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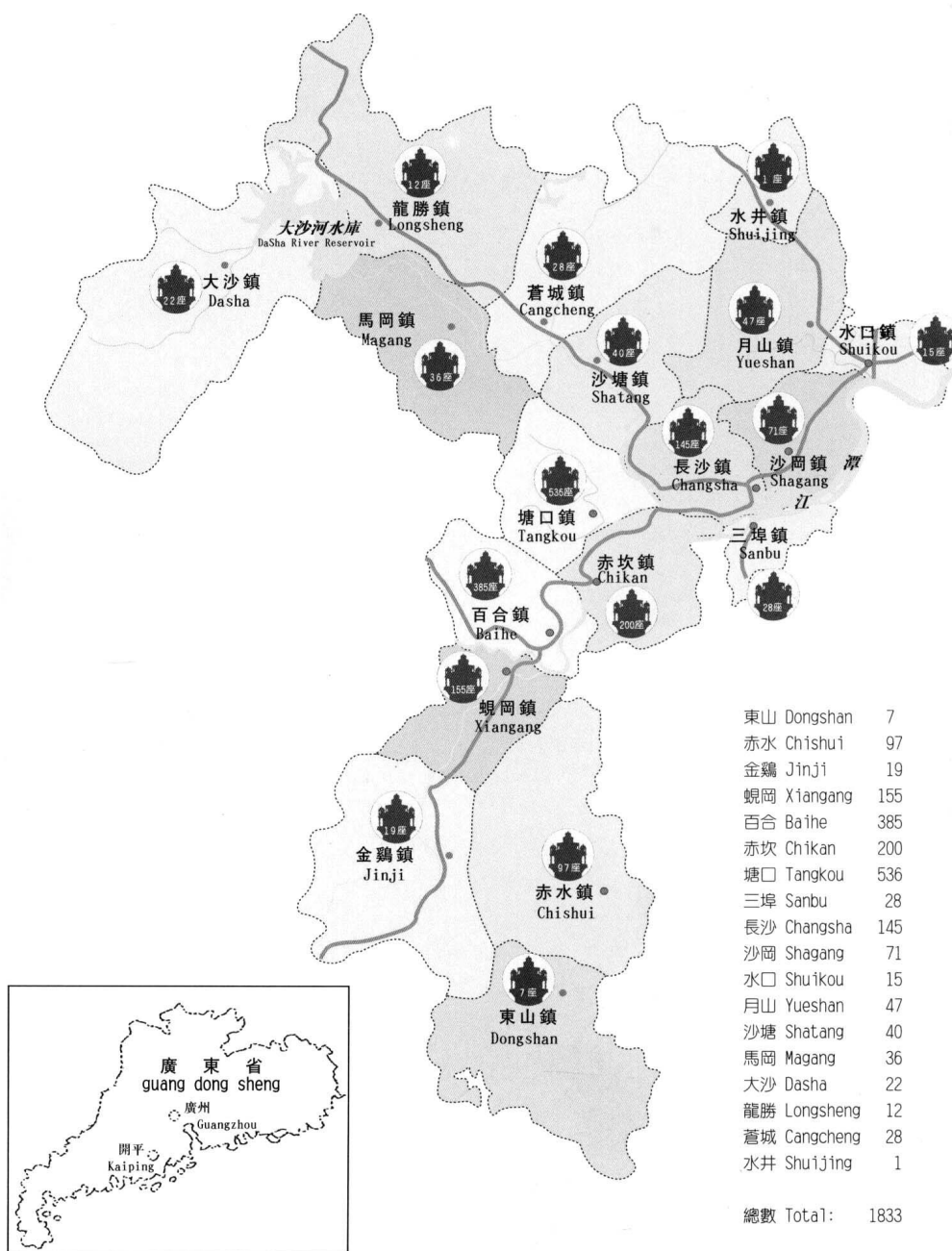
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# 開平市碉樓分布圖

The Distribution of Diao Lou in Kaiping City



# **Diaolou and Folk Dwellings in Kaiping**

**Zhang Guoxiong**

People who have been to Kaiping city of Guangdong Province will surely be impressed by the exotic scenes, where human and nature achieve great harmony. The villages are surrounded by forests of bamboo and plantains, and the rolling horizons are by no means monotonous. The local architecture is rich with historical and cultural characteristics in that dialou of various designs, folk dwellings of ordinary styles, and ancestral temples embody influences of foreign culture. All these have made Kaiping a place with unique idyllic beauty.

