

The Value Recognition of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall in Xishan, Suzhou, from the Perspective of Spatial Heritage

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Abstract: Under the guidance of rural revitalisation, the protection of vernacular architecture has begun to focus on both tangible and intangible culture, and in this critical period of rural cultural transformation, the study of the representative ancestral halls will contribute to cultural revitalisation. This paper starts from the perspective of spatial heritage, combining field mapping and historical data to comprehensively analyse the material and intangible elements in the physical, spiritual and social spaces of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall in order to recognize its architectural heritage value. The study finds that the Xu Family Ancestral Hall, as a representative of the traditional skills of the Xiangshan Gang, has a variety of cultural connotations. Through its location, space and detailed carvings, it presents the unique artistic characteristics of the architecture of Xishan, and highlights the ecological wisdom of the traditional construction, which not only bears witness to the development of the Dongting merchant gang and the Xishan village, but also serves as a sacred space for the family to perform rituals, and is also used to maintain the bond between the family's identity and the villagers' emotions.

Keywords: Xu Family Ancestral Hall, Spatial Heritage, Value Recognition, Suzhou

1. Introduction

With the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, emphasis should be placed on the in-depth exploration and preservation of rural cultural essence. Therefore, vernacular architecture, as a carrier of rural culture, holds significant research value. On one hand, ancestral halls—representative structures as the highest-ranked buildings in villages—have evolved through generations into unique tangible and intangible cultural heritage through their architectural forms, decorative styles, and ancestral worship functions. On the other hand, the coordinated preservation of traditional villages and intangible cultural heritage faces significant challenges. Therefore, during this critical period of rural cultural reconstruction and transformation, research and protection of ancestral hall architecture and its underlying culture are highly necessary and urgent.

Current architectural heritage research internationally emphasizes the social dimensions^[1] and contemporary value^[2] of heritage, while domestically focuses on indigenous theoretical frameworks^[3] and digital technology applications^[4]. Overall trends indicate a shift from singular restoration of physical spaces toward holistic preservation integrating tangible and intangible elements. Domestic research on ancestral halls in traditional villages can be categorized into three main directions: First, studies on the architectural entities themselves, concentrating on building forms, spatial layouts, decorative arts, and construction techniques^[5-8]; Second, explorations of the clan culture behind ancestral halls, often involving clan systems, sacrificial rituals, and family studies^[9-11]; Third, preservation and inheritance strategies, encompassing theoretical approaches^[12] and revitalization initiatives^[13]. Specifically regarding ancestral halls in the Suzhou region, current research primarily centers on clan culture^[14] and architectural forms^[15]. Deeper, multidimensional exploration of their heritage value remains insufficient. According to Suzhou's 2023 publicly available cultural heritage protection inventory statistics, ancestral halls constitute approximately 3.7% of listed heritage sites. Therefore, deepening research into their value is particularly urgent and important.

Against the backdrop of rural cultural revitalization, actively exploring the value of ancestral halls can awaken public awareness of vernacular architecture and traditional culture, thereby facilitating their timely protection and inheritance. Based on the above, this paper will employ the theoretical framework of spatial heritage to analyze the material and immaterial heritage elements of the Xu Family Ancestral

Hall from a holistic perspective, thereby recognizing its heritage value. This study will explore the cultural connotations and value-bearing capacity of ancestral halls to contribute to cultural revitalization and provide insights for recognizing their value.

2. Theory of Spatial Heritage

Spatial heritage refers to spatial environments possessing outstanding universal historical and cultural value, representing a convergence of physical, social, and spiritual dimensions^[16]. Adopting this framework as the theoretical foundation for analyzing the Xu Family Ancestral Hall leverages the dual strengths of spatial production theory and cultural heritage theory. It constructs a value-oriented approach to heritage spatial analysis, emphasizing the interrelated examination of tangible physical spaces and intangible cultural elements within architectural heritage. This methodology facilitates broader recognition of its universal value and enables more appropriate conservation strategies. First, spatial production theory—specifically Lefebvre's “trinity” spatial dialectic^[17]—posits that space encompasses spatial practice, spatial representation, and represented space. This framework underscores the socio-historical nature of space, requiring analysis not only at the material level but also in conjunction with the cultural and social activities embedded within it. This theory endows space with social attributes while linking material, mental, and social spaces through interconnectedness. Thus, it serves as an analytical framework for constructing spatial heritage theory and studying spatial relationships. Cultural heritage theory remains in a state of ongoing development, with its focus on spatial value serving as a guiding principle for constructing spatial heritage theory. The integrated spatial heritage framework establishes a value-oriented spatial analysis methodology that connects “intangible” and “tangible” heritage, holding significant theoretical implications^[18].

