

Article

The Decorative Art and Evolution of the “Xuan” in Ancestral Halls of Southern Anhui

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Abstract

Numerous well-preserved ancestral halls dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties are found throughout Southern Anhui, China. Among the architectural elements in these ancestral halls, the “Xuan” plays a significant decorative role. Nevertheless, scholarly research on the “Xuan” in this region remains limited, particularly in the context of the temporal and regional evolution of its decorative art. This study examines the decorative characteristics and spatiotemporal evolution of the front Xuan of 115 ancestral halls across Southern Anhui belonging to the Ming and Qing periods. Using field surveys, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, and ArcGIS kernel density analysis, this study identifies key trends in Xuan evolution. Specifically, the findings indicate that the Chuanpeng Xuan emerged as the predominant style, replacing the earlier Renzi Xuan after the mid-Ming period. By the late Qing period, the primary structural components of the Xuan showed increasing standardization, while accessory elements showed notable diversification. During the commercial boom of the mid-Qing era, flood-dragon carvings and S-shaped short beams became especially prevalent. Spatially, kernel density analysis demonstrated a core-periphery distribution pattern: mainstream styles were concentrated in central counties, whereas a greater variety of stylistic combinations and niche forms emerged in border regions. These evolutionary patterns reflect the broader sociohistorical dynamics of this period, including ritual reforms during the Ming dynasty, the patronage of Huizhou merchants, innovations in carving tools, and wartime resource constraints. These findings provide diagnostic criteria for dating unidentified ancestral halls and offer a practical reference for the conservation of architectural heritage.

Keywords: decorative components; style evolution; spatial distribution pattern; cultural symbolism; sociohistorical drivers



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1. Introduction

As a witness to the historical evolution of civilization, traditional architecture offers insights into structural mechanics, material use strategies, and ecological principles that can inform contemporary architectural practices [1]. From a cultural perspective, traditional architecture serves as a non-textual repository of historical memory, and research in this area plays a vital role in preserving cultural diversity and fostering cultural identity [2,3]. In practical terms, the passive energy-saving strategies and regional material recycling technologies derived from traditional architecture provide ecological paradigms for green building development [4–6]. Additionally, adaptive reuse studies based on spa-

tial prototypes can effectively balance the need for historic preservation and urban renewal, promoting the living transmission of cultural heritage as well as sustainable development.

Despite the presence of a vast and diverse array of traditional architectural clusters that constitute China's rich traditional architectural heritage, the global academic and research community has largely focused on residential buildings [7–9]. In contrast, scholarly explorations of ancestral halls, which carry profound historical and cultural significance as well as distinct regional characteristics, have remained scarce [10–12]. This underscores the urgency and importance of in-depth excavation and systematic research on the artistic features and evolution patterns of ancestral hall architecture across different regions and time periods.

The Southern Anhui region of China has many distinctive and well-preserved ancestral hall buildings dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties [13]. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Southern Anhui (①, see Section Notes) contained five prefectures—Huizhou, Ningguo, Chizhou, Taiping, and Guangde—largely corresponding to the region south of the Yangtze River in present-day Anhui Province, as well as Wuyuan County in Jiangxi Province (Figure 1). The majority of these ancestral halls from Southern Anhui feature a front “Xuan” (軒), which is characterized by intricate frame designs and a rich variety of detailed components. This architectural element, which can signify clan strength, not only enhances the architectural richness of the buildings but also bears distinct temporal and regional imprints and can thus be used to document historical evolution. Furthermore, it fully showcases the decorative artistry of large wooden structures within the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui, thus holding high value from a research perspective (②, see Section Notes).

In traditional Chinese architecture, the term “Xuan” can hold two primary meanings. On one hand, it refers to a distinctive type of landscape architecture that is commonly found in classical Chinese gardens. On the other hand, it describes the spatial elements found inside traditional buildings in the ancient Jiangnan regions of China. These spaces resemble interior corridors and are typically located near the front and rear eaves of a building. Their roofs usually comprise decorative frameworks detached from the main roof surface, facilitating a more natural transition between indoor and outdoor spaces. The current paper primarily focuses on these types of “Xuan”, which are not independent architectural entities but rather a type of interstitial space attached to the main body of a building.

So far, most research on the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui has focused on the Huizhou Prefecture area, exploring aspects such as clan culture, architectural form, spatial organization, and decorative art [1]. Meanwhile, studies on Xuan have largely focused on the core areas of Jiangnan, such as Suzhou, Wuxi, and Changzhou [14]. Thus, there is limited research on the Xuan from Southern Anhui, especially with respect to the time- and region-dependent evolution of its decorative art (③, see Section Notes). However, in traditional wooden architecture, “decoration” refers not merely to superficial beautification but also has rich cultural significance and symbolic value because it reflects the social functions, cultural identity, and aesthetic pursuits of the architecture. Within the ancestral halls of the Huizhou region, decorative elements such as frame styles and detailed Xuan components not only showcase the architectural craftsmanship of that period but also serve as a vital reflection of clan culture, ritual systems, and regional characteristics.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the decorative art embodied within the frame style and detailed components of the Xuan from the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui and discuss its evolution over time and across different districts. In this study, “decorative art” refers to the aesthetics and cultural connotations conveyed through the shapes, patterns, and arrangements of architectural components. To achieve this goal, the front Xuans of 115 ancestral halls from Southern Anhui were selected for this study (④, see Section Notes).

and research methods such as field investigation, qualitative and quantitative analysis, and ArcGIS Kernel Density Analysis were adopted.

