



# Interpreting the Symbolic Meaning of Dong Drum Tower Architectural Form—Taking Sanjiang Ma Fat Drum Tower as an Example

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## Abstract

The Drum Tower is a landmark of the Dong ethnic group, spawned by the unique terroir of the Dong region and shaped through the skillful construction of Dong craftsmen. Because of the Drum Tower, the architectural culture of the Dong people has become more mellow and splendid. The richness and variety of the images of the drum towers surviving today reflect the diversity of the culture. Taking the Sanjiang Ma Fat Drum Tower as an example, the article analyzes the architectural forms of the Dong drum towers through extensive documentary research, explores the various functions of the Dong drum towers and examines the correspondence between the architectural forms of the drum towers and their symbolic meanings. In this way, a deeper understanding of the traditional culture deposited by the Dong villages is gained. This will enable more people to pay attention to the Drum Tower, to appreciate the artistic style of the Drum Tower and to appreciate the humanistic landscape of the Dong people.

## Subject Areas

Architecture

## Keywords

Dong, Drum Tower, Symbolism

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## 1. Introduction

The Drum Tower is a landmark of the Dong people, mainly located in the southern dialect of the Dong language at the junction of Guangxi, Guizhou and Hunan provinces. In recent years, the use of construction machinery, improved building techniques and the development of tourism have driven the construc-

tion of drum towers, and the image of drum towers has taken on new characteristics—historical architectural features such as dense eaves and saved spires have been selected and exaggerated to become a contemporary formative feature of drum towers. The images of the Drum Tower presented in modern media are often associated with ritualistic moments. These phenomena tend to create a simplistic perception of the Drum Tower as a ritualistic building with finished features. Historically, drum towers have been more varied: the façade has been multi-storeyed with dense eaves as well as single eaves; the roofs have been overhanging and hinged, in addition to saved spires; and the spaces used have been single-storeyed on the ground as well as dry-roofed and double-storeyed [1]. Because of the drum tower, the architectural culture of the Dong people has become more mellow and splendid.

Research on Dong drum towers is too numerous to mention. Research on traditional Dong architecture in China is largely divided between the 1980s and the 1980s, when research was sporadic and scattered, focusing mainly on the investigation of traditional dwellings and the examination of the origins of dry bars and drum towers. It was only in the 1980s that academic research on the traditional architecture of the Dong people really began, not only from a variety of perspectives, but also with a significant increase in depth and breadth, and with fruitful results. Domestic research on Dong drum towers has mainly focused on the study of the morphology of drum towers in the field of architectural disciplines, and the study of the function and cultural value of drum towers in the field of ethnography and sociology.

The main studies on the function of the drum tower include Yang Shunqing (1990) [2], who argues that the drum tower, known as “tangwa” or “tangka” in the Dong language, is one of the unique architectural forms of the Dong people, and that the culture of the drum tower is an important part of Dong culture. Based on this study, Shi Xinhui (2002) [3] and others have developed their understanding of Dong drum tower culture, pointing out that discovering and absorbing the essence of traditional Dong architectural culture is important for creating a new architectural culture with both national forms and world advanced standards. Raymond Firth (2002) analyzes the social function of drumming and messaging in drum towers from the perspective of humanistic typology. He Qiong (2008) [4] [5] argues that the architectural form of the Dong Drum Tower is an intuitive architectural feature of the Drum Tower, from which she proposes the concept of “harmony” in Drum Tower architecture, and she further argues that the architectural concept of “harmony” is central to the ancient architecture of the Dong people, and is a central part of their. She further suggests that the architectural concept of “harmony” is central to the ancient architecture of the Dong people and is a profound reflection of their ethical, aesthetic, value and natural outlook. At the same time, Jin Shuang (2012) [6] argues that the functions of the Drum Tower are reflected in four aspects: the ritual centre of the clan, the transmission of information, the place of festivals and daily leisure.

Tang Yun (2010) [7] discusses that the contemporary Drum Tower has actually become a cultural display landscape detached from its local socio-cultural roots from the perspective of the changing socio-cultural significance of the Drum Tower.

