



The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000 BC - AD 2000

Julia Lovell

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Legendarily 2,200 years old and 4,300 miles long, the Great Wall of China seems to make an overwhelmingly confident physical statement about the country it spans: about China's age-old sense of itself being an advanced civilization anxious to draw a clear line between itself and the "barbarians" at its borders. But behind the wall's intimidating exterior—and the myths that have built up around it—is a complex history that has both defined and undermined China. Author Julia Lovell has written a new and important history of the Great Wall that guides the reader through the conquests and cataclysms of the Chinese empire, from the second millennium BC to the present day.

In recent years, the Wall has become an ever more potent symbol of Chinese nationalism, of a determination to resist foreign domination. But how successful was the Wall in reality, and what was its real purpose? Was it a precursor, albeit on a huge scale, of the Berlin Wall—a barrier designed to keep its population in as much as undesirables out? Lovell looks behind the modern mythology of the Great Wall, uncovering a three-thousand-year history far more fragmented and less illustrious than its crowds of visitors imagine today. The story of the Wall winds through that of the Chinese state and the frontier policy that defined it, through the lives of the millions of individuals who supported, criticized, built, and attacked it.

The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000 BC - AD 2000 Details

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Frank says

vor langer Zeit ließen die chinesischen Kaiser die Gesandten der *Barbaren* aus allen Herren Nationen zu sich kommen. Die Gesandten wurden kleine Geschenke mitbringen und dem Kaiser den Kotau machen. Wenn die Gesandten aus militärischer überlegenen Nationen kamen, gingen sie dann mit großen Mengen, sehr prachtvollen Geschenken zurück nach Hause (d.h. Tribut der Chinesen). So bewährte sich die Chinesen Ihr Gesicht und der Illusion Ihrer Überlegenheit.

Ob sich inzwischen etwas geändert hat??

Harald Groven says

An excellent 3000 year history of China. The book's recurrent theme is the imperial regimes different foreign policies towards the outside world, excemplified how to keep the barabarians out by maintaining the Great Wall fortifications.

The first chapters are truly remarkabl examples of cultural history, stressing the surprising point that it was actually western visitors in 18th and 19th century that taught the Chinese to appreciate the Great Wall as something to be proud of (as national identity). Before that, the wall was simply a fortification system carrying no significance as a national symbol.

Most chapters are standard traditional political history (i.e. dynasties and wars), but the cultural history parts really stand out as a wonderful account of how history are USED, not that it just something that happened.

Aleksander says

Põhjalik ülevaade hiinlaste maailmavaate kujunemisest legendaarse Suure Müüri (või siis Suurte Müüride) kaudu. Kui Hiinast absoluutselt mitte midagi ei tea, siis on see raamat kindlasti väga hea koht, kust alustada.

Kelley says

I was rather disappointed with this book. While I really enjoyed the concept and following the history of China using the Great Wall as a constant, I found this book extremely difficult to read. It's like the author wrote one section at a time and then tried to mash them together to make a chapter. Often they could be very repetitive, which makes me wonder if they edited the book properly. It was weird to have something said at the beginning chapter that was again explained later on. Now, I read many history non-fictions (I was planning on getting my Masters degree in History) but I it would take me 15-20 minutes to read each page because I would have to re-read sentences. They were just too long - often an entire paragraph was made up of one whole sentence with multiple commas, dashes and semi-colons breaking up several separate ideas. My favorite chapter was definitely the last as I thought it has the most insight. I did learn a lot about Chinese history which I did not know before, but it was still quite a painful read.

Maureen says

Pros: By focusing on the history of wall-building and public perception of the Great Wall, Lovell does a good job of making 3000 years of history digestible. This book is a good resource for an overview of Chinese history that includes greater themes as well as little details.

Cons: The repeated stories of uprisings, massacres and famines were a little depressing- how could nobody ever learn? Also, the author's (justifiably) snide tone was funny at first but got tiresome and made me wonder- if all she can say about Chinese government is sarcastically critical, why did she choose this subject matter as her life's work?

Alexander Case says

Very well done book, covering how historical China's border-wall building was fueled by (and recursively lead to), their imperialist ambitions and isolationist attitudes, and how that would effect the country in the future. That said, some of the other elements that effect these attitudes (the unpredictability of the Yangtze river requiring any centralized government to focus it's attention inward on *that* in order to make sure everyone gets fed, is only given brief mention, which is kind of unfortunate.

Still, it's a good book, and you should check it out.

Diego Palomino says

Well written and researched, it opened my eyes to Chinese and Mongol culture. The author explains the dichotomy of two walls a physical and psychological one. She also documents its evolution through thousands of years. At times it read like a novel specially when relating to conflicts or wars. well worth the read.

Trice says

Most of this book felt tainted by an obnoxiously sarcastic undertone which seemed to hint at derision for much of Chinese history. While I've nothing against criticizing modern or historical leaders, the kind of criticism, implied or obviously stated, that was found in the pages seemed more snide than helpful. Overall, though, this was a very readable overview of Chinese history. It is definitely from a macro view, so you don't get a lot of the details, but from this view it presented well the continuance implying repetition of a certain kind of Chinese perspective on the nation known as China and on the outside world - and it definitely is an inside-outside/insider-outsider perspective.

I'm trying to be careful, because while I've seen hints of this, I don't think it's true for everyone in China and the majority of my personal interactions have belied it in fact. But there is something to support it in the fact that in China you are either Chinese or a foreigner. And there is a lot of serious confusion and, I think,

annoyance at this confusion, over ethnically Chinese people who consider themselves members of other nations but return to China to learn about and understand it and their parents' (or parents' parents') history and who may not be completely fluent in Mandarin - definite shock and confusion at the least.

