

The State Army, the Guerrillas, and the Civilian Militias: Politics and the Myth of the *Tulou*, 1927–1949

JING ZHENG

This article questions the myth of the *tulou* as a “defensive” architectural tradition, with a focus on the period of the Chinese Civil War. By examining the evolution of the building form, changing political circumstances, and the social struggles of local communities, it argues that although the *tulou* construction tradition was constantly transmitted, the building form was adapted to different uses through history, and therefore constituted very different architectural traditions over time. This is why so-called “*tulou* fortresses” were no longer favored as defensive positions in twentieth-century warfare.

Myths are statements invented with cultural, social or political intentions. As time goes by, some statements may be selected and carried down as facts. These usually embody appealing and oversimplified views that neglect subtle but influential changes in history. Generally, they fail to explain emerging and contradictory facts, and this is part of how they become myths.

Tulou are large, multistory residential structures, a traditional building form developed in southeastern China. Since the 1980s, in heritage-preservation and other discussions, they have frequently been portrayed as fortresses. In fact, *tulou* built in the twentieth century and during many past periods were not constructed for defense purposes at all. It is often assumed the Hakka ethnic group of Fujian created such fortress-like structures for common defense in a hostile environment. According to many accounts, this practice started around the fifteenth century and lasted into the late twentieth century. However, this article argues that although the tradition of building *tulou* was constantly transmitted, by the early twentieth century the structures had long since been adapted to different uses. The contemporary notion of “*tulou* fortresses” is thus a myth.

Jing Zheng is a postdoctoral fellow at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

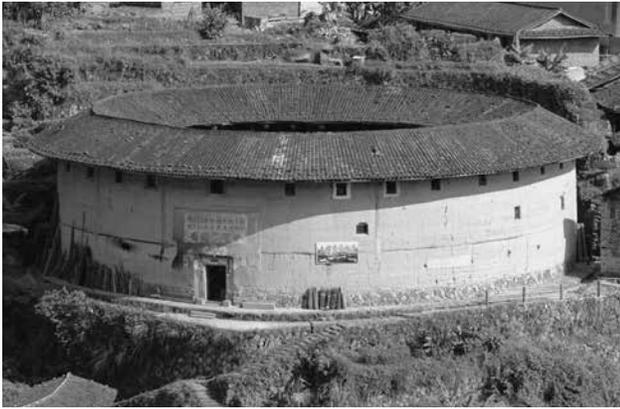


FIGURE 1. The appearance of typical tulou.

The article focuses on *tulou* built between 1927 and 1949, the period of the Chinese Civil War. These were the most tumultuous decades in the past few centuries in areas where *tulou* were built. During this time three military powers coexisted and contested for domination of the region: the state army (also known as the White army) commanded by the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang); the guerrillas (also known as the Red guerrillas) commanded by the Chinese Communist Party; and civilian militias commanded by local landlords. According to my survey and to government records, during this period of warfare, none of these military forces saw any advantage to defending *tulou*. Indeed, although the building type may once have offered limited strategic potential, there is little evidence that *tulou* were ever deliberately built and utilized as fortresses.

This article asks why, if *tulou* were fortresses built by local people using vernacular techniques, neither external nor local forces were interested in seizing and controlling them during periods of war. Based on an examination of the evolution of *tulou* structures and communities, governmental archives, and the memories of those alive at the time, it suggests two correlated answers. First, despite sharing basic structural features with early *tulou*, *tulou* built in the early twentieth century had changed functionally to serve primarily as a form of cooperative housing. Second, in these later *tulou*, many of the defensive features of older structures had been gradually eliminated as a way to simplify them and reduce the cost of construction. Moreover, since these buildings were vulnerable to modern artillery, they were no longer considered worthy for military powers to occupy or construct. As a result, *tulou* communities sought security through political negotiations with the various military forces in the region, rather than by relying on the physical strength of the *tulou* as a defensive structure.



THE MYTH OF THE TULO

In the rugged areas of western Fujian Province, China, there stand more than two thousand multistory, fortress-like buildings known today as *tulou*. Made of earth and timber, with simple geometric layouts, they are clustered along river valleys or are built in the mountains (FIG. 1). Usually, each *tulou* is about 3,000 square meters in area and 10 meters in height, consisting of up to 200 identical rooms (FIG. 2). Since the 1980s the picturesque landscape of *tulou* settlements has fascinated tourists from China and abroad. In 2008, 46 selected *tulou* were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for the stated reason that they “represent the particular values of defensive functions.”¹

The geometric and solid appearance of *tulou* certainly resemble those of defensive structures elsewhere in the world. And in descriptive literature they are sometimes associated with medieval European castles and fortifications — or even with prisons such as Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. The layout of a *tulou* is simple and rational, usually comprising a rectangular or circular earth-and-timber structure surrounding a large central courtyard. Rooms of identical form and size are vertically aligned around this central open space on three or four stories, connected by communal corridors and staircases. The large volume of the *tulou*’s outer wall is made of solid rammed earth, with a thickness ranging from 1.2 to 2 meters. There are few openings in this wall; windows are small and only open out on the third floor and above (FIG. 3).

Tulou have been regarded as fortresses since they were first described in contemporary literature.² An illustration by the architectural historian Huang Hanmin provides one of the most elaborate demonstrations of their supposed defensive systems (FIG. 4). As shown by Huang, the building had a solid outer wall for passive defense, the base of which was reinforced to prevent attackers from digging through it or undermining it. Windows on the lower floors were narrow and used as firing posts, while those on higher floors were

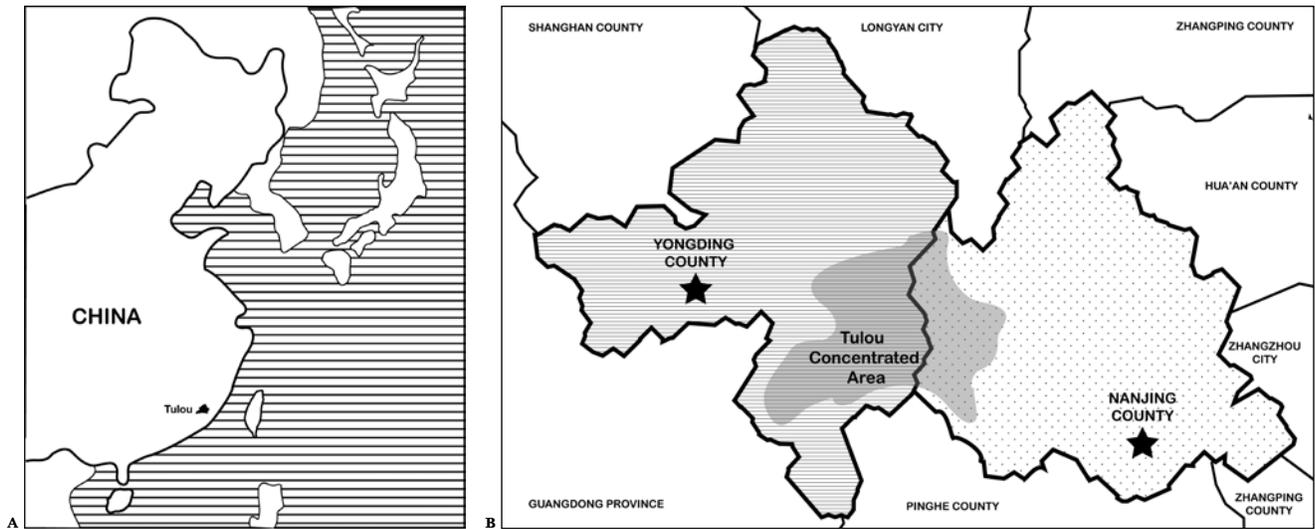


FIGURE 2. A) General area of tulou construction. B) Tulou area and the administrations.