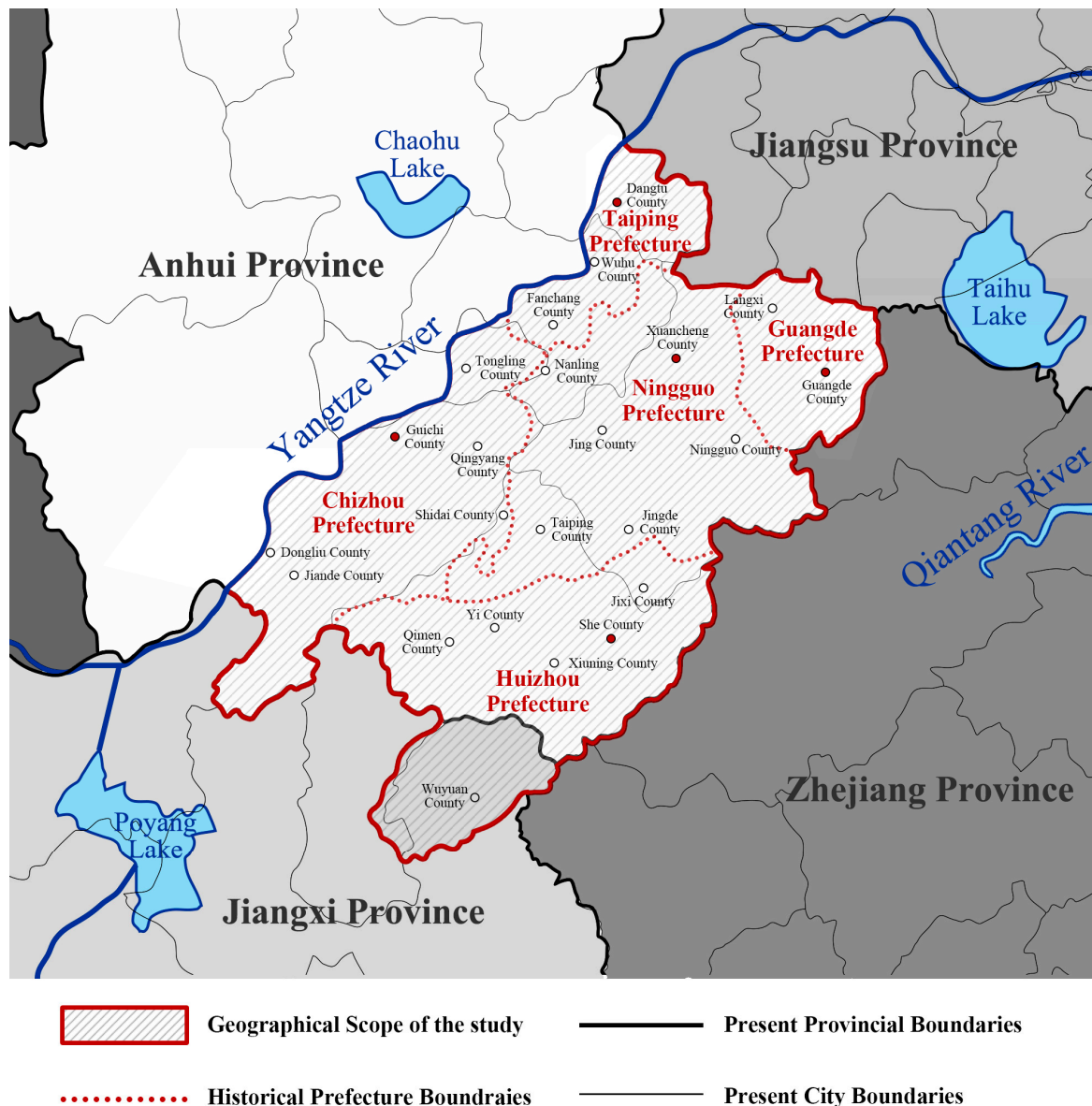


Figure 1. Location of Southern Anhui.

2. Complex and Varied Frame Styles

If one focuses on categories alone, the front Xuans of Southern Anhui ancestral halls are not complicated. Their frame styles can usually be distinguished by the shape of the rafters or the overall roof configuration on the top. The names of Xuan are also typically derived from the shapes of these rafters. For instance, the Chuanpeng Xuan (Boat-canopy Xuan) features rafters that arch upward in a circular arc, and the roof resembles the canopy of the wooden boats used in ancient China. Meanwhile, the Renzi Xuan (人-shaped Xuan) is formed by two sets of straight rafters joined at the front and the back, creating a roof shape similar to that of the Chinese character “人”. Finally, the Hejing Xuan (Crane-neck Xuan) consists of two sets of S-shaped curved rafters, resembling the neck of a red-crowned crane (Figure 2) (⑤, see Section Notes). Of these types of Xuan, Chuanpeng Xuan and Renzi Xuan are the most common. However, the components of Xuan were not static and changed constantly throughout history, leading to the formation of complex and varied

pavilion frame styles. In addition, a few ancestral halls combined different frame styles, making the front Xuan of the ancestral hall quite unique.



Figure 2. Types of “Xuan” and their rafters.

When discussing the frame styles of the Xuan found in Huizhou ancestral halls, the term “style” encompasses not only the combination and visual characteristics of architectural components but also the underlying design philosophies and cultural connotations. For instance, the Chuanpeng Xuan not only creates a distinctive visual effect but also symbolizes navigation and protection, embodying the clan’s blessings to safeguard future generations. In contrast, the Renzi Xuan metaphorically represents human dignity and clan unity. Therefore, these frame styles are not merely displays of architectural technique but also have concrete cultural symbolism.

2.1. Frame Styles

Regardless of the type of Xuan, the combination of columns and beams within the skeleton of the Xuan determines the frame style and serves as the structural support for other components. Among these components, the number of short columns and beams is the most clear and intuitive and can also clarify the scale of the Xuan. Therefore, this study focused on the number of short columns and beams in the frame of each Xuan (○Columns ○Beams). This information was then combined with the most characteristic components of the Xuan, such as the short beam, Xiangbi (decorative wooden structure resembling the head of an elephant), diagonal brace, head-to-head lions (structural component resembling two lion heads facing each other), and brackets (Ⓔ, see Section Notes) (Figure 3). Collectively, this information was used to analyze the frame styles of the front Xuan of ancestral halls from Southern Anhui. For instance, an Xuan with a framework that included two short columns and two beams, along with the presence of a short-beam component, was considered a “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” type of Xuan. Notably, if the framework also incorporated a diagonal brace component, the Xuan was further classified as “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam & Diagonal brace” (Figure 4).

2.1.1. Chuanpeng (Boat-Canopy) Xuan

The Chuanpeng Xuan is most widely used in the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui, and its frame styles are also the most complex and varied. The findings from this study showed that the most common frame style of Chuanpeng Xuan is “2Columns2Beams” combined with short-beam or Xiangbi components. The style “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” is observed within Zhou’s ancestral hall in Jixi County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty (Ⓔ, see Section Notes). Meanwhile, the style “2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi” is seen in Tangyue Bao’s ancestral hall in She County, which was also built during this period. These two variants represent the foundational styles of Chuanpeng Xuan, comprising

nearly 80% of all observed forms of Chuanpeng Xuan and exhibiting a close interconnection with other stylistic forms.

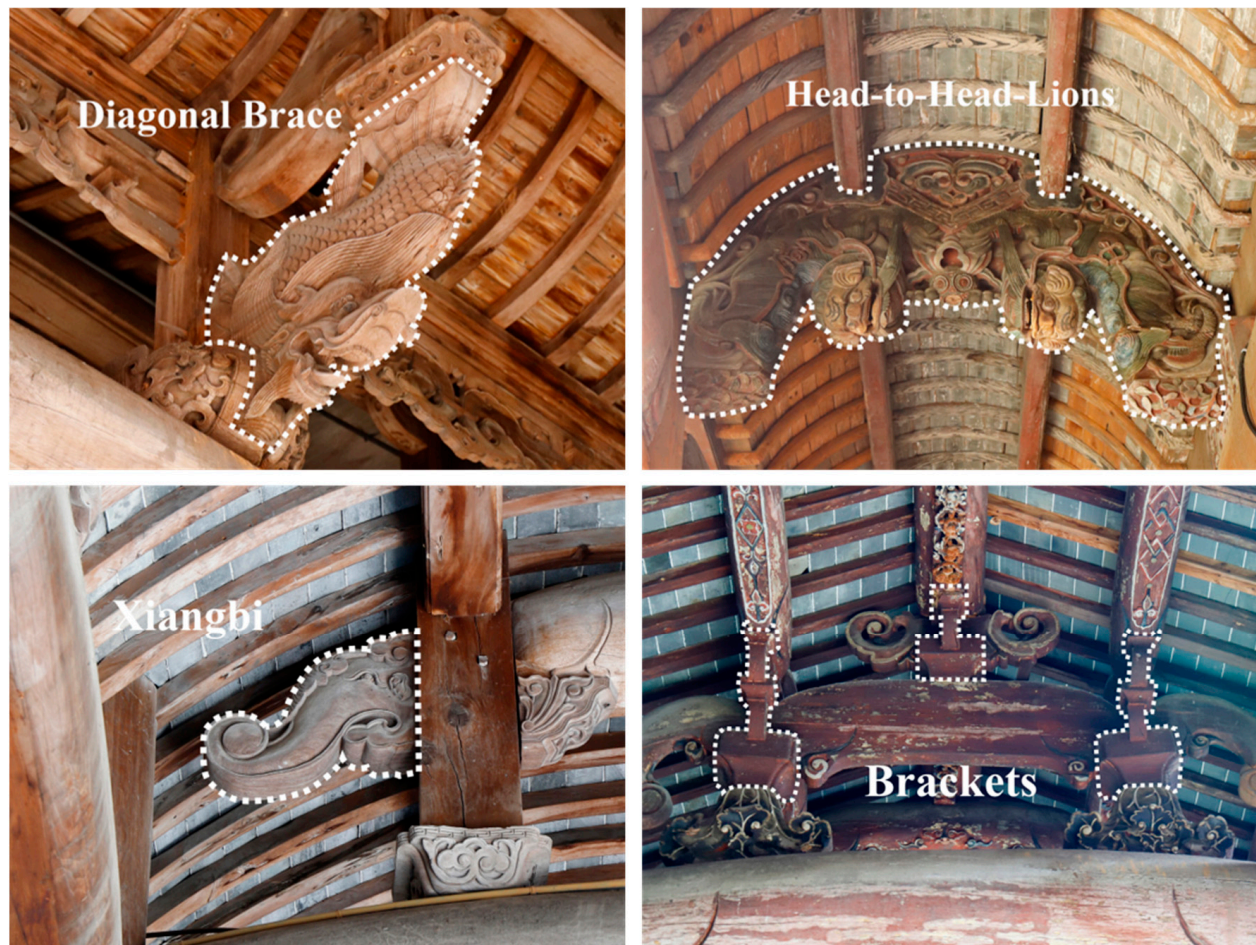


Figure 3. The most characteristic components of Xuan.