Fewer studies have been conducted on the style of drum towers, with the main ones being Yang Yongming (2008) [8] [9] and Huang Enhou (2008), who describe them as a combination of pavilion and pagoda from the perspective of stylistic features. Luo Deqi (2009) [10] grouped the structural forms of drum towers into two main categories: the “pagoda” and “pavilion” styles, which are based on the cedar tree, and concluded that drum towers are composed of three sections: the base of the pavilion, the body of the pagoda and the top of the pavilion. In a study of drum towers in Hunan, Yang Shenchu (1993) explored the varied styles of drum towers, based on examples from the southern Dong dialect area of Hunan province, and categorised them into four types: the “hall style” with a rectangular plan and a mixture of pierced buckets and raised beams; the “dry bar style” with an elevated ground floor, a square plan, and a heavy eaves with a hillside or pointed roof; and the “dry-rail” style; the “close eaves” style with a square plan, close eaves and a hipped roof or a saved spire; and the “combined” style, which is a combination with other gates and compartments.

Research on the ancient building of Sanjiang Ma Fat has mainly focused on architectural modelling studies and applications, with less analysis of its cultural value, function and symbolic significance.

The Ma Fat Drum Tower, as a representative of the dense eaves Drum Tower, is in fact a masterpiece of Dong ethnic architecture, which demonstrates the wisdom and spirit of a people in an exquisite way. From ancient times to the present day, the Sanjiang Dong people have built a large number of drum towers throughout the county, and more than 180 of them are still intact today. The main body of the Ma Fat Drum Tower is made up of four rectangular pillars of 13 metres long and nearly 2 metres around the waist, plus small pillars and flying eaves, which are stacked on top of each other to form a 15-metre high building, 11 metres long and wide, with a total of nine storeys, with heavy tilting and flying eaves, like an eagle soaring. In addition to the four tall main pillars, which symbolise the four seasons of peace, there are also 24 thick, squarely arranged side pillars on the diagonal and extension of the sides of the main pillars, adding a sense of solidity and gravity to the beautifully shaped building. 28 pillar pads, all made of the finest green stone, are carved with vivid images, fully reflecting the Dong people’s aesthetic sense of both grandeur and elegance for a single building.

On the basis of describing the architectural form of the Mafang Drum Tower, this paper analyses the functional and cultural values that its form can bring, and then identifies the symbolic meaning of the Mafang Ancient Building in Sanjiang. It provides a reference for the study of the symbolic meaning of the Mafang Ancient Building in Sanjiang.

## 2. Dong Drum Tower Architectural Form

The external form of the Dong Drum Tower is extremely visual and holographically expresses the concept of clan authority and values of the Dong villages [11]. The most extant drum towers in Dong villages are of the pagoda and dense eaves styles, the appearance of which is in line with traditional Chinese pagoda and eaves architecture. In terms of appearance, the Sanjiang Ma Fat Drum Tower is a typical close-gabled drum tower, and its basic shape consists of a pavilion base, a tower body and a spire [12] (Figures 1-3).



**Figure 1.** Front view of Ma Fat Drum tower.



**Figure 2.** Horse Fat Drum tower cornice.



**Figure 3.** Gable of the Ma Fat Drum tower.

The base of the Ma Fat Drum Tower is square and surrounded by wide, sturdy benches for people to rest on. The building is surrounded by inlaid wooden panels and railings, with thick wooden benches and platforms inside, and a fire pit in the centre of the building [13]. The pagoda is made up of layers of stacked buildings, and the giant cedar tree prototype is a blend of the ancient Chinese design of a multi-storey pagoda with close eaves, shaped like a pagoda, gradually closing from the bottom to the top. A series of gourd-shaped tops represent the pagoda's spire, piercing the sky. The eaves are four-sided, with each gable face covered by layers of gable panels, like dragon scales, which are joined in an orderly fashion from the bottom up. At the corner where each of the two gables meet, there is a protruding part called the corner. Together with the ridge of the roof, it is sculpted into a fish-tailed beast with a dragon's head and a fish's tail, which in ancient Yue times was known as the Chi (scops) tail [14]. The eaves are beautifully carved with dragons and phoenixes, flowers and brocades, and at the top of the building, a thousand-year-old crane, a symbol of good wind and rain, is sculpted with fine workmanship, spreading its wings to fly [15].

### 3. Functions of the Dong Drum Tower

The Dong Drum Tower is a product of multiple sources and its development has gone through a process from simple to complex, and its evolution has been roughly as follows [16] [17]:

1) Before the Neolithic period, the primitive worship of the sacred tree emerged, which then evolved into a fortress pile (or totem pole) closely related to the primitive worship, which is the earliest prototype of the Dong drum tower and the source of its culture. After the Neolithic period, the fence-like public house emerged, which was one of the earliest buildings for congregating and deliberating, and is one of the prototypes of the Dong Drum Tower and the source of its structural form.

