

Michael Cheng

LA 314

May 9, 2021

Jia and Huaqiao: Bridges to Abroad

Nestled between the Pearl River Delta to the east and low hills to the west, sits the county of Kaiping in Guangdong Province, China.¹ The area is notable for its rich history of emigration; presently, about 4 million overseas Chinese can trace their roots back to the Wuyi region, which consists of Kaiping along with four bordering counties.² Hundreds of extravagant buildings called *diaolou* dot the landscape of Kaiping's villages, which showcase the area's emigration culture and incorporate features to defend against banditry common across the county at the time.³ Kaiping in the early nineteenth century was marked with crime and political instability. This led to the need for fortress-style buildings, which have designs that incorporate local Chinese architectural features with Western elements brought back from Kaiping emigrees.



Figure 1: Jinjiang Diaolou (left) and Shengfeng Diaolou (right)⁴

¹ He Luping et al., *Protection and Management Plan on Kaiping Diaolou and Villages (Extracts)* (Beijing: Urban Planning and Design Center of Peking University, 2001), 5.

² Tingting Elle Li and Eric Tak Hin Chan, "Connotations of ancestral home: An exploration of place attachment by multiple generations of Chinese diaspora," *Population Space and Place* 24, no. 8 (2018): 3.

³ Patricia R.S. Batto, "The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937): Buildings for Dangerous Times," *China Perspectives* 66 (2006): 8, 20, accessed May 7, 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/1033>.

⁴ Angela and Calvin, "Jinjiangli (錦江里) Village, Kaiping, China," *Blue Lapis Road* (blog). March 3, 2016. Wordpress. <https://bluelapisroad.wordpress.com/2016/03/13/jinjiangli-%e9%8c%a6%e6%b1%9f%e9%87%8c-village-kaiping-china/>

With the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, different groups sought to gain power over territory.⁵ Warlords battled over control of areas in Kaiping, hoping to seize the trade routes that traversed over the county, linking western Guangdong with the Pearl River Delta on the east.⁶ In 1913, Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Chinese Revolutionary Party, used Kaiping as a battleground for the Second Revolution, and again in 1917, for the Constitution Protection Movement.⁷ The civil chaos resulting from the power struggles in the early nineteenth century enabled crime to be rampant across Kaiping.⁸ One particular banditry incident in Kaiping is recorded in the 1933 edition of the Kaiping County Annals: “June of the twenty-seventh year of the republic [1928], bandits raid the Fang clan in Qilongma Village, Guzhai Township, kidnap over twenty men and women, murder over ten people, burn twenty-three buildings. Militia of the neighboring Li Village, along with the militia of Tanxi and other townships, came to help, but left midway [during the incident].”⁹ Kaiping residents constructed diaolou with a variety of defensive features to defend their families and villages against similar incidents.

There are three main types of diaolou, categorized by their purpose; all share fortress-style defensive features in common, however, needed to protect the inhabitants within from crime rampant at the time. Many were fitted with small windows to shoot guns through, narrow

⁵ Yuen-fong Woon, *Social Organization in South China, 1911-1949: The Case of Kuan Lineage in K'ai-p'ing County* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies-The University of Michigan, 1984), 60.

⁶ Woon, 60.

⁷ Woon, 60.

⁸ Woon, 60-62.

⁹ 開平縣志 45 卷 *Kaiping Xianzhi 45 juan* “*Kaiping County Annals vol. 45*”, (1933).

doors, and thick walls.¹⁰ One type is the watchtower, usually built high up at the village's entrance and equipped with defensive systems such as searchlights and sirens to protect the village.¹¹ Another type is the communal diaolou. Construction of these were funded by the entire village, with small rooms allotted to each contributing household, used as shelter in times of emergency.¹² Residential diaolou are the most common form of diaolou in Kaiping.¹³ Serving as a place of residence for a single family, construction was typically funded by wealthy emigres sending money back home.¹⁴

