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## Introduction: what is the Great Wall of China?

In September of 1984 Deng Xiaoping himself inscribed the characters that launched a new campaign in China. Loosely translated, they said “Let us love our country and restore our Great Wall.”<sup>1</sup> In the months before, the Chinese press had been carrying many stories about the famous Great Wall, and they made unpleasant reading. Although wind and weather over hundreds of years had eroded much of it, man, it seemed, had done the worst damage, particularly during the years of the “Cultural Revolution” when everything old had been despised. Then hundreds of kilometers of wall had been destroyed, and the material sometimes used for road, reservoir, and building construction.<sup>2</sup> Now the Chinese government was going to restore and preserve what remained, and rightly so. As a journalist active in the new campaign put it, “The Great Wall is the symbol of the Chinese nation,” and “loving and repairing the Great Wall will reflect the patriotic feelings of the Chinese people.”<sup>3</sup>

But what exactly was this “Great Wall” that China was now setting out to repair and why had it been built in the first place? The need to answer these questions led to the writing of this book, and the task has proved far less straightforward than might have been thought. This may seem surprising. The Great Wall of China, after all, has been known in the west for centuries, and seemingly definitive descriptions of it are not hard to find. A dictionary, for example, tells us matter-of-factly that it is a structure “over 1,500 miles long, extending from Kansu in the west to the Yellow Sea in the east, constructed between 246 and 209 B.C., and defining the historical boundary between China and Mongolia.”<sup>4</sup> Somewhat more romantic is the description found on the dust-jacket of a recent illustrated book on the subject. The Great Wall, it tells us, is “the most awesome structure ever devised by man,” one that “lies across the northern borders of China like some great sleeping dragon, stretching and sunning itself on the peaks and ridges of some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world. An astonishing 6,000 kilometres long,” it continues, “the Great Wall of China was more than 2,000 years in the building, and the only way man can look upon the sum total of his handiwork is by viewing it from outer space.”<sup>5</sup>

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Certainly both general surveys and specialized monographs on Chinese history make frequent reference to this Wall. The commonly accepted account tells how the emperor who first unified China, Ch'in Shih-huang (r. 221–210 B.C.), incorporated early walls built by the preceding Warring States into a first “Great Wall” constructed at his command. Subsequent dynasties repaired and rebuilt his original work ever after, so that a Great Wall originating in ancient times was, as William McNeill puts it, “maintained throughout most of subsequent Chinese history.”<sup>6</sup> This account of the history of the Wall is presented to visitors at its best-known section, along the Pa-ta-ling ridge not far from Peking. There a Chinese-language sign describes the wall of Ch'in Shih-huang, and adds that after his death “many dynasties carried out rebuilding. The present Great Wall was rebuilt in Ming times on the ancient foundations.”<sup>7</sup> Guidebooks say the same, as do journalists. At the time of Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, for instance, the *New York Times* explained the Wall by noting that “Beginning in 221 B.C., construction of the unified stone, earth, and brick barrier took 15 years and employed a million men.”<sup>8</sup> Other writers add the assertion that the Great Wall is the only man-made object visible from outer space.<sup>9</sup> Generally speaking, some version of this idea of the Great Wall of China today forms part of the common knowledge of most ordinary Chinese and Westerners.

The idea of such a Wall has furthermore become a major ordering concept for students of Chinese history, and a major source of cross-cultural comparisons. Its construction and renewal figure in theories of Chinese society and foreign relations, while its route is thought of as defining that country’s traditional northern boundary. Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988), for example, takes the “periodic reconstruction” of the Wall as powerful evidence of the “continued effectiveness” of the hydraulic economy which he argues makes China’s society an “oriental despotism.”<sup>10</sup> Owen Lattimore (1900–89) asks if there is not “something inherent in the historical processes of the state in China” that “favored the evolution of walled frontiers.”<sup>11</sup> As for foreign policy, Frederic Wakeman is one of many scholars who make the Wall embody traditional Chinese attitudes toward the outside world. It was, he explains:

[ ... ] more than a defense line. To the Chinese it marked the border between civilization and the barbarian hordes of Huns, Turks, Khitan, Ju-chen, and Mongols that successively threatened native dynasties. To the nomads it was a barrier that challenged and beckoned ...<sup>12</sup>

