

# 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, skillfully 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 the first census-taking of the towers, counting them, mapping them, measuring them, drawing them, photographing them, categorizing them, collecting samples of wooden elements for carbon-dating, questioning the people living in proximity to the towers and researching the history of the regions in which they are to be found.

## WHO

As Darragon recounts, the towers are found in what is known as the "Tribal Corridor" between Central Tibet and China. This area has been inhabited time out of mind by a distinctly varied assortment of tribes, often categorized in Chinese ancient texts as the Qiang Ren (ren meaning people). In the recorded history of



Ready to go. Near Long Ping village, in the Min Mountains of the Maoxian region, the HeiHu tribal area with one of the round towers reinforced with vertical ridges characteristic of this area.

China, there are few clues about these regions before the 4th century AD.

During China's Sui Dynasty (581-618) and Tang Dynasty (618-907), a time when Tibet had become a military power, many independent-minded barbarian tribes created regional kingdoms in the rugged hinterlands between the two realms. The Tribal Corridor today is comprised of twenty or so regions that are home to more than a dozen minorities (as well as a number of Han Chinese that entered during the Qing Dynasty [1644-1912] and since.)

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 dissimilar, varying greatly from valley to valley. One thing these mutually unintelligible languages and/or dialects do 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 mainly to the Tibetan 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.

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 stonemasonry. Marvelous.

## WHEN

Conscientiously, Darragon collected samples from structural wooden elements for laboratory carbon-dating. The oldest towers are those found at the highest altitude, in Kongpo in the southeast of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. One wood sample from that region was dated from between 780 to 1040 AD; another from 900 to 1140 (of course, the wood samples might be older than the tower itself, so, bearing this in mind, she was careful to sample smaller pieces of wood which was less likely to have been reused.)

Of 58 towers dated, the youngest were found to be around 500 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 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, as integral features of fortified hamlets. The entryways of some towers were several meters above ground level (like the towers built by the Irish monks to safeguard themselves against Viking raiders.) Sometimes the