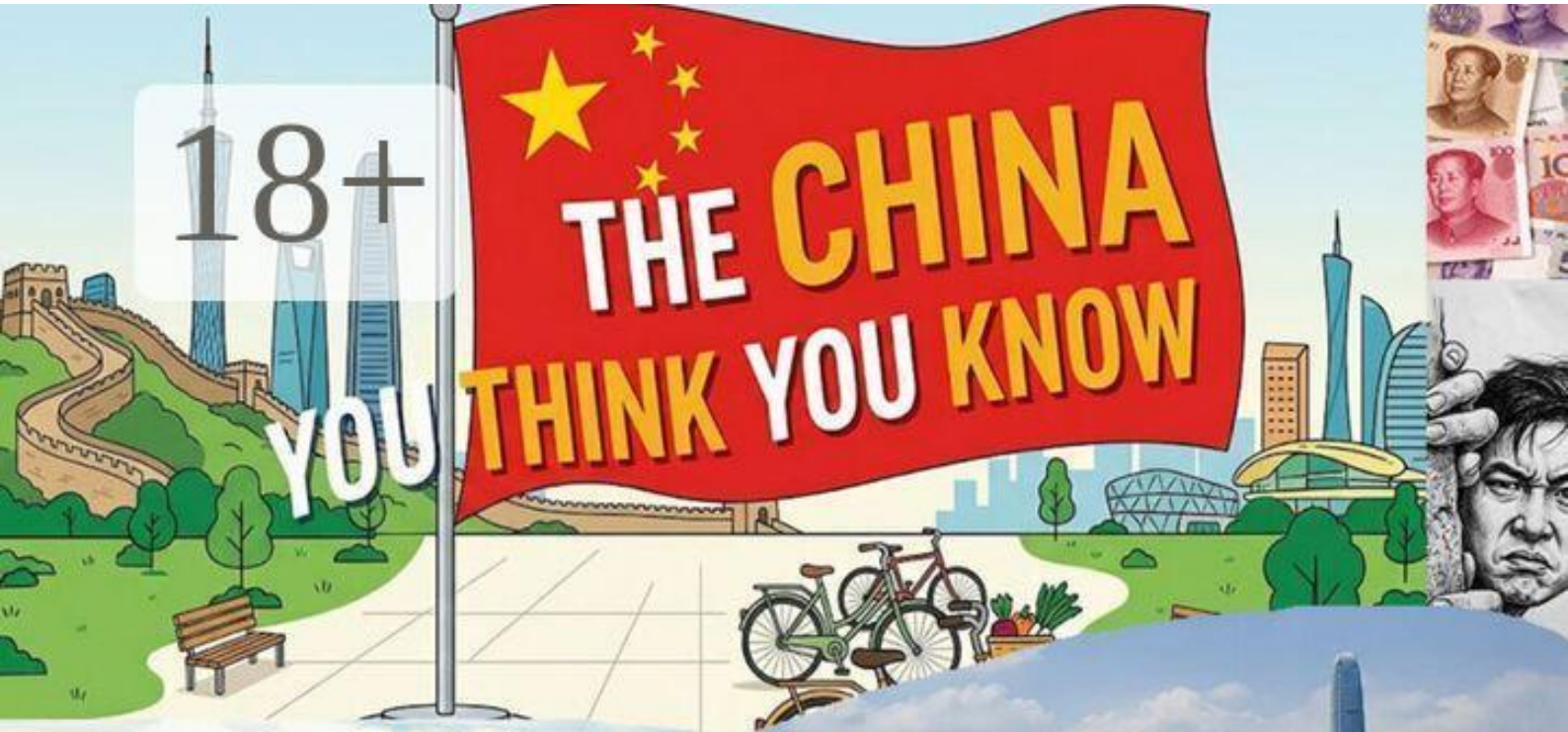




Fozildzhon Fatulloev

The China you think you know

«Издательские решения»

Fatulloev F.

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ ВРЕД
ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН И ВЛЕЧЕТ
УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. The
Great Wall isn't one wall. Pandas are political tools. And Suzhou gardens are
universes in miniature. Travel writer Fozildzhon Fatulloev takes you beyond the
postcards to the real China: 10 famous destinations, 10 shattered myths. No dry
history — just living culture, unexpected truths, and stories that stay with you. For
travelers who want to truly see, not just visit.

