



Research Article

The Educational Function of Chaoshan Chinese Ancestral Halls

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Abstract

The Chaoshan region is a renowned hometown of overseas Chinese in China. Since the Ming Dynasty, massive populations of Chaoshan natives have migrated overseas. Statistics indicate that overseas Chinese of Chaoshan origin account for one quarter of all Chinese overseas communities, with major settlements across Southeast Asia and scattered populations throughout Europe and the Americas. Ancestral halls stand as vital material carriers of Chaoshan culture and hold a pivotal position within transnational Chaoshan communities. Rooted in the clan culture of Chaoshan people, ancestral halls facilitate the intergenerational inheritance of native customs, dialectal culture, and familial traditions via sacrificial rituals, genealogy compilation, charitable undertakings, and other clan activities. To look into the educational role of Chaoshan Chinese ancestral halls, this study takes textual records and interviews records for analytical exploration to trace the changes of Chaoshan overseas ancestral halls in Southeast Asia. It summarizes the cultural and educational functions embodied by these diaspora ancestral halls, and briefly reviews the inheritance, dissemination, development and innovation of traditional Chinese culture in overseas contexts. This study illuminates the enduring cultural inheritance and educational functions fulfilled by Chinese ancestral halls both domestically and internationally across traditional and modern eras, and clarifies that overseas Chaoshan ancestral halls serve as core bonds for social cohesion within diaspora groups. Furthermore, it identifies the challenges confronting Chaoshan ancestral halls in the new era, providing empirical references for exploring the value and practical prospects of overseas Chinese ancestral halls in cultural inheritance and educational undertakings.

Keywords

Chaoshan Ancestral Halls, Overseas Chaoshan Chinese, Cultural Inheritance, Educational Function

1. Introduction

As a renowned hometown of overseas Chinese in China, the Chaoshan region has nurtured a distinctive overseas Chinese cultural system. The Chaoshan area, encompassing the three prefecture-level cities of Shantou, Chaozhou, and Jieyang in

Guangdong Province, is geographically situated on the southeastern coast of Guangdong, south of the Lianhua Mountains, thus forming the culturally delineated Chaoshan region. Endowed with a topographical feature of being "surrounded by

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Received: 2 July 2026; Accepted: 16 July 2026; Published: 18 August 2026



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mountains on three sides and bordering the sea on one," the region suffers from limited arable land and a low per capita farmland share. Historically, this geographical constraint has propelled the Chaoshan people toward commercial activities and overseas exploration. Dubbed the "Oriental Jews," the Chaoshan overseas has established a global presence, forming a distinct transnational community. Demographically, the majority of Chaoshan overseas Chinese and emigrants are settled in Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, with significant populations also in Australia, Canada, and France. Statistical data indicate that the global overseas Chinese population exceeds 60 million, spanning 198 countries and regions, among whom over 15 million trace their ancestral roots to Chaoshan, predominantly distributed across Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas. [1]

Ancestral halls (citang 祠堂 or zongci 宗祠), as pivotal material carriers of Chaoshan culture, occupy a central position within overseas Chaoshan communities. Ancestral halls are deeply embedded in their role as cultural and spiritual hubs within Chinese clan societies, serving as both formal and informal platforms for transmitting values, knowledge, and identity across generations. These functions are multifaceted and historically intertwined with the social, ethical, and cultural fabric of Chinese communities. Far beyond mere architectural structures, they function as spiritual sanctuaries and cultural homelands for overseas Chaoshan people, facilitating the transmission of local customs, linguistic traditions, and familial norms, thereby ensuring the continuity and evolution of Chaoshan culture in transnational contexts.

From the perspective of cultural heritage, ancestral halls encapsulate rich historical and cultural epistemologies, ancestral halls act as primary sites for moral and ethical indoctrination. The unique architectural style of Chaoshan ancestral halls integrates exquisite traditional crafts such as wood carving, stone carving, and ceramic inlay, which not only demonstrate the superior artisanal skills of the Chaoshan region but also embody the aesthetic paradigms and cultural connotations of its inhabitants. For instance, clan rules inscribed on hall walls or displayed in plaques serve as tangible reminders of ethical obligations, guiding younger members toward virtuous living. Within these halls, genealogies, inscribed plaques, and couplets serve as tangible records of familial evolution and ancestral achievements, functioning as authentic testimonies to familial history. Through engaging in ancestral worship rituals and hall maintenance practices, overseas Chaoshan communities transmit these cultural heritages to subsequent generations, reinforcing their sense of ancestral roots and historical continuity. [2] For marginalized groups or overseas Chinese diasporas, these spaces become critical for preserving cultural roots, resisting acculturation, and maintaining ties to their ancestral homeland. [3]

