The Great Wall of China was finished at its northernmost location. The construction work moved up from the south-east and south-west and joined at this point. The system of building in sections was also followed on a small scale within the two great armies of workers, the eastern and western. It was carried out in the following manner: groups of about twenty workers were formed, each of which had to take on a section of the wall, about five hundred metres. A neighbouring group then built a wall of similar length to meet it. But afterwards, when the sections were fully joined, construction was not continued on any further at the end of this thousand-metre section. Instead the groups of workers were shipped off again to build the wall in completely different regions. Naturally, with this method many large gaps arose, which were filled in only gradually and slowly, many of them not until after it had already been reported that the building of the wall was complete. In fact, there are said to be gaps which have never been built in at all, although that’s merely an assertion which probably belongs among the many legends which have arisen about the structure and which, for individual people at least, are impossible to prove with their own eyes and according to their own standards, because the structure is so immense.

Now, at first one might think it would have been more advantageous in every way to build in continuous sections or at least continuously within two main sections. For the wall was conceived as a protection against the people of the north, as was commonly announced and universally known. But how can protection be provided by a wall which is not built continuously? In fact, not only can such a wall not protect, but the structure itself is in constant danger. Those parts of the wall left standing abandoned in particular regions could easily be destroyed again and again by the nomads, especially by those back then who, worried about the building of the wall, changed their place of residence with incredible speed, like grasshoppers, and thus perhaps had an even better overall view of how the construction was proceeding than we did, the people who built it.

However, there was no other way to carry out the construction except the way it happened. In order to understand this, one must consider the following: the wall was to be a protection for centuries; thus, the essential prerequisites for the work were the most careful construction, the use of the architectural wisdom of all known ages and peoples, and an enduring sense of personal responsibility in the builders. Of course, for the more humble tasks one could use ignorant day labourers from the people—the men, women, and children who offered their services for good money.

But the supervision of even four day labourers required a knowledgeable man, an educated expert in construction, someone who was capable of feeling sympathy deep in his heart for what was at stake here. And the higher the challenge, the greater the demands. And such men were in fact available—if not the crowds of them which this construction could have used, at least in great numbers.

They did not set about this task recklessly. Fifty years before the start of construction it was announced throughout the whole region of China which was to be enclosed within the wall that architecture and especially masonry were the most important areas of knowledge, and everything else was recognized only to the extent that it had some relationship to those. I still remember very well how as small children who could hardly walk we stood in our teacher’s little garden and had to construct a sort of wall out of pebbles, and how the teacher gathered up his coat and ran against the wall, naturally making everything collapse, and then scolded us so much for the weakness of our construction that we ran off in all directions howling to our parents. A tiny incident, but an indication of the spirit of the times.

I was lucky that at twenty years of age, when I passed the final examination of the lowest school, the construction of the wall was just starting. I say lucky because many who earlier had attained the highest limit of education available to them for years had no idea what to do with their knowledge and wandered around uselessly, with the most splendid architectural plans in their heads, and a great many of them just went downhill from there. But the ones who finally got to work as supervisors on the construction, even if they had the lowest rank, were really worthy of their position. They were masons who had given much thought to the construction and never stopped thinking about it, men who, right from the first stone which they sunk into the ground, had a sense of themselves as part of the wall. Such masons, of course, were driven not only by the desire to carry out the work as thoroughly as possible but also by impatience to see the structure standing there in its complete final perfection. Day labourers do not experience this impatience. They are driven only by their pay. The higher supervisors and, indeed, even the middle supervisors, see enough from their various perspectives on the growth of the wall to keep their spirits energized. But the subordinate supervisors, men who were mentally far above their small, more trivial tasks, had to be catered to in other ways. One could not, for example, let them lay one building block on top of another in an uninhabited region of the mountains, hundreds of miles from their homes, for months or even years at a time. The hopelessness of such a hard task, which could not be completed even in a long human lifetime, would have caused them distress and, more than anything else, made them worthless for work. For that reason they chose the system of building in sections.

Five hundred metres could be completed in something like five years, by which time naturally the supervisors were as a rule too exhausted and had lost all faith in themselves, in the building, and in the world.

