the physical aspects such as terrain may also affect the manner in which people perceive and conceptualize information (Shi & Tian, 2025). Asgaripour et al. (2024) illustrate that buildings including corridors, layouts, and appearance may be functional in promoting learning because they help to direct user interaction and engagement in an experience. This approach classifies architecture as a participant in the educational process, in which knowledge is imparted through spatial experience as opposed to being instructed.

2.3. Chinese Ancestral Hall Tradition

Chinese ancestral halls are a distinct type of architectural heritage that portrays the social-cultural and political structure of the Chinese traditional society. These monuments emerged as both the focus institutions of clan systems, places of ancestor worship, of communal assembly, and of state administration. Their formation is strongly associated with the organization of the kinship and Confucian ideals, which are connected to the hierarchy, filial piety, and social order (Shuxian, 2025). Li et al. (2023) believe that ancestral halls are firmly enshrined within the political and cultural structure of kinship, as they become the physical manifestation of the family and social order.

Ancestral halls served various purposes in societies in the past. They were the setting of ritual ceremonies, such as the veneration of ancestors and the feasts of seasons, which strengthen the spiritual and moral relations between generations. Along with their religious purposes, the functions of the ancestral halls were also those of social government when clan members could meet to make decisions, solve disputes, and hold events within the community (Yingrui, 2023). The multifunctional role of ancestral halls emphasizes the significance of ancestral halls as both a physical and social organization.

In addition to their practical uses, ancestral halls also have important cultural symbolism in that they represent a sense of group identity and continuity. The architecture of them is associated with hierarchy and the spatial design of the buildings is characterized by hierarchical structures and emphasis of order, symmetry, and authority. The features are not only functional factors but also describe cultural values and social norms. Therefore, it is possible to perceive an ancestral hall as the place where architecture and culture overlap providing conditions to interact with one another and to pass on culture (Mo & Mohd Jaki Bin, 2025).

2.4. Traditional Decorative Elements in Chinese Architecture

One of the characteristic features of the Chinese ancestral hall type of architecture is the widespread use of decorative elements, which can be aesthetic and symbolic at the same time. These aspects are wood carvings, stone carvings, murals, and calligraphic inscriptions, all of which play a role in the general cultural account that is inherent in the building (Li et al., 2023). Some of the best-known elements of decoration include wood carvings, usually representing folklore, historical and moral tales. These carvings can be discussed as images with the ability to convey cultural values and ethical principles (Fang et al., 2024). Similarly, the depiction of symbolic motifs in stone and bricks remains sustainable because of the carvings, which support the message of prosperity, long life, and virtue. Ancestral halls also have a visual storytelling element shown through murals and painted decorations which feature the use of colour and imagery to tell complicated cultural stories (Lian et al., 2024).

The use of calligraphy and inscriptions has a special relevance in the standard of conveying philosophical and moral teaching. These are literary elements that usually contain proverbs, family rules, and Confucian doctrine and are a direct presentation of the cultural ideals. According to Saburovna (2025), visual signatures like colour and visual symbols may have multiple layers of meaning so that viewers can decode cultural context about objects with visual and written information.

The symbolic values inherent in such ornamental features are tightly connected with some of the most important cultural ideas such as filial piety, moral integrity, and social hierarchy. Filial piety is one of the core Confucian values that is often manifested in imagery and inscriptions that underline reverence to ancestors and lineage members (Shao et al., 2025). Moral concept is taught by means of stories which depict virtue like fidelity, integrity and patience. The hierarchy that is displayed in the organization and the conspicuousness of the decorative elements contribute to the hierarchical structure of the traditional society.

2.5. Heritage Preservation and Cultural Sustainability

The preservation of heritage is a decisive part of the cultural sustainability and transmission of cultural valuables to the future generation. Historical conservation techniques have been concerned with physical restoration and conservation of heritage structures. Nonetheless, modern approaches note the need to protect the tangible and the intangible elements of heritage, such as the cultural meanings, practices, and the knowledge systems (Muthuswamy & Esakki, 2024). In addition, Megarry et al. (2026) reveal the issues related to the implementation of cultural heritage into the large-scale paradigms of sustainability and risk management. Their analysis demonstrates the major gaps in the existing solutions especially the case of vulnerability of heritage sites to the change of the environment and socio-economic condition. The challenges make it clear that further detailed strategies should be employed in terms of the dynamism and changing aspect of cultural heritage.

