Much has been written about China’s rise, yet from a historical perspective, China’s rise is nothing new. Historian Wang Gungwu points out three past instances: the Qin–Han unification, the Sui–Tang reunification, and the Ming–Qing dynasties. The present, fourth rise of China ‘needs to be seen in a longer perspective’. What can we learn from China’s rich historical experience? The polity that we now know as China was the most powerful state and a regional hegemon during certain periods of East Asian history. How did China behave in the region when it had preponderant power? Did China expand when strong? And how did China manage its hegemony to stay on top? As the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) is the only period from the fall of the Tang dynasty in 907 until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912 when a native or non-alien Chinese dynasty dominated East Asia, this feature alone makes the Ming dynasty a good vehicle for examining Chinese strategic behaviour. By examining a past regional hegemon, this article offers a first-cut at the longer historical perspective on the rise of China.

International relations (IR) theory in the past two decades tends to focus on states’ resistance to a concentration of power. Scholars debate over whether or not balances of power recurrently form or whether or not a balancing coalition against the United States, the current unipolar leader, will emerge. This focus on power balancing, albeit important, overlooks a
crucial aspect of international politics: domination. The paramount state can take steps to manage hegemony and preserve dominance in the system. A skilful hegemon, or a state looking to dominate, can find ways of accumulating power and maneuvering to prevent the formation of a balancing alliance.\(^3\) IR theory should seek not only to analyse a state’s decision to resist and balance power, but also to explore how a state becomes dominant and maintains hegemony. This article explores how a state manages hegemony in its region of the world.

China during the early Ming dynasty enjoyed a preponderance of military and economic resources in East Asia. The country’s overwhelming power allowed it to pursue continental and maritime expansions in the early 15th century and to set up tributary ‘rules of the game’ that governed interactions among political units. As the regional hegemon, Ming China wielded substantial influence over governance of the system. Vastly superior material resources enabled it to dictate the norms and rules of tributary relations that influenced how political units interacted. International politics was thus conducted on Chinese terms. This asymmetric power structure had profound impact on the alignment decisions of second-tier actors, leading most of them to accept the tributary arrangement.

The next section discusses the theoretical expectations of hegemonic behaviour. I argue that the paramount state manages its hegemony by expanding political interests abroad and establishing rules of the game for the system. Due to space constraints, the article will be limited to early Ming China, a period when it was the undisputed regional hegemon. At the height of its power, the Ming dynasty expanded on three fronts: those of attacking the Mongols, annexing Vietnam, and launching seven maritime expeditions. To dictate the boundaries of appropriate behaviour, Ming China set up tributary ‘rules of the game’ for lesser states to follow. These rules created a political environment that disproportionately served Chinese interests. The article ends with a discussion of the implications of my analysis for IR theory.

**Managing Hegemony**

The term ‘hegemony’ is used in different and confusing ways. Some pass value judgements on hegemony; others use it interchangeably with ‘empire’. In this article, I adopt a narrow definition of ‘hegemony’ and distinguish it

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3 On how a state can overcome balancing and become dominant, see Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
from ‘empire’. Hegemony rests on material power. For a state to be a
ehegemon, it must possess a preponderance of military force compared to
that of other political actors in the system. John Mearsheimer defines a
hegemon as the great power that dominates the system and enjoys so
much military supremacy that ‘no other state has the military wherewithal
to put up a serious fight against it’.4 There are no great powers in the system
other than the hegemon. In addition to military superiority, hegemony is
also about possessing a preponderance of economic resources, such as raw
materials, capital, market access, and productive capacity.5 These economic
resources are necessary to support the hegemon’s military capabilities. The
hegemon’s preponderant power, however, does not mean that it will always
achieve its desired outcome, although it certainly creates unprecedented
opportunities to do so.6 The emphasis on material capabilities does not
rule out the social dimension of hegemony, such as authority, legitimacy,
status, or prestige. These social aspects do not operate in a vacuum; they are
usually derivative of the power relations underlying interactions among pol-
itical units. Material resources are the necessary condition for a hegemon to
exercise authority, enjoy prestige, or generate legitimacy. Compared to
non-material factors, material power has more causal weight in producing
the desired outcome.

Hegemony should be distinguished from empire. Hegemony is about pos-
sessing an overwhelming power advantage over others. A hegemon’s mili-
tary power and wealth must be ‘stronger than all second-ranked powers
acting as members of a counterbalancing coalition’.7 An empire, on the
other hand, is about relationships of political control. It is the rule exercised
by one political actor over subordinate ones to regulate their external and
internal behaviours.8 A state can have an empire without itself being a
hegemon. For instance, Britain had an overseas empire in the 19th century,
but its land power and share of world gross domestic product was far from
hegemonic. The United Kingdom built a large formal empire, covering
nearly a quarter of the world’s land surface, while indirectly ruling parts
of Asia and Africa through local potentates. Yet, it was ‘never truly hege-
monic’.9 In contrast, the United States was a regional hegemon in the
Western Hemisphere, but its direct imperial reach was far more limited,
covering only 14 dependencies throughout the world, about one-half of

4 John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W. W. Norton,
5 Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political
6 Christopher Layne, ‘The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United
9 Niall Ferguson, ‘Empire or Hegemony’, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 82, No. 5 (2003), p. 156.
1% of the world land surface. A hegemon can have a small formal empire or none at all, but it can still exert significant political influence within the system. Hegemonies entail more material capabilities than do empires.

A hegemon enjoys numerous security benefits. In an anarchic system with no central authority to enforce order, states desiring to protect themselves will try to accumulate as much power as possible relative to others. In general, powerful states have the best chance of defending themselves and getting their way within the system. In international politics, prudence dictates a state not trust its security in the goodwill of others, but rely instead on its own military capabilities. The intentions of other states are difficult to fathom, and even if known may change in the future. Power thus becomes essential for survival-seeking states operating under anarchy. For great powers, the pursuit of power is a continuous process, with becoming a regional hegemon the preferred outcome. The more power a state has, the more secure it will be. The overwhelming military capabilities of the paramount state can be used to attack a security threat or to defend against an attack. More often than not, weaker states defer to the wishes of the hegemon, knowing that their odds of prevailing in a fight are too small. In most instances, preponderant power enables the hegemon to get what it wants without having to fight for it.