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The China you think you know

Fozildzhon Fatulloev

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Introduction

Why this book was written

China is the most populous country in the world, one of the most ancient civilizations, and the second-largest economy on the planet. Thousands of books have been written about it, hundreds of films have been made, and millions of studies have been conducted. It would seem that what more could be said? But it is precisely this abundance of information that creates the problem. When a country is talked about too much, when its image is projected onto screens, magazine covers, and headlines every day, a strange thing happens: instead of understanding, stereotypes grow. The more noise, the less is heard.

There's a dangerous misconception that China can be encompassed in a single glance. That seeing Beijing, Shanghai, the Great Wall, and the Terracotta Army is enough to say, "I've been to China, I know what it's like." But a country home to over a billion people, where history stretches back thousands of years, where you can travel from snow-capped mountains to tropical jungles in a single day, doesn't fit within the scope of a short trip. Nor does it fit within the scope of a single book. But a book can do something else: it can teach you to see.

This book does not claim to be an exhaustive guide. It does not contain complete lists of hotels, bus schedules, or ticket prices — though practical information is provided. It is not a history textbook — though historical context is present on every page. It does not aim to debunk all the myths about China — such a task would require many volumes. The goal of this book is more modest and, I hope, more useful: to show ten places that everyone knows but sees differently, and through the prism of these places, to dispel ten stereotypes that hinder understanding.

What is a stereotype and why is it dangerous?

A stereotype is a mental economy. The human brain is designed to categorize, simplify, and generalize. This is essential for survival: if we constantly relearn whether fire is dangerous, we won't have time to pull our hand away. But when this same function is applied to a culture, a country, a civilization, the result is the opposite. A stereotype doesn't protect. It cripples. It replaces a complex reality with a simple image, and this image takes on a life of its own, bearing no resemblance to the original.

The stereotype of China is particularly persistent because it is reinforced by visual images that are easy to remember and hard to erase. The Great Wall as one long line. The Terracotta Warriors as a crowd of clones. Pandas as cute toys. Shanghai as a collection of glass towers. These images aren't false. They are incomplete. And it's precisely this incompleteness that makes them dangerous. Anyone who thinks they know China because they've seen these images stops asking questions. And a country that stops asking questions is doomed to superficiality.

For a traveler, stereotypes are even more dangerous. They don't just distort understanding. They distort experience. If you arrive in a country with a predetermined set of expectations, you only see what fits those expectations. You photograph what you've already seen on postcards. You listen to what you want to hear. You pass by what doesn't fit the picture. And you leave with confirmation of your own misconceptions, not with new knowledge.

This book is written for those who want to see more. Not for those who seek to prove themselves right. Not for those who seek confirmation of long-held views. But for those who are ready to doubt. For those who understand: the real journey begins where the map ends, and true knowledge begins where certainty ends.

How to read this book

The book is structured around ten locations. Each one is one of China's most visited attractions. Each one is a starting point for reflection. Each chapter begins with a stereotype: what most people think. This is followed by a dismantling of that stereotype through history, culture, and context. Then

comes practical information: how to get there, when to go, what to see. And the chapter concludes with a personal anecdote — a story that doesn't pretend to be objective, but rather conveys the atmosphere.

Important: This book is written in Russian, but is intended for readers from any country. The examples, comparisons, and contexts are chosen to be understandable regardless of where you live — Russia, the United States, Europe, Latin America, or Japan. China is a country that speaks many languages, and this book aims to be part of that conversation.

It's also important to note: this book doesn't contain political judgments. It doesn't aim to criticize or praise. It describes what exists, within the bounds of respect for the laws, culture, and traditions of the country it describes. The author is not a political scientist or historian in the academic sense. He is a traveler who has spent a lot of time in China, who has walked these places, talked to people, made mistakes, been surprised, and rethought. And he shares this experience with you.

Which route shall we take?

Our journey begins at the Great Wall. Not because it's the most famous place, but because it teaches the first lesson: don't trust a single image. The Wall isn't just one wall. It's many walls, many eras, many meanings.

Next up is the Terracotta Army in Xi'an. Here we'll debunk the myth that these figures are faceless soldiers. Each one is unique, and their mission was not military, but cosmic.

In Beijing, in the Forbidden City, we will see that the emperor was not a lazy tyrant in gold, but a man whose workday was more grueling than that of many modern managers.

Shanghai will teach us that the future doesn't cancel the past, but builds on it. The Bund and Pudong are not two cities. They are one dialogue.

