

**The *Diaolou* of Zili Village: An aspect of China's architectural heritage**

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**Abstract**

In this piece of photographic journalism, I explore an aspect of Pacific Rim architecture, that is, China's *Diaolou* – fortress-like buildings combining aspects of Chinese and Western architecture which were constructed for a combination of defense and housing on the instructions of Chinese migrants returning from overseas. These buildings provide us with important insights into the history of China and Chinese migration.

**Introduction**

Zili Village is a low-lying area in Kaiping County near the city of Jiangmen in the Guangdong Province of Southern China. To the southeast of Jiangmen is Zhuhai, a modern city in the Pearl River Delta that borders Macao. The easiest way to reach Kaiping is by fast ferry from Hong Kong or by bus from either Zhuhai or Guangzhou. Zili Village is renowned for its *diaolou*.

The *diaolou* are fortified watchtower homes that stand amongst paddy fields and lotus ponds. First built in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties (1698 – 1911), the *diaolou* reached their greatest splendor in the 1920s and 1930s as returning overseas Chinese built around 3000 of them in a combined European and Chinese architectural style that featured Greek, Roman, Gothic, Islamic, Baroque and Rococo elements as well as elements of traditional Chinese design. The *diaolou* of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were embellished with turrets, domes, loopholes, balconies, arches, balustrades, ornamental urns, and cupolas. Today, about 1800 *diaolou* remain, although most are uninhabited.

These fortified castle-like watchtowers, which stand up to nine stories high, provided defense against local bandits and protection against river flooding. The very early towers followed the brick design of Ch'ing Dynasty houses but with thicker walls, narrower doors and smaller windows. But as the 'Golden Mountain Uncles' returned from San Francisco and the Californian goldfields in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *diaolou* were built using reinforced concrete with closing iron window covers and strong iron gates. The roofs were generally flat with ports for defense and observation. This provided the occupying families with greater protection from kidnappers and from the increasing lawlessness that accompanied the Chinese civil war. Later, it provided protection during the Japanese occupation.

Kaiping was established as a county in 1649 with the first two *diaolou*, named Fengfulou and Yinglonglou, appearing around 1650. From 1840, both Canada and the United States recruited Chinese labour for digging goldmines and building railroads. Many people from Kaiping went abroad to earn their fortune, returning to China to buy land, build a home and marry. In Kaiping, many built *diaolou*. But by the late 1930s, the escalating war with Japan meant that few overseas Chinese returned to build *diaolou*. After the establishment of the Communist Government in 1949, American Chinese, prohibited from visiting, no longer invested their savings in

China. Local people also stopped building *diaolou* as the new central government had successfully eradicated banditry. Thus, the *diaolou* fell into disrepair with many disappearing altogether.

Accompanying China's new policy in 1979 of 'Opening to the Outside World' was a greater appreciation of the historic value of *diaolou*. In 2001, they were protected by heritage regulations from Peking. Since then the *diaolou* have received recognition from the United Nations as buildings of cultural significance. Currently, *diaolou* are being restored under local government supervision as an important feature of Guangdong's heritage.

The *diaolou* of Zili Village are returning to life again. Today it is estimated that Zili Village has 63 households and 175 villagers. A further 248 former villagers live as far afield as the United States, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Malaysia, Fiji, Hong Kong and Macao. With restoration now firmly underway, it is hoped that these unique architectural structures of Southern China will stir the imagination, foster curiosity and generate interest in the diversity of China's heritage.

**Plate 1: Village courtyard (A)**



**Plate 2: Village courtyard (B)**



**Plate 3: Village courtyard (C)**



*Plate 4: Diaolou with cupolas and turrets*



*Plate 5: Diaolou with iron window covers*



**Plate 6: Village buildings**



**Plate 7: *Diaolou* undergoing restoration (notice the bamboo scaffolding)**



**Plate 8: Stand-alone diaolou (A)**



**Plate 9: Village housing and diaolou**



*Plate 10: Zili village*



*Plate 11: Diaolou with passers-by*



**Plate 12: Contrasting styles: *Diaolou* and typical village building**



**Plate 13: Soft foundations in low-lying land**



**Plate 14: Stand-alone *diaolou* (B)**



**Plate 15: Lotus pond and *diaolou***



***Plate 16: Lotus pond and village building***



***Plate 17: Diaolou in typical unadorned setting***



**Endnotes**

1. Dr Howard Scott is a photographer who has visited China several times. He has completed a post-graduate diploma in Chinese Law at the University of Peking, a Winston Churchill Fellowship in Shanghai and an artists' residency at Xiamen University in Fujian. He is currently photographing in the south of China.