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# Study on the Social Issues of the “Ancestral Temple Revival” in China

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the revival of ancestral halls has been rapidly gaining momentum across various regions in China. This paper takes the eastern region of Hubei Province as a case study and, based on extensive fieldwork, investigates the main reasons behind the accelerated revival of ancestral halls in contemporary China and the social issues concealed behind this phenomenon. The key issues identified include: (1) the serious tendency for excessive comparison in the construction of ancestral halls and the negative impact this has on social values; (2) the deep penetration of grassroots administrative power into the construction of ancestral halls and the potential corruption problems arising from this involvement; (3) the compulsory fundraising for ancestral hall construction and the heavy economic burden it places on the impoverished rural population; in addition, the challenges related to the transformation of the shared nature of existing ancestral halls, the vulgarization of aesthetics in newly built ancestral halls, and the current divergence between the revival of ancestral halls and the mainstream national values. Finally, the paper offers recommendations on these issues, aimed at actively responding to the current exploration and practice of rural revitalization in China, particularly the goal of "inheriting, developing, and enhancing agricultural civilization, and promoting the prosperity of rural culture."

## 1. Introduction

Ancient China, shaped by the nourishment of its great rivers, was a typical agricultural civilization. The laboring population was deeply rooted in the land, where the pursuit of stability in production outweighed all other concerns. Families often expanded and flourished within relatively fixed geographical areas,

with little frequent migration. Cooperation among family members was crucial for both agricultural production and resource competition. In this context, large, prosperous families with strong cohesion had a distinct survival and development advantage in ancient society. Consequently, Chinese agricultural populations have historically exhibited a strong sense of

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clan identity, emphasizing the maintenance of the extended family. Clan culture, which reinforces family unity, naturally emerged as a means of strengthening familial ties. Clan culture, bound by blood relations and guided by traditional Confucian ethics, emphasizes internal hierarchy and order within the family, akin to the governance system of the state. It teaches family members to fulfill their roles without overstepping their boundaries, forming a complete set of ritual norms applicable to the family. This, to some extent, contributed to the stability of ancient agricultural production. In this context, the ancestral hall, an important material representation of clan culture, naturally flourished in ancient society. Ancestral halls were primarily used for honoring and worshipping ancestors, and they also played vital roles in family management, educational gatherings, and performances during festive occasions to honor the gods—all functions aimed at enhancing clan cohesion. The origin of the ancestral hall can be traced back to the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties periods, reaching its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties. During this time, ancestral halls spread across the country, especially in rural areas, where the normal functioning of administrative duties relied heavily on the so-called "clan autonomy." The ancestral hall became the place where clans exercised their grassroots authority, known as "clan power."

However, since the modern era, particularly after the land reform movement, the administrative model based on clan power has increasingly become incompatible with the times. The demands for clan power began to diverge from government policies,

leading to the gradual marginalization of this structure. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, clan power became a target for revolutionary efforts. The grassroots party organizations in various villages and towns broke the long-standing political tradition of "imperial power not reaching the county" in China. During the People's Commune period, the state established a three-tiered ownership system based on "communes, brigades, and teams," thereby exercising full control over grassroots governance.

As a result of these changes, the ancestral halls scattered across the country largely lost their functions. Many were dismantled during movements such as the "Destroy the Four Olds" campaign, as they were seen as symbols of feudalism. Only a few were spared, either because they were repurposed by the state or converted into office spaces or residences for local communities. With the advent of the reform and opening-up policies, the People's Commune system was abolished, and the omnipotent state model began to contract to some extent. As the political environment at the grassroots level began to loosen, clan culture once again began to permeate rural life, and many traditional elements of clan power, which had many dregs, resurfaced in various forms. In recent years, the large-scale renovation or construction of ancestral halls across the country has become one of the most evident manifestations of this trend, with the revival of ancestral halls accelerating especially since the beginning of this century. Taking Yangxin County in the eastern part of Hubei Province as an example, by the end of 2021, the county had a total of 407 different types of ancestral halls, of which 293 were built

**Table 1 | Statistics on the Number of Existing Ancestral Halls and Their Construction Dates in Various Townships of Yangxin County, China**

Township	Xingguo	Fuchi	Huangga ngkou	Weiyuank ou	Taizi	Dawang	Taogang	Baisha
Number of Ancestral Halls	17	21	24	16	29	31	19	41
Built After 2000	11	15	20	13	21	21	14	32
Built Before 2000	6	6	4	3	8	10	5	9

Township	Futuo	Sanxi	Wangying	Longgan g	Yanggan g	Paishi	Mugan	Fenglin
Number of Ancestral Halls	42	21	24	40	19	20	22	21
Built After 2000	29	17	18	32	15	14	16	14
Built Before 2000	13	4	6	8	4	6	6	7

after 2000 (Table 1), accounting for as much as 72%. This clearly illustrates the rapid pace of ancestral hall construction in recent years.