A comparative analysis of these two foundational styles can reveal the evolutionary trajectory of other related styles (Figure 4). Notably, the style “2Columns1Beams + Short-beam & Diagonal brace” is derived from the style “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” (the lower beam is replaced by a pair of diagonal braces). This style can be seen in Yangchun Fang’s ancestral hall in Wuyuan County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. Meanwhile, “2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi & Fang” is derived from “2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi” (Fang added between the columns and the beams). This style can be found in Shitan Wu’s ancestral hall in Yi County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. The style “0Columns2Beams + Xiangbi & Brackets,” derived from “2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi” (short columns replaced by brackets), can be found in Huwan Hu’s ancestral hall in Wanzhi County, which was built in the late Ming dynasty. The style “0Columns0Beams + Head-to-Head-Lions,” derived from “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” (all components replaced by the head-to-head lions), is present in Zhang’s ancestral hall in Guichi County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. The scale of the styles “3Columns2Beams + Short-beam” and “3Columns1Beam + Short-beam & Diagonal brace” is much greater than that of the styles they were derived from (“2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” and “2Columns1Beams + Short-beam & Diagonal brace”) by expanding the scale and adding one short column. However, these styles only appear in Wangkou Yu’s ancestral hall in Wuyuan County, which was built in the mid-Qing dynasty.

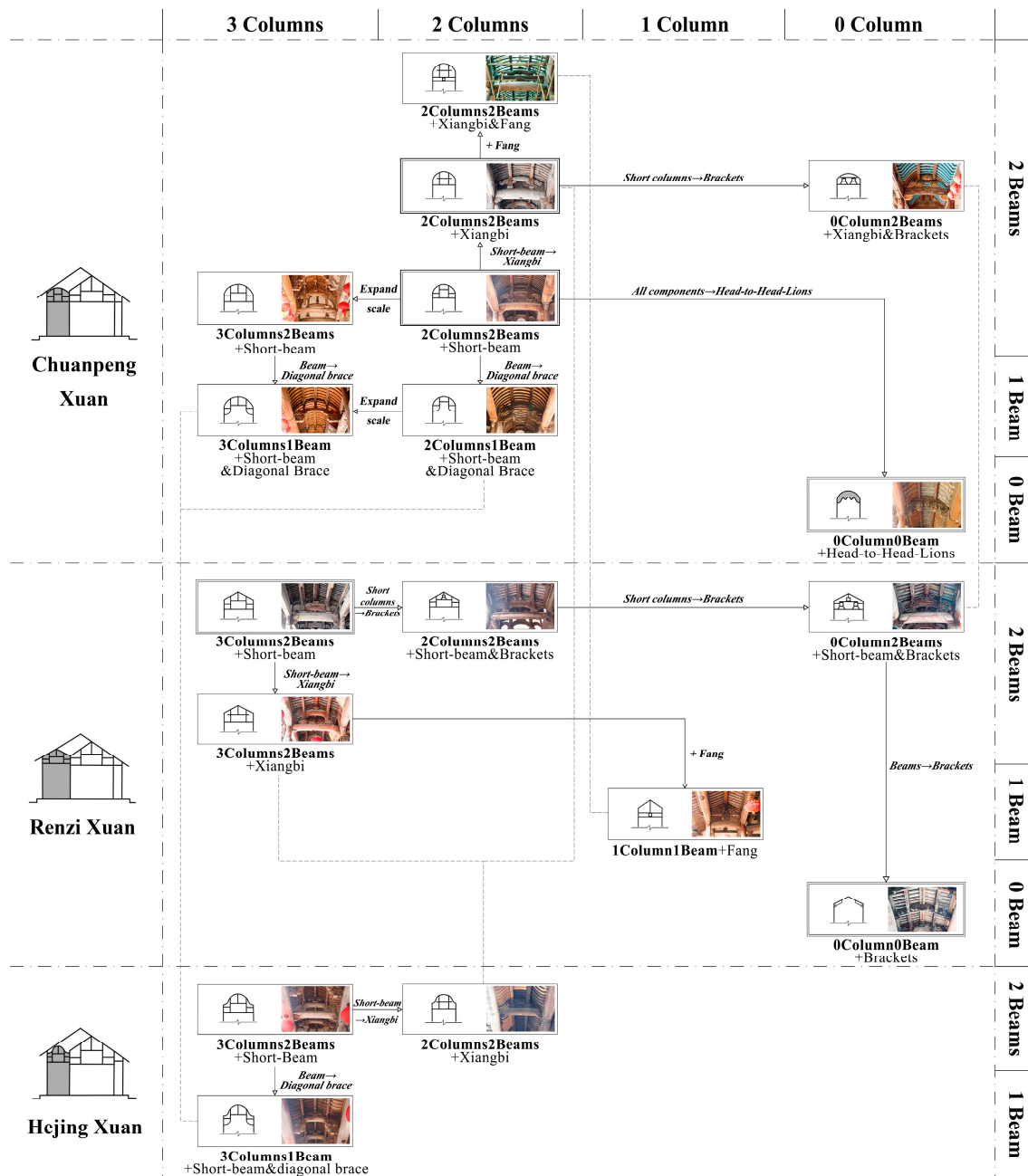


Figure 4. Classification and designation of the frame styles of different ancestral hall Xuans from Southern Anhui based on the "OColumnOBeam" framework.

2.1.2. Renzi (人-Shaped) Xuan

Although Renzi Xuan is not as widely used as Chuanpeng Xuan, its frame styles are also quite complicated with respect to the changes in short columns and beams (Figure 4). The basic frame style of Renzi Xuan is "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam," as exemplified by Cui's Sanjia ancestral hall in Taiping County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. The style "3Columns2Beams + Xiangbi" is derived from the style "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam" (short beam replaced by Xiangbi) and can be found in Hong's ancestral hall in She County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. Meanwhile, "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam & Brackets" is derived from "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam" (the middle short column replaced by brackets) and can be seen in Xu's ancestral hall in Jixi County, which was built in the early Ming dynasty. The style "0Columns2Beams + Short-beam & Brackets" is also derived from the basic framework by replacing two more

short columns with brackets, as seen in Xu's ancestral hall in She County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. The style "0Columns0Beams + Brackets" typically appears in secondary or auxiliary structures such as extra series (⑧, see Section Notes) and diagonal components are utilized herein to transfer loads to the brackets, as seen in Hang's ancestral hall in Yi County (built in the mid-Ming dynasty). Notably, the style "1Columns1Beams + fang" is derived from the style "3Columns2Beams + Xiangbi" by significantly reducing the scale via a reduction in the number of columns and beams. This style is observed in Dejing Wang's ancestral hall in Jixi County, which was built in the mid-Qing dynasty.

2.1.3. Hejing (Crane-Neck) Xuan

The Hejing variant of Xuan is relatively rare in Southern Anhui. Consequently, its frame styles exhibit a comparatively simpler design (Figure 4). The analysis of Chuanpeng Xuan and Renzi Xuan indicates that "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam" is a relatively basic style of Xuan. The style "3Columns1Beams + Short-beam & Diagonal brace" is derived from this basic style (lower beam replaced by a pair of diagonal braces), and both styles appear at Hong's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County, which was built in the mid-Qing dynasty. The scale of the style "2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi," derived from "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam," is much reduced due to the reduction in the middle short column. This style can be found in Ziwu Song's ancestral hall in Xiuning County, which was built in the late Ming dynasty.

