

Classicizing Architecture and the Kaiping Diaolou: Diasporic Identity in Guangdong, China

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Abstract: The county of Kaiping, located in Guangdong Province, China, is well-known for the local watchtowers called *diaolou* which are commonly found throughout its landscape. The *diaolou* is a form of defensive architecture first developed in the Ming era. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kaiping saw a boom in *diaolou* building, accompanied by rising numbers of local people migrating to the West or Western colonial spaces in East Asia and then later returning home. The *diaolou* built during this period display a unique mix of Western architecture, often recognizably Classical or Classicizing, set in a traditional Chinese structure. This article argues that the reception of Western/Classical architecture in these buildings was multivalent, structured along the following themes. First, the Western/Classical references were not drawing from true antique Classical architecture, but rather, on contemporary Neoclassical architecture in Asian colonial spaces, Australia, and North America. Second, the designs of these buildings reference how their owners and builders experienced overseas migration into Western spaces during this period. And lastly, these *diaolou* have served as enduring foci of cultural memory regarding the diasporic experiences of the local community over time.

Keywords: architecture, Classical reception, diaspora, migration, Neoclassical.

Introduction¹

This article investigates the historical reception of architectural Classical and Classicizing elements as found in the *diaolou* (碉楼) (“watchtowers”), a category of traditional Chinese defensive architecture which invites questions about diasporic identity, migrant experience, and cultural exchange. Informed by the postcolonial critique of Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said, I argue that these structures evidence what I am terming an “occidentalism of power”: the construction of Western-coded material, in this case tied directly to the phenomenon of Western colonialism during the 18th-19th centuries, for a local, non-Western audience.² The structures under consideration, the *diaolou*, are located in the county of Kaiping in the southwestern part of Guangdong province, China, situated along the Tanjiang River (Fig. 1).

¹ I am grateful for the support of Arum Park, whose guidance was absolutely invaluable; for the kind, constructive feedback offered by two anonymous reviewers; and for the members of my ABD writing group, whose generous comments on my earliest draft were a great help.

² Particularly influential for my study are Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge: 1994) and Said’s *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage Books: 1978). If Said’s orientalism is about a created body of theory and practice which constructs images of the Orient or the East directed towards those in the West, leading to the proliferation of stereotypes, then my treatment of occidentalism is to consider it as the construction of images of the West directed towards those in the East, also leading to stereotyping.

The position of Kaiping near the coast and the busy Pearl River Delta has historically facilitated ready access to the sea and encounters with foreign influences. Starting in the early 1800s, people from Guangdong began to seek opportunities overseas due to pervasive regional famines and economic instability at home, traveling to places such as South Asia, Australia, and North America. Kaiping and its surrounding counties became the ancestral home of many in the Chinese diaspora.

By the late 1800s, Kaiping had developed a tradition of migration that became embedded in its local culture.³ Most families had at least a few close members, usually men, who had left to work overseas. Money was continually sent home, and the aim was to eventually return. While not everyone came back with enough of a fortune to build the grand fortified tower-mansions called *diaolou* (碉楼), those who did do so set new standards for architectural taste and the expression of wealth in Kaiping. From the first decades of their construction to the present time, they have served as enduring foci of cultural memory regarding the diasporic experience in this community, while also being continuously instrumentalized to reflect changing cultural values over time. The *diaolou* that were built in the late Qing and early Republican periods (c. 1840 to 1937) are a distinct, unique mix of Western (often recognizably Classical or Classicizing) and traditional Chinese architecture. They embody specific cultural norms and experiences from the time of their construction and, most intriguingly, they reference how their owners and builders experienced overseas migration into Western spaces during this period.

There is a fascinating piece of Classical reception happening in these buildings as a result of those experiences: the Classicizing elements are not drawing on true antique Classical architecture, but rather, on the Neoclassical architecture which was so common in Asian colonial spaces, Australia, and North America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The connection between the architecture of the Classical canon and the Kaiping *diaolou* is not a straight thoroughfare. Rather, it is one interrupted by other receptions of Classical architecture, embodied in Neoclassicism and its Renaissance predecessors. The architecture of the *diaolou* is a response to a response, like an architectural game of telephone, which cannot be separated from the immigration experiences of the people who made them.

In this study, I trace how these buildings resonated in the community over time. I begin with outlining the historical background of the *diaolou* and the contexts of their development. Then, in order to illustrate the integration of Western-coded material in the *diaolou*, I identify and categorize Classical/Classicizing elements, including those which derive from post-antique rather than Classical sources. This is followed by a discussion on the relationship between *diaolou* architecture and vernacular architecture, leading into an analysis of community reception and use of the *diaolou*. This analysis is framed chronologically, proceeding first through the major period of their construction (1890-1937), then from 1940-1980 in the times of World War II and the Cultural Revolution, and finally, from 1980 to the present day. I take a qualitative approach to my overall analysis, grounding it in the material features of the *diaolou* themselves while also drawing on phenomenological observations and informal conversations with local residents. As I will demonstrate, these buildings represent a rich opportunity to explore a case of historical Classical reception in a

³ For an in-depth treatment of this, see Bo-wei Chiang, “Landscapes of Memories: A Study of Representation for Translocal Chinese Cultural Heritage in Kaiping, Guangdong, China,” *Translocal Chinese: East Asian Perspectives* 15, no. 1 (July 1, 2021): 5–37, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24522015-15010002>; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.

non-Western locale, shaped by complex historical relationships with migration, colonialism, and intercultural contact.

