

Anthropological Investigation of the Ancient Blockhouses in Jiarong Tibetan Village

—Taking Moluo Village and Qiongsan Village in Danba County as an Example

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Abstract—As the unique architectural style and historical and cultural relics, the fortifications of Jiarong Tibetan Village in the northwestern part of Sichuan have attracted much attention. Based on the micro scenarios of Moluo Village and Qiongsan Village in Danba County, this paper conducts an anthropological investigation on the origin, function and cultural implication of the Diaolou. It is believed that the Diaolou is the result of the interaction and blending of different ethnic groups or nationalities in specific historical space-time fields. After thousands of years of unfailing and mightily standing, Danba Tibetan Fortifications has a very precious cultural heritage value.

Keywords—Jiarong Tibetans; Diaolou; Function; Cultural Implications

I. THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF JIARONG TIBETAN DIAOLOU

A. Jiarong Tibetan and the Worship of Khyung

Jiarong is a unique Tibetan branch in the west of Minjiang River and the upper reaches of Dadu River in Northwest Sichuan Province, mainly distributed in Jinchuan, Xiaojin County, Barkham, Li County, Heishui County in Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Dunbar in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Baoxing County in Ya'an. As for the origin of Jiarong, Mr. Shi Shuo believes that there are widespread cultural legends and historical memories in Jiarong society that the ancestors of chieftain originated from "khyung-po" of Zhang-Zhung in Tibet [1]. It is said that there is a clan called "Seqiongza" in Tibet. "Khyung" is both a place name and a clan name, and Jiarong is derived from the differentiation of the clan of Khyung [2]. According to the records of the Bonismo and the ancient Tibetan literature, "khyung" (Qiong) was a kind of divine bird, which was the object of belief and worship of the Zhang Zhung tribe. It was the object of the belief and worship of the Zhang Zhung tribe. Then it was borrowed by Tibetan Buddhism and named "Dapeng Bird". The Chieftain in the Jiarong region wrote down the memory of the ancestors and the legend of "khyung-po" of Zhang Zhung

in Tibetan, which was confirmed by Chieftain Nimawangdeng¹ (Chinese name: Wang Shouchang) in Badi. The worship of "Khyung" in Jiarong area has continued up to now, and many place names with "qiong" pronunciation have been preserved, such as "Qiongsan Yicun" and "Qiongsan Guanzhai" in Badi. In the past, there were "Qiong" people in Sichuan, as well as "Qiongsui", "Linqiong", "Qionglai" and so on. The Chieftain of Jiarong usually reflected the legend of Qiong birds by using the murals of Qiong birds in the Chieftain Village and hanging the wooden carvings of Qiong birds at the entrance of the village, so as to maintain the historical memory of the ancestors.

B. "Qionglong" and Diaolou

"Qionglong" is the earliest title of tall stone masonry or tower building in Chinese literature and historical books. According to the Biography of the Southwestern Minority Groups in Nanman in the Book of the *Later Han Dynasty*, people all lived in the mountains, building rooms with stones, and the tallest one was more than ten zhangs, which was the Qionglong [3]. It also described the living conditions of the ancient Ranmang² tribes more than two thousand years ago. As far as the word "Qionglong" is concerned, Mr. Sun Hongkai believed that "Qionglong" originated from Qiang dialect and was a transliteration loanword of Qiang dialect. It has the meaning of "stone" in the ancient Qiang dialect, which can prove that "Qionglong" is the pillar of "a room with a lot of stones". "Qionglong" can be used as a bedroom function for living, which is different from "ancient blockhouse".

Li Xian, a native of the Tang Dynasty, noted that now the native people called it 'carving' (Diao). This showed that the "Qionglong" recorded in the Book of *Later Han Dynasty* has been clearly defined as the "Diao" in the Tang Dynasty, which was the "Diaolou" we see today. According to the retrieval, in Chinese literature the word "Diao" was first seen in the

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¹ Nima Wangdeng is the last generation of Chieftain in Badi, whose Chinese name is Wang Shouchang. In the investigation of Qiongsan Village, the author interviewed the 88-year-old Taoist Yongzhong and he introduced that the last Chieftain of Badi was Wang Shouchang, but the real one who should be the Chieftain was his elder brother. Because his elder brother did not like politics, regardless of the issues, he liked a girl in the pastoral area and has two children. The Chieftain of Jinchuan sent killers to assassinate the elder brother of Wang Shouchang. Later, his brother's wife married him, and Wang Shouchang became the last Chieftain.