I came to Kaiping for the first time when I was transferred from Beijing to Wuyi University. At the first sight, I was deeply impressed by the local diaolou and folk dwellings. In recent years, I often embark on a research tour to the countryside of Kaiping, and have taken part in several projects of the local government for protecting the architectural heritage. Thus, I have developed some profound knowledge in

this regard. Earlier this year, Mr. Li Yuxiang asked me to write an essay for The Old Houses; Diaolou and the Folk Dwellings in Kaiping. I know that The Old Houses Series are well known for their profound cultural value in domestic publishing, cultural and academic circles. The publication of this series is very meaningful for the preservation and accumulation of Chinese traditional culture. Therefore I feel grateful to Mr. Li Yuxiang who has given me the opportunity, and deem it an honor to participate in this work. Compared with the other 15 themes in the series, Diaolou and the Folk Dwellings in Kaiping show more foreign influence than native characters. However, cultural diversity has offered uniqueness to the buildings in Kaiping, and crowned them among the famous Chinese traditional architecture. Its unique cultural and historical values have also encouraged me to write this essay.

## 1

Kaiping is located in the west of the Zhujiang River Delta. It's a mountainous area, of which farmland covers only about 30%. There are hills and dales in the south, north and west, plain and some small hills in the east and the central part. The Tanjiang River runs through the middle of Kaiping, forming a net of rivers and brooks together with its branches, and creating a flood plain along its banks. It was not until the sixth year of Emperor Shunzhi's Reign in the Qing Dynasty (1649) that Kaiping had its own administration of county's level.

Before that year, Kaiping was the border region between three counties, Xinhui, Enping and Xinxing. Because nobody could tell which county should take charge of it, the area was obsessed by various crimes at that time. This very geographical and social background has had much influence upon the special architectural style of Kaiping. And the formation of the style is also a result of the international emigration movement.

No later than the turn of the Tang and Song Dynasties, early overseas emigrants left Kaiping for Southeast Asia. The change of the Qing Dynasty's taxation policy was one factor of population growth in this region. The problem resulting from large population and insufficient farmland was deteriorating, and the area suffered from two kinds of pressures: the lack of food caused by overpopulation and the surplus of labor. After the Opium War, armed conflicts broke out between the natives and the Hakka ethnic group. They took revenge against each other, kidnapped people of the other side and sold them on the overseas slave markets. At that time, gold mines were discovered in America, Canada and Australia, where laborers were in desperate need due to the Gold Rush. Some overseas Chinese made a fortune in the early Gold Rush. Their successful stories were spread among their folks. Some of the nouveaux riches even returned to the hometown and showed off their success to wealth. The legend became so attractive that gold mining was considered a shortcut to overnight fortunes. This was a way of living in the eyes of the people of Kaiping

who were suffering from social unrest and lack of means of livelihood on the overpopulated land. Except for those in some isolated villages in the mountainous area, most of the under-privileged people in Kaiping went abroad through various means such as being sold as slave laborers, contracted laborers, or family emigrants. Among them, there were poor farmers, bankrupt craftsmen and private tutors who could not make ends meet by teaching. They bid farewell to their hometown and family members, and were forced to toil in a distant land until they exhausted last drop of their tears and blood. Many of them died on the strange foreign soil. During that period, the majority of the emigrants went to America, Canada and Australia.

With the emigration waves, Kaiping has become one of the famous five mother-towns of overseas Chinese, together with Xinhui, Taishan, Enping and Heshan. Now there are 670 thousand inhabitants in Kaiping, while among the overseas Chinese compatriots of Hong Kong and Macao, 740 thousand are rooted in Kaiping. Therefore, there is a popular saying among local folks that one Kaiping is at home and the other is abroad.

The emigrants from Kaiping have brought to their hometown not only a large amount of wealth, but also novel ideas, foreign life-style and household utensils, and various exotic architectural styles as well. All these have contributed a lot to the cultural pluralism in Kaiping.



## 2

Among all kinds of folk architecture in Kaiping, the most remarkable is diaolou. There are altogether 1,800 diaolou in Kaiping City, scattered around eighteen towns among which Tangkou, Baihe, Chikan, Xiangang, Changsha and Chishui share a larger proportion. The colloquial name for diaolou is the "gun tower", gun means not cannon but rifle, which connotes the kind of weapon it was designed to resist. But the formal name is still "diaolou" of course. For example, there is, in Tangkou, one called Guoxing Fortified Diaolou (Guoxing denotes nation's destiny ).

Diaolou, as a local constructing style, appears in many places near Kaiping City. For example, in Puji Autonomous Region of Sichuan Province in inland China, there is a similar type of building called "Tusi Turret". And even in other parts of Guangdong Province, Meixian and Wuhua counties in the north, Dongguan City in the east of the Zhujiang River Delta, such one-wall-column buildings serving the same function dot sparsely the local Hakka dwelling houses. But the difference is that diaolou is not an indispensable part of the construction blocks. Therefore, the number is not very large. But in Kaiping it is just the opposite case. Diaolou is a symbol of a village. It is not a village without diaolou goes the popular saying. There is at least one fortified diaolou in a village. And some villages have more than ten diaolou, which are the most

obvious appeals to visitors. In Kaiping, diaolou are large in number and complete in types, with various styles and delicate and exquisite construction. Such folk architecture rarely exists in our country. Its design is unique among our country's folk arts of building. Diaolou serves as an important scene of culture and history.

