

The Kafkaesque Wall: The Construction of Jewish Identity in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer”

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Abstract

In his short story “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” Franz Kafka creates a highly distinctive, Kafkaesque image of China and the Great Wall. Although Kafka never visited China, he referred to the distant country multiple times in his letters and writings, even once describing himself as “a Chinese” in a postcard. This allegorical self-identification reflects his use of the country as a cultural Other. In “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer,” Kafka deliberately constructs a fictional image of China, using the Great Wall as a means to explore themes of Zionism and Judaism. This study aims to examine how Kafka’s imagined China functions as an allegory, reflecting his complex and nuanced reflections on Jewish identity and Zionist concerns.

Keywords: imagined China; Kafka; “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer”; Zionism

UNISA 

Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 41 | 2025 | #18221 | 15 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/18221>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

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Introduction

I think that if I were a Chinese and would immediately travel home (basically I am Chinese and am traveling home), I would soon have to force myself to return here.

—Franz Kafka (2005, 161), postcard to Felice Bauer, Marienbad, 15 May 1916

Franz Kafka never set foot in China, yet he referred to this distant country multiple times in his letters and writings, even identifying himself as “Chinese” once in a postcard to his girlfriend Felice Bauer. This self-designation reveals not only Kafka’s fascination with China but also reflects his complex use of China as a cultural and allegorical Other. In early 20th-century Europe, an exoticised view of the East—especially China—was common in intellectual circles. This Orientalism encompassed European curiosity about non-Western cultures but often relied on stereotypes that oversimplified and distorted these societies. In Kafka’s work, China functions as both an exotic realm and an allegorical framework through which he examines issues of identity and belonging.

In his 1917 short story “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (At the construction of the Great Wall of China), Kafka engages with the Chinese motif more deeply than in any of his other works, constructing a distinctly Kafkaesque vision of China and the Chinese Wall. In the story, an anonymous narrator, who took part in the construction of the Great Wall, describes its building process. The Wall was constructed piece by piece, a method that contradicts its legendary purpose of “defending against northern peoples,” because the gaps left by this approach provided opportunities for invasion. The reason for this fragmented construction remains a mystery, and the narrator believes only the highest leadership can answer it. However, the leadership itself is unclear, seemingly existing since ancient times, with the decision to build the Wall appearing just as old. In the latter part of the story, the focus shifts from the Wall to the empire and the emperor. The narrator views the empire as the most obscure of China’s political institutions. Due to the vast land, people outside the capital know little about the emperor; they do not even know which dynasty rules, let alone who the current emperor is. Information is transmitted so slowly that the people confuse past events with the present. They maintain deep loyalty to the emperor, yet in reality, they live without one, following ancient instructions passed down through generations.

Kafka’s fragmented, almost scientific narrative style conveys a sense of vast scale and disorienting complexity, as though the very structure of the story mirrors the monumental, unfinished nature of the Wall itself. The construction seems to extend into a space that feels boundless—not only in its physical expanse but also in the existential questions it raises.

The story, like much of Kafka’s writing, is imbued with a mysterious tone. Its depiction of the Wall’s construction and the emperor remains intentionally vague, inviting varied interpretations that have made it a prominent focus in Kafka studies. This article investigates how Kafka’s interest in China reflects an allegorical engagement with his own Jewish identity. By analysing his short story “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer,”

this study aims to demonstrate how Kafka intentionally shaped a “fictitious China” to explore his cultural reflections and identity concerns, offering a fresh perspective on his work.

The European Image of China and Kafka’s Fascination with China

Manfred S. Fischer (1987, 58) defines the term “image” as “a historically grounded, structured entirety of individual and collective statements, an extremely complex interplay of ‘conceptions’ regarding foreign nations.” According to Fischer, an image, especially one from literary works, has a dual genesis. On one side, it is shaped by the social imaginary through “collective statements”—that is, prevailing ideologies and established stereotypes. On the other side, it emerges from the author’s imagination as a unique literary creation, informed by “individual statements”—or the author’s interpretation of the foreign/Other. To understand Kafka’s image of China, it is essential to consider both the historical development of China’s reception in Europe and the stereotypes common during Kafka’s time, as well as Kafka’s personal engagement with the concept of China.