wider so defenders could throw stones down on attackers if they attempted to scale the walls. Gates provided the weakest point in this defensive perimeter. To protect them against battering rams, their door planks were made of thick wood and equipped with strong latches. A water channel was even provided above each door to protect it with a curtain of water, if attackers tried to set it aflame.³

This vivid portrayal of the *tulou* as a primarily defensive structure, however, is imaginary. As confirmation of Huang’s analysis, there is little evidence that *tulou* were ever used in battle. On the contrary, statistics reveal that few *tulou* were constructed during the most tumultuous periods of the twentieth century — namely, the late Qing imperial period until 1911, the Warlord period (1912–1926), and the

period of the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949). Construction accelerated, however, during periods of relative social stability (1949–1983) (FIG. 5). In other words, *tulou* were favored more during peaceful periods than during times of war.⁴

These statistics contradict the prevailing view of *tulou* as “fortresses,” and show it to be a myth. In fact, as the dominant architectural form in the region, few existing *tulou* were ever constructed to shelter a community from military attack.⁵ If *tulou* had all the defensive properties Huang ascribed to them, why weren’t they built when security was a concern? To answer this question, I will first examine the nature of *tulou* communities and the challenges they faced during this period.

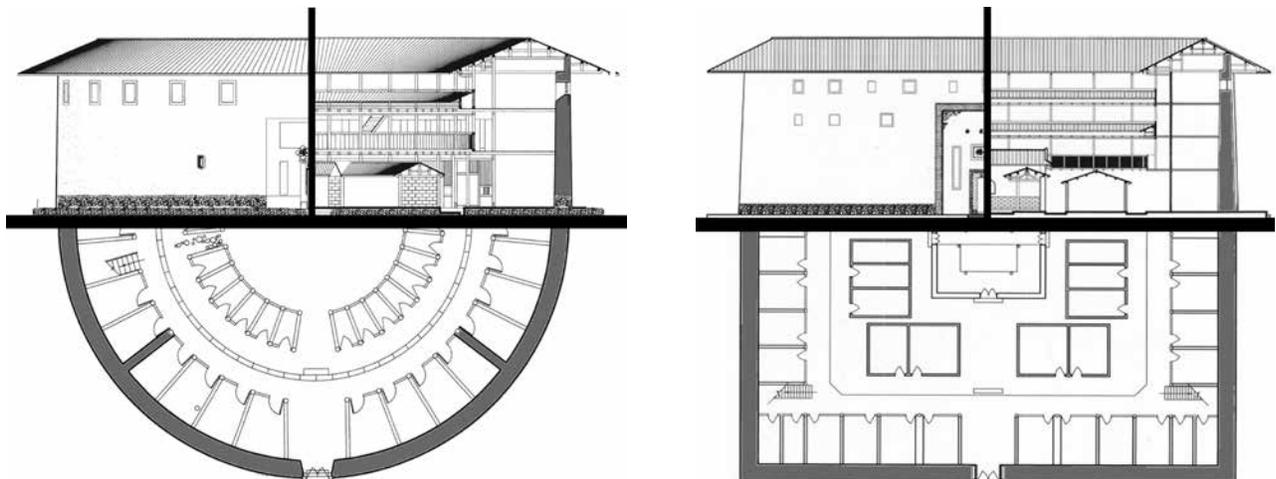


FIGURE 3. Floor plan, facade and section of a typical tulou.

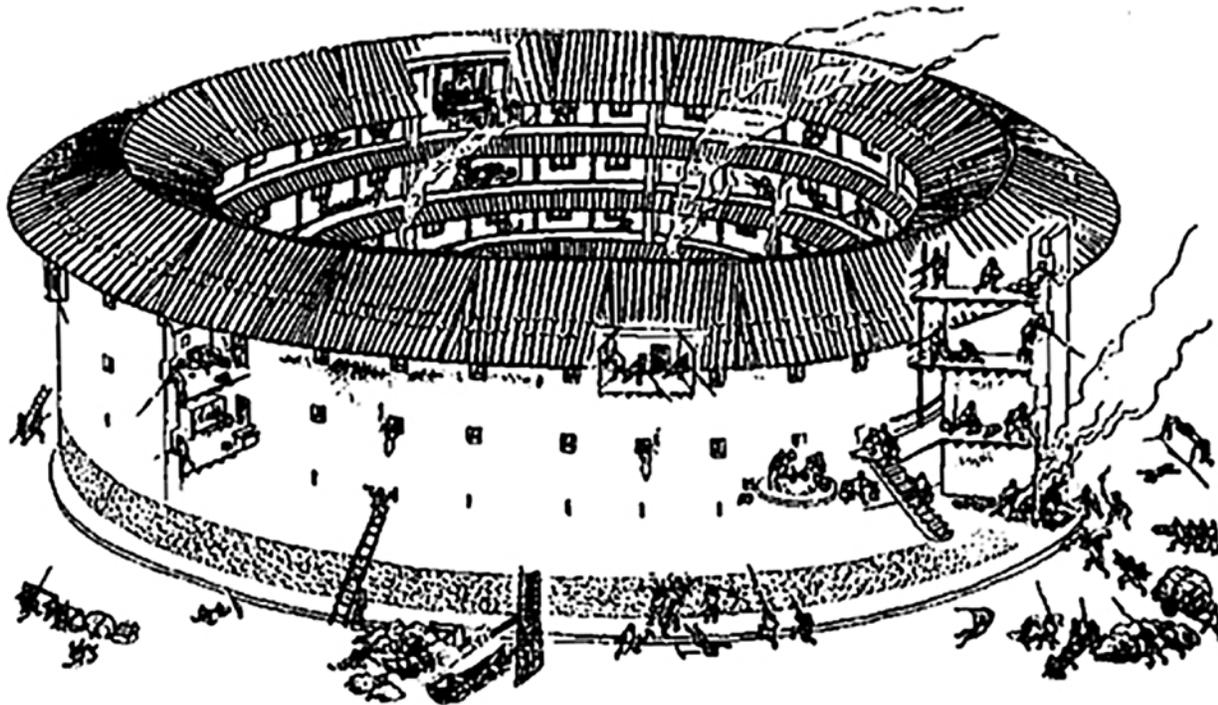
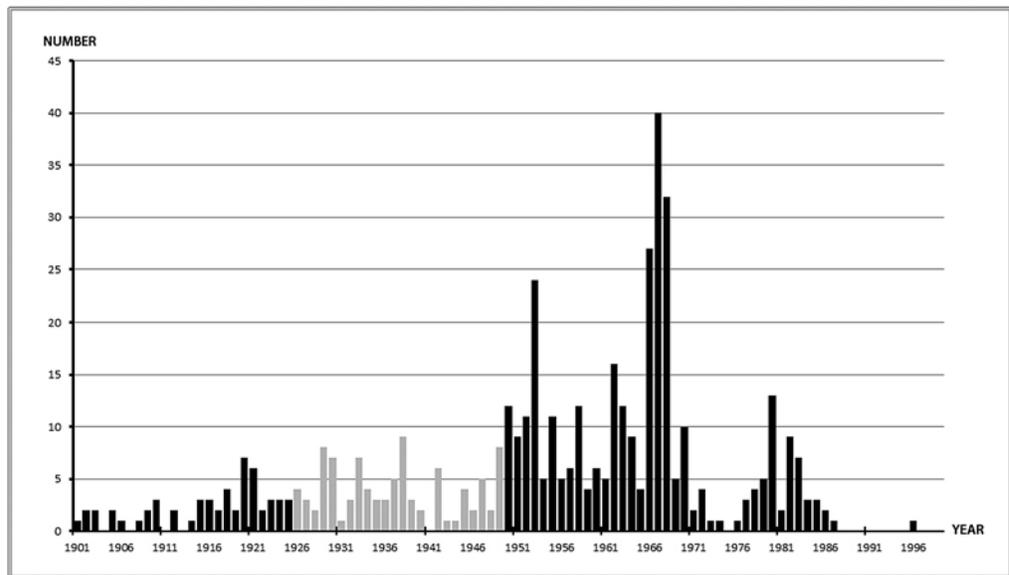