Guilin and Yangshuo will show that the "typical Chinese landscape" is not just the beauty of nature, but an aesthetic canon that has been formed over thousands of years.

In Xi'an, in the Muslim Quarter, we will discover that China is not a monolith. It is a country of many peoples, languages, and faiths that have found a way to coexist.

Chengdu will dispel the myth of pandas as mere symbols of cuteness. They have complex politics behind them, and the city itself preserves a culinary and tea tradition that is more important than any zoo.

Hangzhou and West Lake will teach us to see art where we think we see nature. And we will understand that the best landscapes are those created over centuries.

Suzhou and its gardens will reveal a microcosmic world. A garden is not a park. It is a miniature universe, where every stone is a mountain, and every pond a sea.

And finally, Hong Kong. Not because it's "typical China," but because it proves that Chinese civilization is capable of producing a wide variety of forms. Hong Kong is a reminder that unity does not require uniformity.

What you will need

This book doesn't require any special knowledge. You don't need to be a historian, philologist, or sinologist. All you need is one thing: a willingness to look closely. A willingness to put down the camera and see with your own eyes. A willingness to hear the silence beyond the noise. A willingness to acknowledge that what you knew was only the beginning.

China doesn't reveal itself at first glance. It unfolds gradually, layer by layer, like an onion, like an ancient scroll, like tea that only reveals itself after the third steeping. This book is an attempt to help you in this unfolding. Not instead of you, but alongside you. Not instead of the trip, but with it.

If after reading these ten places you see them differently than you did before, the book has served its purpose. If you want to see them with your own eyes, even better. If you return home and realize you know less than you thought before your trip, that's the best result. Because the only way to understand China is to accept that it defies definitive understanding. And that's precisely its appeal.

We are starting.

Chapter 1. The Great Wall

Stereotype

Most people, when planning a trip to China, imagine one thing: a long stone wall stretching to the horizon, built by ancient emperors to protect against Mongol troops. This image has become so ingrained in the popular imagination that it has become practically synonymous with the country itself. But if you arrive in China with this single image in your mind, you'll only see a fragment. And perhaps not the most important one.

The Great Wall isn't just one wall. It isn't just one era. And it's not only, or even primarily, a military structure, but a symbol, an engineering project, and a political message that has been read differently over the centuries. To understand China, we must understand what the wall truly says. And to do that, we must separate what we think we know from what remains in stone.

Immersion

Not one wall, but many

The first thing to forget is the notion of a single line built in one fell swoop along the country's entire northern border. In reality, we're dealing with a system of fortifications built at different times, in different locations, and using different materials. They are united not by a single design, but by a single function — control of space.

The earliest precursors of the wall appeared during the Warring States period, long before the unification of China under Qin Shi Huang. Back then, individual principalities built palisades and ramparts to defend themselves from one another. These were earthen embankments, wooden forts, and moats — not grandiose stone marvels, but the pragmatic engineering of their time.

When Qin Shi Huangdi united the disparate states into a single empire in the third century BCE, he ordered the existing northern fortifications to be connected into a single line. But it's important to understand: this wasn't a stone monument, but primarily an earthen rampart with wooden superstructures. The goal wasn't so much to repel a massive invasion as to control the movement of people, caravans, and military detachments. The wall was a customs house, not just a fortress.

The next major stage was the Han Dynasty. The wall extended further west, into the desert regions traversed by the Silk Road. Here, it served a different function: protecting trade routes and controlling the movement of nomadic tribes. In some places, the Han Wall was not continuous, but rather a chain of forts and beacon towers, connected by sections of wall where appropriate. Engineering followed the logic of the terrain, not the aesthetics of a single line.

But what tourists see today is, in the vast majority of cases, a wall from the Ming Dynasty. It was between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries that the fortifications acquired their familiar appearance: stonework, brick, powerful towers, and internal passages. The Ming Wall is a response to new military realities: a powerful nomadic alliance arose in the north, and the empire required serious defense.

It's important to understand: the Ming Wall is not a continuation of the Qin Wall. It's a new project, built in a different location, with different materials and technology. In some places, it runs alongside ancient ramparts, and in others, in entirely new sections. The length of all the wall sections from different eras, when combined, exceeds twenty-one thousand kilometers. But this figure reflects the scale of ambition rather than an actual continuous line.

Not only from the Mongols

The second stereotype is that the wall was built solely to protect against the Mongols. This is an oversimplification that offends history, the Mongols themselves, and the logic of Chinese foreign policy.