In terms of educational functionality, ancestral halls assume an irreplaceable role in the acculturation of overseas Chaoshan populations. Ancestral halls facilitate cultural and historical

transmission. They serve as critical sites for the inculcation of moral norms and value systems. Traditional virtues, including filial piety toward elders, integrity, and diligence, as enshrined in familial precepts and teachings, exert a subtle yet profound influence on younger generations through the guidance of elders and various hall-based activities. Furthermore, ancestral halls function as community-based educational institutions, they provide a platform for social interaction and knowledge exchange, where individuals share life experiences and entrepreneurial wisdom, fostering intra-familial solidarity and collaborative ethos, while cultivating a collective sense of community and belonging. Which foster collective identity and social cohesion. This collective identity transcends individual interests, encouraging cooperation, mutual support, and responsibility toward the clan and broader community.

The study of overseas Chaoshan ancestral halls holds significant theoretical and practical implications for comprehending the cultural attributes, social structures of overseas Chaoshan communities, and the transnational dissemination and evolution of Chinese culture. This research employs a multi-methodological framework to conduct a comprehensive analysis of this complex and diverse cultural phenomenon. Literature review constitutes the foundational approach, involving extensive collection and critical analysis of academic monographs, journal articles, research reports, genealogies, local chronicles, and historical archives, and newspapers and online news reports pertaining to Chaoshan culture, overseas Chinese studies, and ancestral hall culture. Case study methodology is another core component, focusing on representative overseas Chaoshan ancestral halls to identify commonalities and idiosyncrasies in their cultural inheritance and educational functions, as well as to distill successful experiences and extant challenges.

This research presents innovative perspectives and content. It transcends the traditional single-disciplinary paradigms—such as those rooted in history, architecture, or sociology—that have hitherto dominated ancestral hall studies. Instead, it adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating theories and methodologies from history, cultural studies, sociology, and education to conduct a holistic analysis of the role of overseas Chaoshan ancestral halls in cultural inheritance and educational practice.

2. The Function of Chaoshan Ancestral Halls in History

2.1. Ancestral Halls as the Core of Cultural Inheritance

In the Chaoshan region, a large number of clan ancestral halls are distributed in both urban and rural areas, with annual ancestral worship ceremonies for the clans attracting up to tens of thousands of participants. "Chinese clans" (宗族) re-

fers to a social group formed by individuals who share a common male ancestor and are bound together by blood ties, ancestral worship, and a set of shared norms and institutions. The main clans in Chaoshan are mostly rooted from ancient Chinese patriarchal society, who migrated from the Central China (Yellow River Basin Area) during the Tang and Song dynasties. Clans represent a fundamental unit of social organization that extends beyond the nuclear family, encompassing multiple generations and branches of a kinship network. At the core of a Chinese clan is the belief in ancestral continuity, which is materialized through institutions such as ancestral halls (where rituals honoring ancestors are performed), genealogies (which meticulously record lineage relationships), and clan rules (that regulate members' behavior, enforce moral standards, and manage collective affairs). These elements serve to reinforce a sense of shared identity, solidarity, and mutual obligation among clan members. After migrating to South China region, the immigrant communities needed to maintain the collective sense of honor among family members by continuing the glory of their distant ancestors in the new living space through rituals of "reverencing the past and honoring ancestors"; meanwhile, the lifestyle of living in clan-based settlements prompted them to establish a dedicated venue for commemorating and worshipping ancestors, that is the ancestral hall. This context led to the dense distribution of clan ancestral halls in the Chaoshan region. For instance, there are more than 50 clan ancestral halls of various sizes in the ancient village of Longhu, Chaozhou alone. And there are more than 300 ancestral halls (zuci) belonging exclusively to the Chen lineage alone in Chenghai District.

Ancestral hall worship is both a clan ritual for gathering blood ties, strengthening emotional bonds, and forging spiritual identity, and a personal practice for individuals to "remember their roots, be grateful and filial, rectify their conduct, and receive teachings from ancestors." The legacy of ancestral hall persists in cultural practices, kinship networks, and the enduring emphasis on familial and ancestral bonds in Chinese society. As researchers have poignantly noted, "The ancestral hall is the most authentic spiritual heritage of individuals. With the existence of the ancestral hall, people develop a sense of awe and perseverance. [4] The 'heavenly spirit' revered by the Chinese people actually restrains individual willfulness, curbs impetuosity, and houses inner conscience." Every ancestral hall bears a hall cognomen (most clan public halls generally lack such cognomens). Likewise, the lintels of residential mansions are conventionally inscribed with ancestral prefectural designations. These markers serve as primary criteria for distinguishing regional origins and delineating kinship proximity, and constitute vital threads for tracing ancestral lineages and genealogical roots. At a glance, one may readily identify the birthplace of a given surname. Such traditional historical folk cultural heritage reinforces the cohesion and centripetal force of Chinese descendants at home and overseas.

