
The Star-shaped Towers of the Tribal Corridor of Southwest China

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ABSTRACT: Hundreds of free-standing tall towering stone structures, some of the most astonishing star shapes, are still standing, in the remote, earthquake prone, mountains of Western Sichuan and Southeastern Tibet, part of a region also called Kham. I had stumbled by coincidence upon them, but I later learned that no one knew who had built them, or why, or when.

After 11 years of research, hampered by the lack of local written language, and after sending 68 samples of wood, collected from their now broken beams, for carbon-dating, I was able to establish that the towers still standing were built from 200 AD to 1600 AD, they must have been thousands, and they span over a territory large as a third of France. I was also able to determine that, in fact, they belong to 4 different groups, each located in a specific geographical pocket that corresponds to the traditional lands of an ancient tribe.

The towers, standing between at 1500 to 4000 meters above sea level, have shapes, masonry techniques and architectural characteristics that are unique to this region and, also, contrary to most other extraordinary towering buildings in the world, they are lay and vernacular constructions.

These flamboyant towers are architectural masterpieces and outstanding examples of traditional human settlement and land use which deserve a UNESCO inscription under everyone of the 7 criteria. It is our common responsibility to make known and protect such glorious heritage.

KEY WORDS: Stone star-shaped towers, Kham, Tribal Corridor, South-west China, Heritage

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Qiang towers in Ying Zui, Maoxian, Sichuanr Gyalrong towers in Danba Ganze, Sichuan By Frederique Darragon

INTRODUCTION

In the late 90's, as I was traveling on my own and on foot in remote valleys of Sichuan and Tibet looking for snow leopards, I had repeatedly stumbled upon groups of stone free-standing towers, some taller than a 15 story building. These towering structures, some of which had a strange star-shape, were all skillfully constructed, cunningly designed, remarkable in form and scale and unlike anything I had ever seen in decades of world travel.

As I started inquiring about them, I discovered that nobody knew who had built them, or why, or when. Even the colorful, but now impoverished, minority people, who appear to have lived for centuries around the towers, could tell little about them.

When people wonder how such extraordinary constructions could have remained ignored by Chinese, Tibetans and westerners alike, I often give the example of the Sanxingdui and Jinsha Civilization. This still undecipherable culture, with its stupefying 3 millennia-old gold and bronze highly sophisticated artifacts, was located right in Chengdu, and, until one site was unearthed by coincidence in 1986, had never been recorded anywhere.

I soon became fascinated by this mystery and since 1998, I devoted a lot of my time and money to unravel it. Later, I also bought a house in the region.

Obviously square or round tall free-standing towers are found all over the world, so I had originally decided to focus on the very sophisticated star-shaped skyscrapers but, as I was soon to learn via the results of carbon-dating, both the star-shaped towers, and the tall square towers built in their vicinity, had been built during the same time period. I therefore concluded that these tall square towers must belong to the same mysterious culture and I included them in my research.

1. SOLVING A RIDDLE IN PLAIN SIGHT

These archaic stone sky-scrapers had never been mapped, dated or even researched as a separate architectural phenomenon in and of itself. So I first needed to locate all the towers, then find a

way of dating them and determine if they had a common history. But before setting out, I investigated the available literature for clues.¹

1.1 Clues in Chinese texts

Professor Chen Zongxiang, although he had never seen the towers, had already collected mentions of the towers in ancient Chinese texts. Here are the most relevant of his findings:

1. *“Later Han Annals, The History of Ran Long Tribe”* records : *“ The masses live by the hill , the houses are called G-rong and are build by piling up stones , some of these stone houses are forty meters tall”*

2. *“Bei Shi, The Piwat Kingdom”* and *“Sui Annals, The Piwat Kingdom History”* record : *“The Piwat Kingdom² has no city walls and is located in the valley near a precipice ... The tallest stone houses are about forty meters tall , some smaller ones about eighteen meters tall”*

3. Wang Zhong, *“The Biography of Songtsen Gampo”* records *“Before the arrival of the Bod (=Tibetan) People on the Southern Tibetan Plateau , there lived the Mon Tribe (孟族) . The people of that tribe lived of animal husbandry and were known as good builders of stone towers”*

4. *“Sui Annals, The Women’s Kingdom”* records: *“The Women’s Kingdom... The city is build on a mountain ..., the queen resides in a nine story building”*

5. *“Annals of Wenchuan County”* records *“The wife of the last king of Chen dynasty (538-589 AD) gave birth in the Su Village. The inhabitants built a seven story tower for the event”*

6. *“New Tang Annals, The History of the Eastern Women’s Kingdom”* records: *“The queen lives in a nine story building and the other people live in six story buildings”*

Professor Chen then concludes that, according to historical records, the stone buildings in form of tall towers appeared before or at the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220AD)

In an article written in 1989, linguist Professor Sun Hongkai mentions similar findings in ancient texts; he also adds that, the word “G-rong”, designating the towers in the Han Annals, is an ancient Qiang language word, which is still used in specialized literature. The tall towers were called “Chao” in the Sui Annals and “Diao” in the Tang Annals and after; both are Chinese words.