As power preponderance brings a high level of security, a hegemon will work towards maintaining the existing balance of power that favours its dominance. Managing hegemony is a dynamic process that requires constant attention to the distribution of power between the hegemon and potential rivals. A hegemon will strive to maintain a favourable power advantage and defeat rivals that threaten its pre-eminence. To maintain its lead, the hegemon will try to excel in power-generating capabilities such as technological innovation and military breakthroughs, control the political environment in its region by establishing a sphere of influence, and manoeuvre to forestall a counterbalancing coalition from taking shape. The hegemon’s preponderant capabilities give rise to a large repertoire of external interests which require projection of power to protect. Hegemons will hence not stop at borders, and will expand political interests abroad. The acquisition of external interests helps the hegemon to control the international political environment that better prepares it to deal with the various

12 Ibid.
contingencies that may arise. The British Empire, for example, had expansive colonial interests in India, North America, and Africa, and maintained a global naval presence to protect those interests. The United States, the current hegemon, also has overseas interests in many parts of the world. It has stationed troops in Europe and Asia, and constructed an extensive network of alliances throughout the world.

Expansion, however, does not necessarily mean acquisition of territory. Although technological advances today have reduced the utility of territory in generating power, and the rise of nationalism has made conquest difficult, control of territory, especially strategic chokepoints, remains an important objective of states. In addition to territorial control, expansionist activities may include establishing a sphere of influence, dictating the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, grabbing resources beyond the frontiers, and using military means to advance security interests or resolve disputes. The case of American hegemony is illustrative. The United States did not control the territory of Caribbean states, yet between 1898 and 1934 it intervened on more than 30 occasions to dictate their internal affairs. President Theodore Roosevelt, following the Monroe Doctrine, declared that the United States might exercise ‘international police power’ over the domestic and foreign affairs of its southern neighbours. As David Lake points out, these activities and a subsequent series of US military interventions in Central America in the mid-1980s, in Panama in 1989, and in Haiti in 1994, together with opposition to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, economic sanctions on Cuba, and support of the coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, are evidence that these southern neighbours are not at liberty to defy the authority of the United States without penalty.

Hypothesis 1: A hegemon will expand political interests abroad.

Second, a hegemon wishing to stay at the top of the international pecking order can create ‘rules of the game’ conducive to its political, economic, and ideological interests. These rules help the pre-eminence state to consolidate hegemony and prolong dominance. A hegemon has a vested interest in the governance of the international system, and will take steps to shape and control the processes of interaction among political units in a way that benefits the dominant power. Hegemonic power is agenda-setting power, allowing the dominant state to shape the diplomatic environment and limit lesser states’ scope of choice. Of all the states in the system, the hegemon is profusely equipped with the material wherewithal to shape their political environment. Such power can help create, mould and sustain

rules that are accepted by lesser states. Through its overwhelming dominance, the hegemon sets up political and economic institutions that govern the rules of interaction among political units, as well as how they trade with one another, thus disproportionately serving its self-interests. As the hegemon maintains security and economic order in the system, this provision of public goods gives lesser states an interest in following its lead. In the absence of viable alternatives to the hegemon’s preferred order, lesser states accept these rules of the game centred on the hegemon.

Intent on maintaining its preeminent position, the hegemon will take steps to reduce any incentives for lesser states to resist its dominance. To minimize resistance, the hegemon promotes an ideology that justifies its dominance in the eyes of lesser states. This ideology usually takes the form of an argument wherein the hegemon’s continued dominance and the international order it has created will benefit all states within the system by providing security, stability, and prosperity. The United States, for instance, promotes an ideology of free trade, democracy, and liberty. Official US policy statements are often couched in the language of protecting freedom and justice, spreading democratic values, and promoting free trade as the foundation of the US national security strategy. US officials and commentators argue that American leadership helps ensure peace and stability around the world. As Samuel Huntington puts it, ‘A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder.’

Robert Gilpin notes that the rules of the system govern, or at least influence, the diplomatic, economic, and military interactions among political units, and may cover the recognition of spheres of influence, the exchange of ambassadors, the conduct of commerce, and international law. Creating rules of the system is an important part of the hegemon’s statecraft, as they influence the behaviour of other states. Compliance with these rules is largely a function of power asymmetry. Preponderance of material resources gives the hegemon a range of tools with which to reward or punish lesser states. When lesser states share common values and mutual

interests with the hegemon, compliance will be even stronger. Nevertheless, even in cases where rules and norms are built on consensual acceptance, the power and interests of the hegemon remains the principal beneficiary of those rules and norms. As Giplin argues, ‘Although the rights and rules governing interstate behaviour are to varying degrees based on consensus and mutual interest, the primary foundation of rights and rules is in the power and interests of the dominant groups or states in a social system.’

Hypothesis 2: A hegemon will create and maintain ‘rules of the game’ for the system.

To test these theories it is important to select a period in which a state enjoys a clear preponderance of power. In the next section, I test the two hypotheses—that the hegemon will expand political interests abroad; and that it will establish ‘rules of the game’—in the case of early Ming China. Although Chinese history offers other examples of regional hegemony, for instance, the Han dynasty and the Tang dynasty, there are three reasons, in addition to space constraints, for selecting the Ming dynasty. First, one defining feature of the Ming dynasty is that it is the last indigenous Chinese dynasty, as opposed to one ruled by an alien conqueror. Ming China’s regional hegemony hence makes the period a good example for examining Chinese strategic behaviour at a time when the country enjoyed a preponderance of power. Second, two of the most popular historical analogies today about China’s rise—the defensive Great Wall and Zheng He’s maritime expeditions—originate in the Ming dynasty. Examining this period can help us either to confirm or disprove these popular analogies. Third, as existing IR literature tends to focus on European or American hegemonies, studying an Asian hegemon can help enrich the empirical scope of the field.

Ming China’s Continental and Maritime Expansion

China during the Ming dynasty was far more powerful than any of its neighbours. John K. Fairbank has described Ming China as ‘the world’s largest and most diversified state’. A census in 1393 recorded a population of 60,545,812, dwarfing Portugal’s one million and England’s five million

during the same period. For a good part of the region’s history, Ming China was the regional hegemon in East Asia. The country had sizeable well-trained troops, a record number of cavalry horses, and unprecedented levels of grain production in military colonies. At the height of its power in the early 15th century, the Ming had 1.5 to 2.5 million soldiers throughout the country. Provisions of food and other materials for military campaigns were also more plentiful than at any other period. Numbers of the quality horses crucial to cavalry warfare in the Mongolian steppe rose steadily from 37,993 in 1403 to 1,585,311 in 1423, a remarkable 40-fold increase. Grain production in frontier military colonies also climbed to the highest level ever of 23,450,799 piculs during the reign of Emperor Yongle (r. 1403–1425). Ming China was indeed the strongest, wealthiest, and most populous country on earth at that time.