Ancestral halls of overseas Chaoshan people, as material

carriers of family memory, continuously strengthen the cultural identity of overseas Chaoshan communities with their families and hometown through ancestral worship rituals and family gatherings. The profound and time-honored Chinese culture embodies the wisdom of ancient Chinese sages and the glorious achievements of the Chinese nation. Among its core values, the spirit of national cohesion expressed as "patriotism like thirst," the political ideal of "being the first to worry about the world's troubles and the last to enjoy its happiness," and the sense of responsibility that "every individual is responsible for the rise and fall of the nation" have profoundly shaped the values of overseas Chinese and their descendants. These values instill a strong sense of sacred duty in them to inherit family missions, undertake national responsibilities, and participate in social construction. A notable example is Zheng Da (later renamed Zheng Yong) from Huaifu Village, Chenghai County, Chaozhou Prefecture (now Shanghua Town, Chenghai District, Shantou). He traveled to Thailand to make a living in his youth, married a Siamese woman named Luoyang, and had a son named Zheng Xin. When Zheng Xin grew up, he entered politics. In 1764, when Burmese troops invaded Thailand on a large scale, he led the military and civilians in heroic resistance, achieving remarkable military exploits. After the fall of the old Thai dynasty, Zheng Xin gathered forces in eastern Thailand, repelled the Burmese army, suppressed local warlords, unified the country, and established the Thonburi Dynasty. He was enthroned as the King of Thailand in 1767, known historically as "King Taksin." [5] Due to his outstanding contributions to Thailand, he is deeply revered by the Thai people. In 1950, the Thai government built the "Monument to King Taksin the Great" in the center of Thonburi Square in Bangkok for public admiration, and designated December 28th of each year (the date of the founding of the Thonburi Dynasty) as "Taksin Day" to commemorate this national hero. Today, the couplet beside the gate of the Zheng Clan Ancestral Hall in Huaifu Village "Once brothers with emperors; proudly having emperors as disciples", and Zheng Xin's clothes tomb (a tomb containing personal belongings in lieu of remains) beside a pond outside the village, which has been listed as a cultural relics protection unit by the Chenghai Municipal Government, serve as material witnesses to this historical memory. In 1998, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand made a special trip to Chenghai to pay homage to Zheng Xin's clothes tomb, further highlighting the transnational influence of this cultural symbol. [6]

As core sites for overseas Chaoshan people to inherit local culture, ancestral halls transmit traditional Chaoshan customs and values to younger generations through cultural activities, exhibitions, and other forms. In Myanmar, for example, overseas Chinese education remained predominantly private for a long period. Wealthy overseas Chinese, seeking to provide their clan's younger generations with Chinese-style education, invited scholars from China to establish private schools or traditional academies in Myanmar. These institutions taught enlightenment classics such as the Three-Character Classic and

Thousand-Character Classic, with classes held either in private residences or attached to collective spaces such as clan associations, temples, and ancestral halls. [7] Although this traditional Chinese education laid a certain foundation in sinology for locally born overseas Chinese in Myanmar, the education conducted by Myanmar's overseas Chinese based in ancestral halls played a crucial role in spreading traditional Chinese culture and strengthening Chinese national identity.

Chinese clans historically played multifaceted roles in society. They acted as mechanisms for social control, transmitting Confucian values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and loyalty to the group. Chinese culture emphasizes personal cultivation, shaping the Chinese nation's character of being moderate, reasonable, and valuing moral life — a unique spiritual hallmark of Chinese culture and a source of strength for the Chinese nation's perseverance, hard work, and enterprising spirit. In regions with large overseas Chinese and Chinese descendant populations, particularly in politically stable, rapidly developing emerging industrialized countries and regions in the Pacific, the influence of Chinese culture is evident. The "neo-Confucianism" and "neo-Confucius thought" advocated in these countries are, in fact, contemporary interpretations of Chinese culture. In Indonesia, for instance, the Chinese community has leveraged clan ancestral halls and Chinese history museums to enable ethnic historical and cultural heritage to play a central role in inheriting national culture, consolidating ethnic identity, and constructing collective memory. This has also exerted a non-negligible impact on promoting Chinese integration into Indonesian society, facilitating ethnic integration and reconciliation, enhancing ethnic communication and understanding, and fostering racial harmony.

