The Great Wall of China Does Not Exist

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Dear reader,

This is a chapter on the idea of the “Great Wall of China” which is to go into a book on “walls and walling” edited by Agnese Horvath and Marius Bența and forthcoming with Routledge. The Great Wall of China, it turns out, does not exist.

There are many walls in China but there is no “Great Wall” understood as a unified structure built for a given purpose. The Great Wall is a social rather than a physical construction erected not in China itself but in the minds of Europeans. The Great Wall existed because the Europeans decided that it had to exist, and before long they had found similar walls everywhere throughout the country. In early modern Europe, when mercantilism was the reigning doctrine, the Great Wall was admired; in the nineteenth-century, when ideas of free exchange were dominant, it was vilified. The eventual result of this work of the imagination was an aggressive European posture and a policy of imperialism.

Please quote as:


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yours,

Erik
The Great Wall of China Does Not Exist

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Walls are distinct, man-made, features of an environment, and to the extent that they block our way or our vision they are impossible to ignore. As such they are inherently in need of an explanation. Yet walls can be built with many purposes in mind and serve several functions, and functions, moreover, often vary over time. Defense and protection may be the most obvious reasons. A tall, solid, wall appears impassable in its concrete concreteness, yet walls, no matter how high, are never actually all that daunting. If we keep on moving, keep on exploring, we will sooner or later find a way around them, across or under them; a gate will be found ajar, a tower unmanned or a guard who can be bribed.¹ Walls in the end are nothing in themselves and only something as a part of a tactic, but tactics often change — for technological reasons, or political or cultural — and the walls, as a result, will be rendered obsolete and useless. Walls are not final conclusions as much as temporary statements awaiting refutation. As a result, walls will tell us a lot about the outlook of the societies that built them. Walls tell stories about presumptions and premonitions, fears and ambitions; about who we take ourselves to be and how we relate to others. Yet as far as story-tellers go, they are annoyingly silent. Walls cannot talk; they stonewall us; and it does not help if we plead with, or wail before, them.

Consider the Great Wall of China.² As history textbooks explain, the Great Wall was built to keep the barbarians at bay. North of the wall the climate was too arid for agriculture and the only people who could survive here were pastoralists with their grazing

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¹ Lattimore, “The Frontier in History,” 486.
herds. This was where Chinese people, some time in prehistory, came to stop in their gradual northward expansion. In order to protect themselves from raids they built a wall which protected their lives and their culture. Culture, after all, refers to “cultivation,” that is, to the “tilling of the land.” Just as walls may protect our crops from animals, thieves and inclement weather, they can protect our culture from whatever comes towards it from the outside — foreign influences, barbarian hordes, the winds of change. This is how Chinese people always have defended themselves, the first European visitors concluded; the Chinese are inherently a wall-building people and the Great Wall is their pièce de résistance. By limiting trade and keeping the country secure, the Chinese protected their wealth and their way of life. We have no use for Facebook and Twitter, as today’s Chinese leaders explain when implementing the “Golden Shield Project,” intended to protect their culture, and their people, from the rest of the Internet. Appropriately enough, the policy is commonly referred to as the fānghuǒ chángchéng, “the Great Firewall of China.”

This agricultural mind-set contrasts sharply with a commercial. As Adam Smith explained, a nation is wealthy not because it has gathered a lot of treasure but because of what it can produce. Productivity requires specialization and specialization requires exchange. The larger the market, and the more unimpeded the exchange, the more far-reaching the division of labor and, ceteris paribus, the more productive we become. Walls, from this point of view, are an abomination. Walls do not keep our wealth in but they keep exchange out; they limit the division of labor and they lower productivity. Moreover, walls block access to new ideas, to the latest technological advances, medical discoveries and scientific breakthroughs. Walls, in short, limit access to civilization. Thus, although culture may require walls to be erected, civilization requires walls to come down. A country which hides behind walls can never be civilized.