The *diaolou* of Kaiping: historical background and overview

Diaolou (碉樓) literally translates to “carved-stone tower,” but is usually translated as “watchtower.” Colloquially, the *diaolou* are called *paolou* (炮樓), or “gun towers,” referring to the rifles and small firearms they were meant to withstand.⁴ The *diaolou* reflect a longstanding regional tradition of organized, village-based self-defense in Kaiping, which developed in response to frequent banditry, kidnapping, and a lack of government presence and protection. The apocryphal story behind the construction of the first *diaolou*, recorded in the Kaiping County Annals in the early 1500s, emphasizes the use of these buildings as a response to widespread violence. That first *diaolou*, called the *Fengfulou* (奉父樓) or “father-honoring tower,” was built because of a man called Xu Long, whose wife was taken by bandits. The son, Xu Yi, gathered a large ransom for his mother, but his mother told him through the mediator that the money should be spent on a fortified tower to protect his father. The virtuous mother then died by suicide, and the filial son built the *diaolou* according to his mother’s wishes.⁵

The *Fengfulou* is lost, but a roughly contemporary example, the *Yinglonglou* (迎龍樓), still stands as an example of how the oldest *diaolou* were designed and built. The *Yinglonglou*, or “greeting-dragon tower,” was built during the late Ming Dynasty in 1644.⁶ It is a massive, rectangular structure made of fired brick and tile, with three stories and a flat roof (see Fig. 2). By any measure, the *Yinglonglou* is a type of fortress. Its architecture was a response to violent circumstances under which villagers were responsible for protecting themselves. Although the *diaolou* were often built and used by a single family, it was also common for them to be collectively paid for by the village, so that anyone could find refuge there in times of danger. A popular regional saying goes, “Without watchtowers, there is no village” (無碉樓不成村). Some of the larger villages have as many as ten towers, and most mid-sized villages had at least one.

The *diaolou* remained a central component of local architecture from the Ming Dynasty down to the Qing-Republican period, as the dangerous circumstances for which they were built never abated and in fact, worsened in the late 1800s–early 1900s. The second half of the 19th century brought the Opium Wars, revolts against Qing governance, and warfare between local clans and ethnic groups, all of which had major impacts in Guangdong. The collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 triggered only more instability. Guangdong technically became part of the new Republic, but the emergence of the Warlord Era in 1912 meant that social circumstances continued to be fraught with violence and fluctuating economic conditions. Local records reported that “between 1912 and 1930 there were more than a hundred murders, over a thousand abductions, and 71 major robberies, in addition to the countless thefts of buffalo and other goods...In addition, between 1912 and 1926, eight schools were attacked, leading to the abduction of over a hundred pupils and teachers.”⁷ There was a heightened need during this period for the *diaolou*, coinciding with growing

⁴ Guoxiong Zhang, 開平碉樓與民居, 老房子 (Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2002), 5.

⁵ Patricia R. S. Batto, “The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937),” *China Perspectives* 2006, no. 4 (July 1, 2006): 10, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.1033>; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.

⁶ Chiang, “Landscapes of Memories,” 13.

⁷ Batto, “The Diaolou of Kaiping (1842-1937),” 9.

waves of people who were leaving to work overseas, sending money home, and/or then returning with newfound wealth (or, not uncommonly, disappearing or dying without a body to be sent back). Thus, Kaiping saw a boom in *diaolou* building.

Classical architecture and the *diaolou*

The architecture of the new *diaolou* looked substantially different from their earlier predecessors in many ways, of which perhaps the most obvious was their incorporation of new, foreign materials and motifs (see Fig. 3). The *diaolou* still served the same purposes (protection, prestige, village identity, etc.) that they had always had—but the changes in their appearance were reflections of how immigration and life overseas had changed the communities who built them. The new *diaolou* incorporated Classicizing elements, reflecting increased interaction with the West as well as, I argue, an adaptation of the power encoded within Western colonialist architecture.