2.2. Ancestral Halls for Education

In contemporary contexts, while their educational roles have adapted to modernity—often integrating formal schooling, cultural workshops, or heritage education programs—ancestral halls retain their core function as transmitters of values, bridging the past and present to shape the moral and cultural consciousness of new generations. Ancestral halls often display family precepts and rules, through the explanations and inheritances of elders, teaching younger generations traditional virtues such as respecting the elders and caring for the young, being honest and trustworthy. Overseas Chaoshan ancestral halls, as platforms for cultural education, hold traditional art activities such as calligraphy, painting, and Chaoshan opera, enabling overseas Chaoshan people to learn and inherit the cultural arts of their hometown. Meanwhile, some ancestral halls also offer Chaoshan dialect teaching to help younger generations learn and use the Chaoshan dialect, maintaining the continuity of language culture. These are the direct and specific manifestations of the educational functions of ancestral halls. Although overseas Chinese live far away from their motherland in foreign lands, the essence of Chinese culture not only integrates into the consciousness of the older

generation of overseas Chinese, becoming the criterion guiding their behaviors, but also serves as an important curriculum for educating the descendants of overseas Chinese, allowing them to review the past and gain new insights.

In the early days, ancestral halls once directly functioned as private schools or schools for educational purposes. In the late Qing Dynasty, the French priest Riccius described that in Jiayingzhou in Meizhou, "Every village of the Hakka people has an ancestral hall, and that ancestral hall is also a school. There are six or seven hundred villages in the whole area, all with ancestral halls, that is, six or seven hundred schools. This is really an astonishing fact." [8] Hakka overseas Chinese who migrated overseas also inherited the excellent tradition of the Hakka people attaching great importance to education and actively established educational institutions. This is clearly reflected in their active establishment of Chinese schools in the host countries, and more prominently in their enthusiastic support for education in their hometowns. According to historical records, on the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China, there were 2,464 primary schools and 75 middle schools in Meizhou, and most of these schools were founded or supported by overseas Chinese donations. [9]

The most famous Chaoshan Hakka people are undoubtedly Hu Wenhui, who hails from Zhongchuan Village in Meizhou Dapu to Longyan (now part of Fujian Province) and is known as the "King of Ten Thousand Gold Oil". As a famous ancient village, Zhongchuan Village is known as the "Number One Overseas Chinese Village in the World". Zhongchuan Village is a place where talents have emerged. In just a few hundred years, the Hu family in Zhongchuan has created a unique family culture and is known as a "literary and martial arts family". These traditions are well reflected in Hu Wenhui, who, although a businessman, attaches great importance to cultural education and has donated money multiple times to build schools.

Take the well-known Congxi Gong Ancestral Hall as an example to illustrate its educational functions. The Congxi Gong Ancestral Hall in Caitang, Chao'an was built with a large amount of funds remitted by Chen Xunian, an overseas Chinese. The construction of the ancestral hall started in 1870 during the Qing Dynasty and was completed in 1883, taking 13 years and costing 260,000 silver dollars. In the second year after the completion of the ancestral hall, Chen Xunian took skilled craftsmen from his hometown to Singapore and built another identical building - Zizhengdi according to the layout of the ancestral hall in his hometown. In 1900, due to the railway being laid behind Zizhengdi, the elderly Chen Xunian found the noise of passing trains too disturbing, so he sold the mansion to the government and returned to his hometown in Chaozhou to spend his remaining years. Later, after lying dormant for more than a hundred years, Zizhengdi built by Chen Xunian in Singapore was rented as the Singapore campus of the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago in the United States, which once again attracted wide-

spread attention from the local society. This is a direct manifestation of the educational function of the ancestral hall. Later, Singapore specifically printed the appearance of Zizhengdi on stamps. Now, the Congxi Gong Ancestral Hall was approved by the State Council to be included in the list of the sixth batch of national key cultural relics protection units in 2006, and Zizhengdi has also become a protected historic site in Singapore. [10]