Many in Kaiping decided to leave China to look for new opportunities in foreign lands, seeking to escape the turbulence as well as advance their economic status.¹⁵ Emigres are often referred to as *huaqiao*.¹⁶ The amount of people in Kaiping who emigrated is especially high. Sam Chang (1886-1988), a Kaiping huaqiao whose letters between family and friends are extensively archived at the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California in Los Angeles, joined his father in California in 1915.¹⁷ Sam's family owned a residential diaolou in Kaiping—his American-born Chinese stepmother Nellie Yee, in a visit to Kaiping in 1929, noted how

¹⁰ The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People's Republic of China (NACH), *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages* (2006), 68.

¹¹ NACH, 22.

¹² NACH, 22.

¹³ He et al., *Protection and Management Plan on Kaiping Diaolou and Villages*, 18.

¹⁴ Batto, "The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937)," 29.

¹⁵ Haiming Liu, *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family: Immigrant Letters, Family Business, and Reverse Migration* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁶ Batto, "The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937)," 2.

¹⁷ Liu, *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family*, ix-1.

uncomfortable it was to sleep in the building due to its fortress-style design.¹⁸ His father, Yitang Chung (1866-1952), had founded a Chinese herbal medicine business in Los Angeles, and regularly sent money back to his family in China.¹⁹ This pattern of emigration is typical of Chinese migration at the time, with one male immigrant leading the way for both nuclear and extended family members to immigrate afterwards.²⁰ While these immigrants made their physical homes in foreign countries, the Chinese culture of *jia* (lit. home/family) includes connotations of one's ancestors and ancestral home, their *jiaxiang*, as well as family obligations regardless of any physical separation.²¹ While on a trip to Kaiping in 1929, Yitang constructed a new tomb for his late mother, and also funded the construction of a road project and an elementary school in his ancestral village.²²

Kaiping emigrees faced a multitude of hardships abroad. In 1931, Sam Chang wrote to his uncle:

Very few native-born Chinese youth in America have high aspirations, due to the racial environment here. From childhood to adulthood, they have been exposed to all kinds of prejudice against the Chinese. The bias of the Westerners against the Chinese is deep-rooted in America. College education is useless for the Chinese here. There are so many college-educated Chinese who cannot find suitable jobs. Chinese youth have to return to China, get to know the motherland, learn the ethical values, and pick up the language at college there. Then they can

¹⁸ Liu, 169.

¹⁹ Liu, 1.

²⁰ Liu, 2-3.

²¹ Li and Chan, "Connotations of ancestral home," 7; Liu, 1.

²² Liu, 168.

go to Europe and America for some intern opportunities, for a few years. They will get good positions when they return to China after that.²³

While many left Kaiping to America to flee the societal chaos, America had its own share of problems. Even if one were highly educated, being ethnically Chinese meant you would only be hired for the most menial jobs.²⁴ Many Chinese-Americans thus decided to return to their motherland in search of greater opportunity. Racism faced overseas, as well as Chinese cultural connotations of *jia*, led to ten percent of Kaiping's population in 1957 being made up of returned huaqiao.²⁵

Owing to the transnational nature of Kaiping, diaolou were constructed with a blend of Western and Chinese architectural design. Diaolou follow the principles of feng shui (lit. "wind water"), a Chinese tradition of geomancy where buildings (along with elements within them) and villages are arranged and oriented to create an auspicious environment, taking features of the surrounding nature into consideration.²⁶ The manmade landscape is harmonious with the natural landscape, creating a yin-yang balance, such as by building the diaolou with mountains set behind and a body of water in front.²⁷ Bamboo groves surround the villages and diaolou.²⁸

Emigrees returning to Kaiping brought back various influences from abroad. This can be seen in diaolou through the use of Western architectural motifs, as well as the construction

²³ Liu, 203.

²⁴ Liu, 203.

²⁵ Batto, "The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937)," 21.

²⁶ NACH, *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages*, 48-49.

²⁷ NACH, 50.

