

# Study on Hakka Ancestral Hall and Hakka Culture

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**Abstract:** *Within years of evolution, the Hakka people still retain many of the customs and cultural traditions of their homeland, and still adhere to the Confucian ethics and morals that originated in their homeland. Among them, the core values of respect for ancestors, respect for teachers, virtue and self-improvement have been integrated into the cultural bloodline of the Hakka people, becoming an excellent spiritual quality of Hakka culture and an important asset for the Hakka people to overcome difficulties and strengthen their communities. As an important carrier of traditional Hakka culture, the Hakka ancestral hall is a special cultural symbol, and the Hakka ancestral hall culture, expresses the basic values of the Hakka people and typically embodies these spiritual qualities of Hakka culture.*

**Keywords:** *Hakka ancestral hall; ethnic identity; cohesive force*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Ancestral halls can be easily found in the Hakka regions all over Chinese mainland, and about overseas, although not as numerous as on the mainland, they can also be found in some Hakka settlements. Modern psychology suggests that at a certain stage of development, individual human beings and ethnic groups are confused about what I am and where I or we come from, which is known as the 'identity crisis'. The 'identity crisis' has prompted people to explore the origins and history of life, and the Hakka folk system, formed by the Hakka ancestors who migrated from the Central Plains to the south, has shown its "identity crisis" even more strongly. The Hakka ancestral hall is therefore both a product of history and a mark of the times. An ancestral hall is a huge symbol that unites the clan and strengthens the ethnic identity, helping us to unravel the mysteries of Hakka history and culture, and to take Hakka studies to a deeper level <sup>[1]</sup>.

The establishment of Hakka ancestral halls can be traced back to the Song and Yuan dynasties. In ancient China, it was only natural that ancestor worship should be practiced, but the establishment of ancestral temples was the prerogative of monarchs and nobles. During the Song dynasty, the economic development and expansion of the power of the landowners, together with the great efforts of the Rationalists to promote ancestral worship and the re-establishment of the clan system, led to a relaxation of the ancestral worship rituals and the emergence of ancestral halls among the people. This led to a relaxation of ancestral rituals by the rulers, and the emergence of ancestral halls among the people.

During the Ming dynasty, the construction of ancestral halls entered a period of great development for two reasons. Firstly, during the Ming Dynasty, the rulers continued to loosen restrictions on ancestral rituals, leading to the emergence of large ancestral halls among the people and inspiring them to build them. Secondly, during the Ming dynasty, the Hakka family had grown considerably in terms of number, size and financial resources, as well as in terms of the importance they attached to tradition, the strength of their ancestral values, and the need to use their ancestral banners to unite their people in order to overcome difficulties. The number of ancestral halls reached a peak during the Qing Dynasty, when many clans renovated their previously built halls, making them even larger and more beautifully decorated.

During the Republican period, when there were internal and external troubles and warfare, a small number of new Hakka ancestral halls were built, while others were destroyed by war. Since the 1980s, many of the ancestral halls in the Hakka region have been restored and reopened as places of worship for ancestors, and this continues to be the case today.

The number of ancestral halls in a Hakka clan depends on the length of the clan's history and the

size of its population, with larger clans often having several, a dozen or more. Each ancestral hall is not completely independent, but forms a network with other ancestral halls of the same clan, forming a system of ancestral hall organization <sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. Cultural Analysis**

### **2.1. Education**

The Hakka people are rich in talent because of the importance they attach to education and the cultivation of talent. The importance they attach to education is evident in many ways, not least in the establishment of ancestral schools and the awarding of scholarships.

Ancestral halls are tall, spacious, well-lit and quiet, and the many literary couplets carved into the foyers and pillars create an inspiring cultural atmosphere. The Hakka people took advantage of the unique advantages of their ancestral halls to set up schools, known as family schools or ancestral hall schools. The number of schools in Hakka ancestral halls reached its peak in the late Qin Dynasty. By rough count, there were thousands of ancestral halls that were used as school places! Even today, there are still a small number of ancestral halls that are used as teaching spaces for village primary schools, which shows the close relationship between Hakka ancestral halls and education.

The purpose of the school is clear: to improve the cultural quality of the clan's children, and to produce talented people who will enhance the prestige and status of the clan. Therefore, the Hakka had to spend a lot of money on their ancestral shrine schools, hiring as many people as possible to teach at a high level. By using their ancestral sites and assets to run schools, provide scholarships and grants, the Hakka played a positive role in improving the cultural quality of the Hakka people and fostering talent.

### **2.2. Marriage and funeral customs**

About the marriage custom, in the traditional view, however, it is not just a personal matter, but a matter for the whole family or even an ethnic group. Marriage, in particular, is a matter of succession and the inheritance of family property. Therefore, it is inevitably linked to the ancestral halls.