In 1969, the U.S.S.R. brought this wall into the territorial dispute with China, officially suggesting in *Pravda* that “The Great Wall was the northern boundary of China.”<sup>13</sup> The Wall has even been assigned a key

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role in world history. The scholar Joseph DeGuignes (1721–1800) suggested the theory, since widely accepted, that its construction by Ch'in Shih-huang forced the people known in Asia as the Hsiung-nu to begin a migration across the Eurasian continent that ultimately brought them to Europe where, as the Huns, they contributed to the fall of Rome.<sup>14</sup>

When, as a graduate student at Harvard, I began thesis research into the military policy of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), I too believed in this Great Wall. Like my teachers and fellow students, I had known about it since childhood, and never doubted its existence. It formed, furthermore, part of the setting for my chief interest, Chinese foreign policy in traditional times, and specifically the wars between the Ming Chinese and the Mongols. To me the significance of those wars was chiefly the way that, over decades, they drained much of the wealth of the Ming state, thus causing, indirectly, the collapse of that last Chinese-ruled dynasty. The Great Wall, which in nearly every account of these wars is described as marking the limits of “China proper,” through which nomads are said to break, and from which Chinese armies are described as exiting at the start of northern campaigns, I took completely for granted. The Wall for me was as close to being a part of China’s natural geography as any man-made feature conceivably could become. As for the Wall’s significance, I tended to agree with my teacher, the late Joseph F. Fletcher, Jr., that its existence over millennia was important above all because of what it seemed to demonstrate about the fundamental incompatibility of the agrarian society of China with the nomadic world of the steppe.

But as I pursued my research in Chinese documents of the Ming period, I began to feel doubts about much that I had taken for granted, and slowly to realize that my assumptions about the continuous existence of a Great Wall simply did not fit with what the Chinese texts told me. Much attention is devoted in traditional Chinese writings to problems of border defense, and fortifications of many different kinds are described. But nowhere did I find a clear mention of “The Great Wall” as I understood the concept and supplied it almost instinctively to my texts: what was more, some passages seemed impossible to reconcile with its existence. My reading also raised doubts about the larger question of the compatibility of nomadic and agrarian ways of life. Chinese sources record in considerable detail debates carried out by successive dynasties over policy toward the Hsiung-nu, the Turks, the Mongols, and other nomadic groups. These discussions disclosed a far wider range of points of view on policy than I had expected. Some Chinese, to be sure, wanted exclusion and at various times advocated wall-building to accomplish it. But others argued for trade and diplomacy, or in effect for peaceful coexistence with the nomads. It occurred to me that rather than being a given, almost an aspect of Chinese

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culture, wall-building was a policy about which people disagreed, and ought to be studied as such. Thus the first outlines of the present work began to take shape.

Initially my plan was to limit my scope to policy discussions regarding wall-building in the Ming dynasty. For the history of the Wall in earlier periods I would rely on secondary literature. But when I attempted to resolve my doubts about its pre-Ming history in this way I began to realize just how vast the topic I was stumbling into was. It did not take much investigation to discover that no standard or definitive work on the Great Wall exists in any language. Joseph Needham had earlier found out the same thing: In the section called “Walls and the Wall” in *Science and Civilization in China*, he complains that studies of the Wall “based on modern historical scholarship” are “few and far between, whether in Chinese or Western languages,” and adds in a footnote that he had “not been fortunate enough to find one.”<sup>15</sup> The period since Needham made his survey had not filled the gap, and I realized that I would have to begin at the beginning in my investigation of the Wall, the topic to which I shifted my research as soon as my Ph.D thesis was completed. This book is an account of what I found out, and its conclusions conflict at nearly every point with what I thought I knew when I began. The Great Wall of China, it turns out, is a fascinating vision, and one not surprisingly now deeply imbedded in learned and popular imaginations, in both China and the west. Yet at the root of the commonly accepted idea of the Wall lie some fundamental misunderstandings. The reality is quite different from the vision, and the whole topic is in need of comprehensive reexamination.

