The Hall of Purity

Self-combed women and communal living in the Canton Delta (1880-2012)

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Abstract

Throughout history, women's emancipation has affected architectural designs. Collective or communal buildings for women on their own have been documented at least since medieval times. Yet, in China's Canton region, a unique women-only building typology has remained unfamiliar to the general public. The Aunt's Houses refer to communal buildings for self-combed women – a group of women who tied their hair up as a vow of never marrying. Originating in the 1880s, this custom was distinctive to China's Canton Delta. It thrived with the region's silk economy development (1900-1930) and eventually faded towards the end of the 20th century alongside the modern country's reformation. As a place to accompany and support each other, the Aunt's Houses were the retreat for self-combed women after rebelling against the patriarchal society. *Bing Yu Tang* – "The Hall of Purity" – is the best-preserved case of such houses. Completed in 1951 in Shunde, Canton, the Hall of Purity was initiated by around 400 self-combed women as their collective retirement home. It was converted into a museum in 2012, along with the passing of the last generation of these women. Based on primary sources gathered from the field visit to the Hall of Purity, including contemporary and historical images and survey data, as well as archival images and literature, this history thesis takes The Hall of Purity as a case study and explores the uniqueness of self-combed women and their communal living places from its origin in the 1880s until its diminishment between the 1980-2010s. Through material and symbolic lenses of architecture, this thesis aims to document and comprehend the reasons behind self-combed women's formation and the significance of architecture in the women's community.

Keywords: Self-Combed Women, the Aunt's Houses, the Hall of Purity, Female Communal Living, Female Independence

Introduction

Hair tied into a bun, a group of women gathered in front of a house in Shunde, Canton, celebrating its completion in 1951 (Figure 1). These women were *Zi-shu nü* [self-combed women] – women who tie their hair up as a vow of never marrying. Such rebelling against the Confucian society was unique to China's Canton Delta. These women lived together and formed their own communities. The reasons behind this were complex. Yet, their social and architectural history remains unfamiliar to the general public. In Chinese, self-combed women's houses were called *Gu-po wu* – the Aunt's Houses. These houses are found in the Pearl River Delta in Canton. *Bing-yu Tang* – the Hall of Purity – is the best-preserved case of such houses. The cultural phenomenon of self-combing narrates an intertwined history of China's female independence, economic development and social changes. This thesis takes The Hall of Purity as a case study, exploring the uniqueness of self-combed women and their communal living from its inception in the 1880s until its diminishment at the beginning of this century.[1]

Figure 1. A group of self-combed women celebrating the Hall of Purity's completion. They were likely to be its first inhabitants. Original photo in 1951. Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022, from photo display at the Hall of Purity.

According to local county annuals in the Qing dynasty, marriage resistance appeared as far back as the 1810s in rural Canton. However, "self-combing" was only first documented in 1884.[2] This custom developed alongside the region's silk economy and peaked during 1900-1930 when approximately 10% of

[1] The practise of self-combing was first documented in 1884. It has decreased since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Hall of Purity was completed one year after modern China was established. This building was converted into a museum in 2012, along with the death of the last generation of self-combed women.

[2] The acts of marriage resistance already appeared in *Shunde Xianzhi* 顺德县志 [County records of Shunde] in 1813, also in the later county records in 1827, 1853, 1872, etc. The term "self-combing" was first noted in *Yueyou Xiaozhi* 粤游小志 [Document of Canton Things] in 1884.

Canton's female population became self-combed.[3] After the economic depression in the 1930s, many women immigrated to Singapore for a living. The Hall of Purity was initiated by around 400 self-combed women working in Singapore, as they wanted a settled place in their hometown of Shunde. This two-storey communal house contains accommodations, living spaces, and religious and memorial chapels. About 30 women lived there during its peak time in 1978.[4]

Why did these women choose to self-comb? And what role did architecture play in this setting? Self-combing was not a mere act of feminist manifestation following the women's financial independence. Similarly, female communal living was not simply a "result" of this phenomenon. The Aunt's Houses were vessels of self-combed women's life histories. Through material and symbolic lenses of architecture, this thesis aims to document and comprehend the reasons behind self-combed women's formation and the significance of architecture in the women's community.

Since they slowly disappeared after the 1980s, self-combed women have been studied by historians, anthropologists and sociologists. Authors like Marjorie Topley and Janice E. Stockard stated that self-combing was built upon the silk economy's explicit foundation and expressed a feminist awakening.[5] Social scientist Alvin So identified the strong correlation between marriage resistance and industrialised production, suggesting the "feminist movement" resulted from rural society facing capitalist influence.[6] These works focused on the "patriarchal oppression – feminist revolt" dichotomy; however, lacking an understanding of Canton's regional cultural context. Historian Ye Hanming defined self-combing as a sub-culture developed under China's dominant cultural system. Ye emphasised the "collective power" of self-combed women, fostered and reinforced by their communal living. Likewise, Cao Xuansi and Li Ningli covered the influence of folk culture and rural religion, indicating the praise of "chastity" and "purity" had impacted the decision for self-combing but also became another form of constraint.[7] Whilst a considerable body of research has been carried out on anthropology and sociology aspects of self-combing, much less is discussed about its architecture. Although – with the passing of self-combed women – recent studies have focused more on the Aunt's Houses, very few scholars on this have an architectural background. Yet, some recent works acknowledge the relevance of these spaces. In 2016, journalists Xu Chunlian and Lin Zhiwen

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[3] Ye Hanming 叶汉明, "Quanli de ciwenhua ziyuan: Zishu nü yu zimei qunti" 权力的次文化资源：自梳女与姊妹群体 [Power of Culture Sub-System: Self-Combed Women and Sisterhood], in *Huanan hunyin zhidu yu funü diwei* 华南婚姻制度与妇女地位 [Marriage Systems and Women's Status in Southern China], ed. Ma Jiandao 马建钊, Qiao Jian 乔健, and Du Ruile 杜瑞乐 (Nanning: Guangxi Ethic Press, 1994), 80.

[4] Xu Chunlian 徐春莲 and Lin Zhiwen 林志文, *Zhongguo zuihou de zishu nü* 中国最后的自梳女 [China's Last Self-Combed Women] (Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 2016), 154.

[5] Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung" in *Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore: Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money*, ed. Marjorie Topley and Jean DeBernardi (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011). Janice E. Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930* (California: Stanford University Press, 1989).

[6] Alvin So, *The South China Silk District: Local Historical Transformation and World System Theory,* trans. Chen Chunsheng (Henan: Zhongzhou Ancient Works Press, 1987).

[7] Cao Xuansi 曹玄思, "Xiantian dao de zishu nü" 先天道的自梳女 [The Self-Combed Women of Xiantian Dao], in *Huanan hunyin zhidu yu funü diwei* 华南婚姻制度与妇女地位 [Marriage Systems and Women's Status in Southern China], ed. Ma Jiandao 马建钊, Qiao Jian 乔健, and Du Ruile 杜瑞乐 (Nanning: Guangxi Ethic Press, 1994). Li Ningli 李宁利, *Shunde zishu nü wenhua jiedu* 顺德自梳女文化解读 [Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women] (Beijing: People's Press, 2007), 47.

documented their visits to various Aunt's Houses with interviews and images.[8] They recorded first-hand information at its last chance but with limited analysis. In 2017, anthropologist He Wenzhen focused on the Hall of Purity's cultural representational meanings, indicating architecture's contribution to forming collective memories and a sense of belonging.[9] So far, none of the studies has shown proper floor plans of the Aunt's Houses.

To fill this research gap, this thesis documents the Hall of Purity's social and architectural history from its completion in 1951 till its conversion into a museum in 2012. Specifically, it incorporates primary sources gathered from field visits to the Hall of Purity and Shatou village, Shunde, where the building is located, in December 2022. These sources include the building's contemporary and historical images and survey data, such as room dimensions. The reproduction of the building's floor plans, based on these images and data, offers fresh insights into the architectural research of self-combed women. Secondary sources include books, journals, and interviews by others, providing background knowledge in analysing the building. Archival data, such as historical annuals and statics preserved at online libraries and Shunde archives, are also studied in this sense. Due to practical reasons, the author could not access local archives in person, so another architect, Yingyi Sun, conducted the fieldwork on the author's behalf.

The thesis is divided into three parts in response to the research questions. The first chapter traces the history of marriage resistance and self-combing in the context of Canton's regional culture and economic development between 1880-1930, exploring the factors for forming this custom. The second chapter discusses self-combed women's communal living and the typology of the Aunt's Houses, examining the role of architecture in establishing the women's communities. The third chapter analyses the Hall of Purity in its history (1951-2012) and architecture, focusing on self-combed women's dwellings in more detail and looking into the connection between the building and its occupants.

As a unique female group in China's history, self-combed women emerged under the co-influence of social and cultural factors during the country's modernisation. Women's rejection of patriarchal obligations pushed them to the margins of society. Superficially, they appeared to be living together as a compromise. However, as evidenced by the architectural analysis of the Hall of Purity, self-combed women's communal living has strengthened their self-identity and formed a close-knit women's community.

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[8] Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*.

[9] He Wenzhen 和文臻, "Kuayue lishi de shengming zhi she: Zishu nü jusuo 'Bingyu Tang' zuowei shengmingkongjian de renleixue yanjiu" 跨越历史的生命之舍：自梳女居所 "冰玉堂" 作为生命空间的人类学研究 [Life Places Across History: An Anthropological Study on Self-Combed Women's Dwelling "Bingyu Tang" as a Life Space], *Minsu yanjiu* 民俗研究 135, no.5 (2017): 120-127.

