THE SECRET TOWERS OF THE HIMALAYAS
by Frederique Darragon

Review by Pierre de Montaulieu

THE RUGGED HINTERLANDS
of Western Sichuan province, between central China and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, an area known as the Tribal Corridor, were at one time dotted with thousands of lofty stone towers cunningly designed, skilfully constructed, remarkable in form and scale, and mysterious in origin.

A few hundred of them still stand scattered amongst an indigenous populace largely ignorant of their history, indifferent to their presence and often detrimental to their well-being. Until recently that is.

The towers have acquired a champion in the adventurous person of Frederique Darragon, who became a dedicated amateur archaeologist as she delved into the mystery surrounding the origins of these remarkable structures. Who had built them, and why, and when, were the questions she set out to answer. In the process, she uncovered answers to another question, how were they built? These answers are to be found in her book, The Secret Towers of the Himalayas.

From her home bases in Sichuan (an apartment in Chengdu, the capital, and a house adjoining a tower in one of the many valleys), she has conducted what amounts to a dozen minority research projects. The current inhabitants of this area with one of the round towers reinforced with vertical ridges characteristic of this area.

Due to the diverse nature of their origins and the fragmented terrain in which they live, the languages spoken by the contemporary rural peoples are diabolically varied, one dialect from valley to valley. One thing they have in common is the lack of a written form, therefore, there is no written history.

There are towers of various kinds and qualities throughout the Tribal Corridor, but only four regions where the star towers are to be found. The current inhabitants of these regions are considered to belong mostly to the Tibetans or Qiang Minorities, but Darragon is convinced that their ancestors, who built the towers, were, in fact, subjects of fairly independent kingdoms, the Qiang of the Min Mountains, the Jiarong, the Minyang and the people of Nyang-Po.

WHEN
Conscientiously, Darragon collected samples from structural wooden elements for laboratory carbon-dating. The oldest towers are those found at 900 years old; the oldest could have been built as long as 1200 years ago. It is an interesting coincidence that the era of tower building here, 900-1400, corresponded roughly to the great era of cathedral (and tower) building in Europe.

WHY
As the Smithsonian article relates, many theories have been put forward. Some say the towers were defensive in nature, that the era of tower building here, 900-1400, corresponded roughly to the great era of cathedral (and tower) building in Europe.

opposite: Twin epitomes of the star tower concept, the Remede towers, built around 1200 AD. Eleven meters (36 feet) wide at base, thirty meters (almost 100 feet) tall. Eight outward and eight inward pointing corners, all sixteen corners of both towers battered back at precisely the same angle. Well-fitted stone masonry. Marvelous.