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This is the **submitted version** of the review:

Noordam, Barend. «Book Reviews». *Journal of Chinese Military History*, Vol. 9  
Núm. 2 (2020), p. 209–211. DOI 10.1163/22127453-12341357

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*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. \$129.00. ISBN: 978-1-5381-3510-5.

At over 550 pages, John Dardess' impressive swansong provides a lengthy and detailed overview of that perennial headache of Ming national security: the long, ever-unruly and perilous northern frontier. Mere stability was usually most the imperial leadership could hope for. Despite some offensive campaigns during the early empire, for most of the period under review in this book no attempt was made to expand political control into the steppe and frontier security was usually characterized by a reactive and defensive mindset. Applied policies were legion, but purely military measures occupied the prime position, making this overview a great contribution to military history.

The reader is presented with an introduction and fourteen chapters, the latter each usually corresponding to the reign of a single emperor. The very brief reigns of the Jianwen (r. 1398-1402), Hongxi (r. 1424-1425), Taichang (r. 1620), and Tianqi (r. 1620-1627) emperors are subsumed into the chapters covering the stories of their longer-reigning predecessors or successors. The narrative cuts off rather abruptly at 1627, in the middle of the conflict with the rising Manchu. As such, the final reign of the Chongzhen (r. 1627-1644) emperor is omitted. According to Dardess, after 1627 the narrative shifts towards a history of imperial institutional collapse, apparently warranting the period's exclusion. Inept imperial leadership and political factionalism, in combination with internal rebellions, conspired to bring the ambitious Manchu to power (pp. 512-513). What Dardess' narrative structure clarifies, however, is how much this latter-day Jurchen threat must have come out of leftfield in the seventeenth century for the Ming leadership. Up until then, the Liaodong frontier had been among the quietest places along the frontier. The main antagonists in the story - featured in thirteen of the fourteen chapters no less - were usually different confederations of Mongols, or ambitious polities on the Silk Road threatening to undermine the empire's control over Hami, the primary access point to China for foreign tribute and trade missions.

In the book's brief introduction, Dardess points out that there has not been a proper overview of the national security management of this threat, as seen from the Chinese perspective. A cognitive reflex might be to equate this management with the Great Wall, but the book's subtitle already reveals the author's intention to move beyond a reappraisal of this giant defensive fortification. Whereas previous research highlighted the nomadic side of the story, or focused on the process of frontier wall building, Dardess contends an overarching analytical treatment of the topic needs to rest on the "flow of events" and the stories of the individuals involved in them (p. vii). The sources are largely left to speak for themselves and a sparse analytical glue is supplied to hold the resulting narrative together, which mostly rests on an impressively erudite reading of the dynasty's *Veritable Records*, in addition to a number of private histories, military handbooks and official memorials. As such, the historical panorama of the northern frontier and its related security exigencies pass by the reader's gaze much as they must have unfolded and presented themselves to the Ming imperial leadership at the time.

Dardess does not challenge the already established periodization in three phases of frontier policy: the pro-active interventionist stance of the early emperors, the shift to a defensive reactive stance after the disastrous Tumu route of 1449, and the armed peace concluded with the Altan Khan-led (1507-1582) Mongols after 1571. The book *does* challenge many of the preconceptions specialists and non-specialists alike might have, at least it did for this reviewer. Moreover, the details extracted from the primary sources furnish a treasure trove of information. For example, the much-celebrated Great Wall seems to have been a result of intermittent flurries of constructive activities, usually in response to one crisis or another (p. 264). Surprising is also the concrete practical implementation of early universal Ming rulership.

No real hard line seems to have divided subject and foreign populations living near the border: extraterritorial frontier-dwelling communities willing to submit to Ming suzerainty could be awarded official military “Guard”-designations (p. 9). Military history aficionados will be interested in the report of a Ming official advocating the resurrection of the Yongle (r. 1404-1421) emperor’s infantry volley fire tactics, complete with counter marching formations of soldiers armed with handguns. This places the earliest known explicit formulation of these tactical innovations with gunpowder weapons back more than a century from 1560 to the early fifteenth century (pp. 183-184).

The book asks the question how the Ming empire was able to successfully guard its 1,700-mile northern frontier, but it lacks a proper conclusion with a conveniently compressed answer. Considering the author’s search for this answer (or answers) in the “master narrative of the flow of events” (p. vii), the book in its entirety should perhaps be regarded as the reply. It is therefore often up to the reader to decide which factor, or combination of factors, made frontier security successful at any given time, which seems to have varied per reign. Fortunately, the chapters function well as standalone instalments, and therefore a reader interested in late Ming frontier developments does not necessarily need to study preceding chapters in great detail. The Jiajing reign (1521-1567) gets relatively short shrift, but Dardess already covered this part of the story in two preceding monographs.

From a military perspective, surveying the evidence presented in the book might make one wonder to what extent “successful” is an appropriate assessment of Ming policies. Except for the offensive thrusts into the steppe launched by the early emperors, the later successes on the battlefield seem few and far between. Having relinquished the initiative, the Ming military garrisons could do little more than sit and wait for the next hard-to-anticipate Mongol raid, and try to intercept the enemy on the way back. The frontier was simply too long, the military intelligence too unreliable, and the enemy too mobile to rely on a purely military solution. Rather the Ming success seems to have rested on sheer perseverance and the prevention of the emergence of a unified steppe leadership by various military and non-military means. When this leadership did temporarily emerge, as it did twice in the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, the resources and political stability of the sedentary Ming usually allowed the empire to outlast its nomadic adversaries. Even so, by 1571 the Ming had finally accepted that a more lasting peace might be achieved by granting trade concessions. Furthermore, no Mongol leaders emerged who wished to revive the Yuan empire by reconquering China. No one seriously challenged Ming imperial hegemony until the relatively sudden emergence of Nurhaci (1559-1626) as leader of the consolidated Jurchen tribes.

This book provides a fantastically detailed history of almost three centuries of frontier security implemented by a sedentary empire bordering the Eurasian arid zone. The relatively sparse narrative glue provided by the author might make this a challenging read for the non-specialist, but for scholars and those already familiar with some Ming history it will prove to be an indispensable handbook.

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Wordcount: 1200