Self-combing as a cultural phenomenon

Hair, in Chinese culture, has been closely related to a person's identity, representing their marital status, occupation, or social class. A hairdressing ritual was performed at the wedding to signal the bride's arrival at "social maturity": she was no longer a girl, but a married woman.[10] Self-combed women, on the contrary, imitated this transition ritual without the participation of a husband, thus manifesting their rejection of marriage. Self-combed regions were mainly around Canton's Pearl River Delta (Figure 2). This custom originated in Shunde *Xian* [County] and gradually became prevalent in the surrounding areas.[11] Chronologically, self-combed women could be divided into three generations: the first generation (before the 1880s) took other forms of marriage resistance, the second (1880s-1930s) mainly worked in silk factories, and the third generation (1930s-1950s) worked as domestic workers abroad or in larger cities.[12]

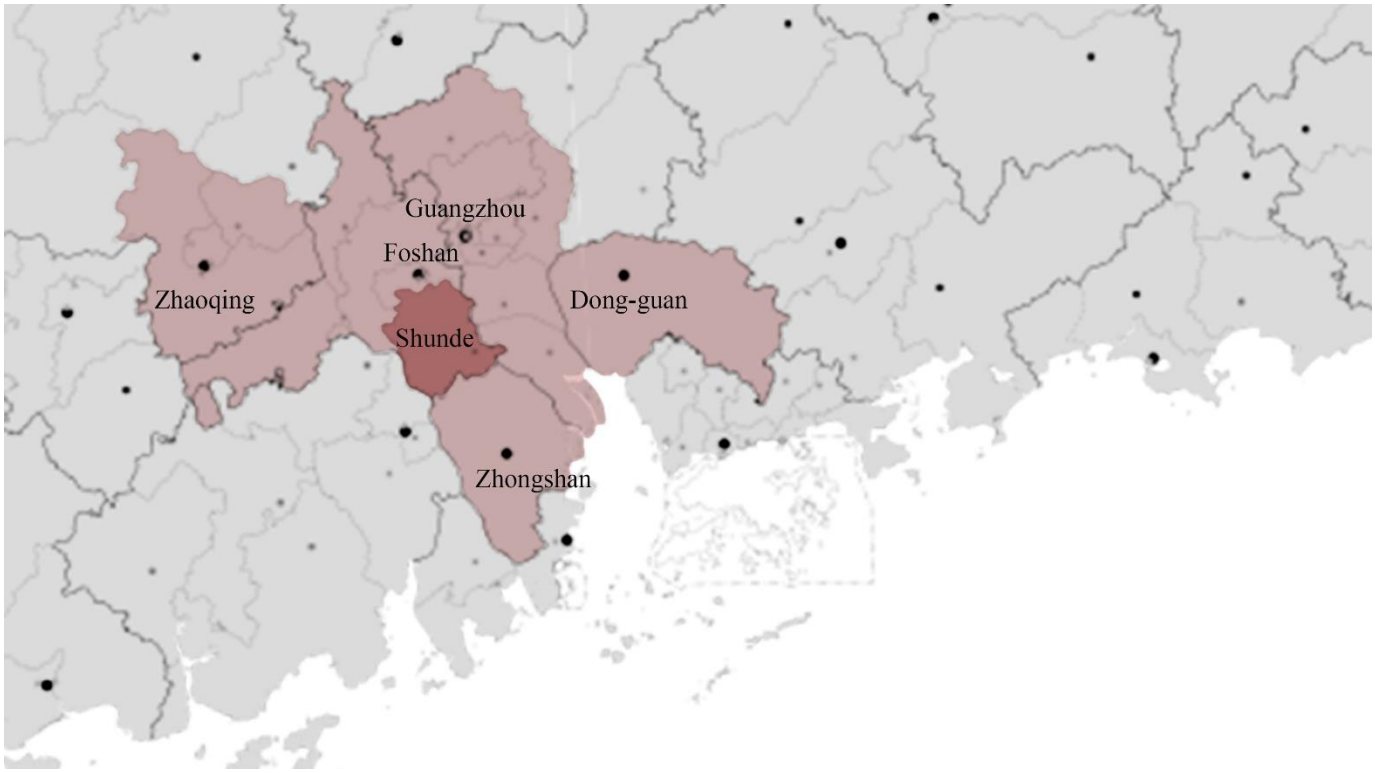

Figure 2. Map of self-combed regions.
By the author, based on the map drawn by Cartographic Services, Australian National University.[13]

Self-combing was a combined result of multiple factors mainly based on three aspects: the regional culture and religion, the cohabitation of young girls, and the development of the silk industry. Regional culture provided preconditions for this custom to form, and economic development catalysed it to thrive. Girls' cohabitation, although often overlooked, fostered female solidarity and was the prototype for self-combed women's communal living.

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[10] Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung", 423.

[11] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 15.

[12] Li Jianming 李建明, interview by Wang Yanxian 王艳羡, *Zhujiang Shangbao* 珠江商报, August 14, 2011. This interview appeared as extractions from local newspapers as part of the display in the Hall of Purity.

[13] The map by Cartographic Services, Australian National University was accessed from Ye Ziling, "Zishu nü: Dutiful daughters of the Guangdong (Canton) Delta", *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no.17 (July 2008). http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue17/ye.htm

The cultural context of Canton has been fundamentally influenced by the idea of *Zong-zu* [lineage] – a dominant power in South China. Many villages in this region were mono-surname, meaning that most of the inhabitants were of the same male ancestors. The patriarchal cultural system determined the region's societal gendered ideals and family organisation. Married women were cut-off from their natal families to join the lineage of their husbands. The marriage was often appointed by parents as a way of "keeping the lineage going" without even considering the bride's consent. Women were "installed" in unfamiliar in-law families to perform heavy domestic work and bear sons, continuing the family's male descent line.[14] Their fear of mistreatment and loss of freedom thus led to female anti-marital positions.

The earlier form of marriage resistance was *Bu-luo jia* [delayed-transfer marriage], in which the bride refused to join her husband's family. In extreme cases - as appeared in a newspaper illustration showing six women sinking themselves in resistance to marriage - women committed collective suicide while being forced to live with their husbands (Figure 3).[15] Some delayed-transfer women paid compensation fees to their in-law families to avoid living with them. This prototype gradually turned into self-combing. Once a daughter was self-combed, her parents could no longer appoint her a husband.[16] This declared celibacy saved the women from negotiating with in-law families and paying compensations, thus freeing them from marriage at less cost.[17] In earlier folk poems, unmarried girls were still portrayed as having uncombed hair. However, a document in 1884 recorded a change: "Girls who refuse to marry…initiate dressing ceremonies themselves…are called self-combed sisters…".[18] Self-combing thereby became the ritualised and visualised expression of celibacy.

Figure 3. "Good Flowers fade Together." Newspaper illustration of six women sinking themselves in resistance to marriage. Source: *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, collection No. Xin (3), 21. This picture was published during 1884-1898.

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[14] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 1-3.

[15] Delayed-transfer marriage and the extreme cases of collective suicide were recorded in various documents during the end of the Qing dynasty, such as *Xiangshan Xianzhi* 香山县志 [County Records of Xiangshan] in 1827, *Yueyou Xiaozhi* 粤游小志 [Document of Canton Things] in 1884, and *Zhonghua Quanguo Fengsu Zhi* 中华全国风俗志 [Documents of folk cultures in China] in 1922. Marriage resistance was seen as an "undesirable" custom and often bore biased comments from the authors.

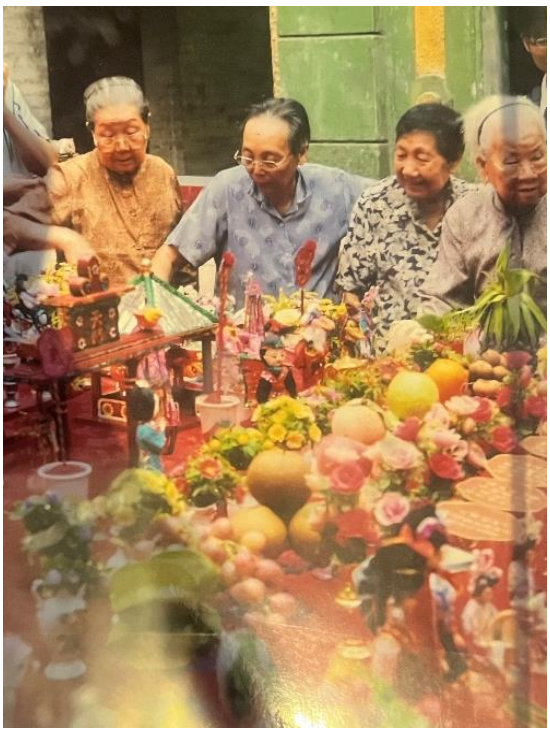
[16] Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung", 438.

[17] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 168-169.

[18] *Zhang Xintai* 张心泰, *Yueyou Xiaozhi* 粤游小志 [Document of Canton Things], 1884, Historical text, From *Chinese Text Project*, https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=104735&page=198. The male author commented "these women just have not yet found the man they like" and overlooked the mistreatment towards married women at the time.

Local religions further emphasised women's anti-marital notions. Many self-combed women believed in *Xian-tian Dao* [the Way of Formal Heaven] – a folk religion introduced to Shunde in 1920 – and worshipped *Guang Yin* [the Goddess of Mercy].[19] This goddess appeared in religious literature as a model woman who remained unmarried and chaste over her parents' objections. Self-combed women followed her as a "perfect female figure" and strengthened their commitment to celibacy.[20] The fear of being "polluted" from sex and childbirth added to female distaste towards sexual relations with men. The praise of female chastity aligned with patriarchal ideology, ironically bringing self-combed women high societal status yet with constraints. Despite their expected duties of wifehood and motherhood, women were allowed to be single as long as they remained "pure" and "chaste".

Another figure of worship was *Qi-jie* [the seven sisters], in celebration of *Qi-xi* [the Double-Seven festival]. The festival was popular throughout China but had a different focus in Canton. In the widely circulated version, a couple got separated by the girl's father and could only see each other once a year. The festival was to celebrate their reunion. However, this legend took another form in the Canton Delta: the girl favoured sisterhood over marriage, so she would only meet her husband once a year. Local women worshipped these sisters with elaborate displays of their handcraft skills. The reformation of this legend resonated with the local culture of marriage resistance, stressing women's community rather than the patriarchy. Women, instead of men, entered the *Ci-tang* [ancestral halls] to lead celebrations, and many among them were self-combed women.[21] The Goddess of Mercy and the Seven Sisters thus became spiritual symbols for self-combing (Figures 4 and 5). One represented purity and the other implied female solidarity.