Regarding the study of ancestral hall architectural value, ancestral halls serve as carriers of familial authority and spiritual identity. Their material and immaterial relational values warrant further exploration with the help of spatial heritage theory. By analyzing the architectural characteristics revealed in material space, the order established in spiritual space through material space, and the reconstruction of material space via social activities in social space, this approach offers new perspectives on recognizing the heritage value embodied by ancestral halls (Figure 1).

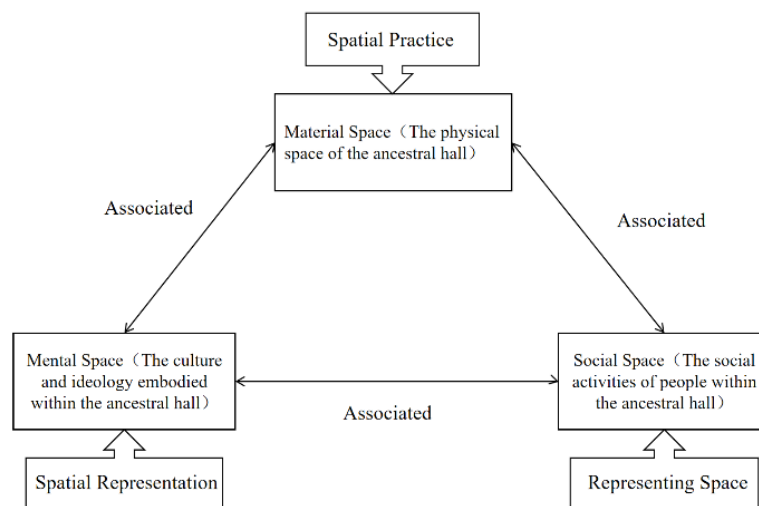


Fig.1 Diagram of Spatial Heritage Theory in conjunction with Shrines

3. Analysis of Heritage Elements in the Xu Family Ancestral Hall

3.1 Basic Overview of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall

Given that Suzhou's traditional villages are primarily distributed near the eastern and western hills of Lake Taihu, this study focuses on the Xu Family Ancestral Hall in the Western Hills. This hall, also known as a family shrine, was established by members of the same clan based on “blood ties” for the purpose of ancestral worship. The Xu clan represents the largest lineage on West Hill, comprising six branches: Houbu, South Xu, North Xu, Dongyuan, Tangli, and Xuxiang. The Xu Family Ancestral Hall

was constructed by the Dongyuan branch. Located at the western entrance of Dongcun Village, the Xujia Ancestral Hall faces south. Constructed during the Qianlong era of the Qing Dynasty, only the gatehouse remains as an original structure, with the rest recently restored. Designated a Suzhou Municipal Cultural Heritage Site in 2009 and listed as a Jiangsu Provincial Cultural Heritage Site in 2011, it now serves as the West Hill Carving Exhibition Hall.

3.2 Physical Spatial Information

The shaping of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall's physical spatial information will be described from planning and site selection, through spatial layout, to detailed ornamentation. This analysis will explore how the physical space reflects the distinctive characteristics of local architecture in the East and West Hills region.

First, the site selection of the ancestral hall. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, feng shui principles were widely observed in folk practices across grassroots society. As the highest-ranked structure in a village, ancestral halls were built for ancestral worship while embodying hopes for family prosperity. Their locations were thus chosen with feng shui considerations. Feng shui adheres to the fundamental principle of “facing the sun and leaning against the shade.” This involves selecting a site backed by mountains and facing rivers. The Xu Family Ancestral Hall occupies the most prominent position at the village entrance. It faces Lake Tai to the front and rests against Zhangjia Mountain to the rear, fulfilling the ideal feng shui layout for a clan hall. Second, it is oriented north-south to ensure ample sunlight. Third, the hall is situated beside ancient trees, with an ancient well placed before its entrance. This arrangement serves to gather water and wealth, while the well also provides convenient access for clan members (Figure 2).



