

7 The Great Wall of China does not exist

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Introduction

Walls are distinct, man-made features of an environment, and to the extent that they block our way or our vision they are impossible to ignore. As such they are inherently in need of an explanation. Yet walls can be built with many purposes in mind and serve several functions, and functions, moreover, are likely to vary over time. A tall, solid wall appears impassable in its concrete concreteness, yet walls, no matter how high, are never actually all that daunting. If we keep on moving, keep on exploring, we will sooner or later find a way around, across or under them; a gate will be found ajar, a tower unmanned or a guard who can be bribed (Lattimore 1962b: 486). Walls in the end are nothing in themselves and only something as a part of a tactic, but tactics often change – for technological, political or cultural reasons – and the walls, as a result, will be rendered obsolete and useless. Walls are not final conclusions as much as temporary statements awaiting refutation. As a result, walls will tell us a lot about the outlook of the societies that built them. Walls tell stories about presumptions and premonitions, fears and ambitions; about who we take ourselves to be and how we relate to others. Yet as far as storytellers go, they are annoyingly silent. Walls cannot talk; they stonewall us; and it does not help if we plead with, or wail before, them.

Take the case of the Great Wall of China (Waldron 1983; Waldron 1992; Lovell 2007; Huang 2012). As history textbooks explain, the Great Wall was built to keep the barbarians at bay. North of the wall, on the enormous steppes of inner Asia, was where the nomads lived with their grazing herds. It was here that Chinese-speaking peoples, sometime in prehistory, came to stop in their gradual northward expansion. The nomads were a constant threat to the new arrivals, and this, the textbooks tell us, was why the Great Wall was built. The wall would protect the crops and lives of the Chinese farmers, and it would protect their culture too. Culture is often said to require walls; culture, after all, refers to 'cultivation', to the 'tilling of the land'. Just as walls are built to protect crops, they are built to protect a culture from whatever comes towards it from the outside – foreign influences, barbarian hordes, the winds of change. This is how Chinese people always have defended themselves, the first European visitors to China concluded; the Chinese are inherently a wall-building people and the Great Wall is their 'pièce de résistance'. It was by limiting trade and keeping the country secure that the Chinese

protected their wealth and their way of life. We have no use for Facebook and Twitter, as today's Chinese leaders explain when implementing the 'Golden Shield Project', intended to protect their culture, and their people, from the rest of the Internet. Appropriately enough, the policy is commonly referred to as the '*fǎnghuǒ chángchéng*', 'the Great Firewall of China'.²

This agricultural mind-set contrasts sharply with that of a commercial economy. As Adam Smith explained, a nation is wealthy not because it has gathered a lot of treasure but because of what it can produce. Productivity requires specialisation and specialisation requires exchange. The larger the market, and the more unimpeded the exchange, the more far-reaching the division of labour and, *ceteris paribus*, the more productive we become. Walls, from this point of view, are an abomination. Walls do not keep our wealth in but they keep exchange out; they limit the division of labour and they lower productivity. Moreover, walls block access to new ideas, to the latest technological advances, medical discoveries and scientific breakthroughs. Walls, in short, limit access to civilisation. Thus, while culture may require walls to be erected, civilisation requires walls to come down. As a result, a country that hides behind walls can never be civilised (Ringmar 2011b: 5–32). This is why China is so backward, Europeans came to conclude in the nineteenth century, once free-trade doctrines had become the official wisdom in Europe. This is why China's economy has stalled and why Chinese people are so ignorant, so secretive and so corrupt. And this is also why the country seemed to be perpetually stuck in the past tense. History, the Europeans pointed out, is a matter of progress, but since nothing in China ever changes, China, per definition, is history-less (Mill 1859: 413). The Great Wall was the perfect symbol of this stationary mind-set, and, what was particularly infuriating to the Europeans, the Chinese utterly failed to understand the nature of the predicament they were in. '[I]f they are ever to be further improved,' as John Stuart Mill concluded in *On Liberty* in 1859, referring to the Chinese, 'it must be by foreigners' (Mill 1859: 129). The assistance that China so urgently required was given in the First and the Second Opium Wars, 1839–42 and 1856–60, respectively. Positioning their rifled ordnance facing China's walls, the Chinese were forced to open up to the outside world (Ringmar 2011a: 273–98; Ringmar 2013). Soon European goods and ideas flooded in, spreading civilisation while destroying Chinese culture and uprooting its people.