During the Enlightenment, there was a lively debate over Chinese religion, philosophy, and history. Confucian thought gained increasing attention among European missionaries, some of whom translated Confucian classics into European languages. Until the late 18th century, missionaries continued to promote a highly positive image of China (Mackerras 1989, 33). European intellectuals engaged in extensive discussions on Chinese philosophy, history, religion, and governance, resulting in sharply contrasting perspectives. For thinkers like Voltaire, Leibniz, and Christian Wolff, China represented an ideal society. Voltaire, for instance, viewed Confucian China as a utopian model (Berger 1990, 77).

However, negative portrayals of China began to emerge during this period, particularly in the works of Montesquieu and Herder. Montesquieu (1992, 427–428) argued, based on climate theories, that China’s “necessity and perhaps the nature of the climate” fostered “an incredible greed for profit,” cautioning that “one should not compare Chinese morality with European morality.” He called the Chinese “the greatest deceivers on earth.” Herder (1965, 16) likewise criticised China, describing it as stagnant and calling it “a balm-smearred mummy.” These negative stereotypes proliferated, reaching a peak by the 19th century. Heated debates surrounding China further intensified European interest, inspiring Chinoiserie in art and various literary works about China, such as Voltaire’s *Orphelin de la Chine* and Pietro Metastasio’s *Le Cinesi* and *L’Eroe Cinese*.

Spanning the 19th century, negative stereotypes of China intensified across Europe. This shift in attitudes stemmed from two main factors: first, the self-assuredness Europeans felt following the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution, which led them to view other nations as inferior; and second, the decline of the Qing dynasty, which had begun during the late reign of Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) and

continued into the 19th century until its collapse in 1912 (Mackerras 1989, 65). In 1792, Lord Macartney led the first official British embassy to China on behalf of King George III. His observations reinforced European views of China as resistant to change, stating, “a nation that does not advance must retrograde, and finally fall back to barbarism and misery” (Cranmer-Byng 1962, 226).

By the end of the 19th century, as European colonial influence grew, a more politically driven and hostile stereotype of China emerged. However, increased interaction with China through colonial activities gradually deepened European understanding of the country. In the early 20th century, a new spiritual movement emerged in the West—as Reichwein (1923, 9) wrote: “Today’s proposition stands in direct opposition to the 19th century: we strive to turn our lives inward.” It was against this historical backdrop that Daoist thought began to enter the consciousness of Europeans at that time. The unprecedented world war exposed the deep-seated conflicts and contradictions within Europe in the most brutal and tragic ways. These profound social upheavals gave rise to scepticism towards old ideas, leading many German thinkers in the early 20th century to seek spiritual solace in Eastern thought. This interest was in harmony with the anti-rationalist movements and reflections on the Enlightenment occurring within Europe. If European thought since the Enlightenment had emphasised detailed categorisation, Daoist thought presented a vision of integration and unity. China became a prominent theme in Western literature, providing Kafka, who lived during this period, with new perspectives of China.

Kafka never travelled to China, nor did he speak Chinese—a fact well-documented in his correspondence and diaries. However, his letters and recorded conversations reveal a deep fascination with Chinese culture and literature. As noted earlier, he once referred to himself as “Chinese.” This playful self-identification hints at a sense of affinity with China, perhaps suggesting that Kafka felt a connection that transcended geographical or linguistic barriers.

On 24 November 1912, Kafka (1999a, 259) quoted a Chinese poem titled “In Deep Night” in a letter to his girlfriend, Felice Bauer:

In Deep Night
 In the cold night, I forgot the hour of going to bed
 While I was reading my book.
 The perfumes of my gold-embroidered bedspread
 Have already faded, the fireplace no longer burns.
 My beautiful friend, who with great effort had controlled
 Her anger up to this point, snatches the lamp from me
 And asks, “Do you know what time it is?”