3 The latest news on the official Chinese Internet policy is available at http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/internet-control/
4 Ringmar, “Free Trade by Force,” 5–32.
This is why China is so backward, Europeans came to conclude in the nineteenth-century, once free-trade doctrines had become the official wisdom. This is why China's economy has stalled and why Chinese people are so ignorant, so secretive and so corrupt. And this is also why the country seemed to be perpetually stuck in past tense. History, the Europeans pointed out, is a matter of progress, but since nothing in China ever changes, China has no history.\(^5\) The Great Wall was the perfect symbol of this mind-set. And, what was particularly infuriating to the Europeans, the Chinese utterly failed to understand the predicament they were in. “If they are ever to be further improved,” as John Stuart Mill concluded in *On Liberty* in 1859, referring to the Chinese, “it must be by foreigners.”\(^6\) The assistance which China required was given in the First and the Second Opium Wars, 1839-42 and 1856-60, respectively. Positioning their rifled ordnance facing China's walls, the Chinese were forced to open up to the outside world.\(^7\) Soon Europeans goods and ideas flooded in, spreading civilization while destroying Chinese culture and uprooting its people.

Considering all that we think we know about the Great Wall of China, it is surprising to learn that there is no such thing. The Great Wall of China does not exist. There are many walls scattered across the plains of northern China, and bits of walls, and remnants of former walls, but there is no “Great Wall of China” understood as a unified project constructed at a particular time with a particular object in mind. The Great Wall is not a physical as much as a social construction. What is constructed can be deconstructed, and such deconstruction is what we will engage in here. As we will discover, the irony, and the tragedy, is that the Great Wall of China, and the wall-building mind-set of the Chinese, existed no where else but in the imagination of the Europeans. The Great Wall justified

admiration as long as walls were admired, but once walls came to be seen as an abomination, it became a pretext for European imperialism.

Wall building in China

Despite its ethnic and linguistic diversity, the Chinese empire was always, officially at least, based on only one socio-economic model. The subjects of the emperor were all farmers who worked on small plots of land, growing millet in the north and rice in the south. To compensate for the dearth of land, they supplied other factors of production; notably their own labor and that of their family members, but they also relied heavily on artificial irrigation and on fertilizers. The imperial state glorified the farmers while exploiting them for corvée labor and taxes. It is the farmers who feed us all, Confucian rhetoric proclaimed, and farming is the only truly productive occupation. Yet as each dynasty was acutely aware, their ability to maintain themselves in power depended more than anything on their ability to keep the farmers in their places.

There was an obvious geographical limit to the feasibility of this model. On the steppes of Eurasia — covering much of the landmass from north-west of Beijing all the way to Hungary — there was not enough rainfall to sustain agriculture, no large rivers and no means of irrigation. This was instead where the nomads lived. Although the climate was arid, there was plenty of grass on which their animals could feed and the nomads compensated for the lack of water by means of other factors of production — notably land, which was over-abundant. When the grass in one pasture had run out they simply moved to another pasture. The pastoral economy, to put it differently, was highly specialized. Since the nomads produced only what they were best at producing — meat, wool, horses — they required others to provide them with everything else that they needed. That is,

9 Ibid., 477–81.
10 Khazanov, Nomads and the Outside World.
they had to trade, or failing that they reserved the right to raid their farming neighbors. The perennial problem of imperial Chinese history, from the third century BCE onwards, was how to deal with this recurring menace. There were three main options: to subdue the nomads by offensive military means; to concede to their demands and involve them in exchange; or to repel them by means of defensive arrangements, including walls.¹¹