First, the threat from the north came repeatedly and from various sources. At various times, these included the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Turks, Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols, and Manchus. Each of

these tribes or groups represented a distinct civilization with its own power structure, language, and military tactics. The wall was built and rebuilt in response to a specific threat at a specific time, not as a universal defense against an abstract nomad.

Secondly, the wall was never an insurmountable obstacle. Historical chronicles record numerous instances of nomadic armies bypassing it, finding passages, bribing guards, or simply storming the gates. The wall slowed the advance, but did not stop it. Its military value lay not in absolute impregnability, but in creating a buffer zone within which the empire could mobilize forces, gather intelligence, and organize its defense.

Thirdly, the wall was an instrument not only of defense but also of governance. It demarcated zones of economic influence, controlled trade, levied duties, and regulated migration. Those living on the southern side of the rampart were under the jurisdiction of the empire. Those on the northern side were subject to nomadic politics. The wall was a border, and a border is always not only a military line but also an economic and administrative mechanism.

Engineering and logistics

To appreciate the scale of the project, it's worth considering not just the length, but the logistics. Construction took place in mountainous areas, across rivers, on slopes, in harsh climates. Stone was quarried on-site or nearby. Bricks were fired in kilns built right next to the construction site. The mortar was made from lime, sometimes with the addition of rice water — the latter, incidentally, increased the plasticity and strength of the mixture, a fact confirmed by modern research.

The material used depended on the region. Where stone was available, stone was used. In desert regions, clay and reed were used, alternating layers. In mountainous areas, the wall followed the ridges, utilizing the natural slopes as part of the fortification. Ming engineers understood that a mountaintop wall was not only a defense but also an observation post. Signal towers were positioned so that messages of an impending threat could be transmitted from one to the other using smoke during the day and fire at night. Signal transmission speeds could reach several hundred kilometers per day — faster than any courier of the time.

Within the wall, in Ming-era sections, were internal passages, arsenals, barracks, and warehouses. This was not just a fence, but a military complex capable of housing a garrison, weapons, and provisions. Towers were positioned within bowshot distance of one another, allowing for crossfire. Stairs and ramps within were narrow and steep — to prevent an enemy breaching the wall from maneuvering quickly.

A symbol, not just a stone

But perhaps most importantly, the wall transcended its practical function and became a symbol. Already during the Ming Dynasty, it was perceived not only as a military objective but also as a sign of the empire's unity, its ability to mobilize resources and will. Building the wall required enormous expenditures — human, financial, and material. The empire's ability to carry out such work demonstrated its power and organization.

After the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the wall gradually lost its military significance. The Qing Empire itself had come from the north, and for them, the northern border no longer required such defense. The fortifications fell into disrepair, in places crumbling, and in others dismantled for building materials. The wall became a ruin, remembered as a monument to the past.

Interestingly, the Western world learned about the Great Wall primarily through travelers and missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Europeans, hearing stories of a gigantic structure projected onto the map, added mythology to it. The wall became one of the wonders of the world in the Western imagination long before it achieved such status in China.

In recent times, the wall has undergone restoration. But there's another important point here: most of what tourists see are restored or renovated sections. This isn't a fake, but neither is it

pristine antiquity. It's a commitment to heritage, allowing you to appreciate the scale but requiring an understanding: the stone you're walking on may have been laid in the 20th century, not the 16th.

What the wall says about China

If you approach the wall not as a backdrop for a photograph, but as a text, you can read several lessons about the country itself in it.

The first is an attitude toward scale. Chinese civilization is not afraid of large projects stretching across time and space. The wall was built over centuries, and each dynasty considered it its duty to contribute to it. This is long-term thinking, where the outcome is more important than the lifespan of a single person.

The second is pragmatism. The wall is not perfect. It is crooked, discontinuous in places, built of clay in places, and stone in others. The engineers adapted to the terrain, the climate, and the available resources. Beauty here is secondary to function, although over time, function has generated its own aesthetics.

The third is the border as dialogue. A wall is not only a division but also a point of contact. Trade took place along it, technologies were transferred, cultures mingled. Those who lived near the wall often knew both sides. They served as translators, guides, and traders. The border generated not only conflict but also exchange.

Practice

Where to go

There are several areas available to visit, and the choice depends on what you want to achieve.

