

# The Origin, Fission, and Social Structure of a Lineage Village

-- Based on empirical study and investigation of compiling *Zhongshan Wu's Genealogy*

Tianyi Wu\*

Huangbai Junior High School, Chongqing, China

\*1652880296@qq.com

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the internal mechanisms that enabled a clan-based village to maintain social order across nearly nine hundred years of dynastic changes, using the Wu lineage in Zhongshan, Tonglu, Zhejiang as a case study. Drawing on the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy*, local chronicles, and field research, the study explores how the Wu lineage historically adhered to the principle of "dividing households but not the lineage." Centered on a patriarchal system, the clan employed organizational tools such as ancestral halls, genealogical records, and communal landholdings to construct an autonomous social structure. Through the imperial examination system, the clan established a symbiotic relationship with state power, where the political status of the literati class legitimized clan governance, while retired officials returning to their hometown reinforced clan discipline with Confucian ethics. This formed a village power structure characterized by "imperial proxy-clan autonomy." The clan repeatedly reinforced bloodline identity through genealogy compilation and consolidated territorial control via public projects (e.g., water management and education). Even in the face of external disruptions (such as the Taiping Rebellion), the clan sought to restore social order through measures like genealogy revision. In summary, the enduring stability of this Wu-dominated clan village relied not only on blood ties and material foundations but also on value integration (imperial examination ethics, ritual norms) to balance state authority and local autonomy. Under the traditional Chinese governance framework where "imperial power did not extend below the county level," the clan successfully filled the power vacuum in grassroots society, achieving long-term stability. The analysis of the Wu lineage's harmonious continuity offers insights for local governments in engaging with collective values and identifying shared ethical principles in rural communities.

**Keywords:** Lineage, Village, Social Structure, Local Power, Clan Genealogy.

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## 1. Preface

Around 509 BC, Cleisthenes, the ruler of ancient Athens in Greece, implemented sweeping reforms to the tribal structure of Athens. He dismantled the original kinship-based tribes and reorganized them into new tribes based on geographical divisions. This reform is often regarded as a symbol of Athens breaking free from the constraints of the old system and taking a significant step toward civilization[1]. During the same period, the Zhou Dynasty was in the late Spring and Autumn era, already stepping into an age of collapsing rituals and disintegrating norms. The foundation of its rule-the patriarchal clan system-had been openly trampled by events such as the Tian family replacing the Qi and the partition of Jin by three families. Even in that era, the kinship-based "clan" society seemed on the verge of collapse, poised to be replaced by a new, geographically organized society of mixed surnames.[2]

In today's China, the vitality of kinship-based clan societies remains remarkably strong. Although, with the progression of time, individual clans no longer match the scale of the Zhou royal family-once the great ancestral source of an entire nation-small-scale clan societies still persist.[3] The author had the privilege of participating in the compilation and revision of their own clan's genealogy, *The Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy*. As the work progressed, the author discovered that the ancestors of the Wu clan were not native to the area but rather a small branch of a family that had migrated there. What astonished the author even more was

that this initially tiny group of outsiders became a pivotal force in establishing and developing the village they settled in, which has endured to this day. To this day, the Wu clan's village has grown into a "clan village" of over a thousand people. Moreover, throughout this developmental process, the Wu clan has consistently maintained an overwhelming demographic advantage over other surname groups in the village, with no other surnames able to rival its dominance.[4]

Thus, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: What enabled a single-surname family to maintain a village social order dominated by it for 900 years (from 1126 to 2025)? How did its internal structure operate so stably? How did it adapt to the constantly changing dynasties and societies outside? And over the course of nearly a millennium, what kind of social structure did this clan village form?

### 1.1. External Perspectives on Chinese Lineage Research: Structural Functionalism and Symbolic Representation

Current research on Chinese lineages has yielded extensive and outstanding results from both domestic and international scholars adopting third-party perspectives.[5]

Professor Maurice Freedman's *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* proposed an economic determinism paradigm that long dominated the study of Chinese lineages. Based on his structural analysis of lineages in Guangdong and Fujian, he concluded that communal property systems-such as ancestral land and temples-formed the core foundation of lineage organization. Building on this, he posited the

existence of "higher-order" and "lower-order" lineage groups, with the former controlling the latter as the "main lineage," overseeing certain activities. The scale of a lineage's property directly determined its degree of differentiation and cohesion. Furthermore, the wealthier and more powerful a lineage, the richer its internal occupational diversity and the closer its proximity to state power.

Professor David Faure similarly emphasized the economic determinism of lineages, proposing the "right of settlement" theory.[6] He argued that lineages served as tools for specific groups to assert land rights. Settlers legitimized their land claims by compiling genealogies and constructing ancestral halls, integrating themselves into a state-sanctioned patriarchal system—even if their distant ancestral narratives were fictional, the rules of ancestral worship reflected real power distributions.

Professor Hsiao Kung-chuan expanded the functionalist perspective by incorporating local political power. In *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, he systematically analyzed how the Qing state-controlled villages through institutions like the *baojia*, *lijia*, communal granaries, and schools, as well as the complex role lineages played—sometimes as state agents, other times as centers of local autonomy.[7]

Diverging from functionalist emphases on economic or political factors, Japanese scholar Sudo Yoshiaki, in *Genealogies: Lineages, Geomancy, and Migration of Han Chinese in South China*, examined genealogies and geomancy practices among lineages in Hong Kong's New Territories. He proposed that lineages reinforced internal cohesion through cultural symbols like feng shui or shared ancestral rituals. These symbols strengthened unity during lineage development but later became tools for sub-branches to pursue independent interests. Professor Emily Ahern echoed this in *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (1973), noting how ancestor worship reflected social stratification, such as grave locations symbolizing status.

