
The Origins of the Great Wall

Nicola Di Cosmo

*Institute for Advanced Study,
Princeton (USA)*

If there is a single Chinese monument that people anywhere in the world are likely to have seen, heard of, or read about, this is the Great Wall (Fig. 1). Aside from its mythical proportions, the Great Wall has symbolic powers that transcend its historical and material existence. It has been depicted as a parting line between the known and the unknown and the physical line marking the frontiers of civilization, the inhospitable liminal universe which was the preserve of a demimonde of barbarians and trans-frontiersmen, convicts and soldiers, crafty merchants and banished officials. In historical writings, the Great Wall has been presented as protection against invaders — the engineering product of a superior civilization erected against the tumultuous waves of its enemies — but also as the symbol of unrestrained, vain, and arrogant tyranny, tangible product of the blood and tears of the toiling masses. Most recently the Great Wall has acquired yet another meaning, following new orientations in the politics of historical interpretation: a meeting point of cultural exchange, compared to a river that unites rather than divides, and brings different nationalities closer together. A malleable symbol adapted to political and cultural metaphors, gate to be crossed or drawbridge to be lifted, the Great Wall of China continues to be a testimony of China's cultural, historical, and now national identity: a most patriotic artifact.

Owen Lattimore probably was the first Western scholar to see the Great Wall more as an economic and environmental than a cultural

boundary between nomads and settled people (Lattimore 1937, 1940). Arthur Waldron in his excellent study restored its historical dimension, exploding some of its myths (that it could be seen from the moon, for instance) and focusing on its construction during the Ming dynasty, in the fifteenth century, when the Great Wall became the majestic monument we can see today (Waldron 1990). Yet although the Ming Great Wall is a relatively recent creation, the concept of a Great Wall, or more correctly 'long walls' (*chang cheng*) has been in existence for a much longer time, going back to the late fourth century BCE. As astonishing as the spatial dimension of the Great Wall is, covering several thousand miles, it is its temporal aspect that has been key to its success as a symbol of patriotism and national pride, a line in the sand between barbarians and Chinese drawn even before China's imperial unification.

Yet once we begin to consider the Great Wall as a historical artifact rather than as symbol, we are bound to recognize an altogether different picture. As a defense structure, its record is abysmally bad. It never prevented invasions, and it was expensive to build and maintain. The

monumental futility of the Great Wall as a military installation has been demonstrated in especially stark terms during the Ming period, when massive investments did not prevent China from being attacked by the Mongols and eventually conquered by another northern people, the Manchus. China's strategic culture seems to have favored static defense, and this may be one reason for the long existence of various types of border fortifications, and the Ming construction of the Great Wall as we know it. But was this always the case? Did the Great Wall always serve as a defensive structure? These are some of the questions I had to ask as I became interested in the early phase of the history of the frontier between China and the steppe.

The theory that the northern walls were erected to defend Chinese states from the nomads is well known and continues to carry much weight today. As we shall see in greater detail below, Sima Qian's narrative account of

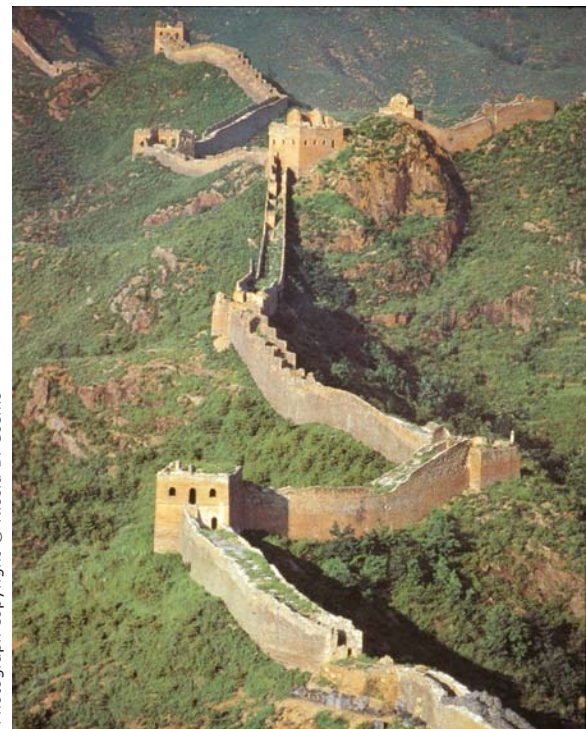


Fig. 1. The Ming Great Wall in northeastern China.