However, alongside the ongoing revival of ancestral halls, a series of social issues that warrant our attention have emerged. These have led to widespread national attention and discussions, which in turn have attracted scholars to explore contemporary issues surrounding ancestral halls. The research primarily focuses on two aspects: the first concerns the functional transformation of contemporary ancestral halls, and the second addresses the changes in the grassroots political ecology and social moral system in China, which are reflected in the phenomenon of ancestral hall revival. Regarding the first aspect, scholars such as Wu Zhiwei and Ma Guanghai, through analyzing individual cases of ancestral hall repairs initiated by overseas elites, have argued that ancestral halls are being stripped of their sacredness and gradually secularized. In some cases, they have even evolved into a form of social capital used to establish external connections between clans or villages<sup>[1]</sup>. Jin Haohui conducted a study on the integration of rural cultural halls with ancestral halls in Zhejiang Province, suggesting that this practice helps to bridge the gap between the government and society, urban and rural areas, as well as between permanent residents and migrant populations. It also facilitates rural social governance through cultural transmission<sup>[2]</sup>. Huang Likun and He Yong, using traditional ancestral hall restoration cases as examples, explored the correlation between the transformation of ancestral halls and the revival of clan culture. They proposed two architectural renovation plans for traditional ancestral halls in the transformation process<sup>[3]</sup>. Li Qing and Hu Junqiu examined the feasibility of converting ancestral halls into rural libraries, using the example of a reconstruction project in Conghua city<sup>[4]</sup>. Gao Yang emphasized that ancestral halls must actively abandon outdated traditional functions to secure their proper positioning in modern society. He identified functions related to identity recognition, external communication, and the promotion of traditional culture as key focuses for the innovation of contemporary ancestral halls<sup>[5]</sup>. Additionally, scholars like Yuan Zhenjie<sup>[6]</sup>, Wang Baohua<sup>[7]</sup>, and Wu Zukun<sup>[8]</sup> have also studied the ongoing construction of the sacredness of traditional ancestral halls and the ways in which their social education functions can be continued today. Their works point to the necessity

of clarifying and strengthening the cultural transmission function of contemporary ancestral halls as a central theme in the transformation of ancestral halls. On the other hand, some scholars have raised concerns about the underlying changes in China's grassroots political ecology and social moral system that are reflected in the revival of ancestral halls, and this research and discussion: For example, Fang Shengde<sup>[9]</sup> found through a survey of a newly constructed ancestral hall that the construction of ancestral halls has become a "face project" where clans compete with each other, leading to substantial financial waste and the potential for unreasonable political power expansion of rural clan forces. Lu Yanqi and Liu Linhan<sup>[10]</sup>, through a survey of the restoration trend of ancestral halls in a certain town, found a coupling between the restoration of ancestral halls and the reconstruction of clan governance authority. However, they also pointed out that due to the outdated values in clan governance, the reconstruction process is fundamentally unsustainable. Li Lewei<sup>[11]</sup>, in his study of the culture of ancestral halls in Guinan, discovered that the current revival of ancestral halls has introduced certain risks to the local grassroots' political ecology. These risks manifest in the interference of village committee elections, the undermining of village autonomy, the deterioration of relations between the government and the people, and the further spread of theism. Furthermore, Jin Haohui<sup>[2]</sup>, in his study of integrating rural cultural halls into ancestral halls in Zhejiang Province, mentioned that the proliferation of ancestral halls in rural areas has led to adverse outcomes such as the occupation of land resources, the abandonment of many ancestral halls, the squandering of local financial resources, and the strengthening of clan forces. However, the author believes that transforming ancestral halls into cultural halls could alleviate these issues to some extent. In contrast, Xu Shengxiang<sup>[12]</sup>, in his field survey of 765 ancestral halls in Cangnan County, argued that newly built ancestral halls are occupying vast amounts of arable land and consuming large amounts of funds, which not only increases the burden on the public but also results in significant resource waste due to the abandonment of these halls after construction. He investigated the "reconstruction of ancestral halls into rural cultural centers" initiative implemented by the Cangnan County government but found that it had failed to achieve the expected results.

At present, research on the revival of ancestral halls in China has yet to form a comprehensive theoretical framework. Some negative social phenomena related to this issue have been noticed by a few scholars, but most of these are only touched upon during other studies. There is a lack of specialized research focused specifically on the revival of ancestral halls and its associated impacts. As a result, current research is insufficient in terms of comprehensiveness, and lacks an in-depth analysis of the causes behind various problems, as well as a thorough discussion of their manifestations and the extent of their effects. Therefore, research on the revival of ancestral halls has not yet formed a clear and logical framework. Against this backdrop, this paper takes the eastern region of Hubei Province, where ancestral halls are densely distributed, as a case study. Based on extensive field research, it focuses on studying the series of grassroots social issues that have emerged in recent years due to the accelerated revival of ancestral halls, as well as the causes behind these issues. The paper also offers relevant suggestions for addressing these problems, to actively respond to China's current exploration and practice of rural revitalization, which aims to "inherit, develop, and enhance agricultural civilization and promote the prosperity of rural culture."