I use “Classicizing” broadly to describe any architectural element which is recognizably Classical (Vitruvian), Neoclassical, or otherwise related to those styles. It is worth noting once again that Classicizing elements in the *diaolou* were not inspired directly by antique Classical architecture, which no immigrant from Kaiping was likely to have seen. Rather, they reference Neoclassical and Classicizing architecture in North America and colonial southeast Asia. Keeping this layer of reception in mind helps frame how and why these elements appear as they do in the categories of elements I have identified below. The *diaolou* commissioners were never concerned with producing “correct” or canonical renditions of Classical/Neoclassical architecture. They were, rather, actively using visual vocabularies of Western power to which they were exposed overseas and adapting it as needed within their home communities—thus engaging in an occidentalism of power. The builders, all local craftsmen under the direction of master masons, were shown images like postcards and photographs brought back from abroad or did their best according to oral descriptions.⁸ The resulting architecture was not a result of ignorance of canonical Western architecture, as has been sometimes suggested,⁹ but of adaptation and response, intentionally performed for the local community.

In the remainder of this section, I provide a qualitative summary of categories of Classicizing architectural features among the *diaolou*, drawing from two sources: first, from 11 examples which I had the opportunity to examine in person in Zili and Majianlong Villages, and second, from a comprehensive collection of *diaolou* photos published in the Kaiping volume of the academic *Old Houses* (老房子) series.¹⁰

Columns

In contrast to the earlier *diaolou*, which lack columns entirely, columns are ubiquitous among the Qing-Republican examples. They are usually either placed along the uppermost level of the building, supporting loggias and roof structures, or framing doors and windows, where

⁸ Batto, 30.

⁹ A. A. Kim, “The Origins of the Formation and Features of the Manifestation of the Chinese Europeanized Architecture in Mid-19th–Second Half of the 20th Century,” in *IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering*, vol. 962 (IOP Publishing, 2020), 032060, <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1757-899X/962/3/032060/meta>; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.

¹⁰ Zhang, 開平碉樓與民居.

they tend to be decorative rather than load bearing. In those contexts, it is especially clear that the columns are simply add-ons whose value is not in physical need, but in visual signaling of power through the incorporation of a Western aesthetic. Also, their use is not restricted to the building's exterior. When used in the interior, they are usually in doorways (Fig. 4) or, more rarely, produced in miniature for the household ancestral shrine (Fig. 5).

The columns on some *diaolou* are plain, but Classicizing columns seem to have been a popular choice in general. All three of the major Vitruvian orders appear in recognizable ways, but often with some modifications in unique local variations. For example, see Fig. 6: the column on the far left seems Ionic at first glance, but closer inspection reveals that the shaft lacks fluting, the necking is very long, and the abacus is unusually thick and topped with a Chinese-style rosette. These kinds of stylistic modifications were common, but the nature of the modifications varied from tower to tower, highlighting individuality even as *diaolou* architecture became its own cohesive category of architectural vocabulary.

The doorway in Fig. 7, by contrast, displays relatively fewer modifications than the columns in Fig. 8. The culturally layered appearance of Classicizing columns in each tower seems to have been a collaborative matter between the commissioner's personal taste and the skill of the craftsman. Direct Western references for these designs can sometimes be found in Neoclassical buildings of the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly for the decorative window-framing columns (see Fig. 9).

Roofing

The roofs of the Qing-Republican *diaolou* are generally flat, untiled, and made of reinforced concrete (as opposed to the traditional stone, brick, or mudbrick). These features were a major departure from conventional Chinese roofing in the local style, which was gabled, tiled, and edged with ceramic figurines depicting mythological creatures or figures.¹¹ However, the new flatness of these roofs meant that there was room for more to be built on top of the structure. The stereotypical Qing-Republican *diaolou* has a multi-tiered upper edge: the top floor of the tower extends into a protruding loggia, sometimes turreted at the corners. On the flat top of the loggia, there is usually a rooftop enclosure with a surrounding balcony or a cupola on top. In the summer, when the heat in Guangdong is especially humid and oppressive, the wind travels through the tower, caught in the loggia and the openwork structure of the upper building.

The columns, arches, cupolas, balconies, and domes all have direct parallels in Classical or Neoclassical architecture. Modifications to these forms in the *diaolou* draw on not just traditional Chinese styles, but others as well. Islamic petal arches and domes, Gothic arches and ornamentation, stereotypical Western castle architecture, and Baroque accents are common in *diaolou* roofs. In conversations with locals, several people mentioned casually that these features can be used to guess where their owners went overseas. Domes, petal arches, and loggias are associated with Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and other southeastern Asian colonial spaces (where colonial architecture was widespread and long-established, with clear parallels to some *diaolou* styles; see Fig. 10, the Tamsui Red Castle in

¹¹ Edward Yee Wah Leung, "Roofs of Clans: Chinese Roofs of Vernacular Architectures of Branches of Communities in Hong Kong and Respective Restoration Techniques," in *East Asian Architecture in Globalization*, ed. Subin Xu, Nobuo Aoki, and B bio Vieira Amaro (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 396, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75937-7_30; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.

Taiwan, for an example). The more castle-like *diaolou* with turrets, battlements, and slit windows are said to suggest America or Canada. Although I was not able to systematically investigate it,¹² this etiological rumor is still of interest—it indicates a persistent communal memory regarding which families or individuals migrated where, preserved through the architecture of these buildings and the oral history surrounding them.