The first option, a military offensive, was never going to be easy. The terrain which separated the Chinese heartlands from the steppes was flat and open and difficult to defend. Moreover, the nomads were the vastly more efficient warriors. They only had cavalry, no infantry or supply train, and they were highly mobile. The nomads could quickly assemble in force at a certain location, make a strike or a breech, and then just as quickly disperse again. Or they could outflank an enemy who came marching towards them and attack them from the back. Since they had no particular territory to defend, the nomads made no difference between offensive and defense warfare. To retreat was not humiliating, but instead an opportunity to outrun, or ambush, any imperial soldiers who pursued them. The only way to defeat such an enemy, the Chinese eventually discovered, was to fight in the same manner.¹² But for this to be possible, the Chinese needed a powerful, horse-based, army guided by entirely different tactics than previously and they needed knowledge of the steppe and its people. The Tang dynasty, 618–907 CE, were successful in this regard, but they were famously open to outside influences and foreign ideas.¹³ The Yuan dynasty, 1271–1368 CE, and the Qing dynasty, 1644-1912, were also good at dealing with the nomads but then again the Yuan emperors where Mongols and the Qing emperors Manchu — both peoples with their origin on the steppes.

¹² Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*.
The second option, trade, was much what the nomads themselves would have preferred, and this was also what they repeatedly asked for. The problem was only that the Chinese authorities regarded trade as a concession. We have everything a person might require within our own borders, Confucian scholars argued, and this is why we never have to leave our country; foreigners, by contrast, come here since they have needs that cannot be fulfilled at home. The Chinese traded with these visitor to be sure, but out of a sense of magnanimity and in order to bring them into their own cultural sphere. There was never a difference, in Chinese minds, between trade and the giving of tributes, and the gifts that were exchanged were designed to institutionalize the inferior position of the barbarians. Such condescension was not appreciated by the peoples of the steppe and, as they explained, they needed more goods than what was available to them within the tribute system. And, since they were in a position to back up their demands with force, one Chinese concession would easily lead to another and before long the imperial authorities would be completely at their mercy. This, at least, is what Confucian hardliners at court argued. “The situation of the empire may be described as like that of a person hanging upside down.”

The third, defensive, alternative, which included wall-building, was the fallback option. This is what you did if you were too weak or too timid to go on the offensive and too proud to make concessions. Defense was no one’s favorite option but instead what you ended up doing when you had to do something without knowing quite what. Although walls were unlikely to actually stop an invader, there was a variety of other roles they could play. In fact, from a military point of view, walls are best understood not as

17 Memorial by Jia Yi of the Han dynasty, quoted in ibid., 41; See further De Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 166–68.
means of excluding an enemy as much as man-made obstacles that can help reshape the layout of a battlefield.19 Walls are like speed bumps in a road, designed to slow down an enemy, and thereby structures along which armies can be organized. In these respects they are more similar to ramparts or trenches. Moreover, in many cases walls were built mainly as a means of connecting already existing military installations to each other, making it possible to move troops securely from one position to the next. Or you could place your troops outside of the wall and use it as a way to protect your flank. In addition to these military uses, walls made political statements. A wall, even a scalable one, is a manifestation of power. Powerful rulers have powerful walls and the walls of the emperor of China had to be very impressive indeed — at least the walls built in places were people were most likely to see them. In addition, walls can be constructed as a way to stake out a claim; in order to let everyone know how far our imperial ambitions reach and what we one day would like to accomplish. As a result of this mixing of military and political aims, walls can at the same time be part of a defensive and an offensive strategy.

It was for such a variety of reasons that walls came to be constructed in northern China already in the sixth century BCE, and why walls intermittently were constructed by any dynasty that failed to come up with other ways of dealing with the nomads. Qin Shihuang, the First Emperor, in the third century BCE, was one such wall-builder but his walls were made of mud and they quickly deteriorated.20 Subsequent dynasties occasionally embarked on similar projects, but most of them did not. There were no walls to stop the Mongols from invading China in the 1270s and when Marco Polo return to Venice in 1295 he said nothing about walls. It was only in the latter part of the Ming

20 Subsequent references to these walls were made above all in order to emphasize the hardship their construction imposed on the people and the failure of the policies of the Qin. Waldron, The Great Wall of China, 195–202.
dynasty, in the 1580s, that major wall construction begun.\textsuperscript{21} The issue here concerned control over the Ordos, the land encircled by a vast loop in the Yellow River, strategically located just west of Beijing. Given its arid climate, the Ordos should really have belonged to the nomads, but the the presence of the Yellow River meant that least some of the region could be farmed. Moreover, holding this land was of a paramount military importance to the empire: the capital had to be defended from the nomadic threat.\textsuperscript{22}