## **2. The Accelerating Trend of Ancestral Hall Revival and Analysis of its Causes**

Although the revival of ancestral halls in eastern Hubei has begun since the reform and opening-up, but after the gestation period of the 1980s and 1990s, the large-scale construction of new ancestral halls truly began at the start of this century. Especially in the past decade, the construction speed of ancestral halls in this region has accelerated significantly. The main reasons for this acceleration are the following three points:

### ***2.1. The Continuous Strengthening of Individual Economic Power as a Key Driving Force Behind the Acceleration of Ancestral Hall Revival***

Ancestral halls are not government-funded projects; they are typically built through joint contributions from clan members. Therefore, an individual's economic strength is the primary prerequisite for the construction of an ancestral hall. In the early stages of China's reform and opening up, most families had

limited income and were unable to afford the task of collective fundraising for building ancestral halls. However, after more than two decades of modernization, the income levels of the people have significantly increased since the beginning of this century, thus reigniting enthusiasm for building new ancestral halls across the country. Moreover, the reform and opening-up process has produced a group of successful individuals who have become wealthy first, often referred to as "village elites." These elites wield considerable influence within the clan, and they are also willing to donate substantial sums to lead their fellow clansmen in constructing ancestral halls to strengthen clan cohesion, thereby enhancing their own prestige and ultimately benefiting their personal careers. In the recent construction of ancestral halls in eastern Hubei, donations from these village elites have sometimes amounted to as much as 300,000 to 500,000 yuan (Table 2). And in one ancestral hall, a clan member, who is also the chairman of a company, single-handedly covered a portion of the main construction costs, with the actual donation exceeding 1 million yuan. The generous contributions from these village elites not only alleviated the fundraising difficulties in the construction of the ancestral halls but also significantly boosted the morale of all clan members involved, thereby accelerating the revival of ancestral halls in this region.

### ***2.2. The Rapid Development of the Internet and Mobile Communication Has Played a Catalytic Role in Accelerating the Revival of Ancestral Halls***

After the reform and opening-up, as people gradually gained the freedom to choose their occupations, clan populations became dispersed across the country. Therefore, in the era before the internet was widespread, organizing clan members to contribute funds for the construction of new ancestral halls was a challenging task. Organizers often had to go door-to-door to solicit donations, and contacting clan members living in distant places could only be done by phone or letter, which made the process highly inefficient. On the other hand, clan members living away from home, after making donations, could no longer easily track the latest progress of the construction and could not exercise their right to supervise. This led to a sense of detachment from clan affairs and significantly reduced their enthusiasm for the construction of ancestral halls. However, since the beginning of this century, the gradual spread of the

**Table 2 | Donation Statistics for the Construction of 8 New Ancestral Halls in Eastern Hubei, China**

Ancestral Hall No.	Total Investment (Million Yuan)	Highest Donation (Yuan)	Number of Donors Over 100,000 Yuan	Number of Donors Over 10,000 Yuan	Remarks
1st Ancestral Hall	10 million	300,000	6	16	
2nd Ancestral Hall	8 million	500,000	4	23	
3rd Ancestral Hall	6 million	200,000	7	21	
4th Ancestral Hall	5 million	300,000	3	8	One person independently undertook part of the main construction
5th Ancestral Hall	5 million	350,000	4	14	
6th Ancestral Hall	2 million	150,000	2	6	
7th Ancestral Hall	800,000	50,000	0	6	
8th Ancestral Hall	500,000	20,000	0	3	

internet, especially mobile communication, has removed geographical barriers to communication. This has completely solved the communication difficulties that were once the most challenging aspects of fundraising and construction for ancestral halls. This, in turn, has paved the way for the accelerated revival of ancestral halls. Currently, the construction of new ancestral halls in the eastern Hubei region almost all rely on online groups, supplemented by public accounts or related websites for communication and publicity. Online groups are used to update information, release donation accounts, and urge clan members to donate as soon as possible. Public accounts or websites are used to publish information about financial arrangements, land planning, architectural renderings, speeches by clan leaders or important family members, as well as other significant matters. Through mobile networks, each clan member can stay informed of the latest developments in the construction of the ancestral halls and clearly know how their donations are being used. Members can also communicate online about various issues in the construction process and offer their opinions. As a result, the enthusiasm of clan members for the construction of ancestral halls has greatly increased, which has led to a significant acceleration in the revival of ancestral halls in the local area in recent years.

