

四十八

Outside of Beijing
at the Jinshanling wall
we scrambled and trekked
trying hard not to fall
Slid down the zip line
into Si-Ma-Tai
went fishing for trout
on the 4th of July



Chapter 48 – Fishing at the Great Wall

Walls in China pre-date the earliest historical dynasties. Built as enclosures, walls have been a part of Chinese villages and cities for most of China's history. Indeed the character *chéng* (城), depending on how it is used, can colloquially mean either wall or city. Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing all had walls surrounding them, long gone now. Today, you can rent a bicycle to ride the nearly 14 km perimeter on the top of the city wall of Xi'an, one of the few remaining complete city walls in China.

In his quest for immortality, Emperor Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) burned books and destroyed historical records so that Chinese history would recognize him as China's first emperor. Some historians believe that the name "China" came from Qin (pronounced "chin"). It was this emperor who had over 6,000 life-sized terra cotta soldiers and horses made to protect him in the after-life. And, it was Emperor Qin, China's most narcissistic ruler ever, who decided that he wanted to unite the already existing walls into a barrier wall that would protect all of China and keep the northern barbarian invaders from entering into his kingdom.



Stretching from 山海关 Shānhǎiguān in Hebei Province, 270 km northeast of Tianjin, the Great Wall snakes about 2,250 km (1400 miles) across northern China to the final resting post, 嘉峪关 Jiāyùguān in Gansu province. It varies in dimensions, but is nearly 10 meters tall (over 30 feet) in some places and is as wide as a single lane road on the top. It crosses deserts, steep mountain passes, and plains. Combining the lengths of all the tributary walls with that of the northern wall, it is estimated that the Great Wall stretches for nearly 8,000 km (5,000 miles.) Only a fraction of the current wall was initially connected together by Emperor Qin. Most of the Great Wall was built during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The Ming Dynasty overthrew the Yuan Dynasty which had

been ruled by the Mongolian people to the north of China. A large portion of the Great Wall was built to prevent another invasion from the Mongolian steppes. There is no way of ascertaining the human cost of building the wall. Historians believe that the number of people who died constructing the wall exceeds 1,000,000. Scientists all agree that there's no way that a person could make out the Great Wall or any other man-made construction from the moon. And most military minds agree that a wall is an ineffective way of protecting a border.

That said, the Great Wall is impressive. And it's crowded. Remember my formula for visiting Chinese sites. Walk for 10 minutes and the crowd diminishes by half; another 10 and it can be quiet; 30 minutes and you can be by yourself. Definitely the case for the Great Wall. All the sites are impressive. That's why they were chosen in the first place. I think my favorite – so far – is the 10 km stretch of the “wild wall” starting at 金山岭 Jīnshānlǐng and ending at 司马台 Sīmǎtái. We used to be able to walk the entire 10 km stretch, pretty much hassle-free. In recent years, certain parts of that section of the wall have been closed off for a variety of reasons. At the Simatai end of that section, there was an amazing zip-line that would take you from the wall itself over a reservoir onto a platform right outside the tourist area of Simatai. Probably not the safest of Chinese tourist attractions, but maybe they've upped the standards. Sure was fun!

Outside the walls at 八达岭 Bādálǐng, 司马台 Sīmǎtái, and 慕田峪 Mùtiányù, there were fishing ponds where you could rent cane poles with hooks covered in balls of dough which you cast into small concrete fishing pools teeming with rainbow trout and salmon. After catching a trout, it would then be barbequed on a wood fire and served with local greens and a kind of cornbread. My Montana fly-fishing father is probably turning in his grave reading this, and it wasn't much of a fishing experience, but the local people did know how to barbeque the trout and they were delicious.