

The Great Wall of China

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Perhaps the most famous symbol of China and its history is the Great Wall of China. This enormous monument actually consists of many walls and fortifications. It was originally conceived by Emperor Qin Shi Huang over 2,200 years ago. The emperor wanted to build the wall to keep out invaders from the north. The Great Wall is one of the largest construction projects ever completed. Today, it remains a powerful symbol of China's strength.

Construction during the Qin dynasty

The Chinese began to build the Great Wall around 220 B.C. However, many of the fortifications included in the wall were built hundreds of years earlier. At that time, China was split into several different kingdoms. These were later united under Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who started the Qin Dynasty. The emperor ordered that walls along the northern border be joined into a single wall more than 3,000 miles long. This would protect China against attacks from the north.

The Great Wall was one of the largest building projects ever undertaken. It is said that as many as 400,000 workers died during the wall's construction. Many of these workers were buried within the wall itself.

The Great Wall stretched from the China Sea port of Shanhaiguan over 3,000 miles west into Gansu province. It was made mostly of earth and stone. From a base of 15 to 50 feet, the Great Wall rose some 15 to 30 feet high. Guard towers were placed along it.

The Great Wall through the centuries

After the death of Qin Shi Huang, much of the Great Wall fell into disrepair. About 400 years later, a series of tribes seized control in northern China. The most powerful of these was the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535 A.D.). It repaired and extended the existing wall to defend against attacks from other tribes. The Bei Qi kingdom (550-577 A.D.) built or repaired more than 900 miles of wall. The Sui dynasty (581-618 A.D.) also repaired and extended the Great Wall.

Eventually, the powerful Mongol dynasty (1206-1368) took over China. The Mongols had little use for the Great Wall as a military fortification. However, they placed soldiers along it to protect trade routes.

Wall building during the Ming dynasty

The Great Wall of China as it exists today was built mainly during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This period saw a huge amount of construction. The Ming wall extended from the Yalu River in northeast China to the Taolai River in northwest China. It wound its way through many important cities.

Starting west of Juyong Pass, the Great Wall was split into south and north lines. These were called the Inner and Outer Walls. Castles called "passes" were placed along the wall. The Juyong, Daoma and Zijing passes were named the Three Inner Passes. Further west were Yanmen, Ningwu and Piantou, the Three Outer Passes. All six passes were heavily protected during the Ming period. They were considered essential to the defense of the Chinese capital, Beijing.

Significance of the Great Wall

In the 1600s, the Manchus broke through the Great Wall and took over China. This was the beginning of the Manchu dynasty (1644-1912). Between the 1700s and 1900s, the Great Wall became the most common symbol of China for the Western world.

Today, the Great Wall is considered one of the most amazing structures in the world. In 1987, the United Nations named the Great Wall a World Heritage site. Over the years, roadways have been cut through the wall at various points. Many sections have fallen apart after years of neglect. The most well-known section of the Great Wall is Badaling, located 43 miles northwest of Beijing. This section of the wall was rebuilt in the late 1950s. It continues to attract thousands of tourists every day.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Construction during the Qin dynasty."

Select the paragraph from this section that shows that the idea of building a wall for protection did not start with Qin.

2 Read the section "Significance of the Great Wall."

Which sentence from this section BEST supports the conclusion that the Great Wall of China is no longer used for protection?

- (A) Between the 1700s and 1900s, the Great Wall became the most common symbol of China for the Western world.
- (B) Today, the Great Wall is considered one of the most amazing structures in the world.
- (C) Over the years, roadways have been cut through the wall at various points.
- (D) The most well-known section of the Great Wall is Badaling, located 43 miles northwest of Beijing.

3 What was the Ming dynasty's relationship to the Great Wall?

- (A) The Great Wall was expanded and was relied on for protection during that time.
- (B) The Great Wall began to fall apart and was neglected during that time.
- (C) The Great Wall was repaired in many areas during that time.
- (D) The Great Wall became a symbol of Chinese culture during that time.

4 What effect did the Northern Wei dynasty have on the Great Wall?

- (A) it allowed the Great Wall to fall apart
- (B) it fixed and expanded the Great Wall
- (C) it took over China and this made the Great Wall useless
- (D) it was responsible for first building the Great Wall