
The Great Wall of Ancient China: Did the Benefits Outweigh the Costs?

EV

Photo by William Lindsey.



A section of the Great Wall built with the pounded-earth technique.

Overview: The Great Wall of China is often regarded as one of the man-made wonders of the world. It was built over a 2,000-year period, and GPS satellites have measured its various sections to be 5,488 miles long. Such a wall did not come cheap in terms of lives lost and time and money spent. This Mini-Q focuses on two of the early Chinese wall-building dynasties, the Qin (“chin”; 221–206 BCE) and the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). It asks if all the effort was worth it.

The Documents:

- Document A: The Great Wall of Qin and Han China (map)
- Document B: Relations with the Xiongnu (“shung-nu”) Mongols
- Document C: Tribute to the Xiongnu (chart)
- Document D: Silk Road Trade
- Document E: Peasants and Soldiers
- Document F: Poetry of the Great Wall

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

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In 221 BCE, a local ruler from the Chinese state of Qin (“chin”) violently conquered many towns and states and merged them into a large, new kingdom. That kingdom was the beginning of the China we know today. This ruler, who came to be known as **Emperor Qin**, died 11 years later, but in that short, brutal time, he directed a number of grand projects. Using forced labor, he built roads, constructed a huge palace, and had artists make a **terra cotta army** of 8,000 larger-than-life soldiers to accompany him to the next world. He also ordered the construction of a great wall.

Before that time, the Chinese had built walls to protect individual towns and cities. What made Qin’s project different was the sheer size of it. The written record about Qin’s wall is very sparse, but the ancient stories, poems and artifacts that remain help us tell at least a part of the story.

Cruel rulers invite rebellion, and Qin was cruel. In 206 BCE, his successors were overthrown by the **Han Dynasty**, which ruled for the next 400 years. Like the Qin, the Han were concerned with border security. Especially bothersome were the **Xiongnu** (“shung-nu”) Mongols, who lived beyond China’s northern border. Like the Qin, the Han decided that one way to deal with the Xiongnu was to keep them out with a wall.

The Qin and Han recipe for building a dirt **hang-t’u** wall was fairly simple:

1. Construct a wall frame roughly 30’ long, 25’ wide, 20’ high.
2. Spread a layer of dirt within the frame.
3. Pound the dirt until it is 6”–8” thick.
4. Repeat with as many layers as necessary to fill the frame.
5. Remove frame and repeat process for several hundred miles.

At this point, two things need to be made clear: The Great Wall was never one continuous structure. What we call the Great Wall is really a series of walls constructed over a period of 2,500 years. When each dynasty came into power, workers connected previously built walls, repaired and extended them, or tore them down and built anew. It is also important to note that the beautiful, winding Great Wall that many of us have in our minds was built not by the Qin or the Han, but by the Ming Dynasty, which ruled 1,500 years after the Han. Our focus is on the earlier walls.

The walls constructed by the Qin and the

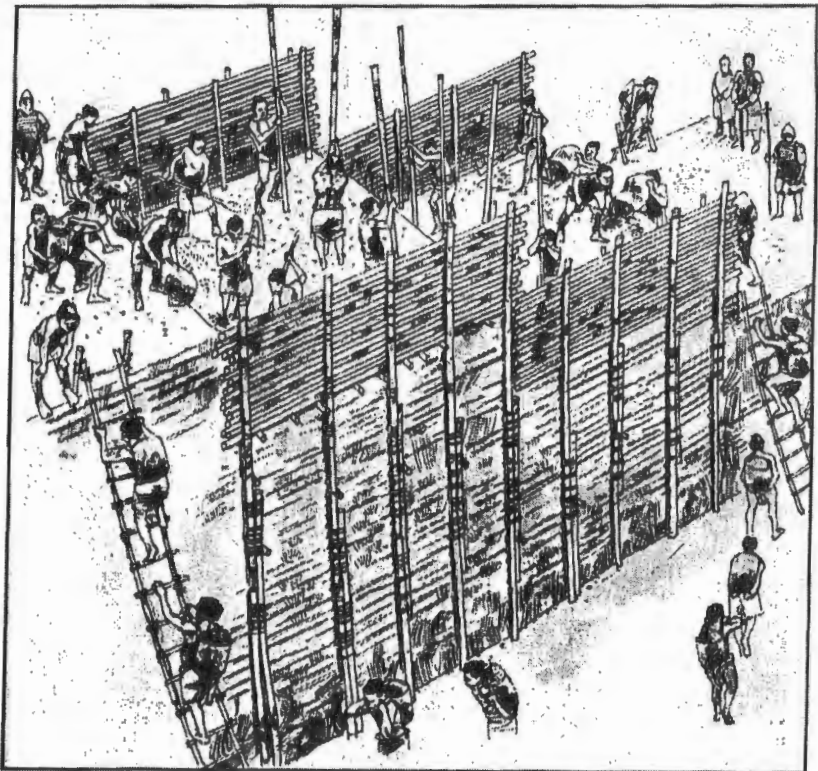


Illustration: Arthur Cotterell, *Ancient China*, Knopf, 1994.

