

BOOK REVIEWS

## More Than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368–1644

By John W. Dardess. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. Pp. x + 561. \$129.99/£99.00 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-5381-3510-5.

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For the rulers and administrators of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the northern border constituted a source of perennial crisis and conflict. The constellations of rural communities, trading outposts, and border garrisons scattered across the northern frontier were subject to constant harassment, raiding, and depredation. So too did threats from the frontier nearly bring about the destruction of the Ming state itself, as in the epochal Tumu Incident of 1449 or the Gengxu Incident of 1550. How the Ming state provided security for its peripheral extremities and ensured its survival against hostile adversaries in the steppe are questions which the late John W. Dardess (1937–2020) answers within his 2020 monograph *More Than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368–1644*. It investigates how the Ming and its operatives managed, administered, and coped with its northern frontier and, ultimately, how under constant pressure the Ming was able to survive for as long as it did.

*More Than the Great Wall* is divided into fourteen chronological chapters based on the reigns of Ming emperors, spanning the book proper's 513 pages. Imperative to the design of Dardess' work is his proposed structural schema which delineates three overarching trends in northern frontier defense, thereby providing thematic coherence to his narrative. The first, spanning 1368–1435, identifies a period of aggressive imperial interventionism. Emperors not only proactively involved themselves in the formulation of policy and strategy but also dispatched or personally led armies into the field – as did the Yongle and Xuande Emperors. So too did they project “globalizing moral authority” into the steppe, asserting the Ming's political, cultural, and moral hegemony over its adversaries. This covers Chapters 1–3 which span the Hongwu, Yongle, Hongxi, and Xuande reigns. The second phase, spanning 1449–1571, witnesses the Ming's increasingly introspective posturing, wherein globalizing moral authority gives way to the hardening of abstract and physical borders as well as hostile rhetoric. This period also saw the emergent preference for defensive as opposed to aggressive military measures against northern invaders, which culminated in the emergence of what Dardess terms “Fortress China.” This covers Chapters 4–11 which examine the Zhengtong (and an intervening chapter on his steppe captivity), Jingtai, Tianshun, Chenghua, Hongzhi, Zhengde, and Jiajing reigns. The third phase, spanning 1571 to the final decades of the Ming, begins with the ratification of a bilateral peace agreement and concludes with the dynasty's failure to stymie domestic tumult within and foreign aggression without. This covers Chapters 12–14 which span the Longqing, Wanli, Taichang, and Tianqi reigns. The final chapter focuses on the “Last Frontier” of Liaodong (pp. viii–ix). Dardess thereby examines the Ming from its founding in 1368 until 1627. He does not pursue at great length the collapse of Ming northern frontier security beyond 1627, developments which are recounted in such works as Swope's *The Military Collapse of China's Ming Dynasty, 1618–1644* (2014).

Dardess' three-phase schema resonates throughout the volume and provides useful analytical architecture with which to relate detailed day-to-day engagements to broader developmental trajectories that

unfolded over two and a half centuries of imperial rule. Indeed, this volume offers an impressive amount of qualitative detail, which does threaten to overwhelm the unprepared reader; the clearly delineated architecture provided by Dardess nevertheless grounds these minutiae within a comprehensible historical arc.

Dardess presents two overarching arguments in *More Than the Great Wall*. First, he considers officials who operated in the capital and the field as logisticians, commanders, and diplomats to have been essential for the sustaining of dynastic defense. This argument comes to the fore in Chapter 11: Fortress China. Dardess follows the engagements of Supreme Commander Yang Yiqing 楊一清 (1454–1530), a senior official who personally served in the perilous northwestern frontier region. Dardess recounts his many memorials to Beijing, wherein Yang describes the suffering of soldiers, shortages in food supply, the complex logistics of military defense, and his overseeing of personnel reviews and appointments. Yang personally led troops into the field to meet the enemy as well, and was by no means a conventional “armchair strategist” (pp. 379; 374–92). Ultimately, Dardess concludes that “It was the involvement of officials of Yang’s caliber, who made the best of a very demanding task, that helped sustain the Ming defenses for two and a half centuries” (p. 392). Even under the disruptive governance of a stubborn or unrestrained emperor, in addition to the perpetual conflict that blighted the northern frontier, the Ming system’s survival over such an extended period of time certainly owed to the efforts of those who designed, facilitated, and carried out the defense of the realm.<sup>1</sup>