²⁸ He et al., *Protection and Management Plan on Kaiping Diaolou and Villages*, 16.

materials, such as using steel and cement to create reinforced concrete, a foreign technology at the time.²⁹ The Mingshi tower, built by a huaqiao who returned from Chicago, Illinois, has a Baroque style terrace on the sixth floor, with a hexagonal Chinese pavilion in the middle. It features Ionic order columns on the fifth-floor veranda. The Fang Clan Watch Tower, whose construction was funded by several surrounding villages, includes lockable shutters, buttresses, and a domed roof.³⁰

Some diaolou not only had elements of Western architecture but were designed by Western architects themselves. Huang Fengxiu, a Kaiping huaqiao, studied medicine in America and returned to Guangzhou to work as a doctor at the French Concession.³¹ This connection to France led Huang, in 1919, to commission a French architect to design a residential diaolou called the Shengfeng tower (Fig. 1), in his ancestral home of Jinijiangli Village.³² European design elements featured in the tower include Baroque style pavilions, Roman columns, and exterior walls plastered in a “French Blue” color.³³ The Shengfeng tower exemplifies how huaqiao not only returned with new ideas obtained from their time overseas, but also continued to shape Kaiping’s landscape through experiences after their return to China—experiences which could only be made because of their very status being a huaqiao.

The landscape architecture of the Kaiping diaolou epitomize the history of the area in the early nineteenth century. Kaiping was the stage for multiple power struggles following the

²⁹ Batto, “The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937),” 20.

³⁰ NACH, *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages*, 30-31.

³¹ NACH, 35.

³² NACH, 244.

³³ NACH, 35.

collapse of the Qing Empire and the formation of the Republic of China. This forced villagers to protect themselves and construct buildings called diaolou, which featured defensive elements such as gun windows and lockable windows. Because of the culture of emigration in Kaiping, and the Chinese connotations of *jia*, many of these diaolou were built by wealthy huaqiao, who displayed influences they brought back from abroad in the architectural features. Diaolou vibrantly fuse Western and Chinese cultural design, through the use of feng shui and elements such as verandas and Roman columns.

Glossary

For the disambiguation of Chinese terms in this essay

Kaiping County	開平縣	Guangdong	廣東
Huaqiao	華僑	Guangzhou	廣州
Diaolou	碉樓	Wuyi	五邑
Feng shui	風水	Jia	家
Shengfeng tower	升峰樓	Jiaxiang	家鄉
Jinjiangli Village	錦江里	Qilongma	騎龍馬
Guzhai Township	古宅鄉	Tanxi Township	潭溪鄉

Bibliography

開平縣志 45 卷 *Kaiping Xianzhi 45 juan* “*Kaiping County Annals vol. 45*”, (1933).

Angela and Calvin, “Jinjiangli (錦江里) Village, Kaiping, China,” *Blue Lapis Road* (blog).

March 3, 2016. *Wordpress*.

<https://bluelapisroad.wordpress.com/2016/03/13/jinjiangli-%e9%8c%a6%e6%b1%9f%e9%87%8c-village-kaiping-china/>

Haiming Liu, *The Transnational History of a Chinese Family: Immigrant Letters, Family Business, and Reverse Migration* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

He Luping et al., *Protection and Management Plan on Kaiping Diaolou and Villages (Extracts)* (Beijing: Urban Planning and Design Center of Peking University, 2001).

Patricia R.S. Batto, “The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937): Buildings for Dangerous Times,” *China Perspectives* 66 (2006): 8, 20, accessed May 7, 2021.

The State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China (NACH), *Kaiping Diaolou and Villages* (2006).

Tingting Elle Li and Eric Tak Hin Chan, “Connotations of ancestral home: An exploration of place attachment by multiple generations of Chinese diaspora,” *Population Space and Place* 24, no. 8 (2018).

Yuen-fong Woon, *Social Organization in South China, 1911-1949: The Case of Kuan Lineage in K'ai-p'ing County* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies-The University of Michigan, 1984).