The Great Wall of China
**Geography:**

During Ancient times, China’s neighbors to the north were groups of nomads (some of whom became the ferocious group called the Huns). These nomads had no permanent home; instead, they went where the food was in order to survive. To the Chinese, these nomads were groups of uncivilized barbarians. However, sometimes the Chinese people traded with these “uncivilized barbarians.” Most often, the Chinese received horses in exchange for grain, silk, and iron. Sometimes the nomads ended up in the country of China and created chaos. These nomads didn’t always get what they wanted through trade, so they would raid China and steal what they wanted. Most groups were very good at hunting and fighting, which created a lot of problems for the Chinese. In an attempt to stop these nomads from invading China, different emperors tried several ways to stop the nomads. Some emperors tried making peace treaties, some sent soldiers to fight the nomads, and some tried to encourage rules for trading between the two cultures. Eventually though, the Great Wall was built. It was built as a defensive wall that was designed to say “Stop! This is the border of China!”

**Qin Shi Huangdi:**

In 221 BCE, a man by the name of Qin Shi Huangdi united the seven warring Chinese provinces (states) into one major empire. He is widely considered to be the first Emperor of China. Qin began what is now known as the Qin (Ch’in) Dynasty. He set up a very strong system of government that included a huge system of taxes and required public labor of all citizens of China. The unification under the Qin Empire allowed public works projects (like road or wall construction) to be run by the strong government. Along with the use of peasants for labor, the rulers also used prisoners and other people they didn’t like to complete construction on walls, major roads, and dams.

Perhaps the most important public works project ever undertaken in China was the construction of the Great Wall. In 700 BCE, four small fortification walls were built to keep out the Huns. In 221 BCE, Emperor Qin approved a project to connect and expand all of the walls. Continual invasion and wars from the barbarians to the north drove the emperor to order the construction of the Great Wall to protect the newly unified China. Qin Shi Huangdi needed money in order to complete this project, so he taxed the people heavily, which soon lead to starvation and suffering. The original Great Wall was probably only about 2,000 miles long, which is an amazing accomplishment. Qin Shi Huangdi employed more than 800,000 soldiers, peasants, and prisoners for more than 10 years to complete the wall. While the wall was being built, Qin stationed soldiers to protect all those who were building the wall.
Construction of the Wall:

Most of the Great Wall is constructed from bricks, packed earth, granite blocks, rocks, and mud. While some parts of the wall are from 700 BCE, the Great Wall itself did not begin taking shape until Qin Shi Huangdi began uniting the walls into one Great Wall. In order to construct the wall, Qin decided to have the wall adapt with the environment, rather than one long flat wall. So, the Great Wall travels up mountains and down into valleys rather than around a mountain or valley. This made the wall much more complicated to build. The Wall was built across the mountains of northern China, where there is little in the way of supplies. A wall that stretches through the wilderness is not easily accessed by supply lines. So, Chinese Emperors had to figure out a way to get all of the materials where they needed to go. Remember, they did not have the technology that we have today. The Great Wall has blocks that are 7-10 feet long and weigh almost 2,000 pounds! The only equipment they had was very primitive, but the Chinese figured out a few ways to solve this problem.

Labor Force: This is probably the most primitive method of constructing the Great Wall. People would carry the weight of some of the blocks on their shoulders and/or backs. They also worked in relay teams, passing the items by hand from the base of the mountain right to the very top. The advantage of this method was that it was a great time saver. In addition, in a narrow path, it avoided workers running over each other. It can also raise the efficiency of the construction.

Simple Tools: The Chinese people would use simple tools like wheelbarrows, rolling logs (timbers), and crowbars. They made wonderful use of these tools and took advantage of the natural setting to accomplish their goals. Wheelbarrows were often used in the construction of passes and fortresses, which were built on the flat ground. Rolling logs were used to carry huge stones in the mountains. They would place the stone on several large logs and then push and pull the stone over the logs. This made moving the stones very easy. People also used crowbars and other levers to move bricks. Sometimes, they would string ropes across large valleys and carried the materials over the ravine in baskets!

