

The Indomitable Hakka People of China

By Lam Pin Foo



Tianluokeng tulou site in Nanjing, nicknamed 'four dishes and a soup', photo by Lam Pin Foo

The Hakka people have had a long and colourful history since warfare, foreign domination, severe famines and natural disasters led them to migrate from their original homeland in north China. The first of their mass migrations predated Mao Zedong's Long March (1934-1935) by more than 1,600 years. Today, the Hakkas number between 40 and 50 million, live in seven of southern China's provinces and have also spread overseas.

Comprising less than 5% of the population, the Hakkas have had an influence on the course of Chinese history that is totally disproportionate to their numerical weight, especially when it comes to revolutionary, political and military leaders. Prominent Hakka revolutionaries include Dr Sun Yat Sen, the founding father of the Republic of China, Field Marshal Zhude, founder of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and Hong Xiuquan, leader of the Taiping Rebellion. Among the political and military Hakka personages are well-known names, the foremost being Deng Xiaoping who transformed China's stagnating economy. Among their overseas descendants are statesmen of international standing, including Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.



Yuchanglou tulou in Nanjing, photo by Lam Pin Foo

In the past 30 years, my wife and I have made many trips to China. Two of the most memorable were journeys through the Hakka heartlands of Yongding and Nanjing in Fujian province and Dabu in Guangdong, to see the unique Hakka *toulou* (earthen building) groups. They are regarded by international architects and heritage experts as wonders of Chinese folk architecture, with most built between the 13th and early 20th centuries. In 2008, 46 *toulou* sites in Nanjing and Yongding counties were conferred World Heritage status.

We toured several of these sites. Three of the most impressive *toulou* are the *Tianlou Keng* cluster (nicknamed *Four Dishes and a Soup*) completed in the late 14th century, *Yuchanglou* completed in 1338 and *Jiqinglou*, built in 1419. They were wonderful sights to behold, with each one displaying its own architectural characteristics and flavours. I felt overwhelmed by their grandeur and delighted by their charm since they gave me a glimpse into the simple lifestyle of Old China's rural folk. Many descendants of the original clan families still reside there.

When the Han Hakkas first migrated south to Fujian and Guangdong, other Han Chinese communities had already settled there. Naturally, they had chosen the choicest land and shunned the mountainous areas, inhabited mainly by hostile native tribes. Since the Hakkas were regarded as intruders and were resented for their regional and linguistic differences, they had no alternative but to take to the inhospitable mountainous regions to avoid persecution and bloody clashes with their Han brethren. In the face of adversity, they had to summon up courage, ingenuity and physical stamina in order to adapt to their new surroundings since they also had to contend with belligerent native tribes, gangs of roving bandits and ferocious beasts. They realised that they would be able to overcome the formidable challenges they faced only through group cohesion and teamwork.

So they opted for communal living and shared the meagre

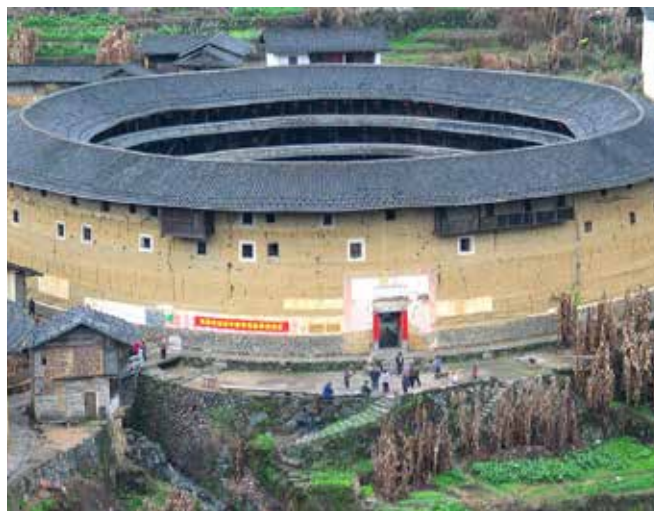


Circular tulou cluster in Chuxi, photo by Peter Chen

harvests that the unproductive land yielded. For protection against their enemies and the hostile forces of Mother Nature, they had to build fortress-like, mostly circular but sometimes rectangular communal dwellings that could accommodate dozens of families of the same clan. Living in such close proximity with one another meant that maintaining harmonious relationships was essential.

