

DESTINATION

# All around the watchtowers

**Mark Andrews** visits the Unesco-listed diaolou of Kaiping.

Ask someone on the street in Kaiping, Guangdong province, what the population of the town is and they may well say, “680,000, plus 750,000”. The fact that many members of this overseas “population” may never have set foot in Kaiping does not matter; this town is a symbol of 19th century emigration.

Unesco named Kaiping a World Heritage site in 2007, because of the tower-like structures, known as *diaolou*, that dot the surrounding countryside. At one time they numbered as many as 3,000 but at the last count there were 1,833 of what today appear to be follies. Twenty buildings in the villages of Sanmenli, Zili, Majianlong and Jinjiangli have been added to the Unesco list.

A cacophony of ducks greets visitors to Zili, its nine *diaolou* and six Western-style villas rising out of the rice fields. These buildings were once the ultimate symbol of success but their expense and fortification belie the blood, sweat and suffering that went into their conception. The village museum takes up the story.

Times were hard in the mid-19th century; civic unrest and overpopulation resulted in three major waves of emigration. The Kaiping diaspora is spread through 69 countries, although more than half of them live in North America and nearly a third in Hong Kong.

Many of the early emigrants found themselves working in slavery-like conditions but some succeeded and amassed fortunes. Lack of acceptance overseas – exemplified by the United States’ anti-immigration Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 – led those who did succeed to channel their money into their hometowns. As wealth flowed into the area around Kaiping, so did bandits. The *diaolou* were built to guard against these intruders and to provide refuge in times of flooding.

The origins of the tower-type buildings date back to the 16th century. Sanmenli is home to one of the original *diaolou*, which is about 450 years old.

Picture: Xinhua



Diaolou in Zili village.

Although also a defensive building, it is different in style to the newer towers, being low rise and occupying a larger area.

A visit to Minshi Lou in Zili, shows the success of *diaolou* built in the early 20th century. Made with Western construction techniques and materials, these buildings were capable of repelling Japanese soldiers.

Just outside Zili is another type of *diaolou*, a watch tower, used to warn of impending bandit attacks.

At nine storeys, Ruishi Lou, in Jinjiangli, is the tallest of the towers. Although easy to spot, it is not easy to get to. A maze of roads criss-crosses the rice fields and even locals can be unsure about which one to take. Persistence is rewarded with what is claimed to be “the best” *diaolou*, thanks to its mix of Western with Chinese design and original furnishings.

Peaceful Majianlong is protected by the Tan River, mountains and an enveloping bamboo grove. Laid out

according to fung shui principles, the village has seven *diaolou*; including Tianlu Lou, which was built by the community.

Chikan township, as well as being a good lunch spot, has its own type of construction. Known locally as *qilou*, the picturesque riverside buildings are famed for their balconies. Movie buffs might recognise the nearby film set – and its *qilou* reconstructions – from the film *Drunken Master*, starring Jackie Chan.

Li Garden is a legacy of Xie Weili, who made a fortune trading in the US and Hong Kong. The “garden” is a collection of six villas and a tower. Security was paramount and the homestead has an escape tunnel, which runs from the *diaolou* to a canal.

**Getting there:** Trans-Island Chinalink ([www.trans-island.com.hk/eng/china-line.html#kaiping](http://www.trans-island.com.hk/eng/china-line.html#kaiping)) operates four buses a day direct from Portland Street, Kowloon. Travel time is about four hours.

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