Fig.2 Xu Family Ancestral Hall Site Selection

The influence of Confucian culture is evident in architectural hierarchy and spatial order. Guided by the “ritual system,” structures honor the southward orientation and follow a north-south axis, reflecting reverence for ancestors and clan elders. The Dongyuan Xu Ancestral Hall, for instance, features a symmetrical layout centered on the main hall, with sacrificial and gate structures arranged along the axis and auxiliary buildings on both sides, embodying a strict hierarchical concept. A color scheme of black, white, and gray echoes the ritual codes in the Classic of Rites. Decorative elements, such as carvings depicting themes like “King Wen Visiting Talents” or “Farming, Fishing, Woodcutting, and Reading,” further emphasize Confucian educational values (Figure 3).

Lastly, intricate decorative details demonstrate masterful wood, brick, and stone carving techniques applied to architectural elements for both aesthetic and symbolic purposes. The gatehouse features exceptionally preserved wooden carvings executed in the “full-hall color carving” technique. Structural members—including beams, lintels, bracket sets, corbels, doors, and windows—are all adorned with elaborate motifs. The beams serve as the focal point, carved at both ends with patterns that extend along the shoulders and curve subtly downward, introducing elegance within the solemn space. Central “wrapped brocade” panels display polychrome carvings of animals, figures, and plants reflecting Confucian and familial themes. Rafters are decorated with Suzhou-style polychrome paintings, applied using techniques from the *Treatise on Construction Methods*: outlines are brushed in gesso, then filled mainly with pale green and light red inspired by local silk designs. Dougong brackets, characteristic of the Xiangshan school, are openwork-carved to visually lighten the roof. Brick carvings appear in inscribed plaques conveying family mottos such as “Honor the Ancestors and Cherish Filial Piety.” Stone carvings, though fewer, embellish column bases with continuous geometric patterns symbolizing

harmony and masking structural simplicity (Fig. 4).

The Xu Family Ancestral Hall embodies the vernacular architectural characteristics of the East and West Hills settlements. Its site selection adheres to the feng shui principle of “facing the sun and embracing the shade,” integrating with the terrain while occupying a central position at the village entrance. Spatially, it adopts a three-courtyard layout with central axis symmetry, echoing the form of East-West Mountain dwellings. Features like courtyard wells, terraced steps, and concealed drainage channels adapt to Suzhou's climate. Detailed ornamentation primarily employs the three carvings (wood, stone, and plaster) and Suzhou-style painted decorations, showcasing the exquisite craftsmanship of the Xiangshan Guild artisans.

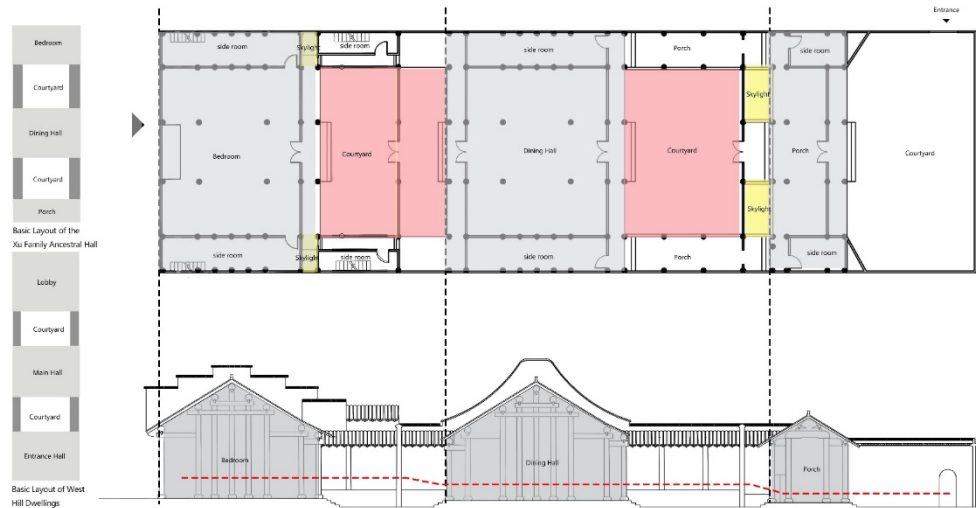


Fig.3 Spatial pattern of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall



Fig.4 Detailed Decoration of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall

3.3 Spiritual Space Information

Spiritual space information constitutes a vital component of intangible heritage, primarily derived from Confucian and clan cultures. This section explores how such information manifests within physical spaces, exerting governing and constraining influences on their development while also examining its inherent functions.