Today, in mandarin Chinese, they are still called “Diao” “Diao-fang” and “Diao-lou”³. The towers also have different names in each different local language.

At the time, in the late 90’s, practically no Chinese architect had yet shown much interest in the

¹ Generally I have used Chinese pinyin when speaking of today administrative regions and Tibetan transliteration for ancient kingdoms.

² It is hard to exactly locate this kingdom.

³ These words have a defensive connotation since “diao” means fortress.

strange structures which puzzled me, only a few photos had been published. Some of the smaller towers standing in Qiang Zu villages of Maoxian and Wenchuan had been documented, but they were hundreds of miles away from the towers I had seen. But Deng Shaoqin, in a 1944 book,⁴ did publish a list of locations of some of the star-shaped towers.

A notable source of confusion is that there are, in the Qing Annals, lengthy descriptions of the thousands of towers build for, and during, the “Jinchuan wars” of the 18th century. Many scholars were under the impression that these were the towers standing. I have yet to find a single tower built during that period. More importantly still, these wars took place in a specific area very much smaller than the very large territory where I had already seen many towers.

1.2 Clues in Tibetan and Western texts

The local populations still have many different languages and dialects, none of which has a written form, consequently there are no local written records of any kind.

Literary Tibetan was used in Buddhist and Bonpo monasteries but these books, practically none of them written before the 14th century, mostly dealt with religious themes and never mentioned the towers. Although I did contact many Tibetan scholars, none could supply information about any Tibetan book having references about the towers.

Many 19th and early 20th century western travelers wrote having seen some towers. Most of them also record that the local people could not provide any relevant information.

1.3 Locating and counting the towers

By the end of 1999, after many fields trips, I was able to determine that, although earthen, wood and smallish stone towers could be seen all over China, the star-shaped and the very tall towers were only found in specific areas of western Sichuan and one region of Southeast Tibet.

In Sichuan they were scattered in fairly rich agricultural pockets, from Aba to the North to Muly in the South, and from Maoxian to Wenchuan on the Min River in the East, to the Yalong River in the West.

There were none along the Yangtze, the Langcang or the Nu Rivers.

In the TAR, all such towers were only found along the Nyang River and its tributaries as well as along the part of the Yarlung Zangpo close its confluence with the Nyang River

The towers once must have been counted by the thousands. Now there are about 250 of a fair size and at least three times that number in an advanced state of ruin.

1.4 Carbon-dating technique and dating the towers

Apart from conducting what amounted to the first census-taking of the towers by counting them, mapping them, measuring them, drawing them, photographing them and categorizing them, the most urgent task was to date them. Local people, when asked, would, either say they did not

⁴ *The Legend of She-Wu*, 1944.

know, or that the towers were “very old”.

So, as I was searching for more towers, I always carried, among other things, a GPS and a small saw. The towers are made of skillfully stacked stones with wooden rods imbedded in the masonry. The floors, now mostly rotten, were also mostly made of wood and, starting in 1998, I had been collecting wood samples whenever possible.

“Calibrated” carbon-dating (called “Calibration 2 Sigma”) indicates a bracket of about 150 years during which there is a 95% chance that the wood has died.

Obviously carbon-dating dates the wood and not really the tower, so one has to choose carefully each wood sample: it has to originate FROM A SMALL BEAM that cannot have been changed because:

—the “age” of the construction will appear less than its actual age if the beam selected is in fact the replacement of an original beam,

Or

—the “age” of the construction will appear more than its actual age if the beam selected had been stored for a long period of time or salvaged from an older building. Obviously this could be the case with large trunks, but plentiful small beams will not be stored or reused, especially in well-wooded areas.

—the “age” of the construction will also appear more than its actual age if the wood sample was taken from the center of a large trunk. In point of fact, the age of the outside of the trunk is different from the age of the center (could be 600 years if the tree lived that long!).

From 2000 until today I have sent 108 samples to be dated, using carbon-dating technique, to Beta Analytic, USA, world’s largest of such laboratories. That resulted in 3 temples, 1 castle, 11 houses and 77 different towers dated (2 towers were dated thrice, 7 towers were dated twice and 5 samples could not be dated.)

