



# HAKKA LAND AND ROUNDHOUSES

By George Koo

At one time, these structures viewed from satellite appeared to be threatening missile silos, at least to some wary American officials. In 2008, UNESCO designated these uniquely Hakka constructions as World Heritage buildings. Though generically known as Hakka Roundhouses, not all are round but can come in oval and rectangular shapes as well as in all sizes and configurations. The generic Chinese terminology is tulou meaning earthen buildings and is more accurate. Increasingly these buildings are considered as

ecologically sound architectural gems and are drawing the attention of professional architects around the world.

Though varied in size and shape, the tulous share certain common characteristics. The walls are made of rammed earth reinforced with bamboo strips, up to 2 meters thick at the base and gradually tapered as the wall rises to the roof, 3 to 4 stories high. Small windows begin on the third floor where inhabitants live. Most roundhouses have only one entrance, a thick solid

wooden door heavily reinforced and protected by a water dousing system in the event of siege by fire.

Most of the community activity takes place in the central courtyard. Facing the entrance would be the altar to pay homage to goddess Guanyin and in the center of large tulous, there would be a community meeting hall. There would be at least one well in the courtyard and in many cases two on the east west axis, though never aligned for fengshui reasons. Abutting the sides of the meeting hall are pig pens and chicken coops, most of them no longer in use, as well as public bath facilities.

Many families can live in one building, usually all related with the same surname. Every family occupies a slice of the roundhouse, from first floor to the top. Ground level is for cooking and eating. Second floor is usually for storage and to do the daily chores and the upper floors for sleeping. Obviously all social activities take place in the central courtyard.

The basic advantages of the Hakka buildings are low cost of construction and maintenance, the last one built in 1962 cost around \$30,000, and long lasting for centuries. The buildings have proven to be earthquake proof, cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The Hakka people are Han Chinese and not a distinct ethnic minority. Through successive waves of migration from the north to south starting from the days of turmoil and strife during the Western Jin dynasty in fourth century AD,



**THIS IS A REPRESENTATIVE VIEW OF THE UPPER STRUCTURE OF A ROUNDHOUSE. NOTE THE UPPER FLOOR IS CANTILEVERED OVER THE LOWER AND THE USE OF MANY BAMBOO BASKETS.**

they came to remote regions of Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Hakka is another term for kejiaren or guest people. Feeling like unwelcomed guests wherever they go, they devised the easy-to-defend roundhouses for their communities. Known for their diligence and hard work, many important historic personages are Hakka including Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China.

I first learned about the tulous from Professor Bill Brown, teaching at the Business School of

Xiamen University and writes humor laden tour books on the side. Bill and his wife, Sue, have raised their two young kids into adulthood while teaching in Xiamen and developing a personal fascination for the roundhouses. I believe the Browns are prototypical of exemplary American ‘hakkas’ living in China.

It’s possible to see the Nanjing tulous on a day trip from Xiamen, but that would be missing a lot. There are said to be 20,000 tulous in Fujian. One should at least stay overnight and see the many tulous in Yongding as well as Nanjing. The Yongding tulous are older and more varied. According to the tour guide at Yongding, the tulous of Nanjing were built by folks that migrated from Yongding.

Better go sooner than later. Along the way, we can see massive investment underway for modern hotels and entertainment centers and “disneyfication” of the scenic countryside is a real concern. The following are some of the memorable photos.

The most photographed cluster is undoubtedly the Tianluokeng village, nicknamed “four dishes and a soup.” [opening photograph .ed] The road to Nanjing leads right up to scenic view. After the obligatory photo stop, we then walked downhill to see and enter each of the buildings.



**KUIJULOU WAS BUILT IN 1834 AND IS A MULTILEVELED BUILDING MORE LIKE A PALACE.**

This is a representative view of the upper structure of a round house. Note the upper floor is cantilevered over the lower and the use of many bamboo baskets.

Despite beams that could be “off spec” causing as much as a 15 degree tilt from vertical, the buildings have withstood rain, wind and earthquakes for over 700 years.

The highlight of our visit was the opportunity to stay overnight at one of the tulous, Zhenfulou in the outskirts of Yongding. It was built during the turn of the 20th century; the third generation owner, Mr. Su and his family live in a two storied structure next to the tulou. We were their guests for the night.