Decorative elements

The architectural decoration of the *diaolou* is typically found on roofs, windows, and doorways, each of which had its own conventions in the existing traditional local architecture. The Qing-Republican *diaolou* demonstrate how those conventions could be maintained and elaborated upon using foreign—especially Classical/Classicizing—decorative motifs, visually signaling the power associated with Western colonialism.

A characteristic feature of traditional roofing in the local style, sometimes called Lingnan architecture, is the use of elaborate ceramic figurines around the edges of the roof.¹³ The *diaolou* roofs maintained this tradition but adapted it for the new flat roofing and little overhangs which could be found over doors or windows. The ceramics which decorate the *diaolou* roofs are ornate and incorporate traditional Chinese motifs like mythological creatures, narrative stories, or objects representing luck and fortune (see Fig. 11). At the same time, many of these ceramics include Western motifs such as curling Baroque vines and Roman garlands. Aside from the ceramics, other roof decorations do the same seamless incorporation of Western elements into Chinese conventions: for example, most *diaolou* have a character plaque set into the top, front-facing edge of the roof to display the name of the tower. The Qing-Republican *diaolou* frame that character plaque with eclectic, yet cohesive mixes of Chinese and Western motifs. Of the latter, some of the most popular include Baroque vegetation, empty shields, false arches, Dutch gables, and flagpoles.

The windows and doors display similar decoration within different conventions from the roofing. Windows are relatively narrow, shuttered with metal or thick wood, and barred with iron. Decoration around them is focused on the frame. Pediments (Neoclassically pointed, curved, and broken) were extremely popular. The most elaborate decoration was concentrated in the tympanum, where some of the most complex stucco reliefs and stone-carving in the tradition of *diaolou* architecture can be found. Once again, the aesthetic reflection here demonstrates the same remixing and ownership of various Western and Chinese motifs: phoenixes and gourds appear as frequently as fruit-bowl still lifes. The same is true for the doorways, which are structured traditionally: recessed in several layers and stone-carved. The outer recess is often framed with Classicizing columns supporting a pediment or arch, with elaborate reliefs of the same type surrounding the windows and roof set above or within the tympanum.

The striking thing about the architectural decoration is that it is so consistently elaborate from building to building, even in the less wealthy examples. The quality of the reliefs, carvings, and ceramics are exemplary. This should be taken not just as a testament to the skill of the local craftsmen who made them, but as evidence of skill adaptation in the face of new tastes and influences. Kaiping already had longstanding traditions of complex

¹² These conversations were casual and while I made notes, I did not record them. Formal interviews are planned for a future follow-up study with more comprehensive data analysis.

¹³ Leung, “Roofs of Clans,” 397.

craftsmanship in carving (especially ivory and stone), woodworking, and ceramic production.¹⁴ The Qing-Republican *diaolou* are evidence of how those traditions of local craftsmanship, like other elements of local culture, adapted to a society deeply changed by increased migration and exposure to foreign influences.

Vernacular echoes

The *diaolou* were, in many ways, community projects, regardless of whether they had been paid for by a single family or a village as a whole. Their importance to the landscape of Kaiping cannot be understated. Even now, it is difficult to find a single remaining village of note in Kaiping which does not have a *diaolou* or the remnants of one. They were highly visible structures by intention, meant to be seen and to deter banditry or violence. This same visibility meant that there was a sort of trickle-down effect in terms of their architecture and decoration. More relatively mundane structures, like regular homes and ancestral halls, took on elements from *diaolou* designs. In any village with large portions of its historical architecture intact, which in Kaiping is a high number, one can see these elements in every range of use, in every type of building from the Qing-Republican era. Relatively humble houses which are otherwise in the fully traditional style—gabled, made of brick, three stories at maximum and usually less—often have Baroque and Classicizing reliefs over their windows, under the eaves of their roofs or over their doors (see Fig. 12 for an example).

The middle step, so to speak, between the traditional house and the *diaolou* is represented by the *lu* (廬) mansion, often translated as “villa” and contemporary to the Qing-Republican *diaolou*. The *lu* are explicitly residential.¹⁵ The *diaolou* could be used residentially, especially if they were paid for by a single family, but it was also common for them to be inhabited only in times of crisis, like attacks and floods. The *lu* are distinguished from the *diaolou* in terms of architecture mainly by their smaller size and broader, flatter layout. In all other respects, the *lu* are functionally a house version of the Qing-Republican *diaolou*, translated into a fully domestic space. Thus, the cultural changes represented by the *diaolou* were not limited to that particular form of fortress architecture. Rather, they were pervasive throughout the community, permeating the architectural expression of local identity to the point of ubiquity.

Community resonance: reception in practice over time

The *diaolou*, from their first appearance to the modern day, have been foci of cultural cachet. Throughout their existence, they have been instrumentalized to display and embody common social values in Kaiping, even as these values have changed significantly over time. In order to illustrate the various ways in which these buildings and their unique architecture were received by their communities, this section, which covers a significant period of time, takes a chronological approach. While I acknowledge that my treatment of the material here is broad (in part because this study is a first step in what I hope will be a larger work in the future), I nonetheless aim to give a clear outline here of the most relevant points.

