

From military frontier wall to spiritual Great Wall: functional transformation and the construction of new meaning of the Great Wall in the Qing dynasty

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Abstract. After the Qing dynasty entered the Central Plains, the disappearance of northern military threats led the regions along the Great Wall to shift from frontier zones to interior territories. As a result, the military defensive function of the Great Wall rapidly declined, while its value as a key corridor for north–south transportation became unprecedentedly prominent. This article argues that the functional transformation of the Great Wall in the Qing dynasty constituted a profound process of national spatial governance and identity reconstruction. At the material level, the passes of the Great Wall gradually evolved from military strongholds into commercial hubs and nodes of information dissemination. The transportation network formed on this basis further developed into an information transmission system centered on imperial court bulletins (*dibao*), with the Great Wall passes serving as channels of circulation, thereby integrating regions inside and outside the Wall into a unified system of administrative communication. At the spiritual level, the Qing court deconstructed the Great Wall's traditional symbolic meaning as a boundary between "Chinese and non-Chinese" through imperial discourse, and, through the dissemination of court bulletins, implicitly reshaped the Great Wall into a spiritual symbol representing political unity and the integration of inner and outer realms.

Keywords: Great Wall in the Qing dynasty, court bulletins (*Dibao*), commercial trade, functional transformation, construction of new meaning

1. Introduction

The Great Wall, as the most magnificent man-made structure in Chinese history, has witnessed countless wars and dynastic transitions and once played an irreplaceable role in military defense. After the unification of China under the Qin dynasty, "Meng Tian was ordered to lead an army of 300,000 northward to drive back the Rong and Di tribes, reclaim the region south of the Yellow River, and construct the Great Wall. Taking advantage of the terrain and natural strategic positions to establish defensive barriers, it extended from Lintao in the west to Liaodong in the east, stretching for more than ten thousand li" [1]. This forced the Xiongnu to retreat northward and deterred them from launching southern incursions for over a decade. During the Han dynasty, in response to continued Xiongnu harassment, successive rulers from Emperor Gaozu to Emperor Jing further expanded the scale of the Great Wall. In the Ming dynasty, in order to resist the incursions and

plundering of nomadic groups such as the Mongols and the Jurchens, the court attached great importance to northern frontier defense. Compared with earlier periods, the Great Wall constructed during the Ming dynasty was more complete, and its defensive capacity was correspondingly stronger. The Great Walls built during these three dynasties were all intended to prevent southward incursions by northern nomadic peoples. It can therefore be said that from the pre-Qin period through the Ming dynasty, the Great Wall existed both functionally and symbolically as a clearly defined military fortification and a boundary demarcating state territory. Its primary function was to "keep the enemy beyond the gates of the state", restricting and controlling the movement of people, goods, and information; this constituted the fundamental role of the Great Wall prior to the Qing dynasty.

However, after the establishment of the Qing dynasty, this vast frontier wall stretching across northern China underwent a fundamental turning point in its historical fate. The Manchu rulers, who originated beyond the passes and had themselves been the very targets of defense under the Ming Great Wall, established a unified empire encompassing territories both inside and outside the Wall and far exceeding the territorial extent of the Han and Tang dynasties. In doing so, they confronted unprecedented challenges of governance. Faced with the sharp contradiction between the Great Wall's long-standing symbolic role as a boundary between "Chinese and non-Chinese" and the Qing political ideal of integrating Manchus, Mongols, and Han into a single unified polity, the Qing court did not simply demolish or abandon the Great Wall. Instead, it initiated a highly creative process of functional transformation and reconstruction of meaning.

2. The material Great Wall: from commercial nodes to information dissemination hubs

2.1. As an important commercial node of the Qing dynasty

During the Ming dynasty, fixed mutual trade markets were established along the northern frontier. These markets, centered primarily on horse trading while also dealing in other commodities, were known as *horse markets* (mashi). However, throughout the Ming period, such frontier trade was typically established only after prolonged military confrontation with Mongolian tribes in the north, serving as a passive measure to promote economic recovery and restore national strength. After incorporating Mongolian territories into its imperial domain, the Qing Empire continued the frontier trade tradition inherited from the previous dynasty. Former military strongholds once heavily garrisoned gradually transformed into key nodes for commercial exchange and population movement. Since certain Great Wall passes marked the boundary between Qing tributary regions and interior provinces, mutual trade markets were established at or near these passes [2]. Consequently, the passes along the Great Wall gradually evolved from "frontline battlefields" into "marketplaces of exchange".