FIGURE 4. Drawing illustrating the defensive system of a tulou. By Guo Yucheng, in H. Huang, *Fujian Tulou: Zhongguo Chuantong Minju De Guibao* (Beijing: Shenghuo, du shu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 2009), p.226.

FIGURE 5. Statistical breakdown of tulou construction during the twentieth century by year, with the Civil War period of 1927–1949 highlighted.



THREE COEXISTING MILITARY FORCES

In China, the first half of the twentieth century saw the alternating ascendancy of four political regimes. In 1912 the establishment of the Republic of China (R.O.C.) heralded the end of the imperial Qing dynasty. Without strong military support, however, the R.O.C. government was weak, and

the new country soon became fragmented, with different areas coming under the control of regional warlords. In the 1920s the Chinese Nationalist Party cooperated with the Chinese Communist Party to fight against the power of these warlords in northern China. The campaign was known as the Northern Expedition, and by 1927 the Chinese Nationalist Party, under Chiang Kai-Shek, had managed to reunify

China and transform it into a one-party “democratic” state. Around the same time, however, the political division and struggle for power between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party led to the onset of the Chinese Civil War. This conflict was divided into two stages, separated by the Japanese invasion from 1937 to 1945, during which the two parties cooperated for the sake of the “national interest.” The Civil War ended in 1949 when the Communists prevailed and established the Peoples Republic of China (P.R.C.) on the mainland, while the Nationalist Party retreated to the nearby island of Taiwan.

Tulou are concentrated along the mountainous boundary between two political administrations: Yongding County and Nanjing County. Yongding County was a part of the Communist Party’s short-lived “Western Fujian Soviet Base” from 1929 to 1934. At this time the Nationalist Party and its state army desperately wanted to nip the rising threat of the rival Communists in the bud, and Yongding became a major battleground. By contrast, neighboring Nanjing County was in a rear area under secure control of the Nationalist Party. The border region of these two counties, where many *tulou* were located, inevitably suffered from battles during these years.⁶ From 1927 to 1949 three military forces coexisted and fought each other in this area. They were the state army of the Nationalist Party, the Red guerrillas of the Communist Party, and the civilian militias of local landlords.⁷

The Nationalist Party first established local governments in these two counties in late 1926, and they were followed in this effort a few months later by the Communist Party.⁸ Prior to this time, the area had been ruled by the military governments of various warlords. Though often keen to present themselves as revolutionaries, the warlords had less interest in political reform than in extorting riches from the populace. Under their rule, government positions were such a profitable commodity that they were sold with great frequency.⁹ From 1912 to 1926, 33 men served as the county head of Yongding, an average of 2.2 office holders per year.¹⁰ And in 1925 alone, six men held the position. Rather than serving the populace or simply seeking to raise their own social status, the buyers utilized the position to profit from the collection of exorbitant taxes and fees. One ruse was to collude with local military forces to perform shows of “suppressing bandits.” Local militiamen would disguise themselves as bandits and harass isolated communities so the government could collect additional levies for policing. Afterwards, the state officials would split the levies with the “bandits.”¹¹

These local military units, which sometimes constituted more organized civilian militias, were largely commanded by powerful local figures such as landlords and gentry.¹² Since China’s late imperial period, such literate, rich and powerful men had served as intermediaries between the state government and local communities.¹³ Sometimes these figures became so powerful that state officials had to rely on them to govern.¹⁴ For example, in 1928 the civilian militia of Zhang

Heshan virtually ruled all of Nanjing County. Zhang controlled such vital activities as setting up tax outposts, building and running military factories, training army officers, and even issuing bank notes! Instead of suppressing Zhang, the new Nationalist state government initially had to rely on him to manage local affairs and wage war against the Communists. It supplied Zhang’s civilian militia with weapons and empowered him to govern the area for several years before finally seizing back control and executing him.¹⁵

Indeed, powerful civilian militias often posed an intractable challenge to state governments. These vested interests blocked needed progress in such areas as land reform, education, and women’s rights. On the other hand, the civilian militias could also provide political, financial and military support to the newly established local Nationalist governments. Most importantly, they could be the Nationalist Party’s allies against the Communists, who in the eyes of the state government posed an even more radical and aggressive threat.

The Communists set up their branches in Yongding and Nanjing in 1927, and, as mentioned, established a short-lived rural soviet regime from 1927 to 1934.¹⁶ During most of the Civil War period, however, the Communists fought as guerrillas. Their goals included “suppressing the landlords, redistributing land, and empowering the peasants’ association,” and encouraging uprisings against vested interests.¹⁷ Most of the guerrillas were village volunteers, recruited from among the landless poor. Li Jinzhou was one such recruit. Born in a remote *tulou* in 1913, he was orphaned at the age of eleven and immediately sold to another town. Almost two years later his uncle raised enough money to redeem him. When guerrillas arrived in his village on a recruiting drive in 1934, Li immediately volunteered.¹⁸

Without a means of conscription or sufficient funds to provide adequate compensation, it was difficult for the Communist guerrillas to recruit new members. They basically had to knock at every door. Thus records indicate that in 1935 Captain Li Mingkang visited ten villages only to recruit thirty troops.¹⁹ Another captain, Chen Mushu, was luckier, however, thanks to his social network. He recruited 38 men from his home village and another twenty from a neighboring village.²⁰