Considering all that we think we know about the Great Wall of China, it is surprising to learn that there is no such thing. That's right – the Great Wall of China does not exist. There are certainly many walls scattered across the plains of northern China, and bits of walls, and remnants of former walls, but there is no 'Great Wall of China' understood as a unified project constructed at a particular time and with a particular object in mind. The Great Wall is not a physical as much as a social construction. Yet what is constructed can be deconstructed, and such deconstruction is what we will engage in here. As we will discover, the irony, and the tragedy, is that the Great Wall of China, and the wall-building mind-set of the Chinese, existed nowhere else but in the imagination of the Europeans. The Great Wall justified admiration as long as walls were admired, but once walls came to be seen as an abomination, it became a pretext for European imperialism.

Wall building in China

Despite its ethnic and linguistic diversity, the Chinese empire was always, officially at least, based on only one socio-economic model (Lattimore 1962b, 469–91). The subjects of the emperor were all farmers who worked on small plots of land, growing millet in the north and rice in the south. To compensate for the dearth of land, they supplied other factors of production; notably their own labour and that of their family members, but they also relied heavily on artificial irrigation and on fertilisers. The imperial state glorified the farmers while exploiting them for *corvée* labour and taxes. It is the farmers who feed us all, Confucian rhetoric proclaimed, and farming is the only truly productive occupation. Yet as each dynasty was acutely aware, their ability to maintain themselves in power depended more than anything on their ability to keep the farmers in their places.

There was an obvious geographical limit to the feasibility of this socio-economic model (Lattimore 1962b: 477–81). On the steppes of Eurasia – covering much of the landmass from north-west of Beijing all the way to Hungary – there was not enough rainfall to sustain agriculture, few large rivers and no means of irrigation. This was instead where the nomads lived. Although the climate was arid, there was plenty of grass on which their animals could feed and the nomads compensated for the lack of water by means of other factors of production – notably land, which was over-abundant. When the grass in one pasture had run out they simply moved to another pasture. The pastoral economy, to put it differently, was highly specialised. Since the nomads produced only what they were best at producing – meat, wool, horses – they required others to provide them with everything else that they needed (Khazanov 1994). That is, they had to trade, or failing that they reserved the right to raid their farming neighbours. The perennial problem of imperial Chinese history, from the third century BCE onwards, was how to deal with this recurring menace. There were three main options: to subdue the nomads by offensive military means; to concede to their demands and involve them in exchange; or to repel them by means of defensive arrangements, including walls (Waldron 1992: 55–6).

The first option, a military offensive, was never going to be easy. The terrain that separated the Chinese heartlands from the steppes was flat and open and difficult to defend. Moreover, the nomads were the vastly more efficient warriors. They only had cavalry, no infantry or supply train, and they were highly mobile. As a result, they could quickly assemble in force at a certain location, make a strike or a breach, and then just as quickly disperse again. Or they could outflank an enemy who came marching towards them and attack them from the rear. Moreover, since they had no particular territory to defend, the nomads did not differentiate between offensive and defence warfare. To retreat was not humiliating, but instead an opportunity to outrun, or ambush, any imperial soldiers who pursued them. The only way to defeat such an enemy, the Chinese eventually discovered, was to learn to fight in the same manner (Waldron 1992). But for this to be possible the Chinese needed a powerful, horse-based, army guided by entirely different tactics than previously and they needed knowledge of the steppe and its people. The Tang dynasty, 618–907 CE, was successful in this regard, but they were famously open to outside

influences and foreign ideas (Lovell 2007: 138–47). The Yuan dynasty, 1271–1368 CE, and the Qing dynasty, 1644–1912, were also good at dealing with the nomads but the Yuan emperors were Mongols and the Qing emperors were Manchu – both peoples with their origin on the steppes.

The second option, trade, was much what the nomads themselves would have preferred, and this was also what they repeatedly requested (Waldron 1992: 178–82). In the eyes of the Chinese authorities, however, trade was not understood as an opportunity but instead as a concession. We have everything a person might require within our own borders, Confucian scholars argued, and therefore we never have to leave our country; foreigners, by contrast, come here since they have needs that cannot be fulfilled at home. The Chinese traded with these visitors, but above all out of a sense of magnanimity and in order to bring them into their own cultural sphere. Trade, the Chinese hoped, would transform the ‘raw’ barbarians into ‘cooked’ barbarians (Fiskesjö, 1999: 139–68). Such condescension was not appreciated by the peoples of the steppe and in any case, as they explained, they needed far more goods than the Chinese were prepared to supply (Waldron 1992: 176–7). Since the nomads were able to back up their demands with force, and the Chinese authorities were in a weak position, one concession would easily lead to another and before long the imperial authorities would be completely at the nomads’ mercy. This, at least, is what Confucian hardliners at court argued. ‘The situation of the empire may be described as like that of a person hanging upside down’ (Memorial by Jia Yi of the Han dynasty, quoted in Waldron 1992: 41). Perversely, the nomads were on top and the Chinese were at the bottom.