It was an old tradition in China to build certain fortified defense, which is informally called "gun loophole", but formally termed as "watch tower". As early as in the Han Dynasty, buildings alike were built among dwelling houses for defensive purpose. The concept came from the ancient military constructions of watch tower and fortified diaolou. This shows the origin of diaolou. At the same time, with respect to the styles in my discussion, there are also other sources of origin. In other words, the alien elements are involved in the construction of buildings in the overseas Chinese hometown. On my first tour to Kaiping, I couldn't help thinking of turrets in the cathedrals of Roman style in West Europe in the 10th-12th centuries. The turret is also a building with one square column and often stands on the west part of a cathedral, playing the role of summoning Christians, indicating time or watching. Turrets not only exist inside cathedrals. Outside cathedrals, they stand high in the town. For example in the Italian city of Xiyena in the 12th century, there were more than 70 stone turrets scattering all around the city. They served as the military defense, the early warning against

enemy's attack and raid. Even today, ten turrets still remain in the city. I also recall the "Light Tower" in Islamic mosques. But the turret is most similar to the fortified tower in the medieval Europe.

When did diaolou emerge as an important part of Kaiping local buildings in rural villages? It is recorded in documents that it appeared first during the transitional period from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. According to Kaiping County Annals during the rule of the Kuomintang Regime, the ins and outs of building the Father Honoring Diaolou, in the Longtian Village of Yueshan Town, read as follows, in early period of the Qing Dynasty, robbers and bandits were rampant. There was a man called Xu Long, whose wife was grabbed by bandits. In order to get back his mother, his son, Xu Yi collected a big ransom. But the mother told him through the mediator, It's not a good deal for you to get me back with so much money. You can build a fortified diaolou with the money to protect your father. On the same night, she jumped off the cliff. Xu Yi therefore built diaolou after his mother's will, to protect his father from being kidnapped, hence the name of diaolou. It was the first diaolou ever recorded in the historical documents. But unfortunately, it disappeared with the passing of time. It is probable that other diaolou might have existed earlier than this one. Among the existing diaolou in Kaiping, the Yalong Diaolou, built by the people of Guan clan in the reign of Emperor Jiajing of the Ming Dynasty (1522-

1566) is the oldest. It lies in the Sanmenli Village of Chikan Town and is made of wood and bricks, facing the south east. The three-storied building is 11.4 meters high, with the first and second floors made of red bricks, and the third blue bricks, revealing the trace of repair during the early Republic of China. Its wall is very thick, but the beams and floors inside are all made of wood. There is one turret on all of the four corners. The I-shaped tunnels are on the four walls of the second and the third floor. Its construction pattern is different from that of others in Kaiping, because it was built in an earlier period.

According to the present investigation, most of the existing diaolou in Kaiping were built in the last years of the Qing Dynasty and the years before the Anti-Japanese War. The 1910s and 1920s witnessed a surge of diaolou construction. Here arises a question, why are there few fortified diaolou built during the early and late Qing Dynasty? In my opinion, there are two explanations for this. One is that many stone-and-brick diaolou in the Qing Dynasty were pulled down after the liberation of China, the other is that it was only after the Opium War that many native Kaiping emigrants returned from abroad to build diaolou in large numbers. The historical facts show that it was the money brought or sent back by those emigrants that made such large-scale buildings possible. Before that time, most of the villagers were too poor to build anything. Only few rich families had the financial means to build what they liked. That is why there were fewer diaolou

before the Opium War. Furthermore, people used the bricks and stones of the buildings for other purposes, so many dialou were pulled down in subsequent years. However, in the 1910s and 1920s, dialou were mainly built with reinforced concrete, a material which is not able to be reused for other buildings. So they were preserved till today. That is the reason why most of the buildings today belong to the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China.

Dialou in Kaiping came to a full flourish due to the special natural and social situations. Some of the emigrants who went abroad after the Opium War gradually accumulated some money through hard work. What they had in mind above all were three things: to build a house in hometown, marry a woman and buy a homestead. This mentality and behavior were similar to those of migrants of other parts of China, away from their hometowns for business or farming. The businessmen from Shanxi and Huizhou also behaved in the same way. The only difference is that emigrants of Kaiping went overseas, rather than to other parts of the country. Another common state of mind of the Chinese migrants is that no matter what kind of hardships they have endured in other places, they always try to look important and wealthy when returning home, hence the saying "returning home in glorious robes".

Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, overseas people from Kaiping returned home one after another. They were

called Jinshanke, or Guests from Gold Rush. Most of them would take one (or more) wooden or leather box home, which was called Jinshanxiang, or Box of Gold Rush. This kind of boxes can still be seen in some diaolou or houses in which overseas Kaiping folks once lived. At that time, the box was the symbol of wealth filled with western daily articles, small tools, costumes and some gold and silver ornaments. Therefore, there were some ballads about it, such as "Guests from Gold Rush, possess eight hundred dollars if not one thousand", "Guests from Gold Rush save a full house of gold, silver and silk for their descendents". The erection of the new houses that followed the massive return brought no stability to those overseas Chinese and their relatives, but attracted those evil bandits. For it was widely known that the overseas Chinese and their relatives were rich so that they naturally became the prey of the bandits. "One returned overseas Chinese is shadowed by three bandits" was the true description of the life of those overseas Chinese and their relatives in that chaotic social situation. Many people were killed only for what they had earned with sweat and toil. The deteriorating public order was a big trouble to both the local authority and the ordinary people of Kaiping.

Because the local authority was powerless to enforce law and order, local people had no choice but to defend themselves. Therefore diaolou were built up one after another, funded either by the whole village, several families or a single family.

Whatever financial means were taken for building diaolou, overseas remittance was the main source of funding. Mr. Fang Wenxian of the Zili Village, Tangkou Town, was an overseas Chinese from the Southeast Asia. He returned home frequently in the early period of the Republic of China and had foreign style buildings built for his three sons respectively. Thinking that he was rather rich, the bandits frequented his hometown consequently. Every time the bandits came, Fang Wenxian had to carry his feet-bound grandmother on his back and seek protection with his sons in the adjoining Qiling Diaolou at Qiangya district. Thinking that it was not an effective way to run away every time, Fang Wenxian had Yunhuan Diaolou built in 1921. One December night in 1922, a group of bandits attacked the Kaiping Secondary School in Chikan Town and kidnapped the schoolmaster and 16 students. The local civil corps on the Hongyi Diaolou of adjacent Eagle Village gave a warning alarm of the enemy attack. The nearby local corps besieged the bandits just in time to arrest 11 bandits and rescue the headmaster and his students.

The public order was restored after diaolou were built, and in consequence, overseas Kaiping folks were more active in building diaolou. Even some people who had already shared diaolou with others took the responsibility of building a second one on their own fund. So in some villages, diaolou were located in no order, one standing by the other. The overseas Kaiping people not only had diaolou built up, but also bought

guns and ammunitions, floodlights, power generators, sirens from abroad to improve the early warning system and effective defense of diaolou.

The central region of Kaiping is a plain intersected with rivers. Tide and windstorm in every summer and autumn will flood the area, and many villages will be inundated. Therefore, most diaolou on the plain were built as protection against rampant flood. Many middle and old aged people in Kaiping had the experience of staying in diaolou to avoid the flood. Diaolou in plain area had that function up to the 1960s. Therefore, people there have always harboured deeper affection for diaolou than those of other places. The Yalong Diaolou in Sanmenli, Chikan Town, has been maintained in good condition, which indicates the deep feeling and care of the local people.

Diaolou are in close relation not only with the life of ordinary people, but also with the social progress in Kaiping. The first peasant association in Kaiping was founded in the Shi Diaolou in the Xiabian Village, Baihe Town. The honeycomb-like holes caused by bullets on the Nanlou Diaolou in Chikan Town recorded the heroic feats of seven martyrs in front of the Japanese invaders. Diaolou are the witnesses to the various historical events in Kaiping.

### 3

The most important cause for building diaolou lies in the fact that it has the defensive function. For further analysis,



diaolou can be classified according to their different defensive functions. The first kind of diaolou is called light tower, built on the tableland outside the village, and its main functions are to watch the surroundings and give an early warning to the villagers nearby in case of danger. Inside the tower, flashlights, sirens and power generators were installed. Because it was built to meet the needs of joint defense of several villages, it appeared rather late, and had a small number in Kaiping area, compared with the two other kinds of diaolou below, the second is called gate tower or siren tower. Like the light tower, it functioned as giving early warning to the villagers in a village and was regarded as one of the earliest kinds of diaolou in Kaiping. It had a very close relationship with the traditional emplacement in ancient Chinese villages. Those gate towers were mainly made of bricks and wood, and many of them have been pulled down since the founding of New China so that only few can be found today. The third kind of diaolou is the one-column-wall diaolou built behind or beside the village for defense purpose only. There are many diaolou of this kind in Kaiping. Generally the one-column-wall diaolou appeared after the siren tower, but earlier than the light tower. It can be classified into two kinds, one only for protection and the other both for inhabitation and defense.

In accordance with the building materials, diaolou can be categorized into four kinds: stone one, rammed-mud one, brick one and RC (Reinforced Concrete) one.