Charts and carbon-dating reports are available on request.

The oldest tower standing could date from the 3rd century and the newest ones are from the 16 century⁵. This corresponds to the available, but very limited, historical data.

2. OTHER TOWERS IN THE WORLD AND UNIQUENESS OF THOSE OF SOUTHWEST CHINA

2.1 Other ancient towers around the world

As already mentioned, towers were, and still are, found all over the world.

Most of these towers were round or square; they can still be seen in large numbers in Italy, Scotland, Georgia, Chechnya, Greece and most Muslim territories. The most famous square towers are those of San Geminiano, Tuscany, Italy; they were mainly status symbols, build by

⁵ Darragon, Frederique, About carbon dating technique in general and my use of that technique to date 68 ancient towers found in Tibet and Sichuan. Sichuan University Unicorn Heritage Institute Newsletter, December 2008.

powerful families made rich by booming trade.

The tallest round towers are religious “minarets”. Flanged or ribbed towering constructions are found in today’s Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and India, some made of bricks, some of stones, all are Muslims monuments, the oldest dating from the 11th century. These flanges and ribs are often mainly decorative.

There are also ancient very tall hexagonal or octagonal towers, such as the Buddhist Chinese, Korean and Japanese “pagodas”.

With the exception of the Tuscany towers, all these impressive monuments were built for religious purposes or by princes.

2.2 Uniqueness of stone star-shaped towers of South-west China

The stone Southwest China towers, topic of this article, have a set of very unusual characteristics; these specific traits are the very criteria that, in absence of any epigraphic remains and of any kind of significant documental information, enabled me to circumscribe my study and to classify these towers in a category of their own.

Most of them are very tall, quite thin and free standing but, more important still, many have a very specific external shape that resembles a star with outward-pointing corners in numbers ranging from 5 to 13 and as many inward-pointing ones ⁶. They are totally different from simple hexagons or octagons which are convex and consequently only have outward pointing angles. They are also different from the flanged Muslim towers. In the Sino-Tibetan Marches, the vertical ridges, woven into the body of the wall rather than built against it, are both structural pillars interlaced together as well as the wall itself; they are more than just engaged columns. The masonry style of the towers, also specific to these areas, always includes horizontal wooden beams inserted inside the stone work. The only other constructions, which I know of, where similar reinforcing wooden rods are used, are the Greek Meteora Monasteries, built from the 14th to the 16th century.

These two characteristics, of pillars woven together to form a wall, and of reinforcing wooden rods, are probably what have enabled so many of these towers to resist quasi annual tremors or earthquakes.

But the towers of the Sino-Tibetan Marches are also unique in another notable way: they are lay and vernacular and part of still thriving Cultural Landscapes.

It is amazing that these innovative constructions are only located in hard to access mountainous areas. Although some valleys show traces of human occupation dating from 11000 B.C.⁷, the populations that were living in these regions have been recorded in both Chinese and Tibetan historic texts as barbarians. There were no roads, no wheel and no written language, (with the

⁶ Van Driem - Languages of the Himalayas,

⁷ Most of the Sichuan Star-shaped towers have 8 points. I believe that it is both a more stable design and an easier one to realize. It is possible that there were as many towers of other kinds of star-shapes but they have collapsed earlier. Some scholars have suggested that the number 8 was used because it is an auspicious number in China. I disagree since this area was not part of China at the time. In both the Chinese and Lamaist Buddhism, 8 is also auspicious, but in Korean or Japanese Buddhism the number 7 is preferred. In the Bonpo tradition, uneven numbers, and specially 9, are considered auspicious

exception of literary Tibetan used in Bon or Buddhist monasteries) until recent times...

Designing and building these extraordinary structures must have required enormous efforts. What use could have justified such an expenditure of time and energy in places that were, at the time, and still today, very sparsely inhabited? I became convinced that these towers were the expression of a fairly affluent and technically sophisticated society preoccupied with more than just security and wanting to express its grandeur.

3. TOWERS AS A CLUE TO ANCIENT TRIBES LOST MEMORY

I also started to realize that a harnessing of cultural historical and archeological methodologies in the study of these epochal constructions would hold the most promise for illuminating the social and cultural universe of these quarters of the Sino-Tibetan Marches during what we, westerners, call the first millennium and a half.

3.1 Common characteristics of all the towers of this study, whether they are star-shaped or square.

—Outside walls are inward-sloping

This construction style, with a base larger than its top, lowers the center of gravity and thus adds stability. In the past it was widely employed by many different cultures. The walls are very thick at the bottom and also grow thinner at the top.