(Left) Figure 4. The statue of the Goddess of Mercy at the Hall of Purity. Photo by Yingyi Sun, 2022.
(Right) Figure 5. A group of self-combed women celebrating the Double-Seven festival at the Hall of Purity. The original photo was taken during the 1980s-2010s. Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

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[19] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 36.

[20] Cao, "The Self-Combed Women of Xiantian Dao", 131.

[21] Ancestral halls, or lineage temples, are buildings dedicated to defining ancestors and progenitors of surname lineages and holding family events. Typically, the ancestral halls are exclusively for male family members; women are considered "outsiders".

Women in the Canton Delta developed close companionships with each other at a young age. One common feature of the region was the co-sleeping of young girls in *Nü-zai wu* [the Girl's Houses] – the place for adolescent girls to sleep and socialise outside their families. Due to a lack of space and privacy, it was inappropriate for the girls to sleep at home with their male family members. As recorded by anthropologist Andrea Sanker from her interviewee's personal experience: "The homes were so small that the girls could see their father and brother using the chamber pot at night, which was terribly embarrassing."[22] It was a common custom to separate unmarried girls from men. According to the same interviewee, the girls enjoyed each other's company and preferred to sleep in the Girl's Houses rather than with their families: "We moved in…as soon as we could take care of ourselves at night…All the girls wanted to live in the Girl's Houses. It was great fun."[23]

The Girl's Houses (Figure 6) were not specially built for this purpose. These were spare village buildings owned by senior (often male) family members and were rented to the girls for free.[24] Inhabitants from different economic backgrounds could sleep in the same house. The houses varied in scale and form, consisting of gathering spaces and large communal bedrooms. Each house typically accommodated 4 to 6 girls.[25] The girls started their residence around age 10, usually introduced by friends or female relatives.[26] They worked or stayed with their families during the day and went to the Girl's Houses in the evening to chat, sing, and play games with each other.

Figure 6. A Girl's House in a village in Foshan, Canton. It is now preserved as an intangible cultural heritage.
Source: Foshan Gaoming Museum, 2018.

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[22] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 38. The original documentation was published in 1978.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Gaoming Bowuguan 高明博物馆 [Foshan Gaoming Museum], "Nü-zai Wu" 女仔屋 [the Girl's House], Foshan Gaoming qv zhengfu wang 佛山高明区政府网 [Government Official of Gaoming district, Foshan City], December 10, 2018, http://www.gaoming.gov.cn/zwgk/zdlyxxgkzl/whjg/qbwggwgk/jy/zskz_1109610/content/post_28068.html

[25] Ibid.

[26] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 31-41.

The Girl's Houses were informal places of interaction and education. Girls exchanged stories and skills, taught each other how to write and sew, and told each other about manners, religious customs and marriage – things they would not learn from elsewhere. The mingling in the Girl's Houses fostered strong bonds among the girls and played an important role in shaping their notions of womanhood and marriage. Unpleasant stories from married girls were passed along during their visits and contributed to forming anti-marital thoughts among unmarried girls.[27] Sometimes, the girls even prevented the marriage of their sisters by helping them to escape or teaching them ways to resist. Many self-combed women made up their minds while living in the Girl's Houses.[28] Although differing from the Aunt's Houses in many aspects, the Girl's Houses appeared to be their precedents in this sense. Self-combing marked the transformation from the "Girl's" to the "Aunt's" house in the significance of a woman's social maturity. The sisterhood formed in one house was passed on to the other and developed into a close-knit women's community.

Self-combing gained popularity at the end of the 19th century, paralleling the growth of the silk economy. There was a positive correlation between the self-combed regions and the sericulture areas (Figure 7). Shunde, where self-combing originated, was also the centre of sericulture development. Investigations during the 1920-30s indicated that 1.4 out of 1.8 million of Shunde's population practised sericulture.[29] Women were preferred in silk reeling because their hands were "smaller and more delicate".[30]

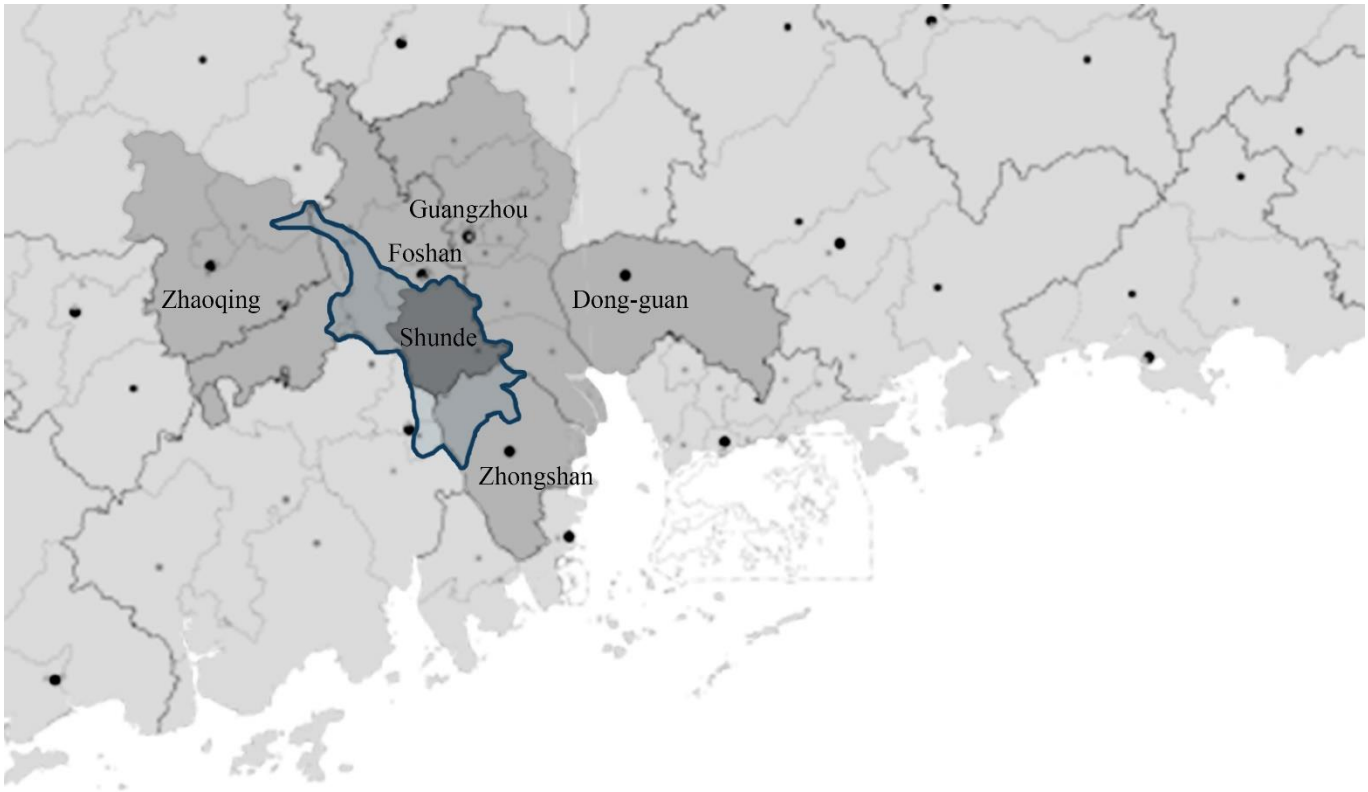

Figure 7. Areas under mulberry cultivation (blue) in comparison to the self-combed regions.
By the author. The mulberry cultivation area was based on the map by Janice E. Stockard, in *Daughters of the Canton Delta.*

[27] Ibid, 46.

[28] Ye "Power of Culture Sub-System: Self-Combed Women and Sisterhood", 78.

[29] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 130.

[30] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 148.

Between 1820-1880, Canton's silk exportation increased ten times, marking the start of the region's export economy. Manual production could no longer fulfil the high demands of Western customers. Therefore, steam reeling machines were introduced in the 1870s, leading to rapid expansions of filature factories (Figure 8). From 1880 to 1920, factories increased from 6 to 167, and workers increased from 3000 to 83000.[31] Most silk-reeling workers were female, whereas men were managers and technicians. On average, one factory had 525 female workers and 15 males.[32] Meanwhile, self-combing custom thrived with this. A 1953 report stated that half of the female workers in Shunde's silk factories were unmarried, with 30% being self-combed women.[33]

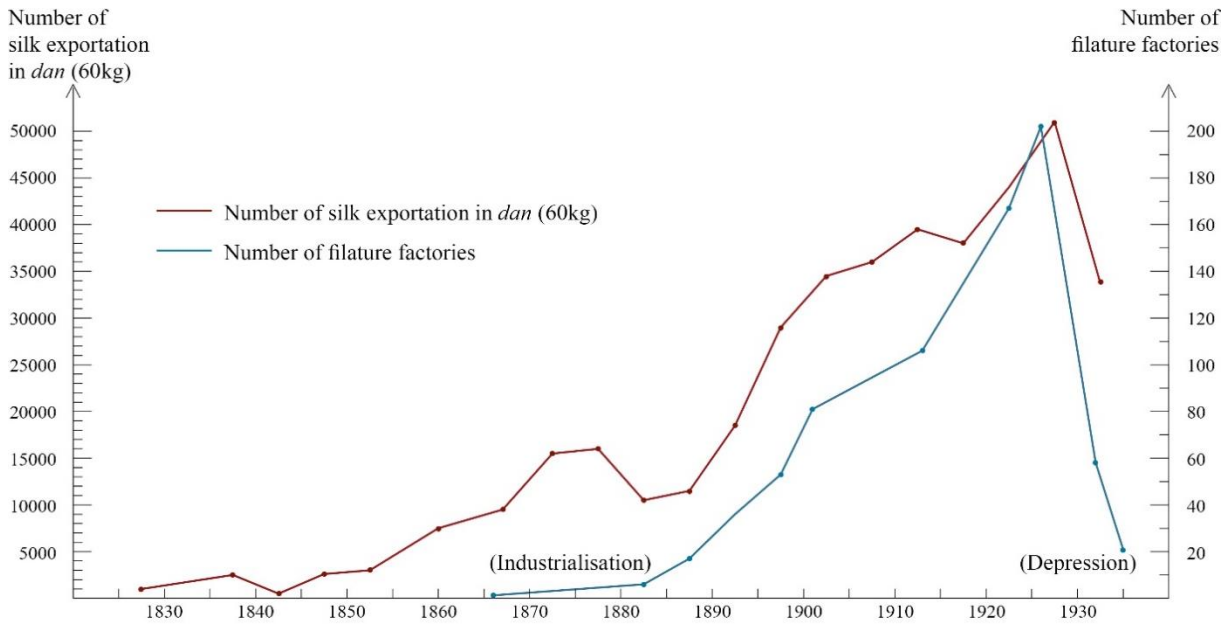

Figure 8. The growth of Canton's silk economy from 1825 to 1935.
By the author. Based on data from So, *The South China Silk District: Local Historical Transformation and World System Theory* and Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*.[34]

