

# History and Cultural Heritage of an Ancient Village Cuandixia

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**Abstract:** The ancient village Cuandixia bears abundant Chinese culture, especially that of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The thesis deals with its historical culture from three aspects: the formation and history of the village, the cultural relics of various historical periods, and the heritage of its historical culture at present day. The change of the village proves that culture is a mobile process changing with different historical backgrounds. Faced with the surge of globalization, Cuandixia villagers and all the citizens of Beijing share the duty to protect and inherit local culture.

## 1. Introduction

Known as the “Potala Palace” of west Beijing, Cuandixia village is located at the Northwest of Zhaitang township, Mentougou District. The village keeps well some ancient architectures and cultures like the courtyard houses of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with ancient roads, walls, wells and miscellaneous things to reveal the original appearance of an old village. Ancient villages are important sites to remember the tradition and inherit the historical cultures, and “a cultural memory is a memory shared by a nation or a country formed through a long historical development, recorded by and inherited through a certain culture, and it is the unique cultural logo of a certain nation”[1]. Understanding the historical culture of Cuandixia village helps to enrich the interpretation of Chinese culture, strengthening our national confidence and inheriting its unique cultures.

## 2. History of Cuandixia Village

### 2.1 A Village Formed Around the Great Wall

According to the relevant historical studies, the development of Cuandixia village is related to the construction of the inner Great Wall defense system and the dispatch of troops to garrison the frontier [2]. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) established a defense system around Beijing, represented by the Great Wall, in order to prevent the southward invasion of Mongolian and other minority regimes. The Zhaitang area where Cuandixia village is located is an important part of westward defense. At that time, the border between the Ming territory and Mongolia was in Datong, Shanxi Province. If Mongolian soldiers invaded Beijing through Shanxi and Hebei, it would be a shortcut to go by Zhaitang to enter Beijing, because this is the upstream area of Yongding River flowing into Beijing, and the terrain is high. No matter from water or land, you can directly take Lugou Bridge (Marco Polo Bridge) and surround Beijing from the whole west side. The military defense system of the Great Wall of the Ming Dynasty focused on the construction at dangerous passes, including walls, military stations, etc., and the government sent troops to guard them all the year round. There is an ancient city-fortress near Cuandixia village. It forms a complete defense line of the Great Wall in western Beijing with the Riverside City and Yellow Grass Mountain Ridge (Huangcaoliang) in the north. Today, there are the remains of the beacon tower and city wall of the Ming Dynasty and the site of the green-camp, a military organization in the Qing Dynasty. The famous part of the Great Wall on the Ridge of Huangcaoliang Mountain, known as “seven cities”, reminding us that there used to be seven towers here, and they were connected by the Great Wall.

Cuandixia village is located in the military corridor connecting the capital and the border of the

empire. The village was first settled in Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty, so it has a history of more than 500 years. Cuandixia is so named because it is located at the bottom of “Cuanlikou”, suggestive of a military opening (kou stands for mouth). According to *The Records of Four Towns and Three Passes* compiled by Liu Xiaozu in the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, in 1 km to the north of today’s Cuandixia village, there is a “Cuanlikou” which is one of the passes of the Great Wall at the Riverside City. It was built in the year 1515 A. D. in the reign of Zhengde Emperor of the Ming Dynasty. “Cuanlikou” is located at a very important position because it “looks at the capital in the East, and passes through the desert in the west” [an inscription of the year 1591 found at the Riverside City]. Since ancient times, it has been an important place for military strategists. Therefore, in the 14th year of Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (1519), the chiliarch (leader of a thousand soldiers) named Li Gong led the people to build a post road nearby leading to Huangcao Ridge. After the completion of the main city of “cuanlikou”, the soldiers set up castle-style courtyards and settled down in today’s village site, serving as the army in wartime and the farmer in peacetime. After that, their family members and descendants came here to live and the place gradually became a village. Today, we can see the remaining high-wall barriers here, which is the witness of the fact that the village used to be a military castle.