In the first year of the Shunzhi reign (1644), when the northern frontier situation had stabilized, the Qing government opened a formal passage through the Great Wall at Dajingmen and constructed a gate there in order to facilitate commercial exchange with northwestern ethnic groups [3]. From that point onward, Zhangjiakou transformed from a military stronghold into an important trading center along the northwestern commercial route. In the second year of Shunzhi (1645), the Qing court authorized trade activities near the mutual markets of Inner Mongolia at locations such as Zhangjiakou and Gubeikou along the Great Wall. The Qing government issued orders stating: "At all garrison locations, whenever merchants from Outer Mongolia arrive, they must be directed to conduct trade at designated frontier passes according to established regulations, and no obstruction shall be permitted". In the thirty-fifth year of the Kangxi reign (1696), the Qing

court officially abolished the horse markets established during the Ming dynasty along the Great Wall. Thereafter, civilian trade based on open markets became the dominant form of exchange [4]. Mutual trade at frontier passes along the Great Wall thus shifted from horse or tea-horse exchange to diversified commodity markets serving the production and livelihood needs of populations both inside and outside the Wall. In the fifty-fifth year of Kangxi (1716), Gansu experienced an abundant grain harvest, and local residents sought to transport grain westward for trade in regions such as Dunhuang and Hami, beyond Jiayuguan. In response, the Qing court ordered local officials to issue official travel permits for cross-border trade, thereby transforming Jiayuguan into a key commercial passage linking Gansu with the Western Regions, from which it derived its prominence. In the same year, severe grain shortages struck Yongping Prefecture in Zhili Province. The Qing government promptly lifted the grain transport ban at Shanhaiguan, allowing residents from the Northeast to transport grain into Yongping for trade [5]. As contemporary accounts observed, "People beyond the passes exchanged grain for silver and thereby became more prosperous", while those inside the passes "exchanged silver for grain and secured their livelihoods". Shanhaiguan thus became a vital commercial hub facilitating reciprocal exchange and mutual economic sustenance between populations on both sides of the Wall.

Beyond the six principal passes—Shanhaiguan, Xifengkou, Gubeikou, Dushikou, Zhangjiakou, and Shahukou—numerous other frontier trade sites were established, including Rehe, Bagou, Sanzuota, Qiqihar, Dolonnor, and Guihua City, as well as various locations along the borders of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Ningxia. In total, there were at least seventy to eighty such frontier trade points [6]. Nevertheless, the Qing government did not indiscriminately expand mutual trade. Instead, it imposed clear regulations governing tributary trade with subordinate regions. As recorded: "Trade with Mongolian groups had designated locations. Initially, the Khalkha were permitted to trade at Zhangjiakou and Gubeikou. During the Kangxi reign, the Karut were permitted to trade at Zhangjiakou and Guihua City; and in the thirty-sixth year, the Ordos were permitted to trade at Huamachi in Dingbian" [7]. According to the *Gazetteer of Shuoping Prefecture* compiled during the Yongzheng reign, Mongolian groups traveling to Beijing to present tribute were required to pass through designated frontier passes. In the sixth year of Yongzheng (1728), further regulations stipulated that Mongolian groups entering and exiting the Central Plains must pass through one of six designated frontier passes—Shanhaiguan, Xifengkou, Gubeikou, Zhangjiakou, Dushikou, or Shahukou—and that passage through other frontier points was strictly prohibited [8]. These strict regulations governing trade and tribute routes were not merely logistical measures for managing tribute and commerce but constituted a carefully designed mechanism for frontier governance and political integration. On the one hand, by restricting routes of passage, issuing official permits, and stationing supervisory officials, the Qing court incorporated material exchange between Mongolian groups and interior regions into a regulated and controllable administrative framework, thereby mitigating political risks arising from unregulated trade and tribute activities. On the other hand, clearly defined procedures governing tribute missions—including designated entry points, personnel numbers, tribute quantities, and reception protocols—transformed tribute into a ritualized process reinforcing hierarchical political relationships and consolidating imperial authority. As a result, the Great Wall frontier shifted from a defensive military boundary into a political space for receiving tributary delegations and administering imperial favor. Importantly, this system of fixed-pass management did not hinder economic and cultural exchange across the Great Wall. On the contrary, its institutional stability and predictability promoted frontier prosperity. Former Ming military garrisons such as Zhangjiakou and Shahukou rapidly developed into bustling commercial centers filled with merchants and shops, giving rise to specialized merchant networks engaged in Mongolian trade. Meanwhile, the extensive network of relay stations and post roads established along the Great Wall formed a complex transportation system connecting northwestern China with Mongolian regions, thereby transforming the Great Wall into a major commercial artery of the Qing Empire.

