

Hegemony, Social Fields, and Symbolic Capital: The Apollo Project and the Ming Treasure
Fleets

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Wow.
So draft.
Much rough.
Such comments, yes.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy committed the United States to a goal of “before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”¹ Between 1969 and 1972, the Apollo project landed six manned spacecraft on the lunar surface, but in 1972 President Richard Nixon terminated the program and significantly rolled back the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s (NASA) budget. In 1405, the Yongle emperor of the Ming Dynasty, authorized the first of several massive naval expeditions from China to the Indian Ocean. After a final voyage under the Xuande emperor in 1433, the expeditions ended forever.

These two projects remain linked in the popular imagination. For advocates of space exploration, the Zheng He treasure fleets stand as a cautionary tale of what happens to a great power when it stops exploration of the frontier.² The fate of the Chinese treasure fleets also figures as a trope for anti-isolationists: for them, the end of the expeditions serves as a marker for the Ming Dynasty’s inward turn, which they see as resulting in China’s eventual ‘century of humiliation’ at the hands of more adventuresome western powers.³

But beyond these rhetorical invocations, what implications does the comparison between the two projects entail for the study of international relations? We argue that they shed light on the politics of international hierarchy. In particular, they call attention to the role of symbolic assets and legitimation in driving costly policies by leaders of hegemonic powers.

An important dimension of the “new hierarchy studies” concerns the dynamics of legitimacy in international hierarchy.⁴ Scholarship on international hierarchy offers different perspectives on legitimacy and legitimation. For many realists, “authority quickly reduces to a question of capabilities.”⁵ Hegemonic-order theory, in contrast, focuses on dominant actors as ‘rule makers’ and subordinate actors as ‘rule takers.’⁶ They stress how hegemons and other superordinate actors create rules of the game, allocate status and prestige, and establish norms of appropriate behavior. For dominant actors, legitimacy flows from convincing subordinate actors of the desirability of the order in general, and their leadership in particular.⁷ Such approaches generally neglect how *historically specific* aspects of the social bases of hierarchy may lead leaders of dominant powers to pursue policies inconsistent with, or even counterproductive to, enhancing and conserving military capabilities.

¹ John F. Kennedy: "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs," May 25, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8151>

² Smith and Davies 2012, 140-141., and Zuber, Maria T., testimony before Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, 22 September 2011,
https://science.house.gov/sites/republicans.science.house.gov/files/documents/hearings/092211_Zuber.pdf.

³ E.g., Barr 2012, 45-53; Zakaria 2012, 49-51.

⁴ For examples, see Adler-Nissen 2014; Grynaviski and Hsieh 2015; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Lake 2009; Lake 2010; MacDonald 2009; Nexon and Wright 2007; Wendt and Friedheim 1995; Zarakol 2011.

⁵ Waltz 1979, 88.

⁶ Mastanduno 2009.

⁷ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Lake 2009.

This article tackles a particular dimension of legitimation. Why do dominant actors invest in costly projects with few immediate benefits? We answer that they do so when they perceive fundamental threats to their legitimacy—and therefore their dominance—that require increasing their stock of symbolic capital. In alternative language, they face intense status ambiguity or insecurity.⁸ The terms of the hierarchical order matter for this process. Dominant actors may act as ‘rule makers,’ but they often find themselves subject to the same basic rules for the allocation of status and prestige as their subordinates.⁹ Indeed, as they themselves benefit from existing terms of hierarchical stratification, they face significant risks if they respond to legitimacy challenges by attempting to rewrite the terms of that hierarchy. Thus, they sometimes have incentives to engage in costly projects with ‘merely’ symbolic benefits.

Our account explains, *first*, why the Ming and the United States suddenly undertook such massive expenditures, *second*, how they performed these projects, and, *third*, why both the Ming and the Apollo missions ended abruptly—a fact that observers of both series of expeditions find puzzling. In brief, we argue that once respective threats to legitimacy decreased in salience, neither regime saw any point in continuing to divert resources to these projects.

We engage with major streams of work on hegemony, hierarchy, and the politics of legitimation. We develop a framework that unifies their disparate insights. Following Julian Go, we understand international order in terms of “fields”: “arena[s] in which states or other actors... compete with each other over species of capital.”¹⁰ For example, what hegemonic-stability theorists refer to as ‘the allocation of status and prestige’ rests upon the relative value of different kinds of capital.¹¹ This approach provides a particularly useful analytic for understanding efforts by actors to convert one kind of capital—such as economic resources—into symbolic capital.

We next provide an overview of the conditions faced by the United States in the early 1960s and the Ming Dynasty in the first part of the fifteenth century. We show that both perceived significant threats to their legitimacy and that these threats centered on the symbolic basis of their leadership. We then turn to briefly addressing alternative explanations before providing a more detailed account of the two cases. We conclude with a discussion of what our findings mean for the study of international hierarchy.

