

Wrath of the Khans: Ming Border Policy, 1368-1574

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Abstract

This paper addresses the inability of the Ming Dynasty to maintain military dominance on the steppe and the subsequent shift to a defensive policy of wall building. The Hongwu Emperor failure to conquer the steppe and eliminate the descendants of Khubilai Khan, allowed for the survival of the Yuan court and of the legacy of Chinggis Khan challenged the legitimacy of the Ming state and allowed for the consolidation of Mongolian power beyond the border of the Ming Empire. The Hongwu Emperor's appointment of Mongols to control territories and lands along the northern border marked the furthest extent of the Ming Empire. Limited by economic restraints and inadequate infrastructure, the Ming were not able to exert their will upon the steppe. The Yongle Emperor retreated from specific fortified garrisons in the Ordos region because of those infrastructural and economic restraints, providing Mongolian leaders with the necessary bases to raid and invade China. Although the Ming and the Mongols were enemies, trade tied them together. Indeed, many Mongols lived within China serving the Ming government, forcing us to rethink the division between the Mongols and the Chinese and to reevaluate the role of the Great Wall as the marker of that division.

*--attempting to stop water from boiling without knowing enough to
remove the firewood*

Zeng Xian 1546

Altan Khan led his army from the steppe to the gates of Beijing in 1550 demanding the opening of border markets for the trade and barter of Mongol livestock and Chinese goods. He was rebuffed by the Ming

court and answered by razing the suburbs surrounding the capital and countryside on his way back to the steppe. Again in 1574 Altan Khan returned to Beijing. Altan Khan's Mongols were able to reach Beijing because they controlled the Ordos region to the northwest. The Mongols on the steppe to the north were the largest threat to the legitimacy of the Ming dynasty. Periodic raiding and invasions challenged the Ming state's legitimacy from proclamation in 1368 to collapse in 1644.

Ming response to the Mongolian threat to the north was a dynamic process that changed over the course of the dynasty. The process that led to Ming wall building began with Zhu Yuanzhang's failure to conquer the steppe and destroy the descendants of the house of Kubilai Khan. When he founded the Ming dynasty remnants of the Yuan dynasty fled the Mongol capital to the steppe and re-established the Yuan court at Karakorum in outer Mongolia.¹¹⁰ The survival of the Yuan court and the legacy of Khubilai Khan, himself a descendant of Chinggis Khan, challenged the legitimacy of the Ming state and allowed for a space, beyond the border of the Ming empire, for a Mongolian power to form. The inability of the Ming to maintain military power on the steppe and the consolidation of Mongolian power around strong leaders set the tone for the relationship between Chinese empire and nomadic confederations, paving the road to the construction of walled fortifications, defining an arbitrary northern border that would later become known as the Great Wall.

Wall building was by no means an inevitable outcome of border tensions, but as the Ming became more inward looking and were unable to project military power onto the steppe, like their Yuan predecessors had, supporters of defensive wall building gained the upper hand in the Ming court. By the 1540s wall building was entrenched as Ming security policy. Why were the Ming unable to maintain military dominance on the steppe and instead resorted to wall building? It was precisely the Hongwu emperor granting Mongolian tribes land and territory along the northern

¹¹⁰ René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes; a History of Central Asia. / Translated from the French by Naomi Walford* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 502.

border demarcating a northern border along two lines, an outer line for staging offensives and an inner defensive line, that set the stage for what became the Great Wall. While the defining of the northern border wasn't the direct cause of wall building, granting Mongolian territories along the northern border region and contractions of Ming fortified garrisons in the Ordos region gave Mongolian leaders the bases from which to raid and invade China. The direct threat of the Mongolian raiders and invaders fueled the court debate that ultimately decided upon wall building.

When Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed the Ming dynasty in 1368 there was no Great Wall, and the Ming's defense strategy depended on military might. However, by 1550, the Ming had been building walls for almost a century. Arthur Waldron's comprehensive study of the Great Wall claims that the entrenchment of wall building by the Ming was the product of a series of debates that lasted the length of the dynasty of how to deal with the Mongolian threat to the north. His study divides the process of entrenchment into three phases: 1368-1449, 1449-1540s, 1540s-1644. The first phase was one of Chinese military aggression and numerous campaigns conducted on the steppe. The rise of the Oiriyad Mongol leader Essen, his defeat of the Ming at Tu'mu in 1449 and the capture of emperor Wang Zhen marked the end of Ming military dominance on the steppe. For the following century Ming strategy shifted from offensive military campaigns toward wall building campaigns along the northern border. The first fortifications were built in 1474. Wall building became the focus of the Ming after 1540 and the defeat of Zeng Xian's proposition to the Ming court to recover the Ordos from the Mongols.

Julia Lovell's book *The Great Wall* takes a much broader perspective of wall building throughout China's history. Drawing on sources from as early as the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) she challenges the idea that walls were used as purely defensive measures and presents evidence that they were also used as an aggressive

form of Chinese imperialism.¹¹¹ This claim builds on Owen Lattimore's thesis that China's walls were as much a product of expansion as they were an attempt to limit that expansion: Chinese statesmen lacked confidence in their ability to maintain a rigid border that they could maintain and continue to expand beyond.¹¹² But Lattimore's thesis is founded on the premise that Chinese states were biased towards a rigid border. Lovell's argument while presenting ideas of aggressive wall building as a tactic of expansion she, at the same time, is picking apart the misconception that the Great Wall ever meant a rigid northern border.

Her book goes further to show, in agreement with many other scholars, that there was anything but a rigid border in fact China's frontier regions throughout Chinese history were places of intense commerce. Jagchid and Symons argue that war and peace between the nomadic peoples beyond China's borders and China was dependant on that commerce. When commerce was interrupted, or viewed as too much or in most cases as too little by either side, conflict broke out along the border. Their model relies heavily on A. M. Khazanov's work on the lifestyles and nature of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. Khazanov points out the dependency of nomadic peoples on a sedentary agricultural economy for many basic necessities. Following this model we begin to see Altan Khan's invasions in 1550 and 1574, and earlier raids by Mongolian and nomadic tribes, as driven by necessity for trade. When Altan Khan arrived in Beijing and did not seek to conquer, but demanded trading rights the Mongols acknowledged their dependence on the Chinese for trade. His invasion in 1550 yielded limited results, but in 1571 he changed tactics. In a letter presented to the Ming court, Altan Khan requested trading rights in language that stresses the inferiority of the author:

We, your vassals, have suffered an increase of population and a

¹¹¹ Julia Lovell, *The Great Wall : China Against the World : 1000 BC-AD 2000* (London: Atlantic, 2006).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 44.

¹¹² Owen Lattimore, "Origins of the Great Wall of China: A Frontier Concept in Theory and Practice," *Geographical Review* 27, No. 4 (Oct., 1937), 530.

shortage of clothing...and none of the borders were markets permitted to open. There was no way to satisfy our needs for clothing. Our furs and felts wear poorly in the summer heat, but it has been impossible to get even a piece of cloth....We petition that the Imperial Decree should be sent to those border officials, ordering them to establish markets, and permit the barbarians [Mongols] and the Chinese to carry out our trade once a year...Thus both Chinese and Barbarians may enjoy a peaceful life. [I, your] vassal, with my brothers, nephews, sons, and grandsons will be grateful from generation to generation, and never rebel again. If there be any transgression, let Heaven punish us.¹¹³

Altan Khan's letter in 1571 is reminiscent of his grandfather's demands and the earlier Oriyad leader Essen's demands for trade. But this letter was not a list of demands, rather it was a petition, referring to the Mongolians themselves as barbarians. Recognizing Chinese superiority in an effort to attain trading rights for very basic needs. "The insistence of the southern Mongol princes of the sixteenth century on having tribute and trade relations with China—with a threat of invasion as an alternative—shows how strongly the Mongols needed and wanted Chinese products."¹¹⁴ In 1550 brute force had not worked, but in 1574 trade relations were normalized and there were peaceful relations between the Mongols and the Ming until the fall of the Ming and the rise of the Qing.