One direct reason for the strong correlation between self-combing and the silk industry was these women's financial independence. Before the introduction of filature machines, silk production was manually carried out on a household basis: fathers and sons grew mulberry trees, and mothers and daughters took care of the cocoons and reeled silk.[35] Most of a family's income – as decided by the father – went to its male members. Industrialisation allowed women to work in factories and earn their own money. Due to the high market demand, factory owners offered decent payment to attract female workers from household-based

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[31] So, *The South China Silk District,* 154, 176

[32] Ibid, 177

[33] Democratic Women's Federation of Shunde, "Shunde Jiande sichang guanyu hunyinfa guanchezhixing qingkuang diaocha baogao" 顺德健德丝厂关于婚姻法贯彻执行情况调查报告 [Investigation Report of Shunde Jiande Silk Factory on the Implementation of Marriage Law], 1953. Quoted in Li Ningli 李宁利, "Zishu nü de hunjia xiangzheng" 自梳女的婚嫁象征 [Marriage symbols of self-combed women], *Minsu Yanjiu* 民族研究 5 (2004): 36-45. This report states that Jiande Factory had 63 male and 940 female workers, of which 116 were self-combed; Dahe Factory had 30 male and 484 female workers, 50% were unmarried and 30% were self-combed.

[34] So, *The South China Silk District,* 121-122, 154, 176. Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 160.

[35] So, *The South China Silk District,* 129-131.

production to the industry. A woman could earn 200 *yuan* a year, enough to feed a family of five.[36] Thus, women became the main source of family income and gained their voice in the home and society, thereby having more courage to resist the patriarchal obligations of wifehood.

On the other hand, the filature factories preferred single women – without being in a relationship and without children – because they carried fewer burdens. Despite the relatively high wages, the working conditions in these factories were inadequate. Women had to work 11 hours a day in dim light and high temperatures (Figure 9), which could quickly damage their health.[37] Only workers under 30 were suitable for the job, which interfered with the expected age of marriage. Thus, some female workers self-combed not because they were anti-marital; instead, they did so to be allowed to earn a salary.

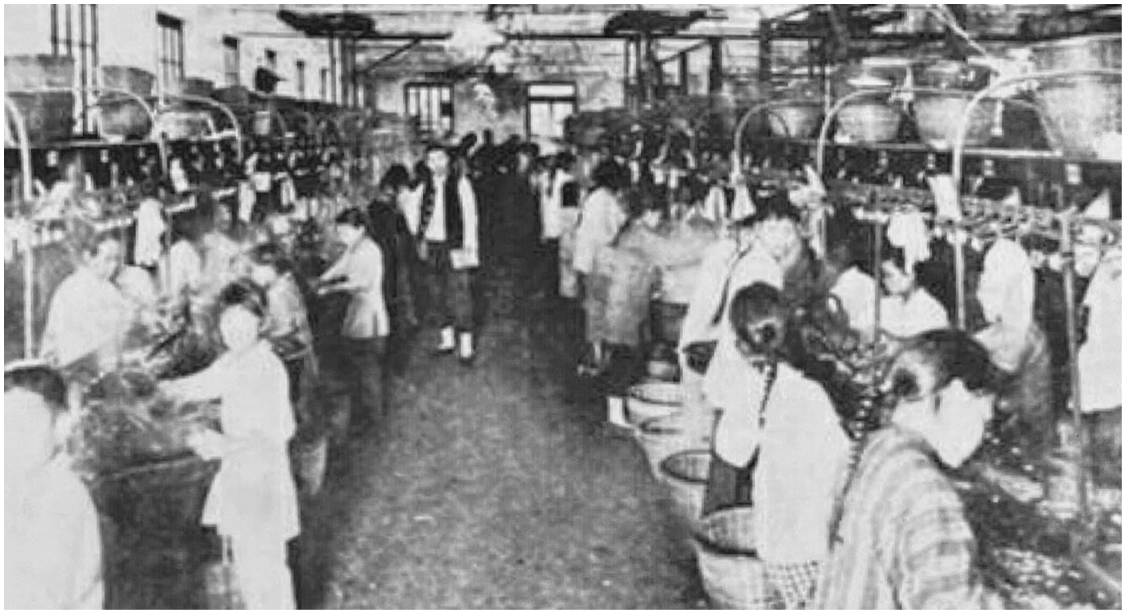

Figure 9. The working condition at a filature factory. Female workers had to crowd together and bear the high temperature of steam machines. The middle of the picture shows a male manager monitoring their work.
Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022, from *Independent Women's Exhibition* in Shunde.

Furthermore, thanks to the silk economy, local lineages became more tolerant of their women's celibacy. Many filature factories were owned by the lineage gentries. Poor working conditions and the gender imbalance in the workforce had led to conflict between the workers and the bourgeoisie. Opposition to self-combing would accelerate the female workers' discontent. Therefore, to reconcile this conflict, the gentries conceded the women's resistance to marriage.[38]

Overall, female anti-marital notions arose from Canton's oppressing patriarchal system, matured under the region's cultural and religious context, and thrived alongside women's financial independence. The declared celibacy of self-combed women implied female autonomy and led to their distinctive way of communal living.

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[36] Ibid, 183.

[37] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 132-134.

[38] So, *The South China Silk District,* 187-188.

The Aunt's Houses and female communal living

In a patriarchal society, marriage symbolised a women's maturity on the one hand and the transformation of her "control" from parental to marital authority on the other. Anthropologists called such rituals "rites of passage".[39] Between the stages of separation and aggregation was the period of "liminality", where the person did not fit into a pre-defined role in society.[40] This was the case for self-combed women. Although self-combing marked their arrival to adulthood, there was no husband to "take over" them from their parents. Self-combed women did not follow the expected transition from a daughter to a wife. Hence, their relationships with their families became ambiguous. Such ambiguity was part of their living spaces.

Society often repels liminal personae for their blurred and paradoxical identities. The public's view on self-combed women was thus contradicting. While people respected these women for their chastity and financial independence, they also stigmatised them for their rejection of wifehood, because patriarchal ideology refused to admit that women could be mentally independent of men. After female workers' unemployment due to the economic depression in the 1930s, newspapers made the best use of this opportunity to mock them: "Workers lost their ways of living…those self-combed ones urged to seek the shelter of a husband. Their embarrassment was pathetic and amusing."[41] Such subjective attacks appealed to society's prevailing view. The public's distorted perceptions led to the belief that celibate daughters could bring bad luck to their birth families. Due to their "incomplete transition", self-combed women were both (and neither) "married" and "unmarried" daughters to the family.[42] In either case, their residence at home – both in life and after death – was unwanted.

During their productive years, self-combed women contributed to their family income and might be allowed to live at home. However, their co-residence with male family members' wives was considered "inharmonious" and often rejected.[43] They were treated as "(self) married" daughters in this sense, meaning that they were socially mature and should no longer live with the family. On the other hand, the women were seen as "unmarried" at their death because they did not have a husband to "accommodate" their spirit.[44] A newspaper article in 1929 described self-combed women's death at home as "ominous" to the family.[45] Even when they could live at home during their earlier years of working at factories, these women had to move out when they got old or sick, normally transferred to a roadside temple or a grass hut

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[39] This term was brought up by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his *Les rites de passage* in 1909.

[40] Victor W Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William Lessa and Evon Vogt (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 234-243. The original text was first published in 1964.

[41] "Jiangui xiaomie zhi Fengcheng nüzi louxi: huanjing suopo, dapo le zishu meng" 渐归消灭之风城女子陋习：环境所迫，打破了自梳梦 [The diminishing of a corrupted custom: breaking the self-combing dream, as compelled by circumstances], *Qun Sheng Bao* 群生报, August 3, 1935. Quoted in Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 137. Several other newspapers between 1930-1936 addressed the same matter with similar biased tones.

[42] Yang Ke 杨可, "Weiwancheng de guodu: zishunv xushi pingshu yu yuxian shijiao xia de zaisi" 未完成的过渡：自梳女评述与阈限视角下的再思 [Unfinished transition: Comment on the narratives of self-combed women and rethinking by the concept of liminality], *Shehuixue pinglun* 社会学评论 [Annual Review of Sociology] 10, no.5 (2022): 108-125.

[43] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 81.

[44] Under the region's patriarchal beliefs, a married woman would become the "ghost of her husband" after death, meaning that her spirit would be accommodated within the husband's family.

[45] "Shunde zishu nü zhi yilai" 顺德自梳女之倚赖 [The Reliance of Shunde's Self-Combed Women], *Min Sheng Bao* 民生报, September 29, 1929. Quoted in Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 77-79.

outside the village to die.[46] Such repulsions continued even after their death. Their *Pai-wei* [spiritual tablets] could not be placed with their families because the "hostless" souls would bring misfortune.[47] A novel in the late 19th century described self-combed women's tombs as: "…scattered around the rocks and under the trees, eroded by the weather and corrupted by the ants…lonely spirit without a host."[48] Some women compromised in the form of *Mai Menkou* [spiritual marriage], in which they nominally married deceased men to be part of wifehood.[49] However, a preferred solution for them was to live together and have a house just for themselves. Eventually, this led to a unique building type – the Aunt's Houses.