During this period, the guerrillas also experienced severe financial difficulties. In 1934 every new guerrilla received a one-off payment of three silver dollars — which was almost nothing, considering that the average salary of a contemporary factory worker in Shanghai was about twenty silver dollars per month.²¹ When the orphan Li Jinzhou, mentioned above, was recruited as a guerrilla, he was allotted a uniform, a gun, and some bullets. The number of bullets, however, was so small that Li was taught to fill his bullet bag with stalk and bamboo pieces for bravado.²²

To supply themselves, the guerrillas attacked the landlords. Thus, in the autumn of 1935 records report that Li Jinzhou’s team laid siege to a *tulou* in Nanjing. After it surrendered, the guerrillas released all their captives and carried

away such daily necessities as rice, money, animals, sheets, quilts, and even mosquito nets. The guerillas wouldn't take anything heavy or slow — for example, a walking buffalo — lest they be caught during their retreat.²³ Sometimes the guerillas kidnapped landlords for ransom. In 1934 Captain Li Mingkang received 400 silver dollars and 500 kilograms of millet from one such kidnapping.²⁴ At the time, that amount of millet could be exchanged for a pig weighing about 85 kilograms at the local bazaar.²⁵

The guerillas continuously harassed landlords for provisions. For them, this was “killing two birds with one stone”: they not only punished the evil exploiters, but also gained provisions. Such a policy was also in accordance with their propaganda, “to eat at the rich's home and take their food.”²⁶ Such a form of “class struggle” was very different from that practiced in the 1950s, when the Communists executed landlords and redistributed their possessions. However, during the Civil War the landlords provided such an inexhaustible treasury for the Communist guerillas that most were kept alive as a source of supply.²⁷ For example, in December 1936 government records relate how a guerilla team led by Captain Jiang Maosheng struck the underguarded *tulou* of landlord Jian Changshi. They rushed directly to the fourth floor, unlocked all the doors, took cash, twenty guns, and one thousand bullets, then fled right away.²⁸ Merely a month later, on the eve of Chinese New Year, another guerilla team led by Captain Zheng Guiqin robbed the same *tulou* for provisions, using the exact same tactics.²⁹

Harassment by the Communist guerillas drove landlords to ally themselves with the Nationalists and seek protection from the state army. In 1928 the head of Yongding County called together local landlords for a discussion on “suppressing the Communist bandits.” He encouraged all the landlords to arm themselves and form a civilian militia union to fight the guerillas, with himself as the commander-in-chief. In return, he promised them government support in terms of military training and weapons. Within months, the number of registered civilian militia troops grew to more than one thousand.³⁰

The civilian militias did not always just serve as hatchet men for the state government; they might also protect local communities against external harassment. For instance, in 1926 farmers of three *tulou* villages in Nanjing County rose up against the military government there after it sought to apply exorbitant levies. The ruling warlord, Zhang Yi, sent an army to quell the rebellion, and it burned more than 3,000 rooms, took numerous possessions, and arrested 44 villagers — eighteen of whom it executed. The landlords and gentry in the villages felt obliged to organize and fight back. They recruited more than 800 farmers as a united civilian militia and trained them as professional soldiers. After several months of battle, the civilian militia managed to defeat the state army and drive away the warlord.³¹

Commanded by rich landlords, the civilian militia were usually composed of farmers or paid soldiers.³² Most of these men were *tulou* residents. It is very important to note that at this time *tulou* were collective houses, each accommodating hundreds of people. They were undivided real property owned and occupied by groups of shareholders. Due to the nature and historical context of such communities, shareholders in a single *tulou* might consist of both powerful landlords and landless farmers. This intermingling of social classes within *tulou* made the contests between the three co-existing military forces complicated and fascinating.

FROM FORTRESSES TO COOPERATIVE HOUSES

The architectural form of the *tulou* is believed to have emerged in the seventeenth century when the region experienced a tumultuous transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties. Nanjing and Yongding at the time were newly founded counties on mountainous barrens inhabited by mostly penniless immigrants and outlaws.³³ It is likely that local people first adapted army fortifications and fortresses to defend themselves against sporadic bandit attacks. The need for defense must have been widespread in the region at the time, because in addition to *tulou* [earthen multistoried buildings], there were other similar fortress-like structures such as the *tuweil* [earthen enclosure], *tucheng* [earthen city], *tubao* [earthen castle], and *tuzhai* [earthen stockade].³⁴

Unlike the castles of medieval European feudal nobility, these buildings were communal properties, built and owned by their residents. For example, Ji'an Lou was one of the earliest recorded *tulou*. Its construction began in 1600 and was finished in 1643, one year before the Qing dynasty replaced the Ming. A declaration of January 20, 1644 (in the Chinese calendar), revealed that Ji'an Lou was built to serve an alliance of several local communities. The members of the alliance came from seven branches of the Tong lineage and three other villages. To organize for their common defense, one man was elected as leader of the alliance, and three others were elected as his associates. Two members of the local literate elite, with state degrees and official positions, were then invited to co-supervise the defending organization — and, more importantly, ensure government support. Since the members of the alliance had diverse backgrounds, they vowed together in front of the local deities to remain loyal to it. According to the declaration, those who disobeyed were either subject to a light fine of about one kilogram of gunpowder, or a heavier punishment of being taken to court.³⁵

The *tulou* of Ji'an Lou was clearly designed for defensive purposes. It was located at the peak of a hill near the crossing of three transportation routes. The hill was inconspicuous, shaped like the back of a turtle, but it provided a defensible position overlooking the surrounding area, in

proximity to local sources of livelihood. The three-storied, circular structure had a diameter of about 42 meters and a height of 9 meters. It was divided into 28 units to accommodate the alliance members and included an oval pool of about 50 square meters in its central courtyard to supply water during a siege. The top half of Ji'an Lou's outer wall was

made of rammed earth, while its bottom half was reinforced with stone (FIG. 6).³⁶ In fact, *tulou* in this early stage in their development used more stone than those built later, a feature which obviously made them stronger as defensive bastions. Some structures, such as Shengping Lou, built in 1601, were entirely built of stone (FIG. 7).



FIGURE 6. The ruin of Ji'an Lou. Source: Y. Lin, "Fujian Tulou Zuizaode Fangwei Mengyue: <Ji'an Lou Huimeng Liyue Xu>," Fujian Wenbo, No.3 (2010), p.77.



FIGURE 7. The ruin of Shengping Lou.

In the history of warfare, stronger materials and structures usually emerged to counter the advent of more powerful offensive weapons. For example, in Europe the Romans initially built fortifications as simple wood or earth structures. But later, with the development of siege weapons such as the trebuchet, medieval castles adopted stone walls and other reinforcements such as moats, curtain walls, and gatehouses.

Tulou buildings followed the opposite path. They were originally built with stone, but this material was later replaced by earth. Compared to stone structures, earthen ones were cheaper and easier to build, and they provided a more reasonable alternative when the need for defense diminished. From the late seventeenth century on, the Qing dynasty oversaw a period of economic prosperity that lasted for more than three centuries. Chinese rural society was stabilized under the Qing, and even in the remote areas where most *tulou* were located, defense was no longer a severe problem.