Kafka (1999a, 259) remarked that the poem was “perhaps a little inappropriate, but it compensates for this lack of propriety with beauty.” He then provided further context for the poem’s background:

It is by the poet Jan-Tsen-Tsai, about whom I find the following note: “Very talented and precocious, he made a brilliant career in government service. He was extraordinarily versatile as both a person and an artist.” To fully appreciate the poem, one must also understand that wealthy Chinese people would perfume their bedding with aromatic essences before going to sleep. (Kafka 1999a, 259)

By including the poem and its context in his letter, Kafka demonstrated both his knowledge and his interest in Chinese culture. This interest went beyond mere literary appreciation; he was also curious about the details of everyday Chinese life. Kafka (1999a, 259) copied the poem into his letter to illustrate that “night work belongs to men everywhere, even in China.” Here, Kafka did not see himself as fundamentally different from the Chinese; rather, he sought to emphasise a shared resonance.

It seems that Kafka became relatively immersed in China around 1913. While discussing the poem “In Deep Night” with Felice, he also introduced her to another book on China on 16 January 1913: *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten* (1911), edited by Martin Buber. This book contains 16 stories selected by Buber from *Liaozhai Zhiyi* by Pu Songling (translated as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*), a collection of 491 stories. Kafka (1999b, 43) wrote in a letter about this volume, “As far as I know, it is magnificent.” Felice purchased the book on Kafka’s recommendation, although Kafka had not actually read it at the time—five days later, he told Felice that he “knew it only from a detailed review, which included various quotes” (Kafka 1999b, 51). However, it is highly likely that Kafka later read the book and came to love it, as it appeared three times in his book lists between 1922 and 1923.¹

Possibly influenced by Buber’s book, which contains stories about ghosts, fairies, and elves, Kafka (1999b, 43) wrote to Felice on 11/12 March 1913: “I’ve been thinking about this for some time: May I call you ‘Fe’? You used to sign yourself like that sometimes, which also reminds me of ‘Fee’ and beautiful China.”

Kafka’s interest also extended beyond literature to Chinese philosophy. In conversations with Gustav Janouch, the son of one of Kafka’s colleagues in the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institution, Kafka described his engagement with Daoism:

I have—so far as it is even possible in translation—studied Daoism quite deeply and for a long time. I own almost all the volumes of the German translations of this school, published by Diederichs in Jena. (Janouch 1981, 171)

Kafka’s interest in China persisted until his final months. In a letter dated late November or early December 1923, just six months before his death, he ordered two books on China—“*Chinese Landscapes* by Fischer” and “*Chinese Gods* by Perzynski”—from the

1 The book appeared in the book lists IV (1922), VI (1922), and VIII (1923). Lists IV and VI were likely compiled by Kafka for his sister Elli. The name “Elli” is written in the margin of List IV, and List VI was sent along with a letter to Elli Hermann, where Kafka mentioned the address of the Ewer bookstore where she could acquire the books (Born 2011, 156–166).

Kurt Wolff Verlag (Kafka 1966, 467). He even followed up on the shipment with a postcard on 31 December 1923 (Kafka 1966, 470). This enduring fascination is particularly striking, considering his letter to Max Brod on 17 December 1923, in which he noted that, due to inflation, he had stopped reading newspapers—even his usual Sunday paper (Kafka 1966, 468). Despite financial difficulties and severe illness, Kafka maintained his commitment to exploring Chinese culture.

Behind the Allegorical Wall: Kafka, Judaism, and Zionism

Gadamer (1993, 22) once commented on Kafka's works in *Dichten und Deuten* (Poetry and interpretation) (1961), stating, "The discussion surrounding Kafka's novels ultimately touches upon the fact that Kafka, in his works, constructs an everyday world in an indescribably calm, crystal-clear, and serene manner, whose apparent familiarity, paired with a mysterious foreignness, creates the impression that everything is not as it seems, but rather signifies something other than itself." This characteristic, in which "either presents one thing in words and another in meaning, or else something absolutely opposed to the meaning of the words" (Quintilian 1922, 327), highlights the allegorical nature of Kafka's works.

"Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer" is exactly such a story with allegorical characteristics. It is found near the beginning of the Oktavheft C from Kafka's estate and is dated to March 1917 (Binder 1975, 218). Unfortunately, it remains fragmentary and was posthumously published in 1931 by Max Brod, against Kafka's testamentary wishes, which dictated that "everything found in my estate—journals, manuscripts, letters, both foreign and my own, drawings, etc.—should be completely and unreadably burned" (Stach 2012, 286).

In "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer," Kafka focuses on the theme of China with a level of intensity and specificity not seen in any of his other writings, crafting a unique and Kafkaesque portrayal of the country. The story deviates from traditional narrative structure and instead resembles an analytical report, divided into two distinct sections. In the first part, the narrator—a historian who also works on the Wall's construction—describes the building process of the Great Wall. The second part shifts focus to the imperial system and governance in ancient China, leaving behind the Wall as a narrative element. Throughout the story, no character is identified by name, enhancing the sense of abstraction. Among the nameless figures, the narrator emerges as the central figure. He closely observes the construction of the Wall, reflects on the vast landscape of China and its people, and poses questions to which he finds no answers.

The story revolves around the construction of the Great Wall. The entire construction of the Wall is characterised by paradox. The first of these arises at the beginning of the narrative in the building system. As a participant in the construction, the first-person narrator explains that the Wall was constructed according to a "system of partial construction" (Kafka 1931, 9), which contradicts the "generally accepted" (Kafka 1931, 10) purpose of the Wall—"to protect against the northern peoples" (Kafka

1931, 10). The narrator presents this contradiction in two aspects. On the one hand, the Wall was built incompletely, with “many large gaps” (Kafka 1931, 9) during the lengthy construction process. These gaps “were only gradually filled in,” and “there should be gaps that were never built at all” (Kafka 1931, 9). This clearly shows that the Wall could not serve its intended purpose of protection. On the other hand, the partially built Wall is in “constant danger,” as the sections left standing in desolate areas can easily be destroyed by the northern peoples (Kafka 1931, 10).

This paradox leads the narrator to question the true purpose of building the Great Wall. The construction was not intended to defend against the northern peoples. The country is too vast, and this vastness itself prevents the northern peoples from reaching the people (Kafka 1931, 18), making a protective wall entirely unnecessary. “Innocent northern peoples believed that they had caused it” (Kafka 1931, 19), but the narrator finds that the Wall’s construction was neither prompted by the northern peoples nor ordered by the emperor. Rather, the decision to build the Wall “has likely existed since time immemorial” (Kafka 1931, 19). The purpose of constructing the Wall seems to be the construction itself.

In the narrative, which is almost devoid of plot and filled with contradictions, two instances illustrate Kafka’s deliberate allegorisation of China and the Chinese Wall. Kafka repeatedly emphasises the vastness of China, using the narrator’s voice to paint an exaggerated picture of the country’s monumental size. According to the narrator, “so vast is our land, no fairy tale compares to its size, barely does the sky encompass it” (Kafka 1931, 21); he refers to “the infinite China” (Kafka 1931, 14) and simply states, “the land is too vast” (Kafka 1931, 18), describing a province as “neighboring, but still very distant” (Kafka 1931, 25).

These descriptions create a sprawling, nearly boundless territory that seems almost beyond imagination. Further analysis of the text reveals that this is Kafka’s deliberate alienation of China. In the story, the narrator mentions an interesting piece of information, that China has “five hundred provinces,” and there are “ten thousand villages in our province” (Kafka 1931, 27). The use of these numerical exaggerations clearly does not correspond to real geographic details. However, Kafka’s narrator, presented as an educated Chinese historian, would presumably have accurate knowledge of his own country’s political divisions.

Therefore, the inclusion of fictionalised figures appears to be a deliberate choice by Kafka, intended to communicate more than mere factual inaccuracy. The exaggerated numbers serve not only to reinforce the vastness of the country but, more importantly, to estrange the “China” depicted in the story from the historical and geographical reality of China. These numerical inventions, such as “ten thousand villages” and “five hundred provinces,” are fictitious in the real world but real within the fictional “China.”

