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CIRCLES OF LIFE

The rural, doughnut-shaped tulou homes of China's Fujian province and the close-knit lifestyle they've fostered are in danger of being swallowed up by modernisation. But some residents are mobilising their communities to ensure the survival of these architectural wonders

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very morning, in the rural depths of Nanjing county in China's southern Fujian province, Mr Liu opens his front door, steps

into the courtyard of one of the country's most beautiful residential structures and lights his first cigarette of the day. "Our ancestor was a government official named Huang," says the fiftysomething Mr Liu as he pours tea at his courtyard stall, positioned in the shade to avoid the punishing sunshine. Clothes drape from washing lines strung up around the three floors of the circular wooden residential block, which forms a perimeter around us. Wicker trays laden with drying fruit dot the scorched ground. A few yards away, a neighbour slosh-hauls a bucket from a nearby well. "Huang was the great-great-great-grandfather of all of us here... he had three wives!" Mr Liu says. "One wife is enough for me," he adds, coughing up a laugh.

We are sitting among Mr Liu's relatives of varying genetic closeness in the Hechang building, as far from the gleaming, skyscraper-housed, shoebox-sized apartments of China's megacities as you can get, both geographically and aesthetically. One of five buildings comprising the Tianluokeng tulou cluster, Hechang and structures like it were mainly built by members of the Hakka ethnic group. Tianluokeng's history dates back to the late 18th century, and many more tulou were built after migrations by Hakka people from north China to Fujian in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



Tulou buildings are either doughnut- or square-shaped walled-off structures, often two to four storeys high and sometimes big enough to house up to 800 people. They were usually built by Hakka people who were too poor to buy property, and instead used a clay mixture sometimes fortified with wood to build their homes.

With tulou houses facing into communal courtyards, arguably the closest communities in China have been formed within their knobby brown walls, which were built up to five feet thick. "We do feel close," says Mr Liu. "We all have the same ancestors and see each other every day. We drink together, share tea..."

Hechang is one of thousands of tulou buildings in Fujian province – some historians have placed the figure as high as 30,000 – and the vibe at the Tianluokeng cluster it sits in the heart of is peaceful and subdued. Many residents here used to make a living from farming but now sell trinkets to a steady stream of tourists, whose presence is the result of these tulou buildings being given World Heritage site status by Unesco in 2008. As well as tourists, this stamp of approval



Previous spread
A tulou building in Fujian province at sunset

This spread, clockwise from top left
Lin Lusheng; an aerial view of tulou buildings; the exterior of Eryilou tulou



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(PREVIOUS SPREAD, TOP RIGHT)

– given to 46 Fujian tulou buildings – ensures a flow of renovation cash that allows for their upkeep and maintenance.

Eryilou is perhaps the most charming example of a Unesco tulou. Located 150km northeast of Tianluokeng, its courtyard bustles in

the daytime as residents hawk bags of local mushrooms. There are fewer tourists at Eryilou than at Tianluokeng, and tea plants are all around. A large tranquil water pool sits outside the tulou, seemingly with no function other than to look extremely pretty. “It was built to give the tulou good feng shui!” says a friendly local returning from a tea haul in the hills.

When night falls, there are more locals than tourists knocking back rice wine in the newly built restaurants nearby, helping the place feel

less like a showcase area than Tianluokeng. But as Eryilou’s trestle tables are packed away for the evening, it becomes clear that most of the structure’s houses are empty. As idyllic as they are, many tulou have been abandoned by families who’d rather not shower using bottles filled from wells or make mosquito-dodging runs to communal toilet blocks in the dead of night.

China’s rural to urban shift – which saw the urban population grow from 26% of the country’s overall figure to 56% between 1990 and 2016 – is keenly felt here. Jiang Jiguang, a 30-year-old tea trader whom I meet at the nearby Nanyang building, is one of the few young adults I encounter in the area. “There were many kids here when I was little,” he says, sitting in the courtyard of Nanyang, where he was born. “Ten years ago, there were 300 people living here. Now it’s mainly just a few older people. It’s too isolated.” Indeed, many believe that beyond the bubble of the Unesco-approved sites, Fujian tulou culture is dying. Much of the province’s tulou are currently empty or in disrepair, as younger generations leave them for big cities.