In this light, Lattimore's argument of delimiting Chinese expansion is interesting because he focuses on the mixed nature of the frontiers, "the true difficulty was the stabilization of a frontier society adequately adapted to the

¹¹³ It is speculated that the letter was not written by Altan Khan himself, but rather his message was sent along to the court by way of Chinese middlemen who crafted the language of the letter in a way better suited to convince the Ming court. Jagchid, Sechin, and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War, and Trade Along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interaction through Two Millennia*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 50-51.

¹¹⁴ Henry Serruys, *The Mongols in China During the Hung-wu Period, 1368-1398*, (Bruges: Impr. Sainte-Catherine, 1959), 96-97.

margin of the steppe and yet auxiliary to Chinese interests.”¹¹⁵ If this were the case then it would seem that the simple answer to Ming border problems would be to grant trading rights. Evidence shows that times when border trade was regulated, instances of Mongolian invasion and hostility diminished sharply.¹¹⁶ Yet after 1500, with only a few exceptions, tribute was not accepted from Mongolians. Just looking at the evidence it would seem that the aim of the Ming was to exclude the Mongolians from Chinese society. And if Lovell’s argument of early Chinese wall building as a way to control more land not traditionally occupied by Chinese is to be believed then the goal was not only to exclude those beyond Chinese control, but to Sinicize, or make Chinese, those within the borders, or confines of Chinese walls. In this way Lattimore’s delimiting argument, which states that the sole purpose of Chinese walls was not for defense, but also as a way for the Chinese state to physically create a division between Chinese and barbarian where there was not one before, becomes more credible.

Waldron likens this idea of China’s northern border, as defined in the Ming, to Augustus choosing the eastern border of Europe to be on the Rhine and the question in modern France, between world wars, over the future of the Rhineland.¹¹⁷ The question of the northern border, like to the French and the Romans, was one of security, and the geographic location in question is the Ordos region in northwestern China.¹¹⁸ Cut off from the steppe by a bend in the Yellow river the Ordos is a semi-arid region with only a few places that could sustain agricultural production through intensive irrigation. The Ordos region was the center of Ming strategic debates and the dynasty repeatedly considered occupying

¹¹⁵ Lattimore “Origins of the Great Wall of China,” 529-549.

¹¹⁶ Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China : from History to Myth* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 111.

¹¹⁷ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 55.

¹¹⁸ Arthur Waldron quotes Ku Tsu-yv (1631-1692) treatise on geography explaining the importance of the Ordos. “The Ordos lies just to the north of the modern province of Shensi, and thus commands the valley of the Wei river to the south, the location of early Chinese capitals such as Ch’ang-an; while the later imperial city of Peking lies not far to the east it is also easily accessible to horsemen dwelling there. Unless the territory is held the capitals become vulnerable.” in Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 56

the region, but ultimately never did.

The Ordos has a long history of Chinese occupation and interaction. Owen Lattimore claims that shortly after the founding of the Qin dynasty, “the entire Ordos plateau steppe was colonized by 30,000 Chinese families and the new frontier sector linked by road with the Ch’in capital, in the Wei Basin.”¹¹⁹ Lovell points out its strategic importance because of its frontier position between two types of society, agriculturalist and nomad, and because it contained both pastoral and farming land. “It thus offered an economic base for domination of the steppe by either nomads or Chinese.”¹²⁰ For the Ming, the Ordos was no exception, and the first emperor, Hongwu, knew that the key to border security and further conquest of the steppe was control of the Ordos. Yet military campaigns were only successful in the short term. Wolfgang Franke notes “the successes of the victorious expeditions into Mongolia were not long lasting, at the most for a few decades, so that defensive measures against the Mongols constituted the determining factor for the external politics of the whole Ming period.”¹²¹ Waldron notes that “this defensive approach crystallized in the policy of the mid-Ming: namely the consolidation of the so-called ‘nine-borders’.”¹²² The ‘nine-borders’ refer to the key defense points—Ming garrisons and fortifications—along the northern border. Unable to occupy and control the Ordos permanently Zhu Yuanzhang maintained fortified garrisons from which Chinese power could be projected. Military reform under Yongle limited the extent of these garrisons and the Ming lost control of the Ordos.