The first problem that anyone setting out to study the Great Wall of China encounters is that of evidence. Most of the information upon which descriptions of the Wall are based comes from the Chinese written tradition: the *Shih chi* and the other standard histories, various encyclopedias, scattered literary references, some specialized works on border policy, and particularly for the late imperial period, local gazetteers. The total amount of material (except for the Ming) is not forbiddingly large, but the sources turn out to be rather difficult to interpret at key points. Chinese, and to a lesser extent Japanese, scholars have taken an interest in these sources since the early decades of this century, and a modest literature in those languages now deals with them.<sup>16</sup>

But the written record has definite limits, and in the Chinese case the kinds of cartographic and archaeological work that have made it possible for students of comparable topics in the west to fill in its omissions and resolve its inconsistencies have not yet been carried out. One has only to compare the studies of the Chinese walls with those of Roman frontiers to realize this

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point. The sixty-eight miles of wall built by Hadrian (r. 117–38) in northern Britain, for example, have been far more thoroughly studied than have the many hundreds of miles of wall that exist in China. We know the exact dimensions of that Roman wall and of the moat that lay in front of it, as well as the precise location of every tower and gate along its length.<sup>17</sup> The wall-ruins in China, by contrast, have never been surveyed.<sup>18</sup> Even today, one cannot be sure exactly where wall-ruins are, not to mention make enumerations of gates, towers, precise lengths, etc.

Even the route of the Great Wall shown on most maps today is uncertain. It appears to derive not from recent surveys but rather from charts first prepared by three Jesuit fathers for the Ch'ing emperor K'ang-hsi (r. 1661–1722), presented to him in 1708, and subsequently published in Europe. These were almost certainly not based entirely on firsthand investigation.<sup>19</sup> The detailed maps in the latest historical atlas from Peking suffer from the same flaw: the wall routes shown in them are based on literary sources and not on fieldwork.<sup>20</sup> Even the best maps, those prepared by the U.S. government using aerial and satellite photography, are not free from errors.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, and particularly since the late 1970s, a limited amount of archaeological investigation has been undertaken in China, which is highly promising, though still in its initial stages.<sup>22</sup> Better maps are also likely to appear before long: a systematic survey, using “aerial remote sensing techniques (including infrared photography) is now underway.”<sup>23</sup> But it will nevertheless be decades before specialists on the history of Chinese frontiers reach a level of sophistication comparable to that of their colleagues in Roman studies today.

Furthermore, the difficulties of interpreting the limited evidence we have are compounded by the existence of a large body of misinformation and unreliable analysis found in the substantial popular literature about the Wall, which continues to confuse scholars and ordinary people alike. One example of the problem is the abundance of conflicting yet exact figures that can be turned up for the length of the Great Wall. Joseph Needham cites an “officially accepted” Chinese estimate from 1962 of 3,720 miles.<sup>24</sup> When Richard Nixon visited China in 1972, the *New York Times* gave the figure as 2,484 miles while *Time* magazine favored 1,684.<sup>25</sup> A few years later, in 1979, the New China News Agency announced that there were 31,250 miles of wall, without making clear the exact meaning of the figure, while Orville Schell, writing in the *New Yorker* in the autumn of 1984 gave the length as 4,000 miles (though it should be noted that when Schell's article appeared in book form the Wall had shrunk to only 1,500 miles).<sup>26</sup> Yet clearly, in the absence of surveys and reliable cartography, it must be admitted that the figure cannot be known. A similar problem arises with

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other statements about the Wall's size. Its volume, for example, was calculated almost two centuries ago by Sir John Barrow (1764–1848), the celebrated explorer who would later found the Royal Geographical Society of London, and who accompanied the first British mission to the Ch'ing court in 1793–4. Assuming the Wall to be throughout of the same construction that he had observed near Peking, Barrow estimated the stone in it was equivalent to “all the dwelling houses of England and Scotland” and would suffice to construct two smaller walls around the earth at the equator.<sup>27</sup> These impressive, but utterly unfounded, extrapolations are regularly quoted, down to this day, by scholars and popularizers of the Great Wall alike, as are similar dubious assertions about the history of the Wall's construction, its cost, the manpower involved, its visibility from outer space, etc. They form part of a popular legend of the Great Wall that has proved so enduring and influential that our final chapter will be devoted entirely to its history.

Clearly, the problem of evidence is fundamental to any study of the Wall, and this book differs from its predecessors chiefly in the way it deals with it. A number of Western authors have studied the Wall.<sup>28</sup> Even the best of them, however, those who recognize and acknowledge the severe evidential problems (Joseph Needham is a good example), nevertheless present accounts in which something like the notion mentioned above of an ancient and continuously existing Great Wall forms the framework, despite the lack of evidence for it. The validity of that larger concept is never subjected to questioning.