2.2. Combination of Different Frame Styles

In Southern Anhui, different frame styles of Xuan can often be observed in the same ancestral hall. Two key examples are Hong's ancestral hall and Wangkou Yu's ancestral hall, both of which are in Wuyuan County and were built in the mid-Qing dynasty. Among the 115 ancestral halls surveyed in Southern Anhui in this study, the majority (89, accounting for 77.4%) contained a single Xuan frame style, while only a small proportion (26, accounting for 22.6%) contained a combination of different frame styles, which made the spatial experience of the ancestral hall richer.

Different frame styles can be combined using two main strategies. Most commonly, the two frame styles in the mid and side series of the front Xuan of the ancestral hall are combined (Figure 5a), and this is usually seen with the Chuanpeng Xuan. Common style combinations include "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam" with "2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi," "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam" with "2Columns1Beams + Short-beam & Diagonal brace," "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam" with "0Columns0Beams + Head-to-Head-Lions," and "0Columns2Beams + Xiangbi & Brackets" with "0Columns0Beams + Head-to-Head-Lions." For example, the front Xuan of Taihe Zhang's ancestral hall in Guichi County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty, combines the styles "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam" and "0Columns0Beams + Head-to-Head-Lions." The head-to-head lion component is complex in shape and exquisitely carved, reflecting the importance of central space through the changes in frame styles.

The second approach involves the use of different frame styles in the extra series and the mid and side series (Figure 5b). This approach is typically used for Renzi Xuan and Hejing Xuan. One notable example is the front Xuan of Hong's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County, which was constructed during the mid-Qing dynasty. Here, the frame style of the extra series adopts a "3Columns1Beam + Short-beam & Diagonal brace" configuration, while the mid and side series feature a "3Columns2Beams + Short-beam" design. The diagonal brace is carved into the shape of a flood dragon, which is quite delicate. The use of such a unique design not only makes the ancestral hall more solemn and majestic but also highlights the historical prominence of the Hong clan.

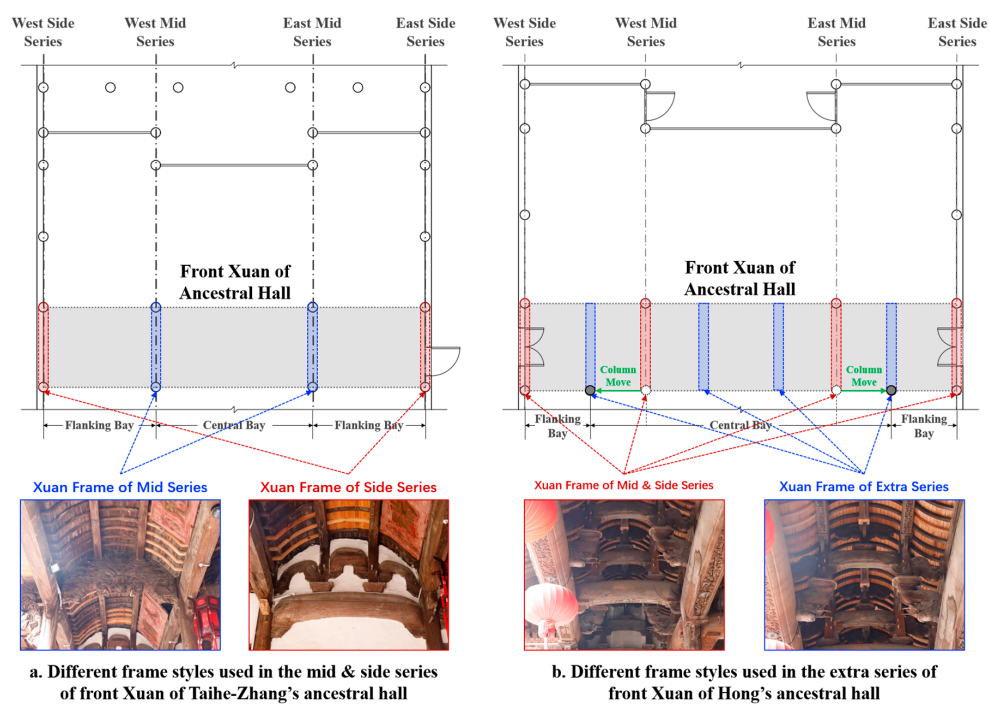


Figure 5. Two strategies to combine different frame styles in the same ancestral hall in Southern Anhui.

3. Multiple and Unified Components

3.1. Main Components

The main components in the front Xuan of the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui refer to the components that are indispensable within the frame and act as important structural supports. These mainly consist of short columns and beams, which can be classified according to their modeling characteristics (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of the main components found in the ancestral hall Xuans of Southern Anhui.

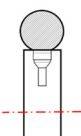
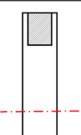
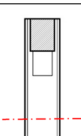
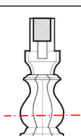
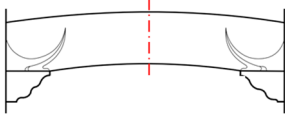
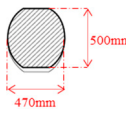
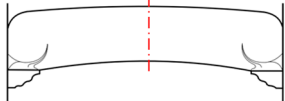
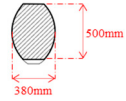
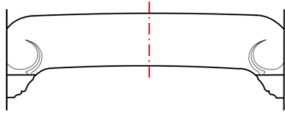
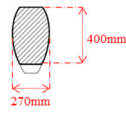
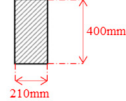
Type	Facade	Section	Representative Cases		
			Photographs	Name	Period, District
Short Column				Zheng's ancestral hall	Late Ming Dynasty, Yi County
				Tangyue Bao's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Yi County
				Huang's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Xiuning County
				Ye's ancestral hall	Early Ming Dynasty, Yi County

Table 1. Cont.

Type	Facade	Section	Representative Cases			
			Photographs	Name	Period, District	
Round and robust Donggua beam				Taihu Wu's ancestral hall	Late Ming Dynasty, Yi County	
Tall and slender Donggua beam				Hong's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Taiping County	
Beam	Moon beam analogous to that depicted in the “Yingzao Fashi”				Nanping Cheng's ancestral hall	Late Ming Dynasty, Yi County
	Straight beam				Nanping Ye's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Yi County

Short columns are small columns on the beam that do not touch the ground. Usually, their upper portion directly supports the purlin, while the lower portion falls into the Pingpandou on the beam. From an overall aesthetic perspective, Southern Anhui ancestral halls typically have straight short columns, with their cross-sectional profiles primarily featuring round or square shapes (including square columns with architraves). In addition, a select number of short columns crafted in the shape of vases, boasting intricate and delicate carvings, can also be observed. These short columns are highly decorative and make the space more elegant. For instance, the short columns in Ye's ancestral hall, located in She County, are ingeniously designed to resemble an Eight-Arris vase, while those in Hong's ancestral hall (She County) and Cheng's ancestral hall (Qimen County) are crafted to look like square vases [15]. The variety of short-column designs within the Xuan framework is not overly complex. Notably, the ancestral halls featuring round columns predominantly date back to an earlier period. These were largely constructed between the mid-Ming and early Qing dynasties and are primarily found in the southern parts of Southern Anhui. Conversely, ancestral halls incorporating square-section columns were erected between the late Ming and late Qing dynasties and exhibit a more widespread distribution across the entirety of Southern Anhui.