¹⁴ Jian Hang and Qihui Guo, *Chinese Arts & Crafts* (中信出版社, 2006), 91.

¹⁵ Jin Hua Tan Selia and De Hua Zheng, “The Architectural Style and Cultural Connotation of Lu Mansions in Kaiping of Guangdong,” *Advanced Materials Research* 598 (2012): 12–21.

The late Qing-Republican period (1840-1939)

As discussed above, this was a time of sociopolitical unrest and rampant banditry. The banditry issue was tied up in a feedback loop with increasing migration in the late Qing period. Rising numbers of returned overseas Chinese, called *jinshanke* (金山客) or “Gold Rush Guests” regardless of where they had been overseas, developed a reputation for being very wealthy, which drew the attention of more bandits, which spurred the construction of more *diaolou*.

With the construction of more towers came increased organized defense, centered on the growing network of towers. Village *diaolou* began to muster their own armed militias and to communicate with each other when attacks occurred. For example, in December 1922 the Kaiping Secondary School in Chikan Town was attacked by bandits who kidnapped the schoolmaster along with 16 students. The local *diaolou* corps, associated with the *Hongyi diaolou*, raised an alarm to the neighboring village, whose own militia confronted the bandits and rescued the hostages.¹⁶

The infrastructure of defense around the towers became increasingly sophisticated over time. Kaiping residents used the influx of overseas money to buy guns and ammunition, and to outfit the towers with floodlights, power generators, and sirens to improve their mutual warning systems. By the late 1930s, when the *diaolou* building boom was coming to an end, the defense systems around the *diaolou* had become well-established,¹⁷ as had the archetypal form of the Qing-Republican *diaolou* in particular: three to five stories tall, thick-walled, made of reinforced concrete, and built in a distinct, ornate style which seamlessly incorporated broadly “Western” architectural motifs from the overseas places people had worked in. The influence of this style was such that when the *Yinglonglou* of 1644 was renovated in the 1920s, more “modern” *diaolou* touches were added, such as the Neoclassical pediments over the windows. The new conception of what a *diaolou* should look like had already settled in the community, who projected it onto the older building.

World War II and the Cultural Revolution (1940-1980)

Diaolou construction halted almost entirely in the 1940s, primarily because of the continuous historical turmoil of that decade: the Second Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Chinese Civil War, and the victory of the Communists over the Nationalist government in 1949, followed by the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1950. Despite the large-scale chaos, the *diaolou* continued to be used and maintained as well as possible. They were places of refuge during the Japanese attacks in particular—many *diaolou* still have bullet pockmarks and artillery damage from this period. Oral history in Chikan Town even remembers how the pockmarks on the face of their *Nanlou diaolou* were made by the Japanese execution of seven townspeople resisting the invasion.¹⁸

In the 1950s-60s, further disruption came when the PRC instituted widespread land reforms and nationalized the economy after the Soviet model. The Great Leap Forward in 1958 resulted in one of the worst famines in history, the Great Chinese Famine, which did not end until 1961. Guangdong was not one of the provinces worst affected by the famine,

¹⁶ Zhang, 開平碉樓與民居, 11.

¹⁷ Xiongfei Liang et al., “The Spatiotemporal Evolution of Kaiping Watchtowers and Village Defense Function Pattern,” 地理研究, no. 36 (2017): 121–33.

¹⁸ Zhang, 開平碉樓與民居, 12.

but the general turbulence of the 1950s put a permanent end to *diaolou* construction. The *diaolou* did, however, remain centers of community gathering and thus were well-maintained. They were used frequently as classrooms or teaching centers, and it was very common to find them used as *nui uk* (女屋), or “women’s house,” which was a type of traditional gathering-house for young, unmarried women to learn gendered skills like sewing, cooking, and childcare. In the plains areas, where summer and autumn floods are frequent, the *diaolou* were a practical place of refuge. In many ways, the *diaolou* became community centers. When the Communist movement began, it was in the *Shidiaolou* of Xiabian Village, Baihe Town that the first peasant association in Kaiping was formed.¹⁹

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) brought a new kind of large-scale social unrest. Its stated goal of purging capitalism and bourgeois elements led to a full decade of chaos and violence which is still within living memory. Although the Revolution was arguably never as strong in the south of China as the north, Guangdong still experienced the purges and abuses of intellectuals and “bourgeois” elements. I was surprised to learn in the course of my research that the *diaolou* were largely left alone during the Revolution, despite their overt display of foreign elements and what would have been considered “bourgeoisie values.” When I asked locals directly about this, I was told that no one wanted to destroy them. Artifact and material destruction during the Revolution was technically mandated at the government level, but was generally carried out more or less at the community or county level, depending on how many people were invested in enforcing it. In Kaiping, people simply did not want to destroy the *diaolou*, so they remained. The *diaolou* were still useful—as shelters from floods, community centers, representations of familial history and prestige, exemplars of local stonework, etc. The *diaolou* (and the villas) did not escape the Revolution fully unscathed, however. Remnants of the occasional Mao poster or Communist slogan can be found in flaking paint on the sides of some towers.