The Aunt's Houses functioned as self-combed women's residences during their lives and their memorial halls after death. Even when they were permitted to live with their birth families, many women still favoured living in the Aunt's Houses to be independent and to have each other's company. A newspaper illustration in 1906 showed a group of unmarried women living together and called it a "corrupted custom" in the title (Figure 10). Such houses were often distant from the villages due to people's prejudice against celibate women.[50] Later, a 1929 newspaper reported the women's co-residence and addressed the Aunt's Houses as a "place for the hostless females".[51] This was the same newspaper that called their death "ominous". Despite the biased viewpoints, these publications revealed self-combed women as organised celibates – with their relocation to the Aunt's Houses implying the "beginning of a new chapter in their lives".[52]

Figure 10, "The corrupt custom of sworn sisterhood." Published in *Shangqi Huabao* [Pictorial of the Bizarre Things], 1906. Source: http://www.qlss.com.cn/News/5/12/NewsDetail_289_1.html

[46] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 82. Ye, "Power of Culture Sub-System: Self-Combed Women and Sisterhood", 85.

[47] The spiritual tablet, or memorial tablet, in Chinese culture, is a physical tablet symbolising the spirit of a deceased person, for others to commemorate. The tablets are usually placed in ancestral halls, or family alters at home.

[48] "Puyi Ci" 普依祠 [The Puyi Temple], in *Nü liaozhai zhiyi* 女聊斋志异 [Female Strange Stories in Oriental Society], n.d., Historical document, From *Chinese Text Project*, https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=699639&remap=gb. The exact date was unknown. This text was likely used to intimidate women by amplifying the potential consequences of their celibacy.

[49] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 102-104.

[50] Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, 86.

[51] Self-combed women were called "gu-po", this could be written as either 姑婆 (the aunts) or 孤婆 (hostless or lonely women). 孤婆 was sometimes used as a stigmatised way of addressing these women for their celibacy. Original text from "The Reliance of Shunde's Self-Combed Women". Quoted in Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 77-79.

[52] "Shunde funu shenghuo" 顺德妇女生活 [Female Lives in Shunde], *Yuefeng* 粤风 [Cantonese Trends], September 15, 1935. Quoted in Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 74.

On rare occasions, high-class families would build houses for their celibate daughters to "enhance the family's prestige".[53] However, most self-combed women had to fundraise for the Aunt's Houses on their own. Typically, women working in silk factories shared rented rooms with their "sisters" and saved money by contributing a set percentage of their monthly salary. Their savings were used for constructing Aunt's Houses, festive celebrations (for the Goddess of Mercy and the Seven Sisters), and future funeral expenses (for each other).[54] Earlier-built houses were passed down to the later generations, who then carried out refurbishments. For those who left their hometowns for employment, it was common to purchase or build Aunt's Houses in their hometowns as retirement homes, where they could live together in their old age. The Hall of Purity was an example.

The Aunt's Houses combined two major aspects: residential and spiritual. From the residential point of view, these houses were designed in such a way that a group of women could live together, with multiple (private or communal) bedrooms and large living spaces (Figure 11). According to a self-combed interviewee, the house she lived in was "capable of accommodating up to 30 sisters; some even slept on the floor when there were not enough beds.[55] The 1929 newspaper described the Aunt's Houses as "basecamps for self-combed women", where "inside was like a hostel, with many beds along one another…the women laugh and sing together from the night to the morning".[56] Such texts might exaggerate the living conditions and activities within these houses, as a way of dissimilating their inhabitants from society. Nonetheless, documentaries in the 2010s did suggest that these women enjoyed each other's companionship. "It was very lively", a former resident of the Hall of Purity recalled, "We sat around the tables…many of us."[57]

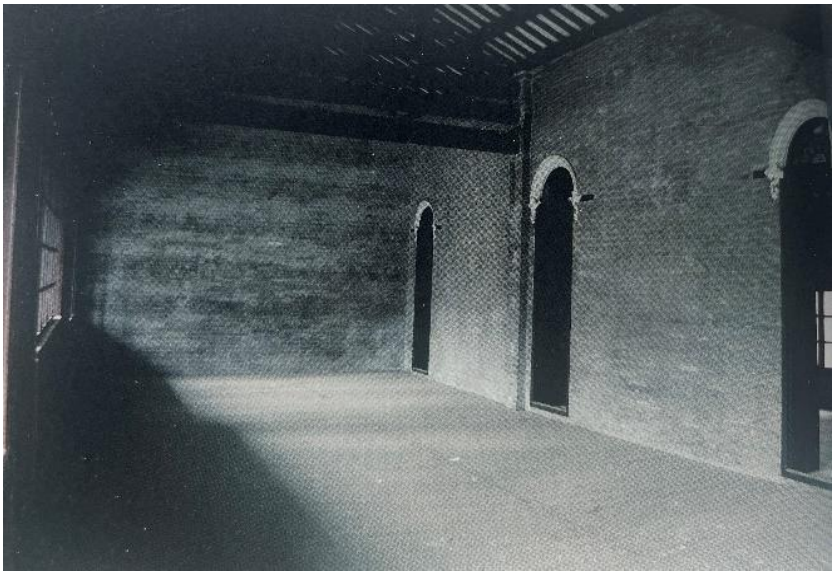

Figure 11, Interior view of an anonymous Aunt's House in Huangpu village, Canton, built in the 1920s. This two-storey house has an identical layout on both floors, with a large gathering space and three doors leading to separate bedrooms. Source: Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, 164.

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[53] Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung", 440-441.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, 83

[56] "The Reliance of Shunde's Self-Combed Women". Quoted in Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*.

[57] According to self-combed woman Liang Jieyuan 梁洁缘 in "Zhongguo zuihou de zishu nü" 中国最后的自梳女 [China's Last Self-Combed Women], documentary produced by Li Xiaowei 黎晓炜 (Phoenix TV, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F34B7LQxOCE. Also in Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, where other self-combed interviewees mentioned similar things.

The spiritual aspect of the Aunt's Houses was mainly concerned with the worship of the Goddess of Mercy and the memory of the deceased self-combed "sisters".[58] Many of these houses contained a religious chapel accommodating the goddess' statue as a "role model" for insisting on her chastity, where self-combed women, as a marginalised group in society, could find spiritual refuge under her guidance (Figure 12). The houses also had a separate chapel for the women, where the departed residents could have their spiritual tablets placed and taken care of by the others, thus saving them from becoming "hostless" souls. As a ritual of worship, the women offered incense sticks to the Goddess of Mercy and their departed sisters on a daily basis (Figure 13) and initiated celebration ceremonies on festive days regarding the goddess and the Seven Sisters.

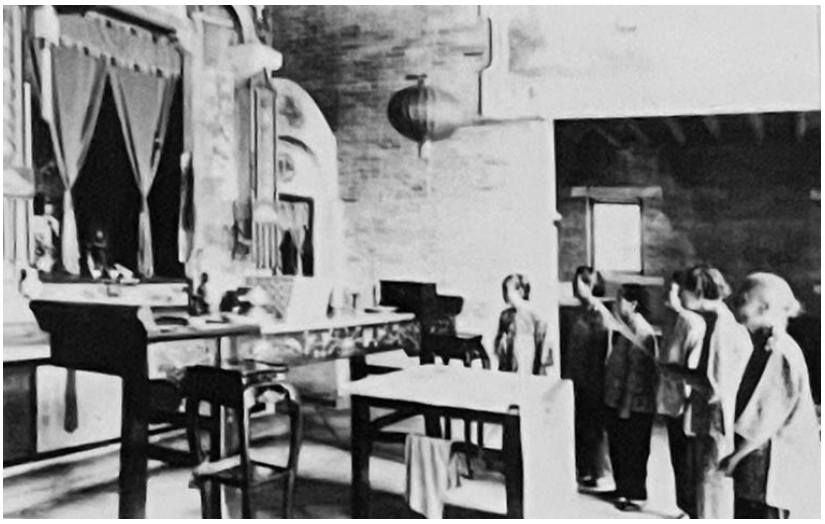

Figure 12. A group of self-combed women praying to the Goddess of Mercy at the Hall of Purity in Shunde, Canton. Original photo taken at the end of the 20th century. Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Figure 13. Self-combed woman Wu Yamei at the chapel of *Guanyin Tang*, an Aunt's House in Zhaoqing, Canton, offering incense sticks to the Goddess of Mercy and her deceased sisters. This building was built around the 1820s and passed on to generations of self-combed women. Wu, by the time of the photo in the 2010s, was one of the building's only two remaining inhabitants. Source: Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, 160.

[58] In the Chinese language, *jiemei* 姐妹 [sisters] is used to address sisterhood even when they are not related by blood, which implies intimate relations and solidarity among the women. This is different from the "religious sister".

Hence, the Aunt's Houses witnessed self-combed women's collective events from life to death: welcoming new sisters, mingling, celebrating birthdays, initiating festive and religious events, and, eventually, funerals. As the women's communal spaces, these houses went beyond their physical existence per se and created a sense of belonging. New social relations were established within the houses. Some women formed *Jinlan Jiemei* [vowed sisterhood] with one another, in which they conducted daily activities as "couples" and cared for each other when they got old or sick. Some scholars, based on this, argued that self-combing was an alternative form of (homosexual) marriage.[59] However, no evidence – apart from anecdotes and word of mouth – proved homosexual behaviours among these women.[60] Their relationship was more of emotional dependency rather than physical. The women also had rules to regulate each other. For example, they should be "on time", "clean", and "chaste" to maintain their disciplined community.[61]

In comparison to the Girl's Houses, the two forms of female communal living were reminiscent of one another and sometimes overlapped in functions. Nonetheless, the Aunt's Houses fundamentally differed from their precedents in several aspects. First and foremost was women's autonomy. Inhabitants remained in the shadows in the Girl's Houses because the buildings belonged to their male seniors. The Aunt's Houses, on the other hand, were initiated by self-combed women themselves, owing to their financial capabilities, and implied their societal independence. Secondly, whereas the Girl's Houses were based on the inhabitants' age (adolescence), the Aunt's Houses were based on their marital status (self-determined celibacy), meaning that these women shared collective identities determined by their free will rather than their physiological condition. Their architecture was thus closely linked to, and became a materialised form of, their ideologies. Furthermore, inhabitants in the Girl's Houses were not obliged to each other, whereas self-combed women had to support one another in "heavier" matters, such as arranging funerals and commemorating the passed-away members. Hence, the women formed solidarity and became emotionally attached to their communal space (Figure 13). Although self-combed women remained "liminal personae" to society in a broader picture, the Aunt's Houses allowed them to embrace a sub-cultural community of their own.

