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THE IMPORTANT POSITION AND EFFECTS OF PIANGUAN IN THE DEFENSE SYSTEM OF THE MING GREAT WALL

Abstract. *Pianguan is located at the junction of northern Shanxi Province and western Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China, on account of special geographical location, it has always played a vital role in ancient Chinese history, especially in the Ming Dynasty. Based on abundant historical materials, this article focuses on Pianguan and other primary forts and passes, intends to have a further research on the position and effects of Pianguan in the defense system of the Ming Great Wall by analyzing the development process and characteristics of these military projects and facilities.*

Key words: *Pianguan; the Ming Great Wall; Defense System; Effects of Military and Economy.*

Introduction

The Great Wall is "a giant military engineer system in ancient China comprising of one or more stretches of walls, forts and various combat facilities, living facilities, and road networks."[1] As one of the major forts along the Great Wall of Shanxi in Ming Dynasty, Pianguan is a representative of communication between the ancient farming nation and nomadic nation. This article concentrates on Pianguan in which is less concerned by people at present, explores its position and effects in the defense system of Ming Great Wall, and excavates massive rich historical information. It is hoped that a growing number of people will pay much attention to these unique forts and reinforce protection of the Great Wall by reading this article.

Historical Overview of Pianguan

Pianguan, also called Piantou Pass in ancient times, is an important fort of the Ming Great Wall. After a long period of baptism, it has developed into Pianguan County with a total area of 1,685 square kilometers. Pianguan is seated at northwest in Shanxi Province, bordering Qingshuihe County of Inner Mongolia in the north. It is adjacent to Junggar Banner in the west across Yellow River, and next to Hequ and Wuzhai County in the south, Shenchi and Shuozhou in the east. Pianguan County is the first station where Yellow River enters Shanxi Province, it stands at the intersection of the outer Great Wall and inner Great Wall in the

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Ming Dynasty. The total length of border walls in Pianguan is more than 126 kilometers, and it is one of the primary sections of the Great Wall. There are more than 29 forts, 247 beacon towers, 100 broadcasting stations, and 214 embattlements. “Pianguan is a county with the most complicated distribution of Ming Great Wall and a large number of ancient forts in China.”[2]

The midstream of the Yellow River, where Pianguan lies, is the birthplace of China. In primeval ages, this place was warm and humid with dense forests. It could be affirmed from cultural sites such as Huanglongchi and Lougou that ancestors lived on this land as early as the Neolithic Age. During the Spring and Autumn Period, Pianguan was inhabited by Lin Hu. Around 305 B.C., King Wuling of Zhao defeated Lin Hu and Lou Fan, occupied their territory and built the Great Wall in the north. From then on, Pianguan was organized as a central plains territory. In the times of Qin and Han, Pianguan belonged to Yanmen Prefecture. In the year of 957, Piantou Village was established for the first time. In the Song Dynasty, it became an important area to resist Liao soldiers. In 1299, Piantou Village was replaced by Piantou Pass, which was called “Three Outer Passes” together with Ningwu Pass and Yanmen Pass.

During the Ming Dynasty, because of located at the junction of two regimes— Ming and Mongolia, the status of Piantou Pass became more prominent. “Piantou Pass, the westernmost point among three passes of outer Ming Great Wall, which is the closest place next to opponents, so it is the most important part in three places.”[3] In 1390, Zhang Xian, the commander of Zhenxiwei, built a new fort on the river. Since then, after four expansion, this fort was continuously strengthened and many auxiliary facilities were added. It could be seen from above trace that with the progress of history, Pianguan was also constantly developing and changing to meet the actual needs.

Major Border Walls and Forts

Pianguan was a key place where farming nation in the central plains contacted with nomadic nation in the north, in view of its strategic position, successive dynasties built military projects here, especially Ming Empire. Projects built by Ming Empire in Pianguan could be divided into two categories, one was border walls and the other was ancillary buildings including forts and passes.

First of all, the main part of Great Wall, known as border walls in Ming Dynasty. “The Great Wall in Pianguan County has some characteristics of a long time span, wide spatial distribution, multiple structures.”[4]There were about 6 kilometers of Northern Qi Great Wall and over 120 kilometers of Ming Great Wall, which had three types mainly distributed in 5 towns and 58 villages, and the preservation condition keeps in a good state relatively.

