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Ai Weiwei's "Wang Family Ancestral Hall"

With a 400-year-long history, the "Wang Family Ancestral Hall" has changed innumerable times with the times, and in various systems has held various functions, attributes and values over the centuries. Today, passing through the walls and office spaces of two galleries, the Wang Family Ancestral Hall is presented as a new work by Ai Weiwei. Its condition and experiences, implied suggestions and ambiguities, as well as the relationship it holds between itself and its owner, immerses the hall in a debate between change and perpetuity – one that settles at neither one thing nor another. In comparison to other ancient architectures and cultural phenomena, the Wang Family Ancestral Hall has become quite an isolated case.

Located in Xiaoqi Village of Wuyuan County, Jiangxi Province, the Wang Family Ancestral Hall was built during the early Ming Dynasty to worship the earliest Wang family ancestor, Wang Hua, the Prince of Yue, an important figure in the sixth century. During the last years of the Sui Dynasty, he established the Kingdom of Wu, which governed six prefectures, of which Xi, Wu, and Xuan were included. When the kingdom was incorporated into imperial Tang territory, Wang was appointed as the Regent of Nine Palaces, giving him control of the imperial guard at Chang'an, and allowing him to reach the highest levels of government. After the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty, Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty and Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty have all commended him a model public servant given his loyal, patriotic and industrious characteristics. As such, the Wang family built the hall as a shrine to their ancestral sage. Moreover, the hall fulfilled the family's spiritual needs and reminded them of the possibility for self-improvement.

Built of the finest materials, the Wang Family Ancestral Hall was comprised of four halls, one of which was a large, centralized hall. The family devoted a significant amount of materials and financial resources to the building, as it represented their ancestral values and order, and through emphasizing these values and order, the family exemplified their social position and influence in the region.

In traditional Chinese society, ancestral halls were used not only to make ancestral sacrifices, but also to serve as a venue for weddings, funerals, birthdays, ceremonies, and other important business meetings. It was a space where clan members could maintain familial relationships, and where discussions of important matters took place. While ancestral halls were the products of belief systems dedicated to worship, they also served other non-religious functions. For example, if a family member disobeyed rules, it was in the ancestral hall that the family patriarch had the power to educate, punish and even banish the wrongdoer from the clan. The ancestral hall was similar to a self-governing court in that it held its own unique moral and ethical system that was external to the governing legal system. It supported clan stability and was untouchable by the bureaucratic system, and as such, when faced with political change or social upheaval, the system remained self-sustaining in its continuity and ability to regenerate.

The Wang Family Ancestral Hall thrived from the Ming Dynasty until 1949. According to *The Genealogy of the Wang Family*, the Wang ancestral line from Xiaoqi Village produced four successful *jinshi*, or palace graduates, and four generations of top-ranking officials. This was not only a great honor to the family, but also a blessing to the ancestors of gratitude and indebtedness. Each generation of the Wang clan had a duty to safeguard the ancestral hall as a continued symbol of the clan system. Through renovations and improvements, the family demonstrated their power, will, and moral uprightness.

Despite several centuries of dynastic change and frequent warring, the social and cultural systems on which the ancestral hall depended did not significantly change. In 1911, the Xiaoqi Wang family members celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival, just as they had in years past. Four days later, revolution broke out, and the two thousand year-old imperial system ended. Neither the political, social or cultural reforms enacted by the Republican government, nor the new culture movement brought about by this political change were able to disrupt the centuries-old clan system, and so the Wangs continued the season's festivities in their ancestral hall. According to the Xiaoqi Wang family members, changes in the political system affected only the structure of the elite society, targeting only the highest power leaders; it had almost no influence on the lower rungs of society, and as Xiaoqi was a small village over 500 kilometers from the Republican capital of Nanjing, they were left nearly untouched. The family's concerns were focused on maintaining the family's prosperity, their tea business and accumulation of more land. The other families in the village depended on the Wang estate for work. Memorial tablets were continuously added to the hall, and the recently deceased were worshipped together with the Prince of Yue; the number of prayers flourished. However, unbeknownst to the family, their continued existence, and the generations of identity and culture that the hall represented, in fact planted seeds for the future—seeds from which would hatch fatal injuries under another governing system.

In 1949, a new government came to power. The Wang family of Xiaoqi continued with their schedule of extravagant sacrifices multiple times a year, in hopes that these ceremonies would bring good weather for the crops. A new government did not necessarily mean change; it was only with the beginning of a new political movement that the hall was given new meaning, whereby its function and value was redefined. In 1950, the national land reform was launched, and members of another family took power in the village, thus leaving the fate of the Wang Family Ancestral Hall to others. When class labels were assigned, the Wangs were deemed landlords, becoming the targets of land reform policies. All records, documents, and memories from the Wang Family Ancestral Hall were destroyed or interrupted. The hall, which was originally private property, became public property, and belonging neither to the Wang family nor any one individual.

Land reform established a new social structure; regardless of family name, clan, or social status, everyone received a label: a landlord, a rich peasant, a middle peasant, a poor peasant, or a hired peasant, thereby destroying the ethical clan-centric systems that had persisted for thousands of years.

If the '49 movement was decided upon and implemented by a higher administrative power,



Photo documentation of the original condition of the Wang Family Ancestral Hall

汪家祠原始状态图片档案



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