Hierarchy, Hegemony, and the Politics of Legitimation

In Waltz’s formulation, “parts of domestic political systems stand in relations of super- and subordination. Some are entitled to command; others are required to obey. Domestic systems are centralized and hierarchic.” In contrast, “the parts of international-political systems stand in relations of coordination. Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to

⁸ On cognate issues in the literature on status, see Bacharach, Bamberger et al. 1993; Eitzen 1972; Renshon 2015; Segal 1969; Stryker and Statham 1978.

⁹ Finnemore 2009, 61.

¹⁰ Go 2008, 207.

¹¹ See, for example, Couldry 2003; Pouliot and Mérand 2012.

command; none is required to obey. International relations are decentralized and anarchic.”¹² Participants in the “new hierarchy studies” reject this formulation. They contend that much of international relations takes place under conditions of super- and subordination, and that recognizing this fact leads to a better understanding of world politics. Two implications follow.

- We should attenuate the distinction between “international” and “domestic” politics. Mechanisms, processes, and causal relationships that hold within states may also operate, to some degree, among and across them.¹³ For example, the absence of a clean distinction between “international anarchy” and “domestic hierarchy” significantly undermines warrants for dismissing the importance of legitimacy and authority in international politics.¹⁴
- We can compare different hierarchical formations that we might otherwise envision as specifically domestic or international. For example, “empire” and “federation” describe ways of organizing both domestic and international politics.¹⁵ This need not imply that relations among sovereign states are necessarily identical to those among political factions in civil society, but it allows for viable comparisons across traditional levels of analysis.¹⁶

Hegemonic-stability and power-transition theory constitute venerable traditions for thinking about international hierarchy qua hierarchy. Both advance a domestic-politics analogy for conceptualizing the role of preeminent actors in world politics. Preeminent powers act like quasi-international governments. They utilize their superior military and economic capabilities to establish ‘rules of the game,’ regulate relations among subordinate polities, allocate status and prestige, and provide (impure) public goods.¹⁷

Our argument sits at the intersection of these literatures. Our puzzle concerns the policies undertaken by leaders of hegemonic powers: the United States and Ming China. Hegemonic-order theories themselves constitute theories of a broad type of international hierarchy: those involving a preeminent power that manages the relations of subordinate actors. Indeed, systematic attention to hegemonic orders in terms of hierarchy—as systems of *social dominance*—helps make sense of why dominant actors might pursue the costly acquisition of status. Borrowing from English-School terminology, much of world politics takes place within international hierarchical “societies” that locate actors in positions of super- and subordination.¹⁸ These locations are not driven solely by military and economic capabilities, but also by the possession of other socially valued assets: cultural capital of various kinds, social capital in the form of relationships with other actors, and the ability to engage in performances that signal various levels of social status.¹⁹

¹² Waltz 1979.

¹³ Cooley 2005; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Wendt and Friedheim 1995.

¹⁴ Lake 2009; Nexon and Wright 2007.

¹⁵ Parent 2011; Rector 2009.

¹⁶ On levels of analysis, see Singer 1961; Waltz 1959.

¹⁷ DiCicco and Levy 1999; Gilpin 1981; Ikenberry 2001; Lemke 2002; Organski 1958.

¹⁸ Bull 1977; Buzan 1993; Clark 1989.

¹⁹ Adler-Nissen 2014; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Towns 2009. On status in international relations, see also Volgy, Corbetta et al. 2011.

Hegemonic-order theorists argue that economic and military capabilities amount to some of the most important assets in world politics. In part, that stems from their fungibility: actors can use them to ‘purchase’ social standing through coercion and exchange. Because force remains the *ultima ratio* of *all* politics, military power, in particular, plays an outsized role in relations of dominance.²⁰ However, these sources, by themselves, cannot purchase acceptance by would-be subordinates. This results, in part, from the exchange-rate problem long identified by scholars of power: there exist contextually specific limits to the ability to convert military capabilities into other assets. It also stems from the social nature of hierarchy; durable patterns of social dominance depend on acceptance by others, that is, the legitimation of asymmetric relationships.²¹

This means that actors seeking to enhance their social standing have incentives to invest in non-military assets and engage in performances that signal higher status to the audience they must impress. Those facing status ambiguity or insecurity will also have incentives to acquire assets and engage in performances commensurate with their desired position in the dominance hierarchy. In many cases, the assets and performances at stake take non-military forms.²² Such concerns motivate even preeminent actors. None of this should surprise traditional hegemonic-order theorists or those working in broadly similar traditions. But those theories are surprisingly ill-equipped to explain why dominant actors would engage in the costly pursuit of unproductive assets.