Huachiew Chalermprakiet University in Thailand is the first and only university in Thailand that was fully funded and built by Chinese donations. It is affiliated with the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, which is the largest Chinese charity organization in overseas Chinese in Thailand and also an outstanding representative of Chaoshan ancestral halls overseas. Thai overseas Chinese spread the belief in Patriarch Dafeng, which was revered in the Chaoshan region, from the Hanjiang River Basin to the banks of the Chao Phraya River. Patriarch Dafeng is the main deity worshipped in the Poh Teck Tung Foundation. He was a monk with the dharma name Dafeng whose native place was unknown in the early 12th century. In the sixth year of Zhenghe in the Northern Song Dynasty, he came to Hepingli, Chaoyang from Fujian and did many good deeds for the local people. To commemorate him, the villagers built an ancestral hall to worship him, named "Baode Hall", and there are still ruins of Baode Hall that can be traced today. During the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, Baode Hall, which evolved from an ancestral hall to a folk - belief temple, further transformed into a Buddhist monastery. Monks lived in the temple and the people's belief in Patriarch Dafeng became even stronger, with more prosperous incense. In 1897 (the 23rd year of the Guangxu reign), Ma Run, a Thai overseas Chinese from Heping Township, Chaoyang, returned to his hometown to welcome the statue of Patriarch Dafeng from "Baode Hall" and set up an altar to worship it on the upper floor of "Yongshunchang Mirror Shop" in Bangkok. Huachiew Chalermprakiet University adheres to the lofty purpose of the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, which is "to comprehensively serve public welfare undertakings in society", and takes "learning to serve society" as its school - running philosophy, providing opportunities for Chinese - descent students and the general Thai people to learn the Chinese language and traditional Chinese culture. In 1992, after the Thai government and parliament passed a policy to relax the teaching of Chinese in Chinese schools, Mr. Zheng Wulou began to build the school, and the foundation - laying ceremony was held on January 18. On March 24, 1994, the King of Thailand visited Huachiew Chalermprakiet University and personally presided over the inauguration ceremony, which became a grand event in the Thai - Chinese community at that time. [11] Since its establishment, Huachiew Chalermprakiet University has always regarded Chinese language teaching and Chinese studies research as the top priorities of the university's development.

Ancestral halls have long served as crucial venues for interaction among clan members, strengthening their connections

and cohesion. In Chaoshan, there has been a tradition of overseas Chinese working hard abroad and returning with financial resources to contribute to their hometowns' development. The wave of emigration in modern times brought villagers from Tianzhong, Chaozhou, to regions like Annam (the former name of South Vietnam) to make a living. Although only a few achieved success, the funds they remitted back played a positive role in the development of their clans. Four ancestral halls in Tianzhong were built during the Daoguang, Xianfeng, and Tongzhi periods of the Qing Dynasty (1821-1850, 1851-1874), largely relying on capital from Southeast Asia. [12]

2.3. Ancestral Halls Reinforces the Cohesion of Chinese Descendants at Home and Overseas

Chen Xunian, a prominent Chaoshan overseas Chinese leader, constructed a new village in his ancestral hometown, including multiple ancestral halls and mansions. Other examples include the Qiyuan New Village in Fengtang, built by Thai overseas Chinese Zheng Zhiyong, and the terraced new village in Xikeng, constructed by Thai overseas Chinese Zhang Junding, each with unique features. Lin Yurui, an overseas Chinese from Pontianak, Indonesia, built the Lanxiang Mansion in Qiaolin Changfangwei, Jieyang County, in the 1920s. Covering an area of 3,000 square meters, it comprises 101 rooms, with the main building named "Renmei Li" and the rear building "Lanxiang Tower." [13]

After China's economic reform and opening-up in the 1980s and 1990s, elderly overseas Chinese returned to their hometowns to visit relatives and donate funds for local development. In terms of education and cultural infrastructure, overseas Chinese from Chenghai contributed to building schools, roads, pavilions, hydropower plants, ancestral halls, and temples. Their patriotic (patriotic sentiments) were primarily manifested in investments in bridge and road construction, medical facilities, and education. [13]: 159.

On specific occasions, overseas Chaoshan Chinese, compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and local Chaoshan residents gather for ancestral worship. They even construct Chaoshan ancestral halls abroad and promote Chaoshan ancestral hall culture. In Xiangqiao District, Chaozhou, the Xie clan of Nanjun holds annual ancestor worship ceremonies, attracting descendants from Hong Kong (China) and Thailand to participate in the grand events. Ancestral halls thus serve as a link between overseas compatriots and their hometowns, facilitating root-seeking and ancestral homage, and encouraging overseas relatives to invest and start businesses locally.

Overseas Chaoshan communities have formed large-scale societies in Southeast Asian countries. Chinese immigrants brought traditional Chinese culture, including religious beliefs, to foreign lands, where these cultural elements became their spiritual pillars. Ancestral halls also organize community activities and public welfare initiatives such as charitable dona-

tions and educational subsidies, promoting harmonious development in their host societies. As the primary destination for overseas Chaoshan migrants, Southeast Asia is home to numerous Chaoshan ancestral halls. The characteristics of overseas Chaoshan migrants and the strong cohesion of Chaoshan culture have enabled the robust inheritance of overseas Chaoshan culture. Overseas Chaoshan opera troupes were once invited to perform for the Thai royal family; in the 1990s, such troupes, with over 100 performers, attracted thousands of spectators per show. In Thailand, Chaoshan ancestral halls are concentrated in cities like Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai. Bangkok, as Thailand's capital, hosts the largest Chaoshan population, with numerous ancestral halls such as the Zheng Clan Ancestral Hall and Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, which serve not only as venues for ancestor worship but also as key platforms for business activities and social gatherings. In Phuket, where Chaoshan people were primarily engaged in tin mining and rubber planting, ancestral halls like the Lin Clan Ancestral Hall bear witness to their entrepreneurial history while preserving family memories. In Chiang Mai, Chaoshan ancestral halls have integrated with local tourism, becoming important windows for showcasing Chaoshan culture and attracting many visitors. Within Chaoshan regions and overseas Chinese communities, a variety of communal activities centering on the Ancestral Hall have served as an institutional carrier for folk charity and public welfare undertakings among overseas Chinese.