2.2. As a hub of information dissemination in the Qing dynasty

"Wherever relay routes reached, the authority of the state and its military power could also reach" [9]. Although the Qing government briefly relied on the Great Wall's military defensive function during early frontier consolidation and later internal pacification, its military role gradually diminished overall, while its non-military functions became increasingly prominent. The regions along the Great Wall gradually evolved into information corridors linking interior China with Mongolian territories.

Where people gathered, information circulated; where populations concentrated, administrative directives needed to be transmitted. The smooth communication of imperial orders and timely exchange of information across the Great Wall depended heavily on court bulletins (*dibao*) and the relay station system. As official documents used by the central government to transmit information to local authorities, court bulletins overcame geographical barriers and helped establish a nationwide information network. Between Beijing and Mongolian regions, five major relay routes passed through the Great Wall at Xifengkou, Gubeikou, Zhangjiakou, Dushikou, and Shahukou. The Great Wall passes in Zhili and Shanxi provinces served as crucial communication channels between the Qing government and Inner Mongolia. Relay routes were typically established at or near Great Wall passes, serving as starting points for routes extending into tributary regions, while remaining integrated into the broader imperial relay network within the interior. In the thirty-second year of Kangxi, the Qing government stipulated: "At relay stations in Xifengkou, Dushikou, Zhangjiakou, and Shahukou, dedicated officials shall be assigned to handle all matters concerning Mongolian communications, ensuring standardized administration". The establishment of this relay network enabled the central government to transmit imperial directives efficiently to tributary regions, facilitating closer communication and integration across the Great Wall [10]. The Great Wall thus began to transform from a defensive barrier separating inner and outer realms into a strategic node managing imperial communications and exchanges.

As a result, an integrated administrative information system emerged, built upon the existing transportation infrastructure of the Great Wall and centered on official documents such as court bulletins and memorials. This system further reinforced the role of Great Wall passes as critical information hubs connecting the imperial center with frontier regions. In the thirty-sixth year of the Qianlong reign, the emperor ordered Vice Minister of Revenue Suolin to investigate the poisoning of a Mongolian princess married into Mongolian nobility and to escort related suspects to the capital for interrogation [11]. To ensure timely transmission of imperial directives during the investigation, the Qing government dispatched memorial responses via two separate relay routes: one copy was delivered urgently through Gubeikou at a speed of six hundred li per day, while another sealed copy was transmitted simultaneously through Xifengkou at the same speed [12]. This dual-route transmission demonstrates both the sophistication and efficiency of the relay network centered on Great Wall passes, ensuring rapid communication between the imperial court and Mongolian territories.

From the perspective of administrative communication and information transmission, the Great Wall clearly functioned as a vital conduit connecting regions inside and outside the Wall. Through the relay network established along its passes, the Qing court transmitted imperial edicts and administrative information to frontier officials and military commanders stationed in Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Northeast China. Commanders stationed in Uliastai and Ili relied heavily on court bulletins transmitted through Great Wall relay stations as a primary source of information on imperial affairs. Conversely, military intelligence and civil reports from frontier regions were transmitted back to the imperial center via the same network. In this way, the Great Wall ceased to function as a barrier defined by its physical structure. Instead, through its network of passes and relay stations, it became a mechanism of deep integration, weaving together the empire's frontier and interior into a unified administrative and communicative system. This material transformation laid a crucial foundation for the subsequent spiritual reconfiguration of the Great Wall's symbolic meaning.

3. The spiritual Great Wall: from the "boundary between Chinese and non-Chinese" to "all under heaven as one family"

As the Great Wall underwent a transformation from a military barrier into a commercial node and information hub, a deeper reconstruction of its political and cultural symbolism simultaneously unfolded at the level of ideology. The shift in the Wall's functional nature not only provided a material foundation for ideological renewal but was also keenly recognized by Qing rulers as a historical opportunity to construct and legitimize their imperial authority.