Second, Dardess contends that the overall sustaining of Ming China’s northern frontier was possible precisely *because* of those who undermined it. Such a claim might appear counterintuitive at first. Without respite over nearly three centuries of rule, the dynasty’s northern border was continually violated by northern raiders and confederations. In 1449 and 1550, Mongol armies even threatened the Ming capital during the Tumu and Gengxu Incidents respectively. Under such conditions, Dardess claims that the Ming survived for as long as it did because “the Tatars and other aggressors never sought to occupy and control China” (pp. 404, 373, 512). To be sure, his claim must be qualified in light of the fact that ambitious chieftains did attempt to resurrect the former Mongol Yuan and did make concrete pretensions to empire-scale hegemony: for instance, the fifteenth century Mongol unifier Esen (d. 1455) was considering “recreating the Yuan as a territorial empire in control of China,” a plan which ultimately never came to pass, in spite of his capturing of emperor Zhu Qizhen in 1449 (p. 140). As well, anxiety about a renewed Mongol takeover persisted well beyond the dynasty’s founding in 1368, which is suggestive of the threat, even if imagined, that Mongols continued to pose to Ming security following the Yuan collapse (p. 200). Moreover, the Ming ceded territory on multiple occasions to its northern adversaries, such as lands in the northeast to the Uriyangkhad in 1403 and the Ordos to the Tatars in 1548 (pp. 74, 412, 477). Dardess contends, however, that steppe leaders’ ambitions were not transformed into unilateral and concerted conquest. Certainly, the Ming and its people suffered at the hands of Mongol and other raiders, but their not pursuing dynastic annexation for such an extended period of time was conducive to Ming China’s longevity. Such longevity was indeed dissolved when bureaucratic factionalism, popular unrest, and – importantly – a determined foe finally brought the Ming down in 1644 (pp. 512–13).

Another noteworthy feature of this book, which is less of Dardess’ own argumentative design than it is this author’s observation, is the Ming court’s extensive engagement in Central Asian politics. Dardess details the Ming’s protracted competition with Central Asian powers for the allegiance and security of Hami (哈密), an oasis city located westward of Ming China’s northwestern frontier province of Gansu. It had served as a protective barrier for the Ming and as a gateway for the processing of tributary missions during the early decades of the dynasty (p. 258), but was abruptly seized by Sultan Ahmad of Turfan, who was a Chinggisid descendent, in 1488. This series of events captured the concern of the Ming court: “Hami and Turfan seemed to be too remote from China to be attracting so much intense scrutiny from Beijing. But they weren’t.” (p. 255). Dardess then recounts the Ming’s

<sup>1</sup>See also, for instance, Dardess’ discussion of the oft-maligned Zhengde Emperor in Chapter 10. He notes that “The real managers of this all but hopeless task were a handful of top mandarins like Yang Yiqing and Wang Qiong. Zhengde’s impact was minimal; his antics were disconcerting but never disruptive enough to cause the whole machinery of national security to clog and grind to a halt.” (p. 358).

maneuvers to stabilize its interests in Hami. The state rewarded loyalists who assassinated members of the occupying Turfan forces; provisioned material support for Hami refugees fleeing the violence; engaged in court debates on how to respond to Ahmad's transgressions; sustained diplomatic pressure on Turfan to restore the city to a Ming-approved ruler; and eventually launched a punitive expedition. The Ming also secured the allegiance of and incorporated Oirat and Wild Mekri (non-Chinese ethnic groups) forces into its campaign, which culminated in the successful Chinese siege of Hami in 1495 (pp. 254–62, 270–86). The aforementioned example demonstrates that the northwestern flank of Ming China's northern frontier was an arena in which the Ming interacted, intervened, and competed with Central Asian powers in the pursuit of its own security interests. Undesirable shifts of control and the undermining of Chinese priorities in Central Asia were not peripheral in the purview of Ming government, and instead occupied a position of pivotal importance in its administrative calculus.