My approach has been rather different. I have tried to examine the evidence, in the first instance, without any fixed prior idea of what it ought to add up to. When one does that, certain fundamental, and I think insurmountable, problems with the ordering concept of “The Great Wall” itself become clearly evident. Then, rather than attempting somehow to fit recalcitrant evidence into it, I have chosen instead to discard the concept. The basic conviction that has thus emerged from my research is that the idea of a Great Wall of China, familiar to me since childhood, and with which I began my work, is a historical myth.

It is important to understand what is meant by this. The phrase “historical myth” is not intended to suggest that the Chinese did not build walls, or that accounts of their northern frontier fortifications are fanciful or invented. Chinese have been constructing border walls of various kinds since the seventh century B.C. The enterprise has been recorded in the histories, and travelers, and more recently archaeologists as well, have described some of the remains of these walls. The problem is not with the existence of walls in Chinese history, but rather with the way that we understand and interpret them.



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In the past, the numerous questions posed by the evidence about how and why walls were built, what they looked like, and how long they survived, as well as, most basically of all, about what significance they should be given in any general understanding of Chinese civilization, were resolved by reference to a single Great Wall thought of as having a unified history and a single purpose. It is that concept, and the many ideas based on or derived from it, that I am convinced is myth. Removing it from our historiography will require us to reconsider much that we thought we already knew. But just as importantly, it will reveal the existence of important questions, hitherto concealed by belief in the myth, that must be considered.

This book cannot hope to treat definitively all the issues raised by these two processes. Its three parts will carry the processes of rethinking evidence, subtracting myth, and reassigning significance through several stages with varying degrees of detail. First it will present what we know about wall-building in Chinese history, and then suggest a general framework for understanding it: a framework that is partly new and partly a rediscovery of a longstanding Chinese tradition of interpretation that has been largely lost sight of during the last century. Second, it will attempt to present the wall-building of the Ming period, when most of what today we call “The Great Wall of China” was in fact built, in terms of that framework. And finally, it will try to explain, once again in general terms, both what, if anything, the heritage of wall-building really tells us about Chinese society and politics, and how the mythic misunderstanding of it originated and spread. That last task will involve consideration of some basic questions about the nature of Chinese civilization, and about the relationship of Asia and Europe.

The two chapters in Part I seek to define the issue. Chapter 1 will survey the evidence bearing on the border fortifications built by Chinese rulers since the first millennium B.C. The narration should make clear how important it is to replace the notion of a single Great Wall existing over time with an understanding that while a number of Chinese dynasties built border fortifications, these did not form a single structure. Among the more important northern fortifications were those built by the Ch'in (221–207 B.C.), the Han (202 B.C. – A.D. 220), the Northern Ch'i (A.D. 550–74), the Sui (A.D. 589–618), and the Ming (A.D. 1369–1644). But rather than being aggregated under one rubric, and considered as parts of a single phenomenon, these walls must each be examined and understood in their own historical contexts. Recognition of this fact, however, leads to a new and basic interpretative question: namely, why did some dynasties build walls while others did not?

Chapter 2 will suggest some ways of thinking about that question, by

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proposing that we understand wall-building as one possible response to the problems presented by the interaction of a largely agrarian Chinese state with the nomadic peoples of the steppe. Using the anthropological understanding of this relationship as our basis for analysis, we will suggest that successive Chinese courts had no single foreign policy, but rather could choose from a variety of possible approaches to the steppe, ranging from peaceful coexistence based on trade and diplomacy, to outright conquest, to attempted isolation. Understanding this range of possible policies, however, is only the beginning of real understanding of the origins of walls. For choice among policies was not a straightforward process. It involved not simply strategic analysis, but also political, bureaucratic, and cultural factors. To understand a dynasty's wall-building then will require considering a larger picture: essentially, the strategic and political origins of what today we might call its "national security policy."

Of course such a study could be made for every dynasty. But to do so at more than an impressionistic level even for those that built walls is beyond the capacity of a single researcher and the scope of a single book. Therefore Part II will attempt to begin the task for only one: the Ming, whose wall-building was the most extensive in Chinese history. Ming politics are fairly well documented, and use of contemporary sources, notably the *Veritable records*, the somewhat-edited daily chronicle of palace activities and decisions, makes it possible to reconstruct the arguments about that dynasty's national security, and for and against walls, with a high degree of confidence.