2) After the Qin conquest of Baiyue and the Han destruction of Nan Yue, northern migrants entered the Pearl River valley and cultural exchanges brought new changes to the building techniques of the Dong region. During the Qin and Han dynasties, the Dong ancestors may have mastered the techniques of building watchtowers and pavilions, but the functions of deliberative public houses, cultural symbols and war warnings had not yet merged, and the public houses at this time were also mostly fence dwellings or thousand-column buildings.

3) During the Tang Dynasty, the Dong ancestors experienced a massive migration, and the pressure of survival prompted a gradual merging of deliberative public houses, cultural symbols and war warnings, which may have given rise to the early prototype of the drum tower. During the Song dynasty, the northern migrants entered the Pearl River valley once again, the Dong ethnic consciousness gradually formed, the Dong organisation was gradually perfected, and due to its location at the border of the Song region and the support and acquiescence of the central government, the Dong military organisation was developed to an unprecedented extent, and a public building combining the functions of a coun-

cil house, a cultural symbol and a war warning emerged, together with the gradual entry of pavilion and pagoda architecture into the Dong region, resulting in the early drum tower.

4) The Ming and Qing dynasties were a period of maturity in the development of the Dong drum tower. The cantonment and immigration of the Ming Dynasty once again contributed to the development of building techniques in the Dong region, and urban drum and pavilion architecture brought further influence on the Dong drum tower, and clear documentation of the Dong drum tower emerged [18]. During the Qing dynasty, further in-depth policies such as land reformation led to the further integration of the Dong region into the Chinese cultural sphere, and with the radiation driven by mill merchants, the techniques of building Dong drum towers gradually matured, and Han feng shui concepts, building rituals and architectural taboos influenced the construction of drum towers more deeply, and the Dong drum towers eventually matured and became established.

The function of the Drum Tower is multifaceted and manifests itself in many ways. As society changes and develops, the form of the drum tower is adapted accordingly, and its functions are constantly added to and changed. In summary, the Drum Tower had three main functions: to gather people for deliberations, to warn them and to interact with them [19] (Table 1).

### 3.1. The Gathering and Deliberative Function of the Dong Drum Tower

The Drum Tower was a regular place for the clan chiefs and village elders to

**Table 1.** The chronological evolution of the architectural function and form of the Dong Drum Tower.

Factor	Building function					Architectural form				
	primitive belief	cultural symbol	get together	War warning	Zhaizhuang nest	gate house	dry lantern	Early Drum Tower	dense eaves pavilion drum tower	
Paleolithic	√				√	√				
Neolithic	√		√			√				
Shang Zhou to Warring States Period	√		√			√	√			
Qin Han						√	√			
Sui Tang			√				√			
Song Yuan			√	√			√	√		
Ming		√	√	√				√		
Qing		√	√	√					√	
Republic of China		√	√	√					√	
People's Republic of China		√	√						√	

gather and deliberate on important matters within the village, such as assembling and deliberating, formulating the “contract”, publicising village rules, rewarding and punishing, adjudicating disputes and settling disputes, all of which were discussed and decided by the elders at the Drum Tower [20]. History tells us that in 1853, the Qing government reinforced its garrison in the area of Zhao Dong in order to suppress the Taiping revolution and to impose excessive taxes. At that time, there were several years of disasters, and the fields were unproductive, so the villages and cottages ran out of food and fled. Lu Da-young, the leader of Zhaoxing Yi Zhai, gathered the people at the Drum Tower and decided to have Luo Han and Lu Da-you draw up a petition to the Liping Prefecture and Yongcong County for a reduction in field taxation. However, the government did not reduce the taxes, but instead sent additional troops to collect food, forcing Lu Dahan to lead a peasant uprising against the Qing government for 21 years. In 1985, the People’s Congress of the village drew up the Convention on Social Security Management in Zhaoxing Township, which was proclaimed by the village elders in the Drum Tower: on the one hand, it is a regulation on the behaviour of the members of the village in terms of production, life, marriage and family, and on the other hand, it is a wish for the guests from outside the village when they visit. In addition to the covenant, each village or pocket often has its own rules and regulations, which are publicised or checked at the Drum Tower during the New Year and festivals to punish those who break them. When something has been agreed upon, it is carved on a stone tablet for people to follow [21]. The monument is placed inside the drum tower or on the drum tower ping, and whoever breaks the rules on the monument is punished according to the rules.