Thus, while they were still experiencing the elation of the celebrations for the joining up of a thousand metres of the wall, they were shipped far, far away. On their journey they saw here and there finished sections of the wall rising up; they passed through the quarters of the higher administrators, who gave them gifts as badges of honour, and they heard the rejoicing of new armies of workers streaming past them out of the depths of the land, saw forests being laid low, wood designated as scaffolding for the wall, witnessed mountains being broken up into rocks for the wall, and heard in the holy places the hymns of the pious praying for the construction to be finished. All this calmed their impatience. The quiet life of home, where they spent some time, reinvigorated them. The high regard which all those doing the building enjoyed, the devout humility with which people listened to their reports, the trust that simple quiet citizens had that the wall would be completed someday—all this tuned the strings of their souls. Then, like eternally hopeful children, they took leave of their home. The enthusiasm for labouring once again at the people’s work became irresistible. They set out from their houses earlier than necessary, and half the village accompanied them for a long way. On all the roads there were groups of people, pennants, banners—they had never seen how great and rich and beautiful and endearing their country was. Every countryman was a brother for whom they were building a protective wall and who would thank him with everything he had and was for all his life. Unity! Unity! Shoulder to shoulder, a coordinated movement of the people, their blood no longer confined in the limited circulation of the body but rolling sweetly and yet still returning through the infinite extent of China.

In view of all this, the system of piecemeal building becomes understandable. But there were still other reasons, too. And there is nothing strange in the fact that I have held off on this point for so long. It is the central issue in the whole construction of the wall, no matter how unimportant it appears at first. If I want to convey the ideas and experiences of that time and make them intelligible, I cannot probe deeply enough into this particular question.

First, one must realize that at that time certain achievements were brought to fruition which rank only slightly behind the Tower of Babel, although in the pleasure they gave to God, at least by human reckoning, they made an impression exactly the opposite of that structure. I mention this because at the time construction was beginning a scholar wrote a book in which he drew this comparison very precisely.

In it he tried to show that the Tower of Babel had failed to attain its goal not for the reasons commonly asserted, or at least that the most important cause was not among these well-known ones. He not only based his proofs on texts and reports, but also claimed to have carried out personal inspections of the location and thus to have found that the structure collapsed and had to collapse because of the weakness of its foundation. And it is true that in this respect our age was far superior to that one long ago. Almost every educated person in our age was a mason by profession and infallible when it came to the business of laying foundations.

But it was not at all the scholar’s aim to prove this. He claimed that the great wall alone would for the first time in the age of human beings create a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel. So first the wall and then the tower. In those days the book was in everyone’s hands, but I confess that even today I do not understand exactly how he imagined this tower. How could the wall, which never once took the form of a circle but only a sort of quarter or half circle, provide the foundation for a tower? But it could be meant only in a spiritual sense. But then why the wall, which was still something real, a product of the efforts and lives of hundreds of thousands of people? And why were there plans in the book—admittedly hazy plans—sketching the tower, as well as detailed proposals about how the energies of the people could be channelled into powerfully new work.

There was a great deal of mental confusion at the time—his book is only one example—perhaps simply because so many people were trying as hard as they could to join together for a single purpose. Human nature, which is fundamentally careless and by nature like the whirling dust, endures no restraint. If it restricts itself, it will soon begin to shake the restraints madly and tear up walls, chains, and even itself all over the place.

It is possible that even these considerations, which argued against building the wall in the first place, were not ignored by the leadership when they decided on piecemeal construction. We—and here I’m really speaking on behalf of many—actually first found out about it by spelling out the orders from the highest levels of management and learned for ourselves that without the leadership neither our school learning nor our human understanding would have been adequate for the small position we had within the enormous totality.

In the office of the leadership—where it was and who sat there no one I asked knows or knew—in this office I imagine that all human thoughts and wishes revolve in a circle, and all human aims and fulfilments in a circle going in the opposite direction. And through the window the reflection of the divine worlds fell onto the hands of the leadership as they drew up the plans.

And for this reason the incorruptible observer will reject the notion that if the leadership had seriously wanted a continuous construction of the wall, they would not have been able to overcome the difficulties standing in the way. So the only conclusion left is that the leadership deliberately chose piecemeal construction. But building in sections was something merely makeshift and impractical. So the conclusion remains that the leadership wanted something impractical. An odd conclusion! True enough, and yet from another perspective it had some inherent justification.