Modernization is a significant threat to the conservation of heritage sites because in the course of urbanization, new social practices and rapid developments cause the social environment to degrade or disintegrate old buildings. This is further complicated by the death of the artisans, the special skills needed to undertake restorations are becoming less common (Znumashova, 2025). Moreover, the commercialization of

heritage sites may lead to commoditization of the cultural assets, with economic significance leading to the culture authenticity (Vicol, 2024). These issues underscore the need to embrace more sustainable conservation and preservation methods where conservation is not sacrificed to the modernity. These strategies must endeavor to preserve the integrity of heritage sites and at the same time ensure their accessibility and educative significance. Educational views can be incorporated into preservation plans to increase the contribution of cultural heritage as a living resource to facilitate learning and cultural continuity.

2.6. Research Gap

Although considerable literature on cultural heritage, architecture and preservation exists, a major gap of knowledge exists on the educational purpose of architectural heritage especially in its ornamental aspects. The current literature leans toward perceiving the features of decoration as elements of art or aesthetic value, without delving into their role as a source of cultural information and instruction. Furthermore, few studies have been conducted to analyze the connection between architecture and cultural pedagogy. Although informal learning in built environments has attracted interest; its establishment in relation to heritage architecture has been insufficiently explored. This is the gap especially in the research done on Chinese ancestral halls, as most attention has been given to historical and architectural factors, although not on educational roles. Case-based qualitative research, which would give a detailed analysis of a certain heritage site, is also needed. The methods may provide useful information about the multifaceted relationships of architecture, culture, and education and provide a more detailed perspective on how heritage spaces can be used as educational settings. Filling these gaps, the present study will use a case study approach to investigate educational potential of ancestral hall architecture. It aims to make a contribution to a more complex provision of understanding of cultural heritage as an educational resource by concentrating on the preservation and interpretation of the decorative element.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research follows a qualitative research methodology based on the interpretivist paradigm to examine the pedagogical value of the ancestral hall architecture. Qualitative research is mostly appropriate in examining any social and cultural complex phenomenon as it allows one to gain a deep insight into meanings, experiences, and interpretations within their natural contexts. Creswell (2019) argues that qualitative inquiry is all about how individuals make meaning and interpret their experiences, which makes it suitable to the studies investigating cultural heritage and architectural symbolism.

This study is based on the interpretivist paradigm, which focuses on subjectivity of reality and its construction. Instead of pursuing objective measurement, the interpretation of interpretivism is the quest to comprehend cultural meanings as incorporated in social and material situations. According to Ponelis (2015), interpretivist studies are particularly preferable to case study research that attempts to address the question of how and why in a real-world context that enables a researcher to develop the rich,

contextualised understanding of complex phenomenon. The interpretivist approach serves the functionality of exploring the phenomenon of ancestral halls as cultural and educational locations in this paper because the significance of the phenomena is built through the architectural design and the ornaments.

3.2. Case Study Method

The study employs case study approach to provide an in-depth and holistic evaluation of ancestral hall architecture as a culture heritage education medium. Case study research has been recognised as a powerful tool used in exploring the modern-day phenomena in their real life contexts, especially where the spheres around the phenomenon and its context have not been demarcated well. Yin (2018) suggests that case studies are particularly adequate to answer exploratory research questions, conduct research on complex systems with several variables and evidence sources.

The case study format is especially suitable to use in architectural research since it enables one to study and discuss particular buildings and their importance in culture. Case studies allow researchers to examine the architectural forms not just in terms of physical space but also of the message they convey, predetermined by historical, social and cultural conditions. The case study approach is the most appropriate to explore the heritage buildings and their symbolic role because it, as noted in the architectural research literature, allows investigating unique and context-based phenomena comprehensively and holistically (Sarvimaki, 2017). Moreover, the case study approach gives a chance to combine various types of data, such as visual, textual, and historical data. Such flexibility in methodology makes the analysis even rich and deep to show in detail how architectural factors ultimately promote cultural and educational processes. Hence, the case study approach is especially effective in researching the interaction of architecture and culture and education in ancestral halls.