### **3.2. The Warning Function of the Drum Tower**

On the top floor of the drum tower, a long, thin-waisted cowhide drum hangs, with a wooden ladder leading up to the top of the tower, along which one can climb upwards and beat the drum to indicate vigilance. In the Qing Dynasty, Li Zong Fang’s “Qianji” states, “Whenever there was injustice, the drum was struck from the top of the tower, and each fortress heard about it and brought a long dart and a sharp blade to the floor to listen to the chief of the fortress.” The drum tower is equipped with a leather drum, which is used to summon people to gather and alert the police: if the drums are dense and long-lasting, it means that there is a call for help and the neighbouring villages should immediately organise teams to go to their aid; if the drums are dense and short, it means that the situation is urgent and people from the village need to rush to the drum tower immediately; if the drums are dense and have an accent in the back, it means that there is a hunt for robbers or a combat mission, and young and strong men must bring dry food and weapons to the drum tower immediately. The young and strong men must bring dry food and weapons to the drum tower and stand by immediately.

### 3.3. The Interaction Function of the Dong Drum Tower

In summer and winter, people like to come to the Drum Tower to sit, talk about the past and the present, and sing and dance. During Chinese New Year and festivals, the Dong people gather on the drum tower to hold various cultural activities, especially the “Doye” [22]. In addition, song competitions, reed-sheng playing and pipa singing are sometimes held in front of the drum tower. The Dong people also engage in a folkloric activity called “weihe” during the farming season. During the leisure time, especially during the Spring Festival, the Dong people visit each other in groups, and these activities take place at the Drum Tower. After entering the village, the guests gather at the Drum Tower or Drum Tower Ping and hold various celebratory and entertaining activities and perform “Doye” collective songs and dances before being distributed to each household. Gifts from guests are placed in the drum tower before being distributed to the households. The guests are also sent away at the drum tower before being sent out of the village.

## 4. Drum Tower as a Symbolic Carrier of Dong Culture

### 4.1. Overview of Symbolic Anthropological Theory

Symbolic anthropology, sometimes called symbolic and interpretive anthropology, is one of the main schools of cultural anthropology, with major figures such as Geertz, Turner and Schneider. Symbolic anthropology views culture as a set of symbolic systems, but each scholar’s perspective and theory has its own focus. Geertz focused on cultural symbol systems, arguing that in order to understand the symbols of other peoples, it is necessary to explore cultural symbols from the perspective of the local people, using a “deep drawing” approach. Turner focuses on ritual processes, analyzing the role of ritual in the process and structure of ritual.

Symbolic anthropology sees culture as a set of symbolic systems made up of symbols and meanings, and the relationship between the concepts of meaning and symbols is that acts, events, etc. can be the medium of meaning, *i.e.* symbolic meaning. Nidham gives the example of how the same rosebush, if given to a lover, means a symbol of love, and if placed on a coffin, a symbol of mourning; it is in different contexts that people give different symbolic meanings to the same thing. The deeper symbolism lies in the fact that men put their role in the performance of the rooster, or that the rooster is an expression of male symbolism. Another example is the “plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum”, a symbol of the “gentleman” in Chinese culture, which does not exist in other cultures. The Dong Drum Tower, as a carrier of ethnic culture, has a unique aesthetic and values that have given it a deep symbolic meaning that continues to this day. The one-legged image of the drum tower, its tall size and the appearance of the brocade scales do not seem to be a functional necessity, but the choice of spring for the pillars and the pride of the singers in staying at night on top of the drum



tower corroborate the fact that the drum tower must have some symbolic meaning [23]. With regard to the symbolic meaning of the drum tower form, the cult of the fortress pile and the cult of the shade tree can be more widely agreed upon, and this will also be explained in depth below, illustrating the symbolic meaning of the architectural form of the Dong drum tower and its origins and influence on the Dong people.

#### **4.2. Symbolic Interpretation of the Architectural Form of the Dong Drum Tower**

There are various interpretations of the symbolic significance of the drum tower, including the cult of the fortress pile, the cult of the shade tree, the Buddhist parody of the multi-podal pagoda, and the cult of the male, as well as functional interpretations, which suggest that the drum tower originated as an imitation of the Han drum tower, the “big house” of the clan commune, and the purpose of beating the drum to defend against the enemy [24]. Among them, the cult of the fortress pile and the cult of the shade tree are more widely accepted. More Dong people believe that the image of the drum tower is an imitation of the cedar tree commonly found in the Dong area, while some imaginative Dong friends believe that the earliest prototype of the drum tower was a house built by the Dong ancestors under a tree to shelter from the rain in ancient times.