And yet, in the sixteenth-century, the nomads moved into the Ordos. The imperial court reacted with alarm and an extensive discussion ensued among the emperor’s advisors.\textsuperscript{23} Some advocated an offensive strategy, others advocated trade, and in the stalemate that was the result, the defensive, wall-building, strategy was what they all could agree on. It was a compromise, a Plan B, which had more to do with the internal politics of the court than with military strategy. But even now, during the late Ming, there was no concerted policy to build a “Great Wall.” In the historical sources there are instead repeated references to “Nine Defense Areas,” a series of nine heavily armed sectors spanning the strategic norther border.\textsuperscript{24} Walls, that is, were built at strategic locations such as at Badaling north-west of Beijing, famous from tourist snaps and YouTube videos. But walls were also constructed as a means of linking up already existing fortifications around the Ordos loop, although many of these were more like rampart made of mud. That these constructions were insufficient to provide protection was clear in 1644, if not before, when the walls were no match for the invading Manchus.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 140–64.
\textsuperscript{22} Lattimore, Inner Asian Frontiers of China, 462.
\textsuperscript{23} Waldron, The Great Wall of China, 91–139.
\textsuperscript{24} Farmer, ”The Hierarchy of Ming City Walls,” 463.
How the Great Wall was constructed

It was instead in Europe, not in China, that the Great Wall was constructed. It was built, beginning in the seventeenth-century, in the minds of European readers of the letters which Jesuit missionaries had begun sending back. The Jesuit were in China to convert the Chinese to Christianity, but once they realized the impossibility of winning converts one by one, they decided instead to start at the top. By presenting themselves as purveyors of European knowledge, above all concerning astronomy, cartography and the arts, they managed to ingratiate themselves with the emperor. For some 150 years, there were Jesuits stationed at the imperial court, and although they never managed to interest the emperor in their religion, they regularly sent letters back to Europe describing their efforts. Their strategy was to tap into well-established European conceptions regarding China as a land of endless wonders and delights. Given that China is such a rich and remarkable country, read the not-too-subtle subtext, our work, even if occasionally thwarted, will eventually be worth the while. One of the prime examples of wondrousness was what the Europeans came to refer to as “the Great Wall.”

One of the first tasks the Jesuits embarked on was to draw up of a map of the Chinese empire. The early eighteenth-century was when European countries finally came to take on a definite geographical shape; a state was more than anything a territorially bounded entity, its borders distinctly demarcated from others and clearly indicated on a map. China too, the Jesuits decided, should be portrayed in the same fashion, and between 1707 and 1717 a contingent of them embarked on a journey to determine China's borders. Following the walls built during Ming they decided that this constituted the frontier

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between China and Tartary. Where walls were confusing, running in parallel or off in the wrong direction, the border was clarified and simplified; where walls were entirely missing, the Jesuits’ map readily supplied them. This was the Great Wall described already in the first chapter in Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s monumental Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de L’empire de La Chine et de La Tartarie Chinoise, 1736. “This celebrated Wall was built by the famous Emperor Tsin Sh-whang, with a politic view, 221 years before Christ. It bounds China on the north, and defends it against the neighboring Tartars.”29 Du Halde’s work was translated into English in 1738 and widely read across Europe, not least by the Enlightenment philosophes who came to greatly admire the wisdom and rationality of China’s government.30 Collaborating with Du Halde, Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville, the leading cartographer in Europe at the time, published Nouvel atlas de la Chine, de la Tartarie chinoise et du Thibet, 1737, on which the Great Wall was depicted as a strong, fortified, northern border.31