Professor Tanaka Issei[7] delved deeper into cultural symbolism. In *Chinese Lineages and Drama*, he observed that South Chinese lineages used ritual performances (e.g., "worship of newborn sons") to merge ancestor worship with community rites, forming "ritual communities" in villages. Despite their economic cost, these activities had lasting effects on lineage cohesion due to the collective emotions they fostered. For instance, the Hakka village of Jiadong continued the "worship of newborn sons" even after its ritual organization dissolved, demonstrating the enduring power of cultural symbols.

Indian scholar Prasenjit Duara, focusing on North China, uncovered patterns distinct from the southeast. In *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942*, he noted that North Chinese lineages, often lacking substantial ancestral property, relied on clustered settlements and contiguous land to consolidate social status, forming networked distributions.

In summary, foreign scholars have approached Chinese lineages from diverse angles—economic, political, cultural, historical, and geographical—analyzing their structures and mechanisms. However, existing research has shortcomings: functionalist paradigms often overlook members' daily practices and overemphasize state influence while neglecting how lineages actively leverage policies. Cultural symbol studies, meanwhile, tend to treat lineages as isolated entities, ignoring their interactions with external power and social

environments.

## 1.2. Internal Perspectives on Chinese Lineage Research: Family History and Social Change

Many scholars, primarily Chinese or of Chinese descent, have studied lineages from more granular angles. Their firsthand experience with lineage life enables access to hidden primary sources, with some even writing in the first person.

Professor Lin Yueh-hwa abandoned abstract academic language in *The Golden Wing*, using the Huang family's story to depict lineage responses to societal shifts. His portrayal presents lineages as open systems constantly interacting with the outside world, their internal power structures fluid. Lin noted how major lineages gradually evolved into smaller family units, with traditional rules merging into village collectives.

Professors Chang Jianhua and Xia Yan, in *Chinese Lineages from the Perspective of Daily Life*, focused on members' daily practices—family rules, rituals, marriages—to reveal how blood ties were maintained. Their study of Hu Tingqing's account books in Huizhou showed how lineages managed private affairs like weddings and funerals to extend their influence.

Professor Qian Hang's research in Ping yang, Zhejiang, highlighted dynamic micro-level activities. In *The Traditional Construction and Modern Transformation of Lineages*, he traced the Xue family's "loyalty legend" rituals, showing how modern lineages adapt by shifting from bloodline emphasis to cultural memory.

Professor Helen F. Siu, in *Agents and Victims in South China*, analyzed how South Chinese lineages navigated revolutions and later revived cultural elements post-reform.

Some scholars conducted long-term fieldwork. Bai Xuejiao, in *Blood and Territory: Lineage Governance via Family, Branch, Lineage, and Bao—A Case Study of the Chen Lineage in Fuling Village, Northern Guangdong*, lived with the Chen family for six months in 2015–2016, uncovering informal rules like age-based rituals and inter-branch cooperation in weddings—knowledge absent from formal lineage codes.

These micro-level, dynamic perspectives reveal how lineages operate through daily practices, not just grand designs, forming the real basis of their continuity. Collectively, they complement, expand, and correct macro-level functionalist studies.[8]

## 1.3. Methodology and Approach

This paper explores the historical evolution and mechanisms of lineage structures and power in rural China, adopting an anthropological lens. Theoretically, it combines structural functionalism and processualism. The former helps analyze how the Zhongshan Wu lineage functioned as a social system, with genealogies and local records detailing its internal power structures, resource allocation, and cultural aspects. However, structural functionalism alone cannot explain the lineage's 900-year evolution. The *Zhongshan Wu Genealogy* documents migrations, occupations, responses to historical events, and rule adaptations, aligning with processualism.

The Wu case shows structural resilience alongside adaptation. Pure structuralism risks overlooking historical change, while pure processualism may undervalue stability. Thus, this study integrates both to understand how lineages endure through change.

Methodologically, it employs historical document analysis, primarily genealogy analysis supplemented by local records.

The *Zhongshan Wu Genealogy* is the core primary source, offering unparalleled details on lives, rules, and events over nine centuries. Sudo Yoshiaki's genealogy analysis method guides this study, treating genealogies as "historical texts" and "cultural constructs" to uncover social structures and trajectories. Local records contextualize the Wu lineage within broader regional history, providing external variables like wars and inter-lineage relations.

Compared to Sudo's dispersed Hakka lineages, the Wu case presents a tightly interconnected sample with robust historical support.

In summary, this study blends structural functionalism and processualism, analyzing the *Zhongshan Wu Genealogy* and local records to explore lineage structures, functions, symbolism, and their historical dynamics, deepening understanding of rural China's power structures and evolution.

## 2. Overview and Origins of the Zhongshan Wu Clan Villages

First, the author will present the spatial layout and population structure of the current Zhongshan Wu Clan villages and compare them with the records in the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy*. This will illustrate the coupling relationship between the present-day Wu-dominated villages in Zhongshan Township and the branches of the Wu Clan.

### 2.1. Distribution of the Zhongshan Wu Clan Villages

The natural villages where the Zhongshan Wu Clan resides include: Wuzhai (divided into Upper Gate and Lower Gate), Shaojiabian, Xiashao, Qianzhongfan, and Longxi. Centered around Wuzhai, Shaojiabian lies to the northeast, Longxi to the west, Qianzhongfan to the southeast, and Xiashao to the south. Except for Longxi, which forms a larger village on the far west, the other four natural villages are closely distributed along a single direction. This is also reflected in local terminology, as these four villages, including Wuzhai, are collectively referred to as "Changfeng."