3.3. Case Selection

Purposive sampling is applied to the selection of case study sites because it is widely applied in qualitative research to determine information-rich cases that will be relevant to the research objectives. The selection criteria of the case study are historical significance, richness of decorative elements, and preservation condition of the site.

Firstly, historical relevance is required so that the chosen ancestral hall is presented as the genuine example of the traditional Chinese architecture, which has certain cultural meaning. Structures that have influential links to clan structures and cultural activities reveal many prizes to the part architecture played in social organisation and the transmission of culture. Secondly, one of the most important criteria would be the availability of various and intact decorative features because the study is aimed at investigating the pedagogical position of architectural ornamentation. Sites that have complex carvings, murals and inscriptions can be used to analyse the symbolic meanings and their role in informal learning. Lastly, preservation of the site is also taken into account in order to make sure that the structural design and the ornamental elements remain intact to be analyzed. Well-preservation sites can be more effectively interpreted in terms of cultural meanings and can be used to gain information about the efficacy of conservation practices.

3.4. Selected Case Study Site

The multiple case study design of this study will focus on three representative

ancestral halls in China; Chen Clan Ancestral Hall in Guangzhou, Wang Family Ancestral Hall in Shanxi, and Huizhou ancestral halls in Anhui Province.

One of the most preserved and architecturally important ancestral halls in southern china is the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall which was built during the late Qing Dynasty. It was initially constructed as a social place of the lineage of the Chen family and had an educational, cultural, and ritual purpose. The site is known to have a lot of decorative material such as wood carvings, brick carvings, ceramic sculptures, calligraphy among others that makes it a good example in examining the educative nature of architectural decoration. Ancestral Hall of Wang Family in the Shanxi Province, this is the northern Chinese ancestral clan and a component of a bigger residential compound. It is a site that is characterised by its massive spatial organisation and hierarchical structure that is dictated by the social structure of a traditional Chinese society. The architectural plan is very stressful on order, symmetry, and authority and offers interesting results concerning the interaction of space arrangement and cultural values.

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3.5. Data Collection Methods

In this study, data collection is based on multiple qualitative techniques to cover all the aims of the research. The analysis of the spatial arrangement, structural attributes, and ornaments of the ancestral hall is carried out using architectural observation as one of the major methods of analysis. It consists of systematic analysis of the design, materials, and visual features of the building in order to outline patterns and meanings found in the architecture. Photographs and other types of visual documentation are utilised to make detailed representations in terms of decorative aspects. In architectural studies, visual data is especially relevant because it is possible to analyze the symbolic elements that can be conveyed only partially in the text.

Moreover, archival and historical sources are also used to give the contextual details regarding the form and purpose of the ancestral hall. These are historical information, academic sources as well as documentation of the heritage which provides information about the cultural and social meaning of the site. Secondary literature is used as well so as to support find interpretation, as well as placing the analysis context in the prevailing academic discussion. It is reasonable that the principles of qualitative research are being observed since a variety of sources is used to obtain information that represents depth and context of occurrences.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data collected are analyzed with the help of thematic analysis; a popular technique in qualitative research to determine approaches to understanding and interpreting patterns of meaning in data. Thematic analysis is used to organize and classify information to formulate recurring themes, which describe overall ideas and relationships. It allows researchers to go beyond descriptive analysis and build interpretive knowledge as to the meaning found within cultural and architectural phenomena. The thematic analysis

is used to analyze three important dimensions in this study including: symbolism, educational meaning, and cultural narratives. This is seen in decorative elements that are analysed in order to verify symbolic motifs and the cultural meaning associated with those motifs. Such meanings are then applied to their educational purposes e.g. passing moral values or strengthening social norms.

3.7. Validity and Reliability

To enhance the quality and reliability of the study, the current research incorporates the idea of triangulation that implies using several sources of data and procedures in order to cross-validate the results. Triangulation positively contributes to reliability in the qualitative research because it lowers the vulnerability of bias and strengthens the depth and productiveness of interpretations. According to Yin (2018), case study research is characterized by the combination in the types of sources of evidence, such as documentation, observations, and artefacts, which help understand the phenomenon more comprehensively. The triangulation in this research study is used by using visual data (photographs and architectural observation), textual data (historical records and literature) and contextual analysis. Such a multi-source method provides the ability to check and confirm the findings of the research and enhances the validity of interpretations.