The Great Wall helped explained to eighteenth-century Europeans why China was so prosperous and so powerful. Wealth, according to the tenets of mercantilism, the dominant economic doctrine of the day, is created through protectionist measures. A country should accumulate resources — treasure, people, minerals, manufacturing industry, agricultural lands — while minimizing foreign trade and stopping the outflow of precious metals. This was exactly what the Chinese empire had done. As a result, “[i]t may be said, without exaggeration,” Du Halde concluded, “that China is one of the most fruitful, as well as large and beautiful countries in the world.”32

Having read about the Great Wall, Europeans naturally wanted to see it, yet since China was closed to foreigners they could only imagine what it would be like. An exception

29 Du Halde, A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, 1:20.
31 Anville, Nouvel atlas de la Chine, de la Tartarie chinoise et du Thibet.
32 Du Halde, A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese-Tartary, 1:314.
were the members of a British diplomatic mission led by George Macartney who visited China in 1793. After having presented themselves at the court in Beijing they followed the emperor to his summer retreat in Chengde, in Manchuria, and on the way there they stopped at the Great Wall. “If the other parts of it be similar to those which I have seen,” Macartney concluded, “it is certainly the most stupendous work of human hands,” and he calculated that its combined volume was greater than all other fortifications in the whole world. 33 The Great Wall proved that China was a powerful empire and a wise and virtuous nation. Already in antiquity the emperors had claimed “an enormous expanse” of labor and treasure for themselves and their people, “rather than to leave succeeding generation to a precarious dependence on contingent resources.” 34 Other members of the mission were equally enthusiastic: “We now approached one of the wonders of the world, the wall that separates China from Tartary, the most stupendous work ever produced by man.” 35 Those fortified walls “presented to the mind an undertaking of stupendous magnitude.” 36 

The inordinate attention which the Macartney mission paid to the sight seems to have puzzled the Chinese officials who accompanied them. “They were astonished at our curiosity,” Macartney reported; “appeared rather uneasy at the length of our stay upon it,” and “almost began to suspect us, I believe, of dangerous designs.” 37 The Chinese mandarins, it turned out, had themselves never visited the sight. Yet this was hardly surprising. It was in Europe, not in China, that “sight-seeing” by the end of the eighteenth-century had become a required activity for travelers. 38 Each city, each country, has its sights, carefully described in the guide-books — the Colosseum in Rome, Notre Dame in

33 Macartney, Some Account of the Public Life, 243; Barrow calculated that the material used for the wall was equivalent to material of all the dwelling-houses of England and Scotland. Barrow, Travels in China, 334.
34 Macartney, Some Account of the Public Life, 243.
35 Anderson, Accurate Account of Lord Macartney’s Embassy to China, 70.
36 Staunton, An Authentic Account, 2:360.
37 Macartney, Our First Embassador to China, 294.
Paris, Parthenon in Athens, and so on. Sights such as these were what each country was famous for and the symbols by which they were represented. Thanks to the indefatigable work of the Jesuits and the vivid imagination of European visitors, China now too had its sight, and the Great Wall has been on the itinerary of visiting foreigners ever since. “It’s a great wall,” as Richard Nixon concluded after visiting the site on February 24, 1972, during his historic first trip to China.39 “It’s majestic,” as Barack Obama put it on November 18, 2009. “It reminds you of the sweep of history, and that our time here on Earth is not that long, so we better make the best of it.”40

How to batter down Chinese walls

In the decades around the turn of the nineteenth-century, Europe’s view of China changed dramatically. No longer the location for wondrous delights and rational government, China was, the Europeans now decided, a backward backwater plagued by Oriental despotism and the tyranny of outdated customs.41 Yet this radical transformation had next to nothing to do with China itself and instead everything to do with Europe. Above all, it was a result of a radical reevaluation of the function of walls.