### ***2.3. The Awakening of Clan Consciousness and the Relaxation of Political Atmosphere Involve a Certain Process***

Although China's patriarchal culture originated and continued for thousands of years alongside the ancient agricultural civilization, it encountered a strong disruption in the 1960s and 1970s. After the reform and opening-up, although the political atmosphere gradually became more relaxed and clan consciousness gradually returned to rural life, this process was a gradual exploration phase. A large number of plans for the construction of new ancestral halls in the eastern Hubei region were formed in the 1980s and 1990s, but under the conservative political climate at that time, every step of the implementation of the plans would face new challenges and could be subject to great pressure, such as the legality and feasibility of construction plans, the ability to secure suitable land for construction, and obtaining planning approvals were common at the time. As a result, most plans remained on paper. It was not until the 21st century, when local clans were able to overcome these challenges through various means, that the region saw a boom in the construction of ancestral halls.

### ***3. Social Problems and Analysis Behind the Revival of Ancestral Halls***

#### ***3.1. The Serious Trend of Comparison in the Current Revival of Ancestral Halls***

The origin of clan culture stems from the agricultural society's pursuit of family cohesion. For agricultural populations, who have lived on the same land for generations, unity and mutual assistance were essential for productive activities, and they also provided an advantage in competing for limited resources with other local families. Therefore, traditional Chinese clan culture was not entirely about warmth and harmony; rather, the spirit of external struggle has always been embedded in it. This struggle was a necessary choice for agricultural families to survive and develop over thousands of years. The combative nature of clan culture is also reflected in the serious trend of comparison that has emerged in recent years during the revival of ancestral halls.

This atmosphere of comparison has led to an increasing scale and rising construction costs for newly built ancestral halls in the eastern Hubei region in recent years. A large number of grand and lavishly decorated modern ancestral halls have sprung up, creating a stark visual contrast with the relatively modest homes of the surrounding villagers. Major clans are often sensitive to the progress of ancestral hall construction by other local families, believing that if others have one, they too must have one. Furthermore, their own construction must never fall behind, as failing to do so would be seen as "losing face" or even "disrespecting their ancestors." This has given rise to a blind trend of copying, resulting in a wave of new ancestral hall constructions in the eastern Hubei region. Some local clans even believe that their newly built ancestral halls must surpass those of other clans in scale and investment. Only by doing so can they overwhelm their competitors in terms of grandeur and thus bring glory to their own family. As a result, the cost of constructing new ancestral halls in the region was generally under 5 million yuan in the first decade of this century, with most costing around 1 million yuan. However, the construction of ancestral halls later became a competition between clans, leading to in recent years the emergence of new ancestral halls costing over 10 million yuan, which is no longer uncommon. In the ancestral halls I surveyed, the highest investment reached 30 million yuan, with a construction area of 6,000 square meters, a courtyard with seven courtyards, and a square in front of the

main entrance capable of parking hundreds of vehicles. The internal worship space can accommodate over a thousand people kneeling to pay respects to their ancestors. Such ancestral halls are incredibly luxurious as rural buildings, and the tremendous fundraising pressure placed on the entire clan is also evident. The person responsible for the construction of the halls remarked in a speech to the clan: "We, as a large family of 80,000 people in this area, have no place for all our family members to gather and worship our ancestors, nor a sacred hall to display our ancestors' glorious achievements and promote our family culture. Many years ago, when our clan association was first established, we already planned to build a new ancestral hall, but it was delayed due to lack of government approval. However, the ancestral halls built later by the X family, X family, X family, X family, X family, and others were completed one after another. Yet the population and number of prominent figures in those families cannot compare to ours. Our family's undertakings have fallen far behind, which makes us feel ashamed before our ancestors. Therefore, this time, we are determined to build the best quality, largest scale, and most functional X family ancestral hall in the entire eastern Hubei region, and we hope that all relatives will actively respond, unite as one, and together complete this unprecedented and monumental task that will benefit our descendants for generations to come." This clearly illustrates the strong sense of family competition rooted in clan culture, which is particularly evident in the region.

However, the ancestral halls built amidst this atmosphere of comparison far exceed the actual usage needs in terms of area, resulting in empty interiors. Moreover, most of these halls remain locked for the majority of the time, only occasionally hosting sacrificial ceremonies. This has led to a significant waste of both funds and land, while also damaging the local social atmosphere. In addition, many ancestral halls in the eastern Hubei region have fallen into a dilemma where they had sufficient funds for construction but lack funds for maintenance. Some halls, despite being built only a few years ago, have already begun to deteriorate, creating a stark contrast with their previously grand appearance.

