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

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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

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A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## 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

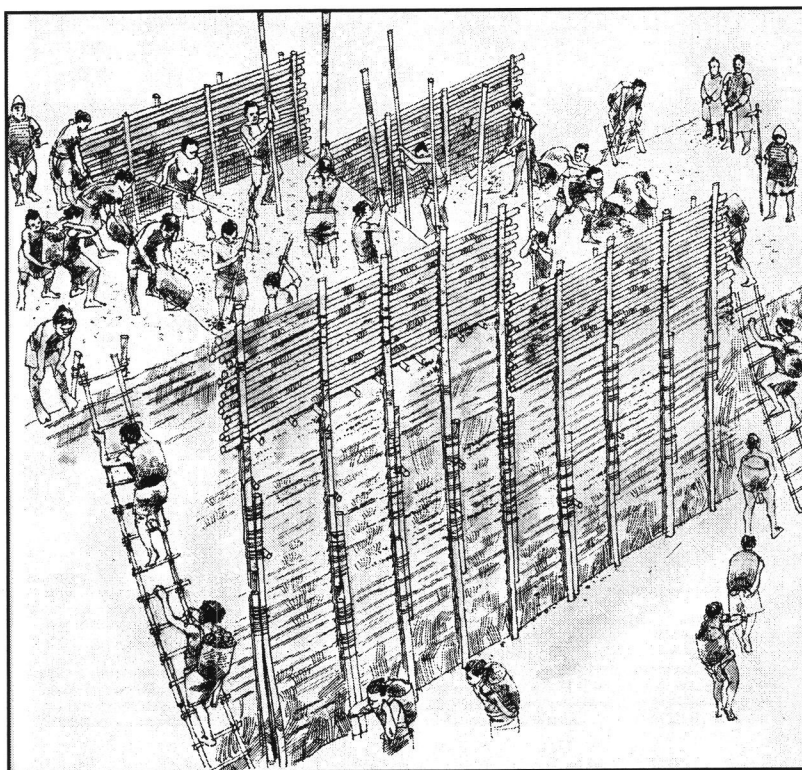


Illustration: Arthur Cotterell, *Ancient China*, Knopf, 1994.

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?*

## 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

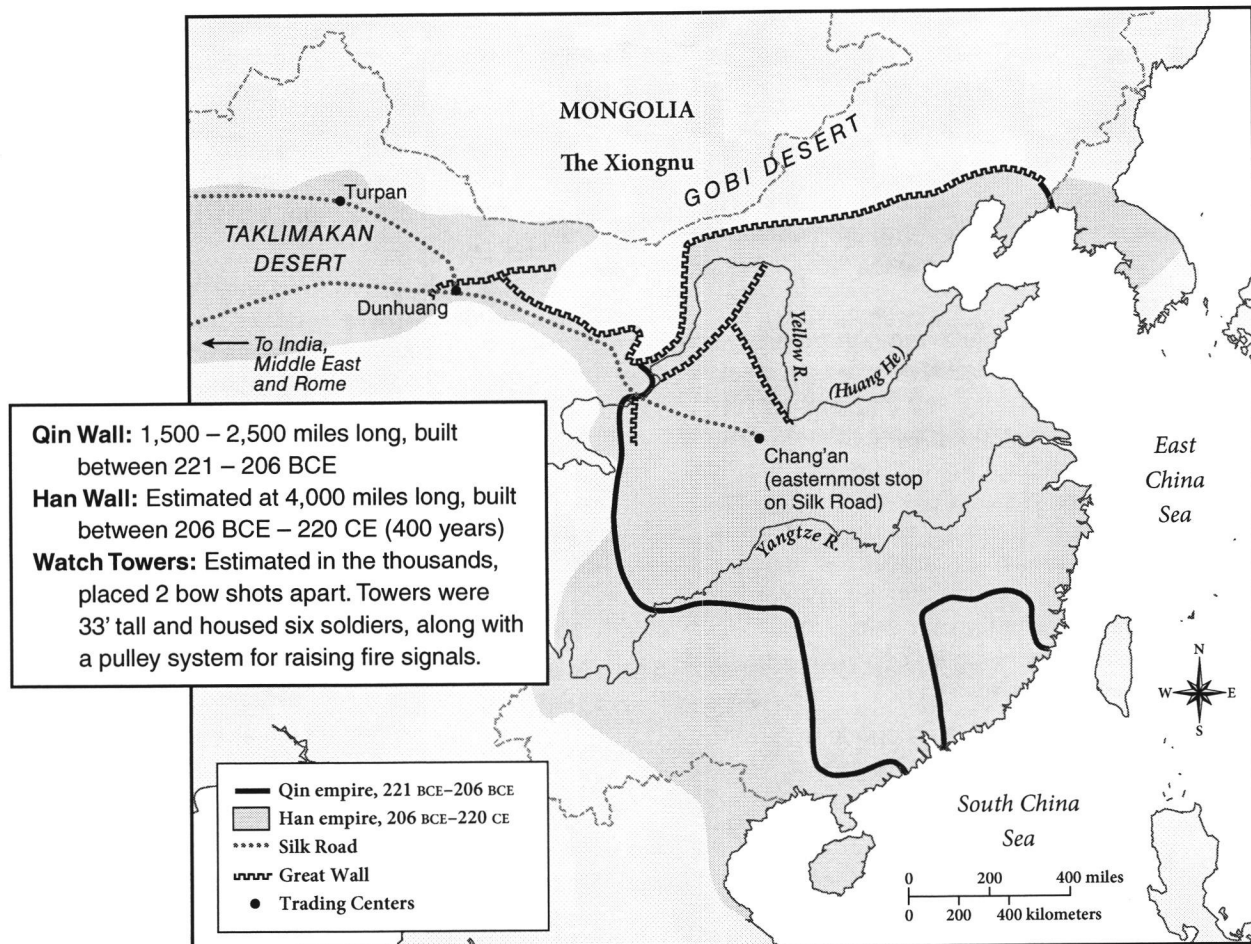
**141 – 87 BCE** – Serious wall restoration projects under Han Emperor Wu

**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?