The beams in Xuan frames support short columns and transfer the load of the roof downward through their ends [16]. From the perspective of appearance, the beams found in Southern Anhui are arched slightly upward and show an outward bulge [17]. Therefore, they are usually called moon beams or Donggua beams. In addition, a few ancestral halls also feature straight beams. One key example is Nanping Ye's ancestral hall in She County, which dates back to the mid-Ming dynasty. Based on their facade morphology and cross-sectional proportions, moon beams can be further classified into three distinct categories. The round and robust Donggua beam, characterized by an arched facade and a circular cross-section, exhibits a height-to-width ratio approaching 1:1. The carvings adorning the ends of these beams are notably wide, elongated, and relatively crude from an execution standpoint. Meanwhile, the tall and slender Donggua beam also features an arched facade, but its cross-section is oval in shape, and it possesses a height-to-width ratio nearing 3:2. The carvings on the ends of these beams are more compact and display a refined level

of craftsmanship. Finally, the moon beam analogous to that depicted in the “Yingzao Fashi (营造法式)” contains a straight midsection with curved extremities. The carvings at the ends of these beams are nearly circular and are adorned with intricate, exquisite patterns [18].

3.2. Accessory Components

In the architecture of the ancestral hall of the Xuans of Southern Anhui, accessory components not only serve as additional elements for structural connections but also as rich carriers of cultural symbolism and aesthetic expression. Through their unique shapes, craftsmanship, and spatial arrangements, these components integrate practical functions with decorative arts, acting as embodiments of technical regional traditions and cultural lineage and identities. Compared to the designs of primary structural components (such as short columns and beams), which are highly consistent, the forms and decorative details of accessory components exhibit greater variability across temporal and regional contexts. Therefore, their evolutionary trajectories directly reflect the pathways of technological diffusion and networks of cultural interaction.

The accessory components examined in this study can be divided into three core categories: (1) structurally integrated decorative components, such as diagonal braces and brackets; (2) spatial transition decorative components, including Dingtou arches and Queti; and (3) symbolic decorative components, such as Xiangbi and short beams (Table 2).

Table 2. Classification of accessory components found in the ancestral hall Xuans of Southern Anhui.

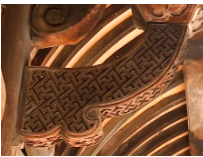
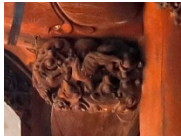
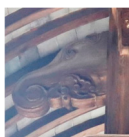
Type	Facade	Representative Cases		
		Photographs	Name	Time, District
Diagonal brace	Arc-shaped		Yangchun Fang’s ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Wuyuan County
	Flood-dragon-shaped		Xichong Yu’s ancestral hall	Mid-Qing Dynasty, Wuyuan County
Dingtou arch	Hollow-shaped		Huang’s ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Xiuning County
	Centrally decorated		Xu’s ancestral hall	Late Ming Dynasty, Yi County
	Arch eye-eliminated		Chifeng Pan’s ancestral hall	Late Qing Dynasty, Wuyuan County

Table 2. Cont.

Type	Facade	Representative Cases		
		Photographs	Name	Time, District
Queti	Overall sculpture molding		Longchuan Hu's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Jixi County
	Flat engraving pattern		Hong's ancestral hall	Mid-Qing Dynasty, Taiping County
Short-beam	Horizontal moon beam		Hang's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Yi County
	C-shaped tilted beam		Hang's ancestral hall	Late Ming Dynasty, Yi County
	S-shaped twisted beam		Baigong's ancestral hall	Mid-Qing Dynasty, Jixi County
	Xiangbi-shaped beam		Wangkou Yu's ancestral hall	Mid-Qing Dynasty, Wuyuan County
Xiangbi	Curls outwards		Tangyue Bao's ancestral hall	Mid-Ming Dynasty, Yi County
	Curls inwards		Huang's ancestral hall	Early Qing Dynasty, Wuyuan County

Diagonal braces serve as diagonal support elements within architectural structures. In the front Xuan of ancestral halls located in Southern Anhui, these braces are typically employed in pairs, effectively substituting for the supportive function of beams. Based on their morphological characteristics, diagonal braces can be categorized as arc-shaped and flood-dragon-shaped diagonal braces. Of these, the arc-shaped diagonal brace exhibits a relatively straightforward structural design. Its facade assumes an arcuate form, embellished with various decorative motifs, including floral, botanical, geometric, and other intricate patterns. For example, the diagonal brace of Yangchun Fang's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County is densely covered with the “卍” swastika pattern, which signifies good fortune, happiness, and longevity [19]. In contrast, the flood-dragon-shaped diagonal brace is exquisite in both shape and decoration. The dragon body and fish tail are made

using a complete piece of wood, and the dragon body is inserted into the column while the fish tail supports the short column. This brace is exquisitely designed and meticulously carved. The flood-dragon motif serves a dual symbolic purpose in ancestral halls—it not only embodies the fervent aspiration for the ancestral edifice to remain impervious to the ravages of fire, but is also a testament to the clan's pride in having nurtured exceptionally talented individuals throughout its history.

The Dingtou arch and Queti have been used independently and even in conjunction with each other in the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui. These elements are typically located at the intersections between beams and columns, as well as between columns and purlins, fulfilling a supplementary supportive function. Compared with the Dingtou arch of the Song dynasty's "Yingzao Fashi," the Dingtou arch found in the Xuan of ancestral halls in Southern Anhui shows the most obvious difference around the eye of the arch [20]. There are three main types of Dingtou arches. First, the hollow-shaped variant, distinguished most prominently by its hollow arch eye, can be found in Huang's ancestral hall in Xiuning County, which was built in the mid-Ming dynasty. Second, the centrally decorated type, characterized primarily by the localized embellishments at the arch eye, is seen in Xu's ancestral hall in She County (late Ming dynasty). Third, the arch-eye-eliminated form, notable for the dissolution of the boundary between the arch's body and eye, resulting solely in a flat Dou, is exemplified by Zhaifeng Pan's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County (late Qing dynasty) [21].

Although the Queti exhibit some diversity with respect to shape, the disparities in the selection and crafting of their decorative patterns are more pronounced. The ancestral halls constructed in Southern Anhui from the early to late Ming dynasty are characterized by the incorporation of Queti, which exhibit both naturalistic and sculptural qualities. Following the late Ming dynasty, while the overall shape of the Queti underwent gradual simplification, there were significant advancements in the thematic content and carving techniques employed in their decorative patterns, representing a paradigm shift. A prime example of this evolution can be observed in Hongkeng Hong's ancestral hall in She County, which was erected during the mid-Qing dynasty [22].

Within the structural framework of the Xuan from Southern Anhui, short beams and Xiangbi occupy relatively peripheral positions and are typically located outside the short columns. Short beams connect disparate columns, thereby contributing to Xuan's structural integrity. The Xiangbi, meanwhile, is distinguished by its unique form and intricate patterns, enhancing the spatial ambience from an aesthetic perspective. Based on their shapes, short beams can be categorized into four distinct types. The first type is the horizontal moon beam type, which is characterized by its horizontal orientation and has a gently arched profile that is reminiscent of a moonbeam. It also contains curved carvings that adorn both sides. One key example of this beam type is found in Hang's ancestral hall in Yi County, constructed during the mid-Ming dynasty. The second type is the C-shaped tilted variant that is primarily defined by components tilted in a manner akin to the shape of the letter "C," and it is seen in Hong's ancestral hall in She County (late Ming dynasty). The third type, the S-shaped twisted type, features a component that is inclined in the shape of the letter "S," exemplified by Baigong's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County (mid-Qing dynasty). Finally, the Xiangbi-shaped type is characterized by its resemblance to an elephant's trunk and can be found in Wangkou Yu's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County (mid-Qing dynasty).

In addition, the Xiangbi can be classified further according to the details of the curl at its end. In one form, the end of the Xiangbi curls outwards, as seen in Tangyue Bao's ancestral hall in She County (mid-Ming dynasty). In another form, the end of the Xiangbi

curls inwards. A prime example of this can be found in Huang's ancestral hall in Wuyuan County, which was built in the early Qing dynasty.