Nowadays one can perhaps speak about it without danger. At that time for many people, even the best, there was a secret principle: Try with all your powers to understand the orders of the leadership, but only up to a certain limit—then stop thinking about them. A very reasonable principle, which incidentally found an even wider interpretation in a later often repeated comparison: Stop further thinking about it, not because it could harm you—it is not at all certain that it will harm you. In this matter one cannot speak in general about harming or not harming. What will happen to you is like a river in spring. It rises, grows stronger, eats away powerfully at the land along its shores, and still maintains its own course down into the sea and is more welcome as a fitter partner for the sea. Reflect upon the orders of the leadership as far as that. But then the river overflows its banks, loses its form and shape, slows down its forward movement, tries, contrary to its destiny, to form small seas inland, damages the fields, and yet cannot maintain its expansion long, but runs back within its banks, in fact, even dries up miserably in the hot time of year which follows. Do not reflect on the orders of the leadership to that extent.

Now, this comparison may perhaps have been extraordinarily apt during the construction of the wall, but it has at most only a limited relevance to my present report. For my investigation is only historical. There is no lightning strike flashing any more from storm clouds which have long since vanished, and thus I may seek an explanation for the piecemeal construction which goes further than the one people were satisfied with back then. The limits which my ability to think sets for me are certainly narrow enough, but the region one would have to pass through here is endless.

Against whom was the great wall to provide protection? Against the people of the north. I come from south-east China. No northern people can threaten us there. We read about them in the books of the ancients. The atrocities which their nature prompts them to commit make us heave a sigh on our peaceful porches. In the faithfully accurate pictures of artists we see the faces of this damnation, with their mouths flung open, the sharp pointed teeth stuck in their jaws, their straining eyes, which seem to be squinting for someone to seize, whom their jaws will crush and rip to pieces. When children are naughty, we hold up these pictures in front of them, and they immediately burst into tears and run into our arms.

But we know nothing else about these northern lands. We have never seen them, and if we remain in our village, we never will see them, even if they charge straight at us and hunt us on their wild horses. The land is so huge, it would not permit them to reach us, and they would lose themselves in empty air.

So if things are like this, why do we leave our homes, the river and bridges, our mothers and fathers, our crying wives, our children in need of education, and go to school in the distant city, with our thoughts on the wall to the north, even further away? Why? Ask the leadership. They know us. As they mull over their immense concerns, they know about us, understand our small worries, see us all sitting together in our humble huts, and approve or disapprove of the prayer which the father of the house says in the evening surrounded by his family. And if I may be permitted such ideas about the leadership, then I must say that in my view the leadership existed even earlier. It did not come together like some high mandarins hastily summoned to a meeting by a beautiful dream of the future, something hastily concluded, a meeting which saw to it that the general population was driven from their beds by a knocking on the door so that they could carry out the decision, even if it was only to set up an lantern in honour of a god who had shown favour to the masters the day before, so that he could thrash them in some dark corner the next day, when the lantern had only just died out. On the contrary, I imagine the leadership has always existed, along with the decision to construct the wall as well. Innocent northern people believed they were the cause; the admirable innocent emperor believed he had given orders for it. We who were builders of the wall know otherwise and are silent.

Even during the construction of the wall and afterwards, right up to the present day, I have devoted myself almost exclusively to the histories of different people. There are certain questions for which one can, to some extent, get to the heart of the matter only in this way. Using this method I have found that we Chinese possess certain popular and state institutions which are uniquely clear and, then again, others which are uniquely obscure. Tracking down the reasons for these, especially for the latter phenomena, always appealed to me, and still does, and the construction of the wall is fundamentally concerned with these issues.

Now, among our most obscure institutions one can certainly include the empire itself. Of course, in Peking, right in the court, there is some clarity about it, although even this is more apparent than real. And the teachers of constitutional law and history in the schools of higher learning give out that they are precisely informed about these things and that they are able to pass this knowledge on to their students.

The deeper one descends into the lower schools, understandably the more the doubts about the students’ own knowledge disappear, and a superficial education surges up as high as a mountain around a few precepts drilled into them for centuries, sayings which, in fact, have lost nothing of their eternal truth, but which remain also eternally unrecognised in the mist and fog.

