Fujian tulou – a living clans-dwelling World Heritage Site


During a short trip to the Hakka region from 15 -18 November, 2011, I visited a remarkable living World Heritage Site, the Fujian “tulou”, or fortified rammed-earth-walled dwellings, of the early Hakka and Minan peoples of Fujian Province.

Mistaken for missile silos

According to AmoyMagic – Guide to Xiamen and Fujian by Sue Brown and Dr Bill, 1,500 of these tulou’s were spotted by a US KH22 spy satellite as possible missile silos. A Department of National Defense report reached the desk of President Ronald Reagan in 1985 and caused much alarm. The truth was revealed soon after a couple from the US New York Institute of Photography were dispatched to pay a site visit.

Perhaps this serves to underline the importance of deeper understanding between the two increasingly rival superpowers.
Now a World Heritage Site

Six tulou clusters with a total of 46 tulou structures were inscribed in 2008 by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Built in 1709, the largest amongst them is the Chengqilou 承啟樓, nicknamed "the king of tulou". Amongst the Gaobei Tulou Cluster 高北土樓群 at Gaotou village of Yongding County, it is a massive rotunda with four concentric rings surrounding an ancestral hall at the centre. The outer ring is 62.6 meters in diameter and four storeys tall. It has 288 rooms, with 72 rooms on each level. There is a circular corridor from the 2nd to 4th floor, with four sets of staircases at cardinal points connecting the ground to top floors. The 15th generation Jiang clan with 57 families and 300 people still live here. At its heyday, more than 80 family branches lived there together.

Strongholds for clanship defense and community dwelling

From the 12th century to 19th century, southern China was plagued by armed bandits. The people of southern Fujian first built strongholds to live on top of mountains. These later evolved into the Fujian Tulou.

The sand and earth appearance of the walls belied their endurance and strength. They consisted of rammed earth with lime-sand-clay mixture reinforced with horizontal bamboo strips and local glutinous rice. Out of curiosity, I pressed a wall to get a feel and was somewhat surprised by its robustness.

The outer walls were two metres thick at the bottom, tapering to one metre at the top. They were meant to be resistant to arrows and even cannon-fire. The
lower one- to two-metre section of the outer wall was sometimes built with granite blocks or large river cobbles. This section was immune to digging, since the outer layer of cobbles was purposely laid with the smaller ends pointing outward.

The weakest link in a walled system was usually the gate. But the door frame was built from a large solid block of granite; the double doors were built with fire-resistant solid wood boards up to 13 cm thick, reinforced with thick iron armour plates. The main gate door was barred with several horizontal and vertical strong wood posts inserted into holes in the granite. To guard against an enemy trying to destroy the front doors with fire, some doors were equipped with water tanks on top to quench fires set by the enemy.

Fujian Tulou residents used firearms for active defense, shooting at enemies from gun ports at the top level of the building. Some Fujian tulous are constructed with a circular corridor along the inside wall to facilitate the movement of armed men and ammunition.

**Other images of the Fujian tulou**
**Variety of surviving Fujian tulou**

*Source: Huang Hanmin in: "Chuugoku minkyou no kuukan o saguru", Keiichirou Mogi, Kenchiku Shiryo Kenkyusha Co. Ltd., 1991*

A slide show on preservation  

[http://globalheritagefund.org/slideshows/fujian_slideshow](http://globalheritagefund.org/slideshows/fujian_slideshow)