3.1. The imperial discourse as the foundation of reinterpretation

As the Qing dynasty gradually consolidated its rule over the entire realm, Qing emperors sought, through a series of official evaluations of the Great Wall, to transform it from a physical marker of the "boundary between Chinese and non-Chinese" into a spiritual symbol of unity, representing the integration of distant and near regions and the idea of "China and the outer regions as one family". In the fifth month of the thirtieth year of the Kangxi reign (1691), the Ministry of Works and other government offices proposed repairing the Great Wall at Gubeikou. The regional military commander Cai Yuan submitted a memorial requesting restoration of its dilapidated sections. In response, the Kangxi Emperor declared: "An emperor who governs the realm relies on fundamental principles, not solely on geographical barriers. Since the Qin dynasty constructed the Great Wall, the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties also repaired it frequently. Yet were there no frontier troubles in their times? ... Thus it is evident that the true method of safeguarding the state lies in cultivating virtue and securing the people. When the people are content, the foundations of the state are strengthened, and the frontiers become secure of themselves. This is what is meant by the unity of popular will forming an impregnable fortress" [13]. This statement constituted an explicit repudiation of the Great Wall's military significance. Its underlying purpose was to promote the Qing governing principle of "winning allegiance through virtue" and advancing the ideal of "all under heaven as one family". By emphasizing moral governance and the willing allegiance of all ethnic groups, Kangxi reframed frontier stability as dependent upon political legitimacy rather than physical fortifications. As he further remarked, "In former times, the Qin mobilized labor to construct the Great Wall. Our dynasty, however, has bestowed favor upon the Khalkha, enabling them to serve as a defense in the northern regions, which is more secure than the Great Wall itself" [14]. This notion—that human allegiance rather than stone fortifications constituted the true defense of the frontier—reflected a fundamental transformation in Qing frontier governance philosophy. This ideological reinterpretation dismantled the heavy historical symbolism that the Great Wall had borne since the Qin and Han dynasties as a dividing line between "Chinese and non-Chinese". In its place, Qing rulers sought to cultivate a new imperial identity transcending physical borders, emphasizing territorial unity and the absence of rigid civilizational divisions. The Yongzheng Emperor articulated this position clearly in *Dayi Juemi Lu* (*Record of Awakening to Great Righteousness*): "Since our dynasty entered and governed the Central Plains, ruling over all under heaven, and incorporated Mongolia and the various frontier tribes into the imperial domain, China's territorial extent has expanded greatly. This is a great blessing for the subjects of China. How, then, can distinctions between Chinese and non-Chinese still be maintained?" [15]. The Qianlong Emperor fully inherited and further developed this reinterpretation of the Great Wall. In the ninth month of the seventeenth year of the Qianlong reign (1752), he personally composed and inscribed the *Discourse on the Ancient Great Wall* stele in present-day Chengde, Hebei. The concluding line declared: "Heaven and earth have already created natural divisions between north and south; thus the Qin construction of the Great Wall becomes all the more laughable" [16]. In this statement, the emperor dismissed the construction of the Great

Wall as a futile expenditure of labor. This perspective was echoed in poems composed by Qing officials, which proclaimed: "Even the former dynasties could not secure their realm through it; and the Qin people are all the more worthy of ridicule. Ultimately, true fortification lies in unified resolve; the foundation of stability rests therein" [17]. Within official Qing discourse, the Great Wall ceased to function as a civilizational boundary separating China from the outside world. Instead, it was redefined as an administrative boundary within a unified imperial system encompassing both interior provinces and tributary regions. Its symbolic meaning thus underwent a fundamental transformation—from a physical barrier separating "inside and outside" into a spiritual symbol integrating diverse peoples within a single imperial order.