With the change in social conditions, however, the construction tradition of *tulou* did not fade away. Rather, communities chose to adapt what had originally served them for defense to the new challenge of housing a rapidly increasing population. There was a practical reason for this: as an architectural form *tulou* proved to be an effective and affordable solution to housing a large population on limited land area.

The typical traditional Chinese house is a single-story courtyard structure. However, by piling living space up vertically, *tulou* saved large areas for other productive purposes and avoided the need to level large areas of ground in hilly regions. *Tulou* construction materials, such as earth, timber and stone, could also be obtained locally. And, most importantly, the simplified solution allowed unskilled laborers — in most cases the shareholders themselves — to manage its construction.

For these reasons the tradition of *tulou* building was carried down through the centuries, remaining the dominant local architectural form even after its relevance as a defensive structure had faded. Thus, by the nineteenth century, *tulou* were seen largely as an efficient means of collective housing. By this time *tulou* were also being built, occupied and managed as cooperative communities.³⁷ And in most cases, the residents of *tulou* identified themselves as unit-proprietors.³⁸

Just as the members of earlier defensive *tulou* alliances had made a declaration of support to one another, the unit-proprietors of later *tulou* made contracts to ensure their group's economic and social cooperation. Chaoyuan Lou is one such case. It was built upon a circular *tulou* ruin in the twentieth century. While the builders of Ji'an Lou, mentioned above, had been primarily interested in providing for common defense, the Chaoyuan Lou housing cooperative had other principal concerns. To begin, it was strictly administered by its shareholders, who participated as individual families. The criteria for inclusion were a candidate family's potential contribution to the cooperative, its social affiliations inside the community, and (last but not least) its investment in terms of labor or resources in building the structure.

To ensure fairness, after Chaoyuan Lou was complete, all shareholders drew lots to distribute the units. Beyond the contract clarifying distribution of ownership, an additional agreement not only detailed the payment methods available to shareholders but also regulated their rights and obligations. For example, proprietors had to take responsibility for the maintenance of their units; the unit property could only be transferred through inheritance; and no proprietors were allowed to tear down their units or assign the use of them to people outside the cooperative. Interestingly, one thing that was not mentioned in the agreement was defensive organization.³⁹

The contract and agreement of Chaoyuan Lou also signalled how complicated the composition of a *tulou* community might be. As I will show in the following sections, this would become a headache for both the Nationalist state government and the Communist guerrillas. A single *tulou* cooperative might consist of shareholders with various backgrounds; yet despite such diversity, the cooperative was organized on democratic principles. And because no unit could be physically torn down, the unity of each building and cooperative was in a way unbreakable. Because units could only be inherited and never traded, the status of different families might also diverge substantially over time. After a few decades or generations this might lead to considerable social and economic difference among residents of the same *tulou*. Some might become rich landlords; some might be powerful gentry; and some might be landless tenants working for the first two groups.

THE FADING OF DEFENSIVE FUNCTION

Despite being carried down through the years as a traditional building type, the defensive design features of the *tulou* soon faded. Changes became evident both in terms of the selection of sites and the elimination of design elements from later structures. With the arrival of artillery on rural battlefields in the twentieth century, the vulnerability of *tulou* became particularly obvious. And by the 1950s they had lost nearly all defensive characteristics, and were simply viewed as a form of collective housing.

By the nineteenth century, *tulou* were already being built on sites that were less suitable from a military perspective. Sites were preferred that were cheaper to obtain, would make construction easier, and were more conveniently located for daily life. The land area needed for a *tulou* was usually several thousand square meters, and sites of this scale were very difficult to obtain in mountainous areas.⁴⁰ Indeed, stories were told about the tremendous sacrifices sometimes made to buy them. In the 1930s the price of the area needed for one grant seedling was normally one silver dollar. And several stories recount how the buyers of *tulou* sites were asked to physically cover them with silver dollars. This expense, of course, did not include the cost of flattening the land. Indeed, for this reason, *tulou* communities in the twentieth century preferred



FIGURE 8. Hekeng Village, Nanjing county, a tulou cluster on a flat, low site.

to build on flat, accessible ground near creeks, regardless of the disadvantages of such sites in terms of defense (FIG. 8).⁴¹

Eryi Lou, built in 1770, has been considered the finest example of a defensive *tulou*. Its outer earthen wall was about 2.5 meters thick. Three gates were installed in it, each with a door made from a double layer of wooden planks coated with iron. Each door also featured a cross latch backing these planks, to fortify it against the force of battering rams. For provision, in case of a siege, wells and food storage areas were included inside the building. But its most special design feature was its defensive circulation system. A continuous, hidden corridor was built between all its fourth-floor rooms and its outer wall. At a width of 0.8 meter, this corridor darkened the adjoining rooms and blocked ventilation, but provided direct access to any point on the wall during an attack. Inside, every unit also included a vertically aligned opening for lifting food, bullets, or even people from floor to floor, if needed. And, if a siege worsened, residents could seek reinforcements by means of a secret underground passage.⁴²

It is important to note that Eryi Lou was a unique structure. Most of its defensive elements were barely evident in other *tulou*. In fact, some built in the twentieth century didn't even have a complete doorframe. Moreover, as elaborate a defensive building as Eryi Lou may have been, it still

did not prove as efficient as other structures. For example, Yanyi Wei was a *tuwe*i [earthen enclosure building] finished in 1677. It was considered a better fortress than a *tulou* in terms of layout, facade, materials, and defensive elements. A rectangular-shaped building, it had several angular gun platforms that could be used to screen the curtain walls from flanking fire. And its enclosing earthen wall was about two meters thick, coated with half-meter-thick bricks. Even its windows were framed by bricks to provide better protection.⁴³

From earliest times *tulou* residents were aware that their residences were "strong enough to defend against bandits, but not strong enough against soldiers." And, fortunately, most assaults launched against *tulou* were relatively weak. These included those by poorly equipped bands of guerrillas during the Civil War. For example, one night in the early 1930s, after laying siege to a *tulou* for four days, a team of guerrillas attempted to use ladders to climb into its third-floor windows. When the residents discovered their attempt, however, they answered by pouring boiling porridge (which was stickier and hotter than boiling water) onto the attackers' heads. The guerrillas later had to approach the building under a table covered with wet quilts. It was only three days later that the guerrillas managed to gain entry by digging a tunnel up to its wall and detonating a coffin filled with 150 kilograms of homemade explosives.⁴⁴

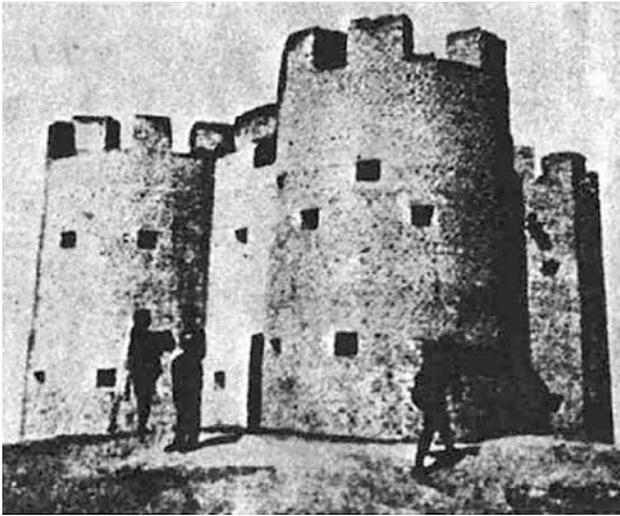


FIGURE 9. Bunker built by the state army in the 1930s. Source: “Wusheng Jiaofei Huiyi Jiesu — Shen Bao, Shanghai, June 16, 1933,” in Y. Chen and P. Jiang, eds., *Lao Xinwen (1931–1939) (Tianjin: Tianjin Renmin Chubanshe, 2003)*, p.69.