The third, defensive, alternative, which included wall-building, was the fall-back option (Waldron 1992: 57–8). This is what you did if you were too weak or too timid to go on the offensive and too proud to trade. Defence was no one’s favourite option but instead what you ended up doing when you did not know what to do. Although walls were unlikely to stop an invader, there was a variety of other roles they could play. In fact, from a military point of view, walls are best understood not as means of excluding an enemy as much as man-made obstacles that can help reshape the layout of a battlefield (Waldron 1992: 45; cf. Lovell 2007: 47–65). Walls are like speed bumps in a road, designed to slow down an enemy, and thereby structures along which armies can be organised. In this respect, they are more similar to ramparts or trenches. Moreover, in many cases walls were built mainly as a means of connecting already existing military installations to each other, making it possible to move troops securely from one position to the next. Or you could place your troops outside of the wall and use it as a way to protect your flank. In addition to these military uses, walls made powerful political statements. A wall, even a scalable one, is a manifestation of power. Powerful rulers have powerful walls and the walls of the emperor of China had to be very impressive indeed – at least the walls built in places where people were most likely to see them. In addition, walls can be constructed as a way to stake out a claim; in order to let everyone know how far our imperial ambitions reach and what we one day would like to accomplish. And walls, quite obviously, can serve to keep people in – such as any oppressed Chinese peasants, tired of taxes and unpaid labour, who might

consider taking up a freer life on the steppes (Lattimore 1962a: 340ff.; Lattimore 1962b: 484). As a result of this mix of military and political aims, walls can at the same time be part of a defensive and an offensive strategy.

It was for such a variety of reasons that walls came to be constructed in northern China already in the sixth century BCE, and why walls intermittently were constructed by any dynasty that failed to come up with other ways of dealing with the nomads. Qin Shihuang, the First Emperor, in the third century BCE, was one such wall-builder but his walls were made of mud and they quickly deteriorated (Waldron 1992: 195–202). Subsequent dynasties occasionally embarked on similar projects, but most of them did not. There were no walls to stop the Mongols from invading China in the 1270s and when Marco Polo returned to Venice in 1295, and started telling his stories of the wonders of the East, he said nothing about any walls. It was instead only in the latter part of the Ming dynasty, in the 1580s, that major wall construction began in earnest (Waldron 1992: 140–64). The issue here concerned control over the Ordos, the land encircled by a vast loop in the Yellow River, strategically located just west of Beijing. Given its arid climate, the Ordos loop should really have belonged to the nomads, but the presence of the Yellow River meant that at least some of the region could be irrigated and thereby farmed and accessible to the Chinese socio-economic model. Moreover, holding this land was of a paramount military importance – the capital, after all, had to be defended from the nomadic threat (Lattimore 1962a: 462).

And yet, in the sixteenth century, the nomads moved into the Ordos. The imperial court reacted with alarm and an extensive discussion ensued among the emperor's advisors regarding what to do (Waldron 1992: 91–139). Some advocated an offensive military strategy, others advocated concessions and trade, and in the stalemate that ensued, the defensive, wall-building, strategy was agreed on. It was a compromise, a plan B, which had more to do with the internal politics of the court than with military expediency, and even now, during the late Ming, there was no concerted policy to build a 'Great Wall'. In the historical sources repeated references are instead made to the 'Nine Defence Areas', a series of nine heavily armed sectors spanning the strategic northern border (Farmer 2009: 463). In line with this policy walls were built at strategic locations such as at Badaling, north-west of Beijing, today the most popular location for visits to 'the Great Wall'. But walls were also constructed as a means of linking up already existing fortifications around the Ordos loop, although many of these were rampart made of mud. That these constructions were insufficient to provide protection was clear in 1644, if not before, when the assembly of walls was no match for the invading Manchus.