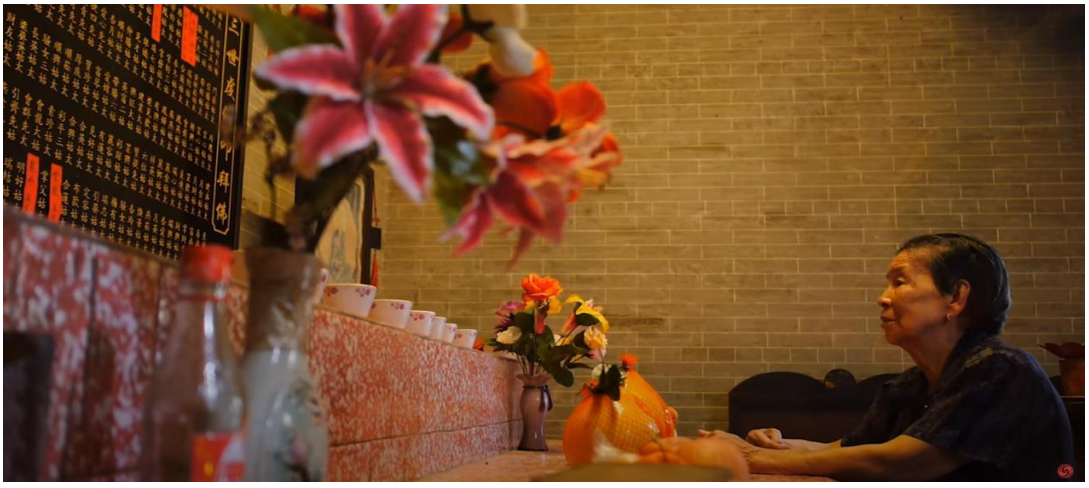

Figure 13. Self-combed woman Liang Jieyuan, in front of the spiritual tablets at the Hall of Purity, 2018. Liang did not live there anymore at the time, but still came every day to care for the house and talk to her departed sisters.
Source: "China's Last Self-Combed Women." Documentary produced by Li Xiaowei (Phoenix TV, 2018)

[59] Li, "Marriage symbols of self-combed women".

[60] Some of them might have been lesbians, but there lacked objective historical records on this, because it was not something that the (male) authors would like to document.

[61] Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 78-80.

The Hall of Purity (1951-2012)

Located in Shatou village in Shunde, Canton, the Hall of Purity was funded and built by the second and third generations of self-combed women as their shared retirement home (Figures 14 and 15). Shatou is a typical mono-surname village. Most of its residents, including its self-combed women, share the family name "Huang". The architectural analysis of the Hall of Purity in this chapter is conducted in comparison to Huang's Ancestral Hall, built in the same village in 1927, to understand how the women's ideology has affected their architecture.

(Left) Figure 14. The hall of Purity, front gate. The building is situated in a quiet corner of the village.
(Right) Figure 15. Central atrium and main facades. This place used to be exclusively for self-combed women back in the day.
Photos by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Canton's silk industry collapsed in the 1930s, displacing over 36000 female silk workers and leaving approximately 10000 women unemployed.[62] As a result, many women immigrated to Singapore and worked as domestic workers for a living. Among them were 2000-3000 self-combed women.[63] They also brought their younger female relatives (sisters and nieces), who then became the third generation of self-combed women. In the 1940s, the women formed a hometown association in Singapore and started raising funds for their retirement house in Shatou, where they wished to live together when they eventually returned home. Around 400 self-combed women contributed. The construction of the Hall of Purity started in 1949 – along with the establishment of the People's Republic of China – and was completed in 1951.[64] The house reached its highest occupancy in the 1970-80s when the majority of the women returned from Singapore. Around 30 women lived there during its peak in 1978.[65] In 2012, the building was converted into a museum and opened to the public.

The Hall of Purity combines both residential and spiritual functions as an Aunt's House. It takes form of a courtyard house, often seen in traditional Chinese architecture, with an overall footprint of 1098 m^2. The building itself has two floors, with an area of 447 m^2. The ground floor comprises outdoor areas, gathering spaces, a kitchen, and shrines. The upper floor used to be bedrooms, now converted into exhibition spaces.

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62 So, *The South China Silk District,* 200. Li, *Cultural Interpretations of Shunde's Self-combed Women*, 136.

63 According to information displayed at the Hall of Purity.

64 The house was completed in 1951 according to Gregorian calendar and in 1950 according to the Lunar calendar.

65 Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, 154.

In general, the spatial form of the Hall of Purity resembles traditional ancestral halls in its hierarchies and the incorporation of "axes". In the traditional courtyard houses, north rooms are of the highest order because they receive the best (south) light. The Hall of Purity has a similar layout to Huang's Ancestral Hall by placing the shrines in the north with a view from the front yard, giving the "spiritual" space the most importance (Figures 16 and 17). However, Huang's Ancestral Hall does so to highlight the lineage's male members, whereas the Hall of Purity honours the Goddess of Mercy and its female occupants. The differentiation between patrilineal power and femininity is also evident in the buildings' names, with the front gate of the ancestral hall reading "Huang's gentlemen with high aims", and that of the Hall of Purity reading "Quiet and peaceful residence by the mountain". The building's plan shows a clear division between the "spiritual" and "mundane" spaces, connected by transitional zones (Figure 18). The layout follows several axes of symmetry. A dominant spatial sequence runs along the central axis: from the front gate through the yard, the second and third gates, the atrium, and finally, the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy. This creates a direct visual connection to the goddess from the entrance (Figure 19), demonstrating her importance as the "spiritual guidance" in this women-only building typology. Likewise, spiritual items – such as tablets and altars – and transitional openings are aligned along secondary axes (Figure 20), comparable with the progressive spatial layers in the ancestral halls.

(Left): Figure 16. The Huang's Ancestral Hall. View from the front yard, looking into shrine of the Huang's (male) ancestors.
(Right): Figure 17. The Hall of Purity. View from the front yard, through the atrium, looking into the shrine of the goddess.
The left says "The Huang's gentlemen with high aims" on the first gate and "The Hall of Succession" on the second.
The right says, "Quiet and peaceful residence by the Heling Mountain" and then "The Hall of Purity".
Photos by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

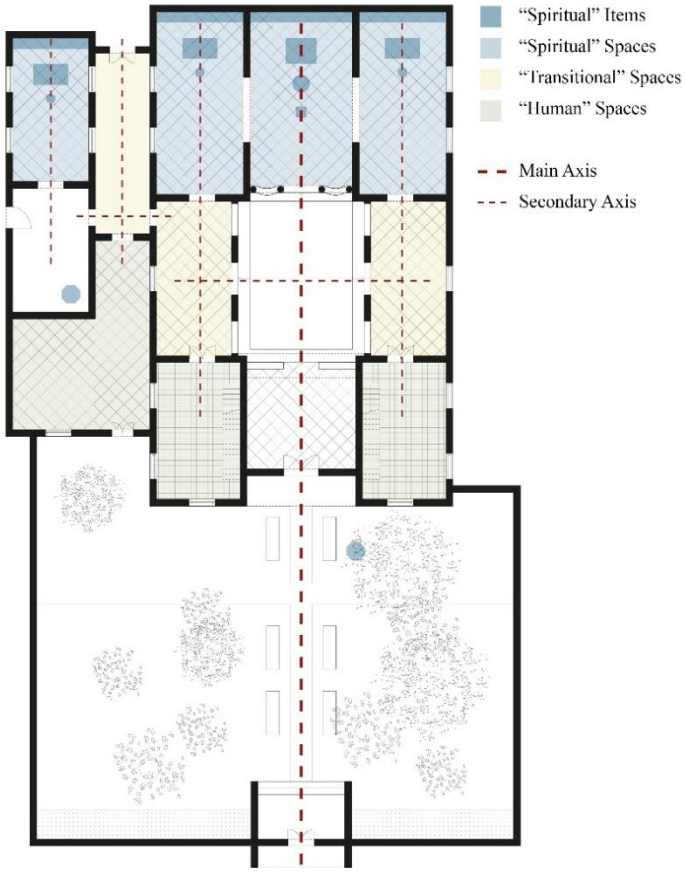


Figure 18. Plan analysis of the Hall of Purity's spatial arrangement and axes of symmetry. By the author.

(Left) Figure 19. View from the front gate, with a direct visual connection to the shrine of the Goddess of Mercy.
(Right): Figure 20, View from the west, looking into the atrium and the east cloister through the sets of lined-up openings.
Photos by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Despite the similarities in spatial arrangements, the Hall of Purity is independent of ancestral halls with the addition of residential functions. Traditional ancestral halls are often single-storey and cannot be lived in, due to the belief that the "living" and the "spirits" should not be housed together. Similarly, there are no actual "indoor" spaces in ancestral halls, meaning that all the spaces are open to the exterior – because "spirits" cannot be trapped in an enclosed room. The Hall of Purity adapts this strategy to some extent by

making the most of its ground floor – the spiritual and gathering spaces – semi-outdoor (Figures 21 and 22). As shown in the plan, the exceptions appear in the south part of the building, where the staircases lead to the upper-floor bedrooms. Hence, the women's dwellings are vertically separated from the shrine of their deceased sisters, yet co-exist in the same house (Figure 23). As described by the women themselves, this is a place "to live in life and to rest in death".[66] The following analysis demonstrates this in more detail by zooming into the spaces with their functions (Figure 24).