By the early twentieth century, cannons and heavy artillery had arrived on the battlefields of rural China.⁴⁵ Although their defensive value had obviously been surpassed much earlier, this made *tulou* extremely vulnerable to organized military attack. Nevertheless, for *tulou* built well into the twentieth century the fortress-like elements of early *tulou* held other benefits related to their use for cooperative housing. The thick earthen wall remained because it provided structural stability. The presence of only a few slit openings on the lower floors accorded with the use of these rooms as kitchens and storage areas. Meanwhile, the design of upper-floor windows, which were wide on the inside and narrower outside, increased the stability of the wall and provided better control over lighting.

During the Civil War, neither the state army nor the guerrillas were interested in occupying *tulou*. It was not wise for any military force to try to hold them during warfare. The state army found it pointless to garrison such vulnerable structures, which could easily be laid siege to; it preferred modern defensive works in the towns or along major routes of travel.⁴⁶ Indeed, by 1935 it had built 224 steel-and-concrete bunkers and numerous gun towers at strategically important locations in Yongding County (FIG. 9).⁴⁷ On the other hand, the guerrillas were not strong enough to engage in the defense of a *tulou*. Without the possibility of reinforcement, their supplies could easily be cut off by a siege. Thus, in all their attacks on *tulou* they sought rather to seize provisions and retreat as soon as possible. Even when Chairman Mao Zedong visited Yongding for recuperation in 1929, he chose to command local guerrillas from a small earthen house rather than from a large *tulou*.⁴⁸

This points to another characteristic weakness of *tulou*. From the point of view of an outsider, the greatest danger

in occupying them came not from external siege or attack, but from internal betrayal. Each *tulou* resident belonged to a closed community defined by the physical structure of the building. This meant that residents had to live as a collective and react to outside force as a single unit. By opening the gate to attackers, the action of any single resident could betray the security of everyone inside. This clearly made these structures more suitable as an instrument of security for local people than as a base for outside military units. It was thus also not surprising that, during warfare, *tulou* residents used their unity as a bargaining chip to gain offers of protection from different military forces.

THE POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES OF *TULO* COMMUNITIES

Although *tulou* were vulnerable to artillery and costly to garrison, the great number of residents in each building still made them a valuable resource. Although neither the state army nor the guerrillas were interested in occupying them, neither wanted their adversary to control their resident populations. Hence, *tulou* communities negotiated with both sides for better offers with regard to military support and other benefits. By promising alliances, they managed to secure their possessions and protect themselves against both warring parties.

During the Civil War, the region was dominated alternately by different forces, and any community without military backing would inevitably invite raids from all sides. In addition to bandits (either authentic or disguised), battles between the state army and the guerrillas caused great damage. More than one hundred battles were fought between the state army, the guerrillas, and the civilian militias between August 1930, when the Communists renewed their campaigns in Yongding and Nanjing, to the end of the war in September 1949. At least two thousand combatants were killed in these battles.⁴⁹

The state army, in particular, was merciless toward the guerrillas and their allies. For instance, they burned the Communist-allied Keling village thirteen times, executed 57 villagers, and dispersed many more. As a result, the village population decreased from 1,201 in 1930 to 496 in 1949.⁵⁰ The guerrillas acted little better, and continually harassed local communities. In addition to robbing and extorting supplies and money from landlords, they sought to undermine the state army by destroying bridges and roads, looting army transportation, cutting electric wires, and killing state officials.⁵¹ As a result, local people could draw little distinction between the two sides, and were largely unable to distinguish the “protective and just” power from the “aggressive and evil” one.⁵² Thus, when the guerrillas arrived in the remote village of Banliao in 1934 to “liberate the landless farmers from their miserable lives,” villagers fled into the woods, thinking that any outsiders, regardless of their political propaganda, were bandits and evil-doers.⁵³

Military confrontations between the state army and the guerrillas took place frequently over the two decades of the Civil War, except during the anti-Japanese period from 1937–1945 when both sides sent troops to the northern frontier to fight the foreign invader. At the beginning of the Civil War there was a large gap in terms of strength between the state army and the guerrillas. In 1926 a division of the regular state army was garrisoned in Yongding and a regiment was garrisoned in Nanjing — a total of some ten thousand soldiers. By comparison, in 1927 the Communists only managed to recruit an “Iron-Blood Regiment” in Yongding of about 1,500 troops.⁵⁴ And in state-controlled Nanjing County, the Communists only managed to establish a “farmers self-defense team” of fifty men.⁵⁵

From November 1930 to October 1934 Director-General Chiang Kai-Shek of the Nationalist Party, in command of the state army, launched five continuous encirclement campaigns against the Communists in southern Jiangxi and western Fujian. When these efforts ended, the main body of Communists were forced to retreat, and eventually marched some 25,000 *li* (about 8,000 miles) to northwestern China, a journey known as “the Long March.” The three following years were extremely arduous for the remaining guerrillas. During most of this period they fought against the state army with only a few hundred troops.⁵⁶ However, the balance of strength was overturned during the anti-Japanese war.⁵⁷ Thus, when the Civil War continued in 1946, the Communist guerrillas were much stronger and were widely supported by the rural population, while the state army had been much reduced in size. Indeed, by this time the Nationalists were forced to rely largely on civilian militias to fight the guerrillas.⁵⁸

These civilian militias had long been a force that incoming powers had competed to recruit. In 1934 the Yongding government attempted to incorporate all able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 into an “official” civilian militia. The estimated number of these troops was 27,600.⁵⁹ The civilian militias had an ambiguous relationship with the state government, and could be incorporated into the state army when it needed to be expanded. Likewise, when the army was downsized, militiamen might be given weapons and asked to take over the duties of regular troops under certain conditions.⁶⁰ The Communists’ strategy against these forces was to “unite the good ones, compete for the middle ones, and attack the bad ones.”⁶¹ They colluded with “the good ones” to fight with them, competed for “the middle ones” who were hesitant, and executed “the bad ones” who refused to cooperate. Sometimes “the middle ones” could be even more useful than the “good ones.” Indeed, the guerrillas called them “the men with white skins but red hearts,” because they could pretend to work with the state army, but were really loyal to the guerrillas.⁶²

The leaders of the civilian militias were mostly opportunists who worked with both sides but were loyal to neither. Shen Qingxiang, “the Stone Man,” was one such powerful civilian militia leader known for his cruelty and sneakiness. When the