4. Case Study Analysis

4.1. Analytical Framework and Approach

This section includes qualitative case study analysis of three ancestral halls in form of rigorous research of Chen Clan Ancestral Hall (Guangzhou), Wang Family Ancestral Hall (Shanxi), and Huizhou ancestral halls (Anhui). According to the conventional case study approach, the analysis is based on the insights into how the structure of the architecture of the ancestral hall can be viewed as a confined system of cultural heritage learning in the context of real life situations. Instead of considering cases as unique descriptions, such cases are discussed on a comparative basis to draw out common trends and theoretical insights.

The idea of thematic analysis was implemented following Braun and Clarke (2006) framework wherein data were determined visually, in architectural layout, and written literature, and coded and grouped in recurrent categories. Three overpowering themes have been noted through the iterative analysis, as spatial pedagogy, symbolic communication by decoration, and cultural transmission by built form. These themes are not outlined in vacuums and rather they are based on empirical results of each of the cases and thus meaning that the interpretation is kept in close relation to empirical results.

4.2. Case Study Descriptions

4.2.1. Chen Clan Ancestral Hall: Symbolic Density and Narrative Pedagogy

The Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, built between 1894 and 1888 is generally considered as one of the most exalted examples of the southern Chinese ancestral architecture. The Chen lineage made the complex a ritual place and a place to study especially to pass imperial examinations (Li et al., 2024). The form of its construction is traditional axial which comprises of several courtyards, halls and corridors that are organized

in a symmetrical manner along a central axis.

The complex, architecturally, follows a rigid axial plan made of consecutive courts and halls in accordance with the north-south axis. Such an arrangement is a representation of the Chinese spatial concepts in the Confucian ideology when symmetry and progression are the indicators of order and subordination (Steinhardt, 2019). The liquidity of the space between the entrance gate and the central ancestral hall provides a distinct shift between the world of the secular and the sacred space, between the hierarchy of rituals and the power of ancestry. The other notable feature of the Chen Clan Hall is its outstanding decorative system which is considered one of the most decorative in the south of China. The building has various expressions in its architectural style as demonstrated in wood carving, carving on bricks, stone reliefs, and decoration of the ceilings on the ridges made by use of ceramics and in calligraphy. These aspects are not simply aesthetics but the carriers of the cultural stories and the teachings. An example is that wood carvings can portray historical myths and Confucian ideals like loyalty and filially respect or piety, which conforms to the conventional teach-back approaches, which relies on visual narratives on accepted moral standards (Knapp, 2012).

Figure 1: Chen Clan Ancestral Hall - Decorative System and Spatial Layout (hpcbristol, 2023).



Besides narrative storytelling, the Chen Clan Hall also exhibits what can be called symbolic density in which a number of layers of meaning are inscribed in a single architectural space. The abstract cultural ideas like prosperity and harmony are demonstrated through the decorations in the ridges of ceramics (Figure 1), whereas the moral code is stated in calligraphic panels. Blending of the visual and textual symbolism creates a multi-layered pedagogical experience where users learn the cultural knowledge on the levels of its interpretation.

The symbolic density concept is especially witnessed in the unification of these

elements. For instance, ceramic ridge characters indicate good fortune, well-being, and good omen, and calligraphic panels depict moral lessons clearly with inscriptions on them. This stratified symbolism allows a variety of meanings, both implicit visual and explicit verbal ones. Ding (2023) has defined such spaces as didactic landscape, where architecture actively is engaged in cultural education.

Altogether, the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall is an exemplar of an advanced combination of spatial hierarchy, symbolic ornament, and pedagogical purpose, so it can be discussed as a demanding example of architecture as a cultural and pedagogical whole.

4.2.2. Wang Family Ancestral Hall: Spatial Hierarchy as Social Instruction

Compared to the Chen Clan Hall, the Wang Family Ancestral Hall is another emblem of architectural education in which the meaning is mostly expressed in spatial organisation as opposed to decorative symbolism. The Wang complex is in Shanxi Province and is characterised by extensive sequences of courtyard that demonstrate strict social hierarchy and family structure.

Figure 2: Wang Family Ancestral Hall - Hierarchical Courtyard Structure (China ToursNet, 2019).