Badaling is the most famous and closest to Beijing. It's an hour and a half away by bus or train. It boasts well-restored sections, convenient ramps, and cable car cabins. It's the choice for those who value comfort and want to see the classic view: a wall running along a ridge with towers on the horizon. The downside is the crowds. On weekends and holidays, it can get so crowded that walking along the wall becomes a queue.

Mutianyu is a little further away, but significantly quieter. It's also well restored, with a ski lift and toboggan run. The scenery here is more picturesque: more trees, higher ridges, and wider views. If you're in Beijing for a few days and want comfort without the crowds of Badaling, this is a reasonable compromise.

Jinshanling is for those willing to spend more time on the trail. It's less crowded and more authentic. This section combines restored and dilapidated sections. You can see what the wall looked like before restoration: stone, overgrown vegetation, and crumbling towers. This section requires good physical fitness, as the climbs are steeper and the railings are missing in places.

Simatay is even further away, partially closed to visitors at various times, but considered one of the most dramatic in terms of terrain. Night tours with lanterns are a unique experience, but require reservations.

How to get there

Tourist buses run from Beijing to Badaling and Mutianyu from the metro stations. You can also book a car with a driver — this is convenient for groups. It's best to travel to Jinshanling by rental car or with an organized group, as public transportation requires transfers and takes several hours.

When to go

The best time is late autumn, September-October. The sky is clear, the air is dry, and the mountain foliage is turning yellow. Spring is also lovely, but April-May can be windy. Summer is hot, and the exposed sections of the wall lack shade. Winter is cold, but if there's snow, you'll get one of the most spectacular views: a white snake among white mountains. The main thing is to avoid national holidays, especially the week of Golden October in early October.

What to take with you

Comfortable shoes with good soles are a must. The steps up the wall are steep, uneven, and crumbling in places. Water and snacks are essential — there are no cafes in the remote sections. A warm jacket, even in summer, is essential: the wind is stronger at higher altitudes than at lower altitudes. A flashlight is recommended if you plan to stay until sunset.

Personal

I remember the sunrise on the wall at Mutianyu. The climb began in the dark, and the first forty minutes were just stairs up until you reached the level where the wall runs along the ridge. The wind was strong, and I had time to think I'd made a mistake with my clothing. But when the sun rose, the mist that had been lying in the valley began to lift, and the wall, stretching east and west, emerged from the gloom in pieces: first the nearest tower, then the next, then a line lost in the clouds.

At that moment, there was no one around. Tourists arrive around lunchtime, and in the morning you're left alone with the stone, the wind, and the silence. And this silence is the most important thing the wall can tell. Not about battles, not about the Mongol hordes, not about the greatness of the empire. But about what has passed. About how people laid stone after stone, not knowing if anyone would see the result. About how all this power is, above all, labor. Thousands of hands, millions of stones, centuries of work.

As I was descending, I encountered the first visitors. They were climbing, taking photos, laughing, buying souvenirs. And that was also right — the wall lives on like that today. But I was glad I had managed to see it before it became a backdrop again. A backdrop for photographs, for performances, for stereotypes. And before that, it was just a wall. Long, old, tired. But real.

Chapter 2. The Terracotta Army

Stereotype

When someone first sees photographs of the Terracotta Army, a common image springs to mind: endless rows of warriors, lined up in strict order, as if ready for battle. They all seem identical — the same pose, the same face, the same armor. It's as if an ancient emperor created a gigantic factory churning out thousands of copies of a single soldier to protect his peace from enemies. This image is so powerful that it has become a hallmark of China, along with the Great Wall. But it's deceiving twice. First, the soldiers are not identical. Second, they were never intended for war as we understand it.

To understand this marvel of ancient engineering, we must move away from associations with modern military equipment. This is not a battalion, a garrison, or a guard. It is a message to another world, composed of clay, bronze, and human labor.

Immersion

The Emperor Who Didn't Want to Die

To understand the Terracotta Army, one must first understand the man who commissioned it. Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of a unified China, reigned in the third century BCE. He came to power at the age of twelve, united the warring kingdoms into a single empire, standardized writing, weights, measures, and currency, and began building a road network. His rule was strict, centralized, and aimed at creating a state that would outlive him.

But along with his political will, Qin Shi Huang also possessed another trait: a fear of death. He searched for the elixir of immortality, sent expeditions overseas, and consulted with magicians and alchemists. When it became clear that physical immortality was unattainable, the emperor turned to another method: creating a world in which he would continue to exist after death. This world was to be an exact replica of his earthly one, but eternal.

