

Rebuilding the Great Wall of China.

Towards a Digital Interactive Map of Its Factual and Symbolic History

In the last two decades the Great Wall of China has gained increased scholarly attention. Not incidentally, this boom of publications (1) has coincided with the economic and political rise of China to a world power, and (2) has been witnessed mainly in Western countries. While with the increase of tourism in the 1990ies, Chinese scholars (such as the Great Wall Society of China) have begun to systematically collect historical information on the Great Wall, Western authors, beginning with Arthur Waldron (1992) have focused the Great Wall “as a monumental metaphor for reading China and its history” (Lovell 2006, 22;). In the wider framework of my project I aim to demonstrate the continuous interplay between three different levels of knowledge about the Great Wall of China: (1) the level of historical data on the multitude of Longs Walls that have been built since the First Emperor (Qin Dynasty); (2) the symbolic meaning attributed to the walls by their builders; (3) the symbolic meaning attributed to the Great Wall by later writers, Westerners and Chinese.

The research proposed here is the first step towards a more comprehensive project. It aims (1) to build up a comprehensive Endnote (.enl) database of descriptions and interpretations of the Great Wall in Western (mainly English, French, German, American) travel writing from the late 18th to the early 20th century. The entries will include full text of the relevant fragments of travelogues, and the fragments will be classified by descriptors such as “language”, “nationality”, and “profession” of the author, “time” and “location” of the visit, and connected “historical events”. Based on these data, I will (2) trace the development of interpretations of the Great Wall from late 18th century philosophy via 19th century colonialism to the early age of modern tourism at the turn from the 19th to the 20th century. Going beyond the work of previous researchers, I will use my multi-lingual and historically comprehensive corpus to demonstrate how “the colossal physical reality of the wall combined with its powerful visual symbolism to transform the Great Wall into the all-defining emblem of China in the Western imagination” (Lovell 2006, 10). Upon publication of these results I will apply for funding at the National Science Council for the second, more comprehensive stage of this project, to be carried out in collaboration with Taiwanese, Chinese and European scholars. There I will integrate my data into an interactive digital map (more precisely, a series of such maps) of the Great Wall which will serve as an interface to the multitude of the relevant historical data and symbolic readings created by Chinese and by Western authors.

Literature

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