The problem with walls, European liberals explained, is that they break up the world into a multitude of separate, non-communicating, compartments. If a wall is in the way, and if it is high enough, it is impossible to communicate with the people on the other side, or even to see who they are or what they are doing. In this way walls make the people on both sides more ignorant than they otherwise would be. What you cannot see you cannot inspect, scrutinize or verify, and walls as a result allow people to hide, to keep secrets and maintain unexamined prejudices. Walls block light, they block enlightenment; the Heim

39 “I think that you would have to conclude that this is a great wall and it had to be built by a great people.” Frankel, “Great Wall Endures,” 14.
40 Higgins, “Obama Weighs in on the Great Wall.”
hides the *heimlich*. And even if the wall does not constitute an absolute barrier, it is still the case that the authority which controls it can restrict and thereby shape the terms of the exchange. Not surprisingly, walls are much relied on by people and institutions who are eager to limit their accountability. Since a political power which is hidden behind a wall is impossible to engage in conversation, it never has to explain itself nor provide reasons for its actions. In this way walls contribute to the sublime mystique of power but also, more prosaically, to political and economic corruption.

By destroying walls, nineteenth-century liberals were convinced, they would help spread civilization. After all, exchange assures the free circulation not only of goods and services but of everything else which can be moved around — ideas, life-styles, institutions, fashions, dreams, desires and ambitions. By picking the best or the cheapest of what is on offer, we can improve our lives and develop our societies. Compare the way the walls of the cities of Europe were being dismantled at this time, or the way economists, following Smith's lead, all railed against “customs walls,” “walls of tariffs” and “walls of protection.” Free exchange, as Lord Palmerston explained in the Corn Law debate in the British parliament in 1842, leads not only to an extension and diffusion of knowledge, to mutual benefits and kindly feelings, but it also makes mankind “happier, wise, better.”

“This,” he concluded, “is the dispensation of Providence — this is the decree of that power which created and disposes the universe.”

The problem with China, Europeans concluded, are the walls that the Chinese have built around their country and their minds. In China walls are everywhere. There were walls around natural resources such as forests and salt lakes; every Chinese city had a city-wall, and inside the cities there were walls separating the Manchu and the Chinese sections but also the members of professional guilds from each other or government officials from

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42 Palmerston, "Corn Law Debate."
43 “Historically,” as Chang puts it, “the Chinese seem to have been a wall-building people.” Chang, “Some Observations on the Morphology of Chinese Walled Cities,” 63.
the rest of the population. Chinese houses were separated by walls and inside the houses walls divided family members from each other and inside the rooms themselves there were portable screens made of paper and wood. All these walls blocked exchange; they blocked access to new and cheaper products but also to new ideas, the latest technological advances, medical discoveries and scientific breakthroughs, and, European missionaries added, to the words of the Christian God.  

Consider trade. In the nineteenth-century British manufacturers were constantly on the lookout for export markets for the products which their factories kept spewing out. China, with an estimated population of some 350 million people, was an obvious candidate. This “third of mankind,” British merchants imagined, were all waiting to be supplied with cotton cloth from Lancashire and cutlery from Newcastle. The problem was only that the imperial authorities refused to grant them access. There was only one city — Guangzhou, “Canton,” in the south — where the Europeans could trade, and only during parts of the year, and even then they were not even allowed to enter the city itself. The British demanded full access to all cities, all markets, all people, in all of China, and in addition to selling their British-made goods they insisted on the right to sell opium grown in British-held India. When the Chinese refused to make concessions and began blocking the opium trade, the British went to war in November 1839. Three years later a peace treaty was concluded in Nanjing which opened up four more cities to the Europeans and turned the barren rocks of Hong Kong into a British colony. The British had wanted more, but they were still overjoyed. “[There is scarcely an article,” Henry Pottinger, the first governor of Hong Kong, explained, “that the manufacturers of England may not supply to them of a quality and at a price that will ensure an almost unlimited demand.” It was inevitable, The Times commented, that “an adventurous maritime people like the English should force

44 James, "God’s Voice from China," 477–554.
45 Gordon, Address to the People, 6.
themselves into connexion with a feeble and unprogressive race like the Chinese, inhabiting a rich country open to our trade.”

To Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels it was the opening up of China which constituted the best illustration of the world transforming powers of capitalism. Once the search for profits has come to replace all other concerns, they argued in the *Communist Manifesto*, written six years after the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, social life will be radically transformed. Capitalism shapes the world in its own image. The profit motive will destroy feudal relations and replace them with market relations; there will be constant revolutions, disturbances of all social conditions, uncertainty and agitation. “The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls.” Engels knew very well what he was talking about here. In a series of articles on the latest developments in military ordnance published in the *New-York Tribune*, he had discussed in great detail what form of military hardware was required to breach various kind of walls. Rifled guns, he had pointed out, constitute a “real revolution” in battlefield tactics.

Yet Marx and Engels were wrong. Cheap prices were not the heavy artillery which in the end battered down the walls of China. Instead the walls of China were battered down by the heavy artillery of heavy artillery. Once the Treaty of Nanjing was signed and the Royal Navy returned home, the Chinese began dragging their feet. The imperial authorities, the British government decided, was not living up to its obligations, and besides, it was still the case that the British wanted all of China to open up. In order to do something about this state of affairs, Lord Palmerston appointed John Bowring as governor of Hong Kong. Bowring was a disciple of Jeremy Bentham’s, one of the original founders of the Anti-Corn Law League and an activist on behalf of various liberal causes.

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46 “In What Light Will These Debates on the Chinese ...”
47 James, “God’s Voice From China,” 477.
49 See the two part article Engels, “Friedrich Engels on Rifled Cannon.”
50 Todd, “Global Dissemination of Free Trade,” 381–82.
“England has the highest and most noble of missions,” Bowring had declared at a meeting of the League on April 13, 1843, which is “to teach the world that commerce should be free — that all humble beings are made to love and help one another.”

Freedom of commerce, I dare say it, is Christianity in action. It is the manifestation of this spirit of kindness, benevolence and love which everywhere seeks to distance itself from evil, and tries in all places to strengthen the good.51

Bowring hated walls — walls around countries, around cities, around prisons, and he regularly spoke out against the nefarious influence of quarantines. Coming to China he was immediately appalled by the ever-presence of its walls. Seizing on a pretext, he called on the Royal Marine to intervene, and in October, 1856, a new war — the Second Opium War — had begun. Before long British gunships on the Pearl River were shelling the city-walls of Guangzhou. Yet when news reached Britain regarding the renewed hostilities, Bowring was criticized in parliament and Palmerston’s government was forced to resign as a result.52 Lord Derby, a former Tory prime minister, reacted strongly against Bowring’s presumptuousness and his aggressive posture.53 Bowring, said Derby, has a “monomaniacal obsessions” with the city-walls of Guangzhou: “I believe he dreams of the entrance into Canton, I believe he thinks of it first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, and in the middle of the night if he happen to awake.”54

Once again peace was concluded — the Treaty of Nanjing, 1858 — and once again the British extracted concessions. China had finally opened up; its walls had come down, and British-made goods, and opium, began flooding in. “The walls of Jericho have fallen flat to the ground,” as an enthusiastic missionary put it.55 “The fields are white unto the harvest. What is wanted? All that is wanted is, reapers to go and gather it in.” China was now for

52 Ringmar, “Free Trade by Force,” 5–32.
53 Derby, “First China Debate, Feb 24, 1856.”
54 Ibid., 1177.
55 James, “God’s Voice from China,” 483.
the first time able to receive the blessings of civilization, even if its culture was destroyed in the process.\textsuperscript{56} One of the reason why we need to build walls, Chinese folklore has always maintained, is that evil spirits only can move in straight lines. Walls will stop them. Chinese folklore may have been right about that, but in the 1850s their walls were too weak.