As presented in Figure 2, the architectural layout is structured around a focal path, with the courtyards being placed in a sequential manner with respect to the social strata. There is a limited entry to inner-courtyards, which forms a clear differentiation in either a public or a private space. Such space order is a kind of social training, and it teaches people their place in the hierarchical system of the clan. At the Wang complex, experience is learning with restrictions and movements unlike the Chen Clan Hall where the meaning is depicted by imagery, which becomes symbolic. People experience the space and come across physical boundaries that control behaviour and establish

authority. This is consistent with the idea of architecture as a disciplinary regime, in which the design of spaces has an impact on social interaction and perception.

The comparative lack of ornamentation changes the emphasis rather on visual interpretation to space experience. Symmetry, scale, and enclosure are set to become the main vehicles of meaning and this proves that, an architectural form can serve as an educative medium. The case also implicates the role of looking beyond only symbolic aspects of architecture into the sort of cultural transmission, which includes layout and movement. Moreover, the Wang Family complex shows the way architecture can represent the form of governance. According to Yingrui (2023), ancestral halls usually operated as social control centres where the space organisation represented and supported authority. In this regard, education is more than transferring of values as it is also about controlling behaviour within a well-organised setting.

4.2.3. Huizhou Ancestral Halls: Textual-Visual Integration and Moral Instruction

Huizhou ancestral halls reflect the model of integration of symbolic decoration and element of text into the unified system of education. These halls have a high level of Confucian influence and they are known due to their high order of craftsmanship and also because of their focus on moral education via both visual and written presentation.

Figure 3: Huizhou Ancestral Hall – Calligraphy and Decorative Symbolism (China Discovery, 2020).



Direct testimonies of Confucian ethics, such as filial piety, integrity, moral discipline are explicitly stated in calligraphic writings that are eminent in Figure 3. As opposed to ambiguous interpretation implied by implicit symbolism of Chen Clan Hall, these inscriptions are seen as explicit pedagogical instruments and they further strengthen the ethical norm. In a similar fashion, decorative art like wood carvings and murals

accompanies the textual teaching with visual demonstrations of the cultural values.

Spatially, the Huizhou halls are more enclosed and introspective in layout than the other cases. The walled-in courtyard design promotes thinking and interaction with symbolism. Such spatial arrangement promotes a more reflective type of learning, in which one engages with architectural elements in terms of slower and more calculated ways. Huizhou ancestral halls are also important in the formation of identity besides moral teaching. Ornamental patterns and text are usually alluded to the history of lineage, and cultural practices other than encourages a sense of unity. According to Chng and Narayanan (2017), cultural heritage forms part of identity because they give people common symbols and stories that resonate them with their members.

4.2.4. Thematic Analysis

Table 1: Thematic Analysis - Codes and Themes.

Theme	Codes Identified	Interpretation
Spatial Pedagogy and Experiential Learning	Spatial hierarchy, axial layout, movement sequence, restricted access, enclosure	Architecture teaches through movement and spatial experience
Decorative Elements as Educational Communication	Narrative carvings, symbolic motifs, calligraphy, visual storytelling, moral representation	Decoration acts as a medium of knowledge transmission
Cultural Transmission and Identity Formation	Collective memory, lineage identity, Confucian values, social hierarchy, tradition	Architecture encodes and preserves cultural identity
User Interaction and Learning Experience	Visitor engagement, interpretation, ritual participation, experiential learning	Learning occurs through active interaction with space
Preservation and Educational Implications	Conservation practices, loss of meaning, museumisation, interpretation gaps	Preservation affects the continuity of educational value

4.2.5. Theme 1: Spatial Pedagogy and Experiential Learning

The initial significant theme revealed is spatial pedagogy as the ability of architectural space to be used in an educative system based on bodily experience. This analysis shows that spatial organisation in ancestral halls is not only functional but clearly designed so as to direct behaviour and translate cultural norms. This is in line with the theory of experiential learning that theories knowledge is built by engaging with physical surroundings instead of abstract knowledge (Pak & De Smet, 2022).

The Sense of spatial hierarchy in the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall is born by the order of courtyards and halls which are in a series of one straight axis. This progressive rotation forms an architectural experience track in which motion is generated into a kind of educating procedure. It is observed that during movement between the entrance and the center of the ancestral shrine there is a slow transformation of the public into the sacred space. This positioning of space supports the significance of lineage, hierarchy, and reverence enabling the user to internalize social values by physically navigating the space.