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the historical relations between China and the northern nomadic peoples in chapter 110 of his *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji*, first century BCE) was based on the historical myth (an 'invented tradition,' some might say), according to which China and the north had been perennially at odds with one another, and that China had since the dawn of history suffered from nomadic invasions. This rationalization of what was in effect a late phenomenon, that is, the appearance of the strong unified nomadic empire of the Xiongnu, set the tone for the later Chinese understanding of relations with the north. According to this deeply rooted *topos* of Chinese historical thinking, which has been repeatedly asserted as recently as at the Symposium on the Great Wall held in 1994, China was weak and unable to oppose an adequate defense against the northern nomads, except for the Great Wall, which then became a symbol of resistance against all invaders (Waldron 1995). Concern for the historical 'weakness' of China vis-à-vis the nomads could not exist, of course, outside of a notion that regarded the nomads themselves as a positively aggressive, militarily superior enemy (as represented, for instance, in the Disney animated movie *Mulan*). As Sima Qian said, it was their innate nature to love war (Sima Qian 1993, p. 129).

The history of the northern frontier before the unification of China is obscure and often cast, in the earliest Chinese texts, in moralizing terms. The Chinese had already attained a high level of cultural sophistication, with music, rituals, moral norms, and especially writing. Those people who did not write, had different customs, and did not belong to the Chinese cultural and political sphere, were therefore regarded as uncivilized. Several passages can be extracted from the earliest historical documents which present the story of the relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese

in terms of 'civilized' vs. 'barbarians.' Among the non-Chinese were, of course, northern peoples thought to be the ancestors of the warlike nomadic horsemen who were to become a major threat from the Han dynasty onwards. From the mid-eighth to the mid-sixth century BCE, Chinese states conducted a series of military campaigns in the north against peoples called Rong and Di. Sometimes these peoples retaliated but usually they were defeated, subjugated, incorporated, and eventually assimilated. This process was made easier by the understanding that certain rules of conduct in war (a code of honor, a sense of fair play) that were to be observed, at least theoretically, when the fighting occurred among Chinese polities, were no longer prescriptive in the case of foreign wars, where no trick or stratagem, no broken oath, no breach of loyalty carried a moral sanction or other undesired political consequences. Foreign peoples were conceived as resources, and their use as such was not only practiced by Chinese states, but also theorized.

From the sparse textual evidence at our disposal we can see that the land and labor extracted from non-Chinese groups constituted a type of wealth often coveted by the Chinese states. Victories obtained against foreign peoples could serve the strategic purpose of intimidating potential enemies. Another doctrine — wrongly assumed to be pacifist — maintained that wars against foreigners had to be undertaken sparingly, because there was a risk that such ventures may weaken the state and expose it to attacks from other Chinese states. It was *realpolitik*, not moral values, that regulated the foreign relations between Chinese states and their neighbors. Generally speaking, the political discourse about foreigners in pre-imperial China tends to justify expansion and conquest, which is exactly what happened. Looking closely at

those statements that point to cultural differences, then, we find that such differences provide a political rationale that allowed for the expansion of Chinese polities.

Especially in the Warring States period (5th-3rd century BCE) the Chinese political and economic spaces continued to expand even though the number of independent states vying for power dwindled. The general trend was towards the creation of larger and stronger states, which expanded not only by swallowing up other Chinese states but also by expanding into external areas. If we look at the northern frontier, this trend is clearly identifiable as the states of Zhao, Yan, and Qin kept expanding and growing both militarily and economically. Setbacks occurred, but the general impulse was towards becoming stronger, and alien peoples, not integrated in Chinese civilization, were a reservoir relatively easy to tap into. From pastoral people the Chinese imported cattle and sheep, wool, leather, horses, and pelts. Moreover, at this time the frontier economy became monetarized through the use of metals, such as gold objects possibly used as currency, and especially bronze coins. Military requirements may have played a key role, since pack animals must have been needed in increasing numbers for transportation during military campaigns as armies became larger and larger. Horses become especially important from the late fourth century BCE with the adoption of mounted warfare by Chinese states. In sum, archaeological but also textual evidence suggest a historical context, on the eve of the building of the very first 'great wall,' in which the northern frontier zone appears to have been increasingly valuable, in economic and strategic terms, to northern Chinese states.