In addition to geographical connections, the Wu Clan members still make up a significant proportion of the population in these villages today. For example, in Longxi Village, there were 541 households totaling 1,654 people in 2015. According to the newly revised *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy* in 2025, the Wu Clan members in Longxi numbered 835 (including female members but excluding spouses). Considering that Longxi Village's population has been primarily migrating outward for work in recent years, even without counting spouses, the Wu Clan members already account for over half of the population. The proportion is even higher in the other four villages. After the 2004 village restructuring, the original Wuzhai, Xiashao, Shaojiabian, and Baojiashan villages were merged into the new Zhongshan Village. According to the 2022 census, the new Zhongshan Village had a population of 4,575, with 3,441 permanent Wu Clan members, accounting for 75%. The population of Qianzhongfan lacks precise data, but villagers estimate it to be around 400 people, with 233 Wu Clan members reported in the 2025 genealogy.

Apart from the Wu Clan, Zhongshan Township also has significant populations with surnames such as Bao, Wang, and Chen. However, none of these families possess

corresponding genealogies, and no one can confirm when their ancestors migrated to the area. According to the 2005 edition of the *Tonglu County Annals*, the ancestors of the Wang surname, which has a relatively large population, can be traced back to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This is about 500 years later than the earliest traceable ancestor of the Wu Clan, Wu Tengxiao, who migrated to Longxi in 1126.

### 2.2. Records of Villages and Population in the Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy

According to the preface of the 1880 *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy*, the Wu Clan members regard Wu Tengxiao, who migrated to the area in 1126, as the first-generation "founding ancestor." These clan members initially lived in Longxi and flourished there until the seventh generation. The seventh-generation brothers Wu Qian, Wu Kun, and Wu Gen saw the second brother, Wu Kun, lead his branch of the clan to migrate to Changfeng (including present-day Wuzhai, Shaojiabian, Xiashao, and Qianzhongfan), while Wu Qian and Wu Gen continued to live in the ancestral land of Longxi.

Subsequently, the clan members who migrated to Changfeng further developed and, by the thirteenth generation, split into three major branches: the Renyi Gong branch (descendants of Wu Renyi), the Ren'er Gong branch (descendants of Wu Ren'er), and the Rensan Gong branch (descendants of Wu Rensan). Locally, these branches are also referred to as "Upper Gate," "Middle Gate," and "Lower Gate." Initially, these divisions were based on generational seniority within the clan rather than geographical location. Most Upper Gate and Lower Gate members lived together, corresponding to present-day Wuzhai, while the Middle Gate members migrated earlier (by the seventeenth generation) to Shaojiabian (Shaofeng Village). As for Qianzhongfan and Xiashao, these two villages were later formed by the migration and settlement of Upper Gate and Lower Gate members.

The Wu Clan members in Longxi also subdivided into numerous branches internally, but they did not migrate elsewhere and continued to live within the boundaries of Longxi Village. Therefore, although the descendants of the eldest brother Wu Qian are recorded in the genealogy with various branches, today's Longxi Wu Clan members do not differentiate themselves (the descendants of the third brother Wu Gen have died out). Their self-identity is as "descendants of the eldest branch," the direct lineage of Wu Tengxiao, which is distinctly different from the Changfeng Wu Clan members, who clearly divide themselves into Upper, Middle, and Lower Gates.

In summary, the distribution pattern of the Zhongshan Wu Clan members is clear. From the seventh generation onward, the descendants of Wu Qian and Wu Gen lived in Longxi, while Wu Kun migrated to the Changfeng area. By the thirteenth generation, further differentiation occurred, forming the Upper, Middle, and Lower Gates, and the Changfeng area was subdivided into the four natural villages of Wuzhai, Shaojiabian, Qianzhongfan, and Xiashao.

Based on the genealogical records and preface content, the author finds that the internal divisions of the clan in the genealogy largely align with the current distribution of Wu Clan members in Zhongshan Township's natural villages. This is especially true for the descendants of the seventh-generation Wu Kun[9], whose major branches are not only divided genealogically and by bloodline but also geographically, with relatively independent branches living in

distinct areas.

Moreover, this distribution pattern has remained largely unchanged since the seventh generation. Wu Kun of the seventh generation was born in the fourteenth year of the Jiading era of the Song Dynasty (1221) and migrated to Changfeng in the second year of the Xianchun era (1266). This is 140 years after the first-generation Wu Tengxiao migrated to Zhongshan (1126). In other words, the basic distribution pattern of the Zhongshan Wu Clan has persisted for nearly 800 years. It has neither disappeared nor expanded further outward but has instead taken deep root in the local area.[10]

### 2.3. Origins of the Zhongshan Wu Clan and the Quest for Ancestral Roots

Like other clans, the Zhongshan Wu Clan places great importance on the "unbroken lineage" of their surname. They believe their surname originates from the ancient legend of Taibo's abdication—during the late Shang Dynasty, Taibo and Zhongyong, the third and second sons of the Yellow Emperor's descendant Gugong Danfu, migrated south to the Wu-Yue region to establish the state of Gouwu to allow their younger brother Jili and his son Ji Chang (King Wen of Zhou) to inherit the throne. After King Wu of Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty, he enfeoffed Zhongyong's third-generation descendant Zhou Zhang as the ruler of Wu and posthumously honored Taibo as the Earl of Wu. The descendants of this Wu state took Wu as their surname, and the Zhongshan Wu Clan traces its origins to this lineage.