According to historical records, posterity has endowed Weng Wanda with symbolic connotations of public ethics and social responsibility, on account of his integrity and incorruptibility, meritorious service in defending the nation, and contributions to the well-being of his hometown. Weng Wanda, a Jinshi (imperial scholar) of the Ming Dynasty (1526) who rose to the position of Minister, had his former residence expanded into an ancestral hall by descendants, with inscriptions such as "Residence of the Grand Marshal" and couplets honoring his official legacy. Weng clan ancestral halls, known as "Outer Hall" in Judeng and "Inner Hall" (or Grand Marshal's Temple) in Pengzhou, are both named "Sidede Hall." In Yujiao Town, Jieyang, relics such as the "Wengong Academy" (site of Meigang Academy) and "Weng Wanda's Study Place" reflect his local reverence. Over 100 temples dedicated to Weng Wanda exist in Thailand, including those in Bangkok and Longjiangcun, built by overseas Chinese since the Qing Dynasty. Researchers argue that Weng Wanda's veneration in Thailand is a result of cultural transplantation, his descendants brought his incense to Thailand, and after "efficacious" divinations, he was believed to be "deified" by heaven, leading to widespread worship. In Thailand and the Chaoshan homeland, clan organizations anchored at temples dedicated to Weng Wanda (including Lord Weng Academy, Side Hall of Remembrance of Virtue, and other venues) undertake not only ritual sacrificial functions but also regularly perform public welfare work encompassing disaster relief and poverty alleviation, educational endowments, bridge and road construction,

and assistance to vulnerable social groups. His cult evolved from ancestral worship within the clan to societal hero worship, gaining respect among overseas Chinese. [14] Chaoshan overseas Chinese revered historical figures like the Eight Immortals, Guan Yu, and Weng Wanda, seeking their divine protection to overcome evil and hardships. [15] This form of ancestral worship transcends national boundaries and functions as an interpersonal bond linking the Chaoshan ancestral homeland with overseas Chinese communities.

This phenomenon also reflects the large proportion of Chaoshan people in Thailand's Chinese community, which further facilitated Weng Wanda's veneration. Generally, in countries with significant overseas Chinese populations, the influence of a regional association correlates with the size of its affiliated community. Chaozhouese overseas Chinese form a large group in Thailand, particularly concentrated in Bangkok's Chinatown, where Chaoshan dialect is widely spoken and has even influenced Thai vocabulary. The Chaozhou Association plays a prominent role in Thailand's Chinese society. Additionally, Chaoshan opera performances often accompany worship and religious events. Overseas Chaoshan opera troupes perform traditional excerpts and adapt local sage stories, folk legends, and anecdotes, serving as vehicles for cultural education and enhancing the cohesion of Chaoshan overseas Chinese communities.

3. Innovation and Challenges of Ancestral Halls in the New Era

In the 21st century, although ancestral halls still hold an important position among overseas Chaoshan people, they are also facing many problems. Especially among the younger generation of Chinese, many, having been born and raised overseas, have a much weaker affection for Chinese culture and their hometown than their grandparents and parents. Issues such as cultural inheritance gap and lack of participation in and understanding of their hometown and some traditional activities have emerged. Surveys have found that the new generation of Singaporean Chinese not only have little knowledge of Chinese culture, but also have a weakened or even vanished concept of clan and hometown in their minds, and are indifferent to China's development. [16] By the 1980s, most Chinese in the Philippines were already the third generation. A survey conducted over 30 years ago showed that among Chinese aged 37-40 or younger, only 15% could read and write Chinese. The younger generation of Chinese regard the Philippines as their motherland, and their sense of identity and belonging to China and their hometown is no longer obvious. [17] Similarly, the younger generation of Chinese in Indonesia also identify themselves more as Indonesian citizens and will actively strive for human rights, showing that the new generation of Indonesian Chinese have stronger adaptability than previous generations, although there is inevitably a touch of

sadness in their hearts. [18] The construction of Chinese historical memorial halls has become a vital symbol of the revival of cultural consciousness among ethnic Chinese communities. The building of such museums in Indonesia not only embodies ethnic Chinese people's efforts to trace and pass down their communal history and culture, but also mirrors the evolving integration of ethnic Chinese with local society and shifts in their political identity. [19]