4. Evolution Across Time and Different Districts

The front Xuan of the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui exhibits a high degree of decorative sophistication, which is evident in both the stylistic attributes of the hall's framework and the intricate detailing of its components. Moreover, the stylistic evolution and component variations in the Xuan not only mirror the prevailing aesthetic and cultural trends of their respective eras but also demonstrate distinct patterns of regional distribution.

4.1. Evolution with Time

4.1.1. The Decline of Renzi Xuan and the Development of a Mainstream Frame Style

Among the ancestral halls built relatively early in Southern Anhui, most have a front Xuan that adopts the Renzi or Chuanpeng style. Cui's Sanjia ancestral hall in Taiping County and Han's ancestral hall in Yi County, both constructed during the mid-Ming dynasty, employ the Renzi Xuan architectural style. In contrast, Huang's ancestral hall in Xiuning County and Longchuan Hu's ancestral hall in Jixi County, both also built in the mid-Ming dynasty, adopt the Chuanpeng Xuan architectural style. Notably, an overwhelming majority of the ancestral halls constructed during the period spanning from the late Ming dynasty to the late Qing dynasty predominantly adopted the Chuanpeng Xuan architectural style instead of the Renzi Xuan style. This was likely because the former enjoyed greater popularity and more widespread acceptance among the populace during that era, as it created a space characterized by softness and aesthetic appeal. In contrast, the Renzi Xuan showed a greater diversity of components and contained more intricate structural configurations.

Interestingly, most forms of Xuan with extensive frame styles were built between the mid-Ming and mid-Qing dynasties. This is because, during this period, there were relatively fewer restrictions on folk ancestor worship practices, spurring an expansion of clan power and triggering a boom in ancestral hall construction [23]. In general, the evolution of Xuan frame styles in ancestral halls across Southern Anhui during the Ming and Qing eras exhibited a phase of concentrated emergence, eventually leading to the establishment of a dominant frame style. This led to the widespread adoption of the Chuanpeng Xuan as the principal type of Xuan, with "2Columns2Beams + Short-beam/Xiangbi" emerging as the main frame configuration.

4.1.2. Standardization of Main Components and Diversification of Accessory Components

As shown in Table 3, during the "ancestral hall boom" of the mid-Ming to mid-Qing dynasties, the main components of Xuan evolved alongside the frame styles. Especially during the Qing dynasty, wealth accumulation among Huizhou merchants bolstered the refinement of carving techniques. Meanwhile, innovations in crafting tools led to the emergence of techniques such as openwork carving and multi-layered relief, enhancing the diversity of architectural components. Through the continuous exploration of construction techniques, vase-shaped short columns and curved or straight beams were produced. However, during the late Qing dynasty, warfare and economic decline led to a reduction in the scale of construction, and decorative elements tended toward a pattern of standardization. This shift reflected a pragmatic shift under resource constraints, and functionality was prioritized over elaborate ornamentation. During this period, overly complex component forms were avoided due to the time-consuming and labor-intensive construction process, as well as the difficulty of maintenance and potential replacement. At the same time, overly simple component forms were no longer adopted because they failed to adequately

showcase the clan's strength and status. The short columns produced subsequently were mostly square in shape, while the beams were mostly moon beams (similar to “Yingzao Fashi”) with smooth curves and more reasonable height-to-width ratios.

Table 3. Correlation between the decorative evolution of the Xuan and sociopolitical and technological factors.

Time Period	Typical Decorative Feature Changes	Social Background	Sociopolitical/Technological Factors
Mid-Ming Dynasty	Standardization of frameworks	Economic prosperity and social stability drove the first wave of ancestral hall construction. Craftsmanship transitioned from imitating “Yingzao Fashi” toward developing localized structural systems.	Policy support: Jiajing-era ritual reforms legalized ancestor worship, increasing clan organization and construction demands. Technological developments: Timber framing techniques were explored on a region-specific level.
Late Ming Dynasty	Diversification of components	The continued construction boom fostered technical specialization. Southern Anhui merchants accumulated capital, which was injected into architectural ornamentation.	Relaxation of artisan registration: Increased mobility of craftsmen facilitated cross-regional knowledge exchange. Functional refinement: Localized adaptations of structural components occurred.
Mid-Qing Dynasty	Development of more elaborate carvings	The economic peak under the patronage of merchants from Southern Anhui drove decorative rivalry. Social competition among clans led to the development of ornate designs.	Tool innovation: Advanced carving techniques were introduced. Commercial influence: Ostentatious aesthetics reflected wealth display.
Late Qing Dynasty	Simplification of components	Resource scarcity occurred due to wars and economic decline. There was a pragmatic shift toward cost-effective construction.	Western technological impact: Mechanized production reduced reliance on handcrafted decorations. Functional prioritization: Overly complex designs were abandoned due to maintenance challenges.

Although the diversification of accessory components in ancestral halls was intricately linked to the standardization of the main structural elements, it is imperative to consider the unique individual differences among ancestral halls as well as the distinctive characteristics of various clans. The enhancement of the decorative aspects of accessory components may have well represented the optimal approach for addressing these considerations, allowing for the expression of clan identity and hall individuality while maintaining overall structural coherence. Beyond surface ornamentation, accessory components also functioned as carriers of personalized expression. Elements such as the flood-dragon-shaped diagonal brace, Dingtou arch, and distinct short beams all represent experimental approaches to the decorative treatment of accessory components within the Xuan frame.

4.2. Evolution Across Different Districts

This section delves into the regional differentiation of decorative art in the ancestral halls across Southern Anhui from the perspectives of style and components. In this study, the key decorative features of the Xuan frame style and its detailed components

were quantified and subsequently correlated with the geographical coordinates of the ancestral halls. This information was then visualized through kernel density analysis using ArcGIS software. The specific steps were as follows. Initially, research samples were selected, and the geographical and spatial data for each ancestral hall were recorded. The spatial attribute data for these samples were extracted using the Planning Cloud website <http://www.guihuayun.com> (accessed on 18 June 2025). Using ArcGIS 10.8, a geographic information database was established based on the decorative art characteristics of the Xuan found in ancestral halls across Southern Anhui. Subsequently, the “Kernel Density Analysis” tool in ArcGIS 10.9 was employed to measure the density distribution of different decorative art features across different regions of Southern Anhui. The area unit was set to SQUARE_MAP_UNITS by default, and the PLANAR method was adopted to generate a kernel density map. Finally, the symbol system of the map was adjusted to better illustrate the data distribution characteristics. The natural breaks (Jenks) classification method was selected, including nine categories, and a gradient color band ranging from white to black was chosen for representation. The findings revealed a regional distribution pattern of decorative art in ancestral Xuan halls across Southern Anhui, characterized by a widespread presence of mainstream styles and a concentrated presence of niche styles in peripheral areas.

With regard to frame style, the uniform frame style of Xuan and the prevalence of Chuanpeng Xuan were quantified and analyzed. Figure 4 shows that ancestral halls with the same Xuan frame style on the front side are distributed throughout Southern Anhui. Such ancestral halls are found most commonly in Yi County and She County, followed by the border of Jixi and She County, Qimen County, and Wuyuan County. However, the ancestral halls with combinations of different Xuan frame styles are largely concentrated in three areas: the border of She and Jixi County; the border common to Guichi, Qingyang, Taiping, and Jing County; and Wuyuan County. Notably, the distribution characteristics of the common styles of Chuanpeng Xuan, namely, “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam” and “2Columns2Beams + Xiangbi,” are consistent with those of ancestral halls containing one Xuan frame style. Such designs are widely prevalent in Southern Anhui. In contrast, the niche styles of Chuanpeng Xuan, such as “2Columns1Beam + Short-beam & Diagonal brace,” “0Columns0Beam + Head-to-Head lions,” and “0Column2Beams + Brackets,” show a similar distribution pattern as ancestral halls containing various combinations of Xuan frame styles, forming clusters on the outskirts of Southern Anhui (Figure 6).