\section*{Life in the borderland}

The Great Wall, we said, understood as a unified structure built for a given purpose, does not exist. There are many walls in China, and bits of walls, and remnants of former walls, but they were built for various reasons, at various times, and they were more than anything the result of political expedience. Instead the Great Wall is a social construction erected not in China itself but in the minds of Europeans who always claimed to know what China was. In early modern Europe, when China was admired for its wealth and its political stability, the Great Wall was the perfect symbol of the wisdom of mercantilism; in the nineteenth-century, when China was mocked for its lack of progress, the destruction of all Chinese walls was the perfect symbols of the wisdom of exchange. To the Europeans, it is the walling instinct of the Chinese that comes first and the Great Wall is only its most prominent expression. The Great Wall existed because the Europeans decided that it had to exist, and before long they had found it everywhere throughout the country. The walls which the Europeans went on to destroy in the nineteenth-century were the ones they had created in the eighteenth-century. The eventual result of this work of the imagination was an aggressive European posture and a policy of imperialism.

This is where the political anthropology of walls becomes a matter of some urgency. It is only by highlighting the varied functions of walls, and the reasons why they originally

\textsuperscript{56} Zeng, “Sleep and Awakening,” 3.
were constructed, that we can hope to influence the policies they justify.\footnote{Ringmar, “Order in a Borderless World”; Cf. Szakolczai, \textit{Permanent Liminality and Modernity}; Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra, \textit{Breaking Boundaries}.} No, we can say, this is not the way walls work. Walls are not only separating people and keeping foreigners out; rather, a borders creates a borderland, an intermediate zone in which people on both sides may relate to each other far more intimately than they do to others. It is not that culture requires a wall in order to thrive but rather that walls create their own culture. The border establishes a shared fate and a communality of interest.\footnote{Lattimore, “The Frontier in History,” 484.} The history of the walls of northern China provides ample illustrations. To be a Chinese border guard in a desolate fortress somewhere along the Ordos loop was to lead a sad existence. Fighting the Mongols was a hopeless task and it made far more sense to interact and to trade with them. This is also what the border guards ended up doing and there was nothing the Chinese official could do about it.\footnote{Waldron, \textit{The Great Wall of China}, 150.} In fact, the people living on both sides of the border were always far more mixed than the official, Confucian, ideology would have it. There were Chinese people who took up a nomadic lifestyle and nomads who began farming. The nomadic frontier was attractive to the Chinese since it allowed them to avoid taxes and \textit{corvée} labor and gave them opportunities to make money from smuggling and trade. The walls which the imperial authorities built were not only intended to keep foreigners out but also, no doubt, to keep the Chinese farmers in.\footnote{Lattimore, “The Frontier in History,” 484; Lattimore, \textit{Inner Asian Frontiers of China}, 340ff; Cf. Scott, \textit{Against the Grain}, 30, 130, 233; A function of the wall also remarked on by European visitors. Macartney, \textit{Some Account of the Public Life}, 244.}

As all nomadic people know, the agricultural metaphor is simply mistaken. A culture does not require walls in order to thrive. A culture does not require roots and it does not require a fixed location. Nomads have a culture of their own after all, a culture on-the-go which thrives in a shifting landscape. Nomads carry everything they need with them on a road that leads to somewhere else, and their culture is as mobile as their horses and as
collapsible as their homes. In addition, nomads know a thing or two about civilization. After all, it is only through exchange — voluntary if possible, if not forced — that their way of life becomes viable. Connecting societies is what nomads always have done — most spectacularly, no doubt, by the Mongols who maintained and protected the caravan routes — the “Silk Road” — which connected China with India, India with Central Asia, and Central Asia with the Middle East and Europe. Although the Mongols were notorious for the destruction they wrought and the number of people they killed, they never sought to impose their values or their world-view on others. Civilization does not equal the imposition of foreign solutions on a defenseless society, and what the Europeans subjected the Chinese to in the nineteenth-century was not civilization as much as a form of European cultural imperialism. Instead, we can conclude, civilization has no specific content but only a general form. The formidable trading network which the Mongols created could be used by anyone, for whatever purpose, and it was by means of the exchange made possible in this way that Europe itself was civilized in the Middle Ages. A world without walls, the nomads will tell us, is not an abstract, formless, empty space; it is a world of paths, of places to discover and possibilities to explore.

Bibliography


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