Although the first-generation ancestor of the Zhongshan Wu Clan, Wu Tengxiao, hailed from Yuezhou (modern-day Shaoxing, Zhejiang), which aligns with the living area of Taibo's descendants, legendary tales alone cannot confer legitimacy to a real-life clan. The Zhongshan Wu Clan requires more substantial ancestors to vouch for them, likely not only to add luster to their written records but also to seek potential kinship "allies" in real life, which would aid the clan's development.

From the contents of the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy*, it is evident that the first-generation ancestor Wu Tengxiao was not alone. He had numerous brothers, uncles, and other relatives, many of whom were notable figures. For example, his uncle Wu Zhongzhu was a ranked 进士 (jinshi) in the second year of the Qingli era (1042) of the Song Dynasty, and his father, Wu Zhichun, was also a jinshi in the second year of the Yuanfeng era (1079), rising to the position of Governor of Henan. The earliest traceable ancestor above him is Wu Xing from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.

Wu Xing migrated from Yuezhou (modern-day Shaoxing, Zhejiang) to Shouyi (modern-day Shou County, Anhui) and then to Xiangtan. Wu Tengxiao migrated from Shouyi to Longxi (Longxi Village in Zhongshan Township). These migration paths align geographically. Thus, the ancestral figure Wu Xing, with a verifiable migration path, and the well-documented paternal lineage form a rudimentary clan framework centered around Wu Tengxiao. However, within this simple framework, the two generations after Wu Xing cannot be ignored. The genealogy records Wu Xing's five sons—Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, and Xin—of whom only Wu Zhi had a son, Wu Tang. The personal information and descendants of the others are entirely absent, and they are not mentioned in later biographies. Moreover, the naming style of "Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin" (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith) starkly contrasts with the more refined names of

later generations, such as "Zhichun" and "Zhongzhu." Given that these two generations of six individuals exist in name only, their authenticity is questionable.

Regardless of their authenticity, this reflects a phenomenon: the Zhongshan Wu Clan is striving to "trace its roots" upward, seeking to establish credible connections with illustrious ancestors. In this context, it is entirely possible for descendants to be erroneously linked to ancestors of different origins. This belief is supported by the fact that such practices persist in the Zhongshan Wu Clan's modern genealogy-compilation activities. The principle of "continuity" is elevated to a high position, often overshadowing the factual verification of bloodline connections. The latter, however, holds significant importance in clan life, as it involves practical matters such as ethical relationships and property distribution. Once bloodline connections cannot be established, an individual's status and rights within the clan become invalid because they are not considered part of the clan.

Apart from the ancestral quest for roots and modern genealogy examples, the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy* explicitly states that in the ninth year of the Wanli era (1581), the two major branches of the Zhongshan Wu Clan—Longxi and Changfeng—merged after previously living separately and compiling their own genealogies. They reached a consensus on genealogy compilation, with each family contributing "two or three volumes of fragmented genealogies." Despite the records being "80-90% incomplete," they proceeded to recompile the genealogy. This was undoubtedly another instance of the Wu Clan members seeking to reconnect with their ancestral roots, mirroring the behavior of Wu Tengxiao tracing his lineage to Wu Xing and modern Zhongshan Wu Clan members attempting to reconnect with their genealogies.

Was there confusion or difficulty in reconnecting branches during this process? The genealogy compilers of the time lamented that even though they were Wu Clan relatives, those beyond the five generations of mourning no longer recognized each other, and beyond four generations, they became like strangers. Coupled with the fragmented genealogies of each household, it was inevitable that self-identified Wu Clan members would struggle to reconnect. Given this, what significance did recompiling the genealogy hold for the Wu Clan? The author believes that beyond serving as proof of clan unity, it represented a reconsolidation of internal power based on bloodline relationships. As the Wanli-era Wu Clan genealogy compiler noted, the orthodox major lineage of the Wu Clan, originating from Taibo's Yanling family, acknowledged that Longxi and Changfeng were of the same lineage. This became an opportunity for internal consolidation within the Zhongshan Wu Clan. However, the actual situation at the time was that clan members were estranged and rarely interacted, making the clan little different from ordinary village neighbors.

Yet the Wu Clan was, after all, a large and populous clan in the area. This potential undoubtedly stirred the ambitions of insightful individuals within the clan. On the one hand, they lamented the clan's internal divisions; on the other, they actively participated in clan affairs, striving to unite human and material resources to achieve collective prosperity. These Wu Clan members, who had effectively "split" long ago, did not drift apart like ordinary members, allowing kinship ties to fade. Instead, they proactively sought cooperation within the clan. Often educated, cultured, and socially prominent, they were the backbone of the Wu Clan—the upper echelons who

could decide and lead the clan's overall affairs.