Firstly, Confucian culture finds expression in its emphasis on hierarchical order and social distinctions, as institutionalized through the “ritual system”. Architecturally, this is reflected in the north-south orientation, with the south symbolizing reverence and honour towards ancestors and elders. The spatial layout, documented in the “Record of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall in Dongyuan”, features a symmetrical arrangement along a central axis: main sleeping chambers at the core, followed by sacrificial halls and gatehouses, flanked by auxiliary structures—all embodying strict Confucian hierarchy (Figure 5). A colour scheme of black, white, and grey derives from ritual dress codes described in The Book of Rites, translating ceremonial norms into architectural expression. Decorative elements further reinforce Confucian values; beam carvings depicting themes such as King Wen seeking talent or scenes of scholars and labourers reflect the enduring emphasis on moral and intellectual cultivation.

Secondly, clan culture employs ancestral halls to demonstrate familial status and authority. These structures, along with activities such as sacrificial ceremonies, genealogy compilation, and management of charitable fields, strengthen clan unity and educational outreach. The spatial organization follows records stating that the founding ancestor is enshrined centrally, with later descendants arranged below alongside their consorts, emphasizing reverence for origins. An upper screen wall is positioned to protect the family's fortune and vitality. Decorative motifs further express cultural values: beams carved with bats represent blessings (fu) and prosperity, while inscribed plaques like "Honor Ancestors, Cultivate Filial Piety" convey moral instruction. A stele in the eastern corridor commemorates Xu's mother for "chastity, longevity, and virtue," highlighting filial devotion. Clan cohesion was also reinforced through communal practices, such as ancestral rituals conducted in rotation among households. The Taihu Reference Records indicate that East and West Mountain clans typically conducted sacrifices on Frost's Descent, Qingming, and the tenth lunar month of Zhongyuan^[19], generally rotating every ten years^[20]. Revised genealogies were compiled. Dongcun Village currently possesses the Dongyuan Xu Clan Genealogy, which meticulously records 56 generations from the Southern Song Dynasty migration to Xishan, including biographies of merchant ancestors, providing rich historical material for studying Ming-Qing merchants around Lake Dongting. Established charitable fields, whose revenues supported widows, orphans, and the elderly within the clan while ensuring clan activities could be conducted, forming a distinctive clan structure unlike those in other regions^[21].



Fig.5 Formal Analysis of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall

Both Confucian and clan cultures shaped material spaces to reflect ruling-class ideology. Confucian culture reinforced hierarchical ethics through axial symmetry, spatial hierarchy, and color codes. Clan culture used spatial symbolism and rituals to express aspirations for prosperity and scholarly success, reinforcing kinship identity and social cohesion.

3.4 Social Spatial Information

Social spatial information constitutes another vital component of intangible heritage, representing micro-level socio-cultural value. It involves interpreting the social spatial information embedded within historical events, family activities, and daily routines.

The Xu Family Ancestral Hall played a significant role in the development of Xishan. Initially funded with some 9,000 taels of silver by Xu Lianxi, a successful Confucian merchant from the area, the hall was built upon his return from business ventures in Jiangxi and Hunan. Its finely carved gatehouse still reflects the region's historical economic prosperity. Damaged and repaired repeatedly during wartime—with its carved tower once stolen—the hall was repurposed after the founding of the People's Republic of China to serve as a village committee office and factory. Traces of this period remain on the second floor. In 2009, as part of rural revitalization efforts, private funding enabled its restoration, and it now operates as the Xishan Carving Museum, with certain areas adapted for exhibition purposes.

The Xu Family Ancestral Hall served as a central hub for social gatherings centered around the Xu clan. These activities extended the hall's traditional functions and, through practical use, supplied valuable historical insight into ancestral halls and clan societies. For special occasions, the clan invited the esteemed Grand Secretary Wang Mingsheng to compose the "Record of the Xu Clan Ancestral Hall in Dongyuan," which was later inscribed on a stele within the hall—illustrating its role as a gathering place. Regular ceremonies, noted in the inscription with the phrase "spring and autumn sacrificial rites

were never neglected,” reinforced kinship ties. Within this space, individuals adhered to behavioral norms and observed related taboos. Later renovations preserved the stone altar for ancestral tablets, maintaining its symbolic importance.