Modern receptions and cultural memory (1980-2024)

The *diaolou* slowly fell out of active use in the 1980s. There was no longer a need for their fortress capacities, and the Kaiping community changed as immigration increased again with China’s new open policies. Many people, mostly young, left for Hong Kong, Australia, Canada, and the U.S. There were increasingly fewer people who needed the *diaolou* as community centers or flood refuge, and even fewer who needed or chose to live in them.

Despite the lack of active use, the majority of the remaining *diaolou* are in fairly good condition, in large part because the overseas Kaiping community still cares about their maintenance. Most of these *diaolou* remain in family hands and are maintained by relatives who still live in the county. The *diaolou* are functionally treated as family heirlooms (although I am aware of at least one instance in which a tower is being used as a bed-and-breakfast for tourists). It is also very common for Kaiping immigrants and their families, including members born and raised overseas, to return to their ancestral village once a year or more to visit their family shrine and to check on their *diaolou* if they have one. A local publication, the Tanxi Monthly, is dedicated to reporting on stories of return visits and other happenings around Kaiping specifically for the overseas Kaiping community.

In 2007, the Kaiping *diaolou* were collectively designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Through this, the *diaolou* gained more protections and attention, leading to several

¹⁹ Zhang, 12.

outstanding examples (such as the Fang Clan *diaolou*) being transformed into museums. Perhaps this quote from the UNESCO nomination file best summarizes how the *diaolou* are perceived today: “The *diaolou*, or multi-storied defensive village houses of Kaiping, display a complex and flamboyant fusion of Chinese and Western structural and decorative forms...the selected groups of *diaolou* in their landscapes...reflect the culmination of almost five centuries of tower-building and the still-strong links between Kaiping and its diaspora.”

Conclusion

The Classicizing and Western architecture used on the *diaolou* are reflective of the worlds through which migrants passed and lived. They are also directly indicative of how these migrants saw and engaged with the visual language of the stereotypical West during a particular historical period and in the context of diasporic experience. This engagement, expressed through the formation of new architectural vocabulary, was predicated on the transformation of those experiences in Western spaces into physical forms meant to signal specific things to a local audience. This messaging of the new *diaolou* was achieved not through the Western elements in themselves, but through the adaptation of these elements into a new form of the *diaolou* tradition. At the time of their construction, the *diaolou* were ultimately about projecting power, and their form is telling of what constituted power in late Qing-early Republican Kaiping: a grand stone fortress that could protect community members, accented with references to the architectural vocabulary of Western colonial rule—another type of power, encountered overseas during immigration experiences. To the community, these *diaolou* represented general concepts such as wealth, tradition, and protection, but also more specific immigration experiences depending on the individual commissioner. The underlying message among all of them, however, implies survival of those immigration experiences. The people who built the *diaolou* were those who successfully “made it,” so to speak, overseas and then at home.

This is ultimately why the degree of “accuracy” of the Western elements does not really matter in terms of understanding why the *diaolou* look the way they do. In fact, their lack of accuracy illuminates exactly what processes gave rise to their appearance. To draw on Homi Bhabha’s “third space” concept of cultural interaction, the contact zones—physical or conceptual—between two cultures is created through imperfect understandings of each other. These imperfect understandings, for better or worse, form the basis of communication rather than getting in its way. The local stonemasons who built Classicizing/Classical architectural elements into the *diaolou* by referencing postcard photos and listening to oral accounts did technically misunderstand the “correct” forms of Western architecture. But this misunderstanding facilitated communication between them and the *diaolou* commissioners and by extension, the West as it was experienced by those commissioners. This misunderstanding also highlights what I mean by the *diaolou* embodying an “occidentalism of power.” The *diaolou* designers engaged in occidentalism in that elements of the West were made stereotypical, but this stereotyping was done in service of projecting a locally understood idea of power.

This stereotyping, and the material features of the Western elements of the *diaolou*, is telling of how Classicizing/Classical architecture was received culturally in this particular historical context. The *diaolou* columns, pediments, etc. are not accurate to actual antique Classical architecture because they were not encountered through direct interactions with that material. Classical architecture has a long history of underwriting the aesthetics of Western power. Immigrants from Kaiping saw the iterations of this colonial architecture that

came to permeate the buildings of modern Western imperialism in spaces like southeast Asia and North America. They never saw the Parthenon or the Pantheon or any other exemplar of Classical architecture from antiquity. The kind of reception which I describe here invites a reevaluation of the entire concept of “Classical reception,” demonstrating how such interaction has not only been possible through direct encounters with materials from antiquity, but also with its legacy branch-offs, most of which are tied inextricably now to the aesthetic of modern Western imperialism. Those legacy branch-offs—English colonial buildings in Hong Kong, Dutch government structures in Indonesia, etc.—held their own representations of Western power, tied back to Classical antiquity. The builders of the *diaolou* took and transformed those representations for themselves. It was not the Western elements accenting the *diaolou* that gave them their power, but the cohesive whole of the *diaolou* itself, creating meanings meant for the Kaiping community and not for the West or anyone else. Those meanings changed significantly over time, transforming the *diaolou* from fortress to flood refuge to community center and finally, to museums and heirlooms.