As for detailed components, the evolution of components such as beams, Dingtong arches, and short beams appeared to be more time-dependent. In this study, short columns and Xiangbi were analyzed as key features for quantitative analysis. Figure 5 shows that circular-shaped short columns are mainly distributed in the southern region of Southern Anhui (the ancient Huizhou Prefecture), with the most concentrated distribution found in She County, followed by Qimen County, the border of Wuyuan and Xuning County, and the border of Jixi and She County. Meanwhile, square-shaped short columns can be found in every district of Southern Anhui. These elements show the highest distribution in Yi County and the border of She and Jixi County, followed by Qimen County; Wuyuan County; the border of Qingyang, Taiping, and Jing County; and She County. Meanwhile, the distribution of outward Xiangbi curls is consistent with the distribution of the common Chuanpeng Xuan style. In contrast, the distribution patterns of inward Xiangbi curls are similar to those of circular-shaped short columns, showing aggregation in the outskirts regions (Figure 7).

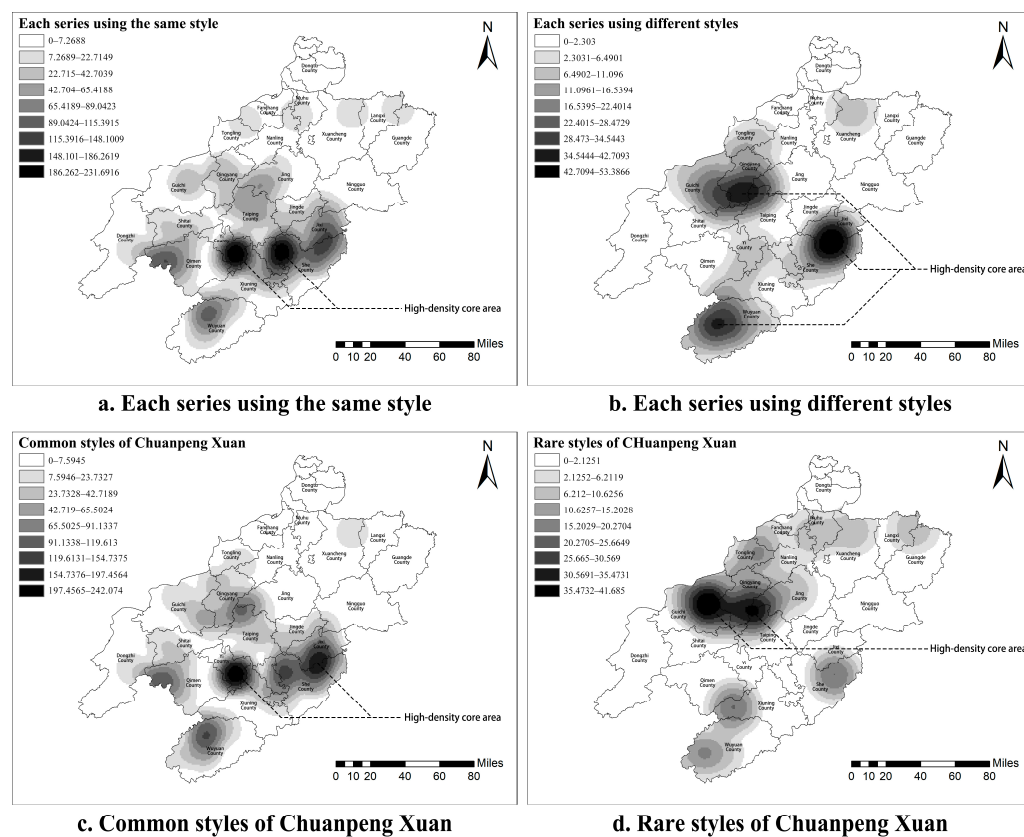


Figure 6. Analysis of the regional distribution of key features of Xuan frame styles.

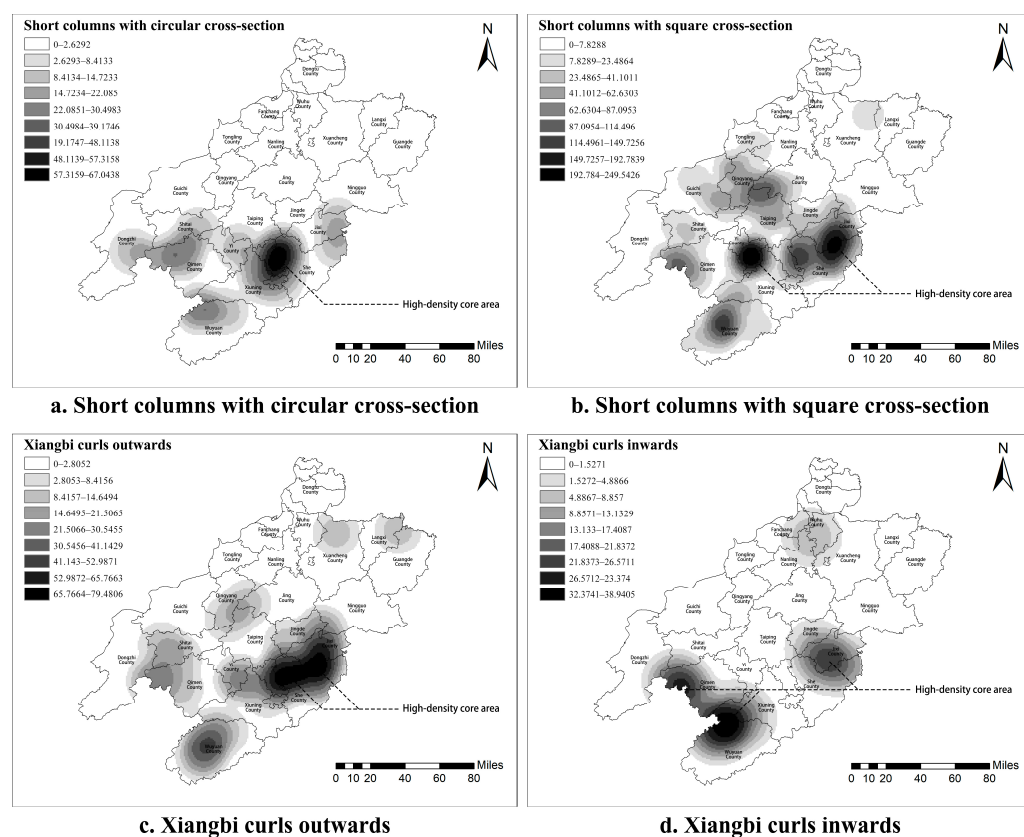


Figure 7. Analysis of the regional distribution of the key detailed components of Xuan.

5. Conclusions

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the spatiotemporal evolution of Xuan styles and decorative art across 115 Ming-Qing ancestral halls in Southern Anhui, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) **Dominant style transition:** The mid-Ming period marked a pivotal shift in Xuan frame styles, with Chuanpeng Xuan emerging as the dominant architectural form, replacing the previously prevalent Renzi Xuan.
- (2) **Structural component standardization:** The main structural components exhibited a clear tendency towards standardization by the late Qing dynasty. This resulted in the predominance of square short columns and moon beams with refined curvature and optimized height-to-width ratios.
- (3) **Accessory component diversification:** In contrast to structural components, accessory components displayed diversification and became more elaborate, particularly during the commercial boom of the mid-Qing period. This era witnessed the proliferation of intricate elements such as flood-dragon-shaped diagonal braces and S-shaped short beams.
- (4) **Core-periphery spatial distribution:** Spatial analysis revealed a distinct core-periphery distribution pattern of Xuan styles. Mainstream frame styles (especially Chuanpeng Xuan types such as “2Columns2Beams + Short-beam/Xiangbi”) and uniform stylistic applications were densely concentrated in the core counties of Southern Anhui. Conversely, diverse frame style combinations within single halls and the use of niche or complex accessory components tended to cluster in the peripheral border regions.
- (5) **Socio-historical drivers of evolution:** The evolution of Xuan decorative art appears to be correlated with key socio-historical factors. The Jiajing-era ritual reforms enabled ancestral hall proliferation, patronage of Huizhou merchants drove mid-Qing decorative elaboration, innovations in carving tools facilitated the fabrication of intricate accessory components, and resource constraints during wartime in the late Qing dynasty prompted structural simplification and ornament standardization.