Communists were establishing their base near Shen’s home in Yongding in 1929, he surrendered and handed over all his weapons and troops. He was immediately assigned to be a commander of a Red defensive group. Seven months later, however, when the state army won battles against the guerrillas, “the Stone Man” defected without a second thought.⁶³ Most civilian militia leaders defected for practical and security considerations, and few held clear political views.⁶⁴

Every defection cost — and in most cases, it cost lives. In particular, defectors were often expected to spy on or betray their former allies. The case of Lin Kaihuai, a rich and powerful commander of a civilian militia in Jinshan town, was typical. In August 1934 the guerrilla captain Huang Qingwang learned of a personal dispute between Lin and the head of Jinshan. Huang decided to take advantage of the situation and successfully raised an armed conflict. As a result, however, a government official was killed, and Lin had to flee. Huang provided a warm welcome and protection for Lin and made him a weapons supplier and informant for the guerrillas. Three months later, however, during the “White Terror” period when the guerrillas were in an inferior position, Lin decided to defect. As a gift, he incited rebellions among the guerrillas and induced ten of them to surrender, before leading the state army to the remaining force to massacre them.⁶⁵ Dozens of people died because of Lin’s defection.

As the traditional protectors and representatives of *tulou* communities, the leaders of the civilian militias often made decisions for their protégés. But this situation changed a few years after the Civil War began, when the state government and the guerrillas sought support directly from villagers. To reach complete agreement on political matters was difficult for most *tulou* communities because of their complicated social composition. Among the hundreds of residents of a *tulou* might simultaneously be landlords commanding the civilian militias, officials or soldiers working for the state government, and tenant farmers counting on the Communists to remake their lives. Due to the physical restriction of the *tulou*, however, each community could only present itself as a single unit and work with one force at a time.

Disputes among residents were frequent and sometimes even led to fierce internal fighting. The novel *Shan’ao shang de tulou* [*The Tulou up on the Hill*] narrates such a dispute. In it, three siblings of the Huang family take different political sides. The eldest brother, Song, is a conservative farmer whose only dream is to build a new *tulou*. As had his father, Song believes the local civilian militia will protect the community from outside attacks. But Song’s younger brother, Bo, steals the family savings and loses them in gambling. He then flees into the mountains and becomes a guerrilla. Meanwhile, the youngest sister, Su, runs away from home because she is in love with a married man in the community. Unlike Bo, however, she chooses to join the state army. At the end of the story, Su is persuaded by Bo to defect. And the siblings are reunited in the new *tulou* Song has built, as

a united force of the civilian militia and the state army fires cannons at them.⁶⁶

In reality, all three forces realized the best way to gain support from *tulou* communities was not through cannon balls and bullets, but by exploiting internal conflicts between members of the cooperative. The Communists called this strategy “political mobilization.” For example, in 1935 they laid siege to a *tulou* jointly guarded by a civilian militia and the state army. But instead of attacking the building directly, they sang an adapted folk song in an effort to induce those inside to capitulate:

*Our brothers in the White Army,
Come quickly, come to the Red Army.
The warlords of Guomindang,
they are not human beings.
They extort our brothers.
If you became a state army soldier,
all you earned would be taken back as fines,
and nothing will be left.
Your captains live happy and comfortable lives.
They drink wine and eat meats.
Poor you, the soldiers,
drink thin porridges every day.
Come quickly, come to the Red Army,
Here the captains and soldiers are equal.*⁶⁷

In the end, the garrison surrendered, and a few even defected to the guerrillas.

Sometimes *tulou* residents also betrayed their cooperative for personal profit. In 1934 the guerrilla captain Huang Qingwang accidentally learned of a domestic dispute between a landlord’s jealous wife and his concubine. Huang induced the wife to punish her husband by colluding with the guerrillas and lowering a rope out of a third-floor window during the night. The guerrillas then snuck into the *tulou*, and took away cash, clothes and rice. Afterwards, the guerrillas divided up what they had taken with the woman, taking seventy percent for themselves and leaving thirty percent for her.⁶⁸

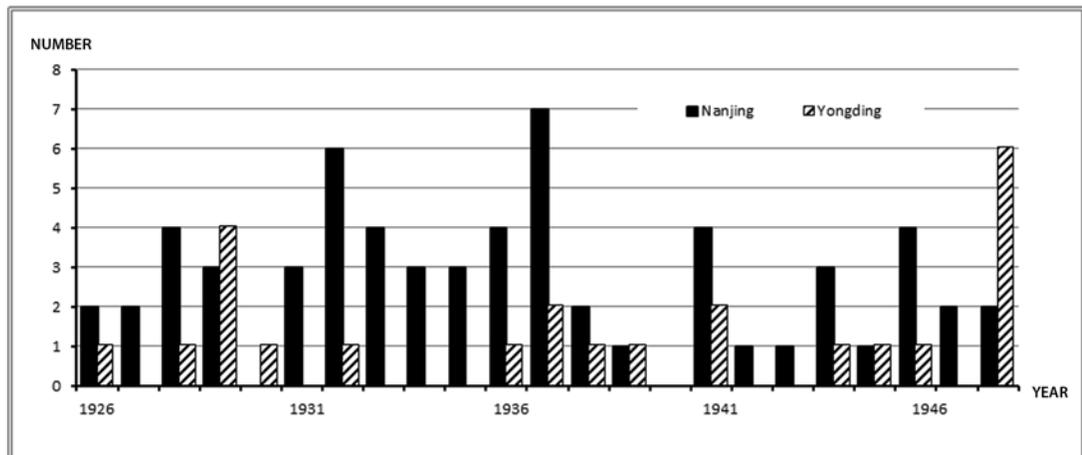
A *tulou* building was a collective house of a group of hundreds of people. To construct and live in one was a communal decision based on mutual trust. It took several years for shareholders to construct a *tulou*, and they and their descendants then had to live their whole lives there with the other shareholders. Therefore, in a troubled period, when few people could be trusted, forming a new *tulou* community involved great risk. That is why, if necessary, *tulou* communities frequently preferred to squeeze into their old buildings and wait until the end of warfare to initiate any new construction.

CONSTRUCTION OF A MYTH

In summary, the statement that all *tulou* were constructed as fortresses is a myth. Most *tulou* were built to provide affordable collective housing in rural areas. As such, they embodied little defensive intent, and featured few defensive design elements. The enclosed physical form of the *tulou* did, however, reinforce a democratic and closed social structure. This tradition relied on mutual trust among the residents of each building. During troubled periods, when such trust was absent — as during the Chinese Civil War — *tulou* structures were vulnerable to attack by outside forces, and therefore few were constructed.

A closer look at the history of *tulou* construction in Nanjing and Yongding Counties during the 22 years of the Civil War helps demonstrate this point (FIG. 10). In general, because it was a major battlefield, few *tulou* were built in the troubled frontier area of Yongding, in comparison to Nanjing, which was safely behind Nationalist lines. However, the number of *tulou* constructed in Yongding did increase in 1929 when the establishment of the Communists’ Soviet Base brought a temporary peace. Likewise, it increased from 1937 to 1945 when the adversaries formed a temporary alliance to fight against the Japanese invaders. It also increased after 1949 when the Communists drove the Nationalist Party away and established a secure new regime. In Nanjing, however, *tulou* construction was concentrated in the years

FIGURE 10.
A comparison of
tulou construction in
Nanjing and Yongding
counties (1927–1949).