In this way, *More Than the Great Wall* offers an important contribution to the expanding corpus of Ming-Eurasia scholarship, and may be read alongside the works of scholars like David M. Robinson. Indeed, Robinson has substantiated the Ming court's extensive connections to Eurasian polities by showing Ming rulers' identities and political activities as being tied to Mongol nobles in *Ming China and Its Allies* (2020). He writes that "The Ming throne required allies who would ensure safe passage for merchants and envoys... provide accurate and timely information about regional developments... [and] refrain from alliances inimical to Ming imperial interests." (p. 199) Dardess shows similar processes as infusing Ming involvement with Hami. As "a custodian of the whole global order" (p. 261), the Ming attempted to resolve its Central Asian Turfan problem for the purposes of domestic stability as well as orchestrating the desired allegiance of polities beyond its borders. Dardess is more concerned with the Ming Chinese perspective and less with explicitly incorporating this narrative into broader conceptual frames. He nevertheless, if even implicitly, joins Robinson in showing the Ming as being invested politically, diplomatically, and militarily in the Eurasian arena.

*More Than the Great Wall* finds strength in its grounding in primary sources. For Dardess, primary sources allowed him to highlight the voices of historical individuals and emphasize their personal agency. This methodological approach guides his account of Ming China's northern frontier, which had to be "found in the stories of those who actually described its challenges, figured out the strategy, made the decisions, and carried out the moves necessary day after day, month after month, and year after year" (p. vii). He states, "Above all, I want all those people on the scene and personally involved in the action to tell their own stories" (p. x). Dardess thus employs memorials, edicts, and reports found in the *Ming Veritable Records* (*Ming shilu* 明實錄), which have been studied entry-by-entry in the composition of this book. He also examines eye-witness accounts preserved in the memoirs and collected writings of officials who personally facilitated the defensive effort, such as the case with Yang Yiqing. Finally, he studies collated memorials in compendia like the *Compilation of Statecraft Writings in the August Ming* (*Huangming jingshi wenbian* 皇明經世文編). In so doing, *More Than the Great Wall* prioritizes the agency enacted by historical individuals in Ming defense, rather than only focusing on impersonal institutions and abstract policies. When records allow, Dardess also amplifies the voices of their Mongol counterparts, and thereby enriches our understanding of how those who lived in the steppe explicitly thought about and interacted with Ming China. (pp. 173–78).

Dardess also acknowledges the limitations of his primary sources, which often provide only limited insights into the perspectives and experiences of the Mongols and frontier peoples. Indeed, the paucity or complete absence of records from the other side of the Ming frontier frustrate efforts to fully comprehend the reality of northern border problems. For instance, when it came to Yongle's Mongolian expeditions, Dardess concedes that "[w]e have to tell the Mongolia story as China's story. The Tatars kept no archive, so their understanding of events is mute" (p. 53). Further, Dardess writes that the lack of records from the Uriyangkhad guards, who were tenuous Tatar allies of the Ming straddling the Mongolia–Manchuria border, obfuscates their motives for undertaking sporadic raiding in Chinese territory (pp. 74, 130). Speculative explanations may be offered, but often without a satisfactory degree of confidence. To a certain degree, this should be seen as a limitation of Dardess' work, which owing to the very nature of its sources produces an incomplete reconstruction of events. The complex social, economic,

political, and military histories of the Ming's northern frontier necessarily privilege the Ming due to the imbalanced distribution of extant source material, which usually renders Mongol narratives obfuscated at best. In spite of this, Dardess is conscious of the evidential shortcomings in the history of Ming frontier defense. And as mentioned earlier, when sources do allow for insights into the Mongol point of view, Dardess attempts to bring them to light (pp. 139–40, 154, 173–78, 196, 406–07, 415). The late Frederick W. Mote's exhortation that "To understand Ming-Mongol relations it is necessary to look at the problems from the quite different points of view of all the participants" finds particular resonance here.<sup>2</sup>

One shortcoming of Dardess' volume is its neglecting to engage with matters of historiography. In the introduction, Dardess offers a paragraph-length overview of important works pertaining to the northern frontier, which includes such texts as Pokotilov's *History of the Eastern Mongols During the Ming Dynasty from 1368 to 1634* (1947, 1976) and Waldron's *The Great Wall of China* (1990). Aside from mentioning a handful of works and pointing briefly to the substantive vacancy in the field, however, Dardess' concerted engagement with historiography ends here. How he envisioned *More Than the Great Wall* as being in constructive conversation with its predecessors would have benefitted from a more thoughtful discussion in the introduction. In other words, Dardess inserts his work into the field but does not explain the logic of its positioning or the specifics of its contributions.