Han were enormous projects. They were built to increase security, impress visitors and enhance the glory of China. However, the walls also required much sacrifice on the part of the Chinese people. Which brings us back to our question: *The Great Wall of Ancient China: Did the benefits outweigh the costs?*

Background Essay Questions

1. What were the first two important wall-building dynasties?
2. How many years did each of these dynasties last?
3. Was there one Great Wall of China? Explain.
4. What is the connection between the wall and the Mongols?
5. What was the primary building ingredient of a hang-t'u wall section?
6. Define these terms:

Emperor Qin

terra cotta army

Han Dynasty

Xiongnu

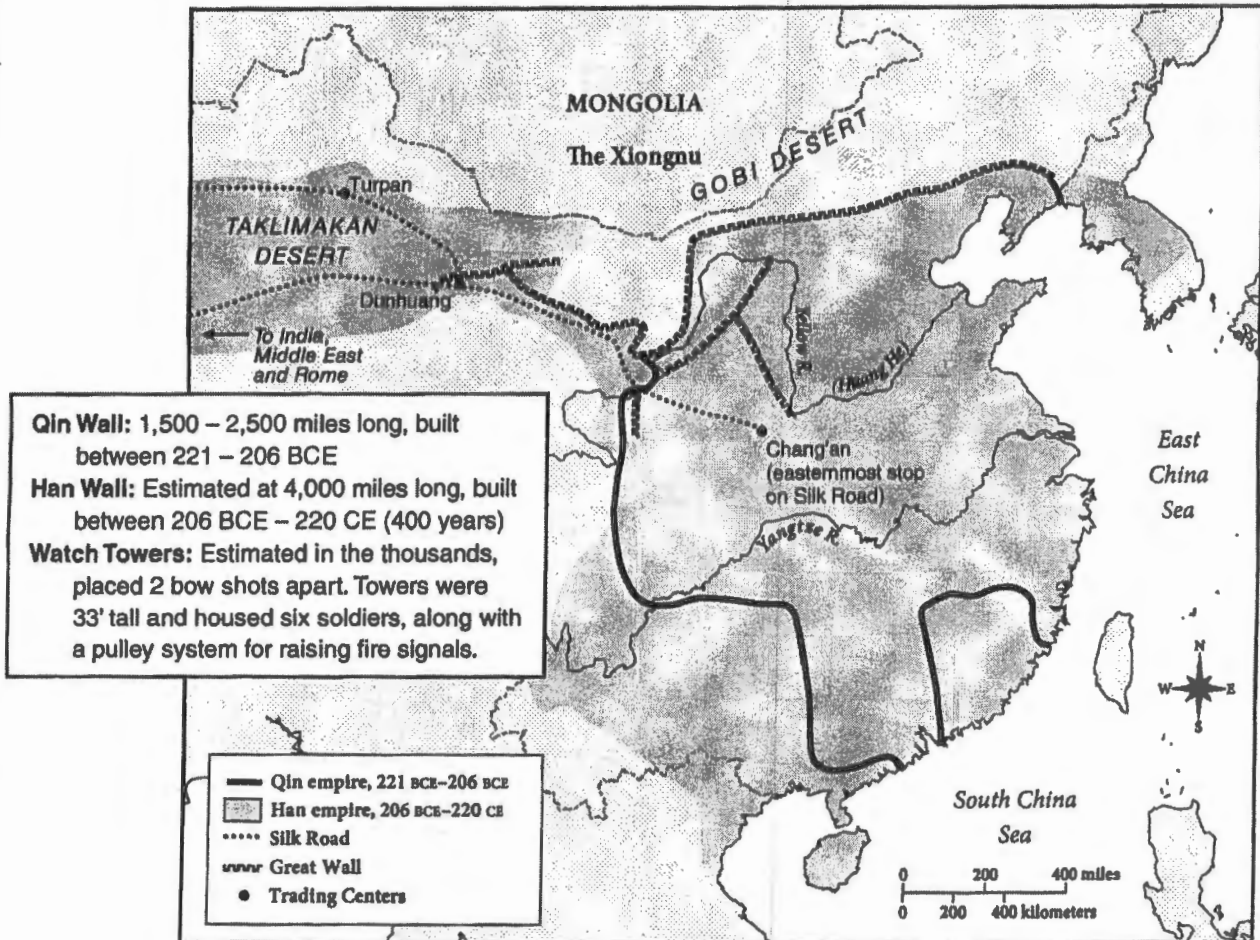
hang t'u

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- c. 1500 BCE** – Early wall building using tamped earth process
 - 221 – 206 BCE** – Qin Empire. Massive wallbuilding project on northern frontier
 - 206 BCE – 220 CE** – Han Empire
 - 200 BCE** – Victories by Xiongnu Mongols near and beyond northern walls
 - 141 – 87 BCE** – Serious wall restoration projects under Han Emperor Wu
 - 1368 – 1644 CE** – Ming Empire. Huge stone wall building projects in northeast China

Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

The Great Wall of Qin and Han China



Document Analysis

1. Examine the map and list three bodies of water, two deserts and three major trading centers.
2. Many Chinese merchants traveled only as far as Dunhuang on the Silk Road. Can you give two reasons why?
3. The information box says that the Han added 4,000 miles of wall. Refer to the mileage scale. How can this be true?
4. Judging from the map, how might China have benefited from building the Great Wall?
5. Is there anything on the map that indicates there may have been some costs involved in building the wall?

Document B

Source: Excerpts of a letter written by Chao Cuo, Imperial Secretary of the Han Dynasty, to Emperor Wen, 169 BCE.

Note: Chao Cuo, an advisor to several Han emperors, was highly respected for his ideas about the military and border defense. The recommendations made in this letter were adopted.

The Xiongnu live on meat and cheese, wear furs, and possess no house or field. They move like birds and animals in the wild. They stop only at places which abound in grass and water, want of which will start them moving again. Today the Xiongnu are herding at several places and hunting along the frontiers.... It will be profitable to you to dispatch generals and officials together with troops to govern the frontier areas. People [slaves, convicts, and willing peasants] should be selected to settle along the border areas permanently, who can set up families and grow food grains while getting prepared against possible invasion by the Xiongnu.

For the immigrants in such border areas, the government will construct walled cities, well protected by high walls, deep moats, catapults, and thorns. Each city, along strategic points and thoroughfares, will be designed to hold no fewer than one thousand households.... Each walled city will have an inner wall and an outer wall 150 paces about 209 meters apart. Each residential area in the outer-wall area is to be surrounded by "sandy fields" ... to detect the intrusion of enemies in the night [Intruders will leave footprints in the soil.]

Document Analysis

1. The Chinese notion of "barbarian" was anyone who wasn't Chinese. What characteristics of the Xiongnu made them seem barbarian to Chao Cuo?
2. What does Chao Cuo recommend to keep the Xiongnu from invading?
3. What do you think would be more effective in discouraging a Xiongnu invasion, walls or a large Chinese population along the border? Explain your thinking.
4. What benefits are suggested by the document?
5. What costs are suggested by the document?

Document C

Source: Chart created from various sources.

Note: A tribute can simply be a gift. It can also be a kind of bribe.

Tribute Paid by the Han to the Xiongnu Mongols

Year (BCE)	Silk Floss (in catties)	Silk Fabric (in bales)
51	1,500	8,000
49	2,000	9,000
33	4,000	18,000
25	5,000	20,000
1	7,500	30,000

Catty: In Asia, a unit of weight equal to about 1.5 pounds

Bale: A large bundle. In China today, a silk bale weighs about 132 pounds.



Photo by William Lindesay

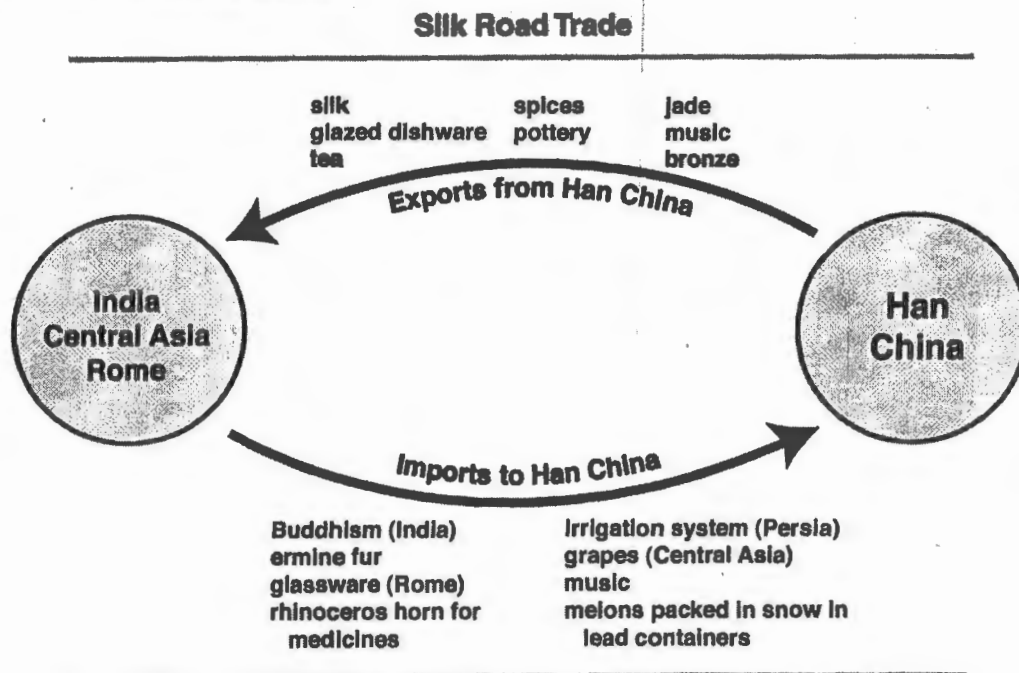
A section of the ancient Han wall.

