

# The Danfeng Gate of the Daming Palace of Tang Capital City of Chang'an

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*Key words: Xi'an Tang capital city of Chang'an Daming Palace Danfeng Gate*

The Danfeng 丹凤 (Cinnabar Phoenix) Gate was the central southern gate of the Daming 大明 Palace of the Tang capital city of Chang'an 长安; The remains of the gate are now an earthen ridge running west to east. The remains measure 49.5m long from east to west, 29m from north to south. The height of the remains is 2m. The site is located at the southern end of the Gexin 革新 Alley between the Ermalu 二马路 and the Ziqiang 自强 streets of the Xincheng 新城 District in Xi'an. Modern buildings are found on top of the remains of the gate.

From September 20th of 2005 to January 15th of 2006, as part of the conservation plan for the Imperial Avenue to the Hanyuan 含元 Hall of the palace, the Xi'an Tang City Archaeological Team excavated the site entirely. The team set up 20 excavation grids of different sizes, and excavated an area of 7525 sq m. The team obtained some important archaeological data (Figure 1).

## The Deposit Strata

The three gateways on the west side of the Danfeng Gate are well preserved. The strata and deposits are quite obvious. Here we use the layers at the second entranceway to explain the site strata.

Stratum 1: surface layer; Stratum 2: layer with modern disturbances; Stratum 3: post-Tang layer. A few broken Tang bricks and tiles and cultural remains of post-Tang

era were found. The deposits are piled on the two sides of the entranceway, possibly related to the removal of building bricks and rocks from the entranceway in post-Tang times. Stratum 4: layer after the gate was abandoned including a large amount of Tang broken bricks, tiles, chunks of burned clod, and pottery and porcelain shards. This layer was deposited after the collapse of the gate. Stratum 5: layer of ashes deposited prior to the collapse of the gate.

Under Stratum 5 was the ramped foundation of the gate from the early Tang period. We dug two test trenches in the middle of the gate foundation (TG 1 and TG2), the trenches showed that the foundation is about 2.2m deep.

Below the ramped foundation is primary earth.

