

**A Preliminary Investigation into the Relationship Between  
Qiong Long (邛崃) and the Languages of the  
Qiang Branch of Tibeto-Burman**

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In the summer of 1956, I went to the Aba (阿坝) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province to investigate the Qiang language. Our car drove north along the bank of the Min River. When we reached the border of Wenchuan (汶川) County, I looked through the window and saw clearly the mountain villages of the Qiang nationality on both sides of the river. Some villages were in the river valleys, others on mountain ridges. What puzzled me was that inside or at the edge of many villages were stone structures over 100 feet high which resembled the chimneys of big factories at a distance. In some places three or four such structures were clustered together, while in other places a single structure stood alone. Some of those structures were badly damaged, and only broken walls remained. Out of curiosity I asked the local cadres accompanying me what these buildings were. They told me they were the "watchtowers" of Qiang villages.

In the years since then, I have investigated Qiang languages in different areas and found similar watchtowers in the Maowen (茂汶) Qiang Autonomous County (formerly Mao (茂) County), and in Heishui (黑水), Songpan (松潘), Wenchuan and Li (理) Counties. All of the watchtowers were alike except for slight differences in architecture or other characteristics. However, none of the people in the local area, whether Qiang or Han, could clearly explain the origin and function of these watchtowers. This mystery has been on my mind for the past 20 years. As time has gone by, I have acquired a growing body of information. In this paper, I would like to present some clues to the solution of the "watchtower mystery." Hopefully my presentation will stimulate further research on the Qiang "watchtowers."

**I. Geographic Distribution  
and Architectural Characteristics**

In 1958, I went to Maerkang (马尔康) County in the Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and found a large number of watchtowers in the villages where the Jiarong (嘉绒) language is spoken. In 1964 and 1965, I went to Lanping (兰坪) and Weixi (维西) in Yunnan Province to investigate the Pumi (普米) language

and found a few watchtowers in the villages where Pumi is spoken. From 1978 to 1982, I went to Muli (木里), Xichang (西昌), and Mianning (冕寧) in Liangshan (涼山) Prefecture, and to Jiulong (九龍), Kangding (康定), and Yajiang (雅江) in Ganzi (甘孜) Prefecture, all in the western part of Sichuan province, to investigate the Muya (木雅), Ergong (爾古), Guizhong (貴州), Namuyi (納木義), Shixing (史興), Ersu (爾蘇) and Zhaba (扎巴) languages. Many watchtowers exist in the areas where these languages are spoken.

In terms of geographical location, watchtowers are basically distributed along the upper reaches of the Min River, the middle reaches of the Dadu River, the middle-lower reaches of the Yalong River and along the middle reaches of the Jinsha and the Lancang Rivers. They are most concentrated along the Min, Dadu and Yalong Rivers. In some areas almost all the villages have watchtowers, while in other areas there is only one for several villages. They are particularly scarce along the Jinsha and Lancang Rivers in Weixi and Lanping in Yunnan Province; only one or two watchtowers can be found in the heavily populated villages of the Pumi nationality.

Watchtowers are usually built at the intersection of river valleys, which are key points of transportation, or on the ridges of mountains, which are strategic locations. Most of them are in close proximity to villages. Some are even in the center of villages. At some locations, several watchtowers are clumped together, forming a row.

Watchtowers are built with irregular stones and mud. Their shape is trapezoidal—the lower part is wide and the upper part narrow, with a hollow center. The diameter of the lower part is about four meters and that of the upper part is about two to 2.5 meters. The lower wall is about one meter thick and the top wall about 50 to 60 centimeters. The highest watchtower is about 200 feet high, while the lowest is probably over 100 feet. In each watchtower there are several floors made of wood, with a simple wooden ladder to get to the top. Most of the present watchtowers are old and have not been repaired for a long time, so the wooden structures have rotted away, leaving only the outer shell.

Externally, most watchtowers are square, with a hollow square cross section. Some have six or eight corners, the cross sections of which look like six or eight-pointed stars, respectively. Though they are all built with irregular stones from the mountains, their vertical edges, whether square, hexagonal or octagonal, are very sharp and clear. They look magnificent at a distance.

It is hard to date the watchtowers precisely. However, it is clear that their builders were highly skilled. Some of the watchtowers have withstood large earthquakes and sustained no damage. The degree of their strength is astonishing.

While visiting various places we learned from the stories told us by some of the old people that watchtowers were built to guard against aggression from external enemies and to protect the people from surprise attacks. They were also used to watch enemy activity, command battles, and make contact with other villages. We are lacking information about whether or not they also served as beacon towers, so the answer to this must await further research.