Hegemonic-order theorists often adopt rather thin conceptions of international order and how it relates to social hierarchy. Indeed, traditional variants adopt a top-down account of international order. Hegemons “construct the international orders [that] they prefer” and therefore act as ‘system makers and privilege takers.’²³ They construct those orders, including along normative dimensions, in ways that satisfy their interests and ideological preferences.²⁴ Thus, the primary problem of legitimacy concerns consent: convincing other actors that the order serves their interests. Thus, scholars sometimes point to top-down mechanisms of elite socialization in explaining why subordinate actors appear to take their cues from hegemons.²⁵

Others focus on the overall material basis of the ‘hegemonic bargain.’ Hegemonic orders remain legitimate so long as subordinate actors believe, overall, that such orders provide security and economic benefits. For example, Ikenberry focuses on the United States’ ability to credibly commit not to overly exploit its asymmetric position. For him, Washington solved this problem after the Second World War by creating a web of institutions and voice opportunities that restrained its ability to adopt predatory policies. Dynamics of “increasing returns” further ‘locked in’ the international order and rendered American dominance palatable to other states.²⁶ Lake,

²⁰ See Baldwin 1989.

²¹ Lake 2009; Lake 2010; Reus-Smit 1997.

²² Clunan 2014, 274-275. Our discussion primarily pertains to location in social hierarchies as a positional good. Similar logic applies to broader status categories, such as clubs.

²³ Mastanduno 2009, 124.

²⁴ Kupchan 2014.

²⁵ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990.

²⁶ Ikenberry 2001.

who distinguishes his theory from traditional hegemonic-order accounts, sees international hierarchy as something like a social contract that subordinate states accept as legitimate so long as it meets their overall needs.²⁷

In these approaches, status enters into the picture largely in the context of weaker actors. As a general matter, the hegemon necessarily enjoys superior status, in part because it established the terms of status allocation in the first place. The primary question, from a legitimacy perspective, centers around whether *other* states believe that the system affords them status commensurate with their own expectations. Thus, rising powers present a special challenge for orders and incumbent hegemons. As challengers' economic and military resources grow, they possess both the appetite (a "lean and hungry look") and the means to bid for a higher position. Thus, the 'problem' of status and legitimacy concerns the hegemon either adjusting the order to afford greater status to rising powers or compensating those states with other forms of status. Failure to do so inclines those powers toward revisionism.²⁸

In sum, hegemonic-order theories often approach dominant-power legitimacy in very general ways. They focus on the conditions that lead subordinate actors to accept, or reject, the legitimacy of the hegemonic power and the order it has established. However, they generally neglect the actor at the center of this order and remain largely silent about why preeminent powers would *themselves* face incentives to invest in status goods. Since such accounts assume that the hegemon created the order for its own benefit and need only reassure subordinate actors about its intention to live up to its transactional bargains, these theories offer a surprisingly thin analytical apparatus for thinking about social hierarchies in international politics.

A Field-Theoretic Account of Hierarchy

To resolve this oversight, we suggest applying insights about social hierarchies from field theory. As Adler-Nissen argues, "A field is a historically derived system of shared meanings, which define agency and make action intelligible and the agents in a field develop a sense of the social game. The stratification of a field is based on different forms of capital (e.g. economic, social and cultural capital) and the efficacy of the capital depends on the contexts where it is used. Each field has a particular mix of relevant capital, and power cannot be imported easily into a new field."²⁹

Although most field analysis focuses on relatively bounded social spaces,³⁰ Go argues for the extension of field analysis to the level of the international system. Doing so "emphasizes that *all* actors in the field are engaged in the struggle for various species of capital, all players are enabled and constrained by the specific configurations of the field and its cultural rules: or in classic field theory as articulated in studies of electromagnetism, *any* position in the field is 'susceptible' to a 'field effect.'"³¹

²⁷ Lake 2009.

²⁸ Ward 2012; Ward 2013. For example, Larson, Paul et al. 2011, 19) focus overwhelmingly on the behavior of rising powers and weaker states.

²⁹ Adler-Nissen 2008, 668.

³⁰ Pouliot 2007; Pouliot 2008; Pouliot 2010.

³¹ Go 2008, 208.