¹¹⁹ While this claim to the whole of the Ordos being occupied by Chinese may be an exaggeration, he goes on to say that “the result [of colonization] was a failure. Within a century the barbarians, by then known politically as the Hsiungnu, had retaken the entire Ordos.” In the same article he says there were similar colonization attempts in the Han dynasty “Here 100,000 colonists were settled and border fortifications put in hand”, but to no avail and that attempt too failed. It continued to be a problem in the Ming and is one of the main reasons historians say the Ming abandoned the Ordos region in the first place. Lattimore, “Origins of the Great Wall of China,” 543.

¹²⁰ Lovell, *The Great Wall*, 34.

¹²¹ Wolfgang Franke, *Yunglo’s Mongolei-Feldzüge* (Peking:Deutschland Institute, 1945), 1-2.

¹²²Arthur Waldron, “The Recovery of the Ordos a Ming Strategic Debate,” Ph.D Dissertation, Harvard University, 1981, 97.

Many scholars point to the Ming's inability to hold the Ordos as the main cause of wall building in Ming China. Waldron agrees with this view, but argues that it was more than geography that determined defense policy in the Ming, "to a very large degree...the origins of the 'Great Wall of China' of the Ming are found...in politics." Influenced by pressures from the steppe and more directly by control over the Ordos region Ming state strategy shifted back and forth from offensive to defensive, from military campaigns deep into the steppe, led by courageous emperors at the head of large armies; to extensive static fortifications along an arbitrary northern border. The Ming began with an open frontier, but almost three hundred years later at the end of the dynasty, the Ming had the most carefully closed border in pre-modern Chinese history.¹²³

The complex process that led to the entrenchment of wall building in Ming defense strategy began in 1368: the failure of Zhu Yuanzhang to destroy the house of Kubilai Khan and the legacy of the Yuan dynasty. When Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed the founding of the Ming dynasty in 1368 "both the destruction of the Yuan and the consolidation of the northern frontier were tasks that remained as yet unaccomplished."¹²⁴ The continued existence of the Yuan dynasty to the north was a challenge to the newly founded Ming dynasty's legitimacy. Edward Dreyer's chapter in the Cambridge History of China also points out that "against the Mongols the Ming were forced by defeat to accept a military stalemate and the need for a permanent frontier garrison system."¹²⁵ This garrison system was modified during the Yongle reign (1402-1424) and later became the rough line of the Great Wall. Dreyer further states that even with large-scale campaigns in 1387, there was no evidence to support the claim of a renewal of Ming desire to gain permanent control

¹²³ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 55.

¹²⁴ Waldron, "The Recovery of the Ordos a Ming Strategic Debate," 89-90.

¹²⁵ Edward L. Dreyer, "Military Origins of Ming China," *The Cambridge History of China, Cambridge Histories Online*. 1st ed. Vol. 7. Cambridge: 1988. 58-106. Web. 21 November 2013.

over Outer Mongolia. While the Ming may have had no plans for the control of Outer Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and lands directly bordering China proper were definitely debated over, even as late as the 1540s.¹²⁶

Zhu's military expedition to conquer and destroy the remnants of the Yuan dynasty in 1372 ultimately failed, but his campaigns set a precedent for how his successors would interact with the Mongol threat to the north. Ming military tactics at this time were similar to that of the Yuan dynasty, and the Hongwu Emperor was able to maintain a stable border region by projecting his power onto the steppe from strategically placed garrisons along the border.¹²⁷ Arthur Waldron notes that by the end of Zhu's reign (1368-1399) "an arc of Ming fortresses" stretched across the northern border from the northeast to the northwest. The most important of these was Dongsheng in the Ordos region between Gansu to the west and Liaodong to the east.¹²⁸ After Zhu's death "the northern defense system was neglected and became chaotic."¹²⁹ When the Yongle emperor usurped the throne in 1402 he conducted military campaigns and maintained an aggressive presence on the steppe, but he did not maintain the northern garrisons established by Zhu Yuanzhang. Yongle's military reform of 1403 contracted the ring of outer fortifications put in place during the Hongwu¹³⁰ leading to the loss of the Ordos

¹²⁶ Quoted in Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China* pg. 127 Tseng Hsien's memorandum to the Ming court suggesting military action be taken to take the Ordos, 'Their dens and nests are now firmly established. To drive them out will be difficult. But I fear the consequences [of their presence in the River loop] will daily grow more serious. Therefore, there is no better policy for dealing with them than the recovery of the Ordos area. Not to approve this plan, but rather out of fear choose the inferior policy of taking defensive measures only, may be compared to attempting to stop water from boiling without knowing enough to remove the firewood; it will not stop catastrophes along the border.'