The idea of an afterlife in China at that time was not an abstraction. The deceased was believed to continue to exist in the underworld, retaining their status, habits, and needs. Consequently, the emperor needed not only a palace but also an entire power structure — an army, officials, musicians, grooms, and artisans. Everything that surrounded him in life had to accompany him afterward.

Not an army, but a palace

The main misconception is that the Terracotta Warriors are a military unit. In reality, they are a ceremonial guard, part of a gigantic tomb complex. Their purpose was not to repel an actual attack on the tomb. Their purpose was to demonstrate the extent of the emperor's power in the world to which he was departing.

Excavations revealed that the emperor's underground city was not a single pit filled with soldiers, but an entire system of structures covering an area of over fifty square kilometers. Bronze chariots with four horses, acrobats, musicians, officials, grooms, birds, and animals were found in various pits. All of this constituted a miniature imperial palace. The army was only the visible part of the iceberg, the one closest to the surface and best preserved.

The bronze chariots discovered in one of the pits are striking in their detail. Bridles, wheel spokes, and body decorations are all life-size and crafted with jeweler's precision. The chariots were plated with silver and gold, suggesting a ceremonial rather than a combat purpose. They were vehicles for the afterlife, not the battlefield.

Another pit contained figures of acrobats and musicians — entertainers for imperial receptions. A third contained officials with tablets, ready to continue their archival work. A fourth contained stone armor, suits of armor, and real weapons. But these, too, were most likely intended for ritual purposes, not combat. Taken together, this created the illusion of a functioning state, where everyone knew their place and role.

The uniqueness of each figure

Now about the second misconception: that all soldiers are alike. This is not true. Each surviving figure is a portrait. They have different hairstyles, reflecting their military rank. Their facial expressions are different — some are tense and focused, others are calm, and still others seem tired. Their armor is different, their boots are different, the folds of their clothing are different.

Hairstyles were an important sign of social status. Warriors with topknots on the right side of their heads belonged to one unit, while those with topknots on the left belonged to another. Generals wore birds on their headdresses, while officers wore specific types of helmets. Privates had the simplest hairstyles. This was not decoration, but a legible system of rank.

The faces are also unique. Modern research using 3D scanning has shown that facial features vary so much that archaeologists can speak of types rather than stereotypes. Some faces are round, others elongated; some have more pronounced cheekbones, others less so. Perhaps the sculptors modeled the figures on real people — warriors who actually served in the Qin army. Or, more likely, they worked in workshops where each sculptor contributed their own style, their own vision of the human face.

Bodies vary too. Some are slender and some are stocky, tall and some are short. Armor is tailored to their height. Even the soles of their boots have different tread patterns — some are dense, others are sparse, depending on the warrior's role in the ranks.

All the figures were originally painted. Their skin was pinkish-brown, their armor red, green, blue, and black. Their eyes were different colors, and their hair was black. When the figures were first unearthed, archaeologists saw these paints. But exposure to air destroyed the pigments within hours. Today, almost all the figures have that same clay-gray color we're accustomed to thinking of as natural. But this is not the case. They were vibrant, almost festive. The Emperor departed for the afterlife not with a gray mass, but with a ceremonial regiment.

Masters and scale

The project took, according to various estimates, around thirty-eight years. Some estimates suggest that around seven hundred thousand artisans participated. This number is hard to comprehend. If we imagine that each artisan produced at least one figure, that would be an army equal to the population of a large modern city.

The work was carried out in workshops located near the burial site. The technology was complex. First, the body was formed from clay, piece by piece — the legs, torso, and arms. Then the head was added, molded separately and attached to the neck. Details — hairstyles, mustaches, folds of clothing — were applied by hand. Afterwards, the figure was fired in a kiln at a temperature of approximately 1,000 degrees Celsius. It was then painted and mounted.

The artisans worked in teams, and many of the figurines bear marks — craftsmen's marks. This allows archaeologists to trace which workshop was responsible for which section. The quality control system was strict: if a figurine cracked during firing, it was discarded and remade. Cracks on some surviving specimens indicate that repair was also possible.

Interestingly, after the work was completed, many of the masters, according to legend, were buried with the emperor to preserve the secret of the tomb's construction. This has not been confirmed archaeologically, but it fits the spirit of the times: Qin Shi Huang was loath to have his greatness widely known. His real tomb, located beneath an artificial mound, remains unopened. Archaeologists fear repeating the mistake made when excavating the warrior pits: exposure to air destroyed the paints and organic materials. The emperor's tomb may contain mercury, trap mechanisms, and unknown substances. It remains sealed, and rightly so.