As we know, the First Emperor of Qin, the one who in 221 BCE emerged victorious from the struggle among the 'Warring

States' and unified China, was not the one who first erected walls. He merely expanded and unified a network of fortifications which existed previously and had been established by the states of Qin in the northwest, Zhao in the north, and Yen in the northeast (see map, Fig. 2, for the various 'walls'). Given that the conventional theory holds that the early walls were built to protect China from the nomads, historians have tried to explain why the nomads would raid, attack, or invade those lands we conventionally call 'Chinese.' Generally speaking, scholars have produced a number of theories more or less persuasive, and more or less supported by the sources. Some have sought to explain the nomads' aggressiveness, for instance, with a model of nomadic-sedentary relations according to which nomads need to acquire resources from their agriculturist neighbors, and would resort to war or trade to obtain them. Owen Lattimore himself saw relations across the frontier strongly determined by competing societies that differed dramatically in terms of environmental adaptation and economy. Chinese scholars have seen also in the 'imbalance' in the development of the productive forces on both sides of the 'great

wall' the source of conflicts originated by the less developed side, the nomads. At any rate, all theories converge to agree that the 'great wall' was built as a response to nomadic aggression. To test the truth of this general apparently unshakeable belief we then should ask a most significant question: what does the evidence actually say?

Surprisingly, there is no textual evidence that allows us to establish a direct cause-effect relationship between nomadic attacks and the building of the walls. The evidence shows, on the contrary, that the building of walls does not *follow* nomads' raids, but rather precedes them. If a linkage can be established in terms of mere chronological sequence, the construction of the walls should be regarded as the cause, not as the effect, of nomadic incursions. Secondly, archaeological evidence does not support the contention that the walls were protecting a sedentary population, even less that they were protecting a 'Chinese' sedentary population. In fact, the early walls did not mark an ecological boundary between steppe and sown, nor did they mark a boundary between a culturally Sinitic zone and an alien

'barbarian' region. For the most part, they were entirely within areas culturally and politically alien to China. These simple observations should already suffice to raise doubts as to the actual function of the earliest walls. More doubts are engendered as we delve deeper into the textual and archeological evidence.

The idea and technology of such 'long wall' military installations is first found in central and southern China and associated with states such as Wei and Chu in the fifth century BCE. The 'walls' built along the northern frontier constituted an integrated system of man-made structures and natural barriers. The careful choice and use of topography enhanced greatly the effectiveness of these fortifications. This system, in addition to the 'walls,' included small as well as relatively large forts, beacon towers, look-out platforms, and watchtowers. Typically, the walls were made out of stamped earth and stones piled up in layers to form a rampart, usually on sloping terrain, so that the outer part would be higher than the inner part (Fig. 3, next page). Moreover, along the walls archaeologists have discovered, at regular or irregular intervals, mounds of stamped



Fig. 2. The Great Walls.



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Fig. 3. The Han wall at Yumenguan, showing stamped earth construction.

earth that are probably the remains of elevated platforms or towers. On higher ground, such as hilltops or even mountain peaks, small stone structures have been found, in the shape of platforms, which are assumed to have served as look-out posts or beacon towers. On the inner side of the wall, at varying distances, we find a number of additional constructions, in the shape of square or rectangular enclosures, whose walls are often made of stone, believed to be forts garrisoned by soldiers.

In mountainous terrain along precipices and ravines or narrow gullies, the man-made structures may be limited to a few towers and gates blocking a mountain pass. Roads on the inner side of these walls served the purpose of connecting the various garrisons with strategically important locations. Beacon towers, also placed on the inner side of the walls, were probably used to communicate between the various stations, although the system of communication is unclear (Fig. 4). Undoubtedly a complex system of couriers, postal stations, and checkpoints must have been operating, and the sheer number of structures and their spatial extension suggest that the efficient use of these early 'walls' required an extensive military presence.

For instance, on top of the wall

built by Qin, for its entire length, we find three to four mounds (raised platforms) per kilometer, amounting to a total of approximately 6,300 separate structures. Throughout the line of the walls, on the inner side, we encounter ruins of military installations. Citadels and forts are distributed at a distance of three to five kilometers from each other, and their internal area may vary from 3,500 m² to 10,000 m². They are generally walled, though forts built on steep ravines and gullies do not have walls, as the natural topography provided sufficient protection.

Turning to the evidence provided by textual sources, some caveats need to be borne in mind. The first concerns authorship, or rather the historical and cultural context from which the sources themselves originated. Explicit

mention of wall building activity by the northern states is found in the *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, authored by Sima Qian around the turn of the second century BCE, that is, over two hundred years after the first northern walls were built, and after about a century of wars between the nomadic empire of the Xiongnu and China. Sima Qian inscribed such a long and bloody confrontation in a historical pattern according to which China (variously indicated as Hua, Hsia, Zhongyuan, Zhongguo, or even 'the land of caps and sashes') and the nomads constituted two antithetic poles that had been at odds ever since the dawn of Chinese history. Within this pattern Sima Qian produced an ethnic genealogy, culminating with the Xiongnu, that held all the various 'northern barbarians' together as one coherent narrative unity. As a result he created a polarization between a unified north and a unified south and projected it into the past. Sima Qian also recorded names and events whose number and variety is in itself evidence of the political and ethnic complexity of the north. Hence, while it is essential to remember that the historical narrative of the northern frontier is, not, itself, neutral, one cannot use this argument simply to dismiss all that it reveals about China's relations with the north during the Warring States period (for details, see Di Cosmo 2002, part IV).



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Fig. 4. Han beacon tower at Yangguan, west of Dunhuang.

Moving then closer to the question of the Great Wall, we need to ask whether the *Shiji*, as our most important historical text, supports an interpretation according to which the walls were established as a military defense. Or, to put it differently: does the historical evidence show a connection between nomadic threats and wall-building? As for the state of Qin, the record says that its king Zhaoxiang (306-251 BCE) began to build walls on the north-western border after a military campaign into that territory, which was inhabited by a non-Chinese people called the Yiqu Rong. The pretext of Qin's expansion is attributed to a 'scandalous' series of events. Apparently the king of these Yiqu Rong had illicit intercourse with the Queen Dowager of Qin, who bore him two sons. Having grown displeased with the king, the Queen Dowager later deceived and killed him, assembled an army, and then proceeded to attack and destroy the Yiqu. Having conquered the Rong, Qin also expanded to the north into the territory within the Yellow River's great bend, today's Ordos region. In this way Qin acquired extensive new lands, which became subject to military administration, or 'commanderies.' Only then Qin 'built a Long Wall to guard against the Hu.' (Hu was a generic term to indicate nomadic steppe peoples.) The state of Yan was located in the north-east. During the reign of King Zhao (311-279 BCE), a general who had served as a hostage among the nomads made a surprise attack against the Eastern Hu. He defeated them, and forced them to retreat 'a thousand miles.' Yan then 'built "long walls"' and established commanderies 'in order to resist the nomads.' But this 'resistance' followed a military expansion well into nomadic territory. The third northern state, Zhao, also had conflicts with steppe nomads. The *Shiji* tells us that King Wuling 'in the north attacked the Lin Hu and the Lou-fan [both of them are generally

understood to be nomadic peoples – NDIC]; built long walls, and made a barrier [stretching] from Dai along the foot of the Yin Mountains to Gaoque.' Thus, Zhao created an advanced line of fortification, deep into today's Inner Mongolia, encircling the Ordos steppe, then inhabited by pastoral nomads. I could find only one passage that refers explicitly to a state's need to protect itself against the nomads without this being linked to a previous Chinese expansion. This is from a debate that took place in 307 BCE at the court of the same King Wuling of Zhao during which the king strove to persuade his advisors to adopt cavalry and follow the example set by the nomads. The king said, 'Without mounted archers how can I protect the frontier against Yan, the Hu, Qin and Han?' In the context of the debate, however, the nomads (that is, the *hu* people) were not the only threat to Zhao, and throughout the whole speech it is evident that the 'protection' argument was accompanied by an even more pronounced expansionist argument. In any case, unlike the adoption of cavalry, the building of walls is not mentioned in connection with the protection from nomads or any other enemy.

This is the core evidential ground based on which scholars have argued that the northern walls had a defensive purpose, and had been erected as a protection against nomadic attacks. However, none of these statements says that walls were constructed as a result of, or as a response to, nomadic attacks on Chinese people. What they say is that the walls were built to 'repel' or 'contain' the nomads *after* the states had advanced deeply into their lands, had occupied their territory, and had set up military commanderies. The building of fortifications proceeded hand in hand with the acquisition of new territory, the transfer of troops to this region, and the establishment of new administrative units. The states of Qin, Zhao and Yan needed to protect

themselves from the nomads only after they had taken large portions of territory from them.

Having examined the textual evidence, let us turn briefly to the archaeological context. The material culture of non-Chinese people in what has been called the Northern Zone is fairly well known. Archaeological excavations throughout the Great Wall region, reveal the presence of a large number of bronze objects, such as knives and swords, belt plaques, horse ornaments, and precious objects. Archaeologists and art historians have long recognized this as a fully separate cultural complex which developed continuously from at least to the second millennium BCE, and usually cite among its salient features a distinctive metallurgical production and stylistic idiom, in particular the 'animal style,' and connections with the greater Siberian and Central Asian 'Scythian' art. Some of the most precious objects, usually in gold, come from the Ordos region. The remains of the Chinese walls crop up for the most part in the middle of this area, across grassland plateaus and deserts or in rough mountainous country. Chinese Warring States coins, pottery shards, and lacquered objects have been found, but the Chinese presence here at this early time was limited only to sites connected with the wall fortifications themselves, showing that military colonies and troops were stationed in an otherwise 'barbarian' cultural environment. For sure the walls were not built between Chinese and nomads, but ran, from a Chinese viewpoint, through a remote territory inhabited by foreign peoples. Some of these peoples were incorporated within the perimeter of the walls, some remained outside.

If we wish to understand the early function of the walls, it is on the Chinese soldiers that we should concentrate, not on the Chinese farmers. Why were the soldiers

stationed so far to the north, in alien territory? The only conclusion that the evidence would support, in my view, is that the walls' and soldiers' presence in the northern regions is consistent with a pattern of steady territorial growth by the states of Yan, Zhao, and Qin. They developed the system of long lines of fortifications to expand into the lands of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples, and fence them off. Soldiers defended this territory against nomadic peoples possibly expelled from their pastures. This military push created a pressure on nomads that in turn led to a pattern of hostilities. The walls, in other words, were part and parcel with an overall expansionist strategy by Chinese northern states meant to support and protect their political and economic penetration into areas thus far alien to the Chinese world. This is consistent both with the general trend of relations between Chinese states and foreign peoples and with the political, economic and military imperatives facing the Warring States in the late fourth century BCE. It was at this time that northern Chinese states began to pay attention to cavalry and to develop mounted warfare, and the local pastoral people were surely more suited to this task than the sedentary Chinese. The walls were, in other words, part of a system designed to enclose and establish exclusive access to a precious reservoir of human and material resources at a time when the bitter struggle among Chinese states had become deadlier than ever, and every state was striving to exploit any means likely to increase its chances of survival. The walls were meant as a barrier not only against dispossessed nomads but also against competing Chinese states. As such, the origins of the Great Wall are closely linked to a military and political project that will eventually result in the imperial unification of China. Recognizing the historical origins of the Great Wall does not diminish its symbolic power, but hopefully makes it less

susceptible to a purely ideological interpretation.

About the Author

Nicola Di Cosmo is Professor of East Asian History at the Institute for Advanced Study, School of Historical Studies (Princeton, N.J.). His main interests are in the history of frontier relations between China and Inner Asia, and in the social and political history of Mongols, Manchus, and other peoples of north and Central Asia. His books include: *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (2002); *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)* (ed., 2002); *A Documentary History of Manchu-Mongol Relations (1616-1626)* (co-authored with Dalizhabu Bao, 2003); *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries and Human Geographies in Chinese History* (co-edited with Don J. Wyatt, 2003); and *The Diary of a Manchu Soldier in Seventeenth-Century China* (2006).

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The Ming Fortress at Jiayuguan, blocking passage through the Hexi Corridor.