Geopolitical necessities induced the Ming court to choose a security policy that focused on its northern frontiers with the Mongols, a strategy that required stable relations along the southern and coastal regions. The previous Mongol Yuan dynasty faced no threat from the north and ‘could thus afford to threaten southern rulers and to extend their power as far south as was feasible’. The early Ming could ill-afford an expansionist policy toward its southern neighbours. In this sense, its strategic environment was similar to that of the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties in being threatened by the nomadic peoples in the north. Given the strategic environment, there was good reason for Ming founding Emperor Hongwu to list 15 countries ‘not to be invaded’ and to restore tributary relationships with them. The strategic rationale was to maintain peaceful borders in the southern and coastal frontiers to enable more allocation of resources to the north. This policy of peace, however, was in preparation for one of war against the Mongols.

26 Edward L. Farmer, Early Ming Government: The Evolution of Dual Capitals (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 171. Farmer suggests that ‘because horses were essential to all military operations on China’s northern border, they provide an important index of Ming strength’ (p. 66).
30 The 15 countries are Korea, Japan, Greater and Lesser Ryukyu islands, Vietnam, Champa, Cambodia, Samudra-Pasai (northern Sumatra), Java, Pahang, Srivijaya (central and southern Sumatra), Siam, Brunei, West Oceans, Pahiuah (West Java). Wang Gungwu, ‘Ming Foreign Relations: Southeast Asia’, p. 312.
To exploit its unsurpassed power, the Ming court worked to reinforce and consolidate its dominant position within the system. As the regional hegemon, Ming China adopted ‘a vigorous policy of expansion’. The country’s preponderant power allowed it to expand simultaneously both on the Asian continent and across the ocean. The vast scale of Ming China’s continental and maritime expansion was testament to the overwhelming power it possessed. Across the Asian steppe in the north, the Ming dynasty launched several rounds of large-scale military attacks against the Mongols. In the south it attacked Vietnam and annexed it as a Chinese province. Across the ocean, Ming China dispatched seven spectacular voyages to project Chinese power and spread the tribute system as far as the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa.

Divide and Conquer: Mongolian Campaigns

Since the founding of the Ming dynasty, Chinese leaders had harboured hopes of incorporating Mongol territory into the Ming Empire as they believed this would solve the security problems on the northern frontiers that had plagued the Chinese state for centuries. The Mongols, who conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), had withdrawn to the steppe after being overthrown by Chinese rebels, and yet remained a formidable adversary. The early Ming exerted consistent military pressure on these northern nomads, dispatching a total eight large-scale expeditions, each of more than 100,000 troops. Ming founding Emperor Hongwu (r. 1368–1398) launched offensive campaigns in 1372 intended to crush the Mongols. His best generals led armies of 150,000 soldiers beyond the Ming frontiers to invade Karakorum, the traditional Mongol capital, as well as the Gansu corridor, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria. These large-scale military actions suggest that Emperor Hongwu hoped to ‘govern the Mongol steppe as part of his empire’, thus solving security problems on the northern frontier once and for all. At one stage the Ming had an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 horses along the border, compared to the Mongols’ 100,000. As cavalry forces were essential for campaigning in

34 Edward L. Farmer, Early Ming Government, p. 90.
the steppe, this disparity put Ming armies at a great disadvantage. In 1388, Emperor Hongwu dispatched a further 150,000 troops across the Gobi desert to attack the Mongol emperor.35 Due to overextended supply lines and shortages of warhorses, however, the two campaigns failed to subdue the Mongols.

Ming power reached its pinnacle during the reign of Emperor Yongle, to whom expansion into Mongol territory was a top priority. Preponderant resources enabled the emperor to pursue ‘the direct destruction of Mongol power through the military invasion of Mongolia’.36 In the eyes of the emperor, not until the Mongol threat was removed that Chinese security could be ensured. To prepare for the invasion, Emperor Yongle constructed the Grand Canal on which to transport grains from the fertile south to the north. He moved the capital in Nanjing northward to Beijing, adjacent to the Ming–Mongol frontier and reorganized military and administrative structures.

Destroying Mongol power, however, was no easy task. Throughout history, logistical difficulties had prohibited various dynasties from successfully campaigning in the vast steppe region in the north.37 Geographical barriers and the constraints of military technology at that time made military expeditions difficult. Chinese troops had to travel great distances across desert, steep mountains, and other rough terrain. Overextended supply lines would expose the rear to enemy ambushes, leaving the invading troops in danger of being cut-off and trapped in the steppe. In the second-century BC, for instance, the Han dynasty lost 60–70% of its troops and about 100,000 horses on such steppe manoeuvres, and the Tang dynasty (618–906) was only able to establish a brief period of control after expanding into northwest China. The Northern and Southern Song dynasties, faced with a formidable threat in the north, failed to recapture territories in the north, let alone to expand into the steppe.38 In addition to logistical difficulties, there were also marked differences in the military skills of agrarian and nomadic societies. The northern Nomads were adept in horsemanship and hence cavalry combat, whereas the settled peoples were more accustomed to infantry warfare. Although the Chinese usually possessed more power resources and a

larger number of troops, the restricted mobility of cavalry forces and accidents of geography frequently combined to obstruct Chinese ambitions to conquer the steppe.

Despite the defensive advantages the Mongols enjoyed, however, Emperor Yongle steadily exerted offensive pressure. The balance of power was ultimately in the Ming’s favour, as the Ming army was much larger in number and well-trained. The Mongols, on the other hand, were divided among several tribes, specifically the Western Mongols (Oirat) and the Eastern Mongols (Da Dan). Both fought for dominance of the Mongol people. The political division of the Mongols enabled Emperor Yongle to employ a strategy of ‘divide and conquer’, by cultivating good relations with the weaker Mongols and attacking the stronger ones. It allowed him to maintain a balance of power between the Mongols, to exploit their conflicting interests and to check the growth of their power. For instance, early in the emperor’s reign the Eastern Mongols were the stronger adversary. They refused to send a tributary embassy to the Ming court, and went so far as to murder the Ming envoy. The Ming then turned to the weaker Oirats, showering their leaders with gifts, titles, and privileges. In 1409, at the Ming’s urging, the Oirats attacked the Eastern Mongols and forced them to retreat to the Kerülen River. To take full advantage of their disarray, the same year Emperor Yongle sent an army of 100,000 across the Gobi desert to attack the Eastern Mongols. The Mongols, however, feigned retreat, lured the overconfident Ming army deep into their territory and crushed it.