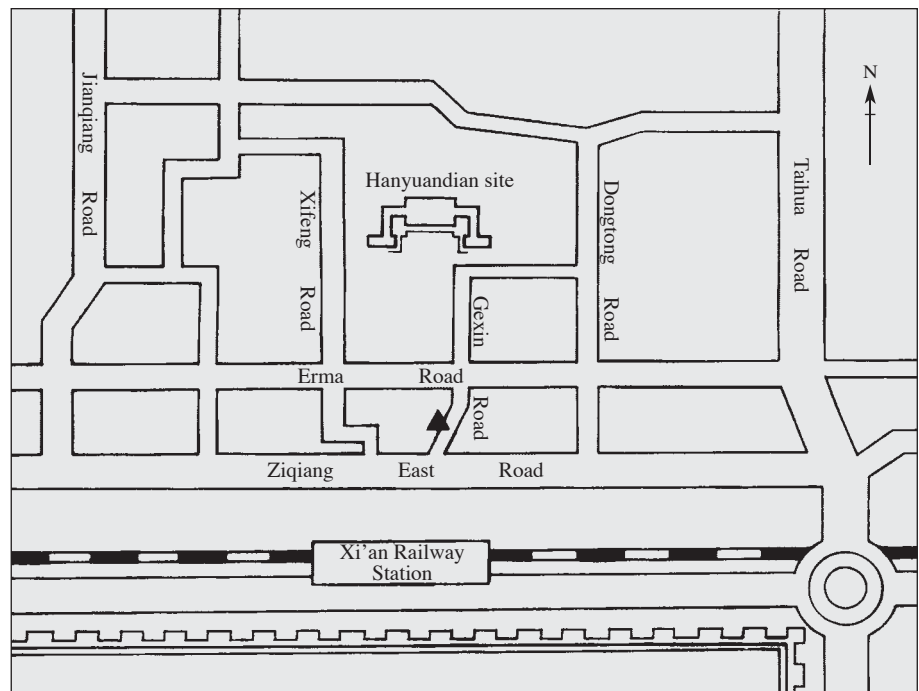


Figure 1. Schematic map of the location of Danfeng Gate site

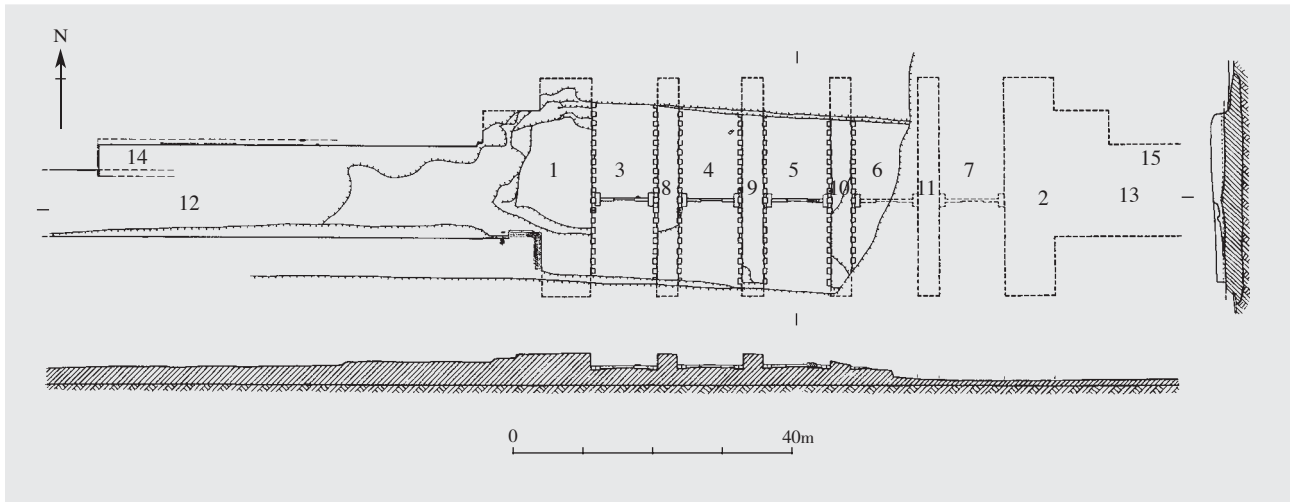


Figure 2. Plan and cross section of Danfeng Gate site

1. western pier platform 2. eastern pier platform 3-7. gate entranceways 8-11. partition walls 12, 13. walls of palace city 14, 15. horse ramps

## The Site

The foundation of the Danfeng Gate was made of ramped earth. The gate site was constructed with two pier platforms (*duntai* 墩台) on the east and west side of the opening, five entranceways, four partition walls. It connects to the city walls and ramps (Figures 2–4). The foundation measures 74.5m long east-west, and 33m deep north-south. The remaining height of the gate is 2m. The gate is 1.2 degrees off due north and it aligned with the central axis of the Hanyuan Hall.

### 1. Pier platform

The western platform is better preserved; at the eastern platform, only the foundations remain. The two pier platforms have exactly the same form.

The ground plan of the western platform is a “T” shape. The remaining length is 24.1m from north to south and 14.7m from east to west. The north and south sides of the pier measure 6.9m each. The northern and southern sections of the approach to the palace divide into the western horse-ramp on the north, and a road on the south. All that remains at the southwest corner of the western platform is a few lining bricks and brick traces. The bricks are 0.8m wide (Figure 5).

West of the southwest corner is the remains of the Tang surface. The area is 40m long and 7m wide. The eastern part of the surface is slightly higher than the western part.

### 2. Gate entranceways

Among the five entranceways, the three on the west are better preserved. The entranceway first from the

east is destroyed, with only marks of ramped earth remaining. The one next to it has only partial remains on its western side. The remaining foundations indicate that the five entranceways had same form and size. Their width is 8.5m and length is 33m.

The surface of the entranceways is red-brown in color from burning after construction. Thick stamping marks remain. No wheel tracks, bricks, or stone pavements were found. This is unusual.