—Masonry

Walls are cornered with staggered stones. The stones are always uncut, their size varies with the regions as well as the quantity of mortar used. The mortar is always dirt or clay, cement was never used. Cement was discovered by the Romans circa 200BC, and, if we are to believe some Japanese scientists, 5000 years ago in China.

—Use of wooden beams

Structural stability was further increased by the use of long wooden elements embedded in the masonry. Wood beams or planks, totally or partly inserted in the stone-work, often overlapping at the corners, are always used to reinforce the walls and link them together. Stones laid between the wooden elements take the bearing weight while the wooden rods impart tensile



Fig.1- Wooden reinforcing elements, Xi Zong tower, Sichuan, by Frederique Darragon

strength to the structure (Fig. 1). It is still used in contemporary constructions.

This technique is totally different from the earthquake-resistant masonry customarily used in Lhasa and in many regions of Central Asia.

—**Usage of vertical ridges and of cluster of pillars**

The builders incorporated buttressing elements in the masonry of houses and towers—vertical ridges were here woven into the body of the wall, rather than built against it. This technology is unique to the houses and the towers of the Sino-Tibetan Marches. Structurally, the star towers are, in essence, clusters of tall pillars, woven together, leaning into and buttressing each other.

—**Other common characteristics**

—The floors were made of wood beams and planks and were linked by ladders.

—Some towers totally lack foundations, but most in most of the cases it is impossible to see if there are foundations or how deep they are.

—Curiously there are no towers featuring a round outside wall.

If this construction style is, obviously, efficient, it can only be customary of well forested districts since building a large tower can require cutting down more than 50 fully grown trees.

—**A comparison between the square towers and the star towers in their structural stability**

The ancient builders were doubtlessly aware that a tall structure composed of numerous walls with relatively narrow faces is more stable than a structure of the same height and diameter with only four, more expansive walls. Never the less, because of their other earthquake-resistant characteristics, many square towers have well resisted.

3.2. Four different regions defined by groups of towers sharing all the same characteristics

The towers are truly tectonic marvels and lofty expressions of a very sophisticated vernacular masonry tradition that evolved in response to challenging circumstances. From basic principles, a variety of indigenous vernacular forms emerged.

As I was thoroughly listing the characteristics of each tower, I came to noticed that, in fact, I could establish four groups of towers, each group sharing a number of common traits. Within each one of these groups the towers were fairly similar. But there were quite a few differences with the set of characteristics shown by the towers of the other groups.

The most obvious differences are the shape of the towers, as seen on Figure 2, but there are more subtle differences concerning the openings, the stone work and the wooden reinforcements, as well as the style of roof (although it has usually collapsed).

Obviously each region had a different natural and social environment, which defined the type of each tower, its location relative to its environment and its probable use.

Each of these groups also corresponded to a different geographical “pocket”.

Three of these regions are in Sichuan and can be described as

—the lands occupied by the contemporary Qiang of the Lixian, Maoxian and Wenchuan

Counties

- the region customarily called rGyalrong. (Jiarong in Chinese)
- the territories extending on both sides of the Yalong River and some of its tributaries, from Muly in the south to Luhuo in the North and from Kangding in the East to Yajiang in the West

The fourth region, in the Southeast of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, encompasses most of today's Gongpu Jiangda, Linzhe and Milin Counties.