How the Great Wall was constructed

It was instead in Europe, not in China, that the Great Wall was constructed. It was built, beginning in the seventeenth century, in the minds of European readers of the letters which Jesuit missionaries had begun sending back (Mungello 1989; Porter 2002: 78–132). The Jesuits were in China to convert the Chinese to Christianity, but once they realised the impossibility of winning converts one by one, they decided

instead to start at the top. By presenting themselves as purveyors of European knowledge – above all concerning astronomy, cartography and the arts – they managed to ingratiate themselves with the emperor. For some 150 years there were Jesuits stationed at the imperial court, and although they never managed to interest the emperor in their religion, they regularly sent letters back to Europe describing their strenuous efforts. Their strategy was to tap into well-established European conceptions regarding China as a land of endless wonders (Cf. Barrow 1804: 30–1). Given that China is such a rich and remarkable country, was the not-too-subtle subtext, our work, even if occasionally thwarted, will eventually be worth the while. One of the prime examples of wondrousness was what the Europeans came to refer to as ‘the Great Wall’.

One of the first tasks the Jesuits embarked on was to make a map of the Chinese empire. The early eighteenth century was when European countries finally came to take on a definite geographical shape (Harley 2009: 129–48). From this time a state was more than anything a territorially bounded entity, its borders distinctly demarcated from others and clearly indicated on a map. China too, the Jesuits decided, should be portrayed in the same fashion, and between 1707 and 1717 a contingent of them embarked on a journey into the steppes of inner Asia in order to determine the location of China’s northern borders (Elliott 2000: 621–4; Hostetler 2000: 651–8; cf. Huang 2012: 66). Following the assorted walls erected during the Ming dynasty, they decided that this constituted the frontier between China and Tartary. Where walls were confusing, running in parallel or off in the wrong direction, the border was clarified and simplified; where walls were entirely missing, the Jesuits’ map readily supplied them. This was the Great Wall described already in the first chapter of Jean-Baptiste Du Halde’s monumental *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique, et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (1736). ‘This celebrated Wall was built by the famous Emperor Tsin Sh-whang, with a political view, 221 years before Christ’, Du Halde explained. ‘It bounds China on the north, and defends it against the neighboring Tartars’ (Du Halde 1738, 1: 20). Du Halde’s work was translated into English in 1738 and widely read across Europe, not least by the Enlightenment philosophers who had come to greatly admire the wisdom and rationality of China’s government (Rowbotham 1932: 1052). Collaborating with Du Halde, Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville, Europe’s leading cartographer at the time, published his *Nouvel atlas de la Chine, de la Tartarie chinoise et du Thibet* (1737), on which the Great Wall was depicted as a continuous, strong, fortified, northern border (Anville 1737).

This was not only a cartographical construction but also the way in which eighteenth-century Europeans imagined China. The Great Wall explained to everyone’s satisfaction why China was so prosperous and so powerful. Wealth, according to the tenets of mercantilism, the dominant economic doctrine in Europe of the day, is created through protectionist measures. A country should accumulate resources – treasure, people, minerals, manufacturing industry, agricultural lands – while minimising foreign trade and restricting the outflow of precious metals. This was exactly what the Chinese empire had done and the Great Wall was one of

the means to do it. As a result, 'It may be said, without exaggeration,' Du Halde concluded, 'that China is one of the most fruitful, as well as large and beautiful countries in the world' (Du Halde 1738, 1: 314).

Having read about the Great Wall, and having imagined it, the Europeans naturally wanted to see it, yet since China was closed to foreigners this feat could not easily be accomplished. There were only the lucky few – such as the members of a British diplomatic mission led by George Macartney who visited China in 1793 – who were given the opportunity. After having presented themselves at the court in Beijing, the Macartney mission followed the emperor to his summer retreat in Chengde, in Manchuria, north of the wall, and on their way, they were thrilled to visit the celebrated construction. 'If the other parts of it be similar to those which I have seen', Macartney concluded, 'it is certainly the most stupendous work of human hands', and he calculated that its combined volume was greater than that of all other fortifications in the whole world and that the material used equivalent to that of all houses in England and Scotland (Macartney 1807: 243; Barrow 1804: 334). The Great Wall provided conclusive proof to European minds that China was a powerful empire and a wise and virtuous nation (Anderson 1797: 70; Staunton 1797, 2: 360).