Each entranceway had a threshold running from east to west. The thresholds are found 2m south of the center, about 0.5m above each entranceway’s surface. The thresholds have a wooden doorsill, upright slabs, and foundation stones. In between the upright slabs is the wooden doorsill. All of them are burned, leaving only charcoal in the groove where the doorsill was. The upright slabs are better preserved in the central entranceway. They are made of polished plain basal. Their remaining length is 138cm, their height above the surface is 54cm, and the buried part is 22cm deep. It is 40cm thick. The foundation stones used to lay on the east and west sides of the upright slabs, but all of them are now gone, leaving only indentations. The best preserved indentation is in the east entranceway, it measures 1.5m long, 0.4m wide, and 0.4m deep. The indentation has a smooth surface; on the bottom are layers of sand and broken pieces of the foundation slabs (Figure 6).

On each side of the each entranceway next to the ramped gate walls is a line of pole holes. The number of extant holes ranges from 16 to 19 in each entranceway. Distances between the holes are rather even, and slightly



Figure 3. Full view of Danfeng Gate site



Figure 4. Side view of Danfeng Gate site (photo taken from northeast to southwest)



Figure 5. Veneer bricks of the southwestern western pier platform (photo taken from west to east)



Figure 6. Doorsill trace of the middle entranceway (photo taken from west to east)

shorter than the length of the rectangular shaped holes. Three layers of sand, dirt, and broken pieces of slab are found in the bottom.

Only four holes have stone bases in the bottom (Figure 7:1–4). They are similar in size and shape. Among them, the first (No. 1) stone base is found on the east side of the entranceway, north of the doorsill. It is 74cm long and 61.5cm wide, with a rectangular-shaped hole in the center. The side of the rock next to the ramped wall is rough and grooved, and the other side exposed to the entranceway has a smooth surface. The poles were thus half covered by the ramped wall and half exposed.

Between the poles the ramped partition walls are faced with whole and broken pieces of brick and dirt. On the surface of the entranceway walls were layers of white-wash plaster. In some places archaeologists found four layers of plaster, indicating there had been several restorations.

In addition, a rectangular shaped rock was found on the surface of second entranceway from the west. It is 60cm long, 25cm wide, and 25cm thick. It is possibly a door-stop.

### 3. Partition wall

Partition walls between the gate entranceway were made of stamped earth. There were a total of four walls, only three are left. The one on the east is no longer extant. The partition wall it-

self is 3m thick; after adding on pole wall on each side, the thickness comes to 3.8m. The partition walls are in general straight, but the southern and northern ends of each ramped wall are destroyed.

#### 4. Palace city wall

On the east and west side of the pier platforms are palace city walls of ramped earth, they are the southern palace walls of the Daming Palace. Based on historical sources and archaeological surveys, these walls also formed the eastern section of the north city wall of the Daxing 大兴 city of the Sui and Chang'an city of the Tang. In other words, when Daming Palace was constructed, it used the existing city wall for its southern walls and did not build a new one.

Only the ramped earth foundation is left on the east side of the gate, but the city wall on the west of the gate is better preserved. The remaining height is 0.3 to 0.5m. The southern side of the walls is slightly sloped; on the north side of the city walls is the western horse ramp.

A test trench was excavated from north to south on the western horse ramp (catalogue no: TG3). The test trench revealed the foundations of the city wall. The wall foundations are 10.3m wide and the depth is 2.5m.

#### 5. Horse ramp

The two remaining horse ramps are found on the east and west side of the Danfeng Gate, with their openings to the palace on the north. The elongate ramp is 54m long and 3.5m wide. Of the ramp on the east of the gate, only a partial trench foundation remains, the ramp on the opposite side is better preserved. On the north side of the ramp archaeologists found one lining brick still in its original place. A 10m long filling layer of broken bricks was also found. The indentations left by the lining bricks indicate that the bricks were 0.4m thick. The west end of the horse ramp still has two lining bricks.

### Artifacts

Most of the artifacts were found in the Tang layer inside the entranceways and on the sides of the openings. The majority of the artifacts are construction materials, along with some utensils.

1. *Construction materials* include bricks of rectangular and square shape, flat and semi-cylindrical tiles, end tiles, bird-tail finials (*chiwei* 鸱尾), and iron nails and a hammer.

About 100 pieces rectangular bricks were found. The gray bricks have a smooth obverse and a cord pattern marked reverse. Few of them have hand marks or

inscriptions. The size of the bricks is 37cm long, 17.5cm wide, and 7.5cm thick. The remaining inscription on T14.4:1, reads “Western workshop, sixth of the Tianbao 天宝 reign (747 CE)” (Figure 7:2; 8).

