



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

By 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.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

There is no Great Wall of China, argues Lovell, who teaches Chinese history at Cambridge University. Instead, there are many Great Walls—physical, mental, cultural, military and economic—separating China from the outside world. The 4,300-mile-long wall is far more complex than any of the thousands of tourists taking a photo along its famous battlements realizes. Indeed, to the Chinese themselves, their wall has variously signified repression, freedom, security, vulnerability, cultural superiority, economic backwardness, imperial greatness and national humiliation. Still, myths about it abound. Far from it being unbreachable, Chinese emperors relied on the wall only as a last resort to fend off their enemies. (The Ming dynasty, for instance, found it useless against the victorious Manchus, who merely bribed the gatekeepers to let them in.) "As a strategy that has survived for more than two millennia," Lovell writes, "China's frontier wall is a monumental metaphor for reading China and its history, for defining a culture and a worldview...." Lovell tells the gripping, colorful story of the wall up to the present day, including a perceptive discussion of the "Great Firewall"—the Internet, which has replaced nomadic raiders as the most threatening of China's attackers. And no, you cannot see it from the Moon. (*Mar.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Young British historian Lovell narrates the history of China's preeminent national symbol, its Great Wall. Dubious about its defensive efficacy, she points out the fortification's repeated failure to save the dynasty that built it. Apart from its physicality, Lovell is also intrigued by the wall as a metaphor for historical Chinese attitudes toward the exterior world. And driving her wonderful chronicle of the wall is her will to dispel visitors' impressions, shared alike by Richard Nixon and backpacking tourists, that the Great Wall is a continuous construction of great antiquity. Informing readers that though the earliest long walls do date to the Qin dynasty (about 220 BCE), the crenellated, watchtower-crowned marvel of today was built by Ming emperors in the 1600s. Along the way, Lovell instills an appreciation for how the Chinese self-conception of civilized superiority vis-a-vis raiding barbarians of the steppe induced periods of wall-building. Amounting to an overview of imperial and postimperial Chinese history, Lovell's account of the Great Wall is a supremely inviting entree to the country. *Gilbert Taylor*

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