## **2.2 Cuandixia Village on the Ancient Post Road**

In order to transport military horses and deliver messages, the Ming government built a post road from Beijing to the northwest and the northern desert in 1519, passing through the village from its south. Along this post road, you can go 6 km southeast to Zhaitang Riverbasin, a valley spanning 40 kilometers from west to east and the only way from the surrounding mountain areas to the capital city; along the post road going north 4 km you will come to Baiyu village, still north across a military pass at Huangcao Ridge, you will come to Mahuang Valley at Huailai County, where you can go through the big Roads to Zhangjiakou and Kulun (today Ulaanbaator) to reach the grassland of Inner Mongolia. Among them, the distance from Cuandixia to Mahuang Valley is about 30 km in the mountain. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, these two directions of the ancient post road were not only an important military channel, but also the only way for business and travel. Even in the Ming Dynasty, the Han and the Mongols had a long time of peaceful coexistence. Both sides opened markets in Datong and Zhangjiakou, exchanging tea for horses, and exchanged needed goods with each other. This post road also became the main transportation route for merchants. Judging from the few remains of the Ming Dynasty in Cuandixia village, we can see post stations for business travelers to feed horses and rest at that time. In the Qing Dynasty, the Great Wall lost its military defense function. During the reign of Emperor Kangxi, Cuandixia village became the imperial post station. According to the postal system that existed since ancient times, there were official postmen resting here, and then went to Inner and Outer Mongolia to mail. Villagers use the advantages of ancient roads to open post stations and engage in business travel trade. The village has become a gathering place for business travelers and horse gangs. In order to find the ancient post station of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, we walked along the ancient post road and find the “board gate” style residential buildings on one side of the road (there are wooden signs on the wall), that is, the front is the commercial shop, and the back is the “mule and horse shop”- inns serving camel caravan salesmen, and such hotels can be seen as the remains of the ancient post station. In the early years of the Republic of China, there were shops named Ruiqingtang, Ruifutang and several shops to accommodate the caravans in the village.

In short, instead of a military fortress in the Ming Dynasty, Cuandixia village in the Qing Dynasty became a transportation center from Beijing to northern Hebei and then to Shanxi, Shaanxi and Mongolia. It was prosperous for a time as a place for merchants to rest, and became a famous merchant village.

### 3. The Culture of Cuandixia Village

#### 3.1 Architectural Remains of the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Cuandixia village is known for its local-style houses since ancient times. Although the interior of the houses has been transformed and the house has modern comfort, the overall structure has retained the characteristics of ancient buildings as far as possible, especially on the outside. Most of the buildings in the village were built in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with a history of about 500 years. There remain 76 sets of quadrangle dwellings (with 656 rooms) of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. They are basically composed of principal rooms, rooms opposite to them, and left and right wing rooms, and some of them have side rooms and the rooms behind the principal rooms. Quadrangle dwellings are mainly divided into mountain-style courtyard, double-shop-style courtyard and shop-and-store style courtyard. The subsidiary buildings of the courtyard mainly include the screen wall inside and outside the door, the gatehouse, the hitching post and mounting stone for horses, etc. There are brick carvings, stone carvings, wood carvings, etc., with the pictures of magpie, bat, peony, lotus, etc. The decorations are mainly concentrated in the ridge, cornice, doors and windows, walls and screen walls of the building, etc. [3]. Because of the different family status and economic conditions, the contents and delicacy of decoration are different.

The overall structure of Cuandixia village is well-designed and reasonable. Its architectural geomancy highlights the characteristics of Chinese traditional culture, that is, with cyan dragon on the left, white tiger on the right, rosefinch in the front, and tortoise at the back [4]. Cyan dragon, white tiger, rosefinch and tortoise are called “four images” or “four spirits”. The expression “four images” comes from *The Book of Changes*, which means that Cuandixia village is protected by these “four images” or “four holy animals”, and these four sacred animals are considered to have boundless power.

On the top of the village, there is a mill built in the Qing Dynasty, with three main rooms and walls decorated with carved murals. There is a grinding plate in it, the diameter of which is more than three meters, which can be pulled by horses or people. There is also a big roller and several small millstones outside the door, which can be used to process the grains. Standing in front of the only ancient mill in the Zhaitang area, we are grateful for the hard workings of our ancestors, who ground crops generation after generation and created a long-standing agricultural civilization in China.

The Guandi temple to worship an ancient general in the village, formerly known as the Dragon King Fu Mo (subdue devils) Temple, faces south. There is an old mulberry tree in front of the gate. There are three rooms in the main hall and one room deep in length. The small yard is 20 meters long and 15 meters wide. In 1998, it was announced as one of the important cultural relics in Mentougou District. There are some inscriptions on the window frame and column: “in the winter of the second year of Yongzheng’s reign (1724), there was the solemn holy image”, “Han Jingjin came back to the West Zhaitang village on May 13, the 11th year of Qianlong’s reign (1746),” “it was set up in 1827 in the seventh year of Daoguang’s reign in the Qing Dynasty, and “the village regulations were implemented in the sixth year of Tongzhi’s reign (1867)”. All these show that the temples of the Qing Dynasty are full of incense and ceremony.

#### 3.2 Surname Culture in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Almost all the people in Cuandixia village (heads of household and children) have the same family name, Han. As for the origin of the Han family in the village, it is generally believed that it comes from the descendants of Han Shining, a Marquis of hundred households stationed along the river mouth in the Ming Dynasty. Han Shining’s tomb in the north of Longmenkou village, Zhaitang town, Mentougou District, is called “old tomb” by the descendants of the Han family in the village. According to the inscription of the tomb, Han Shining lived in Sancha Village, Qingbaikoushe, Wanping (today’s Yanhekou Village), and died in 1494 during the reign of Hongzhi in the Ming Dynasty.