A field-theoretic approach provides a useful link between hierarchy, international hierarchy, and hegemonic-order theory. As Fourcade notes, “field analysis emphasizes relational thinking—the relative position of actors in a particular space: People with similar... endowments of specific forms of capital... typically share a similar field position.” Moreover, “better endowed agents have stronger field effects.... Agents are subjectively oriented to the field they participate in: The field is primarily *a game* whose rules actors both tacitly abide by and struggle to alter.”³²

In crude terms, military and economic fields operate as relative constants in international politics. Actors occupy positions of super- and subordination within those fields, and exercise power over them, by virtue of holding, respectively, military and economic capital. Although international actors can exchange these two forms of capital for one another, their exchange rates vary across time and space.³³ As many international-relations scholars argue, the contemporary economic system—among other things—renders it more difficult for actors to convert military capital into economic capital than in prior periods of human history.³⁴ Regardless, actors that acquire large stocks of military and economic capital can, all things equal, seek to translate that superordinate status into privileged positions in other international fields.³⁵

Thus, preeminent powers, in traditional hegemonic-order terms, occupy a super-ordinate position in military and economic fields and exerts extremely strong effects on them. The act of converting that position into *hegemony* involves not merely manipulating these field-specific effects, but also deploying its military and economic capital to establish what kinds of *other* assets constitute valuable capital in international social and cultural fields.³⁶ In this way, it establishes social dominance—international hierarchies—across different spectrums and legitimates its superordinate position; hegemony entails maintaining a superordinate position across multiple fields.

Actors do so via a variety of mechanisms. Many of these involve ‘purchasing’ or ‘extracting’ social capital—relationships and ties with other actors—and cultural capital.³⁷ Hegemons, in particular, often themselves play a major role in structuring fields. This finds reflection in the notion that they actively allocate status and prestige, establish proscriptive and prescriptive norms, and so. That is, hegemons *order* international fields. Other mechanisms reside in the secondary effects of enjoying a privileged position in international fields. For instance, actors sometimes fetishize specific cultural, economic, military, and social ‘objects’ associated with high-status political communities in world politics. They conflate these artifacts with the underlying social,

³² Fourcade 2007, 1022.

³³ Pouliot and Mérand 2012, 34.

³⁴ Gilpin 1981, 220. Liberman (1998) argues that conquest can still pay, but notes the greater barriers to extraction in modern societies. See also Brooks 1999.

³⁵ Of course, all things are rarely equal. Actors will sometimes find it difficult to translate economic and military assets into, say, higher cultural status. They may not even try, because doing so provides no clear advantage for their own interests. This was the case with some Steppe formations in Central Asia, whose leaders apparently considered it more profitable to engage in symbolic obeisance toward ruling Chinese dynasties than to try to assert greater status. See Barfield 1989, 134-138.

³⁶ Work on “soft power” highlights how enjoying high levels of military or economic capital can also *passively* shape other fields.

³⁷ We use the term “cultural capital” in terms of the stock of cultural artifacts—from buildings to animated films—and not in terms of tacit cultural knowledge. See Arnoldi 2007, 51-52.

economic, and military relations that stratify international relations. In consequence, they become objects of status and prestige in their own right. Thus, aspiring powers pursue aircraft carriers and other weapons systems of limited military utility because they see them as conferring great-power status.³⁸ They also host Olympic Games and the World Cup.³⁹ Similarly, work on “soft power” stresses how the material success of the United States infuses its cultural products—hip-hop, action films, and Facebook—with value that, in turn, provides Washington with an autonomous power resource.⁴⁰

Hierarchy and Symbolic Assets

Social-field approaches provide a useful heuristic not simply because they recode hegemonic-order theory. They also help make sense of how non-military and non-economic fields become sites of competition. Fields each have “their own ‘stakes’ around which contestants struggle and jostle for position... agents are conditioned in their strategic behavior by their location in the competitive, game-playing character of the field.” They “compete, collude, negotiate, and contest for position.”⁴¹ In this competition, various forms of capital serve as both object and weapon; “capital functions... as the most important criteria for defining an agent’s position in the hierarchy in a field.”⁴²

The relevant process here involves the investment of various assets with specific symbolic importance. Zhang notes that any “objective capital can be expressed and represented through symbolic capital, as it will always have a symbolic form.” But “symbolic capital can exist independently of objective capital: for instance, the word ‘progress’ may carry symbolic capital, but by itself it has no form of objective capital. However, when the symbolic capital contained in the term “progress” is married to something objective, such as tools (a form of economic capital), social networks (social capital), or specific building styles (cultural capital), this infusion of symbolic capital will change their nature and increase their capital.”⁴³

Compare with Lake’s understanding of “symbolic obeisance” as “costly acts that do not involve direct compliance with commands but are nonetheless public, often collective displays of submission that acknowledge and affirm the authority of the ruler.”⁴⁴ For Lake, acts of symbolic obeisance provide evidence of international hierarchy. For instance, when small states committed to provide militarily resources to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, they signaled to the United States that they accepted its superordinate position. But superordinate actors also engage in similar activity. Because they want to preserve social dominance, they face incentives to accrue symbolic capital in order to demonstrate *their* position. Leading powers strive for symbolic capital in order to legitimate their politically super-ordinate position: they “seek a ‘capital of trust’ that sustains *symbolic domination*: powerful states do cultural work not to exist but to rightfully occupy and enhance their dominant position in the field.”