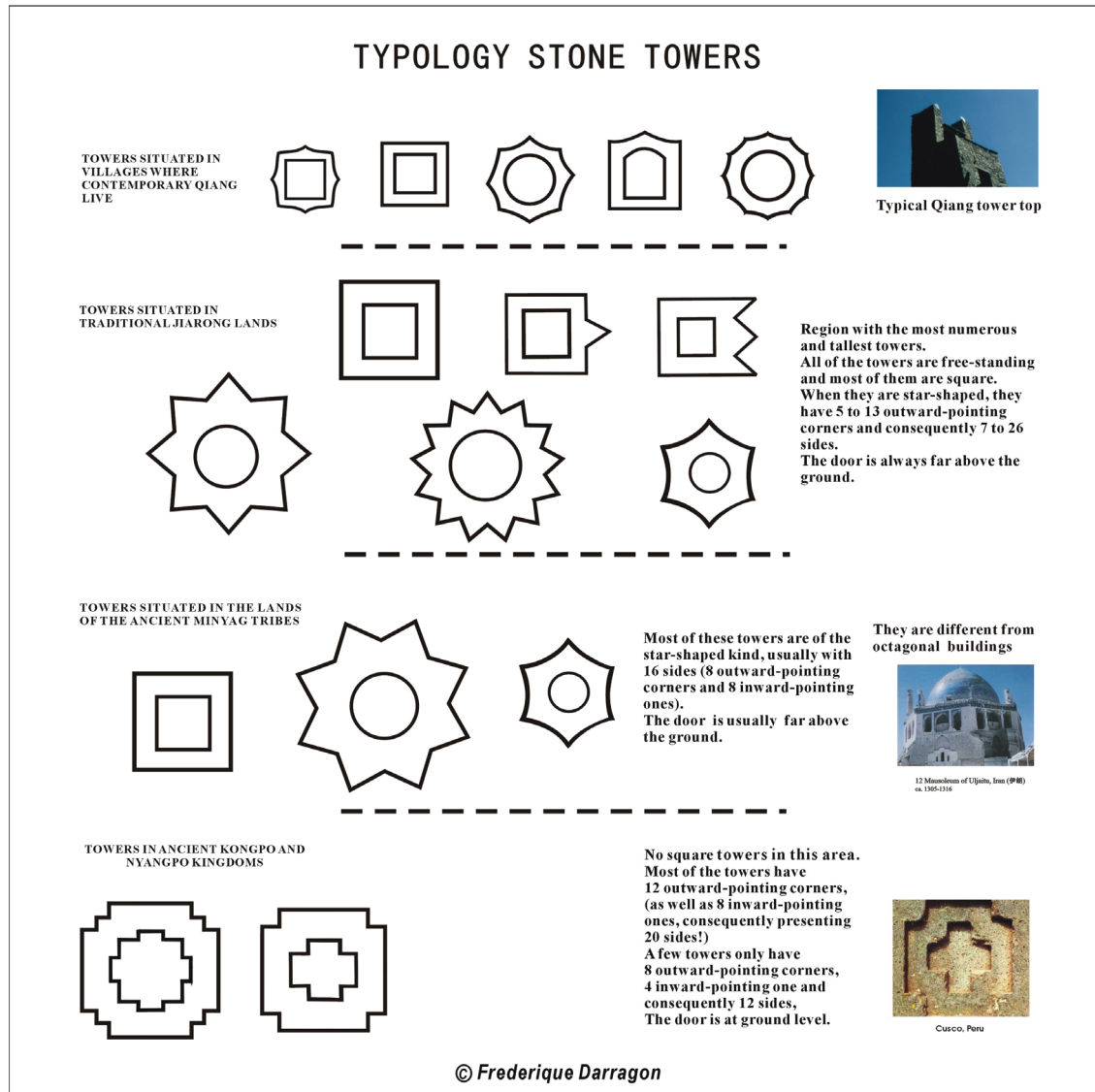


Fig.2- Towers cross-sections by Frederique Darragon

It is only later, when I started researching the history of the different regions, that I came to realize that the different groups of towers corresponded roughly to the ancestral lands of different ancient tribes.

3.3 Continuity in the architectural characteristics: towers, very old houses, old houses and contemporary ones

What also came as a surprise, once I started dating the towers, is that, in each region, the towers still standing had been built over a 500 to 1300 years span with very little change between the oldest and the newest towers.

Another point of importance is that both the very specific masonry that always includes some wood, and the inside arrangements found in the towers, are practically identical to the local techniques still used in contemporary traditional constructions. Since I have located quite a few ancient houses, including one as old as 800 hundred years, it would appear that the impoverished farmers who live around the towers are the descendants of the people who built the towers, but, unfortunately, they now have lost the memory of the pride and grandeur of their ancestors.

4. REGIONAL STYLES OF TOWERS AND FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

Given that these areas were rarely traveled by outsiders and that there were no local written languages, even the history of the whole area was wrapped in mystery. For hundreds of years, this area now known as the Sino-Tibetan Marches (or the Tribal Corridor) was a sort of no man's land, caught between Tibet and China. Amid these two very different and expanding cultures, aboriginal and displaced tribes, invaders, bandits and traders, fought and intermingled, often establishing fiercely independent kingdoms.

4.1. Towers situated in villages inhabited by contemporary Qiang (Lixian, Wenchuan and Maoxian)

The word "Qiang" is found in Chinese inscriptions centuries well before 1000 B.C. It did not apply to one well defined ethnic group but to many tribes of sheep herders roaming lands west of Early China. These numerous Qiang tribes, many of which had a specific name, were different from the contemporary Qiang Minority since today's 200,000 Qiang are probably the descendants of one specific tribe: the Ran Mang (or Ran Long) ⁸. As attested in the Han Annals, the Qiang might be some of the earliest tower builders. They can also be credited for another unusual deed, having figured out, maybe by chance but before anybody else, that our closest relatives are the monkeys.