In daily life, the hall adapted to public and cultural functions, leading to physical modifications such as converting parts of the gatehouse into duty and rest areas. It thus evolved from a clan-exclusive space to a communal venue open to villagers and visitors. The front courtyard, in particular, became a key area for social interaction, where residents gather to chat, play chess, or share stories, strengthening community bonds. Through exhibitions of stone carvings, inscriptions, and cultural lectures, the hall also acts as a gateway for promoting Xishan culture to a broader audience. This growing cultural role continues to attract outsiders, enhancing the hall’s social and cohesive function.

The social space interacts closely with the physical space. First, the hall’s layout has been adapted over time to meet evolving power, economic, and cultural demands. Second, activities such as clan rituals and gatherings of elites have enhanced its ceremonial and public role, while steles and spirit tablets materialize clan memory. Finally, daily and cultural use has transitioned the hall from sacred to everyday space.

4. Recognizing the Heritage Value of the Xu Family Ancestral Hall

Employing the spatial heritage framework, this study analyzes the material, spiritual, and social dimensions of the Xu Clan Ancestral Hall to identify its heritage attributes. The interplay of these spaces reveals a cohesive structure whose value is multidimensional: the material space conveys historical, scientific, and artistic worth, while the spiritual and social dimensions express cultural and social significance, respectively.

The Xu Family Ancestral Hall holds historical value as a testament to the development of the Dongting Lake merchant guild and the evolution of Xishan villages. A prominent member of the Xu clan, Xu Lianxi, was a successful merchant operating between Suzhou and Huguang. By midlife, he had amassed considerable wealth in cities such as Hengyang and Xiangtan, emerging as a leading figure among the Dongting Lake Merchants^[22]. He later invested commercial capital into construction, enabling the establishment of the ancestral hall, which reflects the economic vitality of the merchant guild. Over time, the hall underwent several renovations, transitioning from ceremonial use to village administration, and now serves as a carving museum—a functional evolution that mirrors the historical transformation of Xishan village.

The Xu Family Ancestral Hall exhibits significant artistic value through its spatial design and detailed carvings. The layout features a gradually rising sequence from the entrance to the resting quarters, with a narrowed courtyard enhancing a sense of solemnity amid enclosed structures. Meanwhile, the gatehouse carvings—combining primary and secondary motifs—create a ceremonial entrance while symbolizing aspirations for the clan’s prosperity. As an example of Xiangshan carving craftsmanship, these techniques hold inheritable value for both art and cultural preservation.

Scientifically, the hall’s site selection, spatial arrangement, and structure reflect eco-conscious construction adapted to Suzhou’s humid climate. Nestled between hills and lakes, the location provides natural windbreaks and cooling. Courtyards and perforated roof-wall junctions promote ventilation, while drainage channels manage rainwater effectively. These features demonstrate sophisticated ecological wisdom and passive climate response.

As a vessel merging clan culture with Confucianism, the Xu Family Ancestral Hall materializes the cultural aspirations of its ruling class within its physical space, holding cultural significance. First, its spatial organization reflects traditional ritual norms, while the hierarchical design of materials and forms showcases Confucian values. Second, intricate decorative details reveal profound understanding and transmission of clan culture. Carved motifs and plaques symbolize the clan’s educational influence, reflecting the centrality of Confucian scholarship within the Xu lineage and embodying a distinctive clan identity.

Socially, the hall serves as a repository of clan history and collective memory. It historically hosted rituals that strengthened familial bonds, and today functions as a gathering place for villagers, sustaining emotional ties and community cohesion. The surviving steles and records provide valuable material for research into ancestral traditions.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the Xu Family Ancestral Hall as spatial heritage through its physical, spiritual, and social aspects, revealing its multiple values. The hall reflects both the history of Dongting merchants and Xishan villages, and showcases the craftsmanship of the Xiangshan guild, representing diverse cultural meanings. Its site planning, spatial arrangement, and carvings illustrate the artistic features of Wu-style architecture and the ecological wisdom of traditional construction. Symbolically, it functions as a sacred ritual space and a core of clan identity and community cohesion.

Guided by the principles of authenticity and integrity, holistic conservation measures have been implemented. Digital technologies such as 3D laser scanning are used to create detailed models documenting color and texture for physical preservation. Spiritually, cultural activities and family gatherings are organized to revitalize ancestral traditions and reinforce cultural beliefs. Socially, a collaborative preservation framework involving government, public participation, and market resources helps strengthen community identity. This study aims to deepen appreciation of ancestral halls as heritage, raise awareness of vernacular architecture and traditional culture, and promote the preservation and development of traditional villages.

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