1931–1937, when it was in the rear of the state army's efforts to encircle the Communists in Yongding.

The myth of the *tulou* as fortresses owes much to historians' failure to consider the architectural details and social contexts of local communities. The change of primary function for *tulou* structures came as a consequence of historical changes in social and political conditions. When population pressure replaced the need for defense as the fundamental challenge facing local communities, *tulou* construction

evolved to become a very different architectural tradition.

Such changes in tradition may only be revealed when similar challenges — in this case, the need for common defensive — are met with a rather different reaction. It is therefore important to track changes in tradition by identifying specific moments in history, and by determining the challenges people confront, struggle with, and solve through the structures they build. Only by doing this can we avoid being misled by myths.

REFERENCE NOTES

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1. "Fujian *Tulou*," <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1113/> (accessed July 31, 2012).
2. Refer to H. Huang, *Fujian Tulou* (Taipei: Hansheng zazhi she, 1994); J. Lin, *Tulou: Ninggu De Yinyue He Liti De Shipian* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chuban she, 2006); D. Hu, *Yongding Kejia Tulou Yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chuban she, 2006); and H. Huang, *Fujian Tulou: Zhongguo Chuantong Minju De Guibao* (Beijing: Sheng huo, du shu, xin zhi san lian shu dian, 2009).
3. Huang, *Fujian Tulou* (1994), pp.57–68; and Huang, *Fujian Tulou* (2009), pp.213–26.
4. The statistical basis for this argument is gleaned from official surveys carried out in Nanjing and Yongding from 1988 to 2007, supplemented by my own investigation. The survey covered 492 *tulou* built during the twentieth century in eight townships. They are Chuanchang, Shuyang, Kuyang and Meilin townships in Nanjing County, and Hukeng, Gaotou, Guzhu and Daxi townships in Yongding County.
5. As Ron Knapp has also pointed out, "turmoil certainly was not often a factor" of *tulou* construction, and "in historical periods when security was not a concern, villagers still built *tulou* as 'less fortified dwellings.'" R.G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp.259–61.
6. Q. Su, "Yongding Renmin Geming Douzheng Shi Dashiji (1923–1949)," *Yongding Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol.2 (1983), pp.1–37.
7. For the situation in Yongding, see "Junshi," in *Yongding Xianzhi*, Vol.28 (1994). For the situation in Nanjing, see "Junshi," in *Nanjing Xianzhi*, Vol.32 (1997).
8. For the history of Communist Party

- in Yongding, see "Zhonggong Yongding Difang Zuzhi," in *Yongding Xianzhi*, Vol.21 (1994). For the history of Guomindang in Yongding, see "Dangpai Qunti," in *Yongding Xianzhi*, Vol.23 (1994). For the history in Nanjing, see "Dangpai," in *Nanjing Xianzhi*, Vol.24 (1997).
9. See Y. Zhang and R. Qian, "The Ins and Outs of Suppressing Bandits by County Magistrates in Qing Dynasty — Centered on the Stories of Three County Magistrates Suppressing Bandits in Guangdong Province," *Historiography Research in Anhui*, No.3 (2010), pp.13–22.
 10. "Zhengquan and Zhengxie," in *Yongding Xianzhi*, Vol.22 (1994).
 11. There are many studies of collusion between the state government and landlords. For example, P. Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988); and Zhang and Qian, "The Ins and Outs of Suppressing Bandits by County Magistrates in Qing Dynasty," pp.13–22. Many works of fiction dealing with this period in China also mention the situation, such as the Chinese movie *Let the Bullets Fly* (2011), directed by Jiang Wen.
 12. For a historical origin of Civil Corps in Chinese rural society during the nineteenth century, see P.A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China, Militarization and Social Structure, 1796–1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). For the composition of civilian militias in *tulou* areas during the twentieth century, see "Junshi," in *Yongding Xianzhi* (1994); and "Junshi," in *Nanjing Xianzhi* (1997).
 13. In his study of Chinese rural society from 1900 to 1942, Duara suggested two kinds of brokers: the protection broker, and the entrepreneurial broker who profited from local society. Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, p.2.
 14. Few scholarly research efforts have addressed this topic in *tulou* areas; however, according to government records, the situation should have been similar to that in neighboring Guangdong Province. For the situation in Guangdong, see X. Zhou, "Minchu Guangdong Jun Zhengfu Jianli De

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15. "Zhang Heshan Feibu," in *Nanjing Xianzhi*, Vol.32 (1997).
 16. "Zhonggong Yongding Difang Zuzhi," in *Yongding Xianzhi* (1994).
 17. Ibid.
 18. X. Li, "Lao Hongjun Li Jinzhou," *Nanjing Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol.28, (2005), pp.181–91.
 19. C. Zhang, "Qingqing Zhushan Hun — Ji Lieshi Li Mingkang," *Nanjing Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol.29 (2006), pp.57–66.
 20. X. Xie, "Dashan Fengbei — Ji Lieshi Chen Mushu," *Nanjing Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol.29 (2006), pp.37–46.
 21. Li, "Lao Hongjun Li Jinzhou."
 22. Ibid., pp.182–83. In the late 1920s the guerrillas lacked modern weapons. The governmental record of the uprising showed that during the period from 1927 to 1935 many guerrillas and farmers used choppers, shotguns, and self-made explosives to fight the state army. See "Junshi," in *Yongding Xianzhi* (1994); and "Junshi," in *Nanjing Xianzhi* (1997).
 23. Li, "Lao Hongjun Li Jinzhou."
 24. Zhang, "Qingqing Zhushan Hun — Ji Lieshi Li Mingkang."
 25. Because of price inflation, millet was the common medium of exchange used locally during the Civil War period. From 1930 to 1936, 100 kilograms of millet could be exchanged in the local bazaar for 17 kilograms of pork, 26.8 kilograms of kerosene, 300 kilograms of charcoal, or 580 kilograms of sugarcane. According to "Wujia," in *Nanjing Xianzhi*, Vol.16 (1997).
 26. "Zhonggong Yongding Difang Zuzhi," in *Yongding Xianzhi* (1994).
 27. Ibid. In the 1950s, the socialist period, landlords and gentry were usually killed as a result of class struggles. During the Civil War, however, the guerrillas preferred to keep the landlords alive as a source for daily necessities.

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52. See, for example, Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*.
53. Li, "Lao Hongjun Li Jinzhou."
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62. "Zhonggong Yongding Difang Zuzhi," in *Yongding Xianzhi* (1994).
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65. L. Xin, "Tiaotiao Fenghuo Lu," *Nanjing Wenshi Ziliao*, Vol.28 (2005), pp.68–81.
66. B. He, *Shan'ao Shang De Tulou* (Fuzhou: Haixia wenyi chuban she, 2009).
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