### 3. The Development and Segmentation of the Clan: The Power Dynamics of the Clan-Village

This section will outline the development and segmentation process of the Zhongshan Wu clan after its relocation to Zhongshan Township, and based on this process, explore the distribution model of "patriarchal authority" within the Wu family system. At the same time, given the influence of the Zhongshan Wu clan in the local area, the author will also attempt to describe how this significant clan controlled and governed the villages it inhabited.[11]

#### 3.1. The Synergy between Clan Segmentation and Village Differentiation

As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, the Zhongshan Wu clan split into three major branches—Qian, Kun, and Gen—starting from the seventh generation. Geographically, the Zhongshan Wu clan primarily consisted of the descendants of Wu Kun residing in Changfeng and the descendants of Wu Qian and Wu Gen in Longxi.[12]

So why did the Wu clan begin to split precisely at the seventh generation? The answer is obvious: the seventh generation produced three male heirs—the brothers Qian, Kun, and Gen. The Wu clan designated Wu Qian as the main lineage successor and divided the family estate into three parts. Wu Kun relocated to Changfeng, while Wu Qian and Wu Gen remained in Longxi. Notably, the third generation of the Wu clan already had two brothers, Wu Yu and Wu Ci, but Wu Ci's information is incomplete, and his descendants are unaccounted for, making it unclear whether the brothers divided the family estate at that time.

It is entirely normal for a family with multiple sons to divide the household once the sons reach adulthood and become independent. The small family unit, centered around a male patriarch and his wife, was the most basic unit in traditional Chinese agricultural society. However, merely perpetuating this model would not allow a small family to truly expand, as descendants would inevitably establish new households, thereby separating from the original family. This created a cycle of renewal, and even if a large, multi-generational household emerged, it did not necessarily evolve into a "clan." [13]

Yet, in traditional agricultural society, the various families within the Zhongshan Wu clan still relied on the support and resources of the original household, leading to close interactions between the divided families. Take Wu Kun as an example. Wu Kun had both a given name and a courtesy name, and he was a Confucian scholar—a title his brothers did not possess. His social status afforded him the financial means and motivation to move out of the ancestral home and establish his own household in Changfeng. At this stage, Wu Kun was not fundamentally different from an ordinary small family, living a self-sufficient life independent of the original household.

Moreover, the Changfeng area where Wu Kun settled gradually evolved from a general geographic name into a specific village primarily composed of the Zhongshan Wu clan. Changfeng became an independent region separate from Longxi. The segmentation of the Zhongshan Wu clan and the differentiation of local villages occurred simultaneously.

However, unlike modern villages, Wu Kun did not become

a first-generation ancestor like Wu Tengxiao after his relocation. The descendants of his branch did not sever ties with the larger Zhongshan Wu clan's kinship network. From this perspective, Wu Kun did not cut off from the Zhongshan Wu clan. This was not only due to blood ties but also reflected the close collaboration between the "Kun Branch" and the other two branches in daily life. Changfeng and Longxi worked closely together in practical matters. The entire Zhongshan Wu clan "society" prevented further fragmentation, enabling them to live as a cohesive whole through mutual support and cooperation. Thus, while the Zhongshan Wu clan segmented internally according to patriarchal requirements based on blood ties, the interconnectedness of kinship and practical needs ensured that the clan remained a unified entity.[13]

One of the key activities that maintained the clan as a whole was the collaborative revision of the clan genealogy. In the 26th year of the Ming Jiajing era (1547 AD), Changfeng and Longxi jointly compiled the genealogy, though this earliest recorded collaboration involved few participants and left no surviving preface. The second collaboration occurred in the 9th year of the Wanli era (1581 AD), 34 years later. Assuming a generation spans 20 years, the two revisions were separated by nearly two generations. The preface from the Wanli era even mentioned the difficulty of distinguishing kinship ties within the clan, serving as indirect evidence of the internal segmentation of the Zhongshan Wu clan.

However, after the Wanli-era revision, this significant clan activity continued uninterrupted. The Wu clan revised and updated its genealogy in the 15th year of the Shunzhi era (1658 AD), the 54th and 57th years of the Kangxi era (1715 and 1718 AD), the 13th year of the Yongzheng era (1735 AD), the 5th and 36th years of the Qianlong era (1740 and 1771 AD), the 16th year of the Jiaqing era (1811 AD), the 19th and 25th years of the Daoguang era (1839 and 1845 AD), the 6th year of the Guangxu era (1880 AD), and in 1933 (Year of Guiyou), totaling 13 revisions. The intervals between revisions ranged from decades to just a few years, with longer gaps indicating large-scale collaborations between branches and shorter ones reflecting minor updates by smaller branches.[14]

#### 3.2. The Fusion of Clan Power and Village Politics

The clan's emphasis on collective assets and their collaborative distribution is evident in many specific matters, particularly in the construction of ancestral halls and collective projects. For example, clan members pooled resources to donate land for the construction of a study hall. The "Record of the Zhengsheng Study Hall Fields," dated the 43rd year of the Qianlong era (1778 AD), details the reasons for building the study hall, its specific uses, the scope of property use, and the exact acreage donated by each individual.[15]

This record reveals several points distinct from the earlier discussion of clan branch collaboration. First, the Wu clan did not organize this project based on bloodline branches like the "Qian Branch" or "Kun Branch," nor did it use geographic divisions like Changfeng or Longxi. Instead, it operated under the unit of the ancestral hall, "Chuhua Hall," with clan members donating land in the hall's name. Second, the record does not list the names of the donors, as in the collaborative genealogy revisions, but uses coded identifiers for the donated plots, reflecting their internal order within the clan.