Contrary, the family building of the Wang Family is the site of a more textual spatial pedagogy. In this case, the architectural design is meant to control behaviour by restricting and accessing. The development of the outer and inner courtyards to the inner ones showcases the enhancement of the power and privilege and essentially educate people on their role in the social structure. Thematic coding resulted in recognising such central themes in this case as restricted access and hierarchical movement as to how architecture can be perceived as a disciplinary system that directs behaviour by imposing spatial limitations (Yingrui, 2023).

Another form of spatial pedagogy seen in Huizhou ancestral halls is the use of

closed courtyards that form a more reflective learning space. In comparison with the directional movement of the other cases, Huizhou halls allow experience of space, which stimulates thought and interaction with symbolic features. The space is enclosed which restricts the outside distraction and the users are able to pay attention towards the internal architecture and what they mean. And this shows that spatial pedagogy may work both in motion and stillness, according to the situation in architecture.

In brief, this theme shows that architectural space is an active contributor to learning as it organizes experience and direct interpretation. The results critiquing the concept of architecture as passive in the background, situate it as an active force in cultural education.

4.2.6. Theme 2: Decorative Elements as Educational Communication

The second theme is centered on the role of decorative features as communication systems in terms of providing cultural knowledge. This analysis shows that the decoration in the ancestral halls is not limited to the purpose of aesthetics; it is a structured means where the moral values and cultural stories are passed down.

The decorative elements in the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall are very noticeable and varied such as wood carvings, ceramic sculptures, and calligraphic panels. Thematic coding revealed such features as narrative storytelling and symbolic motifs. The wood carvings are based on folklore scenes and historical events and they convey the moral messages in visual forms. The carvings serve as educational resources as they allow people to make some sense of the cultural values by observing them. This interpretation is supported by Heersmink (2023) who argues that material artefacts qualify as external discursive carriers on knowledge, pregnant with meaning.

The communication of decorative elements at Huizhou ancestral halls is more overt due to the combination of calligraphy and symbolic images. Confucian ethics, including filial piety and moral discipline, are direct expressions that are found in inscriptions making them less ambiguous to interpret. The text and visual effect make the hybrid a two-layered system of communication and the meaning of the text is strengthened in many ways. In the given instance, thematic analysis has pointed out that the codes of textual instruction and symbolic precision were the prevalent ones, which speaks of a more systematic approach toward educational communication.

However, the Wang Family complex has little dependence on ornamentation. This lack however underscores the significance of the architectural form as another way of communicating. Rather than depending on visual symbolism spaces are used with spatial organisation and structural design to pass on meaning. This is an indication that educational communication in architecture can take place via several forms such as decorative or structural ones.

This theme highlights the value of ornament as a form of translation of obscure cultural values into forms that can be decoded into interpretable forms. The location of knowledge in visual and textual representations makes the ancestral halls a place where learning is implemented on a continuous and informal basis.

4.2.7. Theme 3: Cultural Transmission and Identity Formation

The third theme examines how ancestral halls functions as cultural transmission and the formation of identity. The interpretation demonstrates that the values, traditions, and social norms are coded as architectural elements, which allows their preservation and transmission between generations.

The carvings and inscriptions symbolic elements in the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall indicate that there was a collective story which symbolized shared cultural identity. The same motifs and themes in the space of the architecture make it uniform in that it sends the same cultural message that is reinforced by the constant exposure. This corresponds to the idea of the material culture as an extrinsic memory system where information is stored in material artefacts (Heersmink, 2023).

Wang Family complex is manifested through space hierarchy as a means of identity. The arrangement of courtyards also shows order of social positions and relationships, which enhance clan system structure. In this case, a symbolic imagery does not convey the identity but the encounter of space proves that the process of cultural transfer can be carried out not only symbolically but also structurally. The constructions of ancestral halls of Huizhou combine symbolic and textual identity to form identity. The calligraphic writing and decorative patterns allude to the history of the lineage and ethical principles, which makes a powerful connection between the architecture and cultural spirit. According to Chng and Narayanan (2017), cultural heritage helps in the creation of identity by giving those common symbols and stories. This argument is supported by the findings of this study as they show that the use of ancestral halls are a physical representation of the cultural memory.