Square bricks: square-shaped bricks are rather rare. They are gray in color, and three types have been identified: plain, shining black, and decorated with stamped patterns (lotus, grapes, and auspicious animals). T11.4:1 has stamped pattern of grapes and auspicious animals. The remaining sides measure 26cm; it is 8cm thick.

Flat tile: most of the flat tiles are of “*qinggun* 青棍” style (with shining black surfaces). They are large and heavy, and most of the tiles are 3.8cm thick. An inscription on one such tile (T1.4:3) reads: “[Tian?]bao reign, 4th month, official tile” (Figure 7:1; 9). Also found were four pieces of end tiles (also called “eave end tiles” or *dishui* 滴水). The remaining length of T3.4:1 is 15cm; its remaining diameter is 13cm; the tile itself is 3cm thick along with 4.2cm thick at its end.

Semi-cylindrical tile: most of the tiles found at the site are semi-cylinder tiles, all of them are broken. Four types have been identified: gray tiles with a plain or stamped textile pattern; *qinggun* tiles; green glazed tiles, and red

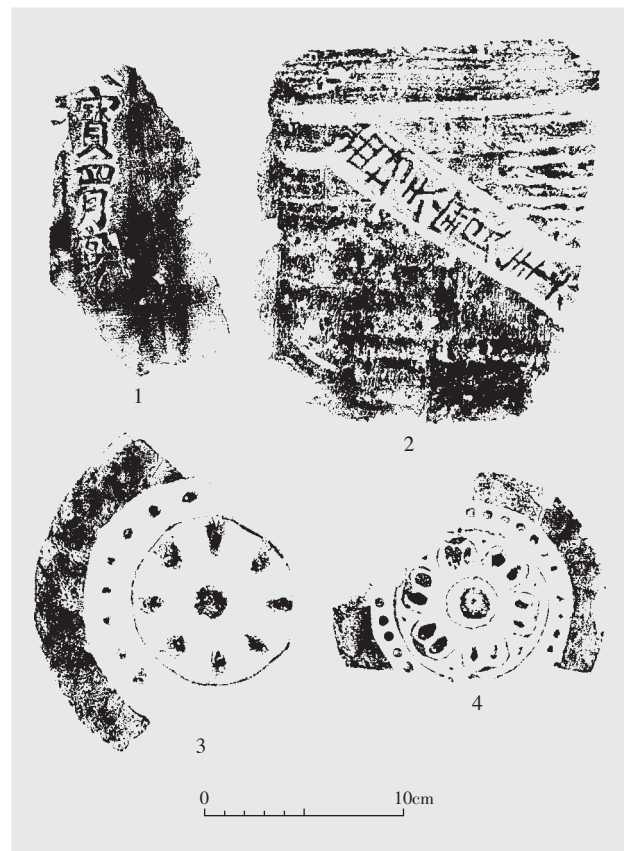


Figure 7. Unearthed objects from Danfeng Gate site  
1. flat tile 2. brick 3, 4. end tiles



Figure 8. An unearthened brick from Danfeng Gate site



Figure 9. An unearthened flat tile from Danfeng Gate site

tiles (very few). One of the *qinggun* tile is 36cm long, 15.5cm in diameter, 2cm thick, and 2.5cm thick at its end (T14.4:2). Green glazed tiles are 1.8cm thick (T5.4:7).

End tile: a relatively large amount of end tiles were found at the site. The surface is dark gray in color. Different sizes of end tiles were found. They had patterns of single and multiple lotus petals. T5.4:5 is 13cm in diameter and 1cm thick (Figure 7:4); T6.4:6 is 19cm diameter and 2cm thick (Figure 7:3).

Bird tail finials (*chiwei*): only four broken pieces were found. They all have a shining black surface. The remaining length and width of one of them are 18cm and 15.5cm, and it is 3cm thick.

Iron nails: the 8 iron nails found are of two styles: straight flat topped spikes square and nails with caps of square or round shapes.