In the Hakka region, the common situation is the bride leaves the ancestral hall and go to the bridegroom's home, where she first pays homage to the man's ancestors in the ancestral hall before the wedding. This is generally the case, but the details vary from place to place.

About the funeral custom, the Hakka people believe that when a person dies, he or she must go to the ancestors. The same applies to the rules of the Hakka ancestral hall: when a person dies, his descendants make a memorial tablet for him and place it in the ancestral hall, making him one of the ancestors. The funeral custom of the Hakka people is thus inseparable from the ancestral hall <sup>[3]</sup>.

According to Hakka custom, after the death of an elder, the children have to go to the ancestral hall for a few days and nights to keep vigil beside the coffin, and in some cases, people may ask a Taoist priest to release the spirit of the death before the funeral. During the funeral, a large piece of red paper is hung above the door of the ancestral hall, signifying "good fortune and avoidance of bad luck". During the forty-nine days following the death of an elderly person, every seven days, the children of the deceased visit the ancestral hall to show their respects to the deceased.

However, not all Hakka people are allowed to go to the ancestral halls for weddings and funerals, and some ancestral halls stipulate that brides over the age of twenty-five are not allowed to enter the halls for weddings. Those who died of an accident, died young or were removed from pedigree of a clan were generally considered to be unacceptable after death.

### **2.3. Entertainment**

Hakka ancestral halls have a solemn side, but they also have other aspects like a lively and relaxing side. During the festivals, our family ancestral hall would host a wealth of entertainment. In my past memory, our ancestral hall was decorated, the clan brought home-made fruit and Hakka Rice Wine to the ancestral hall, everyone sat together, greeted each other, the adults drank, chatted and played chess, and the children played and enjoyed themselves. At the Lantern Festival, our ancestral hall displayed various lanterns with beautiful designs and holds a lantern exhibition, and the girls who had married off meet at the ancestral hall of their mothers, holding hands and jumping and spinning around happily. I

hope I can also participate in more recreational activities in Hakka ancestral hall this year.

#### **2.4. Architecture**

The architecture of the Hakka ancestral halls is distinctive and rich in cultural significance, making them intriguing and thought-provoking. Hakka ancestral halls are generally characterized by the following features <sup>[4]</sup>.

Firstly, they are large in scale. Hakka ancestral halls are generally of a large scale. Most of them have two halls, and each hall is large in size, with a side room and a patio between them. In the Hakka countryside, the architecture of ancestral halls is particularly grand and imposing, standing out from the crowd. Secondly, the shape is dignified. Most of the Hakka ancestral halls are designed as facades, and their style is rarely confused with that of ordinary residential buildings, so that people will know that they are ancestral halls at first glance. The most common forms of Hakka ancestral halls are the pagoda and the temple. The pagoda was originally given by the ruler as a building of honour to recognize eminent officials, loyalists and chaste women, and was erected in front of the house of the person being honored. Many of the Hakka ancestral halls are also of this form, and are characterized by their height, dignity and grandeur. The temple form is also found in a certain proportion of Hakka ancestral hall buildings, as they evolved from clan temples and family temples, and are also 'temples' in nature, except that ordinary temples are dedicated to Buddhist and Taoist gods, while ancestral halls are dedicated to ancestral gods. It is similar in form to the facade of an ordinary temple, and has a dignified and solemn appearance. Thirdly, the architecture is exquisite. This includes the use of materials, construction and decoration. The first is the use of materials. The construction of Hakka ancestral halls is very careful in terms of materials, with good bricks being used, wood being thick, straight and sturdy, and the pillars of the halls being as solid and complete as possible if they are stone pillars. Each of the huge, heavy stone pillars was carried from the river to the building site. The principle was that the work should be slow but good, and the craftsmen were as experienced and skilled as possible, and the quality of the work was of course first class. This quality of construction is illustrated by the fact that in Hakka areas there are still ancestral halls that are a hundred years old, or even several hundred years old. Most of the Hakka ancestral halls are also decorated, and the ancestral halls of prestigious communities are decorated in a more luxurious way, with colourful paintings of flowers, birds and animals, peaches, pomegranates and other auspicious objects, giving them a magnificent appearance, while remaining dignified, elegant and solemn.