4.2.8. User Interaction and Learning Experience

The interaction between users is a crucial element to the mobilization of the educational potential of ancestral halls. As the analysis shows, the process of learning in such spaces is not passive, but rather achieves the result of the interaction with the architectural features and cultural practices. The visitors engage with the decorative elements interacting in Chen Clan Hall in the strict realizing of visual stories. It is not something that can be done passively, and people have to decode symbolic meanings that are conveyed in carvings and inscriptions. In Wang Family complex interaction is based on movement and spatial navigation whereby people are physically subjected to hierarchy. Engagement in halls of Huizhou is a combination of cognitive and visual learning, a combination of reading inscriptions and enhancing symbolic images.

This result corresponds to the experiential learning theory, which focuses on the active involvement in knowledge acquisition (Pak & De Smet, 2022). There is also the use of rituals and ceremonies by community in the ancestral halls to facilitate cultural values by practicing together. Moseykina et al. (2022) also note that heritage sites can be valuable sources of education as they make the personal and social learning experience possible.

4.2.9. Preservation and Educational Implications

The last analytical dimension embraces the issue of preservation and education. Even though conservation is needed to guarantee physical continuity of ancestral halls, the preservation of the symbolic and cultural significance of such halls is what guarantees their educational usefulness.

Through the analysis it is found that the preservation practices mostly focus with physical restoration without paying attention to those intangible aspects like cultural interpretation. The conversion of the Chen Clan Hall into museums has increased access to the hall, although this can lead to erosion of culture as the art gallery. Devoid of contextual interpretation, ornamental items can be viewed as esthetic values and no longer as educational resources. According to Megarry et al. (2026), successful

heritage preservation should apply the tangible and intangible dimensions. Architectural integrity in the case of Wang and Huizhou has been preserved but much more intensive interpretive frameworks are evident to convey values behind these structures. It implies that we cannot preserve it only through conservation but there should be educational strategies that contribute to a deeper understanding.

Overall, this theme stresses the importance of such a holistic approach to heritage conservation, which integrates the notions of architecture conservation and cultural interpretation in order to maintain the ancestral halls as the active education centers.

5. Discussion

The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how ancestral hall architecture operates as a system of cultural heritage education by means of the combination of the spatial organisation, the ornamental symbolism, and the preservation practices. Whenever the ancient halls of the Chen Clan, Wang Family and Huizhou ancestral hall are compared, it is evident that the architecture environment serves not just as a passive artefact but also an active learning system. This discussion is a synthesis of these findings with regard to the existing literature, which shows how architecture facilitates implicit and explicit educational processes.

One of the main contributions of the study is that spatial pedagogy is formulated as a fundamental learning process. The spatial organisation is designed purposefully to influence the movement, control behaviour, and reinforce hierarchy, which argues built environments influence cognition by experience (Sussman & Hollander, 2021). In the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, axial progression forms a process of transition of the space defined as either a public or a sacred space, allowing the users to internalise the social hierarchy in the form of embodied movement. On this note, Wang Family complex also uses space restriction and access control to reinforce social order, which is also subject to the interpretation of architecture as a system of governance (Yingrui, 2023). Huizhou ancestral halls offer a less reflective experience, with enclosed courtyards excepting the experience of thought. The differences indicate that the architectural space aids a wide range of the learning modes, including movement-based and contemplative learning. These results are consistent with the literature about informal learning settings that prioritise construction of knowledge by interacting with physical environments (Carliner, 2023; Salih et al., 2024). They also build on the work of Asgaripour et al. (2024) by demonstrating that heritage architecture as a culturally embedded pedagogical system in which learning takes place through the spatial experience but not the formal instruction.

The second major insight concerns decorative elements being systems of educational communication. The ornamental elements serve as organized representatives of the cultural expertise, which transcend abstract values into visual and textual depictions. Training of moral teachings is demonstrated in wood carvings and ceramic adornments in the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, which provide the idea of the value of visual storytelling by providing support to understanding (Knapp, 2012; Li et al., 2023). The Huizhou ancestral halls also involve the system of dual layers of calligraphy and visual reinforcement in order to provide secondary instruction with a visual image of the message, which corresponds to Fang et al. (2024) that also attribute wood-carving pictures to the role of narration. Conversely, this is refuted in the Wang Family complex by showing that

the educational communication is possible despite the limited ornamentation where meaning is reflected in spatial form. This goes in line with bigger ideas that think of the built environment as a communicative system (Marques da Silva, 2023). The results have thus shown that both conclusions and the structural factors work in tandem to create a wholesome education environment.