Emperor Yongle’s response was to take matters into his own hands. This ‘Emperor on Horseback’ personally led five large-scale offensive campaigns against the Mongols (in 1410, 1414, 1422, 1423, and 1424). Chinese troops marched more than a thousand miles into the Mongolian heartland. These military expeditions were ‘intended to assert Chinese military superiority’ in Mongol territory. Their scale was unprecedented, some comprising half a million troops. The timing of these onslaughts was intended to ‘take advantage of a perceived weakness among his enemies or to forestall the formation of a coalition that would produce a serious attack on the Ming borders’. The entire country was mobilized to supply the army

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41 This is the title of chapter 6 of Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China*.


44 Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 610.
on each expedition. In March 1410, about 500,000 Ming troops set out to attack the stronger Eastern Mongols and reached the northern shores of Kerülen River. According to Ming sources, Emperor Yongle led a force that advanced farther north and caught up with the Mongol Khan Bunyashiri’s troops on the banks of the Onon River, defeating them on June 15. Bunyashiri, however, escaped to the west. Ming forces then turned east to pursue the armies led by the Mongol chancellor Arughtai, defeating them near the Great Khingan Mountains, but Arughtai also escaped. Fearing that supply lines had over-extended, the Chinese proclaimed victory and headed home.

Chinese attacks having severely weakened one Mongol faction, the other later rose in power and became a new security problem. When, just a few years later, the Oirats appeared as the stronger of the two factions, the Ming allied with the Eastern Mongols. In 1414 this combined force went on the offensive against the Oirats, pursuing them as far as the Tula River, but logistical problems once more forced the Ming to disengage and withdraw. Four of Emperor Yongle’s five Mongolian campaigns, other than the second in 1414, were against the Eastern Mongols. Terrain in the Mongolian steppe provided natural defensive cover that shielded the Mongols from Ming assaults. The last three campaigns were not effective because the Eastern Mongols fled at news of the offensive. Ming forces were consequently unable to find, let alone attack, the main arm of the mobile Mongol cavalry. In the first three campaigns, which struck deep in the Mongolian heartland near the Kerülen River, the Ming used cannon, causing heavy Mongol casualties. Logistical problems, however, made the operations difficult to sustain for an extended period, and forced the Ming army to withdraw.45 Emperor Yongle died of illness during the final and fifth campaign in 1424, thus ending the Ming offensive. These campaigns did not destroy the Mongols, but the assaults left them considerably weakened. As a result, the Ming’s northern frontiers enjoyed several years of peace. Emperor Yongle apparently believed that a good offence is the best defence.

It is notable that Ming China did not build the Great Wall while it was militarily strong. Chinese power began to decline in the 1430s, when the Ming withdrew its outward garrisons, letting the Mongols fill in the void and settle in the strategic Ordos. This acquisition gave the Mongols a fertile base from which to project power into China. In 1449, the Mongols launched a major attack on the Ming, capturing the Chinese emperor. The Ming court, unable to strike back, shifted to a defensive grand strategy of building a system of defensive fortifications to ward off Mongol attacks. In 1472, recognizing that offence was impracticable, Ming Emperor Chenghua noted, ‘Constructing border walls is a strategy we can manage

for a long time'. The line of walls the Ming constructed would steadily extend eastward to the sea and become what is known today as the Great Wall.

Annexation of Vietnam (1407–1427)

In addition to expanding into Mongol territory, Ming China also invaded and conquered Vietnam. During the reign of Emperor Hongwu, Vietnam’s Tran dynasty submitted to China and became a tributary state, its ruler receiving the title of King of Annam. In 1400, a court minister named Le Qui-ly (ca 1335–1407) murdered the king and usurped the ruling Tran dynasty, killing most of the royal family. Le Qui-ly claimed to the Ming court that the Tran family had died out and that his son was a royal relative. He requested Ming recognition and investiture. In the absence of accurate substantiating information, the Ming court initially recognized Le as the king of Annam. Soon after a Vietnamese refugee named Tran Thien-binh, claiming to be a prince of the Tran house, arrived at the Ming court. After a fact-finding mission to Vietnam confirmed Tran’s story, moves to restore the erstwhile Tran Dynasty with Tran Thien-binh as king began. Le confessed to his usurpation and agreed to receive the new king. In 1406, the Ming sent an army escort of 5,000 men to accompany Tran’s return to Vietnam. Upon crossing the border they were ambushed, and Tran was killed. Enraged, Emperor Yongle set out to punish Le.

At the outset, the Vietnam campaign was a punitive war to enforce tributary rules. Usurpation of the Ming-endowed throne, troubles on the Chinese border and an attempted conquest of neighbouring Champa all appeared as an overt threat to the sinocentric world order Ming China had been trying to impose on East Asia. In instructions to his generals before their departure, Emperor Yongle so specified the political objective of this campaign: ‘When the criminal is captured, we will select a virtuous offspring of the Tran family as king. We will help him rule the place, and then withdraw our forces.’ This would imply that the Ming court did not at this point plan to annex Vietnam. In 1406, the Ming sent an immense expeditionary force of 800,000—a scale comparable to that of the Mongolian campaigns years later—to bring Vietnam back into line. As a righteous force, Yongle

48 *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 56, p. 0824. John K. Whitmore also suggests that ‘[t]he Chinese Emperor... wished merely to correct the Vietnamese situation and not to conquer the land. The goal of the massive expedition was to restore the Tran dynasty to the Vietnamese throne’. See John K. Whitmore, ‘Chiao-Chih and Neo-Confucianism: The Ming Attempt to Transform Vietnam’, *Ming Studies*, No. 4 (1977), p. 52.
49 *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 60, p. 0868; 68, p. 0944. See also Zhao Zhongchen, *Biography of Ming Chengzu*, p. 344; Mao Peiqi and Li Zuoran, *On Ming Chengzu*, pp. 239–40. The number of
admonished his troops not to destroy Vietnamese tombs and rice fields, not to rape or plunder, and not to kill prisoners of war. The Vietnamese troops were no match for the Ming juggernaut and soon lost two capitals and other major towns of the Red River delta. The next year, the Ming army captured the usurper Le and his son and sent them to the Chinese capital of Nanjing, where they were imprisoned. Le Qui-ly was later exiled to Guangxi.