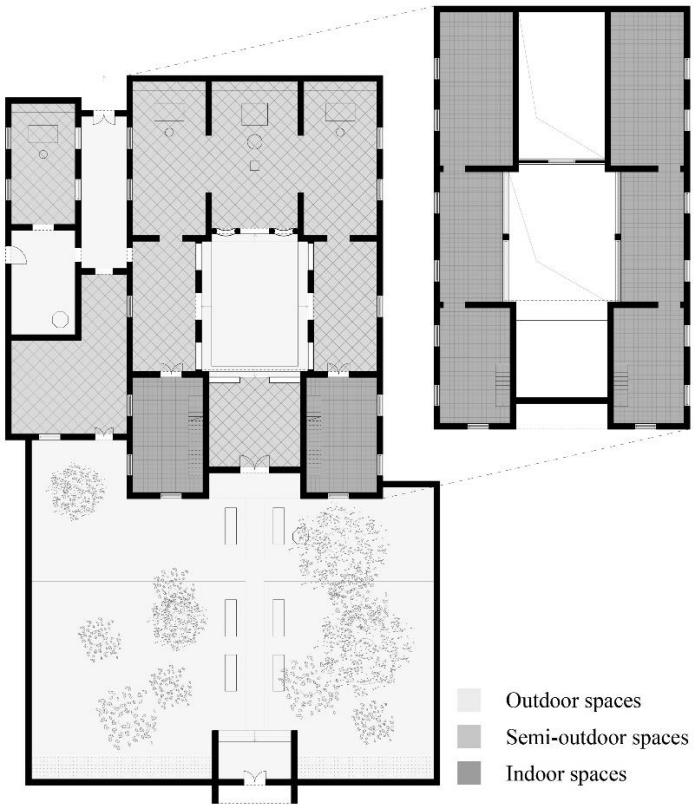


Figure 21. Plan analysis of the Hall of Purity's division of indoor and outdoor spaces. By the author.

(Left) Figure 22. The rooms on the ground floor open directly to the outside.
(Right) Figure 23. View from the atrium. The upper floor contains communal bedrooms. Below it is the cloister for daytime gatherings. To the left are the shrines.
Photos by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

[66] As described by self-women in their collective will in 2001.

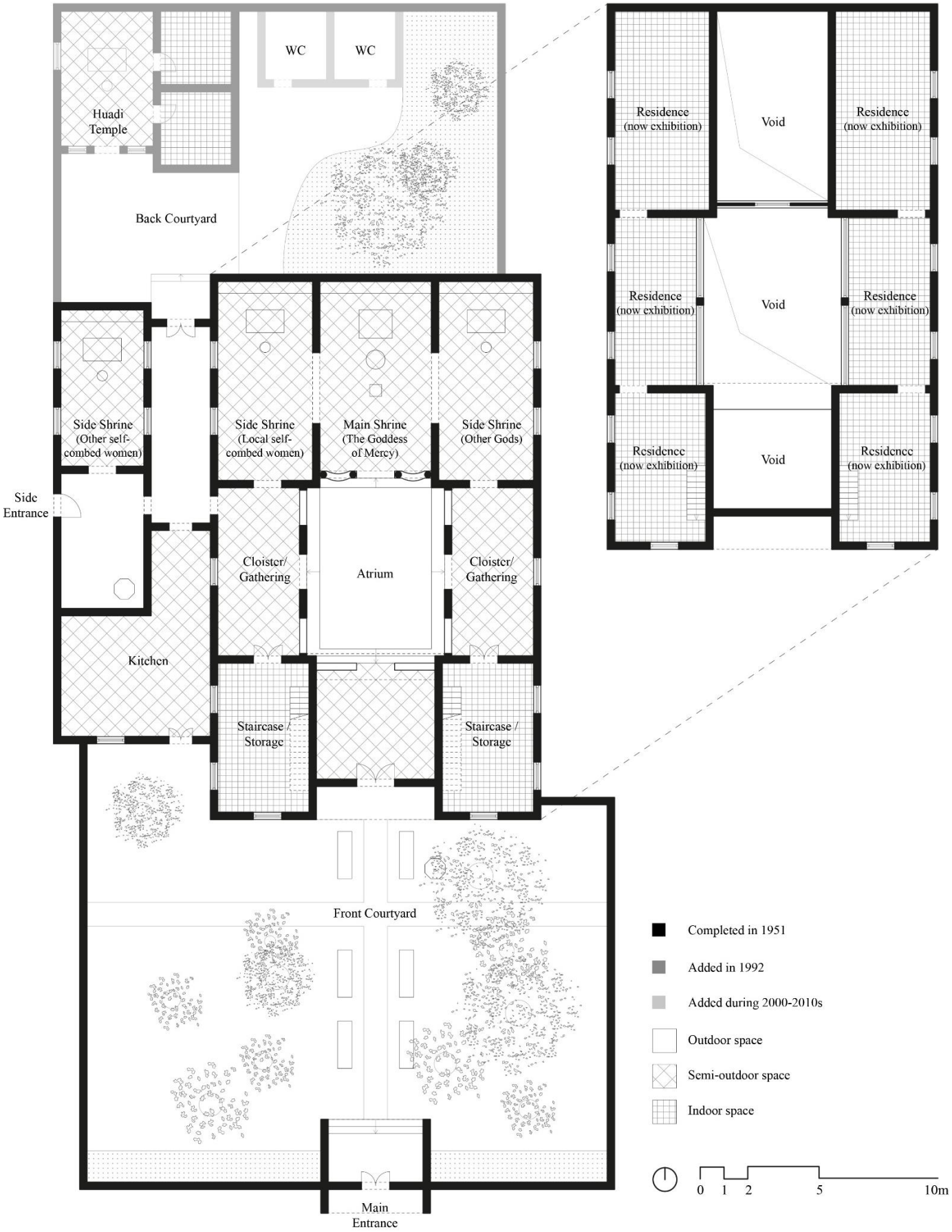


Figure 24. Detailed plan of the Hall of Purity.
By the author. Based on survey data and photos collected by Yingyi Sun, 2022, at the Hall of Purity.

The front yard serves as a buffer zone between the entrance and the rest of the building, indicating the Hall of Purity's past as a reclusive place from the village. Beyond the front yard, the main rooms are arranged around an outdoor atrium, where social activities, such as festive events for the Seven Sisters and the Goddess of Mercy, used to take place. As described by a former occupant, they took out their handicrafts at the Double-Seven Festival and displayed them in the atrium, "making the space very pretty".[67] Self-combed women from the neighbouring villages would also come and visit on these occasions; even the front yard was sometimes filled with people. Hence, the place was an event venue for its residents and other self-combed women in the area.

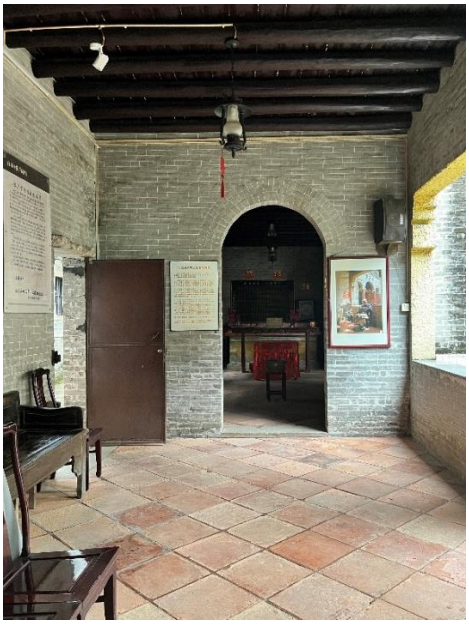
Figure 25. Self-combed women celebrating the Double Seven Festival at the atrium.
Original photo taken around the 2000s. Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Located on the southwest, the kitchen sits adjacent to the front yard and connects to the atrium through a passageway. As the "mundane" part of the building, it is separated from the shrines by a transitional cloister. The kitchen is relatively spacious compared to the rest of the rooms, as it used to cater for a large group of women and provide food for their communal events (Figure 26).

Figure 26. Self-combed women on a festival meal in the kitchen, 2018. The aunts no longer lived there by that time, but the festival celebrations were still their most important events.
Source: "China's Last Self-Combed Women." Documentary produced by Li Xiaowei (Phoenix TV, 2018)

[67] According to interview with self-combed woman Huang Ruiwen 黄瑞云, in *Yipian bingxin zai Yutang* 一片冰心在玉堂 [The ice-like clear souls in the Hall of Purity], video by Foshan Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, July 9, 2021, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/7FFGC683xtv_oa_VbNeO1g

The cloisters are situated on the east and west sides of the atrium, serving as the women's living quarters. Back then, they would gather in these spaces, drinking coffee, chatting, and playing cards (Figure 27). Also functioning as transitional zones, the cloisters are linked to the shrines, the atrium, and the staircases to the bedrooms. Hence, the women's gathering spaces are visually and spatially connected to the resting place of their deceased sisters (Figure 28). Such spatial continuity also stimulates psychological connection.