Stone hammer T6.4:11): the basalt stone hammer with a broken top measures 11cm high, and the diameter is 11cm. The handle socket is 2.5cm in diameter and 3cm deep. The surface of the hammer is smooth and marks of an iron hoop are visible.

2. *Utensils*: not many of utility wares were found in the site and all of them are broken. They include a bowl, jars, lids, a cup, a pillow, an urn and crucibles.

Bowl (T2.4:15): a broken white porcelain bowl, 2cm high and 0.5cm thick, was found. An incised character “*Guan* 官” was found on the bottom.

Lid: two lids were found, one is white porcelain and the other tri-colored ceramic. The tri-colored lid has green, white, and brown colors and it is 0.4cm thick.

Cup (T1.4:7): the broken cup has a ring foot, green, white and brown glazes are applied to both interior and exterior.

Urn (T14.4:4): the broken mouth of an urn is made of gray pottery.

## Conclusion

Base on *Jiu Tangshu* 旧唐书 (Former History of the Tang), *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 (The New History of the Tang), *Chang'an Zhi* 长安志 (The Gazetteer of Chang'an), and *Tang Huiyao* 唐会要, the Danfeng Gate is the central southern gate of the Daming Palace. On top of the gate was the Danfeng Tower; it faced north to the Hanyuan Hall. The Danfeng Gate was not only the main road traveled by all emperors after Gaozong, it was also the official location for government announcements and acts. Emperors used the place to declare new reigns, promulgate amnesties, and hold banquets. A Tang poem describes the morning imperial court session:

Thousand of civil and military officials, as well as ceremonial armies,

People from every direction come together to celebrate peace and prosperity.

The supreme emperor rules alone from the Hanyuan Hall,

When the Danfeng Gate opens, the bright sun shines.

The Danfeng Gate was first opened on the eastern section of the northern city wall of the outer city of Chang'an during the Daming Palace expansion in 662. Its name was changed to Mingfeng 明凤 Gate in 758, but soon its name was changed back to the original name of Danfeng. In 904, when Zhu Quanzhong 朱全忠 forced emperor Zhaozong to move to Luoyang 洛阳, he sacked the Chang'an city. Government buildings and the Daming Palace were destroyed around that time.

The major achievements of the excavation are as follows:

1. *The excavation shows that the Danfeng Gate had five entranceways, revising the result of the 1959-1962 surveys.* It also confirms the “five entranceways” described by Li Hua 李华 of the Tang Dynasty in his “*The Hanyuan Hall Prose-poem 含元殿赋*,” the “*Prose-poem of the Two Capitals 两都赋*” by Li Yu 李庾 of the Tang, and the stone rubbing of the “Map of Chang'an 长安城图” by Lü Dafang 吕大防 of the Song Dynasty thus resolving scholarly debates on the form of the gate.

2. *Among the excavated Chang'an gates, Danfeng Gate is the largest.* The grand scale of its pier platforms, as well as the width of the entranceways, and the length of the ramp, surpassed other gates, such as the southern Mingde 明德 Gate. This shows the high status of the gate.

The excavation helps us understand the layout of Chang'an city and the Daming Palace. The past reconstruction of three entranceways for the Danfeng Gate makes difficult to understand the deviation between the axis of the Gate and that of the Hanyuan Hall. In other words, the axis of the Gate and the Hanyuan Hall do not

line up if we assume three entrances. The excavation of the Danfeng Gate shows that the axis of the Gate and the Hanyuan Hall are, in fact, lined up. Furthermore, the 200 meters width of the gate openings corresponds to the width of the Hanyuan Hall, and matches the historical records of the width of southern Danfeng Avenue. The symmetric design and the layout of the halls reflect the meticulous planning of Chang'an city.

3. *The excavation provides detailed gate measurements and other data for the conservation project of the Daming Palace, which is under national protection of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage.* The excavation also provides firsthand material for Chinese urban archaeology, ancient Chinese architecture, and comparative studies of ancient city planning between China and other countries in the world.

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Note: The original report, published in *Kaogu* 2006.7: 39–49 with 8 illustrations and 2 pages of plates, is written by Gong Guoqiang 龚国强, He Suili 何岁利, and Li Chunlin 李春林. This summary is prepared by the first author and English-translated by Suzanne Cahill and Ye Wa 叶娃.