#### ***3.2. Changes in the Organizational Structure of Ancestral Hall Construction***

In ancient times, ancestral halls were built by local clan organizations, with clan authority, represented by

**Table 3 | Personnel Statistics of the Construction and Advisory Committees of an Ancestral Hall in Eastern Hubei, China**

Position	Construction Council	Advisory Council
Number of Members	51 members	44 members
President's Social Position	Village Party Branch Secretary	Retired local official at the deputy director level, former member of the county Party Standing Committee
Vice Presidents and Council Members' Social Positions	1 Village Party Branch Secretary, 1 Deputy Party Secretary, 3 Village Heads, 3 Deputy Village Heads, 30 Village Group Leaders, 12 Ordinary Villagers	5 Retired deputy director-level officials, 9 serving section chief-level officials, 12 retired section chief-level officials, 4 ordinary officials, 4 business leaders, 2 university professors, 1 lawyer, 6 other individuals

the clan leader, serving as the driving force behind the construction. However, in contemporary society, clan organizations no longer hold grassroots administrative power. This has been replaced by the widespread system of directly elected village secretaries, which has significantly weakened the visible power of clan authority. Moreover, there are often significant disparities in personal achievements and social status among members of the same family, with successful individuals being able to secure more benefits for their own family, thus holding a higher position within the family. These two factors have led to changes in the organizational structure of clan organizations, which were once led by senior family members holding the highest authority. These changes are also reflected in the current construction of ancestral halls, manifesting in the following two aspects:

### **3.2.1. The Leadership of Ancestral Hall Construction Shifts From Clan Leaders to Successful Rural Elites**

Currently, the major families in the eastern Hubei region often form two committees to jointly oversee the construction of ancestral halls: the Construction Council and the Advisory Council (Table 3). The Construction Council is directly responsible for the specific tasks involved in the construction, particularly raising funds, which is its focus. Therefore, the leader of this council is typically someone who is relatively young and capable, with a certain level of influence in the local area. It is most common for this role to be filled by current village officials or former township leaders, as they usually have strong local connections, which help facilitate various relationships, and often possess rich management experience. Additionally, some township entrepreneurs or other pro-

fessionals take on the leadership of the Construction Council. What these leaders have in common is that their personal identity aligns with the local community's understanding of "success." For example, one family in the region explicitly stated in its open selection process for the head of the Construction Council that the person must have "a high local reputation and strong personal financial power." The members of the Advisory Council, on the other hand, do not need to personally direct the construction work. Their primary role is to exert their behind-the-scenes influence to help ensure the smooth progress of the ancestral hall's construction. When difficulties arise, they can use their personal fame to resolve issues. As a result, the members of the Advisory Council are generally individuals with much higher social status and influence than those in the Construction Council. These members are typically the most successful people in the family, such as retired political and administrative leaders, heads of state-owned enterprises, or university professors, among others. The current roles of the Construction and Advisory Council have replaced the positions once held by clan leaders, signaling that in the organizational structure of clans, the importance of blood ties has given way to social influence. The construction of ancestral halls is now formally managed by rural elites, a shift that is closely connected to the second change discussed below.

### **3.2.2. The Widespread Influence of Administrative Power on the Construction of Ancestral Halls**

Currently, most of the rural elites involved in the construction of ancestral halls have experience working in government, and the remaining individuals are generally closely connected to the local government

in one way or another. In fact, the main reason rural elites dominate the construction of ancestral halls is due to the administrative power behind them, which facilitates the construction process. Grassroots officials often directly use their power to intervene in the construction, while high-ranking party and government leaders support their family clans by inspecting construction sites, giving work directives, or delivering speeches at related events. For example, a particular clan in Eastern Hubei managed to establish its newly built ancestral hall as a highlight project in the region's new rural construction, after smoothing its relationship with the local government. This effort directly secured a 1-million-yuan financial grant, which significantly alleviated the financial difficulties in the construction of the ancestral hall. Such cases are not uncommon in the area, and it can be said that political resources have become the most important guarantee for ancestral hall construction. Families with more political resources face less resistance in this process, which is almost universally understood by the villagers in Eastern Hubei. The head of one local ancestral hall construction project stated, "With the efforts of our clan members in communication, the county's departments such as public security, land, construction, urban management, traffic, power supply, and water supply have all provided strong support for the construction of the ancestral hall. Some former city and county leaders from our clan also paid great attention to the project, visiting multiple times to offer advice and suggestions." In another case, the construction head of a different ancestral hall openly admitted that their clan had "people in government," making it "very easy to get through the relationship and acquire land." The construction industry in China has long been a breeding ground of power rent-seeking, and in the current climate, with a lack of vigilance, the resurgence of ancestral halls is prone to corruption. For example, in Yangxin County, a group of village officials has already been dismissed from their positions and expelled from the Party for violations related to ancestral hall construction. The issue of corruption in ancestral hall construction has increasingly caught the local government's attention and is now being strictly managed.

In conclusion, traditional forms of clan power, which have fallen behind the times, have been somewhat dissolved. However, grassroots administrative power has stepped in to fill the gap, ultimately causing the organizational structure of clans to evolve into a new system dominated by administrative power,

which now represents the authority of the clan. This has shown its negative impact on contemporary society in the field of ancestral hall construction.