A third dimension associates with cultural transmission and identity formation. In all of these, social values are coded in architectural materials, which allows them to be passed down to the next generation. This underlines the idea of material culture as a type of external memory that is why suggested by Heersmink (2023). Cultural and identity retaining Exposure to symbolic motifs and inscriptions and continuity increases identity by strengthening cultural stories. These findings also are in correspondence with the data by Chng and Narayanan (2017) who stress that heritage is a determinant of collective identity. The symbolic density in the Chen Clan Hall develops a stratified cultural atmosphere that strengthens membership, whereas the identification is organized by spatial rank in Wang Family complex. Symbolic imagery and references to texts are incorporated in function of strengthening identity in Huizhou ancestral halls. Such findings show that ancestral halls act as cultural systems as can be used to perpetuate social continuity.

The other significant issue is the significance of user interaction in the generation of learning. This process of education in ancestral halls is through interaction with space and symbols. Visitors read, walk up and down hierarchic spaces and audiences engage with inscriptions and architecture becomes an interactive learning space. This spans the experiential learning theory that puts emphasis on active participation (Pak & De Smet, 2022). Moreover, the current carrying out of the rituals in the ancestral halls aligns the cultural value in the practice by the collective practice which reject the halls as educational resources (Moseykina et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the ancestral hall architecture is a multidimensional educational system, which involved spatial design, symbolic communication, and cultural transmission. The work has a contribution towards the literature as it makes a link between architectural studies and heritage education on the relevance of built environments in informal learning. Learning about culture is introduced into architectural spaces and is passed on through contact as opposed to being taught. Regarding the research goals, the analysis depicts definitive evidence of the informative content of the spatial organisation, the semantic meaning of ornamental facilities, and the effects of the preservation activities on the transmission of culture that is to show the flexibility of the ancestral hall architecture as a cultural heritage education system.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has shown that ancestral hall architecture is a multidimensional, dynamic and multidimensional medium of cultural heritage learning as it involves an integration of spatial organisation, ornamental symbolism, and conservation practices. In the comparative study on the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, Wang Family Ancestral Hall and Huizhou ancestral hall, it becomes obvious that these settings are not historical sites that are lifeless and passive in their functioning. One of the results is that spatial organisation serves as a kind of implicit pedagogy as axial configurations, sequential hierarchy and regulated access can mediate movement and behaviour and allow users to internalize

social order and cultural values through embodied experience. Simultaneously, ornamental features like wood carvings, murals and calligraphic inscriptions are organized systems of communication that convert abstract Confucian values into forms that can be easily seen and read. An additional point raised in the paper is that culture transmission and forming an identity is ingrained into these architectural spaces whereby repeated exposure to symbolic motifs and space hierarchies strengthens collective memory and social belonging. Moreover, activating learning in halls of the dead is by user interaction in terms of movement, interpretation and participation in rituals, which is consistent with the theory of experiential learning. The study however raises a key deficiency in the existing preservation models where in most instances, the focus is more on physical conservation disregarding the intangible cultural senses that form the basis of the pedagogical worth of these spaces. Altogether, the results prove that ancient halls can be discussed as such cohered systems of culture, where architecture, symbolism, and social practice interdependent between them support informal learning and cultural tradition.

Based on such findings, some practical recommendations are proposed to improve the ancestral halls in terms of educational and cultural sustainability. The proposed preservation strategies must be holistic and incorporate both the tangible and intangible aspects with the aim of preserving the preservation of symbolic meanings of structures in addition to the physical structures. This should be backed up by the use of tools of interpretation like signage, guided tours as well as digital platforms that convey architectural and decorative meaning. The learning in the heritage sites should also be interactive by observing activities such as workshops and storytelling in order to make them interested. Accessibility and interpretation can be enhanced further by application of technologies like augmented reality. The role of communities in preserving cultural practices is indispensable, and an increase in the level of interdisciplinary cooperation enables the enhancement of their long-term significance by introducing ancestral halls to the education system.

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