

# Great Wall threatened by nature and people

## Experts call for protection of the cultural treasure

A team of experts and journalists finished a thorough investigation into the state of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) Great Wall on September 17. During the 45-day trip to the longest structure on the planet, the team observed and collected information on the structure's precarious situation. Some team members shared their experiences with China Daily staff reporter YU NAN.

None can believe that the over 6,300-kilometre Great Wall might someday disappear.

But Dong Yaohui, secretary-general of the Great Wall Society of China, warned that it could happen after his second trip along the Great Wall.

"Believe it or not, the Great Wall is crumbling, unable to withstand natural deterioration and calamities caused by people," he said.

Eighteen years ago, then-27-year-old Dong hiked for 508 days with two of his friends, traversing the entire length of the Ming Dynasty Great Wall.

The famous report they made, named "Three One-Thirds" (meaning that only one-third of the Great Wall still exists, another one-third is in ruins and the remaining one-third has vanished) has been quoted by the mass media thousands of times in order to arouse public awareness of the importance of protecting the ancient and injured Wall, one of China's most treasured cultural assets.

The condition of the Great Wall that Dong witnessed this time was even more shocking and distressing.

According to Dong, of the portion of the Great Wall built in the Ming Dynasty, less than 20 per cent is still intact and about 30 per cent is in ruins. The sum of the two parts accounts for about 2,500 kilometres of the Wall.

### 'I didn't know...'

Organized by the Great Wall Society of China and headed by Dong, the latest trip started on August 3 from the Great Wall's eastern most point, the Hushan section in Northeast China's Liaoning Province. It ended at the westernmost point at Jiayuguan Pass in Northwest China's Gansu Province on September 17.

The investigative team, consisting of more than 20 experts and about 30 journalists, travelled more than 9,000 kilometres by bus and visited 101 spots along the Great Wall in eight provinces and municipalities.

The trip has yielded about 2 million words in documents on the current conditions of the Great Wall, which will be used as a basis for

follow-up protection work, said Dong.

"The Great Wall can be called 'great' mostly because of its amazing length. But we should realize that the length was constructed one brick at a time," Dong said.

"If we do nothing to save the Great Wall, someday it will become a series of separate relic sites rather than an amazing, continuous structure."

During the trip, a sentence often heard by the team from the local residents living along the Great Wall was: "I didn't know this was the Great Wall."

The Great Wall is actually a series of walls built and rebuilt by different dynasties over the past 2,000 years. Construction began in the reign of China's first emperor, Qin Shihuang of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), and lasted into the Ming Dynasty.

The parts built before the Ming Dynasty have nearly disappeared. The Ming sections, which spiral about 6,300 kilometres from northeastern to northwestern China, comprise what is usually considered the Great Wall by the average person.

"People are familiar with sections such as Badaling in Beijing and Jiayuguan Pass in Gansu, because they have been open to tourists for many years. But those sections away from the public eye have been almost forgotten," said Qian Yu, a reporter from China Central Television who was with the team for the whole trip.

He gave the Sanguankou section in Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region as an example: "Few local people knew the 3-metre-high walls made of earth and stones beside them are part of the Great Wall, even though that section is one of the best preserved and most precious in the region."

Qian had expected to produce an eight-episode TV programme on the trip, but the serial has grown to 14 episodes because, he said, "it's too hard to delete so many precious footage, and people should know more about the entire Great Wall so as to better protect it."

### 'Save the brick beside you'

Dong considers the lack of knowledge as one of the main reasons behind human encroachment on the great structure.

Over the past few years he has grimly discovered a number of problems: Great Wall bricks are crated off by rural people to build their houses, sheep corrals and pig sties; some parts were demolished to give way for the construction of roads and residential buildings; bricks from well-known sections of the Great Wall carved with people's names are popular souvenirs; rubbish is strewn over the battlements.

"I believe most people who destroyed and are destroying the Great Wall know its name, but are not clear about its cultural meaning," said Dong. "It will take a long time to let them know."

The most shocking

scene they encountered during the trip was at the Yehuling Great Wall in North China's Hebei Province.

The bricks from the wall had been torn out in tens of thousands of big holes in the wall, and a sign reads: "Protected Cultural Relics at Provincial Level."

The local farmer who dug out the bricks for 15 yuan (US\$1.80) per tractor load, said Dong, who was caught by police as he prepared to load the bricks.

The man tried to excuse himself, saying "I've never been stopped."

Other cultural relics that have been damaged, the Great Wall officials can never be locked only one administrative level, but the officials should be aware of the importance of the Great Wall," he said.

### Great Wall research needed

Li Fengshan, 66, a professor from the Central University of Nationalities in Beijing, said the trip offered him a good chance to re-acquire knowledge of the Great Wall, the treasure he has used to study through historical records and researching the effects of forming Chinese ethnic groups since the 1990s.

Although not in good health, Li insisted on climbing up and down the mountains, often for four to five hours a day, to obtain first-hand impressions and materials. He said the trip fulfilled multiple functions of

"Normally, people regard the Great Wall work to keep nomads out. But I found the Hexi Corridor (in Northwest China's Gansu Province) was built mainly to safeguard the trade route."