The Dong Drum Tower is a sacred cultural pillar in its entirety, but its predecessor was only a large tree or a large wooden pillar, traces of which can still be seen in Dong customs today. If it is not possible to do so with financial and material resources, a cedar pillar must be erected first as a substitute for the drum tower [25]. The four main pillars of the Dong drum tower symbolise the four directions and the four seasons, and the twelve lining pillars symbolise the twelve months, suggesting that the ancient cedar tree or pillar cult is one source of the sacred origin of the Dong drum tower [26]. However, even if the “totemic” element is excluded, the cedar tree can still have a sacred symbolic identity because of its connection with the religious cosmology of the Dong ancestors. The drum tower became a symbol of the family, and the sacredness of the family could not come from the family itself, but had to come from the sky, from a larger cosmic presence. It was therefore important to find a sacred source for the Drum Tower, and the giant tree served as a metaphor for this in terms of religious belief. The Dong people built their drum tower in the symbolic sense of the cedar tree, and also in the symbolic sense of its vitality [27]. The fir tree has a characteristic that after the old tree has fallen, new saplings continue to sprout from its roots and grow more and more into a forest, which is a perfect symbol for the Dong family, who regard the drum tower as a clan symbol.

Another important symbolic symbol of the Dong drum tower is the taking of the image of the dragon. This taking of images by the Drum Tower makers involves the collective unconscious memory of the dragon in the Dong people’s imagination [28]. The ancient Yue people of southern China were a people whose main totem was the dragon and the snake, and customs such as hair-cutting and

tattooing and dragon boating were phenomena of this totemic culture. This cultural memory has naturally accumulated deep in the hearts of the Dong people, and they have a strong urge to express it. The Dong people have already shown their cultural expression of dragon imagery in the construction of their villages, with feng shui, dwellings, gates and wind and rain bridges all being associated with dragon metaphors. As a complete freestanding drum tower, it is in fact a complete symbolic image of the dragon, but here it is not a sprawling dragon in the air, but a coiled, seated dragon, which is most clearly seen from the eaves of the drum tower's circular form rising upwards in layers, and even more realistically when viewed vertically from above [29]. The green and scaly tiles of the eaves are like the armour of a dragon, the complex and varied shape of the pagoda roof is the dragon's head, and the drum tower appears to be a reclining dragon, a dragon guarding the village.

Some Dong scholars also believe that the drum tower is stylistically taken from the image of an immortal crane [30]. This is also a very valid argument. If you look at the Drum Tower from a certain angle, you can feel that the wings on the two wings of the Drum Tower are very much like a line of cranes standing on the staircase step by step, spreading their wings to fly, and then look at the "silver train hanging in the air", which becomes the shadow of a crane in the distance. Looking at the wings of the two gables in the middle of the Drum Tower, they resemble cranes in various postures gazing at the ground in a vertical line from top to bottom [31].

Finally, it should also be said that the drum tower is a borrowing of a Chinese architectural style [32]. The top part of the Dong drum tower is entirely borrowed from the palace pavilion and tower of Han architecture, as a result of the cultural exchange between Han and Dong, and the design of the top of the Dong drum tower is intended to symbolise the noble taste of the top part of the pavilion. In Han culture, these types of roofs were only used on the buildings of princes and nobles, but they are used on the tops of all the drum towers, and almost every one of them is decorated with a very complex arch. The arch has gradually become a cultural symbol of power, authority, rank, status and identity in Chinese Han architecture, and at one time only palaces and temples were allowed to install arches on their columns and on the square of the inner and outer eaves, and the size of the arch and the number of storeys were used to indicate the ethical taste of the building. In other words, the use of arch decoration on the top pavilion of the Dong people is not only a mechanical necessity, but also a cultural one [33]. In other words, the noble hipped, palace or pointed roof of the pavilion with the arch is the symbol of the drum tower, and the surrounding eaves are the symbol of the village residence.

## 5. Conclusion

The Drum Tower is a precious cultural heritage left behind by the Dong ances-

tors, carrying the good wishes and aspirations of the Dong people, and has the attributes of both material and spiritual wealth. It is not only an iconic symbol of the Dong villages, but is also endowed with the characteristics of national identity. In recent years, as some of the outstanding Dong traditional culture continues to spread to the outside world, the Dong Drum Tower has become more and more known and loved by more and more people. Domestic research on the Dong Drum Tower covers many aspects and subject areas, and the cultural symbolism of the Drum Tower has been unveiled as a mystery, reflecting the history and culture of the Dong people and full of strong ethnic and local characteristics. Taking the architectural form of the Sanjiang Ma Fat Drum Tower as an entry point, this paper analyzes the changes in the function of the Drum Tower brought about by the evolution of the architectural style, and then analyzes the specific connotation and role of the Drum Tower as a cultural symbolic function. It provides a reference for the study of the symbolic meaning of the ancient building of Mafang in Sanjiang.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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