The six chapters of Part II will attempt to tell the story of Ming wall-building as it was understood at the time, as a question of policy choice in a highly charged political atmosphere. Beginning with an analysis of the specific issues of strategic geography on which Ming policy discussions focused, they will narrate the strategic debates, and in particular a celebrated series of court arguments over "the recovery of the Ordos," the territory of the great bend of the Yellow river, into which the Mongols moved in the mid fifteenth century, and which form the background for Ming decisions to build the vast system of border fortifications which in retrospect have been named "The Great Wall."

Part III returns to more general questions. Chapter 9 attempts to relate wall-building to basic questions of Chinese history and foreign policy. It argues specifically that the Ming had economic and diplomatic options for dealing with their nomadic adversaries that might have obviated the need for walls, but which were scorned for political reasons. It furthermore suggests that such damaging unwillingness to compromise, of which the Ming case is a clear example, is part of a larger pattern in Chinese foreign policy. Chapter 10, the conclusion, turns away from the real Wall and looks



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at the evolution of the myth of the Great Wall, specifically at the process by which the Great Wall became one of modern China's national symbols. The chapter will show how Chinese and Western elements were combined to produce the mythical account of the Wall. And it will argue that on some level territorial definition through wall-building, and national definition through the creation of cultural symbols, are both aspects of a single, ongoing process.

That process is of course the definition of China itself, which removal of the Great Wall myth reveals to be even more complicated than we have previously understood. Basic to the process is the definition of the civilized, Chinese *hua* and its negative counterpart, the *i*, or barbarian. Although the actual size of Chinese states has varied greatly from one dynasty to another, the question of what was "Chinese" territory, and what constituted "China proper" is still often thought of as having been answered long ago by the Great Wall, or in modified form, the "line of the Great Wall." But without any such line to rely on, the full magnitude of the problem of defining China becomes clear.

In the Ming, for instance, the question facing the first rulers after the Mongol Yüan had been overthrown was not, as is sometimes thought, how once again to hold the Great Wall, because there was no Great Wall then. Rather, the problem was where the Ming dynasty's own territory should end. Should it stretch to the north, and try to encompass at least some of the territory that its predecessor, the Mongol Yüan, had held? Or should it adopt a line closer to the ecological boundary of Chinese-style agriculture? Debate over this issue simmered for most of the dynasty's nearly three hundred years, without definitive resolution, as Part II will relate. But because historians have assumed that a pre-existing, ancient Great Wall marked the dynasty's northern boundary at the start, most have missed both the existence and significance of this debate.

And the Ming case is but one example of the problem. Dynasty after dynasty has faced the question of where China should end, because for most of her history China's northern frontier has not been walled, but rather quite open. Since no Great Wall has ever supplied a ready-made boundary for them, each dynasty has had to define for itself where its political sway would end. Far from agreeing on a single line, they have made a great variety of choices.

Some dynasties have chosen broad, inclusive definitions, and attempted to place their frontier far in the north. To encompass the diverse peoples who live there, they have had to adopt rather cosmopolitan definitions of Chinese culture and Chineseness. Other dynasties have been more narrow and exclusive, and have either drawn, or been forced to draw, the line in

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the south. Sometimes these boundary lines have been marked by walls or fortified frontiers that can still be traced. But as the great variety of the lines suggests, the route of China's northern frontier has always been a question (and indeed it remains so today).

So considered, the full intellectual significance of the idea of a single Great Wall begins to become clear, as do the possible effects of revising it. Obviously, the first idea fits into a way of thinking about China that sees that state not only as clearly bounded, but also as culturally cohesive, and historically continuous. Given the very real continuities in the Chinese past, such an idea clearly contains more than a kernel of truth. But studies of Chinese culture and society have reached a stage of sophistication which finds scholars increasingly disassembling their subjects into component parts, whether regional populations, philosophical schools, or marketing networks, before once again combining them into some sort of Chinese unity. Disassembling "The Great Wall" in much the same way, over both time and space, will show us more completely than before the range of implications that the issue of boundary demarcation has had, and continues to have, in the Chinese world.