But, in my view, it’s precisely the empire we should be asking the people about, because in them the empire has its final support. It’s true that in this matter I can speak once again only about my own homeland. Other than the agricultural deities and the service to them, which so beautifully and variously fills up the entire year, our thinking concerns itself only with the emperor. But not with the present emperor. We’d rather think about the present one if we knew who he was or anything definite about him. We were naturally always trying—and it’s the single curiosity which satisfies us—to find out something or other about him, but, no matter how strange this sounds, it was hardly possible to learn anything, either from pilgrims, even though they wandered through much of our land, or from the close or remote villages, or from boatmen, although they have travelled not merely on our little waterways but also on the sacred rivers. True, we heard a great deal, but could gather nothing from the many details.

Our land is so huge, that no fairy tale can adequately deal with its size. Heaven hardly covers it all. And Peking is only a point, the imperial palace only a tiny dot. It’s true that, by contrast, throughout all the different levels of the world the emperor, as emperor, is great. But the living emperor, a man like us, lies on a peaceful bed, just as we do. It is, no doubt, of ample proportions, but it could be merely narrow and short. Like us, he sometime stretches out his limbs and, if he is very tired, yawns with his delicately delineated mouth. But how are we to know about that thousands of miles to the south, where we almost border on the Tibetan highlands? Besides, any report which came, even if it reached us, would get there much too late and would be long out of date. Around the emperor the glittering and yet mysterious court throngs—malice and enmity clothed as servants and friends, the counterbalance to the imperial power, with their poisoned arrows always trying to shoot the emperor down from his side of the balance scales. The empire is immortal, but the individual emperor falls and collapses. Even entire dynasties finally sink down and breathe their one last death rattle. The people will never know anything about these struggles and sufferings. Like those who have come too late, like strangers to the city, they stand at the end of the thickly populated side alleyways, quietly living off the provisions they have brought with them, while far off in the market place right in the middle foreground the execution of their master is taking place.

There is a legend which expresses this relationship well.

The Emperor—so they say—has sent a message, directly from his death bed, to you alone, his pathetic subject, a tiny shadow which has taken refuge at the furthest distance from the imperial sun. He ordered the herald to kneel down beside his bed and whispered the message into his ear. He thought it was so important that he had the herald repeat it back to him. He confirmed the accuracy of the verbal message by nodding his head. And in front of the entire crowd of those who’ve come to witness his death—all the obstructing walls have been broken down and all the great ones of his empire are standing in a circle on the broad and high soaring flights of stairs—in front of all of them he dispatched his herald. The messenger started off at once, a powerful, tireless man. Sticking one arm out and then another, he makes his way through the crowd. If he runs into resistance, he points to his breast where there is a sign of the sun. So he moves forward easily, unlike anyone else. But the crowd is so huge; its dwelling places are infinite. If there were an open field, how he would fly along, and soon you would hear the marvelous pounding of his fist on your door. But instead of that, how futile are all his efforts. He is still forcing his way through the private rooms of the innermost palace. He will never he win his way through. And if he did manage that, nothing would have been achieved. He would have to fight his way down the steps, and, if he managed to do that, nothing would have been achieved. He would have to stride through the courtyards, and after the courtyards the second palace encircling the first, and, then again, stairs and courtyards, and then, once again, a palace, and so on for thousands of years. And if he finally did burst through the outermost door—but that can never, never happen—the royal capital city, the centre of the world, is still there in front of him, piled high and full of sediment. No one pushes his way through here, certainly not with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window and dream of that message when evening comes.

That’s exactly how our people look at the emperor, hopelessly and full of hope. They don’t know which emperor is on the throne, and there are even doubts about the name of the dynasty. In the schools they learn a great deal about things like the succession, but the common uncertainty in this respect is so great that even the best pupils are drawn into it. In our villages emperors long since dead are set on the throne, and one of them who still lives on only in songs had one of his announcements issued a little while ago, which the priest read out from the altar. Battles from our most ancient history are now fought for the first time, and with a glowing face your neighbour charges into your house with the report. The imperial wives, over indulged on silk cushions, alienated from noble customs by shrewd courtiers, swollen with thirst for power, driven by greed, excessive in their lust, are always committing their evil acts over again.

The further back they are in time, the more terrible all their colours glow, and with a loud cry of grief our village eventually gets to learn how an empress thousands of years ago drank her husband’s blood in lengthy gulps.