### ***3.3. The "Unfreedom" Behind the So-Called "Voluntary" Fundraising in Ancestral Hall Construction***

The primary source of funding for ancestral hall construction is the collective fundraising of all clan members, making fundraising a key challenge faced in the construction process. In contemporary times, the traditional form of clan authority no longer exerts coercive power over clan members. On the surface, clan members seem to have the right to decide whether to contribute. For those who refuse to contribute, the clan can only resort to continuous persuasion and communication. However, the reality is that "unfreedom" is hidden behind the so-called voluntary fundraising. During the fundraising process, clan forces commonly use both positive spiritual encouragement and negative moral pressure to force members to donate. Those who are unwilling to contribute face significant public pressure within the clan.

Currently, the fundraising for ancestral hall construction in the eastern Hubei region mainly consists of two categories: the "red ding fee" (a fee collected from all clan members) and additional fees levied on certain employed individuals. In addition, local clans also employ various methods to encourage financially capable members to make generous donations, in return for family prestige. For example, in the fundraising efforts for an ancestral hall construction project in recent years in eastern Hubei, the "red ding fee" was set at 400 yuan per male member. Clan workers are required to register each household and collect the funds in a timely manner; if they fail to do so, the responsible officials must advance the funds themselves. Additionally, extra donations from employed individuals were set at 1,000 yuan for regular employees of enterprises and institutions, and for those who had graduated from secondary or higher education; 2,000 yuan for civil servants; 3,000 – 5,000 yuan for officials at the section chief level; and as high as 10,000 – 20,000 yuan for division-level cadres. These individuals must also be registered, with a dedicated person responsible for collecting their contributions. Based on these figures, the minimum donation for employed clan members was 1,400 yuan, while rural workers, who had little to no income, were required to contribute at least 400 yuan each. In



the eastern Hubei region, where many people are still struggling to escape poverty, not everyone is willing or able to bear this financial burden. As a result, the fundraising process has been described by some local clans as "a tough battle."

In the fundraising process, local clans often employ two main forms of positive spiritual encouragement: First, for clan members who actively fulfill their donation duties, especially those who make additional contributions, the clan publicly recognizes their deeds according to the amount of their donations, with permanent records made to enhance their personal reputation within the clan. In addition, the media also plays a significant role in shaping exemplary figures and deeds, aiming to move and inspire the clan members, thereby encouraging generosity. For instance, in a clan in Eastern Hubei, the fundraising guidelines include placing the names of those who donate more than 1,000 yuan on a merit tablet, honoring donors of over 10,000 yuan with plaques in the side hall of the ancestral hall, those donating over 20,000 yuan in the main hall, and those donating over 100,000 yuan with a stone tablet for every four donors, along with inscriptions of praise. Donors contributing 500,000 yuan or more may have a separate monument erected in their honor, while those donating over 1 million yuan have a commemorative pavilion built for them, complete with a statue. Furthermore, naming rights for various conference rooms in the ancestral hall and the planned construction of merit pillars, celebrity halls, and towers are priced clearly. The clan in this region is especially zealous in promoting the actions of impoverished clan members who, despite their own hardships, insist on donating. For example, a female clan member, who had recently lost two family members and was herself living in poverty, insisted on contributing to the fund despite the clan's intention to exempt her from the donation task. She stated, "I still have children and grandchildren, so I cannot bring shame to the family." Another example involves a clan member who faced strong opposition from their family due to the large donation amount. Despite this, the individual comforted their family and insisted on donating several thousand yuan, justifying the act by saying, "I must sacrifice for the greater good." What's more, certain clans even promote completely inappropriate donation ideologies. For instance, one clan publicized the actions of a member who, already heavily in debt, took out further loans to donate. This behavior was celebrated by the clan as a positive example of "not wanting to fall

behind and overcoming difficulties." Another clan highly praised an elderly member, over 80 years old, who donated their meager retirement savings and even borrowed money from their daughter to continue donating. From these typical examples of media promotion, it is evident that the primary concern of the clan is to quickly raise funds, while showing little regard for the living conditions of its members. The values they promote are distorted and backward. Through media influence, the clan forces abstract notions of family responsibility and ancestral customs to take precedence over the normal lives of its members. The original purpose of constructing the ancestral hall to worship ancestors was to seek blessings from the spirits of ancestors for the happiness and well-being of their descendants. However, in the above cases, the descendants, in their desperate attempts to scrape together a small donation from their difficult lives, end up exacerbating their own misfortune—actions that surely would not align with the wishes of their ancestors in the afterlife.

As for reverse moral pressure, the clan authorities primarily target members who refuse to contribute by publicly condemning them and isolating them within the family, aiming to shame them and even render them unable to survive in the local community. The goal is to warn all clan members that they must donate on time and in full. For example, a certain clan in the area once officially announced the penalties for those who refused to contribute. The punishment would include the exclusion of the individual and their children from the family genealogy, the prohibition of any family members who are admitted to university from being listed on the clan's talent board, the family's exclusion from all activities in the ancestral hall, the prohibition of the ashes of deceased family members from being placed in the clan's tomb hall, and even a special entry in the genealogy to publicly condemn their actions as "forgetting their ancestors and virtue" and "losing affection and reason."