According to the Han’s genealogy in the village, there are different generations with middle names varying in the order of Chinese letters pronounced as “Fu Jing Zi Shou Yu, You Ming (Feng)

Wan Hong Si, Yi Ju Xiao Huai Meng, Yong Mao Guang Lian Wen”. So far it has developed to the 17th generation, which is the generation with the middle name as Mao. According to the convention with 25 years as one generation, the first generation of the Han family came to Cuandixia village more than 400 years ago during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty. The brick inscriptions on the Han family’s old grave in the village are as follows: “After the death of the talented scholar Mr. Fengcai in the Qing Dynasty, a tablet was erected for him in early February of the 23rd year of Qianlong’s reign.” Here “Feng” is the seventh generation of the Han family, and the time was 1758 A.D. Six generations before that year, it was in the Wanli period, which was the time when 15 military platforms were built in the Ming Dynasty to strengthen the defense in the area of Cuanlikou. This is not merely a coincidence.

The Dragon King Fu-mo (subdue devils) Temple mentioned above was built by the Han family. The inscription in the temple says, “In 1665 during the reign of the Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty, good people in the village built the temple of Dragon God to subdue demons, so as to fulfill the spontaneous good wishes and people who give money.” The following are the names of donators and the amount of donation in the village, and all the donators belong to the Yu-midnamed generation or You-midnamed generation of the Han family. Finally, there is the signature “Han Yuqin as the leading repairman” and the words “Finished in December of the fifth year of Kangxi’s reign”. It is a proof that Han was the main family name in the village in 1715.

In history, there were many famous people in the Han family, which had a great influence on the village culture. During the reign of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty, a man named Han Shoude came to Beijing to attend the imperial examination. Because he looked like Emperor Kangxi, he was selected to become a monk and stand in for Emperor Kangxi at Longfeng temple in the suburb of Beijing. From then on, the Han family was listed as the royal relatives, with constant rewards, and Han Shoude became a rich man in the west of Beijing. Han Shoude built the Guangliang courtyard, the most magnificent quadrangle in Cuandixia village today.

#### **4. Cultural Inheritance of the Cuandixia Village**

After the founding of new China, with the opening of Fengsha railway and National Highway 109, the ancient post road was abandoned, and the position of the village as a post station has weakened, and the village was gradually dominated by agricultural activities such as farming and beekeeping. However, the ancient culture of Cuandixia village still attracts the attention of many famous people. Luo Zhewen, an architecture expert, pointed out that this ancient village is a pearl of Chinese classical architectural treasures, and it is rich in cultural connotation of northern architectures [4].

Since the reform and opening up, through the joint efforts of government and villagers, the connotation of traditional culture has been gradually presented and highlighted. With the booming of folk tourism, it has become a new fashion for tourists to stay at a farmhouse like Cuandixia to taste a sense of agricultural life. At the same time, Cuandixia village became a base for traditional education and movie-making, with dozens of film and television plays, music TV and advertising films using this place as the setting, such as the movie “The Wardlords”, “Thirteen Chivalrous Ladies”, “Cixi’s Journey to the West”, etc. In 1998, Beijing Institute of Architecture and Engineering made a plan for develop tourism in the village. All these activities help to expand the influence of this ancient village and popularize its history and culture.

The changes of the times promote the transformation of Cuandixia village, that is, from a military location to a village prosperous in commerce, and then to a modern tourist area. The unique history and culture of the village mark the characteristics of this place, which are very important for the tourism development. The villagers there all have a good awareness of the protection of ancient buildings, which has a great relationship with the development of homestay tourism. Because the ancient architecture in the village is the magnetic sign of tourism, the government requires the villagers not to change the outside of the house at will when they decorate their houses.

On the whole, traditional culture is well preserved in the village, but there are some problems in cultural protection and development of the village. Through the development of homestay tourism,

the village has gained great benefits. The contradiction in the village is that tourists like to see “old” houses, but they are willing to live in “good” houses. Therefore, driven by the interests, there appeared some illegal man-made buildings, which is a kind of destruction or dilution of the ancient village style. The main issue for the village is how to make a balance between tourism development and protection of its traditional features.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the past five hundred years, due to the historical change and social development, Cuandixia village has turned from a military fortress to a post station and then to a transportation center. During the Anti-Japanese War, it was a battlefield between the two sides. After the liberation in 1949, it declined into a closed mountain fastness. In recent years, it has become a famous tourist attraction. The cultural and historical traces of almost each era could be seen in the village. The memory and preservation of local culture have special significance. However, with the development of urbanization, industrialization and globalization, this ancient village is facing the crisis of the loss of traditional culture. Therefore we should study its local features and make full use of the rich cultural resources.

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