Animals: The Chinese people would put harnesses on animals to carry the heaviest goods and materials. Some of the domesticated animals helped greatly in building the Great Wall up in the mountains.
People tried all kinds of methods to transport the necessary materials for the construction of the Great Wall. Thousands of years ago, these methods worked. It reveals the creativity and hard work of the ancient Chinese people.

However, in spite of all these creative methods, many people still died during the construction of the Great Wall. In fact, the Great Wall has earned the nickname of the world’s largest cemetery because of the amount of people who died during construction. Many Chinese believe that each brick in the Great Wall represents a life that was lost during construction.

Along with constructing a wall, Watch Towers were also built about every 500 feet so that soldiers could see the entire countryside around them. These towers were built from rubble, stone, and brick and were approximately 40 feet tall.

Along with the watch towers, the soldiers had piles of straw to burn should an attack occur. On the straw, the soldiers would throw a mixture of wolf dung, sulfur, and salt. This would expand the fire and create a smoke signal. This way, an alarm could be relayed over hundreds of miles in just a few hours.

Soldiers were stationed on the wall. They actually lived in the Watch Towers of the wall. This way, the Chinese were always ready for an attack. The soldiers would march on top of the wall, always keeping an eye on the country around them watching for attacks. They would march on the walkway that was roughly 10-40 feet wide. The wall was built this wide so that an entire army could march along the wall. It was also built to be about 25 feet tall so that horses could not jump over the Great Wall.

In different parts of China, different materials were used. In western China, by the desert, the wall was built from mostly packed earth. In the eastern part of China, by the city of Beijing, workers used bricks and stone.

Genghis Khan:

Around 1200 CE, after a long period of peace, a Hun by the name of Genghis Khan united many of the Mongol tribes in an attempt to conquer the Chinese. His army relied heavily on horses. Before Khan, the nomads were separate groups with no power to conquer China. However, once Khan united the Huns, fierce fighting began between the Chinese and the Huns began and lasted for many years. Genghis Khan was able to get through the Great Wall because a Chinese traitor let him and his army through a gate in the Wall. Many Chinese people were killed and cities were destroyed. Genghis Khan never fulfilled his dream of ruling China, but in 1279 CE, Genghis Khan’s grandson, Khubilai or Kublai Khan (koo-bill-eye-kahn) overthrew the emperor of China and took the throne for himself. He began a new dynasty and named it the Yuan Dynasty. Khan ruled from the city we now know as Beijing. During Kublai Khan’s reign, he taxed the people so heavily that many people had little food or money. The Huns continued to wage war against other people, and even invaded Japan and Indonesia. The Huns even fought against themselves.
Ming Dynasty:

A peasant farmer named Zhu Yuanzhang (Ju Yuon-jong) suffered greatly under the Yuan Empire. He became so upset that he devoted himself to the downfall of the Huns. He joined a group called the Red Turbans and became their leader. The Red Turbans attracted many followers and drove the Huns out of China.

Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed himself emperor of China in 1368 CE and named his dynasty the Ming Dynasty. He was a firm ruler and China prospered under his leadership.

It was also during the Ming Dynasty that the Great Wall was renovated. It was expanded to a length of over 4,000 miles. It is said to be the longest structure ever built. The wall was expanded and elaborate designs were made on the wall as well. The watch towers were repaired and cannons were mounted in them. The Ming Dynasty was trying to make sure that the Huns never returned to conquer China.

In 1370 CE, the Chinese people were so frightened of the Huns being in power again that they decided to expand the Great Wall. There was no master plan for this; each leader in a town built a portion of the wall where they thought the Huns would invade. Construction across northern China continued this way for 200 years. This way, the routes through the mountains that the Huns used most were blocked. These small walls were then connected with each other, thus completing in 1550 CE the Great Wall of China that we see today.