Today, all the people living near the towers believe to be the descendants of a monkey. It is a belief which they share with many minorities from China and from the Himalayas but, interestingly, although it is quite close to the actual truth, this Creation Myth is extremely rare, not to say inexistent, in the rest of the world⁹. Although it is now known for being the Tibetan Creation Myth, -which has received, as R. Vitali says, an "overtly Buddhist treatment"¹⁰-, it is, as a point in fact, a Qiang belief. It was already mentioned as such —R.A. Stein ¹¹—during the Sui Dynasty 581-618 AD, well before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. Furthermore, it is neither a Bon, a Buddhist, a Zoroastrian, an Hindu, a Mongol nor an Altaic belief. Today's Qiang practice ancestor-worship as they did in the past and a monkey is essential to their rituals.

⁸ Sun Hongkai, 1989.

⁹ Frederique Darragon, The Civilization of the Star-shaped Towers as the Legacy of the Qiang Tribes, July 2008 paper, Taiyuan Conference.

¹⁰ Vitali, Tribes which populated the Tibetan Plateau as treated in the texts collectively called the Khungs Chen Po Bzhi, Lungta, Spring 2003.

¹¹ Stein, Les Tribus Anciennes des Marches Sino-Tibetaïnes. Paris 1961.

Most of the ancient Qiang villages (at 1500-2000 meters of altitude) are fortified villages. The towers, usually linked with houses and fortification walls, are not very tall; their door is always located at the ground level but only accessible from inside its attached house. The stone Qiang towers are, what I call, somewhat square or somewhat round because they practically always have buttress-like outgrowths in form of vertical ridges on the outside of their walls. Another specific feature of these towers is a wall built on the roof so as to protect the back of the fighters who were facing the assailants coming from the lower part of the valley.

It is not possible to date the Qiang towers by carbon—dating samples of their wooden beams because these towers have been used, and repaired, until recently. Consequently they harbor wood beams from many different time periods.

4.2. Towers situated in lands of the ancient rGyalrong kingdoms

The rGyalrong area could be defined as the valleys and lands around the Upper and Middle Dadu River and its tributaries; it was already reported as “Jialang”¹² during the Sui Dynasty. A Women’s Kingdom was frequently mentioned in the Chinese Annals and its people were classified as a Qiang tribe: the Sumpi. (Sumpa in Tibetan)

This is the region where the towers, all located between 2000 and 3200 meters of altitude, are the most numerous and the tallest. Their door is always far above the ground and the part of the tower below its door is solid masonry. Most of the towers are square, but there are also quite a few that are star-shaped, with outward-pointing corners in numbers ranging from 5 to 13 and with as many inward-pointing ones.

Carbon-dating shows that the earliest rGyalrong tower still standing could date from the 10th century and that most of them were built during the 14th and 15th century. Consequently the towers that I have dated were built at a time when reports about the Women’s Kingdom had been replaced by mentions about the “18 kingdoms of rGyalrong”. Most of these must have been ruled by males because, now, legend has it that a family had to build a tower for each of its sons. Many of these kingdoms were located on ancient trade routes.

Nowadays, the most famous of these ancient kingdoms is certainly Danba, where, often, there is no central village and each tower is attached to a house.

Even if they still speak a dozen of mutually unintelligible languages, today’s inhabitants, the Jiarong, are considered part of the Tibetan minority but they are quite different from the Tibetans from Tibet. This region has always been a strong hold of the Bonpo religion.

4.3. Towers in the valleys of the Yalong River and some of the Minyag ancestral lands

The Minyag are usually called Dangxiang Qiang in the Chinese sources—as early as 200 BC—but sometimes the word Mu-ya (or Mu-yao) was also used. In ancient texts, the references to the Minyag are numerous but confusing since it is both the self-given name of a group of tribes and also the name used to refer to the various kingdoms they established in different places.

Confusion often comes because a famous kingdom, called Xixia in the Chinese sources and

¹² Li Shaoming, 1980.

Tangut in western books, was called “Minyag of the North” in Tibetan sources. In fact it was a very cosmopolitan kingdom, with its own written language, destroyed in 1227 and where no towers were ever mentioned.

Ancient texts translated and commented by renowned western scholars (including French scholar R.A Stein), ascertained that, independently of Xixia and for close to 1500 years, a Minyag kingdom of some sort has existed, always more or less located around today’s Yalong River. The last of these kingdoms, “Chala” (Minsheng in Chinese) lasted until the mid 20th century. It comprised an area bounded in the North by Luhuo, in the South by Muli, in the West by Yajiang and in the East by Kangding.

