



## For enemies within and without

The Great Wall of China may have been of doubtful use, but the wall around the Chinese mind was always impregnable.

### REVIEW OF THE WEEK

#### The Great Wall

By Julia Lovell

Picador, 430pp, \$49.95

Reviewed by Claire Scobie

A SYMBOL OF nationalist pride, China's Great Wall is today promoted as a prime tourist destination. Neil Armstrong said he could see it from the moon. In 1972 Richard Nixon declared: "This is a great wall and it had to be built by a great people." When I visited the well-preserved section north of Beijing, I also gasped at its greatness; like so many before me, I fell for a myth.

Julia Lovell, a Cambridge historian and journalist, successfully debunks the myth to expose "a 3000-year history far more fragmented and less straightforwardly illustrious than its crowds of visitors imagine today".

The Great Wall thus becomes a metaphor for China's relationship with itself and later with the West. It provides a beguiling backdrop against which tragedy and triumph are played out.

Throughout the rise and fall of China's empires, wall building was a constant. For a dynasty to succeed it had to control the northern frontiers and keep uncivilised nomadic tribes - "tone-deaf, colourblind, treacherous fiends" - at bay. But there was never one continuous barrier that neatly surrounded the vast area of modern-day China; there was never one wall, but many smaller constructions, built of packed earth and wood, stone and brick. Most have disappeared, "leaving no more than sandcastle-like remains".

These walls, argues Lovell, were not a symbol of strength, but rather of weakness. They rep-

resented the self-absorbed isolationist approach of dynasties unable to defend themselves through military prowess, diplomacy and trade treaties. Wall building was the barometer of how open and outward-looking Chinese dynasties were to their neighbours and beyond.

The first Qin emperor, who "undoubtedly deserves a place in any rollcall of China's greatest despots" and whose legacy is the Terracotta Army, is famed for building the first Long Wall in 215BC. Far from being a source of celebration for the Chinese, writes Lovell, the "Qin wall generated the earliest stories of suffering and

until they too became "so bound and constricted by the ritualised, Chinese superiority complex that they were unable to contemplate useful dialogue with the next wave of barbarians - the West".

Lovell shows how this Sino-centric arrogance and self-aggrandisement contributed to the downfall of more than one empire. In 1793, when Lord Macartney led a British trade mission to the Qing court, Macartney failed because the Chinese dismissed all foreigners as backward "with little or nothing to offer Chinese civilisation". Such cultural superiority, however, was not matched on the ground by military expertise and after the Opium Wars of the 1840s, foreign powers had their way and were "carving China up like a melon".

On such an epic canvas, Lovell paints with fine brushes of detail and anecdote. She describes Aurel Stein stumbling across remnants of the Han wall in 1907 on his search for the Silk Road, "rootling around in a long-abandoned ancient Chinese rubbish heap" turning up "bowls, ladles, chopsticks, fragments of Shantung silk".

At times, the wealth of information - of bloodthirsty emperors, scheming eunuchs and grovelling generals - can overwhelm, particularly in the earlier chapters. Nonetheless, with the wall as the book's leading protagonist, *The Great Wall* reads with pace like a crafted narrative and is clearly intended for the general reader. Lovell is obviously comfortable with her subject - she has spent extended periods in China and translated several novels - and writes lyrically, even lovingly, with a well-earned confidence and a refreshingly unapologetic tone.

In the later chapters, the cult in the West of the Great Wall is explored. While Macartney failed to procure a trade treaty from the emperor he did visit the famous wall and gushingly declared it to be 2000 years old. The European Jesuits and missionaries who followed played their part in making

### 'Can't you see, the Long Wall / Is propped up on skeletons.'

Chinese poem

sacrifice involved in wall-building". Popular poems lamented the bleakness of the frontier, where guards manned lonely watchtowers: "Can't you see, the Long Wall / Is propped up on skeletons."

In the 13th century, the wall could not keep out Genghis Khan, who pounded China into submission and inaugurated the Yuan empire. The Ming emperors who later followed "never forgot the humiliation of Mongol occupation" and became so obsessed with security against the north that the court was frequently "paralysed" with paranoia and purges. Nor did the wall prevent the Manchus from toppling the Ming emperor in 1644. The Manchus founded the last dynasty, the Qing,



the wall truly “great” and by the 18th century it had become “wide enough for five or six horsemen to march abreast with ease”.

The early-20th-century Chinese nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen would later match the eulogies found in Western travel literature and begin modern China’s love affair with the Great Wall. He also displayed an “unstable combination of hatred and admiration for the imperialist West, and scorn and veneration for China and its past”, writes Lovell. The wall had become much more than bricks and mortar, but a mental barrier constructed to keep the West out.