A typical large *toulou* is well fortified and completely enclosed by very solid, weight-bearing, rammed earth walls. It is usually three or four storeys high, can house from 60 to 80 families and between 600 and 800 inhabitants. There are individual kitchens, storage rooms and family living quarters. In the interior is the spacious air-well, the clan shrine where weddings, funeral rites and festive celebrations are held, wells and ample room for children and poultry to roam about. A large *toulou* is about the same size as a football field. In some, there is a well-concealed door that leads to a tunnel. This enabled residents to escape into the forests if attackers succeeded in breaking into the building. The *toulou's* exterior is built with compacted earth, augmented by sandstone, bamboo strips, wood, cooked glutinous rice and other materials that together support a six-foot-thick wall. All *toulou* have just one well-protected entrance, with a strong iron-reinforced wooden door and gun holes at the building's upper level for defence against attacks. The interior woodwork, including the floorboards, beams, pillars and staircases, were perfectly constructed and fitted into the brackets and joints without a single nail being used and are still in good condition after centuries of use. The termite-resistant timbers ensure the continued stability of the structure. The ingenious construction methods mean the *toulou* is warm in winter and cool in summer and also safeguards the inhabitants against attacks and the unpredictable forces of nature.

The Hakkas' indomitable spirit and ability to overcome privations, coupled with their industry and thriftiness, enabled them to turn adversity into advantage. By so doing, they became the masters of their own destiny and took their rightful place as an integral part of their new homeland. They remain immensely proud of their northern Han roots. Many of their ancestors were of high birth, some had held important positions at the Imperial Court and others were scholars in the strict Confucian tradition. They therefore look back to their homeland with nostalgia and longing and try to preserve as many of their ancient customs and ways of life as possible, even under vastly different and often aggravating environments in south China. Their distinctive dialect, traditions and customs are somewhat different from the other Chinese. For example, foot-binding, although common among other Han Chinese, was never practised by Hakka



Exterior of Jiqinglou, photo by Peter Chen

women who had to work alongside their menfolk in the fields and also undertake household responsibilities.

How do we account for the prominence of so many major Hakka political and military leaders in China and beyond? Is there something in their culture and character traits that accounts for these talents, or are the illustrious leaders mentioned earlier just a coincidence? I feel that their turbulent history as an exiled people escaping persecution and domination from non-Chinese invaders played a central role in their character formation. Settling in the south far from their original homeland, they had to defend themselves. This probably created a keen awareness of how larger political processes can affect individual lives. Collective action in their isolated mountain communities



Interior of Jiqinglou tulou, photo by Peter Chen

assumed an importance among the Hakkas less often found among the more established dialect groups in the lowlands. Living away from large population centres in barricaded mountain fastnesses allowed the Hakkas a degree of freedom from political authority and nurtured a tradition of independent political thought and action. The Hakka reputation for rebelliousness probably reflects these historical and geographical circumstances that over time, have come to define the Hakka psyche. Such a culture and environment also provided an excellent training ground for dynamic men with a gift for rallying whole communities, able to withstand prolonged periods of adversity in tough conditions.

Would it be too far-fetched to imagine that such a tradition has percolated beyond the Hakkas' traditional homelands to the new homelands of the overseas Chinese?

Lam Pin Foo is a retired lawyer and active blogger. His blog (www.lampinfoo.com) has more than 100 articles on history, current affairs, culture, education, travel and other topics.