In traditional Chinese agricultural production, the labor force rarely migrated, and the stable pattern of living in clan-based communities continued for thousands of years. As a result, the importance of the so-called "circle of acquaintances" has deeply ingrained itself in people's minds. Because in the past agricultural society, individuals who were isolated by their family could hardly survive or develop, which is why agricultural populations had a deep fear of "isolation." Today, people can move freely, and their dependence on the clan has greatly weakened. However, the cul-

tural legacy persists, continuing to influence people's thoughts and concepts, making it impossible for them not to care about their status and reputation within the clan. This is especially true for those who remain in the local area and are still engaged in agriculture, for whom the condemnation and isolation by the clan can still cause significant damage to their real lives. For this reason, in the context of so-called voluntary fundraising for the construction of ancestral halls, local people find it very difficult to have the real right to say "no."

### **3.4. The Difficulty of Sustaining the Transformation of Ancestral Halls Into Shared Spaces**

Although ancestral halls played a series of important roles in ancient patrilineal societies, today they primarily serve only ritual purposes. As a result, many newly built ancestral halls across the country, which have cost substantial sums, have been left idle. They have become little more than vanity projects to showcase family power, and the waste of funds and idle resources has become a stark issue, further influencing the social atmosphere in rural areas in a negative way. For example, the manager of an ancestral hall in Eastern Hubei admitted that the hall is only open for three days a year during ritual ceremonies, with the doors locked in the rest of the time and outsiders unwelcome. This phenomenon has already become the norm in the area. On the other hand, rural China is currently facing a severe shortage of public activity spaces, and the spiritual and cultural lives of rural residents are relatively impoverished. Ancestral halls, being widely distributed public buildings in rural areas, could serve a dual purpose if their shared function were fully utilized. In recent years, government departments in Eastern Hubei have recognized this issue and explored the transformation of ancestral halls into shared spaces. For example, counties such as Yangxin and Chibi have been actively working on the "Renovation of Ancestral Halls into Cultural Halls" project. The initiative in Yangxin County started in 2015, and to date, approximately 300 ancestral halls and ancestral temples have been designated as "Cultural Halls." These cultural halls are typically equipped with sports equipment and books, and the walls are adorned with various promotional posters. The local government hopes to create a healthy and positive public activity space in this way. However, the implementation of this project has been far from ideal over the past three years. Although most ances-

tral halls have been designated and even display daily opening hours on signs at their entrances, they are often locked, and the so-called "Cultural Halls" are largely symbolic. After consulting with local villagers, it was found that these ancestral halls were open daily for the first few months after being designated, primarily because they were part of a government image project and needed to host inspections by leaders and media interviews. Once the project was no longer under social scrutiny, the hall managers quickly lost patience with keeping them open to the public, and many chose to close the doors for good.

The root cause of this lies in the inward nature of traditional clan concepts, which are inherently unfavorable to the openness and sharing of ancestral halls. In ancient agricultural societies, competition between families was far more prevalent than cooperation, and tolerance was never a value promoted by clan culture. Instead, self-isolation was its most prominent feature, which led agricultural populations to be suspicious and wary of members from other clans. For this reason, large, private courtyards became the ideal living space for ancient Chinese people, and ancestral halls were equally unwelcoming to outsiders. As places for venerating and worshiping their ancestors, family members believed that outsiders' casual entry would disturb the peace of their ancestors. Holding various shared activities in these spaces was considered a serious offense. Therefore, local people in Eastern Hubei are psychologically resistant to the government-organized "transformation of ancestral halls into shared spaces" activities, leading them to adopt a passive attitude toward the initiative.

### **3.5. The Aesthetic of Modern Ancestral Halls Has Become Vulgar**

The newly built ancestral halls today have shifted from traditional wooden structures to reinforced concrete ones, yet the aesthetic concept behind them has not made any significant progress compared to ancient times; instead, it merely emphasizes a rigid continuation of the past. In the Eastern Hubei region, the newly constructed ancestral halls often replicate traditional architectural forms without change, enthusiastically attempting to reproduce the natural beauty of wooden structures—developed to perfection in ancient buildings—using steel and concrete through mechanical means. However, this only provides a fresh visual impression, with no reflection of new

ideas or a modern spirit at the spiritual level. The architecture's essence remains outdated and vulgar. The root cause lies in the fact that the current revival of ancestral halls is based on a rigid re-creation of traditional clan culture, rather than its optimized development. Moreover, the desire to fulfill competitive social demands is also one of the reasons for the large-scale construction of new ancestral halls. As a result, "grandeur," "imposing style," and "novelty" have become the primary goals of builders, while issues related to architectural aesthetics and functional innovation in ancestral halls are, at least for now, unlikely to attract attention.