² Ran Mang is a branch of the ancient Qiang people. Today's Qiang people are descendants of the ancient Qiang tribe.

“*Biography of Cui Zhongfang*” and “*Biography of Fuguo*” in the History of Northern Dynasty and *Book of Sui*, in which the “Qiantiao” was appeared as the name of a tribe. The name “Qiantiao” was related to the number of the local blockhouses in the northwest of Sichuan and Gannan. “Qionglong” is mainly residential, which is a kind of building connected with houses, not completely separated from the stone chamber building. The “Diao” recorded in History of Northern Dynasty is a special defensive building separated from the “Qionglong”, which is called the ancient blockhouse³ in modern times. Therefore, whether in terms of etymology or architectural form, “Qionglong” appeared before “carving” (Diao), which is also an important distinction between the two kinds of tall stone buildings.

II. BASIC INTRODUCTION OF FORTIFICATIONS IN DANBA JIARONG TIBETAN VILLAGE

A. Geographical Location and Historical Evolution of Danba

There is a unique geographic unit in the Sichuan Basin of the southeast foot of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the transition area of Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. Nu River, Lancang River, Jinsha River, Yalong River, Dadu River and Minjiang River run parallel and cut longitudinally from north to south, forming a series of North-South mountain systems between rivers and valleys, where peaks mountainous overlapping, mountains and forests towering high and valleys are deep. It presents the typical Alpine Canyon terrain of “two mountains with one river” and “two rivers with one mountain”, which is also the well-known “Hengduan Mountainous Region”. “Tibetan-Yi Corridor”⁴ generally refers to this area. The elevation of mountains in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor area decreases gradually from north to south. The northern mountains are relatively complete and about 5000 meters above sea level. Most watershed areas reserve vast plateau planes to form natural grassland pasture; the southern mountains fall to 4,000 meters or so, with steep mountains and valleys, deep riverbeds, vertical and horizontal tributaries. The mountains are divided and fragmented, with only a few remnants of the original plateau. In these alpine valleys, including Linzhi, Shannan and Hikaze regions of Tibet, the western Sichuan plateau, from the west of the upper valley of the Minjiang River to the upper reaches of the Dadu River and the Yalong River, distributes giant stone-built or rammed buildings--Diaolou, which soar into the clouds and stand alone, scattered in the villages, passes, mountains, and the banks of the valley. Among them, Danba County, located in the upper reaches of the Dadu River, is known as “the country of thousands of blocks” because of its large number and rich variety of blockhouses.

Danba County is located in the Qionglai Mountain which is at the southeastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the west of Chengdu Plain. It is located in the east of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and is the eastern gate of Ganzi Prefecture. It borders Xiaojin County in Aba Prefecture

in the east, Kangding County in the south, Daofu County in the West and Jinchuan County in Aba Prefecture in the north. Since ancient times, it has been the key passage to Aba in the north, Lhasa in the west, Yunnan and Guizhou in the south and Chengdu in the east. It also has been an important way for many nationalities or ethnic groups to interact and communicate with each other.

By the end of 2011, Danba County has an area of 5,649 square kilometers, covering 14 townships, 1 town and 2 streets. Due to the influence of history, geographical environment and other factors, this area has formed a unique geographical and cultural unit, showing obvious cultural compound characteristics. Han, Qiang, Hui and Tibetan lived together here, forming the diverse ethnic groups and cultures in this region. Tibetan as the main nationality in the county can be divided into four indigenous groups according to their language families: Jiarong, Kangba, Amdo and Erxi language. The Danba Tibetan language presents a complex feature of “one ditch with one language”.

B. Location of Danba Tibetan Village and Distribution of Diaolou

Danba Tibetan Village is distributed on both sides of the valley and on the gentle slope of the mountainside. From the 7th to the 9th centuries, the Tubo Dynasty, which rose on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, expanded powerfully to the Tibetan-Yi Corridor area, taking Nanzhao as its subordinate department, and gradually pushed forward its influence to the upper reaches of the Minjiang River and the middle and upper reaches of the Dadu River. In 783 AD, the Qingshui League of Tang and Tibet stipulated that the line should be drawn along Minjiang River and Dadu River, the east of the line belongs to the Tang Dynasty and the west of it belongs to the Tubo. A large number of Tubo army entered the Tibetan-Yi Corridor area and lived together with the local conquered tribes for a long time, which facilitated the assimilation and integration of each other in the long years. Nomadic people's traditional lifestyle has been constantly adapted to the local environment, so they become the main residents of the present Danba. The areas with higher elevations are dominated by nomadic husbandry, and the lower areas are dominated by farming. Even the lower Suopo and Geshza have retained the traces of nomadic life, such as horse racing, jumping pots, offering sacrifices to mountain gods and so on. With the development of modern transportation and the implementation of the national policy of returning farmland to forests, high-altitude areas are closed to afforestation and there is no suitable pasture for grazing, so the villages at high altitude move down gradually and live on both sides of the valley.