Now, only about 20.000 people speak one of the two Minyag languages, most of them living in Kangding County

All over this territory, numerous towers are still found today. Most of them are of the star-shaped kind usually with 8 outward-pointing corners (and 8 inward-pointing ones) but a few have 6 outward-pointing corners –a much less stable shape. These towers are usually standing in villages located in rich agricultural plains, often along a branch of the braided ancient trade routes known as “Cha-ma-gu-dao”¹³; a small number of towers are square, these are usually found sitting on mountain tops. Generally the door is located far above the ground and the part of the tower below that door is solid masonry, which could justify the amazing resilience of these towers some of which have no foundations as seen on.

Specific features of these towers, and of most of the contemporary Minyag houses, are the thin horizontal wood planks that, about every meter, encircle them.

“Fu Guo”, a kingdom reported to have many towers, was mentioned in Chinese Sui and Tang Annals. This is now DaoFu County¹⁴ where, nowadays, ancient towers are only found in 3 small areas, Zhaba, Wari and Bamei. Interestingly, the DaoFu new houses each have a small tower built today for a totally different use. Until recently the Zhaba people practiced the “walking marriage” and many of the recent Zhaba houses feature a square tower, which wall the lovers have to climb to enter the woman’s room by the window. Could that be a vestige of the “Kingdom of Women” psyche?

Most of the Minyag people are devout Buddhists and all are officially part of the Tibetan minority to whom they feel close. Nevertheless, many of them are proud of their Minyag identity and quite a few do not consider themselves Tibetan.

4.4. Cross-shaped Towers, the forgotten Nyangpo and Kongpo ancient kingdoms and another connection with the Cha-ma-gu-dao.

Although round and fairly short square towers are common features of Tibetan castles and monasteries, multi-cornered non-convex towers are only found in one region located in Southeastern Tibetan Autonomous Region. Works by Samten Karmay, Guntram Hazod and Pasang Wangdu, prove that the Northwest part of this area corresponds to a small ancient

¹³ These antique trade routes linked China to Tibet, Xixia and Burma. Cargo was carried by horses.

¹⁴ Sun Hongkai, 1989.

kingdom called Nyangpo, the rest used to be the ancient Kongpo kingdom which boundaries are not clearly defined. There are no local written records and consequently this region's history is little known but it is well established that the Cha-ma-gu-dao connecting China with Lhasa ran through it. Numerous legends are attached to Pasum Tso, a stunning lake of Nyangpo kingdom's eastern valley. The near by ancient kingdom, Kongpo, is also very famous because one of its sacred Mountain, Bon-ri, is linked with both Bonpo and Buddhist mythology. Confusion easily happens because the territories of the Nyangpo kingdom and part of those of the ancient Kongpo kingdom are now part of the Gongbu Jiangda County, while the rest of the Kongpo kingdom is divided between two counties : Linzhe and Milin.

The towers in the TAR, all located between 2500 and 4000 meters, are quite different from the Sichuan towers. Their outside as well as inside shape resemble the "Andean" cross with 90-degree angles, the result of a construction made of enormous interlocking rectangular pillars. Most of the towers have 12 outward-pointing corners, as well as 12 inward-pointing ones and consequently 24 sides, but some have 8 outward-pointing corners and 4 inward-pointing ones and 12 sides.

The three oldest towers dated are all located in Nyangpo, dated from 220 to 400 AD, from 260 to 570 AD and from 690 to 950 AD. It does not mean that the Nyangpo towers are the first to have been built, since 40 meters tall towers were mentioned in Sichuan during the Han, Sui and Tang Dynasties, but simply that these Nyangpo valleys are in the highest and the least developed region. It is only in the last few years that roads are being built and, since 2004, I saw 6 towers being dynamited to reuse their stones, including the second and third oldest towers, which were dynamited in 2007.

Ancient tombs are also found in great numbers (Guntram Hazod, personal communication) and personal observation in Ancient Kongpo.

Very little is known about the origin of the Nyangpo and Kongpo people. The Mon Tribe was said, in the Chinese Annals, to build tall towers and to inhabit the Southern Tibetan Plateau, but, today, at least 5 different groups of people are called Mon. Although Guntram Hazod (personal communication) has found, in Tibetan texts, quite a few links between Nyangpo and Mon people, more research is needed. Today most of the people inhabiting in Gongbu Jiangda, Milin and Linzhe have immigrated there from other areas of Tibet. The Basum Tso language, which could be the language of the original habitants, is only spoken fluently in three villages, all located at the very north end of the lake, by a total of about 200 households. These villages and the culture of their inhabitants should urgently be protected.