¹²⁷ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 57.

¹²⁸ Waldron, "The Recovery of the Ordos a Ming Strategic Debate," 93.

¹²⁹ Waldron, "The Recovery of the Ordos a Ming Strategic Debate," 94.

¹³⁰ For more on Yongle's campaigns see the Cambridge history of China vol. 7 ch. 4, page 221.

region to the Mongols.¹³¹

The legacy of Hongwu could be stated as a balance between alliances with steppe Mongolians that became auxiliary to the Ming state through appointment and tributary relationships and aggressive military campaigning to maintain Ming dominance on the steppe. The Yongle emperor conducted five major military campaigns during his reign maintaining the offensive militaristic stance of the Hongwu, but early in his reign Yongle reduced the guard size drastically at the fort garrison at Dongsheng. Reducing the garrison at Dongsheng, the Ming foothold in the Ordos, Yongle made his military campaigns more costly and less effective, weakening the border to future attacks. Without control over the Ordos questions of defense became the central debate in the Ming court,¹³² and the Ming were unable to maintain an offensive position on the steppe. With a lack of forward positions, defending attacks from the steppe became more important and viable than launching offenses.

Zhu was aware of “the problems that an unchastened Mongol power in the north could pose, and sought a decisive solution.”¹³³ Franke Wolfgang stated the goal of Chinese policy during this period as, “the annihilation of Mongol Military power became the principal goal of chinese policy.”¹³⁴ The aggressive military tactics employed by Hongwu in controlling the steppe reflect that attitude, and could have been successfully continued had subsequent emperors maintained an aggressive military position on the borders of the steppe. But due to economic limitations and

¹³¹ In a footnote on page 216 Henry Serruys asks the question, “Were there Mongols in the Ordos in those days [14th century]?” and he answers his question saying there were “small Chinese populations in specific parts of the Ordos, namely the borders around the desert region, near Tung-sheng and along the line of the present day Great Wall from Yü-lin to Hua-ma-ch’ih on to Ning-hsia and along the Yellow river. The rest of the area no doubt had Mongols.” Henry Serruys, *The Mongols in China During the Hung-wu Period, 1368-1398*, (Bruges: Impr. Sainte-Catherine, 1959).

¹³² See Arthur Waldron’s book *The Great Wall of China* chapters 6-8 for a detailed account of the wall building debate at different periods during the Ming dynasty.

¹³³ Waldron, “The Recovery of the Ordos a Ming Strategic Debate” 97.

¹³⁴ Ibid; Waldron quotes direct from Wolfgang Franke’s work, “Yunglo’s Mongolei-Feldzuge” pg. 2.

the difficulty of maintaining isolated garrisons far away from Chinese centers of production, military outposts were abandoned.

Yet, even as Hongwu, and later Yongle, were waging war against the Mongols there is documented evidence of Mongols living within China proper, migrating into China, and working in the service of the Ming government.¹³⁵ Henry Serruys' study of Mongols residing in China during the Hongwu period challenges the preconceived notion that, with the fall of the Yuan, all Mongols simply returned to the lands from which they came or were murdered by the Chinese population. "By no means did all Mongols go back to Mongolia, and very few were killed".¹³⁶ His study goes on to document the locations of Mongolian populations in China proper and he lists, extensively, the commanderies and chiliarchies¹³⁷ that the Ming bestowed on the Mongols in the early years of the empire. These regions at the border under Mongol control seemed a logical result of Zhu Yuanzhang's inability to successfully conquer and control the steppe. It also challenges the ideas that Lattimore put forth about the rigidity of a border region and a distinct separation between Chinese and non-Chinese. In times of peace and prosperity these Mongolian territories were a great resource to the Ming, providing horse flesh and soldiers, but when the Ming were unable to maintain dominance in the region and the tribute system was no longer as lucrative for the Mongols, Mongolian leaders—with promises of plunder and wealth—found support in these areas.

