

**Chinese Civilisation:  
The Great Wall**

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**CHIN 112: Introduction to Chinese Civilisation**  
**June 5, 2007**

# Chinese Civilisation: The Great Wall

I struggled to find a specific topic on the Great Wall for this essay because the massiveness of its history, myths and culture would take an immense amount of study and an essay of greater than 1500 words to do it justice. But after my recent travels to the Great Wall I am mesmerised and intrigued by its beauty yet its harshness, its enormity yet its smallness, its significance yet its nothingness; its continuation yet its intermittence; its power yet its weakness; its humaneness yet its immorality; its history and its myths. So what does this Great Wall mean and does it define Chinese Civilisation?

Wànlǐ Chángchéng, literally translated "the long wall of 10,000 Li,<sup>1</sup>" is a series of stone and earth fortifications in the North of China. More commonly known in English as the Great Wall, it is the largest human-made structure ever built - its length over 6,400km and an average width of 6.5m, it covers an area greater than 4,160,000m<sup>2</sup>. The history of the Wall is immense and just as Chinese Civilisation is the world's longest continuous civilisation; the construction of the Great Wall was a steady and **continuous** development over 2,000 years. The earliest walls date back to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century BC built by primitive settlers to protect their settlements. During the Autumn, Spring and Warring States periods a series of defensive walls or military fortifications were built to defend the seven states of Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei and Qin. These were separate fortifications and were not connected. First emperor Qin Shi Huang (221-207 BC) dismantled the old walls and reinforced and built new sections of walls over an extensive nine years to double the length of the Wall to 5,000km, protecting the Northern frontier against the nomads. The Han dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) extended the Wall, one section crossing the

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<sup>1</sup> The "Li" is a traditional Chinese unit of distance, which has varied considerably over time but now has a standardised length of 500 meters or half a kilometre.

Gobi desert, taking it to 10,000km in length. These early Walls were constructed from layers of bundled twigs, six inches thick, alternated with thinner layers of coarse clay or gravel<sup>2</sup>. The Ming period (1369-1644) was when today's Great Wall framework originated. The traditional earth walls disappeared and in a few decades had to be rebuilt. The Walls that exist today were built in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and are made from stone, and became elaborate structures with watch towers and crenellations. So the Great Wall is historically continuous from 202 BC to the present day however the physical wall itself is not continuous, it is not a single structure and it is **intermittent**. Nathan Gray<sup>3</sup>, a fellow Wellingtonian recently walked the entire length of the Wall over 256 days and writes of the struggle and difficulty to actually find the Wall due to the disintegration of parts of the structure over time but also because the Wall was never a continuous fortification<sup>4</sup>.

So what is the **significance** of the Great Wall? It had a strategic geography and a single purpose to defend the agrarian culture in the south from the nomadic culture in the north. By the 17<sup>th</sup> Century the Ming had created a **power** to be reckoned with - a military frontier and a national boundary marked by a Great Wall. There were other views of the Wall - Professor Owen Lattimore theorised that the walls were built for "keeping in, not keeping out"<sup>5</sup> and some Chinese saw the Wall to lock them in, away from foreigners and from each other. Given its main objective as a defence mechanism, it is ironic that the Great Wall wasn't actually so great or powerful, and its **weakness** was it didn't protect the agrarian culture from foreign invaders in 1644 when the Manchu's conquered Peking. From then on, the Wall no longer held its

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<sup>2</sup> M, Aurel Stein, *Ruins of Desert Cathay* (London: Macmillan, 1912), II, p63

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Hoturoa Gray, *First Pass Under Heaven* (NZ: Penguin, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: from history to myth* (Cambridge University Press, 1990) p28

<sup>5</sup> Owen Lattimore, *Origins of the Great Wall of China: A Frontier Concept in Theory and Practice*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) p112 and 98

original significance - it didn't mark a military or national boundary as the Manchu's held the territory on both sides. French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1774) wrote that the wall had been useless against China's enemies<sup>6</sup> and the Chinese looked at the Wall as **nothingness**; "with perfect indifference; and few... seemed to pay the least attention to it."<sup>7</sup>

The Wall was criticised for its **immorality** when hundreds of thousands of Chinese peasantry men were sent away to build the walls, laying one building block on top of another in an uninhabited region of the mountains, hundreds of miles from their homes, for months or even years at a time. Five hundred metres could be completed in something like five years, by which time the forced labourers were too exhausted and had lost all faith in themselves, in the building, and in the world. Stories tell of how the labourers who died through exhaustion were buried within the Great Wall. There is also the popular myth of Meng Chiang Nu who took clothes to her husband constructing the wall, however she was too late as time she arrived her husband had already died. Her grief causes the wall to break open and reveal her husband's bones which she takes back for a proper burial. Another myth exists of General Meng Tien who after the death of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang, was ordered to kill himself to remove him from the political scene. The story goes that Meng said just before poisoning himself "I have made ramparts and ditches over more than ten thousand li, and in this distance it is impossible that I have not cut through the veins of the earth. This is my crime."<sup>8</sup> The grand historian, Sima Qian asserts that Meng met death "because he conscripted forced labour and did nothing to alleviate the distress of the common people, support the aged, care for the orphaned, or busy

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Waldron, p207

<sup>7</sup> George L. Staunton, An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China (London: G. Nicol, 1797), 184

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Waldron, p195

himself with restoring harmony among the masses."<sup>9</sup> This immorality opposes the Wall's embodiment of the Confucian values of peace and harmony, endeavouring to prevent chaos; **humaneness**; and virtue. As a result the Wall became a negative symbol of oppression, cruelty, despotic rule and political failure.

But now, despite the negativity within China, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Westerners are fascinated by this Wall as a "wonder of the world"; have inaccurately claimed it to be visible from the moon; and remain in awe with multitudes of tourists flocking to China everyday to view this grand structure. Voltaire (1694-1774) "described it in detail as a great feat of engineering superior to the pyramids of Egypt by its utility as by its **immensity**."<sup>10</sup> Arthur Waldron states that "the Great Wall has been transformed, over the last century or so, into China's unofficial **national symbol**. It is the focus of pride and patriotism at home, and the object of awe and respect abroad."<sup>11</sup> "Like the physical wall, the mythical wall is the product of the ongoing process of Chinese state and national definition."<sup>12</sup> The Wall is a symbol of the magnificence and ancient heritage of China and it also enhances foreign relations, as by admiring the wall one is paying homage to the Chinese people and their country. As US President Richard Nixon said from atop the Badaling Great Wall in February 1972 "this is a Great Wall and it had to be built by a great people". More recently it is the underlying theme of songs, poetry and paintings. Mao Zedong had a saying, "You're not a real man if you haven't climbed the Great Wall". He also writes about the Wall in the "Long March" and in the famous poem "Snow." Mao's Successor Deng Xiaoping once stated "Let us love our

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<sup>9</sup> Derk Bodde, *Statemen, Patriot and General in Ancient China*, p64

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Waldron, p207

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Waldron, p169

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Waldron, p169

China and restore our Great Wall.”<sup>13</sup> Since then there has been a campaign to survey the wall, rebuild damaged parts, continue research and improve the preservation process, further illustrating its role as a symbol of modern china. And what does the Wall mean to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese? They are proud of their ancient civilisation, their truly world class Wall and its authenticity; that it is real and legitimate.

So that brings me to my remarkable experience at the Huangyaguan Great Wall or Yellow Cliffs pass, a 3 hour drive north east of Beijing in the province of Tianjin. Huangyaguan is more remote and not one of the usual tourist sections of the Wall making the experience even more special. This section possesses antiquity, grandness, steepness and gracefulness, and it is regarded as an 'Impregnable Pass' in Tianjin. My challenge was to run the gruelling section of the Great Wall twice in a 42km marathon. Two days prior to the race I experienced the Wall for the very first time. Its grand scale and magnitude oozed an indeterminable power. The Wall, thick and grey, has a very **harsh beauty** about its presence. Its majesty in the serene surroundings puts one in a trance, the desire to stand still and lose oneself, breathe deep and feel the moment. Long before I arrived at the Great Wall, I could easily see where we were heading and immediately off the bus I stood still, frozen by the magnitude of the Wall. I felt so insignificant beneath the towering mountain, viewing from east to west the Wall meandering its way along the craggy mountain ridges until it drops out of sight over yet another mountain. It's an amazing sight and there's no doubting why it's the theme of many songs, poetry and paintings. In 3.5 kilometres I clambered up and down a huge 1800 steps. I walked the steep steps ascending 80 degree slopes, some knee high, and ran the flatter steps, some two at a time. On

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<sup>13</sup> China Reconstructs 34, 3 March 1985

some of the more dangerous descents with no wall on one side and a potential free fall we were assisted by temporary ropes covered in material attached to the Wall. I ran through 14 watch towers, some fully enclosed while others had no roof or superstructure. In the past in these watch towers wolf dung was burned to create smoke signals to pass on military messages between towers as to invaders' whereabouts. This enabled the Chinese to communicate messages for hundreds of kilometres in a matter of hours. Guafu Tower (or Widow Tower) is a square watchtower where it was said that during the Ming Dynasty twelve widows of frontier soldiers donated their pension and built this tower. It was named the Widow Tower as a memorial to these women and their spirit. After my strenuous run I have a vast appreciation and respect for the engineers and masons who built the great wall. I agree with Voltaire, it truly is a great feat.

In conclusion, I believe the Great Wall is just but one of China's diverse achievements but it does also symbolise Chineseness with distinctive characteristics of Chinese civilisation. Some of these are the Wall's dynamic, ever changing form; its continuity over vast periods of time; its periods of stability, yet periods of chaos; its strong ideals of social harmony; its power and authority; the interrelatedness and belief that everything is without priority but necessary; the community working as a collective; and Confucian values of belief in the greater good, humaneness, and virtue.

The Great Wall is an awe inspiring achievement of the Chinese. It has been recognised as a UNESCO World heritage site so it will continue to be conserved as a site of outstanding cultural importance to the common heritage of mankind. Without the Great Wall, China could have been conquered by the nomads as early as the Warring States period and the China that we know today may not have existed. Personally, it really was a

remarkable experience to be up close on the Wall, to feel its spirit, to conquer the challenge, to revel in the success of ancient China, but also to realise and appreciate the tragedy of the forced labouring of the Ming Dynasty to construct Wànlǐ Chángchéng.

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