That, then, is how the people deal with the rulers from the past, but they mix up the present rulers with the dead ones. If once, once in a person’s lifetime an imperial official travelling around the province comes into our village, sets out some demands or other in the name of the rulers, checks the tax lists, attends a school class, interrogates the priest about our comings and goings, and then, before climbing into his sedan chair, summarizes everything in a long sermon to the assembled local population, at that point a smile crosses every face, one man looks furtively at another and bends over his children, so as not to let the official see him. How, people think, can he speak of a dead man as if he were alive. This emperor already died a long time ago, the dynasty has been extinguished, the official is having fun with us. But we’ll act as if we didn’t notice, so that we don’t hurt his feelings. However, in all seriousness we’ll obey only our present ruler, for anything else would be a sin. And behind the official’s sedan chair as it hurries away there arises from the already decomposed urn someone or other arbitrarily endorsed as ruler of the village.

Similarly, with us people are, as a rule, little affected by political revolutions and contemporary wars. Here I recall an incident from my youth. In a neighbouring but still very far distant province a rebellion broke out. I cannot remember the causes any more. Besides, they are not important here. In that province reasons for rebellion arise every new day—they are an excitable people. Well, on one occasion a rebel pamphlet was brought to my father’s house by a beggar who had travelled through that province. It happened to be a holiday. Our living room was full of guests. The priest sat in their midst and studied the pamphlet. Suddenly everyone started laughing, the sheet was torn to pieces in the general confusion, and the beggar was chased out of the room with blows, although he had already been richly rewarded. Everyone scattered and ran out into the beautiful day. Why? The dialect of the neighbouring province is essentially different from ours, and these differences manifest themselves also in certain forms of the written language, which for us have an antiquated character. Well, the priest had scarcely read two pages like that, and people had already decided. Old matters heard long ago, and long since got over. And although—as I recall from my memory—a horrifying way of life seemed to speak irrefutably through the beggar, people laughed and shook their head and were unwilling to hear any more. That’s how ready people are among us to obliterate the present.

If one wanted to conclude from such phenomena that we basically have no emperor at all, one would not be far from the truth. I need to say it again and again: There is perhaps no people more faithful to the emperor than we are in the south, but the emperor derives no benefits from our loyalty. It’s true that on the way out of our village there stands on a little pillar the sacred dragon, which, for as long as men can remember, has paid tribute by blowing its fiery breath straight in the direction of Peking. But for the people in the village Peking itself is much stranger than living in the next world. Could there really be a village where houses stand right beside each other covering the fields and reaching further than the view from our hills, with men standing shoulder to shoulder between these houses day and night? Rather than imagining such a city, it’s easier for us to believe that Peking and its emperor are one, something like a cloud, peacefully moving along under the sun as the ages pass.

Now, the consequence of such opinions is a life which is to some extent free and uncontrolled. Not in any way immoral—purity of morals like those in my homeland I have hardly ever come across in my travels. But nonetheless a life that stands under no present laws and only pays attention to the wisdom and advice which reach across to us from ancient times.

I guard again generalizations and do not claim that things like this go on in all ten thousand villages of our province or, indeed, in all five hundred provinces of China. But on the basis of the many writings which I have read concerning this subject, as well as on the basis of my many observations, especially since the construction of the wall with its human material provided an opportunity for a man of feeling to travel through the souls of almost all the provinces—on the basis of all this perhaps I may truly state that with respect to the emperor the prevailing idea again and again reveals a certain universal essential feature common to the conception in my homeland. Now, I have no desire at all to let this conception stand as a virtue—quite the contrary. It’s true that in the main things the blame rests with the government, which in the oldest empire on earth right up to the present day has not been able or has, among other things, neglected to cultivate the institution of empire sufficiently clearly so that it is immediately and ceaselessly effective right up to the most remote frontiers of the empire. On the other hand, however, there is in this also a weakness in the people’s power of imagining or believing, which has not succeeded in pulling the empire out of its deep contemplative state in Peking and making it something fully vital and present in the hearts of subjects, who nonetheless want nothing better than to feel its touch once and then die from the experience.

So this conception is really not a virtue. It’s all the more striking that this very weakness appears to be one of the most important ways of unifying our people.

Indeed, if one may go so far as to use the expression, it is the very ground itself on which we live. To provide a detailed account of why we have a flaw here would amount not just to rattling our consciences but, what is much more serious, to making our feet tremble. And therefore I do not wish to go any further in the investigation of these questions at the present time.