With a loose frontier region, what Waldron terms as the steppe transition zone, the presence of a string of Ming military garrisons created a line between the steppe and Ming China.¹³⁸ Serruys says, "The organization of these Mongol

¹³⁵ The majority of Mongols in China during this period were in the service of the Ming state, mostly as soldiers. Henry Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period*, 20.

¹³⁶ Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period*, 9.

¹³⁷ "The territories here called Mongol Commanderies and Chiliarchies formed a stretch of Mongol areas along the northwestern and northern borders between the Chinese and Mongol populations." Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period*, 216.

¹³⁸ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 80.

commanderies and chiliarchies on the borders...represented a device employed by the Ming government to expand their control over tribes and territories that so far had remained outside control of the Ming empire.”¹³⁹ He notes that while these territories were never incorporated into the Ming empire they, nevertheless, were instrumental in the migration of Mongols into China. More than likely, they were also highly instrumental as staging grounds for Mongolian raids and invasions of China and vice versa. The autonomy and trust¹⁴⁰ afforded the Mongols in this steppe transition zone was a fatal error that allowed for the success of Essen’s invasion in 1449 and facilitated the invasions of Dayan Khan and Altan Khan in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The Ming government evidently figured that the advantage from a great influx of newly surrendered Mongols and Mongolian troops would be far larger than the harm done by possible misunderstandings, friction between Mongols and Chinese, or even so-called “rebellions”.¹⁴¹ Because these territories were given to Mongols the border between China and the steppe was represented by where Ming military control ended and Mongol control began. Until 1449 this was not an issue, the Ming still exerted influence in the region based on the military legacy of the Hongwu and Yongle, but Essen’s invasion severely destabilized that structure.

Even though by the mid and late Ming period mounting an offensive onto the steppe was not a realistic option the debate still raged over the recovery of the Ordos region. Proponents of a Ming offensive argued it as the only way to solve the problem of the Mongolian threat definitively. But the cost of an offensive was prohibitive and supporters for building defensive fortifications more often than not won. In fact according to Arthur Waldron the most important Ordos debate was in

¹³⁹ Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period, 1368-1398*, 216.

¹⁴⁰ “The fact that the Mongols were allowed to settle in the northern provinces, even on the very borders, most clearly implies that the Chinese were not very much afraid of subversive elements among them.” Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hung-wu Period*, 20

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 246

the late 1540s. Zeng Xian, the commander of the Shensi three borders defense, proposed a massive offensive to drive the nomads from the Ordos once and for all. “He suggested two approaches: first, the renewal of fortifications, and second, a series of campaigns to establish a Ming presence in the Yellow river loop. He made these proposals for the first time in two memorials submitted on 8 January 1547.”¹⁴² Zeng’s plan consisted of 8 points of action: it would be an attack by 300,000 or more men, combining land and water operations—taking advantage of Chinese military strengths including their knowledge of firearms. The campaign would cost more than 2,000,000 *tan* (133,000 tons) of grain, and about 3,000 *liang* (3,900 ounces) of silver. When it had been completed, Tseng advocated that an extensive program of fortification should be undertaken. His proposal concluded on a positive note, “If commanders were carefully chosen; if fodder and provisions were sufficient; and if discipline were strictly enforced; then success would be possible.”¹⁴³

The proposal was eventually defeated, like others before it, on the grounds that it was too expensive, Waldron points out a vital flaw in Zeng’s proposal, a gross underestimation of the comprehensive cost of the proposed offensive into the Ordos. Waldron proposes that the cost would be almost 4 times the amount of silver Zeng estimates in his memorial.¹⁴⁴ Criticisms of the proposal extended beyond mere monetary issues however, Weng Wanda, one of the most persuasive advocates for peace with the Mongols through economic means, criticized the feasibility and shortsightedness of Zeng’s proposal. Weng argued that taking the Ordos would not be easy, Ming attack always favored the Mongols, and that Chinese nature was more suited to wall building and defensive measures.