What we don't see

A tourist visiting the museum sees warriors. But they don't see what's beneath their feet and all around them. Excavations continue, and every year archaeologists discover new things. Recently, they discovered a pit containing figures of dancers and acrobats who were supposed to entertain the

emperor at his afterlife feasts. They also found the remains of belts, fabrics, and wooden chariots, which had completely decomposed, leaving only imprints in the clay.

There is evidence that underground rivers of mercury existed around the tomb, simulating the empire's waterways. This is not fiction: soil analysis revealed elevated mercury levels in certain areas. The emperor wanted his underground world to replicate the geography of real China.

It's also worth remembering that the Terracotta Army isn't the only burial of this era. Other smaller burials, constructed according to the same logic, have been found in China. The principle of accompanying a ruler to the afterlife was widespread. But the scale of Qin Shi Huang's remains unparalleled.

The army as a mirror of the empire

If you look closely at the terracotta warriors, you can discern within them the structure of the Qin Empire itself. These aren't just warriors — they're a bureaucratic machine carved into clay. There are archers, spearmen, charioteers, and generals. There are heavily armed units, and there are light units. The arrangement of the figures in the pits replicates the actual battle formations of the Qin army.

This demonstrates that the project's creators understood military affairs. They weren't sculpting abstract heroes — they were recreating a real army. An army that conquered six kingdoms and created a unified state. The Emperor took with him to the afterlife not only luxury but also power. Power that made him great in life.

But there's another, quieter conclusion. All these thousands of figures are the work of ordinary people: artisans, potters, artists, workers. They didn't know their work would survive two thousand years. They didn't know their names, engraved on the stamps, would be read by archaeologists. They were simply following orders. But their execution was such a masterful achievement that we still admire it.

Practice

Where to go

The Terracotta Army Museum is located in the Lintong District, in the eastern part of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. It's not just an exhibition hall, but a complex built directly on the excavation site. Its main difference from many other museums around the world is that you don't see finished exhibits behind glass, but rather the process. The pits are open, pavilions are erected above them, and you stand on balconies, gazing down upon rows of figures, just as the first archaeologists saw them in the 1970s.

The complex consists of three main pits, a bronze chariot museum, and a cinema. Pit one is the largest, containing the bulk of warriors arrayed in battle formation. Pit two is the military headquarters, containing more officers and chariots. Pit three is the command post, smaller in size but containing high-ranking figures. The bronze chariots are displayed in a separate hall and deserve special attention — they are perhaps the most exquisite finds in the complex.

How to get there

The museum is about forty kilometers from central Xi'an. The easiest way is by tourist bus, which departs from Xianbei Station. The journey takes about an hour. You can also take a taxi or book a car with a driver — convenient if you're in a group of three or four. There's also a city bus, but it takes longer and requires transfers.

It's best to leave early in the morning, before the museum opens at eight o'clock. By midday, the complex fills with groups, making it difficult to see the warriors over the heads of other tourists. In the evening, around five o'clock, the crowds thin out, but the lighting in the pavilions isn't as good for photographs.

What to watch

Start with pit number one — it will give you a sense of scale. Then move on to pit number two to examine the details. Pit number three contains few figures, but there are signs of restoration

— broken figures, reassembled by archaeologists, stand next to intact ones. This clearly shows the condition in which they were found.

Be sure to visit the bronze chariot hall. It's cool and dark, the exhibits are covered in glass, but the lighting allows you to see the details. The chariots are smaller than the warriors, but more intricate in their execution.

If you have time, watch a 360-degree film in the museum's cinema. It was filmed using a technology that rotates the auditorium and projects images onto the walls. The film recreates the history of the army's construction and at least partially conveys its scale.

Combination with other places

Xi'an is a city that can't be reduced to just the Terracotta Army. It boasts one of the best-preserved city walls in China. Built during the Ming Dynasty, the Xi'an Wall encircles the historic center on all four sides and can be walked or cycled. It spans fourteen kilometers above the city, offering views of both the old and modern quarters.

Also worth seeing in Xi'an are the Big Wild Goose Pagoda and the Small Wild Goose Pagoda — Buddhist structures associated with the famous monk Xuanzang's journey to India. And, of course, the Muslim Quarter, which we'll discuss in a separate chapter.