The inordinate attention that the Macartney mission paid to the site seems to have puzzled the Chinese officials who accompanied them. 'They were astonished at our curiosity', Macartney reported, and 'appeared rather uneasy at the length of our stay upon it', and 'almost began to suspect us, I believe, of dangerous designs' (Macartney 1908: 294). The Chinese mandarins, it turned out, had themselves never visited the location. Yet this itself was hardly surprising. The Great Wall was not a 'sight' to be visited and in any case 'sightseeing' was a European, not a Chinese preoccupation. To educated European travellers, starting at the end of the eighteenth century, each city, each country, had its sights, carefully described in the guidebooks – the Colosseum in Rome, Notre Dame in Paris, Parthenon in Athens, and so on (Adler 1989: 7–29; Cf. Huang 2012: 74–7). Buildings such as these were what each country was famous for and the symbols by which they were recognised. Thanks to the indefatigable work of the Jesuits and the vivid imagination of European visitors, China now too had its representative symbol, and the Great Wall has been on the itinerary of visiting foreigners ever since. 'It's a great wall', as Richard Nixon observed after visiting the site on 24 February 1972, during his historic first trip to China (Frankel 1972: 14). 'It's majestic', as Barack Obama concluded on 18 November 2009. 'It reminds you of the sweep of history, and that our time here on earth is not that long, so we better make the best of it' (Higgins 2009).

How to batter down Chinese walls

In the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, Europe's view of China changed dramatically. No longer the location for rational government and assorted wonders, China was, the Europeans now decided, a backward backwater plagued by Oriental despotism and the tyranny of outdated customs. Yet this radical

transformation of European perceptions had next to nothing to do with China itself and instead everything to do with Europe. Above all, it was a result of a radical re-evaluation of the function of walls.

The problem with walls, European liberals now explained, is that they break up the world into a multitude of separate, non-communicating, compartments. If a wall is in the way, and if it is high enough, it is impossible to communicate with the people on the other side of it, or even to see who they are or what they are doing. In this way walls make the people on both sides more ignorant than they otherwise would be. What you cannot see you cannot inspect, scrutinise or verify, and walls as a result allow people to hide, to keep secrets and maintain unexamined prejudices. Walls block light, they block enlightenment; the 'Heim hides the heimlich'. And even if the wall does not constitute an absolute barrier, it is still the case that the authority that controls it can restrict and thereby shape the terms of the intercourse. Not surprisingly, walls are much relied on by people and institutions eager to limit their accountability. Since a political power which is hidden behind a wall is impossible to engage in conversation, it never has to explain itself nor provide reasons for its actions. In this way walls contribute to the sublime mystique of power but also, more prosaically, to political and economic corruption.

By destroying walls, nineteenth-century liberals were convinced, they would help spread civilisation. After all, exchange assures the free circulation not only of goods and services but of everything else which can be moved around – ideas, lifestyles, institutions, fashions, dreams, desires and ambitions. By picking the best or the cheapest of what is on offer, we can improve our lives and develop our societies. Compare the way the walls of the cities of Europe were being dismantled at this time, or the way economists, following Smith's lead, all railed against 'customs walls', 'tariffs walls' and 'walls of protection'. Free exchange, Lord Palmerston explained in the Corn Law debate in the British parliament in 1842, leads not only to an extension and diffusion of knowledge, to mutual benefits and kindly feelings, but it makes mankind 'happier, wise, better' (Palmerston 1842). 'This', he concluded, 'is the dispensation of Providence – this is the decree of that power which created and disposes the universe.'

The problem with China, Europeans now concluded, are the walls the Chinese have built around their country and their minds. The Chinese are inherently a wall-building people and there are walls everywhere – around natural resources such as forests and salt lakes; around every Chinese city, and inside the cities there are walls separating the Manchu and the Chinese sections, but also the members of professional guilds from each other or government officials from the rest of the population (Chang 1970: 63). Chinese houses are separated by walls and inside the houses walls divide family members from each other and inside the rooms themselves there are portable screens made of paper and wood. All these walls blocked exchange; they blocked access to new and cheaper products but also to new ideas, the latest technological advances, medical discoveries and scientific breakthroughs, and, European missionaries added, to the words of the Christian God (James 1862: 477–554).