In the new era, cultural identity has become a core issue for overseas Chinese. Ancestral halls, as the root of clan ancestors, have significant value in seeking roots. On specific days, overseas Chaoshan Chinese, people from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and local Chaoshan people gather to worship their ancestors. They even build Chaoshan ancestral halls overseas and develop Chaoshan ancestral hall culture. Ancestral halls have become a link between overseas compatriots and their hometown, helping them seek their roots and pay homage to their ancestors, and facilitating overseas villagers to invest and start businesses in their hometown. This can actually be called a soft attraction for Chinese people. To attract them to travel to their hometown, it should be based on rich, diverse and unique tourism resources to let them experience different customs. The establishment of online ancestral halls and virtual exhibitions allows more overseas Chaoshan people to participate in ancestral hall activities, expanding the influence of ancestral halls. [20]

The current economic development and national strength in China have highlighted the value and importance of strengthening overseas Chinese friendship and confidence in traditional culture. In this regard, traditional ancestral halls will be revitalized with new functions.

Governments at all levels in the Chaoshan advocated the inheritance of the ancestral shrine culture characteristic of overseas Chinese hometowns, proposed to enhance the "root" memory of overseas Chinese. [21] Ancestral halls serve as an emotional bond connecting overseas compatriots with their ancestral homelands. They facilitate the overseas Chinese in tracing genealogical roots and paying homage to ancestors, and act as an intermediary to guide overseas clansmen to return to their hometowns for investment and industrial development. Such institutions can be regarded as soft magnets for ethnic Chinese. To encourage overseas Chinese to travel back to their homelands, many local authorities try to combine the different cultural characteristics of ancestral halls to build them into new bases for sinology education with "overseas Chinese" characteristics and new platforms for cultural inheritance to make them into distinctive tourism resources, enabling these overseas visitors to experience unique local customs and folk traditions, and shape the spirit of rural sages in the new era. [22] These carry forward the ancestral hall culture of overseas Chinese hometowns, and strengthen the liaison work with the descendants of well-known overseas Chinese by taking their genealogy and ancestral halls as carriers.

Meanwhile, the institutional framework of ancestral hall has undergone reforms, some scholars term it as "modernization of

ancestral hall ". For instance, the three major ancestral halls in Chaoyang today operate under a large clan structure without appointing a clan lineage heir (zongzi). Taking the Four Prefects Hall of the Xiao Clan as an example, the General Association of Xiao Clan Kinship of Suxutang, Chaoyang, Guangdong was established to oversee all daily operations. The association's president and board directors are elected from reputable Xiao clansmen. Its inaugural president, Xiao Xinan, was a Chaoyang native residing in Hong Kong. [23] Subsequent successive presidents and board directors also include overseas Xiao clansmen from HongKong or Macau and overseas, which has strengthened the cultural and communal bonds between overseas Chaoshan Chinese and their ancestral homeland.

As important inheritors of Chaoshan culture, overseas Chaoshan people have built ancestral halls overseas that are not only carriers of family memory, but also important places for cultural inheritance and education. For instance, the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan of Singapore stated in its 2025 annual report that it would vigorously push forward the construction of the Teochew Cultural Centre over the subsequent three years. The Centre is designed to evolve into a landmark institution dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Teochew culture, systematically embody the Teochew communal ethos, and carry forward fine traditional culture, while establishing a modern shared venue for community events. In addition, the clan association plans to set up a charitable organisation to nurture outstanding young talents and give back to society. It collaborates with social science universities to jointly launch the "Master Class for Teochew Business Entrepreneurs" and leverages the New Teochew Immigrant Network to facilitate the local integration of international students and new migrants. Such initiatives have won acclaim from government officials including Singapore's Minister for National Development and the Chairman of the Chinese Community Liaison Group, as well as mainstream public opinion. To mark the 96th anniversary of the association's founding, Lianhe Zaobao published congratulatory advertisements. The publication also extended its congratulations to five prominent Teochew overseas community leaders who were recipients of the 2025 National Public Service Award and the Patron of the Arts Award. [24] In the context of the new era, these ancestral halls shoulder multiple missions such as uniting overseas Chinese, inheriting culture, and educating future generations.

4. Conclusion

Over the course of several hundred years, ancestral halls established by overseas Chaoshan communities have performed pivotal functions including cultural inheritance, ethnic mutual assistance, and social dedication. Their educational value is fully manifested in both implicit moral edification and explicit formal schooling.