This suggests two things: First, geographic names like Changfeng or Longxi and branch names based on bloodlines could not be directly linked to the clan's land assets. Second, the codification of clan land-where plots were assigned detailed identifiers-indicates a highly organized system of land management, differing significantly from the small-scale landownership of independent farmers. Later additions to the donation records show further changes. New Wu clan members, such as Wu Xicheng and Wu Mingzheng, made additional "joyful contributions" to the existing land. These individuals were referred to as "chief organizers," indicating their leadership in the project. Notably, their donated land also consisted of multiple small plots, with the same overall identifiers as before, suggesting their land had also been systematically planned.[16]

The situation in Longxi mirrored that of Changfeng. Over time, both regions continuously adjusted their boundaries, but their combined area always accounted for the majority of Zhongshan. This demonstrates the overwhelming dominance of the Zhongshan Wu clan in terms of land and population resources in the Zhongshan area. For instance, a descendant of the Kun Branch, Wu Shaofeng, initially settled near Changfeng. As his descendants grew in number, the area gradually developed into a new village—Shaofeng Village (Shaojia Bian). The villagers of this settlement were blood-related to the Zhongshan Wu clan and geographically part of the Changfeng region. This shows how a small family branching off from the Zhongshan Wu clan could become the origin of a new village, named after its patriarch and later "exclusively" honoring this legacy. Whenever the Zhongshan Wu clan organized activities, the Shaofeng Wu family would actively participate, mobilizing the resources of the entire Shaofeng Village.

The influence of the Zhongshan Wu clan extended beyond its own growth. It actively participated in local public projects, such as the reconstruction of the Moon Mountain Pavilion (originally built by the Wu clan) and, more importantly, water conservancy projects. According to the "Record of River Construction," the Wu clan expanded the existing river based on plans drafted by clan elders. Members contributed funds and labor to widen the river for irrigation. Such public works were not led by the local government but initiated spontaneously by the influential Wu clan, reflecting a tendency toward "self-governance." In this way, the Zhongshan Wu clan took charge of farming, water conservancy, public infrastructure, and settlement expansion, deeply intertwining the clan's fortunes with local development.

In summary, the Zhongshan Wu clan not only had the ability to mobilize the population and land resources of various villages but also established and managed clan "public assets" to support village infrastructure, dominating local economic and political activities. Without external intervention or higher-level authority, the Zhongshan Wu clan effectively filled the "power vacuum," becoming the de facto central authority for the surrounding villages.[17]

#### **4. Imperial Authority Within the Clan: The Fusion of State-Clan Power Systems**

As mentioned in the third section, the leaders and local elites of the Zhongshan Wu clan managed nearly all internal and external affairs, from asset division and population

records to organizing settlements and constructing local infrastructure. This clan-based social structure persisted for nearly 900 years, spanning three dynasties: the Song, Ming, and Qing.

The upper political structures of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties differed significantly. For example, the Song employed a "two councils and three departments" system, the Ming abolished the prime minister in favor of a grand secretariat, and the Qing initially retained elements of military democracy before transitioning to a system resembling the Ming's grand secretariat. Yet, despite these changes, the basic structure of the Zhongshan Wu Clan remained unshaken. This section will analyze how the clan adapted to dynastic transitions and how internal clan authority was distributed.

##### **4.1. Clan Members' Entry into Officialdom Through the Imperial Examinations and the Establishment of Confucian Authority**

The Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties shared a common feature (the Yuan dynasty restored the imperial examinations in 1314 AD): they preserved a pathway from the grassroots to the upper echelons of society—the imperial examination system. Success in the examinations was closely tied to political power. Once a person became a scholar-official, they enjoyed privileges in the economic, political, and legal domains. For instance, stipendiary scholars received government-issued rice allowances. Similarly, Zhongshan Wu Clan members who achieved such status received special care and support from the clan.

The table of contents in the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy* reveals a hierarchy of honors within the clan. The top three categories were clan members awarded by the central government, including honorary titles for women (e.g., "Lady" titles), followed by categories related to the imperial examinations, such as "Scholar-Officials" and "Confucian Scholars." These classifications directly reflected the political status of the individuals and the clan's values—traditional Confucian ideals prioritizing examination success and moral conduct.

How did the prominent figures within the Zhongshan Wu clan consolidate their status and extend their influence to their branch? The central government's edict in the 4th year of the Yuan Yanyou era (1317 AD) honoring Wu Yitian, then Deputy Commissioner of the Lingnan Circuit Surveillance Office and concurrently Deputy Director of Military Farms, offers insight.

The government's commendation of Wu Yitian extended beyond him personally, benefiting his wife and parents—truly a case of "one man's success elevates his entire family." In addition to verbal praise, there were tangible rewards. Wu Yitian's wife, Lady Shao, received the title of "Respectable Lady," granting her the honor of "wearing ceremonial robes" and participating in sacrificial rites, along with certain political privileges. Wu Yitian's mother, Lady Luo, also received this title. His father, Wu Guangyu, was awarded the honorary title of "Grand Master of Palace Counsel" (a nominal fourth-rank position) in recognition of his successful parenting.[18]

Notably, the edict for Wu Yitian was not an appointment notice but a retirement document, marking his return to his hometown after leaving office. The four edicts were issued on the same day, indicating that during Wu Yitian's tenure, his parents and wife did not hold these honors. While Wu Yitian served as an official elsewhere, his parents remained in

Zhongshan. Only upon his retirement did they enjoy "the added joy of familial reunion." The central government's edicts not only praised Wu Yitian's family but also delegated a form of governance legitimacy. The edict instructed Wu Yitian to "not forget his filial duties as a son while serving as a minister," implying that even in retirement, the government expected him to contribute to his hometown, embodying the Confucian principle of "rulers and subjects as fathers and sons." Thus, Wu Yitian's family became implicit representatives of the central government. His relationship with the clan was no longer purely "clan as father, members as sons"; it had transformed into a "ruler-subject" relationship with the imperial court. Having served the emperor and governed regions, Wu Yitian, even in retirement, remained a figure of imperial authority. At this point, he became a bridge-while he could not directly participate in local politics, within the Wu clan, he was an authority figure backed by imperial legitimacy.[19]

Retired officials like Wu Yitian symbolized the pinnacle of examination success. Beyond them, there were lower-level candidates who, despite their Confucian education, struggled to achieve official positions. These individuals, such as Wu Shangrui, Wu Shangzhang, and Wu Shangjing, were recorded in the "Confucian Scholars" section of the genealogy. While Shangrui became a tribute scholar, Shangzhang and Shangjing remained stipendiary scholars, their examination journeys ending there.