3.2. The role of Qing court bulletins in promoting the spiritual reconfiguration of the Great Wall

As the material Great Wall gradually lost its symbolic significance as a civilizational boundary, a new form of "spiritual Great Wall" emerged through the information dissemination network jointly constituted by Great Wall passes and court bulletins (*dibao*). Within the Qing frontier governance system, court bulletins and relay stations played essential roles in transmitting imperial edicts and reporting frontier developments. In the thirty-sixth year of the Kangxi reign (1697), after Kangxi's third personal campaign against the Dzungars resulted in victory, he instructed the Crown Prince: "You have learned of this through the court bulletins; it should also be reported to the Empress Dowager and circulated within the palace for full awareness". Upon receiving news of the victory through court bulletins, officials and civilians alike expressed widespread celebration. One bulletin recorded: "On the second day of the fifth month, the court bulletin reporting the great victory was received: Galdan perished on the thirteenth day of the intercalary third month; his family and followers surrendered. Military and civilian populations throughout Jiangnan rejoiced and celebrated" [18]. Similarly, in the twenty-second year of the Qianlong reign (1757), following the decisive victory in the campaign against the Dzungars, court bulletins proclaimed: "The rebel has been captured, and the entire region of Ili has been incorporated into the imperial domain. Plans shall proceed for cultivation and pastoral settlement, completing the unfinished work left unfinished by the previous emperors. Even the Kazakh peoples, who had never before communicated with China, have now submitted and offered tribute. This represents an expansion of the Great Qing's territory and ensures lasting peace for ten thousand generations. Let this proclamation be widely disseminated" [19]. In the twenty-fourth year of Qianlong (1759), following the suppression of the rebellion led by the Khojas, court bulletins further declared: "All territories west of the frontier gates, extending more than ten thousand li, have now been incorporated into the imperial domain. Regions including the Kazakhs, the Buruts, and the various Muslim cities have been pacified in succession. Lands that had never in antiquity been connected with China have now become subjects of the Great Qing. Such an achievement has no precedent in historical records" [20]. Through the relay station system and court bulletins, the Qing court disseminated news of these victories throughout the empire, reinforcing the image of a unified realm under imperial authority and cultivating the ideological vision of "universal unity under heaven". In the thirty-sixth year of Qianlong (1771), court bulletins recorded the return of the Torghut Mongols under their leader Ubashi to Qing territory. One report stated: "According to the court bulletin of the thirty-sixth year of Qianlong, officials including Shu Wenxiang reported that on the third day of the sixth month, the Torghut leader Chebek Dorji entered the frontier camp to meet the general, having long harbored the intention of returning to the sacred ruler" [21]. The widespread dissemination of this news through court bulletins had profound ideological implications both north and south of the Great Wall. Among Mongolian groups north of the Wall, court bulletins served as a key channel for understanding the Qing ideal of imperial unity, reinforcing their identification with and allegiance to the Qing state. Among Han populations south of the Wall, the circulation of such information fostered pride and strengthened emotional identification with the unified empire. In this

way, the circulation and sharing of court bulletin information contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the concept of a "spiritual Great Wall", transforming the Wall from a mere defensive structure into a symbolic bond uniting the peoples of the empire.

Through the integrated system of court bulletins and relay networks centered on Great Wall passes, imperial edicts and administrative directives could be rapidly disseminated across regions both inside and outside the Wall. In this process, the imperial information network built upon the infrastructure of the Great Wall elevated the function of court bulletins beyond that of administrative communication. Together with the Great Wall itself, they became instruments for sustaining imperial governance and constructing a shared political identity. The transformation of the Great Wall's symbolic meaning thus provided both the ideological foundation and the practical mechanism for realizing genuine imperial unification under the Qing dynasty, while simultaneously dismantling the long-standing conception of the Great Wall as a civilizational boundary between "Chinese and non-Chinese".

4. Conclusion

The transformation of the Great Wall in the Qing dynasty from a military frontier barrier into a spiritual Great Wall fundamentally reflects the underlying logic of the Qing state as a unified multiethnic empire. It reveals a profound historical transition in Qing governance—from reliance on the "natural barrier of fortified walls" for military defense to the construction of a shared spiritual identity grounded in the ideal of "all under heaven as one family". After establishing a political order characterized by the integration of inner and outer regions, the Qing state no longer depended on physical walls for separation and defense. Instead, it proactively transformed Great Wall passes into commercial hubs and information nodes, reshaping them into a new geographical medium for governing its vast imperial territory. This process represented not only a creative transformation of spatial function but also a deliberate project of ideological construction. Through imperial discourse and the dissemination of court bulletins, Qing rulers systematically deconstructed the Great Wall's traditional symbolism as a boundary between Chinese and non-Chinese and elevated it into a spiritual Great Wall that sustained imperial identity.

The Qing dynasty's changing attitude toward the Great Wall demonstrates that the consolidation of a national community depends not only on geographical connectivity but also on spiritual cohesion and the shared meaning of cultural symbols. The Great Wall's enduring embodiment of collective unity and indomitable perseverance has long transcended its original historical context, becoming an integral cultural gene embedded within the identity of the Chinese nation.

As Xi Jinping profoundly observed, "The Great Wall is a representative symbol of the Chinese nation and an important emblem of Chinese civilization. It embodies the Chinese nation's spirit of unremitting self-improvement and its patriotic ethos of unity, resilience, and perseverance". This important statement not only clarifies the Great Wall's exalted status in the history of Chinese civilization but also reveals the enduring vitality of its spiritual and cultural significance. From the Qing dynasty's use of Great Wall passes to construct national identity to the present day, when the Great Wall serves as a vital carrier for inspiring national pride and promoting patriotism, the true Great Wall exists not merely in its physical form of stone and fortifications, but in the living continuity of cultural heritage and the shared spiritual unity of the people. In the context of the new era, further exploring the historical and cultural meanings and national spirit embodied in the Great Wall is of profound significance for strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese national community, reinforcing cultural confidence, and consolidating the collective strength of the nation.

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