Consider trade. In the nineteenth century British manufacturers were constantly on the lookout for export markets for the products that their factories kept spewing out. China, with an estimated population of some 350 million people, was an obvious target of these efforts. This 'third of mankind', British merchants imagined, were all waiting to be supplied with cotton cloth from Lancashire and cutlery from Newcastle. The problem was only that the imperial authorities in Beijing refused to grant access to foreign merchants. There was only one city – Guangzhou, 'Canton', in the south – where the Europeans could trade, and only during parts of the year, and even then they were not allowed to enter the city itself. The British demanded full access to all cities, all markets, all people, in all of China, and in addition to selling their British-made goods they insisted on the right to sell opium grown in British-held India. When the Chinese refused to make concessions and began blocking the opium trade, the British went to war in November 1839. Three years later a peace treaty was concluded in Nanjing which opened four more cities to the Europeans and turned the barren rocks of Hong Kong into a British colony. The British had wanted more, but they were still overjoyed. '[T]here is scarcely an article', Henry Pottinger, the first governor of Hong Kong, explained, 'that the manufacturers of England may not supply to them of a quality and at a price that will ensure an almost unlimited demand' (Gordon 1836: 6). It was inevitable, *The Times* commented, that 'an adventurous maritime people like the English should force themselves into connexion with a feeble and unprogressive race like the Chinese, inhabiting a rich country open to our trade' (*The Times* 1857). 'China is open! Hallelujah, China is open' (James 1862: 477).

To Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, plotting a revolution back home in Europe, it was the opening up of China that constituted the best illustration of the world-transforming powers of capitalism. Once the search for profits has come to replace all other concerns, they argued in *The Communist Manifesto*, written six years after the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, all aspects of life as we know it will be radically transformed. Capitalism shapes the world in its own image. The profit motive will destroy feudal relations and replace them with market relations; there will be constant revolutions, disturbances of all social conditions, uncertainty, and agitation. 'The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls' (Marx and Engels 1906: 18). Engels knew very well what he was talking about here. After all, he fancied himself a military man. In a series of articles on the latest developments in military ordnance published in the *New-York Tribune*, he had discussed in great detail what form of military hardware was required to breach various kinds of walls (Engels 1957). Rifled guns, he had pointed out, constitute a 'real revolution' in battlefield tactics.

Yet Marx and Engels were wrong. Cheap prices were not the heavy artillery which in the end battered down the walls of China. Instead the walls of China were battered down by the heavy artillery of heavy artillery. Once the Treaty of Nanjing was signed and the Royal Navy returned home, the Chinese began dragging their feet. The imperial authorities, the British government decided, were not living up to their obligations, and besides, it was still the case that the British wanted all of China open. To do something about this unsatisfactory state of affairs, Lord Palmerston appointed John Bowring as the new governor of Hong Kong. Bowring was a

disciple of Jeremy Bentham's, one of the original founders of the Anti-Corn Law League and an activist on behalf of various liberal causes (Todd 2008: 381–2). 'England has the highest and most noble of missions', Bowring had declared at a meeting of the League on 13 April 1843, which is 'to teach the world that commerce should be free – that all humble beings are made to love and help one another'.

Freedom of commerce, I dare say it, is Christianity in action. It is the manifestation of this spirit of kindness, benevolence and love which everywhere seeks to distance itself from evil, and tries in all places to strengthen the good.

(Bastiat 1862: 148)

Bowring hated walls – walls around countries, around cities, around prisons, and he regularly spoke out against the nefarious influence of quarantines. Coming to China he was immediately appalled by the ever-presence of its walls. Seizing on a pretext, he called on the Royal Marine to intervene, and in October 1856, a new war – the Second Opium War – had begun. Before long British gunships on the Pearl River were shelling the city walls of Guangzhou. Yet when news reached Britain regarding the renewed hostilities, Bowring was criticised in parliament and Palmerston's government was eventually forced to resign (Ringmar 2011b: 5–32). Lord Derby, a former Tory prime minister, was particularly incensed. He reacted strongly against Bowring's aggressive posture and defended the rights of the Chinese to their own way of life (Derby 1857). How would we like it, Derby asked, if the Chinese started attacking our institutions of government. Bowring had a 'monomaniacal obsessions' with the city walls of Guangzhou: 'I believe he dreams of the entrance into Canton, I believe he thinks of it first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, and in the middle of the night if he happen to awake' (Derby 1857: 1177).

