

Tulou - The Architectural Heritage of the Hakka and the Phenomenon of Collective Identity

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Abstract

This article examines the unique architectural structures known as Tulou, predominantly found in Fujian Province, China, which are closely associated with the Hakka people. Tulou represent a distinctive phenomenon in Chinese architecture and culture that can be analyzed and explored from various perspectives. Renowned for their unique construction, these buildings are typically circular or, in some cases, rectangular, with almost entirely sealed outer walls. Life within the Tulou centers around a large shared courtyard. Each floor features continuous balconies that connect individual apartments, reflecting the defensive purpose of these structures, as the Hakka often had to protect themselves from external threats.

Beyond their exceptional architectural features, Tulou communities themselves are a significant area of study for cultural researchers and ethnologists, as the collective identity shaped within such environments is particularly fascinating. Accordingly, this article also delves into the lives of Tulou inhabitants, their primary challenges, and future prospects.

Keywords: Tulou, Chinese architecture, Hakka, Cultural identity

Description of Tulou

Architecture holds a prominent place in the history of Chinese art, vividly reflecting the cultural, social, and political landscape of the country. It provides a window into people's lifestyles, habits, and daily lives. Across various historical periods, China has produced numerous unique structures, many of which are renowned worldwide. The distinctive style

of Chinese architecture is marked by its originality and is considered one of the most ancient in the East Asian region.

It is important to highlight that China is an expansive country with diverse climatic conditions, which has naturally led to the development of varied types of residential architecture. Among these, one of the most remarkable architectural examples is the Tulou.

Tulou (土楼 *tǔlóu*), translated from Chinese as "earthen tower," is a type of defensive residence. These structures are most commonly concentrated in Fujian Province. The construction of Tulou is historically linked to the Hakka (客家 *kèjiā*)¹, a subgroup of the Han ethnic group. The Hakka people have been historically known for their nomadic lifestyle. Initially, they lived in northern China. However, during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), frequent wars and natural disasters forced them to migrate south.

Upon their arrival in southern China, the Hakka often faced conflicts with the local population, compelling them to transform their dwellings into fortress-like structures for protection. These unique buildings stand as a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of the Hakka people.



¹ The term *Hakka* (客家 *kèjiā*) refers to a group of Han people (汉族 *Hànzú*) who migrated from northern to southern China between the 4th and 13th centuries in several waves. They primarily settled in Guangdong, Fujian, Guangxi, Jiangsu provinces, and other adjacent regions. The Hakka people speak the Hakka dialect (*Kejia hua* 客家话), which is phonetically considered the closest modern Chinese dialect to Middle Chinese. (<https://chinese.ge/#/article/%E5%AE%A2%E5%AE%B6>)

The construction of Tulou residences began during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) and continued until the 20th century. However, the most complex structures were built during the 17th and 18th centuries. Tulou residences are categorized into two main types: rectangular and circular, with the latter being the most prevalent.

As the name suggests, the core material of Tulou is earth and clay, though other materials such as stone, brick, wood, and tiles are also used. The foundation and lower walls, extending several meters above ground, are made of stone. This design serves a dual purpose: providing additional defense against enemies and protecting the residence from flooding during heavy rains.

Tulou structures have only one central gate. The walls, which rise 5–10 meters high, are solid and windowless, except for a few small windows positioned at considerable heights. This architectural design underscores the Tulou's dual function as both a residence and a fortress.

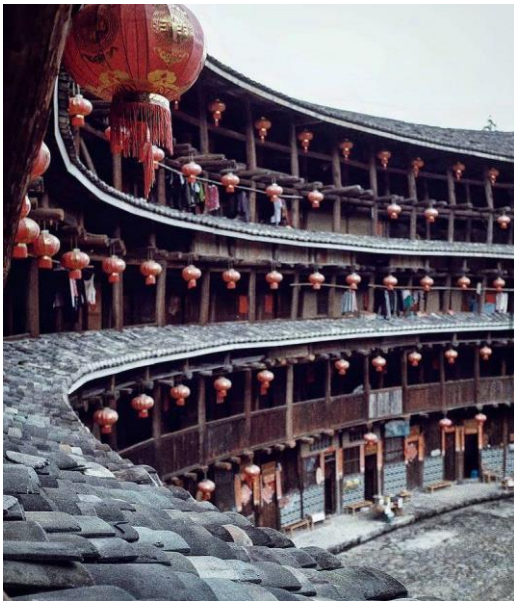


Tulou buildings are primarily three stories tall, although there are examples with four or even five stories. The average height of a Tulou is 15–18 meters, with a circumference reaching up to 200 meters. The walls are exceptionally thick, measuring between 1.5 and 2 meters.