Suopo Township of the Danba County is located about 7 kilometers south of Zhanggu Town, which belonged to “Twenty-four Villages” under the jurisdiction of Chieftain Mingzheng of Kangding in history and was located in the “Chong Department” of Jiarong Tibet. Starting from the county, along the S 211 Provincial Road on the West Bank of the Dadu Valley, and passing a village path, we can reach the Moluo Village, where the government of Suopo Township is located. In the upper reaches of the Dadu River, road traffic means access to the outside world, bearing the spatial imagination of

³The secretary of Suopo Township of Danba Village said that there are two main types of Diaolou. One is a house, also called a tower; the other is ancient blockhouse, which can not live and have defensive functions.

⁴The “Tibetan-Yi Corridor” is a history—ethnic regions concept that was proposed by Mr. Fei Xiaotong around 1980. It mainly refers to the alpine valleys region that was formed by a series of north-south mountains and rivers at the borders of Sichuan, Yunnan and Tibet.

Chinese cities and villages. Moluo Village is surrounded by mountains on three sides and is close to the Dadu River on one side. Its terrain tilted from northeast to south, and along the hillside, Moluo Village, Zuobi Village, Basuo Village and Nayi Village are distributed from bottom to top. "Moluo" means "circular belt" in Tibetan. Some scholars believe that "Moluo" derives its name from the uninhabited annular alluvial delta along the Dadu River. It belongs to the same big stockade village as Zuobi and Basuo [4]. The settlement of Moluo village is divided into two parts by Duanjiagou. The residential houses are mostly concentrated in the northern area, distributed along three ribbons and extended along two contour lines in a ring, which seems to be built around three high blockhouses. The towering blockhouses are located in the center of the circle, which makes it easy to control the whole village spatially.

Badi Chieftain Guanzhai belongs to Badi Township of Danba County, about 20 kilometers away from Danba County. On the western slope of Dajinchuan, a gully winds from west to east on the top of the mountain, and forms a steep slope with the gully that is 500 meters away from Dajinchuan, which made the mountain road is dangerous. Guanzhai is located on a flat land between mountains, covering more than 2,000 square meters. The Diaolou is as high as 9 floors, and it looks magnificent under the surroundings of ordinary houses. A road goes straight from the foot of the mountain to Guanzhai, gathering the center of the entire settlements and control force of the whole Tibetan village. Looking from a distance, the "mountain" shaped Diaolou and the white Tibetan Village merge into one and contrast to each other. There are a pair of wooden carvings on the head of the gate of Guanzhai Village. The village head tells us that the animals on the wooden carvings are similar to the gods and beasts in the water, which is carved vividly to ward off evil spirits. Opening the door and coming in, The courtyard was overgrown with weeds, half of the courtyard walls collapsed, and most of the original buildings were incomplete. The entire Guanzhai is a mixed structure of stone and wood, including the family temple, the Diaolou and the living area. The main building is a conjoined building. It is said that each floor of the Diaolou is equipped with shooting holes for defense. In the east, there are four or five floors of stone and wood houses, the bottom floor is the cell, and the upper floor is the living area and activity area, and the wooden beams of the walls have been seriously corroded and damaged. In the western areas of Sichuan, the Chieftains often build luxurious and magnificent official residences to show their power and status. The Chieftains' Guanzhai can reflect the highest building level in a region. Some scholars have investigated that the site selection of the Chieftain Guanzhai of Badi is an effective application of geomancy. The village and Guanzhai are integrated as if they were in the middle of the "palace chair", surrounded by mountains, which are easy to defend and difficult to attack.