The grandfather made his money from tobacco, still grown in the region and built this tulou. The inside courtyard of this roundhouse is particularly elaborate, no doubt a reflection of his wealth and a more modern times.

The first two floors of Zhenfulou has been converted into a museum on tulous and the Hakka culture. The area surrounding the building is being beautified and will become a future tourist destination as the heart of the Zhenfulou Scenic District.

The next morning we headed for the Hongkeng village and tulou group. Right away, we can see that this cluster is all set to exploit the commercial potential of the recent World Heritage designation.

There was a young lady waiting to guide us, and parking

for our car was free since we were returning to have lunch at the hotel built at the entrance to the village.

The first major structure to greet us was Zhenchenglou and its prominently displayed World Heritage logo. A contemporary of Zhenfulou, this building has some advanced designs.

The owner, a Mr. Lin, had designed brick walls on the inside to mark off sections of the building and to act as fire breaks in case the wooden structure should catch on fire.

Another advanced design involved the way smoke was led away from the ground floor kitchen to the roof top via channels built inside the wall.

Fuyulou is also part of the Hongkeng cluster. This square shaped building is divided into three sections where, in a break with tradition, the youngest brother occupied the middle section while the two older brothers had the two sides.

Kuijulou was built in 1834 and is a multileveled building more like a palace; in

somewhat of a stretch, the guide said like the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

After lunch, we went to the nearby Gaobei cluster of tulous that included Chengqilou, the “king” of tulous, with four concentric circles of buildings, four stories in the outer ring and a total of 400 rooms.

In the same cluster is a very old Wuyunlou that looks shaky even to long-time residents of tulous. Most have vacated and now only three elderly citizens have remained. We were told that they love having the run of the place.

A diagrammatic map of Fujian Tulou showed that there are more than 43 sites for tourists to visit, eight of these are World Heritage sites and another dozen are designated as national treasures. So far availability of various Hakka roundhouse tours is not widely known to foreign tourists and that’s the best time to visit.

## Thursday, May 6, 2010 Changting in the heart of Hakka country

From Yongding, the center of Hakka roundhouses in Fujian, it was a short hop and skip to Changting—at least it was now with new super highways that bridged chasms and bore through mountains.

I had a sentimental reason to visit Changting; I was born there. My parents were teaching at Xiamen University and the university had moved inward in anticipation of the Japanese invasion. Indeed, Xiamen port was taken by the Japanese imperial troops early in the War but they were spread too thin to bother moving westward toward the remote region around Changting.

Changting, now a city of around 600,000 to 700,000 was already an important city in the Tang dynasty known as Tingzhoufu. The city’s tag line was that Rewi Alley said that Changting ranked as one of two most beautiful ancient cities in China along with Fenghuang in Hunan. Now that I have been to both places, I’d say it’s a bit

of exaggeration. Fenghuang had much more to offer as a tourist destination.

Just one comparison should suffice to illustrate my point. Both cities have a pretty river flowing through the center of the city. In Fenghuang, the visitor can skip across the river over carefully placed concrete blocks pretending to be stones and hire boatmen to pole them on bamboo rafts down the river while being serenaded in ethnic Miao folk songs. Changting offered a scenic riverside park for strollers but no raft rides. We did see a fisherman sitting comfortably in the middle of the river casting towards deeper pools. Ms Chen, our guide, explained since a huge flood that occurred in late 1990’s, Ting Jiang has been reduced to not much more than a creek. The flood must have swept the river dragon out to sea, she speculated.

I went to Changting partly to see Fujian’s version of a Fenghuang but more because I wanted to see if there was anything left of Xiamen University campus, where I spent the first six years of my life.

Our guide took us to the largest elementary school in Changting just as the school was letting students home for lunch. This number one elementary school with over 2500 students was built over the grounds of the former university. The only building remained of Xiada was the Daxiongqian built in the traditional style of a Chinese temple. On prominent display by the front door was a sign commemorating the former site of the university from 1937 to 1946.

Practically next door to the school was a Confucius temple, Wen Miao. My mother had told me that we lived in a Confucius temple. Our guide was quite adamant that it was not possible for anyone to live in the side chambers of the main courtyard leading to the main temple. Then my wife, May, spotted a wing of rooms in a dilapidated building in the back of the temple. A couple of rooms were still in use with beds. Others were for storing stuff and gathering mold and dust. Overall, the wing of rooms was just a slight upgrade from a manger. May and I agreed

that we've found my likely place of birth. The feeling was personally gratifying.