Interestingly, the structure is wider at the base and gradually narrows toward the top. This design enhances its stability, allowing the building to withstand strong winds, heavy rain, and even earthquakes. The roofs of Tulou are entirely tiled, adding to their durability and aesthetic appeal.

The interior of Tulou is characterized by its distinctive wooden balconies, which encircle each floor, seamlessly connecting all the apartments. These continuous balconies are a visually striking feature and one of the most iconic elements of Tulou architecture.

Although the balconies and many interior structures are made of wood, some rooms feature stone or brick walls, particularly in areas where fire is commonly used, such as kitchens. These fire-resistant materials significantly reduce the risk of fire spreading within the building.



The inner courtyard of a Tulou serves as the primary gathering space for its residents. Its layout and functions vary significantly across different Tulou structures. In some cases, the courtyard is densely occupied by communal facilities, such as shared kitchens, washrooms, livestock stalls, or storage rooms. Conversely, other Tulou feature more open courtyards, with minimal structures, such as a shrine dedicated to local deities, an altar, or even just a well.

The courtyard plays a vital role in the daily life and social fabric of the community. It is the venue for essential gatherings, grand celebrations, religious rituals, and decision-making on critical matters. This multifunctional space is central to the communal lifestyle and collective identity of Tulou residents.



A single Tulou could accommodate an average of 500–600 residents, with some larger examples housing up to 800 people. Typically, a Tulou was inhabited by members of the same clan, who maintained close familial ties. Consequently, marriages between residents of the same Tulou were extremely rare.

Male residents of Tulou generally spent their entire lives in their birthplace. They grew up, learned a trade or pursued education within the Tulou, and, upon reaching marriageable age, received support from their families to find a wife from another Tulou.

In contrast, women's lives were marked by more significant changes. Upon marriage, a woman would move to her husband's Tulou, leaving behind her familial home to adapt to a new environment and an extended community of her husband's relatives. Opportunities for returning to her natal home were limited, making the transition particularly impactful on her life. This practice highlights the strong patrilocal traditions within Tulou communities.

Social and Cultural Aspects of Tulou

The Tulou buildings offer us an intriguing glimpse into historical and cultural phenomena, serving as examples of how the environment influences both lifestyle and architectural forms. Born out of defensive necessity, the Hakka people created structures that were nearly entirely isolated from the outside, leading to a lifestyle where much of daily life unfolded around a single community and courtyard.

Over time, the size of Tulou structures gradually expanded, and as noted, some could accommodate up to 800 people, who shared a single courtyard and space. This required regulating internal conflicts and establishing rules for peaceful coexistence. The layout of Tulou rooms, the circular courtyard, and the continuous balconies encircling the interior perimeter meant that life inside was highly communal, with almost no private space. Therefore, it became crucial for each individual to maintain control over their words and actions, as everything was public.

The communal aspect of Tulou inevitably brings to mind the traditional courtyard houses in Beijing, known as Siheyuan, particularly after it became Dazayuan, housing multiple families in a single courtyard. Life in these spaces also underwent significant changes, though the scale of Siheyuan and Dazayuan cannot compare to the vast courtyards of Hakka Tulou. The dynamics of living together in such close quarters were similar, as neighbors observed and shared each other's daily lives, both in moments of joy and hardship.

Today, the number of residents in Tulou has significantly decreased. On average, around 60–70 people reside in these buildings, with most involved in receiving tourists, as Tulou architecture attracts hundreds of visitors daily.

The decline in Tulou populations is linked to multiple factors. One of the main reasons is the trend of younger generations migrating to large cities, a phenomenon common worldwide. Additionally, over centuries of use, these buildings have aged, with both the exterior and interior suffering considerable damage. Renovations are costly, as they not only involve individual apartment refurbishments but also the entire building's infrastructure, including sewage, heating, and water supply systems. Because of these practical challenges, many residents choose to move to more comfortable living arrangements.

Another key factor in the gradual abandonment of Tulou is the loss of their original function as defensive dwellings. Today, there is no threat of external attack, making the need for such a closed-off lifestyle obsolete. Moreover, for the young generation of the 21st century, the preservation of personal space is crucial. It is physically and morally challenging for them to continue living in such structures, as the lack of privacy no longer suits modern living conditions.



Conclusion

Although Tulou buildings have noticeably been depopulated in recent years, there remains an elderly population that refuses to leave their ancestral homes. I believe this is of utmost importance, as their contribution to preserving these structures is invaluable. Tulou represents one of the most distinctive and remarkable architectural feats in the world, not only for its structural uniqueness but also for its cultural and historical significance. It reflects the historical, social, and economic conditions of the Hakka people over centuries. Therefore, its preservation is essential. Fortunately, in 2008, the Tulou buildings of Fujian were added to the UNESCO World Heritage list, ensuring their protection and continued legacy.

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