Having occupied the country, the Ming’s war aim expanded from that of punitive expedition to conquest. In response to the suggestion of Ming commander Zhang Fu, who argued that Vietnam had been a part of China since ancient times and sought once more to become Chinese territory, Emperor Yongle annexed Vietnam as a Chinese province, establishing an administrative structure akin to inland provinces such as Guangxi and Yunnan. Moves to assimilate the Vietnamese took place. The new province was named Jiaozhi, Vietnam’s name during the Tang dynasty.

The conquest of Vietnam paid off handsomely. As a result of the war, Ming China obtained 13.6 million *piculs* of grain, 230,590 elephants, horses and cattle, 8,677 ships, and 2.5 million military weapons. Ming records show that Vietnam had a population of about 3,120,000 and an unsinicized tribal population (*manren*) of 2,087,500. The acquired grains were substantial, almost equal to the amounts (14.4 million *piculs*) Ming military colonies produced in 1407. The conquest was lucrative to the extent that Emperor Yongle took pains to emphasize that a just cause, not greed, had been his motivation. He said: ‘I am for the welfare of all the people under heaven. How can I be war-mongering and covet the wealth of the land and people! But the rebellious criminals cannot go unpunished; the poor people cannot be unassisted.’

Vietnam, however, proved a difficult place to administer. The Chinese conquest ignored the strength of the historical traditions of Vietnamese

800,000 recorded in *Ming shi lu* may be an exaggeration, but it at least reflected the large-scale of the campaign. Whitmore suggested that the invasion forces probably numbered 215,000 men. John K. Whitmore, *Vietnam, Ho Quy Ly, and the Ming (1371-1421)*, p. 89.

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50 *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 56, p. 0824.

51 Official Ming history *Ming Shi Lu* recorded that some one thousand Vietnamese gentry came to Zhang Fu’s camp and told him that ‘The Tran family have all been killed by the Le thief. There were no heirs left to inherit the throne. Annan was originally a Chinese territory, but was later lost, immersing itself in barbarian culture and not hearing the teachings of rite and righteousness. Fortunately, the Saintly Dynasty has exterminated the criminals. Soldiers, civilians, the elderly and children can witness the glory and prosperity of Chinese culture. We feel so lucky! Please revert Annan as a prefecture like before so that we can gradually eradicate barbarian culture and forever immerse in saintly culture.’ *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 66, p. 0917. We have reason to believe, however, that Zhang Fu engineered this request, since members of the Tran family had joined him against Le. See John K. Whitmore, ‘Chiao-Chih and Neo-Confucianism’.

52 *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 80, p. 1070.


54 *Ming shi lu*, Taizong 80, p. 1070.
independence and their hostility toward Chinese overlordship’. The Vietnamese resented Chinese rule and rebellions soon followed. At first, the Ming was able to subdue these uprisings through its superior military might; between 1408 and 1413 it twice sent armies to crush the insurrections. Vietnamese resistance notwithstanding, the Ming was able to keep the territory for two decades as a Chinese province. Nevertheless, constant rebellions grew to be a financial and military burden on Ming resources, and the costs of administering the new territory soared. One commander reported in 1421 that Chinese armies in Vietnam suffered from insufficient supplies, and that the hit-and-run tactics of Vietnamese guerrillas had made maintaining Chinese positions there increasingly difficult. The Ming was finally forced to withdraw in 1427.

Zheng He’s Maritime Expeditions (1405–1433)

As earlier noted, a hegemon will expand its political interests abroad. Powerful states expand because they can. As the most powerful state in the system, Ming China not only dominated the Asian continent—incorporating the region of Yunnan into China, annexing Vietnam, and attacking the Mongols—but projected overwhelming power across the ocean. As an outgrowth of its power, Ming China, being the ‘wealthiest and most populous economy on earth’, dispatched seven maritime expeditions, from 1405 to 1433, to the so-called Western Ocean (the maritime area west of Borneo extending to the Indian Ocean), which expanded its political interests abroad. Under the command of the eunuch and military commander Zheng He, the Chinese armada sailed to Southeast Asia, India, and the Persian Gulf, and went as far as present-day Somalia and Kenya in East Africa. The size of the fleets was unprecedented, larger even than the Spanish Armada of 1588. Each expedition carried about 27,000 soldiers on 250 ships. The largest of the treasure ships (baochuan) was 440 feet long, dwarfing Christopher Columbus’s 85-feet-long Santa Maria.

55 Edward L. Dreyer, Early Ming China, 209.
61 Louise Levathes, When China Ruled the Seas, pp. 21, 80.
Many hold the view that China did not intend to conquer overseas states, but was merely interested in exploring unknown territories far from home, promoting commerce and diplomatic relations and demonstrating the benevolence of the Chinese emperor. In short, Zheng He and his fleets were peaceful explorers. Unlike Europe, China did not colonize or conquer the overseas territory it had visited.

This popular view, however, overstates the pacific intent of the Chinese fleet. That China did not colonize overseas does not necessarily presuppose the conclusion that the expeditions were essentially peaceful. Overlooked in the prevailing view is the immense military power of the fleets, far more than was necessary for solely exploratory activities. The Chinese armadas had the backing of 26,803 soldiers, in addition to other support personnel (a number that varied slightly for each expedition, but which was in the 27,000 range). The largest fleet ever witnessed at that time, it comprised 250 ships, including about 60 outsized ‘treasure ships’. As Edward Dreyer points out, ‘The ability to conduct [military operations] was obviously perceived as necessary when the voyages were planned, and this fact refutes any interpretation of the voyages as essentially peaceful in character. Zheng He’s armada fought on only three occasions, but it overawed local authorities without fighting on many more.’ The fleet’s military power thus gave Ming China the capabilities to conduct coercive diplomacy in distant foreign lands.

Chinese history records at least three occasions when Zheng He used force. The three military operations receive special attention, occupying more than one-third of Zheng He’s biography in the official Ming Shi (Ming History) as compiled by Qing historians. The inscriptions on the steles that Zheng He raised in Liujia Harbour (near present-day Shanghai) and in Changle (in Fujian) in 1431 before setting sail for his last voyage (1431–1433) also gave a salient place to the three military conflicts. The prominence given to these military operations in primary Chinese documents suggests that both the use and threat of force constituted an important part of the maritime expeditions.

