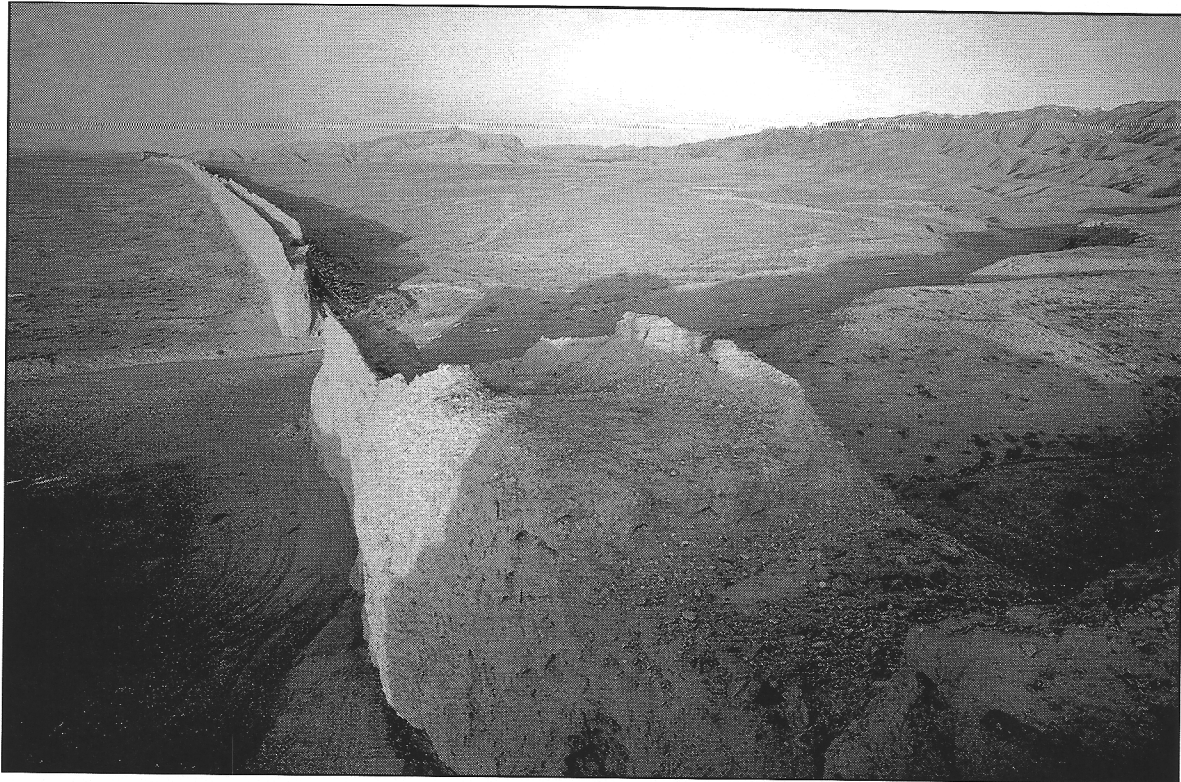


The Great Wall of Ancient China: Did the Benefits Outweigh the Costs?

CV

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)

The Issue: In 1956, the United States Congress passed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. The bill created what we now call the Interstate Highway System. At the time, it was the largest public-works project in U.S. history. The system was a network of highways that crisscross America and often run through our major cities, connecting city to suburb. The interstate system was built over a 35-year period and cost hundreds of billions of dollars. The vast majority—90 percent—was built with federal money (including a national gas tax) and 10 percent came from state tolls and taxes. Government leaders supported the project, partly because it enabled the military to move troops from place to place in case of a land invasion by an enemy.

Task I: Working with a partner, discuss and list possible costs and benefits associated with building the Interstate Highway System. Stretch your mind. Consider social, economic and environmental consequences, good and bad.