When to go

Spring and fall are ideal times. Summers in Xi'an are hot and dry, while winters are cool but snowless. If you visit on weekends or Chinese holidays, be prepared for lines. On weekdays, especially early in the morning, the museum is almost empty.

Personal

I stood by the glass railing of pit number two and watched the restorers. They were working below, among the figures, in white coats and masks. Their tools were small, almost jeweler's. They approached yet another broken figure, carefully dusted it, applied the fragments, and matched the paint.

At that moment, everything was quiet. Groups of tourists passed along the balcony, but their voices didn't reach the ground. And I realized that what we see now isn't a finished monument. It's a process. A process that has been going on for fifty years since its first discovery. And it will continue for decades, if not centuries, to come. Every figure we see intact has passed through the hands of dozens of people. Every broken fragment is a puzzle that needs to be assembled, like a jigsaw puzzle, only without a picture on the box.

The smell in the pavilion is unique. It's not the smell of dust, although there is a lot of it. It's the smell of ancient clay, difficult to describe. It's heavy, earthy, with a dry, bitter note. It reminds you of a basement, but not a damp one — a dry one, where old things are stored. When you stand over the pit, this smell rises from below, and it connects you with those who sculpted these warriors two thousand years ago. They, too, worked with this clay. They, too, smelled this smell.

I walked away from the fence and headed for the exit. In the hallway hung photographs from the first days of excavations — the seventies — people in simple clothes, smiling, shovels in hand. They had no idea they were beginning one of the great discoveries of the twentieth century. They were simply digging. And beneath them lay the silence of two millennia, ready to be broken.

Chapter 3. Beijing. The Forbidden City

Stereotype

When we hear the words "Forbidden City," an image evokes images borrowed from films and illustrations: golden roofs, scarlet columns, a dragon-robed emperor seated on a throne in the silence of a vast hall. Surrounded by submissive eunuchs, beautiful concubines, and guards in vibrant armor. It seems that life here was a continuous celebration of power, where the ruler, sealed off from the world by thick walls, did nothing but accept gifts, sign orders, occasionally watch dancers perform, and die in bed, surrounded by luxury. This image is so familiar that we stop asking: what really

happened behind those walls? What did the man who wielded all power in a country with a population of tens of millions do?

The answer is unexpected. The Forbidden City is not a palace in the European sense. It is not a residence where the monarch relaxes between receptions. It is an administrative complex, a city within a city, operating according to a strict schedule and filled with a bureaucracy as dense as any modern ministry. The emperor did not idle here. He worked. And his work was grueling.

Immersion

City-state

To understand its scale, we must first discard the word “palace” and replace it with “city.” The Forbidden City covers an area of 720,000 square meters. It contains 980 buildings and 8,707 rooms. It is surrounded by a 52-meter-wide moat and a 10-meter-high wall. It has four entrances, each with its own protocol: the northern one for the emperor, the southern one for official ceremonies, and the eastern and western ones for officials and staff.

This was more than just a ruler’s residence. It was a miniature capital. It housed offices, archives, workshops, temples, gardens, warehouses, kitchens, stables, prisons, and residential quarters for several thousand people. The Forbidden City functioned as an autonomous state with its own economy, laws, and hierarchy. It was sealed off from the outside world not to provide the emperor with privacy, but to control every movement within and every entry from without.

It wasn’t just the emperor and his family who lived here. Thousands of eunuchs lived here — they served as servants, guards, secretaries, treasurers, and overseers. Concubines and their attendants lived here. Court officials lived here, taking turns on duty. Cooks, gardeners, tailors, doctors, astrologers, and musicians lived here. The total number of people living within the walls could reach nine thousand. For comparison, that’s the population of a small medieval European city.

Symbolism in every detail

There are no random details in the Forbidden City. Every stone, every color, every number carries meaning. The architecture here is the language in which the empire spoke about itself.

Yellow roof tiles are the color of earth in Chinese cosmology. The emperor was considered the center of the universe, and his roofs were supposed to correspond to the central element. No one else in the empire was allowed to use yellow roof tiles. It was a monopoly of power, expressed through color.

The number of rooms is nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine and a half. Why not ten thousand? Because ten thousand is a perfect number, and perfection belongs only to heaven. The Emperor is a son of heaven, but not heaven itself. Therefore, he had to be content with a number that strives for perfection but falls short. This is an expression of humility before the cosmic order, even under the conditions of absolute earthly power.

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