Another striking aspect is the sudden appearance of the Tower of Babel in the narrative of the Great Wall. The narrator recalls the Tower of Babel, as he explains, “in the early days of the construction, a scholar wrote a book,” arguing that the tower’s failure was due not to the “generally claimed causes” but to “the weakness of the foundation” (Kafka 1931, 14). According to the scholar, only a solid foundation—such as that provided by the Great Wall—could support a new Babel Tower: “So first the Wall, then the tower” (Kafka 1931, 15).

Linking the Great Wall with the Tower of Babel, and even presenting the Wall as the foundation of the tower, these narratives are undoubtedly strange. In fact, they hint at Kafka’s intention to create an imaginative, allegorical space.

As the relationship between “one thing in words” and “another in meaning,” allegorical connections are artificially constructed concepts that trigger associations with other concrete images. In other words, allegory implies what is absent in the original narrative. It redirects meaning elsewhere, offering interpretations that “mean something different from what it is” (Benjamin 2003, 233). This redirection is inextricable from the author’s intent. As Owens (1980, 69) notes, allegory “tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary.” Through the connection with the Tower of Babel, Kafka imbues the “Chinese Wall” with a distinct religious undertone, redirecting the focus from this seemingly Chinese space to a Western context.

As Benjamin (1991, 678) famously remarked about Kafka: “Everything he describes makes statements about something other than itself.” The reference to the Tower of Babel disrupts the original narrative of the Great Wall, simultaneously establishing an allegorical framework that links the Wall’s construction to the Tanach. Notably, at the beginning of the story, the narrator explains, “This system of partial construction was also followed on a smaller scale within the two large labor armies, the East and the West armies” (Kafka 1931, 9). Such East and West labour armies are not visible in actual history; it should be a clear reference to the Eastern and Western Jewish people at that time. In fact, “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” was written in 1917, a time when Kafka was increasingly drawn to Judaism and his attitude towards Zionism was wavering. Günther Anders (1967, 10) rightly pointed out that the word “Chinese” in the story could even be entirely replaced by the word “Jew.”

The relationship between Kafka and Zionism has long been a prominent subject of scholarly inquiry. One key reason for this sustained attention is the changing and ambivalent nature of Kafka’s stance towards Zionism. Kafka’s contemporaries and later scholars have remained divided on this issue. Was Kafka a Zionist? Max Brod (1966, 100–101) argues that Kafka may have harboured doubts about Zionism in his early years, but that “Kafka later increasingly embraced his Zionist stance.” However, Hans-Joachim Schoeps, Walter Muschg, Evelyn Torton Beck, and Peter Beicken argue that Brod posthumously attributed his own Zionist convictions to his friend (Carmely 1979, 351). Schoeps (1985, 124) contends that Kafka’s Zionism was merely Brod’s invention.

A similar criticism was raised by Evelyn Torton Beck (1971, XIII): “In spite of his genuine concern with Judaism, Kafka never became ... a political Zionist, though some of his contemporaries (most notably Max Brod) insist that in his last years he contemplated emigration to Palestine.” But we also see that Brod was not the only friend who believed Kafka was a Zionist. Gustav Janouch, who was himself not a Zionist, confirms: “Kafka was a staunch supporter of Zionism” (Janouch 1981, 68; Carmely 1979, 352). Another of Kafka’s friends, Felix Weltsch (1995, 9), also described him as “a passionate Zionist.”

Kafka was a German-speaking Jew living in Prague, and, in his own words, he was “the most West-Jewish” (Kafka 1954, 294) of the West Jews. In Kafka’s time, it was widely thought that Western Jews assimilated better into Christian society than Eastern Jews. For Kafka, however, this assimilation meant a detachment from Jewish culture and an estrangement from, as well as incompatibility with, Christian culture. This identity dilemma is often revealed in Kafka’s diary and correspondence. In a letter to Milena in 1920, Kafka (1954, 294) wrote:

This means, exaggeratedly speaking, that no moment of peace is granted to me, nothing is given to me, everything must be earned—not only the present and the future, but also the past, something that perhaps everyone else has received, that too must be earned. This is perhaps the hardest work, as the Earth turns to the right... I would have to turn to the left to catch up with the past.

