

Protecting China: How and why the Great Wall was built

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Image 1: A section of China's Great Wall. Photo from: Jakub Haun via Wikimedia Commons

About 2,300 years ago, China was divided into several states. This was in the third century B.C. These states frequently fought among themselves. The time is remembered as the Warring States period. Large armies of foot soldiers and smaller units on horseback crisscrossed the country. Then, in 221 B.C., the king of the western state of Qin defeated all the other kingdoms. He became the First Emperor of China. "Qin" is also where the name "China" comes from.

The emperor's goal was to unify the lands under his control. To help do this, he ordered the building of great roadways. He also commanded the construction of a long, massive wall. It would become part of what we know as the Great Wall of China.

Soldiers, Criminals And Other Laborers Build A Huge Wall

After China's unification, the First Emperor sent soldiers, criminals and other laborers north. They were required to build his wall. In some areas, they had to carry huge slabs of stone to the construction site. They then piled them one on top of the other. In winter, it was extremely cold. In summer, it was very hot. Surviving letters and other records describe the suffering and sorrow of the workers. Many died as a result of the difficult conditions.

Many Enemies

Why did the emperor of the unified China need such a wall? The answer is simple. He wanted to protect his new empire from a new enemy. This foe was the Xiongnu. They were nomads who had come together in a powerful alliance. They lived to the north. The Xiongnu were raiding the farms of Chinese settlers living along China's northern border.

China's history is often measured by its dynasties. These dynasties represent different Chinese groups that rose to power. About 200 B.C., the Qin dynasty fell. That was about 2,200 years ago. It was replaced by the Han dynasty.

Still, the Great Wall remained important. Watchtowers were built at regular intervals. They allowed guards to keep watch for possible enemy attacks. These structures also allowed guards to light large fires to signal other soldiers for help.



A New Threat, A New Great Wall

Many sections of the old Great Wall were not maintained. Over time, they fell into disrepair. Beginning in the 15th century, though, a great effort was made to rebuild them. The menace now was the Mongols, another group of northern raiders. This was during the Ming dynasty. The Ming had succeeded in chasing the Mongols out of China. However, they remained a threat to the country's security. In 1449, a group of Mongols captured the Ming emperor and defeated a huge Chinese army. At that point the Ming decided to build a new Great Wall.

More than 40,000 men were enlisted to do the work. Military commanders supervised the building of different sections. Many structures we recognize in today's pictures of the Great Wall date from this time.

Nearly 5,000 Miles Long Now

In recent decades, many sections of the wall have been repaired. It now runs for nearly 5,000 miles. That is about equal to the distance from New York to Los Angeles and back again.

The Great Wall is not just one wall, but several lines of walls. The sections are not all one size, either. Overall, the wall averages about 23 feet wide and 32 feet high.



Betrayed By A General

In the end, the Great Wall did not protect Ming rule. In 1644, a general named Wu Sangui opened the gates at a strategic point. His betrayal let in the Manchu, another tribe from the northeast, and led to the downfall of the Ming. The Manchu established the Qing dynasty. Ending in 1912, it was the last dynasty in China's long history.

Today, the Great Wall remains an important symbol of China's history and power. It is also a World Heritage Site. The wall is famous around the world and a top attraction for tourists.

Quiz

- 1 Which detail from the article explains why the Great Wall was originally built?
 - (A) After China's unification, the First Emperor sent soldiers, criminals and other laborers north. They were required to build his wall.
 - (B) The Xiongnu were raiding the farms of Chinese settlers living along China's northern border.
 - (C) These structures also allowed guards to light large fires to signal other soldiers for help.
 - (D) The Ming had succeeded in chasing the Mongols out of China. However, they remained a threat to the country's security.

- 2 Which sentence from the section "A New Threat, A New Great Wall" helps the reader understand what happened just before a new Great Wall was built?
 - (A) Many sections of the old Great Wall were not maintained.
 - (B) Beginning in the 15th century, though, a great effort was made to rebuild them.
 - (C) In 1449, a group of Mongols captured the Ming emperor and defeated a huge Chinese army.
 - (D) Many structures we recognize in today's pictures of the Great Wall date from this time.

- 3 What is the structure of this article?
 - (A) chronological
 - (B) cause and effect
 - (C) compare and contrast
 - (D) problem and solution

- 4 Read the following selection from the section "Soldiers, Criminals And Other Laborers Build A Huge Wall."

In winter, it was extremely cold. In summer, it was very hot. Surviving letters and other records describe the suffering and sorrow of the workers. Many died as a result of the difficult conditions.

Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of the selection?

- (A) chronological
- (B) cause and effect
- (C) compare and contrast
- (D) problem and solution