The use of Classicizing architecture in the *diaolou*, brought there via exposure to colonial architecture and Western spaces, is an indication that migrants experienced cultural contact and were changed by it. When they returned to their villages and built the *diaolou*, which were a fundamentally Chinese structure with an explicitly local function, they ornamented them with the things that they had seen abroad, perhaps to communicate not only worldliness, but that their experiences overseas had changed them and their conceptions of opulence or power. Readjustment and reintegration back into the community took place, becoming especially complex in the face of community traumas stemming from how a significant portion of those who left never came back and were never heard from again. For those migrants who made it back to Kaiping and who were rich enough to build the *diaolou*, engaging in those projects was a major part of re-establishing themselves and “fitting” into the community again now that they themselves were different. One *diaolou* in Zilicun Village has a character plaque next to the door that reads, “Strength to the yellow man” (黄種图强), (see Fig. 13). This is somewhat unusual, as while “yellow man” is used in Chinese origin mythology (people of the Yellow River), this context may also be referencing the derogatory phrase from Western race discourse. The family who built that *diaolou* had made their fortune in San Francisco. To place this statement right by the door built with the wealth they had gained in the U.S. seems both poignant and deliberate.

Over time, the *diaolou* took on great significance in their communities, being used and cared for in different ways as social values and political circumstances changed over the course of generations. These structures are physical manifestations of diasporic identity, migrant experience, and cultural exchange, echoing both Chinese and Classical antiquity during a transformative historical period.

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Appendix of figures

Fig. 1. Map of Kaiping within Guangdong, China.

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Jiangmen_within_Guangdong_\(China\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Jiangmen_within_Guangdong_(China).png); link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.



Fig. 2. The Yinglonglou. Image from Wikimedia Commons licensed under CC0 1.0.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanmenli_1.jpg; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.



Fig. 3. Two mansions and a typical Qing-Republican *diaolou* from Tangkou Township, Kaiping. Image by Stefan Fusan from Wikimedia Commons licensed under CC-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zili_Village_Yangxian_Villa_SF0004.jpg; link accessed Nov. 15, 2024.



Fig. 4. Interior of a *diaolou* in Baihe Village, Kaiping. Referenced from Zhang 2002, 318.

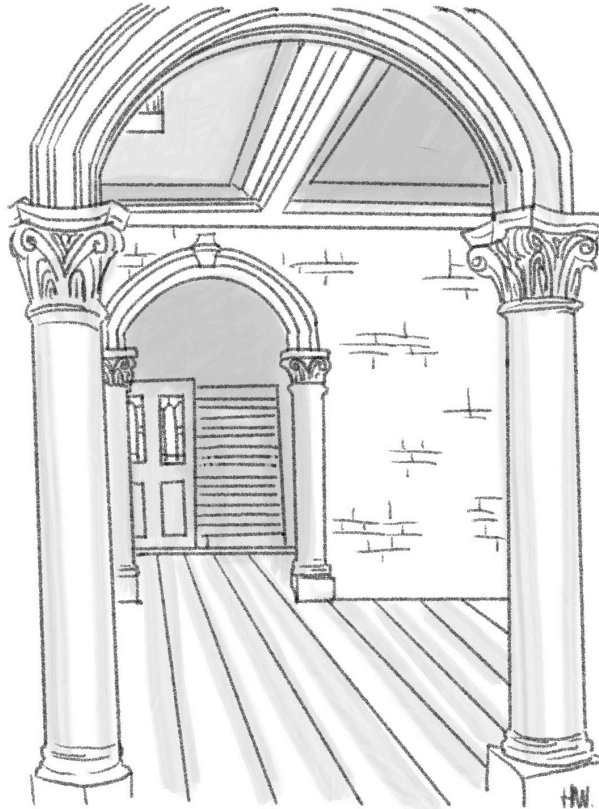


Fig. 5. Ancestral shrine inside a *diaolou* from Baihe Village.
Referenced from Zhang 2002, 321.



Fig. 6. Columns from a *diaolou* in Zili Village. Own image.



Fig. 7. Doorway of the *Fengcailou* in Dihai Village. Referenced from Zhang 2002, 407.