The defeat of Zeng’s proposal marked the end of any realistic consideration of recovering the Ordos by the Ming court. For the rest of the dynasty wall building was the answer to the nomad problem. This defensive approach crystallized in the

¹⁴² Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 127.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

¹⁴⁴ Waldron has a great table on page 133 that details Zeng’s cost estimate, but Waldron’s own estimate is found on the following page; Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 134.

policy of the mid-Ming: namely the consolidation of the so-called “nine-borders”. The nine-borders were a series of nine regions that bordered the steppe. They were under the jurisdiction of different magistrates and generals at different times, but often times they were consolidated under a few generals. In this way the borders of the empire were managed and eventually walled off.¹⁴⁵

The Great Wall of China is the legacy of the Ming dynasty, but its founding emperors would have been shocked by the changes along the northern frontier. Hongwu and Yongle’s military strategy—offensive military campaigns into the steppe—was similar to the Yuan strategy of controlling the steppes. The Yuan were able to control the steppe by bringing “the wealth of China to bear on the steppe.”¹⁴⁶ In the last years of Kubilai Khan’s reign he engaged in a war with a confederation of Mongols unhappy with his policies. This war, and the success of the Yuan dynasty in defeating and controlling the Mongols showed that projecting Chinese power onto the steppe was possible, it just took incredible efforts to shift China proper’s resources to the steppe.¹⁴⁷ Yet Hongwu was unable to establish control over the steppe. At best, his campaigns delayed the rise of a nomadic power to challenge the Ming. From the first chiliarchy founded on August 1, 1370 in the area of the southern Ordos, Hongwu was creating a border to be policed by the Ming and the Mongols through trade agreements. The Ming needed horses and men and those Mongol tribes that surrendered to the Ming enjoyed the goods they received in return for their men and horses. Even without drawing a clear border, establishing tributary territories began the process of demarcating China’s northern border.

The walls the Ming eventually built were only as effective as the men guarding them, and they continued to need the horses from the Mongols to maintain defense. This was one of the main reasons that as Mongol tribes surrendered to the Ming, their forces were incorporated into the Ming military.

¹⁴⁵ Waldron, “The recovery of the Ordos a Ming strategic debate,” 97.

¹⁴⁶ Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 70.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

Mongol commanderies and chiliarchies were an attempt to incorporate a Mongolian population into the Ming state in order to tap Mongolian cavalry as a resource.¹⁴⁸ Serruys holds that “the avowed objective of the Ming emperors and government was to make Chinese of these foreigners.”¹⁴⁹ Even if this were the case and the goal was to Sinicize the Mongols along the border a more immediate concern was maintaining border integrity and continuing to expand China’s borders further onto the steppe. For the Chinese the importance of trade from the steppe into China relied on horses for military purposes, and the Mongols depended on the necessary foodstuffs and other goods they received in exchange for good horses.

Serruys presents this relationship in his extensive study on the presence of Mongols in China during the Hongwu reign, he shows the important and at some times paradoxical nature of this relationship. In 1544 a Ming court official, Yang Zongqi, defended Mongolian troops in court, saying that “Mongol troops of Chen-ting and Pao-ting were China’s staunchest soldiers, who for two hundred years had proved themselves very useful.” This was also occurring at the same time that that the Jinong Gūn-biligmergen of the Ordos and his younger brother Altan Khan had just invaded Shansi province.¹⁵⁰ This defense of Mongolians at a time when the Mongolians were invading China shows the dual role they held in the Chinese empire, simultaneously the enemy and the ally.

When Altan Khan negotiated for trade in the 1570s sacrificing his dignity to the Ming tributary system he was continuing a legacy dating back to the founding of the Ming and Mongolian leaders surrendering to the Zhu Yuanzhang and the

¹⁴⁸ Kenneth Chase acknowledges the inherent contradiction in Ming China’s reliance on Mongolian horses to defend from Mongolian raids. He addresses the importance of horses to the Ming military structure and outlines the four mechanisms the Ming used to acquire horses: the tea horse trade between the Ming and Tibet, the government breeding program, the private breeding program, and the horse border markets. The private breeding program supplied most of the Ming’s horses, but the most effective and sought after horses came from the Mongols. Kenneth Warren Chase. *Firearms: a Global History to 1700* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40.