III. THE CULTURAL IMPLICATION OF THE FORTIFICATIONS IN JIARONG TIBETAN VILLAGE

A. The Functions of the Diaolou

According to the records of ancient books, the function of "Diao" is clearly defined in *"Biography of Fuguo in the*

History of Northern Dynasties" that they were good at revenging according to their customs, so they built nests with stones to avoid hidden danger... They opened up a small gate at the lower stages, passed from the inside and closed at night to prevent thieves. This is the most detailed record of "Diao" on the western Sichuan plateau from the History of *Later Han Dynasty* to the Ming and Qing Dynasties. It is the first time that the function of "Diao" has been explained in detail, "to avoid the hidden danger" and "to prevent its thieves". After more than a decade of field trips to the Danba region, the French researcher Frederique Darragon pointed out in his book the *Mysterious Ancient Block of Himalayas* that from the 2nd to 16th centuries, the ancient tribes living in the four regions of Qiang, Jiarong, Muya and Gongbu/Niangbu have constantly constructed and used these Diaolou for the purpose of defense, identity symbols, trade, and observation marks for more than a thousand years. In recent years, Mr. Shi Shuo of Sichuan University has made a new breakthrough in the study of Diaolou on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau [5]. According to the ethnographic materials about the distribute areas of the Diaolou in the Tibetan-Yi Corridor, he points out that the initial emergence of the Diaolou may be a kind of sacrificial building that used to deal with the relationship between man and God. The Diaolou was obviously divine and a symbol of power. After that, it is transformed into a defensive building to deal with interpersonal conflicts.

B. The Symbolic Significance of Diaolou

Ancient blockhouses have various shapes, including triangular, quadrangular, pentagonal, hexagonal, octagonal, twelve-corner and ten-triangular, among which the four corners are the most common and widely distributed, followed by hexagonal blockhouses and octagonal blockhouses, while triangular, pentagonal, twelve-corner and ten-triangular are relatively rare. The scholars studied that Ms. Freita from France has visited Danba for four times to investigate the ancient blockhouses, two of which specifically investigated the ten triangle blockhouses, and brought the wall reinforced wood in the squatter building to the United States for testing. The test building was built about 580 to 630 years ago, which was at least in the late of Yuan Dynasty and the early Ming Dynasty [6]. Zewang Danzeng, a retired cadre and cultural worker of Moluo Village in Suopo Township, said that among the present ruins the ancient ones can date back to over 1,200 years ago, and the latter ones that can date back to 1,000 years ago are relatively intact. It is found that the only ten-triangle blockhouse in Jiarong area has been reserved in Moluo Village of Suopo Township, Danba County. According to local legend, the ten-triangle blockhouse was built by Lingling Jiabu, the local leader, who is known as "King of the Blocks". Lingling Jiabu was powerful and rich at that time, so he wanted to build a ten-triangle blockhouse to show his power and status. But the craftsmen had never built a ten-triangle blockhouse, and they don't know where to start with the design and how to distribute the thirteen corners. Finally, a young girl who had spun wool thread in Suopo Village inserted a pendant on the ground, and drew thirteen negative and positive corners around the pendant with wool thread, which helped the craftsmen solve the problem and set up a ten-triangle block [7]. The ten-triangle blockhouse is the king and the best of all blockhouses. Why he

want to build the ten-triangle blockhouse? Some people say that the number 13 has sacred religious connotations and is an auspicious figure among the Tibetan folk beliefs in Jiarong. For example, the Tasha of Tibetan Buddhist pagoda has 13-level rings, representing the thirteen heavenly poles. It is also said that the corner of the ancient blockhouses are symbols of power and wealth, and the more the number of corners, the higher the status, the richer the natural. Others say that Danba is located in the western Sichuan plateau, where the wind is strong. The higher the tower is, the more the corners there are, which can also disperse the wind and prolong the life of the old blockhouses.

The Jiarong Tibetan Blockhouses in the Danba area are built on the basis of stone, loess, wall reinforcement and stone masonry techniques and took the combination of traditional Tibetan ethnic groups and Diaolou as the settlement characteristics of the fortified villages, forming a unique architectural style of Jiarong Tibetan buildings, which stands majestically and endures the test of time, strong winds and earthquakes. Due to the blocked environment and the inconvenient traffic in the area where Jiarong Tibetan Blockhouses are concentrated, the blockhouses can be preserved relatively intact; the Jiarong compatriots lived there and have accumulated a strong Jiarong culture. The ancient

blockhouse in Danba is no longer a simple and isolated building. It is a history endowed with a brand new soul and life by every Jiarong person.

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