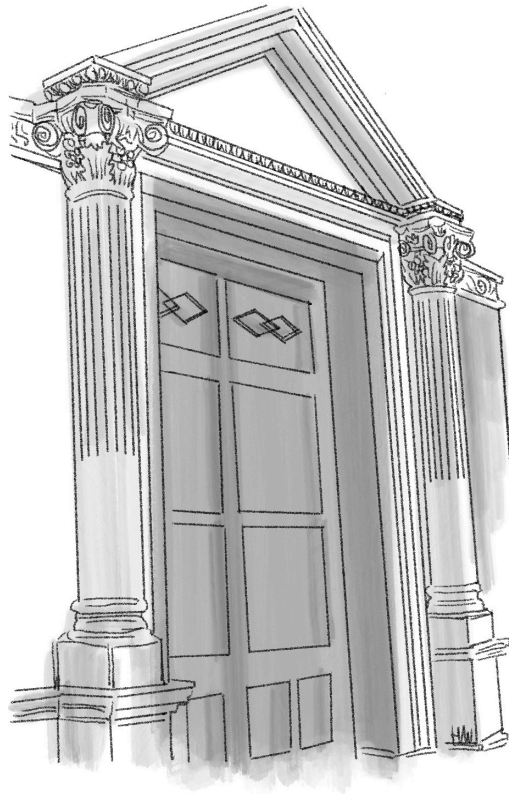


Fig. 8. Doorway from a *diaolou* in Tangkou Village. Referenced from Zhang 2002, 419.



Fig. 9. :Left: Neoclassical window frames.

Image by Hugh Nelson from Wikimedia Commons under CC 3.0 license.
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Four_Windows_\(55877520\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Four_Windows_(55877520).jpeg)

Right: A window frame from a *diaolou* in Baihe Village.
Referenced from Zhang 2002, 474.

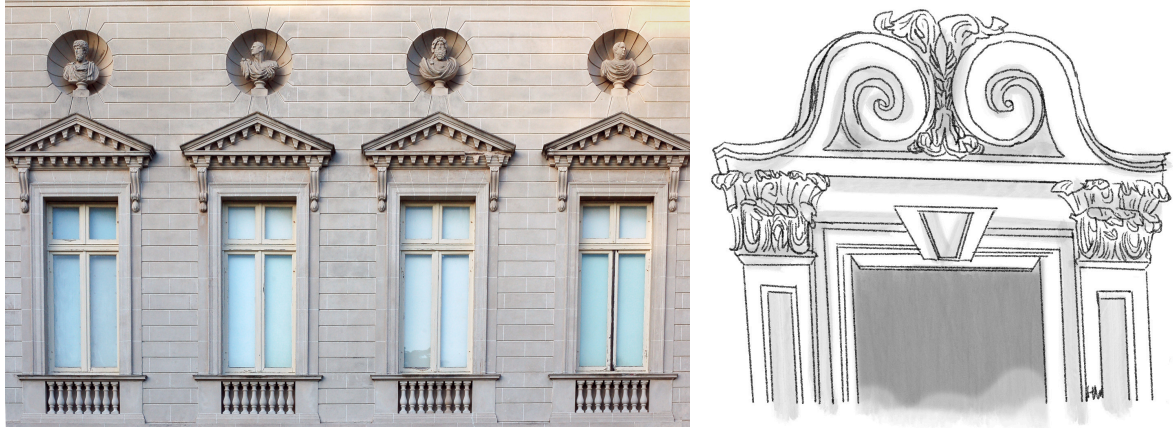


Fig. 10. The Tamsui Red Castle in Taipei, built in 1899.

Note the Western-style arched façade and the Chinese-style interior walls. Own image.



Fig. 11. A ceramic element of a *diaolou* roof edge. Referenced from Zhang 2002, 481.

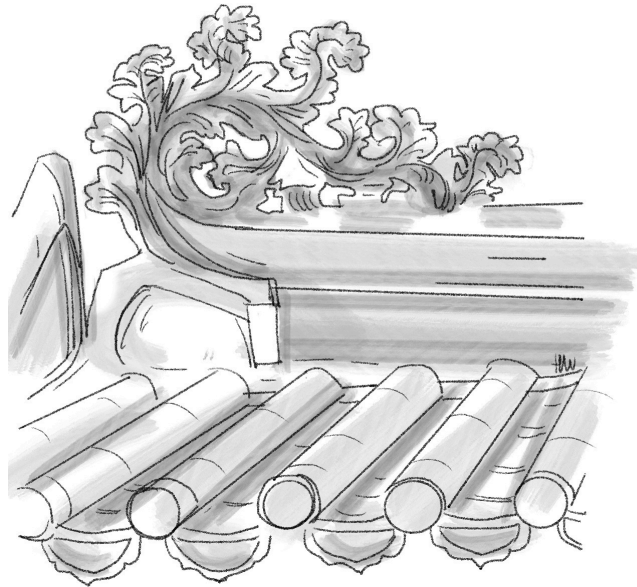


Fig. 12. Ceramic decoration over a doorway in a vernacular house, Zili Village. Own image.



Fig. 13. Plaque from a Zili Village *diaolou*. Own image.



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