³⁸ Eyre and Suchman 1996.

³⁹ Black and Van Der Westhuizen 2004; Broudehoux 2007.

⁴⁰ Nye 1990. For a critical discussion, see Bially Mattern 2005.

⁴¹ Savage, Warde et al. 2005, 39.

⁴² Berling 2012, 455.

⁴³ Zhang 2004, 7.

⁴⁴ Lake 2009, 165.

Indeed, “as powerful states seek symbolic capital to win ‘trust,’ they do so through what Suchman... calls ‘strategic’ and ‘pragmatic’ legitimacy, aiming for symbolic capital as a strategy of power amidst their struggle in the field.”⁴⁵

The nature of that symbolic capital—and all forms of capital—depends on the configuration of relevant international fields. This matters. First, some scholars argue that states divert resources into unproductive, but highly visible, goods as a form of “conspicuous consumption.”⁴⁶ Thus, Pu and Schweller argue that “some projects” including “space programs” are “intended as costly signals of great-power status, for they require enormous capabilities and resources that most states do not possess.”⁴⁷ Early notes that “space capabilities” serve “as important symbols of national pride and indicators of status to other countries in the world.”⁴⁸ But, of course, *many* projects require enormous resources. As Pouliot argues, “the largely arbitrary reasons why some yardsticks gain political prominence... stems from contingent politics and practices...”⁴⁹ Particular projects only acquire such importance if they become ‘infused’ with symbolic capital: and that depends on dynamics within and across fields.⁵⁰

Second, although militarily and economic dominant actors—including hegemons—exercise ability to shape other fields, that ability remains limited. The dominant actor finds it comparatively less expensive to ‘purchase’ assets that fit within existing fields of symbolic value than to rewrite those fields. Moreover, hegemons face significant risk if they attempt to do so. They owe their position of social dominance to having accrued significant symbolic capital under the existing ‘rules of the game’. Changing the basic terms of social priority—turning revisionist against their own order—threatens those assets. Furthermore, holding that hegemons can rewrite the rules of the game at will assumes that dominant actors can somehow stand outside their social habits, practices, and dispositions. In many cases, trying to overhaul the rules of the game will seem simply implausible.

This suggests that leaders will find themselves limited with respect to how they maintain and pursue social dominance through the acquisition of field-relevant capital in general, and symbolic capital in particular. Rulers cannot, under normal conditions, simply abandon long-standing criteria of legitimacy without risking political instability or even overthrow.⁵¹ Even leaders of hegemonic states will often face similar constraints with respect to their position in the international hierarchy.

Thus, we should expect even superordinate actors in international hierarchies to invest in non-military and non-economic assets connected to legitimating their social dominance. During periods of acute status uncertainty or ambiguity,⁵² they may even divert significant economic,

⁴⁵ Go 2008, 208.

⁴⁶ Pu and Schweller 2011, 151.

⁴⁷ Pu and Schweller 2011.

⁴⁸ Early 2014, 56. On the distribution of space capabilities during the Cold War, see Peterson 1997, 245-246.

⁴⁹ Pouliot 2011, 199. See also Neumann 2011.

⁵⁰ Arnoldi 2007, 52.

⁵¹ For example, Ottoman rulers long practiced fratricide in order to secure the throne rather than attempt to rewrite succession rules. See Barfield 1989, 134-138.

⁵² On status ambiguity as a source of conflict, see Volgy and Mayhall 1995; Wohlforth 2009.

material, or social capital to accrue unproductive, but symbolically valuable, assets. The choice of those assets depends a great deal on the nature of preexisting fields, as well as the relative position of relevant actors within those fields.

This framework helps account for both the Zheng He expeditions and the Apollo program. In both cases, dominant actors exchanged significant economic capital for symbolic capital in light of the opportunities and constraints created by the fields in which they sought to legitimate their superordinate position. They faced challenges to their legitimacy on ‘their own terms.’ They believed, rightly or wrongly, that a failure to secure specific kinds of symbolic capital threatened their superordinate position.