(Left) Figure 27. Self-combed women gathering in the cloisters. The photo was taken in the 2010s, after the building's convention into a museum. Behind these women are pictures hanging on the walls illustrating their past stories.
Source: Xu and Lin, *China's Last Self-Combed Women*, 156.
(Right) Figure 28. View from the cloister into the shrine of self-combed women.
Photo by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

The shrines have the highest hierarchy and are located in the north. The central shrine accommodates the Goddess of Mercy and is the most important one. The shrine on the right contains other religious figures, while the one on the left holds spiritual tablets for local self-combed women. The tablet has 374 names, representing the 374 women who contributed to fundraising for the building in the 1940s. There is also a side shrine on the west, hosting spiritual tablets for the sisters from other villages. The names of the living aunts are covered with red paper, which will be removed at their death (Figure 29). By the time of the field visit in 2022, only 5 names on the tablet were still covered with papers, indicating that only 5 out of the 374 self-combed women were still alive. Despite their spatial proximity, these shrines are separated by partition walls (Figure 30) because the spirits of holy figures (Goddess of Mercy) cannot be in the same space as those of ordinary people (self-combed women). In contrast, the shrine in Huang's Ancestral Hall is only concerned with its lineage members and is thus designed as a single large space (Figure 31). Interestingly, women are usually excluded from ancestral halls because these buildings highlight merely the male descent line. Hence, the shrine layout in the Hall of Purity is unique in its joint accommodation of (wo)man and god(dess), which overlooks the patriarchal rules and expresses the women's autonomy over the space.

Figure 29. Self-combed women's spiritual tablets. Only 5 out of the 374 were still alive by the time of the field visit. Photo by Yingyi Sun, 2022

(Left): Figure 30. The shrines for the women and the goddess are spatially connected but separated by a wall.
(Right): Figure 31. The shrine in Huang's ancestral hall is a large space without wall divisions.
Photos by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Towards the end of the 20th century, owing to the modern country's reformation, society's prejudice against self-combed women faded. People started to respect them as independent and disciplined female figures. Fading with prejudice was the practice of self-combing itself. Residents in the Hall of Purity became China's last generation of self-combed women. Eventually, they moved out to live in nursing homes or with their nieces or nephews, but still gathered in the building during the day to socialise and care for their deceased sisters' tablets. In 2001, the living women made a collective will, transferring the Hall of Purity's ownership to the local welfare committee to keep it safe, as they feared it would be demolished after their death to give way to modern constructions (Figure 32).[68] As stated in their will:

[68] The will was made in 2001 according to Gregorian calendar and in 2000 according to the Lunar calendar.

"The world is changing rapidly…our only concern is whether this building will stay. If not, then our effort will be gone with the wind. We wish to keep this legacy for later generations to remember… Now we give it to the Shatou welfare committee to keep it safe. No one has the right to demolish it for any excuse."

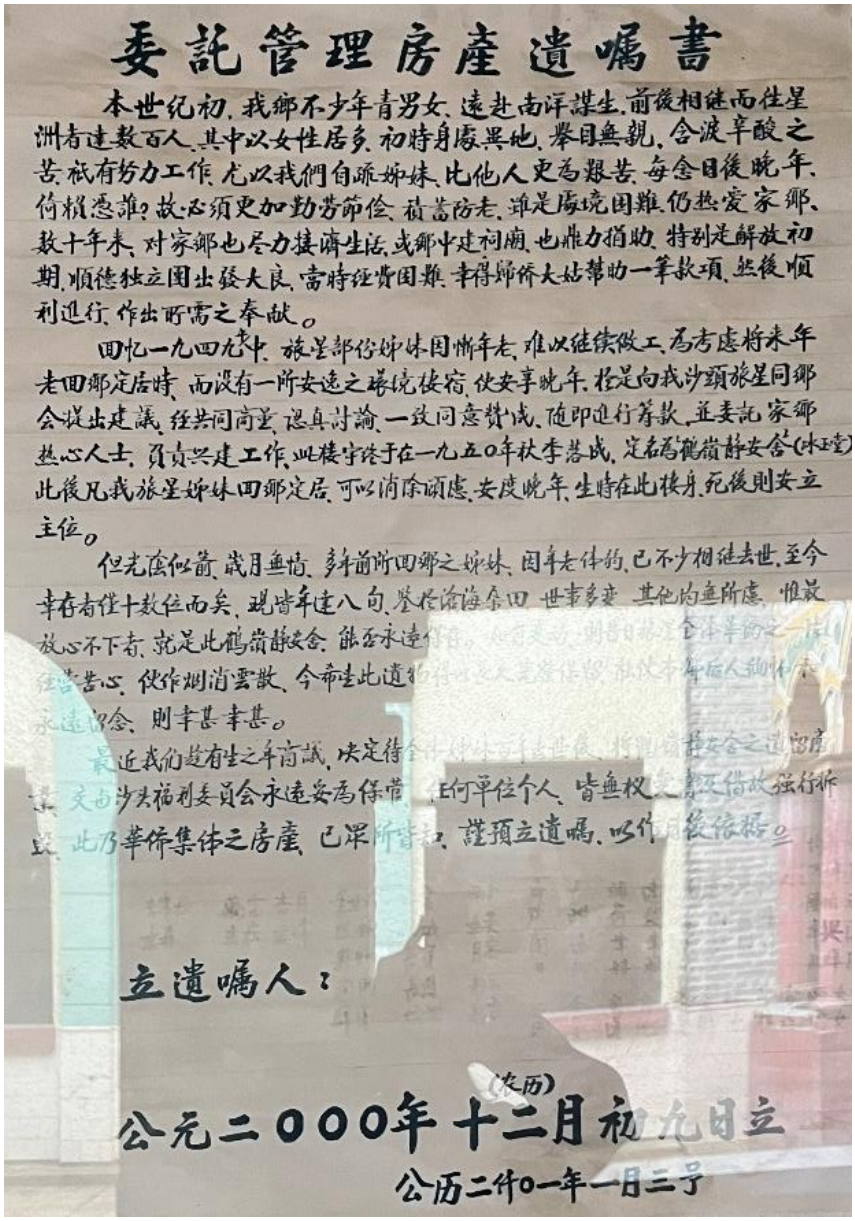


Figure 32. Self-combed women's collective will, 2001.
Photo by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

In 2012, the Hall of Purity was opened to the public as a museum. Since the 2010s, fewer and fewer self-combed women have come to the building (Figures 33 and 34). Many of them were too old to walk or had reached the end of their lives. In a 2018 documentary, several self-combed women sat at the Hall of Purity; next to them were a bunch of curious tourists. The building, once a place for the segregated group, is now ironically a public space for the community. Like the other Aunt's Houses, this building represented the self-identity of its former occupants, witnessed their history, and became one of its very few narrators.

Figure 33. The self-combed women gathered in the Hall of Purity to celebrate the Goddess of Mercy's festival in 2011. This photo was taken one year before the building was opened to the public.
Original photo by Huang Yaoquan. Re-shoot by Yingyi Sun, 2022.

Figure 34. Self-combed woman Huang Ruiwen. Local photographer Huang Yaoquan has been taking pictures of Shatou's self-combed women for the past 20 years. In 2020, Huang Ruiwen was the only one left in the village.
Source: "The Last Self-Combed Women." Documentary produced by Long Xiaolan (Pear video, 2020)

Conclusion

Female marriage resistance in the Canton Delta arose from the patriarchal system's inequity in gendered societal ideals and family organisations. Anti-marital notions matured under the region's folkloric and religious contexts, highlighting women's purity and sisterhood over marriage, thereby leading towards the practice of self-combing, as first documented in 1884. A contributing factor was the female solidarity established in the Girl's Houses, where adolescent girls slept together, passing along unpleasant stories about married life and influencing each other's decisions towards celibacy. Further, the growth of Canton's silk economy between 1880-1930 provided self-combed women with the financial pedestal to reject wifehood obligations, catalysing this custom to strive.

However, self-combing pushed these women to the margins of society. As vowed celibates, their presence at home was unwelcome in both life and death, leading towards architectural segregation in the form of Aunt's Houses, where self-combed women built houses for themselves and supported each other through communal living. As evident in the architectural analysis of the Hall of Purity, the Aunt's Houses combined residential and spiritual functions, serving as a place for these women to not only accompany each other in life, but also rest in peace in death.

Ironically, the plan analysis of the Hall of Purity reveals its ambiguous relationship with traditional ancestral halls – a patriarchal tool – in mimicking their spatial hierarchy to underline the building's spiritual features. Specifically, this refers to worshipping the Goddess of Mercy and commemorating deceased self-combed women. The shrine of the Goddess of Mercy takes a predominant role in space, indicating the goddess' importance in guiding self-combed women to adhere to celibacy. However, the focus on female "chastity" and "pureness" implies that these women were still subject to patriarchal society's restraints. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that self-combed women were limited by their period, primarily between the 1880s and the first half of the 20th century in China. They did not have access to the familiar terms of "feminism" and "emancipation" as we now have. In that sense, the women had already fought for freedom to the best of their capabilities. In particular, the Hall of Purity's joint accommodation of the women and the goddess overlooks the patriarchal rules of excluding females in ancestral halls, hence expressing women's independence and solidarity.

From an architectural point of view, self-combed women's autonomy over their living spaces is reflected in the seemingly contradictory yet self-contained nature of the Aunt's Houses, in which life and death, the spiritual and the mundane, women and goddess, coexist. Their architecture was closely linked to, and became a materialised form of, their identities. These women formed strong bonds among themselves through communal living – as the "liminal personae" in society – and established new social relations.

Hence, this research demonstrates the significance of architecture in self-combed women's communities. Communal living was not just a result of their celibacy, nor was it a compromised solution for the women as marginalised groups. In fact, it was an important factor that helped these women overcome society's obstacles and adhere to the pursuit of independence, thus enabling the cultural phenomenon of self-combing to develop over a century.

Finally, as the author, I would like to add that through this research, I realised that the literature and sources contain varying, and sometimes contradictory, views on self-combed women. They were portrayed as "disgrace", "feminists", "incomplete rebels", "victims of feudal society", "mysterious", "honourable and independent" …and so on. The restraints of accessing local archives in person might have resulted in a

reliance on secondary information while analysing self-combed women's history. Yet, the historical records (and modern analysis) of women, especially a marginalised group of women, have always been difficult to remain objective. During my research, through recorded interviews and documentaries of the women (many of whom have already passed away), I became familiar with some of them: their names, looks, and personalities. In the Hall of Purity, behind the 374 names on the spiritual tablets, are 374 lives that each had their own unique story – just like the other self-combed women who appeared in history. Thus, in this (and future) research, I am trying to avoid the narrative of "othering", because each of the women was once a life with a character, not a mere group of "others".

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