It is noteworthy that names for the watchtowers have been around a long time, and places named for watchtowers are distributed throughout the areas with watchtowers. The names of many places simply take the name "watchtower", e.g. the villages named "Diao Fang" (碉房) in Ganluo (甘洛) and Jiulong Counties. Some are named according to the building materials used in the watchtower, such as "Shidiaolou" (石碉楼) [stone watchtower] Village in Heishui County and "Tudiaolou" (土碉楼) [earth watchtower] Village in Muli County. Some names are based on the appearance of the watchtower, such as "Gaodiao" (高碉) [high watchtower] Village and "Landiao" (爛碉) [broken watchtower] Village in Jiulong County and "Diaotou" (碉頭) [watchtower-head] Village in Wenchuan County. Some are based on its color, such as "Bai Diao" (白碉) [white watchtower] Village in Muli County and "Heihu Diao" (黑虎碉) [black tiger watchtower] Village in Jinchuan (金川) County. Some are based on the shape of the watchtower, such as "Baguadiao" (八卦碉) [hexagram watchtower] Village in Dajin (大金) County and "Bajiaolou" (eight-corner building) in Yajiang County. There are also villages which gave themselves new names based on the local watchtower, such as "Diaolouping" (碉樓坪) [watchtower plain] and "Wangjiadiaofang" (王家碉房) [Wang family watchtower] Villages in Mianning County. It is even more interesting that some places are named after the word for "watchtower" in the language of the local minority. For instance, Luhua town (蘆花), which the Red Army passed by during the Long March, is the county seat of Heishui County in the northwestern part of Sichuan Province. The name "Luhua" is a transliteration of the local Qiang name "Üluqhua". "Ülu" means "watchtower", while "qhua" means "leaning." "Luhua," therefore, means "leaning watchtower" in Qiang. Long ago there was a high watchtower stretching up to the sky in the center of Luhua town, at the intersection of the Heishui River and the Boluo (波洛) canal. Because the watchtower was slightly leaning, it was given the name "Luhua". It was still undamaged when I went to Heishui County in 1960. It is a great pity that this relic was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Other places which take their names from the local word for "watchtower" can be found in the areas of Kangding County where the Muya language is spoken. There are places there named "Eluo" (俄洛), "Wolong" (窩龍) and "Wu" (悟), all of which are words for "watchtower" in the Muya language.

## II. Watchtower — "Qiong Long"

The term "Qiong Long" was first found in the book *Hou Han Shu* (後漢書). In the section about the Ran Mang Yi (冉駝夷) in the volume *Nan Man Xi Nan Yi Zhuan* (南蠻西南夷傳) it is recorded that "the people all lived near mountains and built their houses with stones; the high ones are more than 100 feet high and are called 'Qiong Long'." (Jian et al. 1958:564). The Ran Mang (冉駝), one of the minority nationalities of the southwest in ancient times, lived in Wenshan (文山) Prefecture, in what is now the eastern counties of the Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Historians believe that the present day Qiang people are descendants of the ancient Ran Mang tribe. The custom of the Ran Mang tribe to build Qiong Long was widespread in the western part of Sichuan Province. In the section on Fu Guo (附國) in the chapter on the western territories in the book *Sui Shu* (隋書) there is the following record of the customs and habits of Fu Guo: "Having a habit of revenge, people built their homes with stones so that they could protect themselves against any kind of attack. The highest was over 100 feet high with a base 50 to 60 feet deep. Each floor was about 10 feet high, separated with wood. The lower part had an area of three to four square meters and the upper part two to three square meters. It looked like a pagoda. There was a small door in the lower part. People could go up to the top from inside. The door was closed at night out of fear of thieves" (Jian et al. 1958:2119). There is a similar record of the dwellings of Fu Guo in *Xin Tang Shu* (新唐書): "There were no fences around the villages. People lived in the river valleys and built their homes of piled stones, which were over 100 feet high. The door was between the upper part and the base. People could go up to the top from inside" ("Lie Zhuan" Di 147 Xia (列傳第147下), p. 6328). Historian Ding Qian (丁謙), of the Qing Dynasty, said: "The territory of Fu Guo was outside the border of Dajianlu (打箭爐) in Sichuan Province, in the area of tribes which belonged to Duke Ming Zheng (明正宣慰使). The people there built their homes with stones. From their appearance we believe they were the Qiong Long mentioned in the section on the Ran Mang tribe in *Hou Han Shu* and were the Diao She (碉舍) mentioned in the Piao Guo (徼國) section of *Xin Tang Shu*, and what are now commonly called 'Diao Fang' (碉房). The tribes from various areas of western Sichuan to Tibet all lived in this same style of building. 'Chao' (磽), [the word used in the earlier writings for the homes of the Ran Mang], developed out of the word 'Diao' (碉), and '碉' is the original form of '磽'" (Jian et al. 1958:2120).

From the quotations above, we can see clearly that what are called "Diao Lou" today and "Chao" in *Sui Shu Xi Yu* are the "Qiong