Comparing Camelot and the Central Kingdom

Our comparison implies something like an “uncommon foundations” strategy of “identifying causal mechanisms in widely different cases....”⁵³ Indeed, the cases involve enormous differences across almost any variable we might contemplate. Even ignoring cultural, technological, institutional, regime, military, economic, and social differences, the United States of the 1950s and 1960s was a sovereign state facing a significant international competitor across multiple international fields. The Yongle Emperor faced military threats, but his greatest challenges emerged from elite perceptions that his rule was illegitimate. But if similar analytics and causal mechanisms provide explanatory leverage *despite* these differences, then the uncommon characteristics of the case amount to a methodological feature rather than a bug.⁵⁴

Moreover, the analysis of the two cases itself captures an important issue in theorizing about international hierarchy. As we detail further below, the Ming Dynasty’s writ sits uneasily within conventional distinctions between “domestic” and “international” politics. Not only do some scholars suggest important parallels between the so-called “tribute system” and the American-led international hierarchy,⁵⁵ but the tribute system reaffirmed the Ming Dynasty’s emperor as the head of a consciously multi-polity system.⁵⁶

The United States and Maintaining International Hierarchy during the Cold War

International-relations theorists may only recently have rediscovered “international hierarchy,” but a wide variety of international-relations and historical scholarship has long identified the post-war United States as occupying a leadership position in a variety of international hierarchies.⁵⁷ Both applied hegemonic-stability and power-transition theories treat the United States as a global hegemonic power after the Second World War. Even structural realists assume

⁵³ McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001, 83. See also Hui 2005, 8.

⁵⁴ In general, see Nexon 2009, 65; Tilly 1997.

⁵⁵ Khong 2013.

⁵⁶ Tilly 1995; Tilly 1997.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Lundestad 1986, 263-277. Similarly, Ikenberry (2001; 2011) for instance, identifies the post-1945 United States as a hegemon. For a recent reinterpretation of U.S. visions of the post-Second World War order, see Mazower 2012, 191-243.

that the United States managed its share of the US-Soviet bipolar system.⁵⁸ Cold War historiography highlights the hierarchical character of world politics during this time, and of the systems led by the United States after the U.S.-Soviet rivalry solidified.⁵⁹

Indeed, scholars treat the United States—sometimes simultaneously—as both a hegemonic power and as a pole of a competitive bipolar system during the early Cold War. Some realists reconcile this by treating the US as an incumbent hegemon and the Soviet Union as a rising challenger, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁰ Washington and its allies recognized the existence of a US-led order comprising (at least) the advanced industrialized democracies, most of Latin America, and much of non-communist Asia.⁶¹ They saw the Soviet Union as both a material challenger to this order and as an ideological rival with the capability to attract the political support of their own citizens and states.⁶² From the 1950s onward, competition became particularly intense in the newly decolonizing regions of Africa and Asia, with tremendous uncertainty about which hierarchical system the ‘third world’ would join.⁶³

Policymakers were uncertain about the ultimate result of competitions for geopolitical alignment, as well as which system would prove the most successful. After the Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, the scientific ‘arms race’ became a focal point: success in space seemed to provide a critical demonstration of the superiority of Soviet communism or democratic capitalism as the best route for the progress of the human species.⁶⁴ It may seem fantastic, 25 years after the collapse of the USSR, that Soviet communism once appeared not only as a viable alternative to liberal capitalism but also a superior one in its capacity for economic growth. But many policymakers—and ordinary people across the globe—saw matters that way. The idea that the United States could lose the Cold War not just through military inferiority, but through failing to concretely and continuously make good on the promise of its ideological wagers, animated American and Soviet policy.⁶⁵

East Asia and the Construction of Hierarchy During the Early Ming Dynasty

Empires blend characteristics that scholars habituated to thinking in terms of “Westphalian” states view as “domestic” and “international”. Once established, imperial elites administer relations among peripheries in ways that resemble forms of “domestic” governance elsewhere. But empires themselves may comprise territories and groups that remain culturally, economically, and (in their interior arrangements) politically as otherwise distinct as sovereign polities in other systems. Empires therefore represent a particular hierarchical version of international order.

⁵⁸ Waltz (1979, 200-201, 206-207, 210) not only identifies the United States and the Soviet Union as poles in global politics, but also describes the U.S. role within the Western world and the ambitions of U.S. leaders in hegemonic-order terms.

⁵⁹ For a recent discussion of the significance of these specific hierarchies, see McDonald 2015.

⁶⁰ Schweller and Wohlforth 2000.

⁶¹ Particularly after the Suez crisis.

⁶² For instance, Saunders 2013 and Von Eschen 2009.

⁶³ For a survey, Gaddis 2006, 119-155.

⁶⁴ Early 2014, 56; Fursenko and Naftali 2007, 138-167; McDougall 1985; Sheehan 2007, 25-32, 40-42.

⁶⁵ As we elaborate below, the symbolic stakes of the Apollo program go beyond those scholars identify with national projects as status symbols in general, and space projects in particular; Steinberg 1987.