Caught between two cultures, Kafka reflected deeply on Judaism and the situation of the Jewish people. His profound interest in Jewish culture is evident in his extensive collection of books on Jewish studies. A detailed investigation of his personal library by Jürgen Born further underscores this interest, revealing that Kafka read widely on Jewish thought and tradition (Born 2011). At the same time, Kafka showed considerable interest in Zionism as a potential solution for the Jewish people. As early as September 1913, Kafka attended the 11th World Zionist Congress held in Vienna. However, this experience did not lead him towards Zionism; instead, it left him feeling disappointed. In his diary, Kafka (1990, 1063–1064) wrote: “The worker delegate from Palestine, eternal shouting ... hopeless.” Max Brod’s diary also corroborates this sentiment. In December 1913, Brod (1966, 101) wrote: “Kafka is not a Zionist. Politics. Alienated.” In 1914, Kafka’s letter to Grete Bloch clearly reflects his ambivalence towards Zionism: “I admire Zionism and am repelled by it” (Kafka 1967, 598). In the period that followed, Kafka’s stance on Zionism remained equivocal. In September 1916, Kafka encouraged Felice to participate in activities related to Zionism by working for the “Jüdischen Volksheim” in Berlin. But at this point, Kafka still denies in his correspondence that he is a Zionist. “That I am not a Zionist—this would likely become apparent upon closer examination” (Kafka 1967, 698).

Kafka’s ambiguous statements regarding Zionism are the main reason why it remains unclear whether he can be considered a Zionist. However, it is important to recognise that differing definitions and understandings of Zionism also play a significant role in

this divergence of opinions. Those who regard Kafka as a Zionist do not view Zionism solely from a political perspective. Brod described “all religious-political and specifically messianic movements in Judaism as Zionism” (Schoeps 1985, 125), while Weltsch referred to Kafka’s “human-universal, humanistically oriented Zionism” (Brod 1979, 117). These statements suggest that Kafka’s concern with Zionism likely focused on cultural, religious, and spiritual aspects. Therefore, Kafka’s proximity to Judaism may have contributed to the differing viewpoints on this issue. In this regard, Schoeps’s perspective is worth considering: Kafka “can be interpreted positively as Jewish, but not as Zionist” (Schoeps 1985, 125).

Whether Kafka, in his later years, indeed embraced the Zionist idea of creating a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, as some scholars suggest, is not directly related to the analysis of “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” in this article. However, it is clear that around 1917, Kafka closely followed developments in Judaism and Zionism. This may have been the reason he deliberately imbued the Chinese Wall with religious connotations and created an allegorical structure that points towards Judaism and Zionism in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer.”

An Allegorical Reading of Kafka’s Chinese Wall

Between August and September 1916, Kafka passionately discussed the work at the “Jüdischen Volksheim” in Berlin and Zionism in his correspondence with Felice. In a letter on 3 August 1916, Kafka (2005, 194) wrote, “Zionism, at least in its outermost corner, accessible to most living Jews, is only the gateway to something more important.” A month later, on 12 September 1916, Kafka (2005, 222) wrote again to Felice:

From every task you will perform there, from every effort you will make (though it must not harm your health), from every such thing, I will draw sustenance, just as I do from your last letter. As far as I can see, it is the only absolutely certain way, or the threshold of the way, that can lead to spiritual liberation.

