The Great Wall of China

Perhaps the most recognizable symbol of China and its history is the Great Wall of China. This enormous monument, one of the largest in the world, actually consists of numerous walls and fortifications. The Great Wall was originally planned by Emperor Qin Shi Huang, founder of the Qin dynasty, in the third century B.C. He wanted to prevent barbarian invasions.

The wall is one of the most extensive construction projects ever completed. The best-known and best-preserved section of the Great Wall was built in the 14th through 17th centuries. Today, it remains a powerful symbol of China’s enduring strength.

Construction during the Qin dynasty

The beginning of the Great Wall of China can be traced to the third century B.C. However, many of the fortifications included in the wall date from hundreds of years earlier. At that time, China was divided into several individual kingdoms. Around 220 B.C., Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, ordered that earlier fortifications between states be removed. He also ordered that a number of existing walls along the northern border be joined into a single system that would extend for more than 3,000 miles. This would protect China against attacks from the north.
Construction of the Great Wall was one of the most ambitious building projects ever undertaken by any civilization. The famous Chinese general Meng Tian directed the project, and was said to have used a massive army of soldiers, convicts and commoners as workers. It is said that as many as 400,000 people died during the wall's construction; many of these workers were buried within the wall itself.

Made mostly of earth and stone, the wall stretched from the China Sea port of Shanhaiguan over 3,000 miles west into Gansu province. In some places, sections of the wall overlapped for maximum security. From a base of 15 to 50 feet, the Great Wall rose some 15 to 30 feet high and was topped by ramparts 12 feet or higher; guard towers were placed along it.

The Great Wall through the centuries

With the death of Qin Shi Huang and the fall of the Qin dynasty, much of the Great Wall fell into disrepair. After the fall of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220), a series of frontier tribes seized control in northern China. The most powerful of these was the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535). It repaired and extended the existing wall to defend against attacks from other tribes. The Bei Qi kingdom (550-577 A.D.) built or repaired more than 900 miles of wall, and the Sui dynasty (581-618 A.D.) repaired and extended the Great Wall a number of times.

With the rise of the Tang dynasty (618-907), the Great Wall lost its importance as a fortification. This was because China had expanded past the original frontier protected by the wall. During the Song dynasty (960-1279), the Chinese were forced to withdraw under threat from peoples to the north. Eventually the powerful Mongol dynasty (1206-1368) took over all of China. The Great Wall held little importance for the Mongols as a military fortification. However, soldiers were assigned to man the wall in order to protect merchants traveling along trade routes.

Building of wall during the Ming dynasty

The Great Wall of China as it exists today was constructed mainly during the mighty Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This period saw an immense amount of construction, including bridges, temples and pagodas. The construction of the Great Wall as it is known today began around 1474.

The Ming wall extended from the Yalu River in Liaoning province to the Taolai River in Gansu province. It wound its way from east to west through today’s Liaoning, Beijing, Shanxi and Gansu.

Starting west of Juyong Pass, the Great Wall was split into south and north lines, which were called the Inner and Outer Walls. "Passes," or fortresses, were placed along the wall. The Juyong, Daoma and Zijing passes, closest to Beijing, were named the Three Inner Passes. Further west were Yanmen, Ningwu and Piantou, the Three Outer Passes. All six passes were heavily protected during the Ming period and considered vital to the defense of the capital.
Significance of the Great Wall

In the mid-17th century, the Manchus broke through the Great Wall. They closed in on Beijing, eventually forcing the fall of the Ming dynasty and beginning of the Manchu dynasty (1644-1912). Between the 18th and 20th centuries, the Great Wall emerged as the most common emblem of China for the Western world.

Today, the Great Wall is recognized as one of the most impressive architectural feats in history. In 1987, the United Nations named the Great Wall a World Heritage site. Over the years, roadways have been cut through the wall at various points, and many sections have deteriorated after centuries of neglect. The best-known section of the Great Wall of China - Badaling, located 43 miles northwest of Beijing - was rebuilt in the late 1950s. It continues to attract thousands of tourists every day.