Threats to the core can similarly take on “foreign” and “domestic” guises, such as conquest of all or part of the empire by an external actor, secession by disaffected elites in one or several peripheries, or rebellions by elites or other insurgents throughout the empire. Maintaining imperial rule thereby depends on a combination of “material” factors—providing security and other public goods to the periphery—as well as on sustaining the legitimacy of both the imperial order and of the ruler at its top.⁶⁶

The Ming dynasty, which emerged from a peasant rebellion against the Mongol Yuan, followed this pattern. Ming China comprised “[t]he world’s largest society, spread across an area as large as Western Europe,”⁶⁷ linked by an imperial bureaucracy and military system centered on the court. Ming government practiced differentiated rule throughout its provinces and frontier areas. Much of the day-to-day business of imperial rule operated through elite intermediaries such as landlords and other grantees.⁶⁸ Recurrent periods of conflict and engagement with various steppe polities to the north and west of the Ming administrative zone—including, especially in the early years of the dynasty, with the remnants of the Yuan dynasty itself—demonstrate the external military threats the Ming faced. Although Steppe polities ebbed, any ideological threat they posed to the legitimacy of the Ming dynasty rapidly diminished after Ming victories in the 1370s and 1380s.⁶⁹

As long as Ming rulers could avoid peasant rebellions and conquest from the Steppe, their crucial “national security” task involved maintaining legitimacy as the rightful holders of *the* dominant position in the imperial hierarchy. The emperor had to perform according to an extensive, demanding set of norms partly handed down by tradition and partly created by elites—including the Confucian scholar-official elite—that both justified imperial rule and sought to circumscribe the throne’s arbitrary and autocratic tendencies.⁷⁰

In the early fourteenth century, the Ming Dynasty faced a crisis of legitimacy. The dynastic founder, the Hongwu emperor, died in 1398, leaving his 14-year-old grandson to rule as the Jianwen emperor. Influenced by his Confucian scholar-bureaucratic advisers, the Jianwen emperor began executing potential rivals—including his uncles, imperial princes who had been enfeoffed with substantial domains under the Hongwu emperor. In response, Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan, rebelled, defeated the Jianwen emperor, and assumed office as the Yongle emperor. He immediately confronted external foes—including a perennial security threat along the northern frontier—the potential for an internal rebellion, and the problem that many elites viewed him as a usurper and his rule as illegitimate.⁷¹ To quell the frontier, he embarked on a combination of diplomatic and military means; to ward off an internal military challenge, he created a new military “nobility” loyal to him; and to cement both policies, he removed the capital from Nanjing to the former Mongol capital now renamed Beijing.⁷² Yet the challenge of proving his legitimacy remained, especially in the face of denunciations by scholar-officials. Although he

⁶⁶ Doyle 1986, 11. See also Cooley 2005; Musgrave and Nexon 2013.

⁶⁷ Mote and Twitchett 1988, 6.

⁶⁸ Hucker 1998, 12-16.

⁶⁹ Rossabi 1998, 221-271; Zhang 2015, 119-152.

⁷⁰ For an overview, see Hucker 1998.

⁷¹ Cham 1988, 184-201.

⁷² Cham 1988, 206-208.

executed many such critics and their kin (amounting to tens of thousands of people), questions of the Yongle emperor's legitimacy raged for centuries.⁷³

Disambiguating Status and Explaining Spectacles

Both cases reflect conditions in which dominant actors—the United States and the Yongle emperor—faced, for different reasons, the dynamics of status ambiguity in international hierarchical societies. For the United States, status ambiguity stemmed from the challenge of another political community—itsself the leader of a separate hierarchical system—that made plausible claims to supplant the United States. These claims operated across multiple fields: military, economic, and cultural. Neither Washington nor Moscow believed that they could concede any of them. After all, failure might affect the alignment of not just the global periphery but even ultimately the core members of each camp—or so Washington and Moscow believed.⁷⁴ For the Yongle emperor, the fact that he had usurped his throne compounded the problems common to all rulers of newly established dynasties. Even to the extent that the Ming Dynasty could claim clear legitimacy according to the terms of Chinese social-political hierarchy, Yongle might fail to command the allegiance of the constituent actors of the system—the imperial bureaucracy, the provinces, and the periphery.

In the midst of these crises of legitimacy, both actors chose to invest mammoth sums in objectively unproductive displays. The Yongle emperor funded costly expeditions to Southeast and South Asia; the United States embarked on a mission to land a man on the Moon. These choices were causally linked to the crises by a logic of hierarchical domination that binds dominant actors who wish to retain their position to perform in role-appropriate ways. As we detail below, this claim, provides greater explanatory leverage than a number of alternative accounts.