This inevitably brings to mind the descriptions of the Wall and tower in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer.” Let us once again quote the narrator’s words:

I mention this [the Tower of Babel] because, in the early stages of construction, a scholar wrote a book in which he drew these comparisons very precisely. In it, he sought to prove [...] that the construction failed due to the weakness of the foundation [...] He claimed that only the Great Wall would, for the first time in human history, provide a solid foundation for a new Tower of Babel. So, first the Wall, and then the tower. (Kafka 1931, 14–15)

Hideo Nakazawa (1994, 80–81) interprets this connection between the Wall and the tower as allegorical, suggesting that the scholar in Kafka’s story represents an allusion to Martin Buber. Martin Buber was a leading figure of cultural Zionism, whom Kafka knew personally. Buber promoted a vision of Jewish renewal that differed from the political Zionism advocated by Theodor Herzl in *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish*

State) (1896). Unlike Herzl, who sought a political solution to antisemitism through the establishment of a Jewish state, Buber emphasised the importance of revitalising Jewish culture and spirituality as the foundation for a cohesive Jewish identity.

Buber's essays, "Begriffe und Wirklichkeit. Brief an Herrn Geh. Regierungsrat Prof. Dr. Hermann Cohen" (Concepts and reality. Letter to Mr. Privy Government Councilor Prof. Dr. Hermann Cohen) and "Zion, Der Staat und die Menschheit" (Zion, the state, and humanity) were published in *Der Jude* (The Jew), the monthly journal he founded, in August 1916. By the end of 1917, Buber had published a total of 15 essays in the journal, reflecting his vision of cultural Zionism. Kafka read *Der Jude* regularly and published two of his own stories — "Schakale und Araber" ("Jackals and Arabs") and "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy")—in the journal in 1917, under the title "Zwei Tiergeschichten" (Two animal stories). These stories, likely written the same year as "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer," may also reflect Kafka's thoughts on Jewish identity. Given this context, it is plausible that Kafka drew upon Buber's ideas when shaping the allegorical image of the Wall.

However, Nakazawa's hypothesis that the Wall represents the "Jewish state" and the tower represents the "Jewish religion" is debatable (Nakazawa 1994, 88). If the scholar in Kafka's story indeed alludes to Buber, such an equation would be overly simplistic. As stated above, Buber's vision was far broader than a mere political framework; he aspired to create a "new and whole Judaism" (Buber 1916a, 288). In Buber's view, this vision of Judaism did not require a political state as its foundation. In "Zion, Der Staat und die Menschheit," he wrote very clearly: "Just as the state itself is not the ultimate goal for me as an individual, the 'Jewish state' is not the defining aim for me as a Jew. [...] It is not about establishing a Jewish state" (Buber 1916b, 429). Also Palestine held an abstract meaning for Buber. In the aforementioned essay, he explained:

This is what I mean by Palestine. Not a "state," but this ancient piece of earth, the promised guarantee of ultimate and sanctified permanence, the hard soil in which only the seed of a new unity can sprout. (Buber 1916b, 430)

In Buber's perspective, Palestine represented a spiritual cohesion; its significance was not political. Buber emphasised the "unity" of the Jewish people, but it was not identical to a state in the political sense. The "unity" he spoke of was more religiously coloured, as he stated: "Only in religious life does the unity of true humanity present itself to me; in the state, it is merely one of its manifestations" (Buber 1916b, 429). The line "first the Wall, then the tower" in Kafka's story can be seen as an echo of Buber's philosophy: first the spiritual unity of the Jewish people, centred on Judaism, and then the emergence of the "new and whole Judaism" (Buber 1916a, 288).

The notion of unity appears explicitly in Kafka's story as well. During its construction, the Great Wall was intended to instil a deep sense of unity among the Chinese people. As the narrator analyses, the segmented construction served no practical purpose for the project itself; it was considered unsuitable, but this unsuitability was intentional. It

allowed the people, through their collective effort, to witness “groups, banners, flags—they had never seen how vast, rich, beautiful, and beloved their land was” (Kafka 1931, 13). While the construction of the Wall may have lacked practical significance, the monumental scale of the endeavour transformed it into a national undertaking. By participating in this great project, the people developed a sense of unity and collective consciousness.