These are some of the characteristics of Hakka ancestral hall architecture, but it would be superficial if we were to look at them from an architectural or purely aesthetic point of view, in fact the above characteristics of Hakka ancestral hall architecture have a deep cultural connotation. Firstly, it is a reflection of the Hakka concept of ancestral reverence. The Hakka concept of ancestral worship not only led to the construction of ancestral shrines, but also determined the scale and standard of their architecture. In this regard, Qin period were aware the importance of building ancestral halls. The ancestral temple was given priority among all kinds of buildings. The Hakka people have inherited and carried on this tradition by demanding the construction of large, dignified and beautiful ancestral halls, and in this respect there is a high degree of unity of thought, speech, action and outcome. Secondly, it is a manifestation of a sense of clan power. Traditional Chinese society was a clan society, and the ruler's rule over the people was often achieved through the clan. Ancestral halls are the centre of a clan, the place where the clan meets to deliberate, gather and enforce the law, and in order to reflect the clan's power, they must be built in a dignified and solemn manner to show the majesty of the clan. Thirdly, it is a manifestation of the idea of glorifying the clan. The Hakka people attach great importance to tradition, ancestral honour and clan prestige, and spare no effort in doing so. The purpose of this is to enhance the sense of honour, clan spirit and cohesion of the clan internally, and to show the clan's prestige and elevate its status externally, and the building of large scale, beautifully constructed and dignified clan shrines is an effective way to honour the clan.

#### **2.5. Ideological core**

The existence and revival of folk culture has its own intrinsic value, and it can be recognized and respected by the people. The Hakka Ancestral Hall, as a Hakka folk culture, also has its own ideological core. This is reflected in three main aspects.

Firstly, it unites the strength of the family and the community. In the process of migration, survival and development, the Hakka people have always relied on the strength of the family because of their

special living environment and survival needs, and living in clans is a distinctive feature of Hakka residence in the south. Worship in ancestral halls is a way to meet the spiritual needs of the Hakka people to trace their roots, to be prudent in their pursuit of the future, and to be close to their clan. Ancestral halls, as an effective form of cultural consciousness control, highly integrate ethical concepts and living folklore, and the people who build them and create their culture live in them with order and status, enhancing their self-confidence and vitality to pray for a better future. Ancestor worship is reflected in the common ownership or sharing of ancestral halls, ancestral tombs and genealogies. The family unity and community integration is also demonstrated through the participation in rituals such as common ancestral rituals and genealogy<sup>[5]</sup>.

The second is the embodiment and practice of the concepts of gratitude, filial piety and repayment of virtue. There are many specific rituals in the rituals of Hakka ancestral halls, which can be said to be a filial way of making the descendants remember the pioneering grace of their ancestors from generation to generation, remembering the merits of the clan and thinking of honoring and repaying virtue. Because the Hakka people are so filial and do not forget their ancestors, whenever they build a house they build a hall, and they build the hall first and then the room. Because the hall is built first, the ancestor's spirit can be placed and memorial rites can be paid in accordance with the rites." In the hall or ancestral shrine, a celebration or ancestral ritual is held, in which the mind is submerged and the heart experiences identification with the culture of the clan, passing on the spirit of hard work and pioneering, carrying forward the virtues of the ancestors and constantly realizing the dream of a better life.

Thirdly, it is the pursuit of the goal of family and state harmony in the form of folk cultural activities. The activities of a family are sometimes not confined to the family, but have a greater ideological core, rising to the level of the state and society, and are closely linked to the contemporary social context as a means and goal of effective narrative. The rituals of the Hakka ancestral halls all incorporate this idea, goal or expectation of going beyond the 'family' to contribute to the nation and society, recording words such as 'for the prosperity of the clan, the wealth of the family and the strength of the nation'. The words 'for the prosperity of the clan, the wealth of the family and the strength of the nation' are recorded, showing the presence of the 'nation, the 'local knowledge' is constructed and manifested in the context of the mainstream values, against the background of the great cultural tradition. It is only through the presence of the 'nation' that clan ancestral rituals and ancestral shrine re-glorification activities can be carried out in a legitimate manner, and that family growth, prosperity and family affluence can be compared to national power as a goal to be pursued. This is both a strategy for the survival of folk culture and can also be seen as a change in Hakka culture under new historical conditions, injecting the discourse of the times into family activities and into the contemporary exhibition of Hakka folk culture.

### 3. Conclusion

Hakka ancestral hall is a cultural conceptual construct of the Central Plains civilization, a system of cultural symbolic representation of the migrating Central Plains Han Chinese people who maintain their original cultural traditions and at the same time have migratory characteristics, and is one of the developing forms of traditional culture, with its strong cohesive force and great inclusive power. Ancestral halls are an effective form of cultural consciousness control, combining ethical concepts and living folklore in such a way that the people who build them and create their culture live in a well-ordered and well-defined manner, enhancing their self-confidence and vitality to pray for a better future. In this way, the relationship between cultural behavior and architectural space is skillfully managed in the ancestral hall, exuding a strong sense of traditional moral and ethical culture and enhancing the ethnic identity.

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