Though their achievements in the examinations were limited, these clan members were still well-read Confucian scholars. While they could not serve as models of success, they played guiding roles, embodying the clan's values-revering examinations and moral education. Moreover, major clan activities had to be organized by these local elites. Since examination candidates focused on studying, the primary organizers were often from the "Confucian Scholars" category. For example, the chief organizers of genealogy revisions were drawn from their ranks.

Through the imperial examinations, these wealthy and influential Wu Clan members solidified their privileged status within the clan. They formulated clan rules, guided production, and led cultural activities, perpetuating Confucian teachings from generation to generation and establishing cultural authority from the top down.

## 4.2. Internal Clan Segmentation and Power Subdivision

As mentioned earlier, the Zhongshan Wu Clan's internal organization included unique units centered around ancestral halls, or "tangkou." Both Changfeng and Longxi had multiple tangkou. While clan members were divided by bloodline branches in kinship terms, their daily activities revolved around these ancestral halls. Under the Ming and Qing grassroots administrative systems, formal government structures did not extend below the county level—a principle often summarized as "imperial authority stops at the county." This power vacuum was filled by retired officials like Wu Yitian.[20]

Lacking government oversight, the Zhongshan Wu Clan naturally delineated its "sphere of influence" based on kinship ties and geographic distribution, forming various tangkou. Changfeng had 11 tangkou, including Yanqing Hall, Chuhua Hall, and Changhou Hall, while Longxi had nine, such as Aijing Hall, Shilu Hall, and Shiyi Hall.

Each tangkou maintained its own land records, population

registers, ancestral tablets, and public facilities under its name. The halls served as meeting places for clan elders and venues for ancestral worship during festivals, effectively replacing local government functions and acting as administrative units for central control. Unlike typical administrative units, however, these tangkou were closely interconnected, sharing information and operating independently under normal circumstances. For major projects like collaborative genealogy revisions, they pooled resources to accomplish public initiatives in the clan's name.[21]

Yet, despite the existence of branch leaders, the *Zhongshan Wu Clan Genealogy* never mentions a single "clan leader." Interviews with elderly clan members confirmed that the Zhongshan Wu clan had no clear central authority. The sole criterion for leadership was the household responsible for preserving the genealogy, which implicitly assumed some responsibilities of a "grand clan leader." For instance, they spearheaded genealogy revisions and visited households to document clan members (primarily male descendants). However, they held no decision-making power. All public affairs required deliberation among "elders" and branch leaders, with the genealogy-keeping household acting more as a secretary or historian.

Thus, the internal power structure of the Zhongshan Wu clan was not a simple hierarchy. In managing clan and village affairs, the clan adopted a pragmatic, member-centric organizational model. Details of its operational mechanisms can be gleaned from other sources, such as clan instructions.

The clan instructions emphasized several principles: First, the imperial examinations were paramount. Among the "four occupations" (scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants), becoming a scholar-official was most revered, though farming, craftsmanship, and trade were also acceptable if they provided a livelihood. Second, a rudimentary egalitarian principle dictated that prosperous members should not despise poorer ones, as all shared the same ancestry. Finally, for domestic disputes, members were instructed to report to the branch leader rather than the authorities. This was the only mention of the "government" in the entire genealogy, reflecting the clan's de facto "proxy" role in Zhongshan (Changfeng and Longxi). The actual governing authority—the government—was, to some extent, the clan's counterpart or even adversary. The clan sought to handle all matters internally, avoiding government intervention.[22]

This attitude extended to regulations for female clan members. The instructions, finalized in 1880, prohibited marriages based on dowry amounts, emphasizing family reputation instead. However, this did not imply leniency toward women. On the contrary, the rules for women marrying into the clan were stringent, requiring approval for all actions. Even widows could not remarry without permission. Violations (e.g., remarrying without approval) carried severe penalties: the woman would be stripped of all property, her children forcibly adopted by another branch, herself expelled from the clan, and banished from Zhongshan.

In the Xinyou Year of the Qing Xianfeng Emperor's reign (1861), a major upheaval occurred in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang region. The Qing central government carried out the Xinyou Coup, which formally elevated Empress Dowager Cixi to the political stage, while the Taiping Rebellion approached its demise. The Zhongshan Wu Clan, which had stood strong for 900 years, suffered a heavy blow in 1861. In the relatively open area of Changfeng, 11 of the clan's ancestral halls were destroyed, leaving only two remaining. Even in the secluded

mountain valley of Longxi, two ancestral halls were razed.