¹⁴⁹ Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hongwu Reign*, 20.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

Ming. Many Mongols migrated into China proper and assimilated into Chinese society, “disappearing” into China’s large population. While Mongols beyond the borders of China, to the north, still maintained a cultural otherness, as the Ming exercised less and less control on the steppe, and emperors were less and less exposed to the world beyond the imperial palaces, the fear and hatred of the unknown had great influence on court opinion and trade with Mongols was often rejected. This vast misunderstanding of the Mongols of the steppe is at the root of Ming foreign policy and wall building.

From Serruys’ study it can be seen that while Mongols depended on the Ming for goods, the Ming was also dependent on the Mongols for border security. Earlier dynasties had addressed the security issue to the north with largely ineffective wall building, but the Yuan found the solution to controlling the steppe, although it was incredibly expensive, prohibitively so for the Ming. Even as the Ming began building walled fortifications supposedly separating, protecting, themselves from the steppe and the threat of the Mongols, invasions still ravaged the Chinese countryside and affected policy decisions in the Ming court.

In 1644 the Manchus overran the Ming dynasty and over the next 60 years were able to conquer and control the steppe that the Ming failed to. Peter Purdue’s book *China Marches West* shows that Manchu conquest was dependent on the effective infrastructure developed to deliver armies and supplies from one part of the empire to another. This was precisely where the Ming failed, unable to maintain garrisons on the steppe because they were too difficult to supply. Because the Qing embraced their Jurchen roots they also established a multi-ethnic empire that was able to draw effectively across cultures to solve the problems that faced the empire. This in large part was reflected in the famed Qing banner system that incorporated Mongolians, Chinese and Manchu into a cohesive military force.

The Ming also incorporated Mongols into their armies, but the lack of infrastructure needed to maintain a presence in the Ordos and on the steppe kept

many Mongols on the other side of a loose border. As wall building reached a frenzy in the mid-1500s Mongolians on the steppe began to see themselves physically on the outside and further alienated from the Ming state and Chinese culture. They maintained diplomatic relations and Altan Khan begged for the right to give tribute, but the Ming sought to maintain the difference between the Mongol and the Chinese. But this was futile, Serruys' study sheds light on the relations between the Ming state and the Mongolian presence to the north and within China proper. And in this light arguments that the Great Wall was a "rigid border" that separated the civilized Chinese from the barbarian begin to crack. The frontier region of China was a multi-ethnic and diverse place, and even the interior was representative of China's absorption and assimilation of other peoples. Serruys goes on to say "In fact all the Mongols, Uighurs, Persians, and others who remained in China at the time of the change of dynasty or entered China in later years, have since disappeared. This means that in the course of time they have become Chinese."¹⁵¹

The Qing succeeded where the Ming failed because of successful infrastructure, but how can one say that the Ming, lasting almost three centuries, truly failed? Frederick Mote says it is ironic that "the greatest failure of Ming statesmanship [the static border defense policy]" resulted in "the Great Wall of China...the very symbol [today] of Chinese historical greatness." Yet it is still hard to call wall building a failure in statesmanship. The major campaigns of the first two emperors were effective in disrupting nomadic society, but did little more than delay the rise of a Mongolian leader to unite the steppe for a later Ming emperor to contend with. The economic state of the Ming empire, the inability to fund major expeditions into the Ordos, led to Ming wall building, but regardless of the presence of walls the fact remains that the Ming were only able to maintain peace through trade, the military might of the Ming ended with Zhu Yuanzhang's failed campaigns onto the steppe, and the establishment of Mongolian chieftaincies and commanderies. It was not until the Qing were able to defeat the Zunghars in the far

¹⁵¹ Serruys, *The Mongols in China during the Hongwu Reign*, 20-21

west, conquering the steppe and bringing it definitively under the control of the Chinese state system that the Mongolian threat to the north ceased to be a threat. In that regard the Ming state knew no such success and was plagued with raids and invasions until a tenuous peace was established through trade in 1574.