In the first military operation in 1407, Zheng He fought and captured the Chinese pirate leader Chen Zuyi in Palembang (on the island of Sumatra in present-day Indonesia), burning ten ships and killing five thousand people.

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65 *Ming shi* 304, pp. 7766–8, biography of Zheng He.
Chen Zuyi was delivered to the imperial capital at Nanjing and beheaded. In 1410, in the second, hardest-fought of the three campaigns, the Chinese fleet captured King Alakeshvara (Alagakkonara) of Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) for flouting Ming authority, and delivered him to China. The third battle took place in 1415 during the fourth voyage (1412–1415), when Zheng He fought and captured Sekandar, leader of a rebellion against Zain al-‘Abidin, the king of Semudera (in northern Sumatra), whom China recognized. Sekandar was sent to the Chinese capital and publicly executed. In addition to actual use of force, Ming China also threatened to deploy its naval power if lesser states defied Chinese authority.67

These military operations suggest that the maritime expeditions were not peaceful explorations, but rather power projection activities designed to serve a political purpose—spreading the tribute system and enforcing tributary rules.68 Overwhelming naval power enabled Ming China to discipline unruly political units unreachable by land and overawe others into accepting Chinese supremacy. The voyages ‘brought various states . . . into the empire’s political sphere of influence’.69

In places Chinese fleets visited, backed by the ‘power to hurt’,70 China demanded submission and acknowledgment of Chinese supremacy. In most cases, the demonstration of Chinese naval power was enough to inspire awe and force foreign countries into compliance with the norms of the tribute system. As Chinese historians of the Qing times suggested, ‘Those who did not submit were pacified by force’.71 The Ming fleet’s 27,000 soldiers, possibly equipped with firearms, were ample to overpower local potentates, who commanded ‘seven or eight thousand’ troops.72 Those who accepted Chinese supremacy were rewarded with gold, silk, and other valuables and became a Chinese tributary. Those who refused were invaded or forced to obey, their rulers captured and sometimes sent to China. Chinese fleets brought back innumerable treasures, spices, and rare animals, including giraffes (presented as the auspicious mythical qilin to flatter the emperor) from Africa.

The aim of Zheng He’s expeditions were hence to promote the tribute system and project Chinese power across the sea. Zheng made this purpose clear in this inscription on the stele he raised in Liujia Harbour in 1431 to

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68 Edward L. Dreyer, *Zheng He*.
commemorate the voyages he had led: ‘When we arrived at foreign countries, barbarian kings who resisted transformation by Chinese civilization and were not respectful we captured alive, and bandit soldiers who looted and plundered recklessly we exterminated. Because of this, the sea lanes became pure and peaceful, and foreign peoples could rely upon them and pursue their occupations in safety.’ This amalgamation of force and diplomacy worked well for the Ming. As a result of this active promotion of the tribute system, the number of Ming tributary states rose to more than 60. For Emperor Yongle, who usurped the throne from his nephew, this increase in tributary envoys presumably boosted his legitimacy, which might partly explain why he dispatched Zheng He abroad in the first place.

When the expedition was suspended after the sixth voyage (1421–1422), the number of foreign embassies that came to China also declined—a clear indication that the overwhelming naval power of Zheng He’s fleets was the key to maintaining the tribute system. It was the fall in the number of tributary envoys to China that prompted Emperor Xuande to order the seventh, and what turned out to be the last, expedition (1431–1433) to spread the prestige of the Ming Empire. He stated in the imperial edict that Zheng He carried to foreign states: ‘Everything was prosperous and new, but you foreign countries, distantly located beyond the sea, had not heard and did not know. For this reason, I specially sent Grand Eunuch Zheng He, Wang Jinhong and others, bearing the imperial edict, to go and instruct you.’

In short, Zheng He’s expeditions had the effect of projecting Chinese power and bringing overseas states into the tribute system. As Edward Dreyer concludes, ‘Zheng He’s voyages were undertaken to force the states of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to acknowledge the power and majesty of Ming China and its emperor.’ These overseas states agreed to accept Chinese suzerainty and pay tribute to the Ming court. Since the early Ming restricted trade by privately owned ships and channelled legitimate forms of trade through the tribute system, foreign states had incentive to enter the tribute system in order to trade with China. Chinese power and sphere of influence spread throughout Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent, across the Indian Ocean.

**Establishing Tributary “Rules of the Game”**

For the Ming rulers, building a strong state that would endure was the primary security objective. They were keenly aware of the security threat the Ming faced in East Asia. For almost 600 years before the founding of the

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75 *Ming shi lu*, Xuanzong 67, pp. 1576–7; Ming Shi 304, p. 7768, biography of Zheng He.
Ming, the Chinese polity had been weak, unable to defeat nomadic neighbours. The territorial boundary of China went through a period of fragmentation, wars and alien conquest. Mindful of China’s centuries of weakness and humiliation, Ming founding emperor Hongwu turned to Confucian advisers adept in China’s history of strength in the Han and Tang dynasties, and in its history of weakness in the Song dynasty. Ming rulers also looked back on and drew lessons from their immediate predecessor, the Mongol empire. Their solution to ensuring a secure and enduring empire was the tribute system. In their view, to create a foundation for China’s centrality in East Asia, foreign relations should be organized hierarchically in accordance with tributary rules and rituals.77

Through its overwhelming military and economic might, Ming China was able to set the ‘rules of the game’ for the East Asian system and to enjoy special privileges. Tributary rules based on Confucian ideology governed interactions among Asian polities and helped reduce lesser states’ resistance to Chinese dominance. John K. Fairbank coined the term ‘tribute system’ to describe imperial China’s diplomatic relations with Asian polities. According to him, China’s tributary arrangement with Asian polities was an outgrowth of Confucian thinking. Confucianism envisions a hierarchic political and social order within the state, characterized by ritual and harmony. This hierarchic and non-egalitarian order within the state was then projected on to foreign relations, in the form of the tribute system with China at the centre.78 For China and its vassals, Confucian ideology provided justification for the hierarchical order of the tribute system. The idealized tribute system was a result of cultural expansion, not military coercion, and the ‘Chinese world order’ was benign and harmonious. Foreign polities attracted by the superior Chinese culture and civilization voluntarily became tributaries. Certain tributary states, such as Korea and Vietnam, even adopted Chinese writing and institutions. When a new ruler assumed power in a tributary polity, the individual had to obtain an imperial patent of appointment from the Chinese emperor in a process known as ‘investiture’. Leaders of tributary states could address themselves only as ‘king’; the term ‘emperor’ was China’s reserve. Tributary polities periodically sent embassies to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor with goods produced in their home countries. In court meetings, tributary envoys performed certain rituals, including the full kowtow (kneeling and tapping the forehead on the ground three times) to express submission to the Chinese emperor and to acknowledge their inferior status. In Confucian thinking, the influx of tribute-paying foreign envoys strengthened the legitimacy of the Chinese emperor because these tributes signified his status as the accepted