The last major revision of the Zhongshan Wu Clan's genealogy was in 1880. The preface to this genealogical update repeatedly emphasized the great catastrophe of 1861, intending to use this costly clan-wide effort to reunite their forces and restore the old order. However, this wish was not fulfilled. Over the next 50 years, the Zhongshan Wu Clan seemed unable to rebuild its former glory. The 1933 revision of the genealogy, lacking prefaces, lineage charts, or a complete list of participants, became a shoddy and error-ridden afterthought—a mere "dog's tail" (a disappointing sequel). [23][24]

## 5. Conclusion

After experiencing early development and division, the Zhongshan Wu lineage stabilized and subsequently entrenched itself deeply within the local community. Over nearly nine centuries, the lineage largely maintained a social order dominated by the Wu surname, constructing a profound coupling with state power through the imperial examination system and Confucian ethics. On one hand, the lineage cultivated a scholar-official class, such as Wu Yitian, enabling its members to enter the bureaucratic system. Even after retirement, these individuals became "agents of imperial authority," internalizing state political authority as the legitimizing foundation for lineage governance, despite the lineage's already autonomous status. On the other hand, retired officials who returned to the lineage retained honorary titles granted by the state, leveraging their political capital to establish and reinforce internal hierarchical structures. Meanwhile, lower-tier Confucian literati facilitated the integration of Confucian rites and lineage discipline, making "loyalty and bravery" and "filial piety and fraternal duty" the moral pillars sustaining lineage cohesion.

In terms of internal organizational structure, the ancestral hall-centered "tangkou" replaced grassroots administrative units, achieving autonomy through land registration, genealogy compilation, and the management of public affairs (such as water conservancy and the construction of study halls). Although the lineage lacked a centralized patriarch, elders and local elites made collective decisions through councils. Additionally, family instructions further delineated the rights and responsibilities of members, allowing the lineage to form a stable self-governing system within the governance vacuum created by the imperial principle that "state power did not extend below the county level."

Amid dynastic transitions, the Zhongshan Wu lineage consistently aligned itself with the official mainstream ideology by upholding traditional Confucian imperial examination values (such as promoting scholarly achievements and Confucian literati) and integrating various moral honor systems (such as imperial commendations, chastity awards, and martyr recognitions). This alignment secured tacit approval, if not outright support, from the ruling class.

Compared to existing research on Chinese lineages, this study offers new dimensions of understanding. Previous literature has either emphasized the relatively autonomous structures and cultural symbols of lineages (highlighting internal mechanisms such as communal property, geomancy, and rituals) or focused on state suppression and infiltration. Some scholars argue that lineages exhibited passive adaptation or a reactive "revival" under modernizing

pressures. In short, prior academic frameworks have largely centered on themes of "autonomous independence," "cultural manifestations of autonomy," and "forced adaptation to modernity," overlooking the proactive efforts of lineages like the Zhongshan Wu in consolidating, reinforcing, and stabilizing their autonomy.

The case of the Zhongshan Wu lineage presents a more active and deliberate survival strategy—one in which the lineage neither passively accepted state influence nor existed in isolation from the state system. Instead, it actively leveraged state institutions to secure critical resources (such as political legitimacy) and used these resources to construct and reinforce its local autonomous status and shared identity among members. The key to this effort lay in securing "state endorsement," whereby lineage elites systematically utilized institutions like the imperial examinations to obtain governance capital, then internalized it as the legitimizing foundation for lineage self-rule. This mechanism of actively seeking and achieving a balance between state authority and local autonomy is crucial for understanding how single-lineage villages like the Zhongshan Wu lineage endured for exceptionally long periods.

Despite its long history, this lineage also exhibited signs of division (household partitioning) and internal strife. However, the eventual outcome was "divided households but not lineage, separated villages but not surname." The various branches coexisted harmoniously, jointly establishing lineage rules after building separate ancestral halls and demarcating land interests, then maintaining stable development until the upheavals of the modern era. Evidently, while the proactive embrace of "state endorsement" consolidated the lineage's legitimacy, this alone was insufficient to ensure unity among its members.

After engaging with state power, the Wu lineage immediately began constructing a shared social value system, fully embracing Neo-Confucian moral values, actively participating in imperial examinations, and engaging in public infrastructure projects. In doing so, the lineage managed to curb its "unrestrained expansion" upon reaching a certain scale. Meanwhile, neighboring villages with other surnames gradually developed and intermarried with the Wu lineage. This allowed it to avoid the negative effects seen in many southeastern lineages—infighting among branches of the same surname and violent feuds with other-surname villages.

Nevertheless, this symbiotic relationship between lineage and state also had inherent vulnerabilities. Bottom-up movements like the Taiping Rebellion, which destroyed ancestral halls, directly undermined the lineage's material foundations (such as population records and landholdings), exposing its dependence on land and ritual infrastructure to maintain power. Initially, the lineage could expand unrestrained due to power vacuums and low regional development. However, over time, this seemingly indestructible lineage society was inevitably dismantled alongside the imperial values and social structures to which it was bound. The society constructed by the Zhongshan Wu lineage, though distinct from ordinary small villages, was no utopia.

In the face of crisis, the Zhongshan Wu lineage attempted to rebuild blood ties through genealogy revisions and reshape collective memory using Confucian ethics. Though these efforts did not achieve the desired results, they demonstrated the lineage's resilience and vitality. This cyclical model of "lineage autonomy-state endorsement-strengthened

autonomy-social value formation" became the core logic enabling the Zhongshan Wu lineage to transcend dynastic changes and sustain its control over local villages.

Today, as rural China faces challenges such as population mobility and value pluralism, some long-standing single-surname villages still seek ways to unite internal members and pursue collective development. Understanding how the Zhongshan Wu lineage integrated traditional ethics and actively connected with larger entities (the state) to maintain order may offer historical insights for grassroots organizations in respecting local traditions and tapping into collective spiritual values.

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