Fig.3 -Tsongo village in Basum Tso, TAR by Frederique Darragon

5. DIFFERENT USES OF TOWERS

These were times of trade but also of petty warfare and power was exercised through control and conspicuous symbols of wealth. The flamboyant towers perfectly embody the ancient tribes' innovative solutions to that specific situation.

5.1. Defensive Structures

Some theories say the towers were defensive in nature, that this was a lawless land subject to internecine raiding and invasion from outside. Indeed, many of them seem to have been designed for that purpose, specially the ones part of fortified hamlets, as the Qiang towers, and those, in other regions, that feature loopholes, narrow slits in the wall widening inside the tower, allowing archers to stand and fire arrows at attackers.

5.2. Status symbols

In times of peace, and as early as the 6th century, many towers certainly also played a role as status symbol, as mentioned, in the “Annals of Wenchuan County”.

In the wealthier valleys, some towers are extremely tall or very sophisticated and have and no windows to speak of—clearly built for a purpose other than defense. Often a great many of them are found, scattered on the valley floor or a mountain slope, so they could not have been princely dwellings or tombs. They must have been status symbols of fairly affluent societies, somewhat the “Cadillacs” of their day.

5.3. Strategic Towers

In every region some towers are also found, away from the villages, on mountain tops, entrances to valley or other strategic positions. These towers were used to mark or guard a frontier, as beacon or to transmit messages probably using smoke signals (as recorded in Songgang)

5.4. Defensive-storage trading posts

Most of the more sophisticated towers are located one of the “Cha-ma-gu-dao”. It is possible that these wealthy agricultural valleys, where many horses could be fed, served as relays for the horse caravans. The towers were built as status symbols to impress traders and brigands alike, and being earthquake-resistant and easily defendable, they were used for storing precious possessions such as tea, silk, and salt. They could also be used as trading posts for the collection of locally harvested musk and pelts. It is also obvious than more than agricultural revenues were needed to build so many impressive structures.

CONCLUSION

EXTRAORDINARY VALUE AND CONSERVATION OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

As I was learning more about these astonishing cultural landscapes, where people still largely live as they did centuries ago, I realized that they very much deserved to be nominated on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Moreover, they can be inscribed under seven criteria, since

—**Criterion(i)-**The towers represent a masterpiece of human creative achievement which,

—**Criterion(ii)- exhibits an important interchange of influences between Ancient Tribes inhabiting the Tribal Corridor, and**

—**Criterion(iii)- bears a unique and exceptional testimony of a civilization,**
and

—**Criterion(iv)- is an outstanding, because practically unique, example of buildings that creates an equally outstanding architectural ensemble illustrating the pride and grandeur of primitive tribes without written language,**
and

—**Criterion(v)- is an outstanding example of traditional human settlement and land use,**
and

—**Criterion(vi)- is an eloquent testimony to the strength of spiritual association between people and landscape, as manifested in the harmony between the local populations and their natural surrounding AND is directly and tangibly associated with living traditions and ideas.**

These sites being cultural landscapes they also justify the criterion (vii) of the natural sites : exceptional beauty

Only one other site in China was inscribed with 7 criteria.

But, even if the towers had, for centuries, successfully withstood wars, revolutions, storms, earthquakes, neglect and indifference, more recently they were being pillaged for building materials by impoverished local inhabitants; many had been entirely demolished—the stones from one large tower sufficing to build five new houses.

To try addressing some of these risks, in 2001, I created the Unicorn Foundation, focusing on education and humanitarian programs and, in 2004, I co-funded a research organization, the Sichuan University Unicorn Heritage Institute. I also embarked in a promotion campaign abroad and in China. It started, in 2001, with the filming of a documentary (broadcast around the world

by Discovery Channel and that has brought nice proceeds for my foundation) and continued with conferences, photos exhibits (including at the United Nations in New York in 2004), the publishing of a book and many articles.

This resulted in the towers being inscribed on the World Monuments fund 2006 Watch List and in a restoration program as a cooperative effort of the WMF, the Sichuan Government and our Foundation

The same year, all the towers in Sichuan Province were registered as cultural relics, most at the county level, some at the National level

In 2008, the Chinese government inscribed 2 groups of towers on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Tentative list, but only with 5 criteria, (i) to (v).

But, as roads, bridges and even airports are being built to facilitate commerce, the lure of easy money through mass tourism and over-use of local resources is hard to resist unless other solutions are offered to the local inhabitants.

Consequently, in cooperation with PlanetFinance, we plan to put together the first ethno-ecotourism Micro-franchise pilot project to bring new financial resources to the inhabitants while protecting not only the tangible heritage, but also the local customs, the environment and the wild life.

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