### ***3.6. The Revival of Ancestral Halls Conflicts With China's Mainstream Value Orientation***

Firstly, due to the prevalent culture of comparison in the current wave of ancestral hall revival, the increasingly fierce investment competition in ancestral hall construction inevitably places a huge economic burden on the relatively not-so-wealthy residents of rural areas. China is currently in the midst of an anti-poverty campaign, with targeted poverty alleviation measures being widely implemented across the country. Therefore, poverty alleviation is the top priority in rural development, and solving livelihood issues outweighs everything else. In this context, rural clan forces continue to raise large sums of money, including from impoverished households, to construct ancestral halls that are not urgently needed by society today. This behavior contradicts the national rural development policies.

Secondly, there are many gray areas in current ancestral hall construction, making it a potential breeding ground for corruption. This is a phenomenon that requires vigilance in grassroots anti-corruption efforts. In my research, some villagers in Eastern Hubei indicated that the construction of ancestral halls is currently an action that is "neither legal nor illegal." This means that local governments do not support the construction of ancestral halls. If the process follows entirely legal procedures, approvals for land, planning, and other necessary permits are difficult to obtain. Therefore, the villagers openly stated: "Each family here has its own channels to navigate relations. It is not difficult to build an ancestral hall, and once it is built, it will be considered legal because the government cannot tear it down afterward."

Finally, the revival of ancestral halls is essentially a return to traditional clan power to some extent, mani-

festing the resurgence of clan authority in rural governance. Many of its ideological remnants are detrimental to current cultural development. Clan authority is fundamentally patriarchal, emphasizing unconditional obedience and sacrifice for the so-called "family interests." The newly constructed, grandiose ancestral halls towering in rural areas are the clearest embodiment of the strong return of such clan power. What is lacking in clan governance is democratic thinking, which contradicts the "Four Democracies" spirit being promoted at the grassroots level in rural China. Furthermore, clan authority is a form of rule by man rather than rule of law. The numerous rules from clan culture are the foundation of its social order, which conflicts with the current emphasis on "rule of law" and hinders the advancement of legal development in rural areas.

## **4. Conclusion**

In summary, over the past thirty years since the reform and opening-up, with the gradual loosening of the political environment at the grassroots level in China, the long-dormant clan-based culture has begun to re-emerge in rural life. Clan forces, which have regained a certain degree of influence, are eager to build ancestral halls to win the support and unite the hearts of their families. The increasing economic strength of the general population and the growing convenience of information transmission since the 21st century have provided strong support for the large-scale construction of ancestral halls. As a result, the revival of ancestral halls across the country has shown an accelerated trend. However, amidst the intensifying boom in ancestral hall construction, a series of underlying social issues are cause for concern. First, there is a serious culture of comparison in current ancestral hall construction, with many halls being blindly built for the sake of vanity, lacking true practicality, thus causing significant waste of funds and land and negatively impacting the social atmosphere in rural areas. Second, administrative power has also penetrated deeply into the construction process of ancestral halls, potentially leading to a series of corruption issues. Furthermore, the funding for the construction of ancestral halls generally comes from the collective contributions of all clan members. Clan forces often use various coercive or subtle means to pressure clan members into contributing, leaving them little opportunity to refuse. The high contribution fees further exacerbate the economic burdens of

many impoverished rural residents, which runs counter to the targeted poverty alleviation policies currently being widely implemented. Additionally, a series of issues, such as the difficulty in transforming the shared nature of existing ancestral halls, the increasingly vulgar aesthetics of new halls, and the divergence of the ancestral hall revival process from the country's mainstream values, are also deserving of attention and reflection.

Government departments in the counties and cities of Eastern Hubei region have already deeply recognized the seriousness of these problems and have taken corresponding measures to strictly regulate the situation. For example, places like Yangxin and Chibi implemented special rectification measures for ancestral hall construction in 2018. During the rectification period, construction of ongoing ancestral halls was required to cease, and approvals for new constructions were suspended. At the same time, these counties and cities have actively promoted the core socialist values and advocated for public order and good customs, encouraging local villagers to use ancestral halls as a platform to promote advanced traditional culture. The construction of ancestral halls to honor and worship ancestors has traditionally been a simple aspiration of the laboring people in China, influenced by clan-based culture over thousands of years. As the saying goes, "It is better to guide than to block," and a blanket ban on ancestral hall construction will not completely curb the rise of clan forces in rural areas, nor can it fully eliminate other undesirable social phenomena. Therefore, the solution lies in leading with education and publicity, reshaping traditional views, and guiding the people to realize that extravagance and comparison are not the proper ways to honor ancestors. Ultimately, fostering a positive and healthy ancestral worship culture is key to solving the problem. Secondly, the construction of new ancestral halls should be constrained by relevant regulations and subject to strict approval processes, effectively controlling their scale and investment to avoid unnecessary waste. Additionally, supervision during the construction process should be strengthened to prevent any form of corruption. Lastly, it is important to learn from the current difficulties in transforming the shared nature of ancestral halls and correctly explore the public value of existing ancestral halls, continuing to explore the path of shared transformation for rural ancestral halls.

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