Dardess could have situated his findings, which are based on intensive readings of the primary sources and close focus on individual actors in the capital and the field, alongside those of Alastair Johnston in *Cultural Realism* (1995) or Yuan-kang Wang in his more recent *Harmony and War* (2011). Johnston's approach to Ming–Mongol relations relied on the instruments of political science, offering cognitive maps of Ming memorials while using such concepts as the "capability-contingent *parabellum* model" to explain Ming strategic preferences for the use of military power against its northern adversaries (p. 216). Wang offered a chapter-length survey of Ming–Mongol relations in his volume and framed it within the power-based theorem of structural realism as well as shifting modes of offensive and defensive grand strategies. When *More Than the Great Wall* is compared with such works, it becomes clear that Dardess is less concerned with matters of theory and grand strategy. To their theoretically oriented works, Dardess offers a more intimate and primary-source-driven narrative of *how* Ming rulers and officials managed, succeeded, and failed in the day-to-day affairs of northern frontier security. Dardess' subjects operated less within the context of quantitative triangulations and international relations theory, and rather in their offices scattered throughout the Forbidden City and upon the ruins of devastated frontier villages. Of course, this volume offers not a competing but rather a complementary companion to the works of scholars like Johnston and Wang. Had Dardess engaged in a historiographical exercise such as this, he would have better conveyed how he envisioned his monograph as contributing to the literature and the logic of its position within it.

Dardess also overlooks the writings of Qiu Jun 丘濬 (1421–1495), one of the most influential figures in mid-Ming political and intellectual history. Qiu is perhaps best known for his 1487 *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補, or *Supplement to the Exposition of the Meaning of the Great Learning*. This was an extensively detailed statecraft encyclopedia dedicated to the wholesale administration of Ming China. Qiu, whose approach to statecraft was powerfully shaped by the Tumu Incident of 1449, thus wrote exhaustively on matters concerning the Mongols and the northern frontier in such chapters as "Controlling the Barbarians: The Demarcation Between Chinese Within and Barbarians Without" (*Yu yidi: neixia waiyi zhi xian* 馭夷狄 內夏外夷之限). For Qiu, Ming China's northern frontier constituted one of the greatest threats to the existence of not only the contemporary dynastic order but to the integrity of Chinese civilization itself. When he presented the *Daxue yanyi bu* to the throne, he thus included a collection of policy proposals on how to deal with such matters as reforestation denuded border regions for defense; strictly demarcating Chinese and non-Chinese territories on the basis of physical geography; and the construction of border walls.<sup>3</sup> Despite the crucial

<sup>2</sup>Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (1999), p. 687.

<sup>3</sup>Li Zhuoran (Lee Cheuk-yin) offers an overview of Qiu's frontier policy proposals in *Qiu Jun pingzhuan* 丘濬評傳 (2005), pp. 166–90.

role that he occupies in Ming China's history vis-à-vis the northern frontier, Qiu and his text are only afforded cursory mentioning in *More Than the Great Wall* (c.f. p. 285). Although many of Qiu's policy proposals were not implemented (actual "action" is very much the focus of Dardess), this does not minimize the merits in studying him and his work: the acute sense of defensive urgency felt by Ming officialdom in the post-Tumu era; how Ming border defenses were understood to be in need of reworking; and the ways in which Mongols and northern steppe peoples figured into the maneuvers of mid-Ming politics could have been elucidated by an examination of Qiu Jun's *Daxue yanyi bu*.

In a word, *More Than the Great Wall* is an invaluable contribution to the fields of Ming political, military, and borderland history. It is a compelling and intimate chronology of how the Ming succeeded, managed, and failed in northern border defense, and illustrates how "for 276 years, despite many serious lapses and horrendous breakdowns, the system worked" (p. 2). Surely, students and researchers alike stand to benefit from the carefully crafted scholarship offered in this volume.

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## China goes green: coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet

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The rapid achievement of China's recent environmental regulation in tackling frequent occurrences of heavy smog and unsightly river scenes in cities is remarkable, even under the persistent pressure of continuous economic development. Likewise, it seems that China has succeeded in keeping cases of the novel coronavirus cases very low after a strict lockdown of Wuhan, where there was a striking increase of patients and deaths at the initial stage of the pandemic, while many Western developed countries are still enduring hardship in handling the unfamiliar infectious disease. This book is timely in providing insights into how China, as one of the longest-lasting authoritarian nations in the world, can govern such ecological crises in and beyond the country and questioning whether an authoritarian