Among them, inner Great Wall started from Liebu Town at Shenchi County, entered Nanbuzi of Pianguan, turned northwest through some villages and then went into the north, crossed a river through border walls, and met the outer Great Wall at Baiyangling, Laoying Town. This long wall was generally distributed in the north-south direction, with a total length of over 33 kilometers

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and its average elevation was 1,200 to 1,800 meters. In present day, although some sections are damaged, the overall preservation is still good.

Outer Great Wall began with Baiyangling at Laoying Town, passed through Shuiquan Town and some other places, then ended at Laoniuwan in Wanjiazhai. It was a long east-west wall with a total length of more than 50 kilometers. There were 4 hollow watch towers on the wall, which were generally well preserved. More importantly, the outer Great Wall ran eastward from Shuozhou to Pianguan, and met the inner Great Wall from Shenchi to Pianguan at Baiyangling, forming a Y-shaped joint-point, which was very special.

The Great Wall along Yellow River was built in 1465, the starting point was Laoniuwan, then along the east bank of Yellow River, and went into Hequ. It was 35 kilometers and had an average elevation over 1,000 meters. The distinctive feature of the Great Wall in this section was precipitous. Furthermore, it was well-known that buildings of the Great Wall consisted a variety of types such as forts, beacon towers, embattlements, and passes, composing a complete military defense system, reflecting an ingenious combination of natural obstacles and artificial fortifications. The amount of existing ancient forts and passes of Pianguan remained at a relatively rare level. The major forts were as following.

The first is Piantou Pass, which is located in the lower valley of Guanhe in Pianguan County. It was initially built in 1390. From 1429 to 1449, it was expanded for many times, finally the whole city was almost 2,511 meters in circumference, the height was over 12 meters, covering an area of beyond 900,000 square meters. The walls were made of lime and red mud, with a thickness about 3 meters. “There were a two-storey east gate tower and a three-storey south gate tower, and one octagonal tower with superb craftsmanship and exquisite structure on the southeast city wall.”[5] A 35-meter-high pagoda was built on the mountain one kilometer away from the east of county, and a guard tower situated in the west.

Laoying Fort, the second largest fort, was built in 1449 by Du Zhong, and had been repaired some times. The fort had a perimeter of 2,758 meters and more than 400,000 square meters. Laoying Fort was surrounded by mountains, and close to the Great Wall on both sides. “From perspective of strategic location, Laoying controlled Pinglu in the north and Ningwu in the east, hence its military status was very crucial.”[6]Laoying Fort had three gates, it was originally made of bricks and stones, but now only rammed earth existed.

Shuiquan Fort was named after cool and sweet spring water in local region. Compared with other forts in Pianguan, Shuiquan Fort was much more special. On account of one important pass—Hongmenkou, it had become the only land transportation from Pianguan to the north, and it also the first line of Piantou Pass defense system in Ming Dynasty. It was built in 1434 by General Li Qian, and later renovated. This fort had a circumference over 1.5 kilometers and the height of 12 meters. Military facilities in the fort were well-established, there were more than 1,000 officers and soldiers stationed here. In 1596, another smaller fort was

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constructed with a circumference of 500 meters. In addition, Shuiquan Fort was also a massive trade port. “During the reign of Emperor Longqing, a horse market was founded to trade with Mongolia. ”[7] The setup of above forts further strengthened frontier defense force of Piantou Pass.

The Important Position and Effects of Pianguan

“The Great Wall of Pianguan, connects mountains, rivers with passes, not only an excellent military defense system in ancient times, but also has precious research value in other aspects.”[8] Pianguan is one of the elite sections of Great Wall, it can be called the Museum of Great Wall, which has long been famous at home and abroad.

In terms of military affairs, the Great Wall of Pianguan in Ming Dynasty was an important barrier to defend the capital. Therefore, on the basis of absorbing precious construction methods of previous dynasties, Pianguan Great Wall’s advantages of complex and changeable terrain are fully exerted. And after multiple improvements and innovations, a tremendous system that combined forts, passes, terraces, towers and relied on each other had been formed.