The Interstate Highway System	
Costs	Benefits

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

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

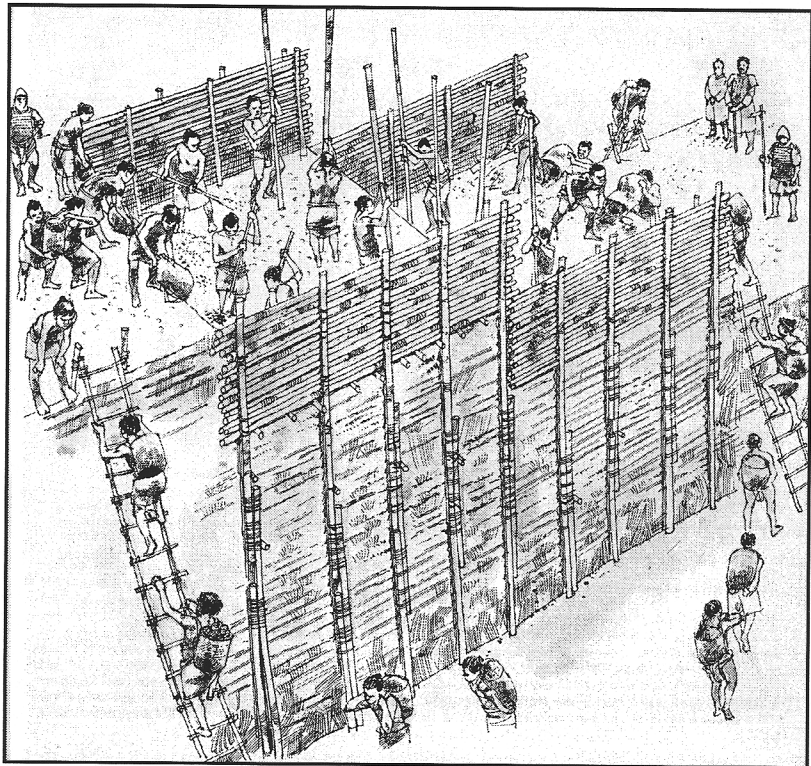


Illustration: Arthur Cotterell, *Ancient China*, Knopf, 1994.

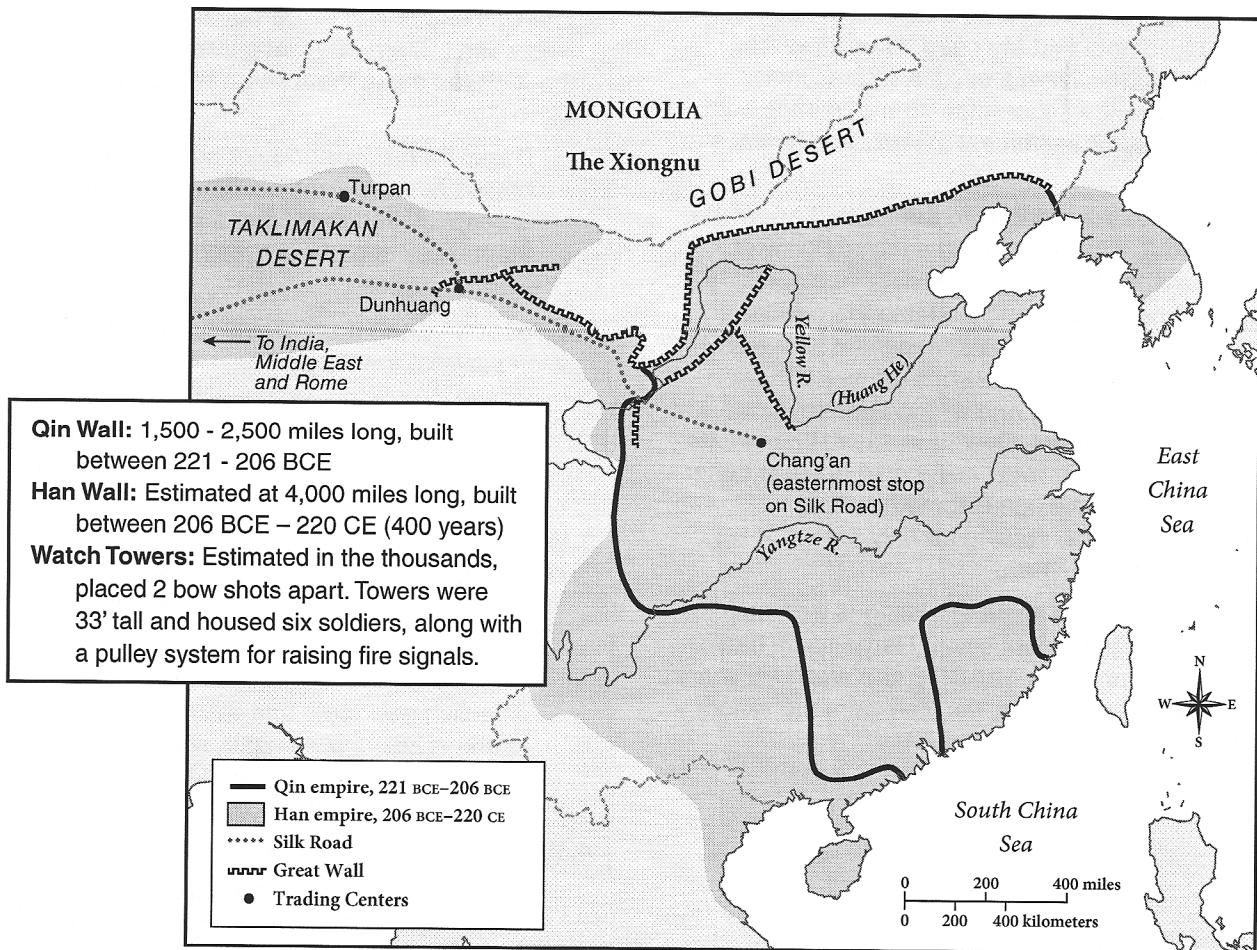
Han were enormous projects. They were built to increase security, impress visitors and enhance the glory of China. However, the walls also required much sacrifice on the part of the Chinese people. Which brings us back to our question: *The Great Wall of Ancient China: Did the benefits outweigh the costs?*

Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

The Great Wall of Qin and Han China

CV



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.]

CV

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.

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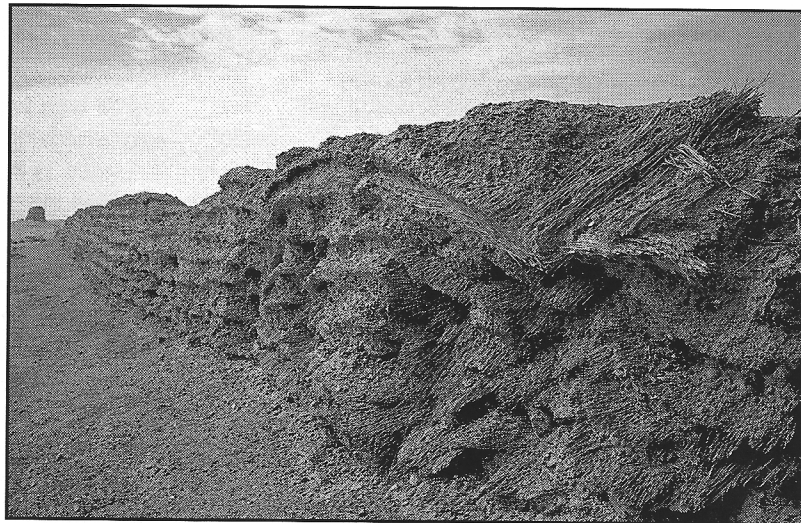
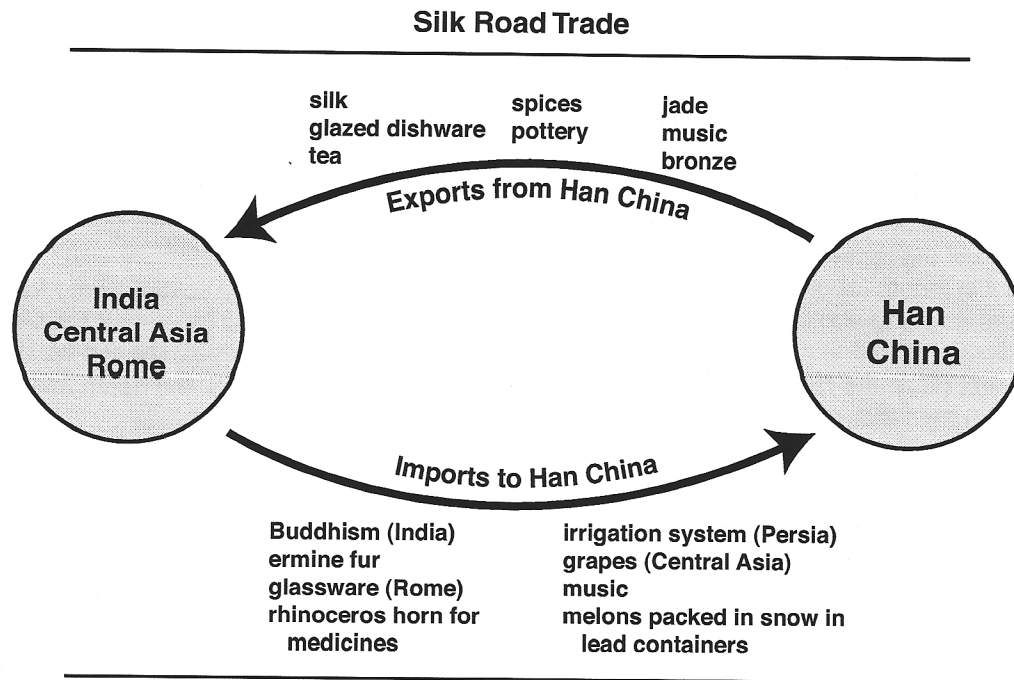


Photo by William Lindesay

A section of the ancient Han wall.

Document D

Source: Chart created from various sources.



CV

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 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.

CV

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.*

CV