On a side note, I almost hesitate to write anything in a review, partly due to my own ignorance of Chinese culture and history (I'm working on it - slowly, but working nonetheless) and the so often experience of being sure of a fact or understanding of China one moment, having it disproved the next, and reprovved the next, and... well, you get my point. And foreigners (is it strange that I include myself in a word that means, basically, 'outsider'?), both within China and without, seem to get it wrong so often... but then, I suppose many Chinese are mistaken on things regarding China as well. We are never so blind as when we try to examine our home culture/nation.

Pieter says

De Chinese Muur staat toch China zoals de Eiffeltoren tot Frankrijk. Het is onlosmakelijk deel van haar cultureel patrimonium en symbool van het land. Uiteraard is het een mythe dat het werk zichtbaar is vanuit de ruimte, maar het blijft een enorme inspanning om deze te bouwen. Arbeid die zich over meerdere eeuwen heeft gespreid. Daarbij beschouwt de auteur de Chinese Muur veeleer als een isolement, eerder dan een beschermende rol. Het taalgebruik doet vermoeden dat Lovell zowel de Chinese traditie als de Europese bezoekers zoals de jezuïeten een eng denken verwijt. Dat lijkt me op zijn minst bijzonder kort door de bocht. Bovendien leest het boek te anekdotisch zonder een gedegen kennis van de Chinese geschiedenis.

Charlie says

Wasn't sure at the outset whether this would be a subject that I would find compelling, as I've always found Chinese history to be a bit mysterious and shrouded. The book turned out to be as interesting as any non-fiction I have ever read. It presents a great overview of Chinese history, presented as somewhat of a "biography" of the Great Wall. I was unexpectedly impressed with the author's wit and keen sense of irony as she uses the Great Wall to trace the ups and downs of Chinese foreign relations and apparent impulse to retreat from the larger world, to it's own detriment.

For an academic (as the author is) to double as such a capable narrator has been rare, in my experience. I was also impressed by her boldness in making judgments regarding the weaknesses of Chinese governance over the millenia. Recent books appear shy to make claims that could even slightly be considered to contain a "Western bias" (no worries, she pokes an equal amount of fun at the European "gentleman explorers of the 19th Century as well). It is a clear-eyed view of both the good and the bad points of Chinese history as it relates to frontier policy.

The main thrust of the narrative is that most Chinese royal dynasties have felt compelled to sink vast resources into wall-building, despite the fact that China nevertheless fell several times to foreign invaders to whom the Great Wall (which isn't actually a "wall" or particularly "great") presented an apparently minor obstacle.

Thus, what I considered the only flaw in the book: although the Great Wall did not prevent China from falling to several foreign peoples, one must also ask the question "what if the wall hadn't been there?" Proving a negative is indeed impossible, but perhaps the Wall was more useful for it's deterrent effect than it's actual performance in reality. Indeed, the author points this out in the last chapter when discussing

China's control of the internet (i.e., although few dissidents are punished for their online activity, the greatest value is in deterring the vast majority of Chinese from even attempting to express their views in this way...). This same analysis can be considered regarding the wall itself, as we can never know whether China would have lost cohesion or how many invasions would have taken place in the absence of the Great Wall. Taking this point into consideration, the decisions of Chinese monarchs to continue pouring lives and treasure into wall building may be more understandable.

Brian Bigelow says

I thought the book was well researched. One concept that surprised me a bit was that the wall was used for consolidating territory. There are a few other surprises in store too.

Persephone Abbott says

I prefer reading long history books confined to limited periods in history however, I thought this book would hold my interest. I was wrong. I do wonder if the author would write about the United Kingdom using the same tone. Some other readers have made remarks about her style. I don't in any way doubt Ms. Lovell's intense knowledge of Chinese history at all, it just seems to me that the entire premise of the book was based on the thought, "Everyone knows about the Chinese Wall, let's write a book "The Great Wall" breezing through Chinese history focusing on military matters and adding Western involvements as much as possible, stamp 'BBC' someplace on the cover, and that will sell copy." Curious, I read an article she wrote for the Guardian, in an effort to examine whether I was being too harsh, and I found her referring to popular culture to orientate her audience. Nothing wrong with this, but then no, and I understand that style is a matter of personal taste.

Natalie says

Un libro interesante sobre la historia de China, vista desde la famosa Gran Muralla. Rompe con algunos de los mitos que rodean la Gran Muralla y explican el significado físico y psicológico que las murallas han tenido para China a lo largo de su historia.

Delia Hannon says

The book I chose to read was The Great Wall: China Against the World by Julia Lovell. It covered Chinese culture from 1000 BC to modern times. The book focused on walls, particularly the Great Wall, throughout China, their purposes, and what they meant, both figuratively and physically.

This book turned out to be a fascinating examination of the Chinese mentality when it came to interacting with other cultures. Lovell used walls as a metaphor for Chinese isolationism and imperialism, discussing how in the early days of the days of the Great Wall, when it was still a collection of much smaller walls, those walls had names that were very clearly anti-outsider. Multiple instances of failed Western/Chinese diplomatic attempts and why they failed were discussed. The Great Wall was a long history of Chinese politics and diplomacy that used the Great Wall as a central point.

I would recommend this book to another reader. It is a fascinating piece of writing filled with information.

It's well paced and well written. My personal favorite part about the book was that it included many smaller stories and details about events in Chinese history. While the book was not written by a Chinese author, it was written by an author who had spent a lot of time in China, and I felt she had an interesting perspective about the country and its mindset. Overall, I found The Great Wall to be a fantastic, interesting book.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. China is a fascinating country with 3000 years of history and a myriad of inventions, rich in traditions and culture. It is also a country that has experienced enormous upheaval and change. This book is a good starting point for someone seeking to know more about China.
