

Skateboarding through time on the Great Wall of China

by Steven Andrew Martin

After several trips to China over the past ten years, I returned last May, looking for new meaning and experience, planning to skateboard several sections of the Great Wall. As a skater, surfer, and student philosopher, I imagined the ancient battlements reflecting rhythmic, piano-key-shaped shadows playing rock-n-roll upon the earth, zigzagging up the mountain in harmony with nature, like an ocean wave or better – a skateboard ramp!

Our sleek private taxi wove its way between big trucks and buses, tiny cars and vans, zooming motorcycles and buzzing scooters. The silent bikes and carts yielded without stress, smoothly avoiding us as if doing Tai Chi. Radiating from Beijing, the traffic faded into tranquility. We, students from the Uof H, headed due north with our driver, a kind-hearted Chinese man with wire-rim glasses and a love for classic Western rock music. We gave him a thumbs-up and nodded when his stereo played Pink Floyd's *Another Brick in the Wall*. Around us wheat and corn formed a checkerboard landscape as hills graduated to small mountains with riverbanks planted with weeping willows, walnut and peach trees, alive under deep blue sky. Slender poplar trees cast zebra-striped shadows which flickered on our faces while we blazed on. It was a perfect day to skate the Wall.

Just as philosophical attitudes of Chinese and Americans differ, so too have reactions to my skating on the Wall. Photos from my early trips in 1995 shocked some Western friends to contend, "You mean they allow you to do that?" In contrast, responses from Chinese people were more positive and light-hearted. The first time I skated the Wall, several guards pointed to my skateboard, uttered something in Mandarin, and motioned for it. To my surprise, trading me a rifle, one man lay on the board feet first and face up and shot down the hill. Reaching the bottom, he skidded to a halt, tearing his clothes and bruising his tail end. Nevertheless, he reacted with a smile and raced up the hill for another try, later encouraging me to show him some tricks.

After our skate session this year I spotted a steep pathway that led to the parking lot a mile below. Even though I had a small fortune in camera gear hanging from my shoulders, I was keen to ride all the way to our car. Soon I was going way too fast and speed-wobbling –yikes! I entered the skater's solemn mind set for survival, similar to the surfer caught in the wave of a dangerous storm. Luckily not wiping out,



Not far from Beijing, like a real life theme park, is Mutianyu (left). Steve skates Badaling (above), perhaps the most visited section of the Wall. A new Chinese friend (right) practices one of Steve's tricks.

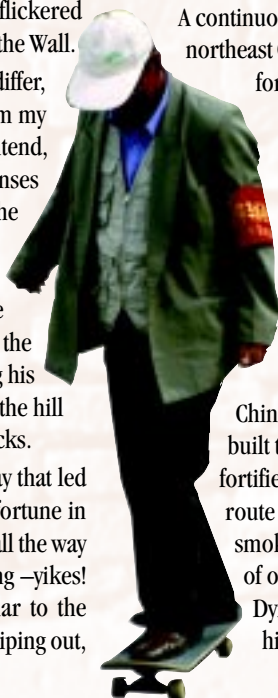
I screamed into the lot nearly out of control, passing a crowd of cheering Chinese tourists.

People young and old, civilian and military, came to have a try (pictured below and right). Unexpectedly we had a marvelous hour together, sharing the moment and cultural experiences. I realized that the function of the Wall had changed from combat to sport, from exclusive to inclusive, from military to peaceful – attracting tourists and hikers, students and teachers, philosophers and politicians. The Wall had become fun and exciting, as if transformed into the world's greatest skatepark.

Conversely, the Great Wall has an intense seriousness about it. It is sometimes called the world's longest cemetery, a place where men were sent to toil and suffer until their expired bodies were thrown heartlessly into the wall as fill. Poems, music, and modest temples throughout China, Korea, and Japan honor the story of Meng Jiang Nu, a woman who searched the entire length before finding her beloved dying husband. The legend states that she cried so hard the wall collapsed where she found him.

A continuous project, the Wall stretches 4,000 miles, from Heilongjiang Province in northeast China and winding westward to the Gobi Desert region of Gansu Province, fortifications that began in isolated and strategic mountain passes over 2,500 years ago. As the supreme guardian of the fertile river-valleys and plains of the south from invasion by the marauding bandits of the Mongolian plateau, the northern face of the Wall is always sheer, often 30 feet tall or perched on the rim of a high cliff, yet the southern face is sometimes only ground level. Resembling a growing plant, it fits into the earth's natural curves, its aspects constantly being altered by seasonal changes. *Today the Wall with all its branches, if placed end to end, would stretch 31,000 miles.*

A great unification of the Wall took place under Emperor Qin Shi Huanghi, China's tyrannical ruler who founded the Chin Dynasty (221-206 BC) and built the infamous terracotta army of Xian. The Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) fortified the Wall as the great military power line of the Silk Road (China's trade route to the western realms). Timely messages could be sent across China, smoke by day or fire by night, and horses could ride down it, and boiling vats of oil could be poured on the heads of ascending attackers. During the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) it was again fully fortified, becoming an information highway facilitating the introduction of Buddhism from the West.



A vertical collage image. The bottom portion features a golden dragon with intricate scales and flowing mane, set against a solid red background. Above this, a section of the Great Wall of China is visible, winding across a valley. The top portion of the image shows a misty, mountainous landscape with green foliage and a clear sky.

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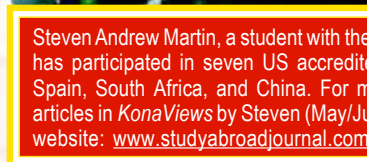
Although many have recognized from the Space Shuttle, too low orbit, because of the landscape, and as the Great Pyramid is possible to disce-

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