In the new era, the evolution of Chinese domestic society and overseas communities has reshaped the patterns of Chaoshan migration, alongside shifts in the settlement status and

social standing of elder generations of overseas Chaoshan residents. As tangible carriers of traditional culture, ancestral halls not only sustain their inherent role in passing down Chaoshan cultural heritage, but also undertake additional missions of consolidating overseas Chaoshan people's identification with and inheritance of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, such ancestral halls are required to adapt to the demands of younger generations, fully tap into their multi-dimensional functions, and exert stronger cultural cohesion among overseas groups.

Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the 'Guangdong Province Philosophy and Social Sciences Planning Project (Discipline Joint

Construction Project)' (GD23XJY80) and is one of the interim research results.

Author Contributions

Chen Xiaohong: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Li Xuanyu: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix

Ancestral halls / citang / zongci

And "every individual is responsible for the rise and fall of the nation"

Annam

Bangkok / Chinatown

Baode Hall

"being the first to worry about the world's troubles and the last to enjoy its happiness"

Caitang

Central China / Yellow River Basin Area

Chao Phraya River

Chao'an

Chaoyang

Chaoshan

Chaoshan dialect

Chaoshan opera

Chaozhou

Chaozhou Association

Chen Clan Ancestral Hall

Chen Xunian

Chenghai County / Chenghai District

Chinese clans / Zongzu

clan rules / familial precepts and teachings / family precepts and rules

clothes tomb

Congxi Gong Ancestral Hall

couplets

Dapu

祠堂 / 宗祠

天下兴亡，匹夫有责

安南

曼谷 / 唐人街

报德堂

先天下之忧而忧，后天下之乐而乐

彩塘

中原地区 / 黄河流域

湄南河

潮安

潮阳

潮汕

潮汕话

潮剧

潮州

潮州会馆

陈氏宗祠

陈迅典

澄海县 / 澄海区

宗族

族规 / 家训 / 家规

衣冠冢

从熙公祠

楹联 / 对联

大埔

Eight Immortals	八仙
filial piety	孝道
genealogies	家谱 / 族谱
Grand Marshal's Temple	大元帅庙
Guan Yu	关羽
Hanjiang River Basin	韩江流域
Hepingli / Heping Township	和平里 / 和平乡
Hu Wenhui / King of Ten Thousand Gold Oil	胡文虎 / 万金油大王
Huachiew Chalermprakiet University	华侨崇圣大学
Huafu Village	华富村
inscribed plaques / plaques	匾额
Jiayingzhou / Meizhou	嘉应州 / 梅州
Jieyang	揭阳
Jinshi	进士
Judeng / Pengzhou / Yujiao Town	居登 / 蓬洲 / 玉谿镇
Lanxiang Mansion / Lanxiang Tower	兰香楼
Lianhua Mountains	莲花山脉
Lin Clan Ancestral Hall	林氏宗祠
Lin Yurui	林雨瑞
Longhu	龙湖
Longjiangcui	龙江厝
Longyan	龙岩
Luoyang	洛央
Ma Run	马润
neo-Confucianism / neo-Confucius thought	新儒家 / 新儒学
Nanjun	南军
Outer Hall / Inner Hall	外祠 / 内祠
patriotism like thirst	爱国如渴
Patriarch Dafeng / Monk Dafeng	大峰祖师 / 大峰禅师
Phuket / Chiang Mai	普吉 / 清迈
Poh Teck Tung Foundation	华侨报德善堂
Pontianak	坤敬
Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn	诗琳通公主
private schools / traditional academies	私塾 / 义学 / 书院
Qiaolin Changfangwei / Jieyang County	乔林 / 揭阳县
Qiyuan New Village / Fengtang	淇园新村 / 枫塘
Renmei Li	仁美里

Residence of the Grand Marshal	大元帅府
reverencing the past and honoring ancestors	追远报本 / 慎终追远
Shanghua Town	上华镇
Shantou	汕头
Sidede Hall	思德堂
stone carving	石雕
Taksin Day	郑皇节 / 达信节
Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan	新加坡潮州八邑会馆
Three-Character Classic	《三字经》
Thonburi	吞武里
Thousand-Character Classic	《千字文》
Tianzhong	田中
Weng Wanda	翁万达
Weng Wanda's Study Place	翁万达读书处
Wenggong Academy / Meigang Academy	翁公书院 / 梅岗书院
wood carving	木雕
ceramic inlay	嵌瓷
Xiangqiao District	湘桥区
Xikeng	西坑
Yongshunchang Mirror Shop	咏顺昌镜庄
Zhang Junding	张军鼎
Zheng Clan Ancestral Hall	郑氏宗祠
Zheng Da / Zheng Yong	郑达 / 郑镛
Zheng Xin / King Taksin	郑信 / 达信大帝
Zheng Wulou	郑午楼
Zheng Zhiyong	郑智勇
Zhongchuan Village	中川村
Zizhengdi	资政第

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Biography



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