77 I am indebted to Professor Wang Gungwu on this point.
ruler of all-under-Heaven (*tianxia*). For the tributaries, Chinese recognition and investiture had the effect of enhancing the legitimacy of local rulers, a process similar to the diplomatic recognition of states today.\(^{79}\)

Chinese leaders used the tribute system to organize foreign relations in a way that helped the country gain security benefits and obtain deference from lesser states at a cost lower than that of using force. In the Chinese view, the world was divided into a civilized centre and an outer rim of ‘barbarians’. By allowing foreigners to pay tribute, it was hoped, they would be transformed into civilized peoples and pose no threat. This cultural transformation served as a defence mechanism to protect China from foreign attacks.\(^ {80}\) Tributary states could call on Chinese help if attacked. China, as the system manager, provided the public goods of regional security. Trading privileges were granted as a reward to those who accepted the tribute system, or withheld as punishment to those who refused to comply. Many Asian polities wished to trade with the resource-rich China, but Chinese leaders restricted exchanges of goods and commodities to the tribute system, leaving little room for non-tributary trade. Foreigners wishing to trade with China had little choice but to accept the tributary arrangement.\(^ {81}\)

In the idealized tribute system, the attractiveness of Chinese culture is the primary reason for the system’s existence. Foreign tributaries were attracted to China by its high culture and superior civilization. This cultural explanation, however, overstates the symbolic value of the tribute system and thus masks the reality of power. The tribute system cannot be separated from considerations of material power. A closer look at the tributary relationship reveals that, although economic and cultural considerations were at play, it was Chinese preponderance of power that made Asian polities accept tributary rules and norms. Whenever not backed by military power, the system usually became unsustainable.\(^ {82}\) In other words, the material power of

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81 According to Chinese accounts, China did not profit from tributary relations, since what the emperor bestowed upon the foreign envoys was always in excess of what they had brought in to the imperial court. As a self-sufficient empire, China was not interested in foreign lands and desired no foreign goods. Rather, it was foreigners who desired Chinese goods and luxuries. T. F. Tsiang, ‘China and European Expansion’, *Política*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1936), p. 4. This idealized version of tributary trade, however, does not always square with reality on the ground. In practice, China enjoyed the benefits of trade as well. According to one study, during the Qing dynasty the value of Korean tributary goods was actually in excess of the value of Chinese return goods. Chang Tsun-wu, *Qing Han zonglan maoyi, 1637-1894 (Qing-Korean Suzerain-Vassal Trade, 1637-1894)* (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1978). I am indebted to Kirk Larsen for bringing this monograph to my attention.

China was the decisive factor in creating and sustaining the tribute system, while Confucianism provided the ideological justification for the rhetoric and rituals of tribute. This is not to say that power was the only factor underlying the tributary relationship, but rather that, compared with economic and cultural factors, power carried more causal weight. As historian Wang Gungwu points out: ‘There could not surely be a stable [tribute] system without power, sustained power.’\(^{83}\) Even though some states still paid tribute when Chinese power was in decline, notably Korea during the late Ming dynasty, by that time the system had become unstable and conflict-ridden. That is, when the centre was in decline some of the dyadic tributary relations might continue, but at the systemic level the functioning of the tribute system had become unstable.

Military strength was the foundation of the Ming tribute system. As the hegemonic power, the early Ming was eager to establish a hierarchic tribute system in East Asia. The founding emperor Hongwu dispatched envoys to Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Champa, Java, Brunei, and other neighbouring countries to announce his accession to the throne and his desire to restore the traditional tributary relations. In direct contrast to Song times, when China’s diplomatic relations had been based on approximate parity,\(^{84}\) equality with Ming China was inconceivable. Asian polities had to acknowledge China’s superior status before entering the tribute system and conducting diplomacy with China.

The early Ming set out to construct a tribute system with neighbouring states and polities. The process was far from smooth, and on several occasions Ming leaders resorted to threats of force. For instance, although many view Korea as an exemplary tributary state, building a tributary relationship with the country in the early Ming was difficult, and took more than three decades to complete. Bilateral tensions were high during the early Ming because the Koreans maintained contacts with the Mongols, who were still militarily active in Manchuria. Sandwiched between the defeated hegemon (the Mongols) and the up-and-coming hegemon (the Ming), the Koreans were careful not to antagonize either of their powerful neighbours and sought to maintain friendly relations with both. The Ming court, concerned about a possible Korean-Mongol alliance, demanded that the Koreans break off relations with the Mongols, an ultimatum the Koreans were not able to meet.\(^{85}\) In 1388, Ming expansion into the Liaodong

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\(^{84}\) Morris Rossabi, China among Equals.

\(^{85}\) Donald N. Clark, ‘Sino-Korean Tributary Relations under the Ming’, in Dennis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, eds., The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8, “The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2”.

peninsula to an area claimed by Koryo almost provoked a war between the two states. King U of the Koryo court mobilized the country and dispatched an expeditionary force of 38,830 soldiers to attack the Ming.86 Conflict was averted when Korean General Yi Songgye made the army turn back and removed King U from power. After ruling from behind the scenes for four years, General Yi took the throne and founded the Choson Dynasty (1392–1910). Ming China and Korea came to the brink of war again in 1398 over three Korean memorials that had offended the Ming emperor Hongwu. Not to be intimidated, the Choson court took the decision to go to war. A palace coup in Korea and the death of Emperor Hongwu in 1398 averted the impending conflict. When, in the early 15th century, both countries had resolved succession issues, Ming–Korean relations were finally brought into the tributary framework. In return, the Choson court gained security, recognition, and non-intervention. Korea’s policy of ‘serving the great’ (sadae), however, was not easy. Ming China’s tribute demands for strategic items such as horses turned out to be no small burden.87 Although Korea has been raised as the model tributary state of China, the tensions between a dominant power and a weak state overshadowed their tributary relationship. Beneath the facade of Confucian harmony was the reality of power asymmetry.