Document Analysis

1. According to the chart, who was giving what to whom?
2. Between 51 BCE and 1 BCE, what happened to the amount of silk that was given?
3. Judging from both the chart and the photo, how can you use this document to argue that building the Great Wall was worth the cost?
4. Judging from both the chart and the photo, how can you use this document to argue that building the Great Wall was not worth the cost?

Document D

Source: Chart created from various sources.



Source: Tim McNeese, *The Great Wall of China*, Lucent Books, Inc., 1997.

The [Han] era began like most other periods in Chinese history—with warfare. Wu Di, the sixth emperor of the Han dynasty, established peaceful relations with the nomadic Xiongnu people of the north only after conquering them. But once this had been accomplished, Wu Di used the Wall to aid in expanding China's influence in the world through trade with other nations. He extended the Wall three hundred miles to the west and added a chain of watchtowers beyond the Wall's end. The Wall and watchtowers followed the famed Silk Road that served as China's link to trade with the west....

Wu Di assigned thousands of soldiers to Wall outposts and watchtowers to protect the merchants and caravans traveling along the trade routes.

Document Analysis

1. The most important export from Han China was silk. According to the chart, what trade items might the Han have received in return?
2. How far did the Han emperor Wu Di extend the wall, and why?
3. How would you describe Wu Di's attitude about China's relationship with the rest of the world?
4. How can you use this document to show the benefits of building the Great Wall?
5. How can you use this document to argue that building the Great Wall was not worth the cost?

Document E

Source: List compiled from various sources, including legends and folk songs as well as historical documents.

The Human Cost of the Great Wall

Soldiers

Qin Dynasty

- 300,000 men from Qin's army ordered to build and guard the wall until complete
- Soldiers forced to leave families and villages for several years
- Convict labor sent to do much of work.
- According to poetry and legend, tens of thousands of soldiers died from hunger, sickness, and extreme heat or cold. No exact numbers of deaths are available.

Han Dynasty

- Soldiers ordered to work on wall for two to five years
- Manned the wall and outposts in desolate western frontier
- Heavy fighting against the Xiongnu during much of 2nd century BCE. One campaign in 104 BCE reported 80 percent Han casualties.

Note: For all soldiers, loneliness and boredom was a problem.

Peasants (Qin and Han)

- During the short ten-year period of Qin wall-building, there was heavy use of peasant laborers, who worked seven-day work weeks with little food. During the eight months of winter, temperatures reached 20- to 30-below zero, Fahrenheit.
- In the Han period, peasant farm families were forced to move north and west both to colonize the Chinese frontier and to build some 4,000 miles of earthen wall. Not as brutal as Qin conditions, but life was still very hard. Many peasants and soldiers attempted to move across the border to live with the Xiongnu.

Document Analysis

1. Name the two categories of people who worked on the Great Wall.
2. According to the document, what evidence is there that conditions were harsh for Qin soldiers sent to the wall?
3. According to the document, what difficulties were faced by Han soldiers sent to the wall?
4. How could you use this document to argue that building the Great Wall was worth the cost?
5. How could you use this document to argue that building the Great Wall was not worth the cost?

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Document F

Source: A Chinese poem describing the life of the Han cavalry (horseback) soldier. The author and date are unknown.

*We fight south of the wall, we die north of the wall;
If we die, unburied, in the wilds, our corpses will feed the crows.
The waters run deep and turbulent, the reeds grow dark and murky;
The cavalry fight to the death, their exhausted steeds pace up and down,
Whinnying.
If the rice isn't harvested, how will you eat?
Although we are willing to serve loyally, how can we live this way?
You will be remembered, worthy, honest soldiers.
We sally forth at dawn, but do not return at dusk.*

Document Analysis

1. What would cause Han cavalry soldiers to die north of the wall?
2. What might explain why the rice in China is not being harvested?
3. If the rice is not harvested, who is likely to go hungry?
4. Explain the line, "We sally forth at dawn, but do not return at dusk."
5. How can you use this poem to argue that the Great Wall was not worth the cost?