Changting may not be quite ready for big time tourism—the best hotel in town did not even have a tourist map to give to the visitor, but did have an unusual local specialty called *bagan*, i.e., eight dried edibles such as dried bamboo shoots, vegetable, bean curd, pork etc. The one that caught my attention was dried field mice. The advertisement showed red roasted color but easily recognizable dried whole rodent, tail and all. I was disappointed that the actual vacuum blister package contained only diced pieces. Still for about \$1.35 per package, I got myself a bargain for a conversation piece.

From Changting's museum, we learned that the old Tingzhoufu was the center of Hakka country. The displays talked about the culture and customs of the Hakka people and their five major waves of migration beginning from the great turmoil of Western Jin dynasty around the fourth century AD when they fled south from what is now the Henan region to Fujian. From Fujian, subsequent waves took the Hakkas to other parts of China and then to Southeast Asia.

Before the Nationalists and the Communists agreed to unite and fight the invading Japanese and before the Long March, Changting was an important commercial base for the CCP. In fact it was known as Red Shanghai, claiming that anything that was available in those days in Shanghai, it could be purchased in Changting. Jिंगgangshan where the main forces were stationed was just a short distance away on the other side of the Fujian-Jiangxi border.



I WENT TO CHANGTING ...MORE BECAUSE I WANTED TO SEE IF THERE WAS ANYTHING LEFT OF XIAMEN UNIVERSITY WHERE I SPENT THE FIRST SIX YEARS OF MY LIFE.

If you are already going to visit the roundhouses of Yongding, then I would recommend a stop in Changting. The museum has excellent displays, albeit in Chinese only, that provide a thorough introduction of the Hakka people, culture and values. At the martyr monument for Qu Qiubai and the museum next to the statue of General Yang Chengwu, one can find

a lot of material describing the early days of CCP and its struggle against the KMT. Qu was an intellectual giant in the CCP's early movement who was too sick with TB to join the Long March. He stayed behind, was captured and Chiang Kai-shek personally ordered his execution. Yang was a local who rose to become a three star general.

Going back to Xiamen from Changting only took a little over 3 hours on limited access toll road all the way. We counted 40 tunnels and probably as many viaducts in the 280 km span of the highway, from the mountainous western edge of Fujian to the seaport. Some of the tunnels were over 3 miles long. Some had serpentine curvature. Knowing that construction of the tunnels began from both ends, we marveled at the engineering skills involved and concluded that one by-product of its heavy infrastructure investment is that no one knows how to build bridges and bore tunnels better than China.

Changting still has some alley sized streets that date back to Song dynasty. On this Song dynasty street, haircut still costs US 75 cents.

Around the corner of the elementary school, a patient hawker was waiting for the children to look and buy his plastics toys. The

school gave the kids a 2.5 hour noon time break to give them time to go home for lunch.

Changting also has a chenghuangmiao, a city god temple. In many cities in China, the city god temple is regarded as old superstition and has been torn down. On one wing of the city god temple were arrays of small figurines that looked like depiction of historical or mythical figure revered in old China. On the two sides of the main temple were ten murals depicting each of the ten magistrates in Hell that will review the sins committed by the new arrival and his orderlies then carried out the punishment to fit the crime.

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*George Koo came to the U.S. as a child from China, grew up in Seattle and educated at MIT, Stevens Institute and Santa Clara Univ. Dr. Koo has recently retired from Deloitte & Touche where he advised clients on their China strategies and business operations. He continues as a special advisor to the Chinese Services Group at Deloitte. Dr. Koo is a frequent speaker in various public forums on China and U.S. China bilateral relations. He writes for Pacific News Service (New America Media) on issues relating to Chinese Americans and to U.S.-China relations. He is a member of Committee of 100 and Pacific Council for International Policy.*



**CHANGTING'S MUSEUM HAS EXCELLENT DISPLAYS THAT PROVIDE A THOROUGH INTRODUCTION TO THE HAKKA PEOPLE, THEIR CULTURES AND VALUES.**