This cultural emergency led 38-year-old Lin Lusheng to spring into action. Lin was born in Taoshu, a tulou building in Neilong village, in Fujian's Yunxiao county. In 2015 he decided to do his part to help stop the decline of the community-led tulou lifestyle that helped form his warm, open personality. Sick of seeing water drip through Taoshu's leaky roof, poor education facilities and more people abandoning the place, he launched the Hao Cuobian project. Hao Cuobian means "Good Neighbour" in the Hokkien dialect Lin's ancestors spoke. "It's from when I was little," he says. "Kids would go to other people's houses for dinner if their parents were busy. Tulou was like a big family."

Lin outlined his tulou reinvigoration vision online then received donations from members of the public hooked by what they read. He enlisted village residents to work as volunteers, renovating the tulou and galvanising the community. Today, Lin speaks in one of Taoshu's small ground-floor rooms that was recently converted into an education centre. Academic books line the shelves, and every few minutes a grinning Hao Cuobian volunteer comically hops in through a window. "The window is quicker to use than the single entrance," laughs Lin.

Now the roof doesn't leak, roads leading to the tulou building have been widened by grafting volunteers and classrooms have been set up for the kids of the 13 families living in Taoshu. Volunteers supplement the education the children get from the small school next to the building, and experts such as master woodcrafters visit at Lin's invitation. He says that this educational aspect is particularly vital, as teaching quality is a huge problem in rural Fujian, where the best teachers tend to move to cities.

Clockwise from top left
Scenes of life at Tianluokeng tulou; residents of Neilong village; the entrance to a tulou building



Like in Eryilou, there are many unoccupied houses in Lin's two-floor tulou building, but a lively buzz throughout. Smiling volunteers usher me into a kitchen room that's been renovated to host visitors, where I'm served delicious locally sourced sausages as they tell me about architecture students from Taiwan who recently visited the tulou after reading about it online.

"The project has brought vitality to us," says 40-year-old Zhang Jiaofeng, plucking potato from a bowl with her chopsticks. "The neighbourhood feels united. Before, older people here



didn't always want to talk to younger people, but now they walk into my house and chat."

Lin concurs, but admits that beyond Taoshu's mud walls, tulou culture is walking wounded. "More people are moving to modern houses, but our project is still changing the mindsets of locals. Our work has made people love tulou again. We didn't have a lot of money, but we've started small, and people can learn from this."

By way of demonstration, we drive to the neighbouring village, Wailong, to visit the Cifu tulou building. It's a square-shaped structure a bit smaller than Taoshu, with crumbling roofs, a courtyard strewn with straggly weeds and faded pro-Mao slogans from the 1950s still visible on the walls. Some 30 people mill around the yard – their average age is probably about 80 – and there's a party atmosphere, or at least that of a particularly lively coffee morning.

Having seen Lin Lusheng's project unfold nearby, Lin Ronghui, the village's Communist Party deputy secretary, helped the Cifu residents form a volunteer clean-up group for their own tulou. "We haven't decided what our overall plan is yet," he says. "But we want to preserve our tulou, like Lin Lusheng did with his. We saw what they did there and loved it."

Hope for tulou culture has also been sparked by the Chinese government's somewhat ambitious promise to eradicate poverty in the country by 2020, which has led to an array of rural initiatives. Yang Ki, 38, is general secretary of the Communist Party committee in Zhao'an county's Fengshi village, located in southwest Fujian

province. He was tasked with helping the area's poverty alleviation plan until this fast-approaching deadline. As part of this, he has ordered tulou rooms in the area to be converted to museum exhibitions before the end of the year, and has organised events promoting Hakka culture.

"Here, it's the opposite way of doing

things, with the government starting the initiative rather than the locals, but it's the same goal," stresses Yang. "These buildings are carriers of local culture. You can build skyscrapers over them, but if this happens there won't be any cultural identity or roots."

No one is expecting the efforts of people like Lin, Yang and Zhang to suddenly cause masses of people to abandon their city apartments and pour back into countryside tulou. But their efforts are rippling outwards. The idea that tulou can exist as something between Unesco-bankrolled tourist sites and crumbling wrecks is beginning to stick. "It's taken years for these cultures to be formed," says Yang. "Even if the practical functions of these buildings weaken, the cultural genes won't be erased. No matter where they go, a tulou villager will always have an attachment to their home. Now, maybe they'll be more willing to [preserve] it."

I leave Lin as he assembles Taoshu's residents in the shadow of the main entrance for a meeting about the environmental impact of the renovations. It's all smiles and tea: a tulou state of mind. An hour-long winter bottle shower in the middle of Taoshu's courtyard couldn't dampen it.



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