The strictness of Piantou Pass military defense system was mainly reflected in the field of military communication. Specifically, a watchtower or beacon tower and other smaller buildings was erected almost every 1,500 to 2,500 meters in each section of local Great Wall, and totally had more than 400 watchtowers and beacon towers were constructed in Pianguan. After a number of refinements, a solid brick hollow pavilion had also been built, with the characteristics of better defense and higher safety.

Pianguan Great Wall was not a simple and isolated linear arrangement of walls, on the contrary, it used watchtowers as the medium, integrating forts together with passes, from point to line, setting up obstacles and observation platforms along main stem, forming a perfect defense system with outstanding effects at last. For example, in the year of 1432, Mongolian Wuliangha tribe attacked Pianguan. Li Qian, the chief commander, learned about the enemy troops’ situation in beacon towers ahead of time, finally captured their leader, and a victory was achieved in the war.

Since the completion of Piantou Pass in 1390, plenty of officers and soldiers garrisoned here. These local generals organically combined military defense with agricultural reclamation, so that labor and force could be integrated well. All soldiers’ combat actions were interrelated with production activities, effectively combined administrative management and military control to form an efficient and flexible management system, which had made a great contribution to safeguarding peace and stability of northern areas, also blocking invasion of nomadic nation, and ensuring development of farming economy and cultural prosperity in Shanxi area.

In the aspect of economic development, the Great Wall played a significant role in promoting prosperity in the zone along the Great Wall. On the one hand, the construction and protection of Great Wall stimulated improvement of northern

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economy. Since Pianguan was a significant border town between Ming and Mongolia, there were many military projects. Revolving around constructing these abundant projects, various measures such as troops engaged in farming as well as garrison duties, migrating farmers to frontiers were carried out both accelerated blossom of local economy.

In addition, Ming emperors conscripted a large number of soldiers to defend and exploit this land with local residents, which not only expedited local economy, but also saved a good deal of money for the Ming Empire. On the other hand, unimpeded traffic network derived from constructing Great Wall "is the artery that transport cereal, equipment and troops. Smooth roads and developed transportation system is a manifestation of economic development as well as the premise of further economic leap."[9]

During the Ming Dynasty, Pianguan was a momentous fort, and many senior military officials ran back and forth for border security. At that time, many roads with different functions were built one after another. In 1429, after General of Taiyuan Town moved to Pianguan, more than 10,000 soldiers stationed here. There were 8 large-scale highways in Pianguan for the sake of practical needs, among them, Pianshuo Road leading to Shuo County, with a total length of 220 kilometers and the 170-kilometer Pianqing Road was noted at that time.

These transportation networks were like blood vessels in wartime to ensure normal operation of military defense. Equally important, in peacetime, they could guarantee local products sold to other places, and activated a lot of daily necessities to be continuously imported simultaneously. In a word, quite a few highways were crucial for strengthening the material and cultural exchange between border areas and hinterland.

Pianguan was an important gateway of northern Shanxi, at the same time, it was a large border trade zone between Ming and Mongolia. After "Longqing Peace Conference", "the Ming Dynasty removed border restrictions and organized experienced officers and soldiers to monitor border markets on the basis of the location of Mongolian tribes. From the fifth year of Emperor Longqing to the end of Emperor Wanli, Ming and Mongolian border areas had several designated markets."[10]There was a huge market in Shuiquan Fort, and a small market in Baiyangling. Mongolian people exchanged horses, cattle, sheep, donkeys and different kinds of fur products for silk, tea, salt, candy and other daily necessities from the Han people.

On the opening day of border trade market, many frontier generals, government officials, and merchants from all over the country came to this grand meeting, which greatly promoted both economic and cultural communication between Mongolian and Han people. Nowadays, as time goes by, even though these border walls, forts, and passes have become historical relics, their existence faithfully records precious history of the Chinese nation. At the same time, it also proves that the bond among China's diverse nationalities is as steady as a rock.

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Conclusion

The Great Wall of Pianguan is like a thick history book, it records those long years of war, but also witnesses the up and down of nationalities in China. What is more, it shows a prosperous scene of mercantile trade and cultural interaction in this land. Although time has gone far, this memorable history has also left people with a rich historical and cultural heritage.

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