Every peasant was a brother, for whom one built a protective Wall, and who, with everything he had and was, thanked for it his entire life. Unity! Unity! Chest to chest, a dance of the people, blood no longer confined in the meager cycle of the body, but sweetly rolling and yet recurring through the endless China. (Kafka 1931, 13–14)

According to the narrator, the Wall was not constructed merely for “protection against the northern peoples” (Kafka 1931, 18), as often claimed. Interestingly, the terms “the northern peoples” (*die Nordvölker*) and “the Jewish plight” (*die Judennot*) are phonetically similar in German. This may be a wordplay by Kafka, suggesting that the unity of the Jews is not solely for the sake of the “Jewish plight” (*Judennot*).

Within the story, the narrator is somewhat puzzled by the scholar’s vision of the tower, commenting “I admit that I still don’t quite understand how he envisioned this tower ... It could only have been meant in a spiritual sense” (Kafka 1931, 16). This sentiment closely mirrors Kafka’s ambivalence towards Buber’s ideas; in a letter to Felice, Kafka (1999b, 44) described Buber as making “a dull impression” on him, saying that “everything he says lacks something.” Kafka may have been using the Wall and the scholar’s vision of the tower as an implicit doubt of the idealised “new and whole Judaism” promoted by Buber. This is also consistent with his ambiguous and at times contradictory attitude towards Zionism during this period.

The Chinese empire is depicted in the story as a “most unclear institution” (Kafka 1931, 20). The knowledge taught in schools about the empire consists of “doctrines hammered into the minds for centuries” (Kafka 1931, 20). Although these doctrines are imbued with “eternal truth,” they remain shrouded in mystery, like “mist and fog,” making it difficult for the people to fully understand them (Kafka 1931, 20).

The emperor is the core of the empire, but the vast geographical distance makes it nearly impossible for the Chinese people to truly perceive the emperor or the empire in a tangible way. As the narrator notes, “the long-dead emperor is placed on the throne in our villages,” and “the battles of our oldest history are only now being fought” (Kafka 1931, 23–24). The geographical distance, in fact, creates a temporal gap. In the present moment of the people’s lives, neither the emperor nor the empire is a living reality. Thus, the geographical distance ultimately functions as a metaphor for the temporal distance. The idea of the state is preserved in historical traditions and survives as an abstract concept within the collective imagination of the people.

The narrator specifically mentions that he “has been almost exclusively concerned with the comparative history of peoples since the time of the Wall’s construction and even until today” (Kafka 1931, 19). This points to a parallel between the Chinese people in the story and the Jewish people beyond the narrative. For the Chinese people, the state is almost rendered meaningless due to the geographical distance. For the allegorically represented Jewish people, the concept of the state is unclear because of the historical distance, “like a cloud, quietly changing under the sun over time” (Kafka 1931, 26).

Conclusion

Kafka weaved an imagined image of China that functions as an allegory. His depiction of China in “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” serves as a complex allegorical space through which he explores Jewish and Zionist issues. In the story, the system of partial construction and the apparent purpose of the Wall—to protect against the northern peoples—ultimately reveal a paradox. The true function of the Wall is not merely defensive; it serves as a means for the people to recognise their shared national identity during its construction. In this way, the Great Wall of China becomes an allegory for the unification of the Jewish people. The narrator’s discussion of the relationship between the Chinese Wall and the Tower of Babel mirrors Buber’s vision of Jewish unity and his concept of the “new whole Judaism.” The narrator’s ongoing questioning of the meanings of the Wall and the Tower reflects Kafka’s ambiguous and, at times, ambivalent relationship with Zionism.

Benjamin (1991, 678) once remarked that Kafka’s work is “prophetic.” Kafka possessed a remarkable sensitivity, perceiving and capturing the subtle signs within life that hint at impending changes, even though the nature of those changes remained unknown. With an investigative description, Kafka transformed these signs into written words, and “no process can be conceived that does not become distorted” (Benjamin 1991, 678). From this distortion arises Kafka’s unique allegorical world. This Kafka, undoubtedly, is open-ended.

Funding Information

This research was supported by the Youth Fund for Humanities and Social Sciences Research, Ministry of Education of China, under Grant Nos. 22YJCZH088 and 23YJCZH011.

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