The threat of military force was evident in Ming China’s effort to bring Japan into the tribute system. Japan’s Prince Kanenaga imprisoned and executed a number of the Chinese envoys that Emperor Hongwu had sent in 1369 to demand tribute, apparently angered at the condescending tone of the diplomatic letter denoting Chinese superiority. When the Ming court threatened invasion, the Japanese reminded it of the Mongols’ failed attempts in 1281 to conquer Japan. A letter Kanenaga sent in 1382 explicitly denied the legitimacy of Chinese dominance: ‘Now the world is the world’s world; it does not belong to a single ruler…. I hear that China has troops able to fight a war, but my small country also has plans of defence…. How could we kneel to and acknowledge Chinese overlordship!’88 In response, the Ming denied trade privileges. Eager to trade with the Ming, the shogun Yoshimitsu sent a mission in 1399 and addressed himself as ‘your subject, the King of Japan.’ Because this departed from Japanese tradition, his successor summarily repudiated the arrangement in 1411. Neither government, however, was able to stop the flow of trade voyages and ‘retained the

88 *Ming shi* 322, Japan; Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China*, p. 120.
pretence that the voyages were official tribute missions signifying Japan’s acquiescence in China’s claim to hegemony. \(^{89}\)

Although power asymmetry facilitated China’s efforts to impose tributary relations on lesser polities, power symmetry hindered the spreading of the tribute system. The Ming tribute system hit a major snag in the powerful Timurid Empire of Central Asia (approximately modern Iran and Afghanistan). The Muslim conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) was so incensed at the Ming diplomatic letter addressing him as a vassal that he decided in 1404 to chastise the Chinese infidels by leading a full-scale invasion of China. He died on his way, thus averting a potentially bloody conflict. His successor, Shahrukh Bahadur, sought to maintain good relations with the Ming. Emperor Yongle, in contrast to Emperor Hongwu’s threat to invade the recalcitrant Japan, and despite some initial bickering over diplomatic protocols, treated Shahrukh as ‘a fellow monarch’. This equal treatment reflected the immense power of the Timurid Empire and its remoteness from China. \(^{90}\)

The strong thus set up a tribute system for the weak to follow, and for use in regulating and influencing interactions among subordinate actors. In essence, tribute reflected power relations. Distant empires and secondary polities that had power to defend themselves were able to keep their independence and remain on the outer rim of the tribute system. There were times in East Asian history when even China had to pay tribute to more powerful states. The early Han dynasty paid a yearly tribute to the powerful Xiongnu Empire. In 1138 the weak Southern Song Dynasty accepted its inferior status as vassal of the Jin Empire. Although the tribute system had a cultural component in Confucianism, its implementation was nonetheless a function of material power. Without the backing of power, the system usually became unsustainable. \(^{91}\)

**Conclusion**

The history of Ming China shows that, as a regional hegemon, it expanded political interests beyond frontiers and used its preponderant power to set up

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\(^{91}\) Jing-shen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven*, pp. 4, 8. Ming power went into a decline in the mid-15th century and the country gradually lost the capabilities to sustain an expansionist foreign policy. Against this relative decline was the rise of Mongol power. A botched Ming expedition in 1449 ended with the capture of the Chinese emperor and the siege of Beijing by the Mongols. Despite its relative decline, Ming power was able to sustain the tribute system—but with increasing difficulties. For instance, in the late 15th century, the Ming court watched helplessly as Hami, a strategic tributary city-state in western China, was gobbled up by Turfan, another Ming tributary state. The Ming court was eventually forced to give up Hami. See Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War*, pp. 166–73.
rules of the game that disproportionately served its self-interests. At the apex of its power, the country was expansionist: it repeatedly attacked the Mongols, annexed Vietnam as a Chinese province, and launched seven maritime expeditions to project power abroad. To consolidate its dominance, the Ming dictated the rules of the game for lesser polities to follow, and used Confucian ideology to justify its dominant position within the tribute system. Tributary rules and rituals gave China special privileges and supreme status in East Asia. As the system manager, Ming China rewarded tributary polities with the benefits of trade, security protection, and cultural artefacts, and punished unruly polities with the denial of trade and the threat or use of military force.

Ming China’s foreign policy cannot be explained simply by the preferences of individual leaders. To attribute the source of Chinese behaviour to the personal traits of an individual leader such as Emperor Yongle is to miss the structural cause of expansionism. How political units are placed in an anarchic system in which they cannot be certain about the intentions of others profoundly influences their external behaviour.92 The pursuit and accumulation of power is the key to state survival. The preponderant capabilities of early Ming China enabled the country to pursue an expansionist foreign policy and to create and maintain tributary rules of the game—all on Chinese terms. Without the support of preponderant power, no leader, however ambitious, will be able to expand political interests to the extent early Ming China did.

Ming China’s strategic behaviour was hardly unique. One can find parallels in other hegemonies. The United States, for example, became a regional hegemon through a series of expansions, its territory having grown from the original 13 colonies to 50 states. Once it dominated the Western Hemisphere, it continued to expand political interests abroad.93 Moreover, the United States took advantage of its preponderant power to establish and shape the rules of the game for the international system. A web of international institutions and regimes, including in the areas of trade, finance, arms control, and non-proliferation, help the United States channel its power and manage its preeminent position in the world. Although other states can take advantage of the existing rules and institutions, the distribution of benefits generally favours the United States.94 The exercise of hegemonic power bears a striking resemblance across time, region, and culture.

The argument advanced in this article has important implications for IR theory and opens areas for further research. In recent decades, realism has been treated synonymously with balance of power theory. This is

92 Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
94 Michael Mastanduno, ‘System Maker and Privilege Taker’.
unfortunate because realism as a research tradition is a diverse lot, housing a family of competing and sometimes contradictory theories. Although balance of power is an important part of international politics, we should not overlook the other half of a state’s strategic calculus: the pursuit of power. After all, international politics is, as Hans Morgenthau famously puts it, ‘a struggle for power’. How a state pursues power to become dominant is equally as important as how a state resists a concentration of power to avoid being dominated. This study of Ming hegemony reveals that the dominant state has a range of tools to maintain its power advantage and to shape the preferences of secondary states. Strategies of hegemony may indeed account for the failure of power balances to form in the history of international politics.

96 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe.