

An Overview on Views of a Wall:  
Changes in Cultural Images of the Great Wall of China

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## Introduction

I come from south-east China. No northern people can threaten us there. We read about them in the books of the ancients... why do we leave our homes, the river and bridges, our mothers and fathers [to construct the wall]... Innocent northern people believed they were the cause; the admirable innocent emperor believed he had given orders for it. We who were builders of the wall know otherwise and are silent.<sup>1</sup>

This is Kafka's description of the Great Wall of China representing an absurd model of an imaginary Orient. But when people speak of the Great Wall today, there is not much difference between the "real" wall and Kafka's wall: it is a reference to a complex and maybe accumulated composition of ideas and knowledge. Despite sufficient philosophical and historical methodologies to abstract and analyze such complicated compositions, there are not numerous studies done on formations of composed views on specific architects or landscapes owning tremendous cultural and historical significance. Although there are prototypical examples of relevant studies, such as Foucault's and Said's works, due to lack of capabilities and resources, this paper only presents and summarizes, with naive analysis, apparent images of the wall through different periods as well as their formations.

The first Great Wall, built from 220 to 203 BCE by joining several ancient walls, was created to prevent the invasion and influence from the nomadic groups in the north.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese feudal and walled-city ideology, which contributed to the formation of the wall, had evolved, and been affected by other cultures over time, resulting in changing recognition and perception of its views. Most perceptions before the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected and were shaped by attitudes toward problems that the wall dealt with. And the meanings of the wall then became more abstract and context-dependent in recent years. And with the current rise of postmodernism, its meanings start

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Kafka, "The Great Wall of China," Franz Kafka Online, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.kafka-online.info/the-great-wall-of-china-page6.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Tanenhaus, *The New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge: A Desk Reference for the Curious Mind* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2011), 1131.

to dissolute in the anti-grand narrative. Most of the time, a composition of the understandings of political structure, ideologies, and economical and social forms, has dynamically constructed the images of the Great Wall of China.

Rather than a view on a specific landscape that occupies definite and certain physical space, the Great Wall can be better understood to be defined as a collection of features of any landscapes that have been culturally recognized as the Great Wall as there were numerous walls constructed in every dynasty except the Tang.<sup>3</sup> Similar to pyramids, they all have the same name despite their various forms and sizes. In this way, it is easier to understand the formation of symbolic images of the wall as a cultural object. The walls were typically built on mountains or near rivers to increase their defensive power. They were constructed, by stones or soil, in the form of bulwarks as an extended version of city walls. There are usually beacons located throughout the walls to send information and store military supplies.

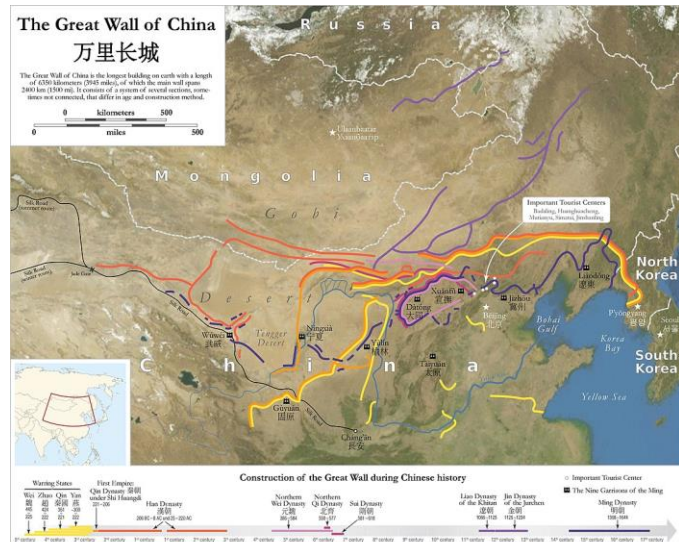


Figure 1: Map of the Great Wall of China. Image Source: Maximilian Dörrbecker, (2008) "The Great Wall of China," Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_the\\_Great\\_Wall\\_of\\_China.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Great_Wall_of_China.jpg).



Figure 2: The Great Wall of China at Jinshanling. Image Source: Severin Stalder, (2013) "The Great Wall of China at Jinshanling," Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Great\\_Wall\\_of\\_China\\_at\\_Jinshanling-edit.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Great_Wall_of_China_at_Jinshanling-edit.jpg).

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.

Most of them do not remain intact and gorgeous as the tourist attraction near Beijing which is continually maintained and repaired.<sup>4</sup>

## Construction of the First Wall

The Great Wall of China was built, as the first national project that both implemented the resource of the entire nation and influenced the nation, by a first centralized government in the area under the influence of Chinese culture. Before the construction when most people resided in separate fiefs that had nearly complete political and economic autonomy, identities were composed of recognitions regarding lived regions and the fiefs, especially for literate city dwellers and those engaged in political activities. The regional conflicts between fiefs were constantly shown in biases through fables and books.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, after the establishment of the Qin empire, the emperor enforced the unification of languages, measurement units, and rituals as well as living standards, which significantly challenged the original identities. Those identities, though still existed through rebellions, started to disappear over time. The regional conflicts amongst fiefs no longer stood while the remaining was between the “civilized” groups in central plains and the “barbarian” northern nomads. This tension provided a concrete ideological foundation for building the wall.

In addition to the military and cultural tension between the central plain and the northerners, the traditional agricultural and fort-state conventions also contributed to the idea of the Great Wall. In the original feudal value, it was considered a virtue for nobles and lords to obey the ritual regulation on the bulwark, diets, divination and sacrifice, entertainment, and so on.<sup>6</sup> The bulwark was considered to define the areas of direct control under lords whose right

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<sup>4</sup> Waldon, *Great Wall*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Jianv Tang, “Research on Geographical Bias in Country Fables in Pre-Qin Period” (Master Thesis, Anhui Normal University, 2017), 23-31.

<sup>6</sup> “The Li Ki,” trans. James Legge, in *Sacred Books of the East* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1885), 26-28.

was bestowed by the ritual and feudal system. The regulation on city walls not only restricted their sizes and appearances but reinforced the legislative and symbolic representation of the power of lords. In the era of the Qin dynasty when the emperor reformed the governmental structure with more centralized power of executioners, the emperor held an unprecedented control over the largest territory there had even been, and the straight consequence of such power was presented as a long defensive wall for the entire country. Besides, the Chinese conventional feudal culture valued the stability and social stratum as prior criteria, resulted in the important position of an explicit, protected territorial boundaries as a part of social order under the traditional stratification.<sup>7</sup> The wall implicitly defined the physical and cultural boundaries of the country at that time which was also a considerable factor of the construction of the wall.<sup>89</sup>

Establishing such a wall over 3100 miles cost enormous resources and labor. Some records show that it took one million people, one-twentieth of the population at that time, to construct the wall. Most of the laborers did not directly work on sites but supplied or built the infrastructure in the journey

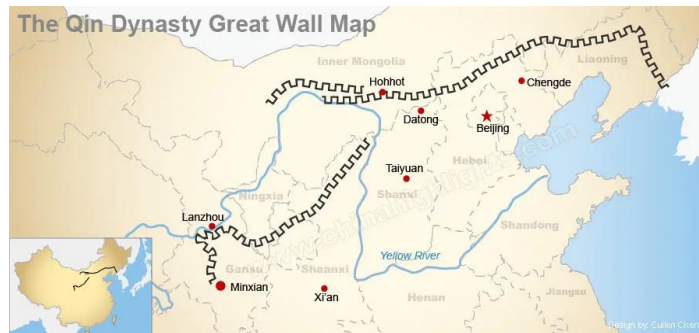


Figure 3: Map of the Great Wall in the Qin dynasty. Image Source: Cullen Chen, "The Qin Dynasty Great Wall Map," China Highlights, <https://www.chinahighlights.com/greatwall/history/qin-dynasty-wall.htm>

to the wall since it was constructed in remote, uninhabited areas.<sup>10</sup> Due to its extreme environment, a tremendous amount of laborers died or injured, and the corpses were buried in mass graves nearby or even inside the wall, which gave rise to the image of the construction as a

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 102-104.

<sup>8</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Origins of the Great Wall of China: A Frontier Concept in Theory and Practice," *Geographical Review* 27, no. 4 (1937): 535-36, 2020. doi:10.2307/209853.

<sup>9</sup> Helmut Langerbein, "Great Blunders?: The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and the Proposed United States/Mexico Border Fence," *The History Teacher* 43, no. 1 (2009): 14-15, [www.jstor.org/stable/40543351](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543351).

<sup>10</sup> Guang Sima, *Wars with the Xiongnu: A Translation from Zizhi Tongjian*, trans. Joseph Yap (United States: Author House, 2009), 159.

tragic or even sorrow, and it still lasted today in China.<sup>1112</sup> The emperor was also called tyranny in later history because of this and his other luxurious architects. There were numbers of legends remaining relevant to the construction of the wall implying the cruelty of the construction.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Great Wall before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Most perceptions of the Great Wall before the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected and were shaped by attitudes toward its functions and the problems it dealt with. The Great Wall served multiple functions, intended and unintended, and though some varied in different periods, most were perpetual.

To start with, the Great Wall was built to defend the northern nomads from invasion, and it had successfully achieved the purpose in most of the time. However, this success came with a high cost, which was the cost of maintenance and supplying the garrison. In addition, the higher the military pressure there was, the more expensive the cost was. For instance, in 1956 in the Ming dynasty, the governmental expenditure on the wall was estimated to be approximately 3.3 billion ounces of silver which were three forth of the annual spending.<sup>14</sup> As people complained about the excessive taxation due to the cost of the wall which revealed the disadvantageous military situation and defensive, passive strategies, while threatened by a strong military force outside (typically from the north), the image of the wall was sometimes associated with emotions regarding the enemies: fear, being not resigned, mortified. In the southern Song dynasty when Mongolia was invading, the presence of the wall in literature was often accompanied with

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Fryer, *The Great Wall of China* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Minglu Gao, "The Great Wall in Chinese Contemporary Art," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12, no. 3 (2004): 773-786, Project Muse.

<sup>13</sup> Bing Zehuang, "从杞梁妻到孟姜女——孟姜女哭倒长城故事的起源和嬗变," *Journal of Ningbo Polytechnic* 8, no. 4 (2004): 57-59, <https://www.ixueshu.com/document/3115782328ee1db7.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Lovell, *The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1 000 BC-AD 2000* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 299.

depictions of armies, self-expression, and desolate scenes.<sup>1516</sup> Nonetheless, during the periods when the military were powerful, the governments often played offensive strategies and refused to repair the “wall of shame” as it was considered a diplomatic failure.<sup>17</sup> When there was not intense military pressure, the Great Wall, as Lovell argued, served to expand territories by seizing and protecting the land in the south of the wall since it had to be cultivated without intervention in order for people to reside or farm.<sup>18</sup> And during the time of expansionary actions, images of the wall, at least in military poetries, were romantic and heroic. In contrast with the



Figure 4: The Great Wall at Yumen Pass in the screenshot of music video of *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty* (梦回唐朝) (1991-1992) which is one of the most influential heavy metal in China. The major theme of this music depicted the splendor and flourishing of the Tang dynasty. The scenes in the video included frontier sceneries in Tang poems and the Great Wall at Yumen Pass which is still a representation of the flourish Tang today. Image Source: Tang Dynasty, *A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty*, Magic Stone Records, 1992, 2:58. Accessed Aug 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ba4jXBnkLvo>.

perspective in the southern Song looking at the wall from the inner land which was retrospective and sentimental, the perspective in expansionary early and mid Tang dynasty, glancing over the north from the wall or even looking at the wall from the north, usually portrayed the aesthetic sceneries around the wall with a bold, optimistic narrative.<sup>19</sup> The descriptions were often accompanied with allegories, frontier sceneries, and honor.<sup>20</sup>

During the time of peace when there was no need for the Great Wall to defend enemies, the wall also had economical and administrative functions as border guards. Except trades and passages, the wall promoted the mutual influence between the nomads and Chinese. In the

<sup>15</sup> Tianxiang Wen, “至广州第七十七” in 文山先生文集 (n.p., 1455).

<sup>16</sup> You Lu, “书愤” in 剑南诗集 (n.p., ca. 1195).

<sup>17</sup> Lovell, *Great Wall*, 17, 137-157.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 20-22, 189.

<sup>19</sup> Changling Wang, “从军行七首” in ed. Yin Cao et al., 全唐诗 (Yangzhou: Jiangning Weaving Bureau, 1706).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

process of trading horses, leathers and so on for metals, pottery, and clothes, many nomadic groups got sinicized by adapting Chinese conventions and cultures. Chinese also absorbed some traditions and religions from Europe and India.<sup>21</sup> The Great Wall, from this perspective, was exotic, expressive, and communicative, and this image was frequently associated with the departure of caravans with camels from portals of the wall.

Finally, and the most importantly, for most Chinese living far away from the Great Wall in self-sufficiency, the wall was a boundary of their spiritual world, the realm of civilization. Reinforced by identities and cultures, the wall as a physical frontier represented, psychoanalytically, the range of the “discourse of the Other” which fabricated one’s world. Some part of Chinese Buddhism argued that people died outside the wall could not be reincarnated back in China.<sup>22</sup> The wall as a symbol of border between the civilized world and the uninhabited was exerted frequently in poems as well.<sup>23</sup> This view was mutually supplemented by the ethnocentrism of beliefs in Chinese cultural superiority. And it reflected the awareness and recognition of the dailiness which was expressed by orders through rituals and social norms. People lived not merely in, but also for the rituals and norms, as their ultimate pursuit of lives.<sup>24</sup> The cultural superiority of the view originated from the orderly structure itself as a form of the presence of the order.

## **The Postmodern Wall at Present**

With the technological advancement, the wall lost its military and strategical importance, and became purely symbolic while there were also various views of its symbolic meanings.

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<sup>21</sup> Fryer, *Great Wall*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Lum, *The Purple Barrier: The Story of the Great Wall of China* (New York: Hale, 1960).

<sup>23</sup> Fryer, *Great Wall*, 65.

<sup>24</sup> Hua Yang, “中国古代礼仪制度的几个特征,” *Journal of Wuhan University* 68, no. 1 (2015): 19-22, doi: 10.14086/j.cnki.wujhs.2015.01.003.



Today, its meanings, along with the process of modernization, become more abstract and meaningless in an anti-grand narrative.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the wall, from the view of the radical progressive, embodied “the ethic of subservience to patriarchal authority... in the family or state bureaucracy.”<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, from the view of artists, the wall indicated heroic resistance against imperialist invasion and this image got popularized during and after the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>26</sup>

Friedman argues that the image of the wall of anti-imperialism nationalism lasted until the end of cultural revolution in the late 70s.<sup>27</sup> As Thorp explained:

The ascendancy of the Communist Party and creation of New China are both understood as the inevitable outcome of China's historical process... [The antiquity and continuity of Chinese culture ... give China a respectable status... Creating a sense of national cultural identity requires persuading all of the non-Han peoples that they have a stake in the fate of the Han majority. If ethnic groups always place their 'Chinese' citizenship behind-their own ethnicity, the state will fragment.<sup>28</sup>

However, Gao provided another perspective of views which was similar to that of progressive scholars in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the wall was a symbol of indoctrinated, obsolete conventions which was a contradiction to the “industrial landscapes”, such as factories and railroads.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Vera Schwarcz, “A Curse on the Great Wall: The Problem of Enlightenment in Modern China,” *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (1984): 445, [www.jstor.org/stable/657460](http://www.jstor.org/stable/657460).

<sup>26</sup> Gao, *Art*, 773-774.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Friedman, “Reconstructing China's Identity: A Southern Alternative to Mao-Era Anti-Imperialist Nationalism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 70-71, doi: 10.2307/2059527.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Thorp, “Let the Past Serve the Present: The Ideological Claims of Cultural Relics Work,” *China Exchange News* 20, no. 2 (1992): 16-19.

<sup>29</sup> Gao, *Art*, 774.

Nevertheless, both Gao and Friedman agreed that those views changed rapidly after the economical reformation in the 80s.<sup>30</sup><sup>31</sup> With the decentralization of power and the rise of anthropology, archaeology, and history, the view of the Great Wall was more humanistic.<sup>32</sup> The artists presented the wall as the place of a ritual sacrifice or a social sculpture, in a sentiment of



Figure 5: The Concept 21 performance on the Great Wall (1988). Image Source: Concept 21, *The Rescue of the Death Series*, Asian Art Archive, 1988. Accessed Aug 2, 2020, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/li-xianting-archive-concept-21-21/archive/li-xianting-archive-concept-21-21/object/the-rescue-of-the-death-series>.

solemn expressions. Such view, though being different from and even opposite to other views, remained as a component of the grand narrative since the wall was expressed and interacted within certain sentiments or modes.

The narrative started to change in the 90s. Following the pace of the western art, the field of art in China also shifted to material, industrial concerns from ritual, ideological expressions. The Great Wall, in artworks, was no longer located in specific positions, but in streets, houses, and its images turned to be “reproducible, fragmented, and portable.”<sup>34</sup> Besides, in the entertainment of the new generation, its images ceased to be framed by bestowed, learned sights and narratives. For example, in the music video of Black Panther’s *Shameful* in 1991, the images

Joseph Beuys’ Shaman art style. Gao commented these artworks as the “ritual attempted to bridge the gap between grand historical memory (a “meta-memory”) and the individuals’ ephemeral experiences.”<sup>33</sup> Even amongst the avant-garde artists in the 80s, the wall still displayed its historical and political significance through the

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Friedman, *Reconstructing*, 80-82.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Gao, *Art*, 774.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 782.

of the Great Wall, along with images of other places owning cultural or political significance, did not have any meanings rather than merely being a simple, purely historic landscape. Some critics about this song and the band even began to refer them by the Great Wall, and since that time, the wall finally could be in any forms and in any references.<sup>35</sup> Nowadays,



Figure 6: The Great Wall in the screenshot of music video of *Shameful*(无地自容) by Black Panther (1991) which was one of the most influential rock music in China. Image Source: Black Panther, *Shameful* in *Heibao*, Magic Stone Records, 4:24, 1992. Accessed Aug 2, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YxjRbs0Gsg>.

with the universalness of higher education and the emergence of social medium, the trend of the dissolution of meanings of the Great Wall does and will continue in a more popularized extent.

## Conclusion

The Great Wall of China, which had been constructed throughout the Chinese history, was viewed from various perspectives in different contexts, resulting in a complicated and even controversial image today. The idea of the initial wall was founded by feudal ideologies, political and cultural unification, and the racial tension. The diplomatic, economical, and ideological functions of the Great Wall shaped the perspectives and the images of the wall. And in modern era with the emergence of more humanistic views, its image has ceased alienation and became a primitive landscape in some perspectives.

The Great Wall is not and should not be considered as only a tourist site or a solemn, historical figure, the examination and study of the historicity of images of a historical site like the Great Wall could contribute to a better understanding of the general as well as the specific

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<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Campbell, "Rock 'n' Roll with Chinese Characteristics: Nirvana Behind the Great Wall," *Popmatters*, October 16, 2011, <https://www.popmatters.com/rock-n-roll-chinese-characteristics-2495934470.html>.

languages and cultures.

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