Once again peace was concluded – the Treaty of Nanjing, 1858 – and this time around China was indeed forced to open up to foreign influences and trade. Once again defeated, China could no longer control its own borders. China's walls had finally come down, and British-made goods, and opium, began flooding in. 'The walls of Jericho have fallen flat to the ground', as an enthusiastic missionary put it. 'The fields are white unto the harvest. What is wanted? All that is wanted is, reapers to go and gather it in' (James 1862: 483). China was now for the first time able to receive the blessings of civilisation, even if its culture was destroyed in the process (Zeng 1887: 3). One of the reason why we need to build walls, Chinese folklore has always maintained, is that evil spirits only can move in straight lines. Walls will stop them. Chinese folklore may have been right about that, but in the 1850s their walls were too weak and the evil spirits too determined.

Life in the borderland

The Great Wall, we said, understood as a unified structure built for a given purpose, does not exist. There are many walls in China, and bits of walls, and remnants of former walls, but they were built for various reasons, at various times, and they

were more than anything the result of political expediency. Instead the Great Wall is a social construction erected not in China itself but instead in the minds of Europeans who always claimed to know what China was. In early modern Europe, when China was admired for its wealth and its political stability, the Great Wall was the perfect symbol of the wisdom of mercantilism; in the nineteenth century, when China was mocked for its lack of progress, the destruction of all Chinese walls symbolised the wisdom of exchange. To the Europeans, it is the walling instinct of the Chinese that comes first and the Great Wall is only its most prominent expression. The Great Wall existed because the Europeans decided that it had to exist, and before long they had found it everywhere throughout the country. The walls that the Europeans went on to destroy in the nineteenth century were the ones they had created in the eighteenth century. The eventual result of this work of the imagination was an aggressive European posture and a policy of imperialism.

This is where the political anthropology of walls becomes a matter of some urgency. It is only by highlighting the varied functions of walls, and the reasons why they originally were constructed, that we can hope to influence the policies they justify (Ringmar 2018). No, we can say, this is not the way walls work; walls can never properly be controlled by the people who build them; walls always result in a number of unintended consequences. In particular, we can be critical of the idea that walls can protect a culture. On the contrary, as is obvious to all people living by a wall, it not only separates people but also unites them. Walls, that is, create a culture of their own. A border designates a borderland, an intermediate zone in which people on both sides may relate to each other far more intimately than they do to others. The border establishes a shared fate and a communality of interest (Lattimore 1962b: 484). The history of the walls of northern China provides an illustration. To be a Chinese border guard in a desolate fortress somewhere along the Ordos loop was to lead a sad existence. Fighting the Mongols was a hopeless task and it made far more sense to interact and to trade with them. This was also what the border guards ended up doing and there was nothing whatsoever that the officials back in Beijing could do about it (Waldron 1992: 150). In fact, the population living on both sides of the border were always far more heterogeneous than the official, Confucian, ideology acknowledged. There were plenty of Chinese people who took up a nomadic lifestyle and plenty of nomads who engaged in part-time farming. Moreover, the nomadic frontier was attractive to many ordinary Chinese since it allowed them to avoid the impositions of the state and gave them opportunities to make money from smuggling and trade.

As all nomadic people know, the agricultural metaphor is simply mistaken. A culture does not require walls to thrive. A culture does not require roots and it does not require a fixed location. Nomads have a culture of their own after all, a culture on-the-go that thrives in a shifting landscape. Nomads carry everything they need with them on a road that leads to somewhere else, and their culture is as mobile as their horses and as collapsible as their homes. In addition, nomads know a thing or two about civilisation. After all, it is only through exchange – voluntary if possible, if not forced – that their way of life becomes viable. Connecting societies is what nomads always have done – most spectacularly, no doubt, by the Mongols who

maintained and protected the caravan routes – the ‘Silk Road’ – which connected China with India, India with Central Asia, and Central Asia with the Middle East and Europe. In this respect nomads are similar to the ‘barbarian hordes’ which today are said to ‘overrun’ Europe. Whenever we are forced to deal with the alien, we are forced to open up to the world and invited to see ourselves in the context of others (Horvath et al. 2015; Szokolczai 2017). The result, if the invitation is accepted, is civilising, but civilisation, we can conclude, does not equal the imposition of foreign solutions on a defenceless society. The formidable trading network that the Mongols created could be used by anyone, for whatever purpose, and it was by means of this bridge that Europe, in the Middle Ages, itself was civilised. A world without walls, the nomads will tell us, is not an abstract, formless, empty space; it is a world of paths, of places to discover and possibilities to explore.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to James C. Scott for comments and suggestions.
- 2 The latest news on the official Chinese Internet policy is available at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/internet-control/>

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