Under Mao, the old Beijing city wall was replaced in the ’50s by a ring road. Reducing the structure


to rubble failed to prevent psychological barriers going up and, under communism, the wall of the imagination – which imprisons rather than protects – became the subject of a highly popular 1988 television program, *River Elegy*, shown across China. In it was a thinly disguised cry for democracy. A year later tyranny descended once more with the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Lovell concludes with an analysis of the internet and the Great Firewall around China, erected by a government still intent on shutting out democracy, fomenting paranoia and yet embracing a market economy. China’s oscillation remains, “between offence and defence, between openness and

isolationism, between hunger for foreign exotic and delusions of self-sufficiency”.

Whether the walls exist physically or in the mind, one fact is clear. Armstrong got it wrong: what he thought was the Great Wall turned out to be a cloud formation. In 2003, the Chinese astronaut from the first Chinese space flight announced that he had not seen a single rampart. But still the tourists will keep coming. The Great Wall, it would seem, has a life of its own.

Claire Scobie’s nonfiction work *Last Seen in Lhasa* will be published by Random House in July.

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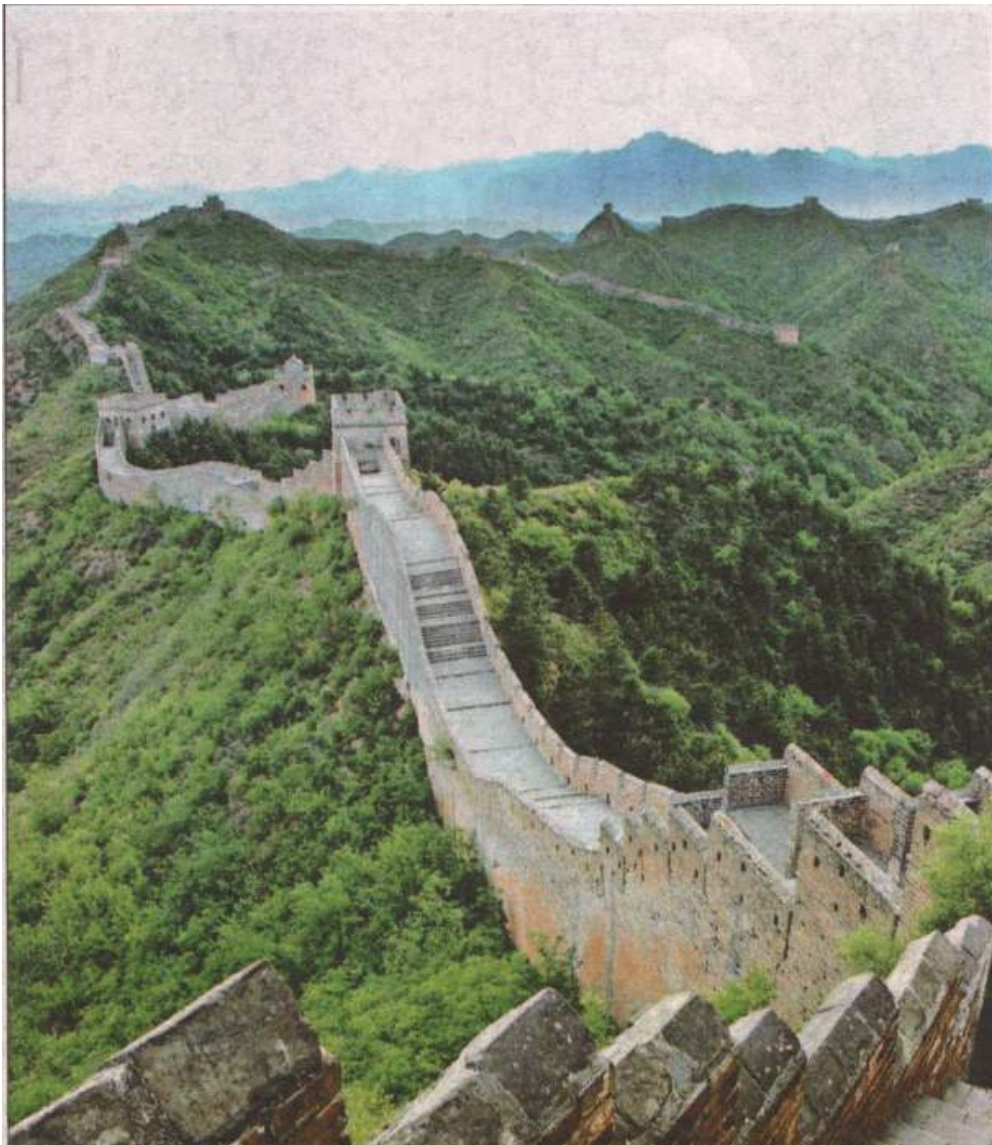


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