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### Legal management needed

The most effective way to protect the Great Wall should be the law, the experts unanimously agreed on their follow-up reports on

are law-abiding. The main problem is that they

have no idea what it takes to protect their cultural heritage. So we need some laws to tell people what they should do, and to punish those who destroy the Wall," said Cao Dawei, a professor from Beijing Normal University.

Cao said he

felt heartache when he saw the holes where the non-existent Yehuling Great Wall should have been, a section which used to be an important frontier trading place.

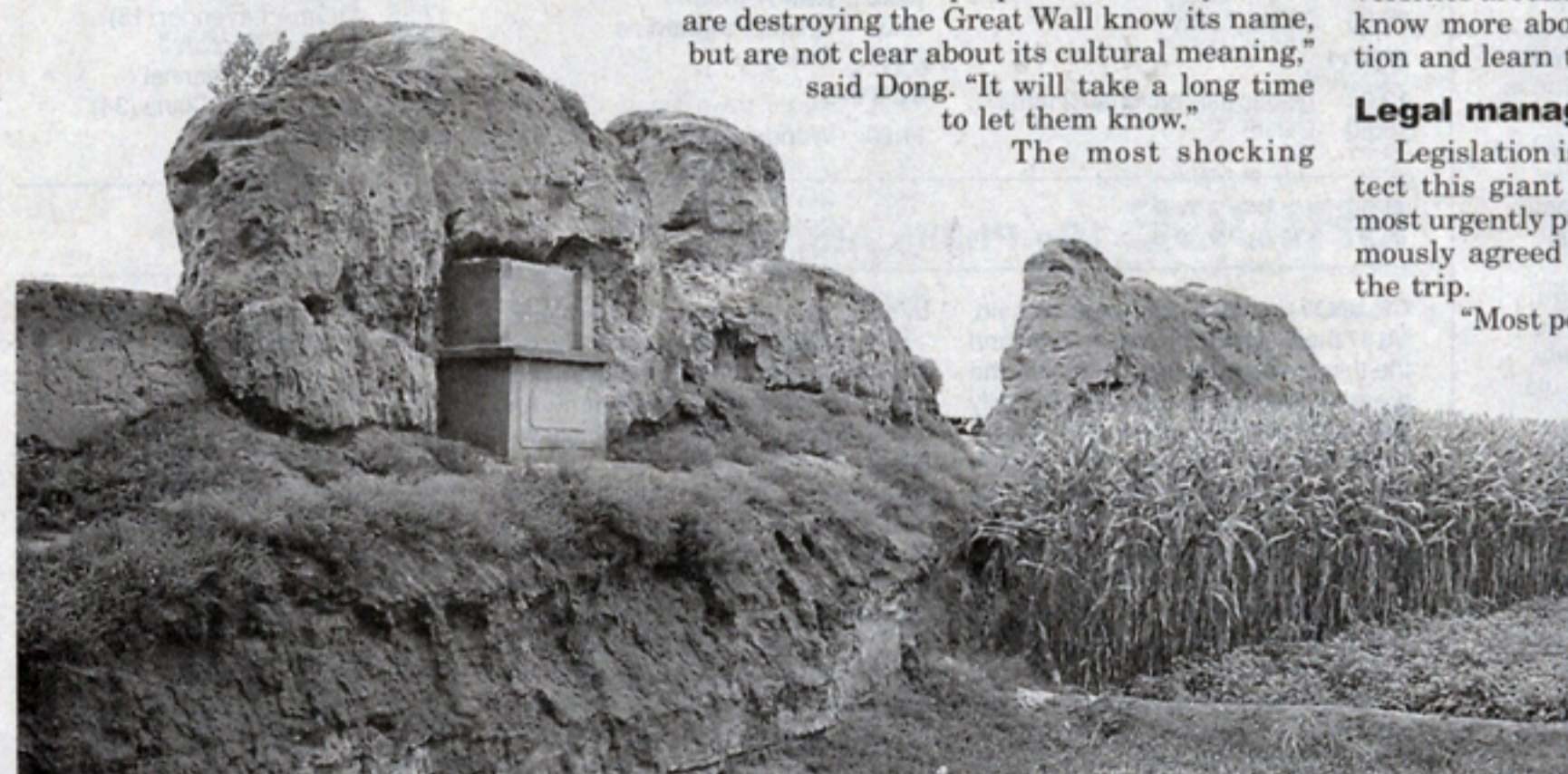
"I have studied the section for a long time but I'll never have the chance to see it again," he said.

In 1999, the local government of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region sanctioned destruction of sections of the Great Wall, which were first built during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), for construction of a highway after it had already extracted a fine of 80,000 yuan (US\$9,660) from the developer.

Many vandals also escaped with small fines, said Dong.

"To fine those who are destroying the Wall will not solve the whole problem. Sometimes it only encourages more destruction," said Dong.

Beijing's legislature has already agreed to consider a draft law to protect the 628 kilometres of the Great Wall around the mu-



Crop encroachment: Farmers expand their land to the side of Great Wall in Wuwei section in Gansu Province.



Right: Dong Yaohui (third from left), takes a brief break with his teammates on Zuoyun section in North China's Shanxi Province. Far right: A part of Panjiakou section in Hebei Province, which is a good spot for fishing.



Photos by YANG TAO

Natural damage: An intact section of the Great Wall at Dongjiakou in Hebei Province.