Based on these findings, it can be deduced that the substantial wooden edifices of ancestral halls in Southern Anhui experienced phases of intensive development, leading to the formation of diverse architectural styles. Furthermore, there was a clear demarcation in the dissemination of woodworking techniques between the central and peripheral regions of Southern Anhui. The research methods employed in this study, including field investigations, combined qualitative and quantitative analysis, and ArcGIS kernel density analysis, are scientifically rigorous and replicable. Thus, they can also be applied to structures in other regions with similar cultural backgrounds. The study revealed the spatiotemporal evolution patterns of architectural decorative arts, providing a theoretical framework that is not only relevant to Southern Anhui but could also guide the preservation of traditional architecture and the design of modern buildings across the Jiangnan region and beyond. Hence, both the methodologies and findings of this study have broad applicability.

While this study establishes diagnostic benchmarks for dating ancestral halls based on the Xuan and documents the evolution of Xuan components across time and different regions, the intricate symbolic language accompanying the aesthetics of ritual wooden architecture warrants further decoding. Future work could explore the semantic meanings, auspicious metaphors, and cosmological concepts embodied by specific motifs and structural forms within the Xuan framework, potentially correlating them with clan genealogies, local folklore, and ritual practices. Notably, the decorative typologies and evolutionary patterns documented in this study provide a robust framework for practical conservation. These findings can directly inform restoration projects by enabling the accurate replication of period-specific components and styles. Beyond conservation, this repository of

traditional forms offers inspiration for contemporary architectural designs with cultural resonance, particularly for ceremonial or culturally significant new buildings.

Notes

- ① “Southern Anhui” is the abbreviation for Wannan Province. Although the five prefectures (Huizhou, Ningguo, Chizhou, Taiping, and Guangde) within its jurisdiction were established in the 5th year of the Xianfeng reign during the Qing dynasty (1855) and were officially designated as such in the 34th year of the Guangxu reign (1908), the administrative divisions remained relatively stable during earlier periods. During the Ming dynasty, these regions were part of the Southern Metropolitan Region, while in the early Qing dynasty, they fell under the jurisdiction of the Anhui Provincial Administration Commissioner of Jiangnan Province. Therefore, “Southern Anhui” in this study refers to the districts of Huizhou Prefecture, Ningguo Prefecture, Chizhou Prefecture, Taiping Prefecture, and Guangde Prefecture during the Ming and Qing dynasties [24].
- ② The ancestral hall is a place where clans, bound by paternal blood ties, worship their ancestors daily and hold regular rituals [25]. The ancestral halls in Southern Anhui are typically composed of individual buildings that have a front hall, a central hall, and a rear hall. The central hall is the site of the most important rituals, making it the core building of the ancestral hall. The Xuan (a type of attached space) is used in the transitional areas in the front, central, and rear halls. The Xuan is most commonly seen in the central hall, where it not only adds spatial depth but also imparts certain flexibility through its strong decorative elements. The decorative art of Xuan is comprised of the frame style and detailed components, which collectively constitute its form [26].
- ③ Academic research on ancestral halls in Southern Anhui has largely focused on the Huizhou Prefecture area, with an emphasis on clan culture, architectural style, spatial organization, and decorative art [27–29]. Meanwhile, most studies on the Xuan itself focus on core areas in southern China, such as Suzhou, Wuxi, and Changzhou [30]. In contrast, studies on the Xuan in Southern Anhui, and especially the decorative art and temporal evolution of the Xuan, are fairly limited.
- ④ Through field research conducted at 123 cultural relic protection units (provincial level or above) focusing on ancestral halls in Southern Anhui, it was discovered that among various spatial configurations, the Xuan located before the central hall was the most prevalent (115 sites), accounting for 93.5% of the total number of ancestral halls surveyed. This was followed by the Xuan located before the rear hall (51 sites), the Xuan located after the central hall (33 sites), the Xuan positioned before the front hall (26 sites), and the Xuan positioned after the front hall (15 sites). As a focal point of the front hall, the Xuan also exhibited strong representativeness. Therefore, this study focused on ancestral halls where the Xuan is located before the central hall.
- ⑤ There is some debate among scholars regarding the terminology that should be used to describe the type of Xuan found in the ancestral halls of Southern Anhui. For example, Zhu has referred to them as “Juanpeng” or “Renzipeng” [21]. However, Yao used the terms “Chuanpeng Xuan,” “Renzipeng Xuan,” and “Ejing Xuan” [31]. In the “Yingzao Fayuan,” apart from Renzi Xuan, which is not documented, the other two types of Xuan are denoted as “Chuanpeng Xuan” and “Hejing Xuan.” According to the author’s interview with Cheng Huiping, General Manager of Huangshan Damu Ancient Architecture Design Co., Ltd., located in Huangshan City, Anhui Province, China and based on the records regarding the Chuanpeng Xuan and Hejing Xuan in

the Yingzao Fayan, this study categorized the three main types of Xuan in ancestral halls as Chuanpeng Xuan, Renzi Xuan, and Hejing Xuan.

- ⑥ Xiangbi is among the most representative decorative components seen in Southern Anhui, and it is usually located on the outer side of short columns. This component is shaped like an elephant's trunk, with beautiful and curled lines at its ends. The diagonal brace, in traditional Chinese architecture, typically refers to a diagonal structural component that provides support. It is commonly found beneath the eaves of buildings. In the Xuan of ancestral halls in Southern Anhui, diagonal braces function as crucial connectors, linking the shorter columns to the main columns and thereby playing a pivotal structural role. Head-to-head lions are commonly found in regions such as Guichi, Qingyang, and Jing County. These structures are made by stacking multiple pieces of wood and carving them as a single unit. Their name is derived from their unique form, which depicts two lions facing each other with their heads turned towards a central pearl, creating a striking and symbolic visual.
- ⑦ For the sake of convenience, this research divides the Ming and Qing dynasties into early, middle, and late periods. Early Ming dynasty: Hongwu year 1 to Xuande year 10 (1368–1435); Mid-Ming dynasty: Zhengtong year 1 to Jiajing year 45 (1436–1566); Late Ming dynasty: Longqing year 1 to Chongzhen year 17 (1567–1644); Early Qing dynasty: Shunzhi year 1 to Yongzheng year 13 (1644–1735); Mid-Qing dynasty: Qianlong year 1 to Jiaqing year 25 (1736–1820); and Late Qing dynasty: Daoguang year 1 to Xuantong year 3 (1821–1911). In this study, we surveyed ancestral halls built between the early Ming dynasty and the late Qing dynasty [32,33].
- ⑧ In Southern Anhui, the traditional architectural framework along the depth of a building is usually called a “Series,” which is the same as the “Feng/Ceyang” in the Yingzao Fashi and the “Tieshi” in the Yingzao Fayuan. This term appears in classical Chinese architectural records. In “Yuanye,” there are references to “five beams ...with one added at the front and rear, making a total of seven beams in a series” and “seven beams, which are the beams that form the roof structure.” This terminology has also been used in other regions of Jiangnan (such as Ningbo). In the traditional five-bay architecture of Southern Anhui, the structures to the east (west) of the central bay are called the east (west) mid-series, east (west) secondary series, and east (west) side series, respectively. With regard to the Xuan frame, some ancestral halls in Southern Anhui have a framework located between two rows, usually between the east and west series or between the series and the side series. This study adopts the customary term used by local craftsmen, i.e., “extra series” [34].

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