Rival Explanations

Following Bennett and Checkel, we present rival explanations, including both idiographic explanations and general ones derived from other international-relations theories.⁷⁵ We present evidence about why we discount these in favor of our preferred approach. In some cases, our rejoinders are brief since the evidence appears conclusive: “being equally tough on alternative explanations does not require going into equal depth ... on every one of them.”⁷⁶

Idiographic Explanations

One explanation for the Apollo missions holds that Kennedy's leadership inspired Americans—as then-Senator Barack Obama put it after winning the 2008 New Hampshire primary, that

⁷³ Ditmanson 2007, 110-158;Hucker 1998, 201-202.

⁷⁴ Logsdon (2010, 12) notes that a CIA survey, leaked to the *Washington Post*, found that “in anticipation of future U.S.-U.S.S.R. standing, foreign opinion... appears to have declining confidence in the U.S. as the ‘wave of the future’ in a number of critical areas”

⁷⁵ Bennett and Checkel 2014, 23.

⁷⁶ Bennett and Checkel 2014, 23-24.

Kennedy was “the president who chose the moon as our new frontier”.⁷⁷ We mention this explanation only to dismiss it. Kennedy was a space skeptic, not an enthusiast, and regretted being forced into an expensive space race.⁷⁸ We similarly reject other popular explanations evoking elective affinities between a supposed American “frontier spirit” and the exploration of space. Such mythic invocations are particularly popular among contemporary boosters of manned space exploration (and even colonization).⁷⁹ But, the Apollo project never enjoyed the kind of overwhelming support this hypotheses posits, and evidence from Kennedy’s decision-making significantly undermines them.

A more compelling explanation views the space race as an extension of Cold War rivalries, either in military-technological terms (viewing advances in rocketry as demonstrations of military capability) or in terms of international or domestic prestige.⁸⁰ This explanation proves more persuasive but also ultimately incomplete. In the specific case of Apollo, the rivalry explanation fails to explain why President Kennedy committed American reputational capital to the *Moon missions*, as opposed to less costly or more useful forms of space competition. Indeed, Kennedy pushed for many other options to pursue the rivalry. More generally, the explanation assumes, rather than explains, why Moscow and Washington viewed space as a competitive field.

One common view of the Ming expeditions portrays them as analogies to the fifteenth-century European voyages of discovery. This argument confuses temporal correlation with causation. It lacks a compelling explanation for what shared causal forces might compel both Chinese and European actors to engage in exploration. No historical evidence suggests that the two categories of voyages were similar in *any* respect except their timing. Whereas European courts funded expeditions into more or less uncharted territories—for a mix of strategic and profit-seeking motivations—the Chinese expeditions “were essentially an urbane but systematic tour of inspection of the known world”.⁸¹

Another interpretation focuses on Ming court politics, especially to rivalry between the Confucian scholar-officials who comprised the bureaucracy and the emperor and his supporters. Prominent members of the Confucian scholarly elite viewed the voyages as scandalously wasteful: “The Grand Fleet ... swallowed up funds which, in the view of all right-thinking bureaucrats, would be much better spent on water-conservancy projects for the farmers, or in agrarian financing, ‘ever-normal granaries’, and the like.”⁸² On the advice of scholar-elite officials, Yongle’s immediate successor, Hongxi, canceled further voyages, but he died after less than a year on the throne. His more energetic successor, the Xuande emperor, commissioned the seventh—and, it proved, final—expedition, which sailed in 1433. Only with the Xuande emperor’s death did it become clear that the anti-fleet faction had prevailed.⁸³

⁷⁷ “Barack Obama’s New Hampshire Primary Speech,” 8 January 2008, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁷⁸ Garber 1999, 5-16.

⁷⁹ Launius 2005, 129-139.

⁸⁰ McDougall, 307-324.

⁸¹ Needham 1971, 529. See also Needham 1971, 508-535, 477-535.

⁸² Needham 1971, 524.

⁸³ Needham 1971, 525.

The court-politics argument better explains why the voyages ended than why they began. If the voyages were as expensive as their critics charged (and the evidence suggests they were), why undertake them at all? And if the voyages yielded returns commensurate with the costs, then why stop them? An explanation focused on the contextual gains to the emperor's prestige resolves both questions, as well as the bitterness of the scholar-official class toward the project. The expense of the treasure fleets allowed the emperor to deter challengers by performing a role as the center of an expanded tributary network, thereby bolstering his position in the imperial hierarchy. Thus, the court justified the expense despite the lack of "objective" gains. Emperors who faced no such crisis of legitimacy would have no need to demonstrate their fitness.

A final idiographic explanation centers on the role of the so-called tributary system. The term describes a complex of ritualized exchanges of emissaries and tribute that Chinese rulers employed to elaborate their claims to occupy the center of the international order. The Hongwu emperor placed special emphasis on the system.⁸⁴ The Ming court conducted relations with many powerful actors outside its direct ambit (including the polities whose successors would later become known as Korea and Japan) through a system of such practices.⁸⁵ Dreyer argues that the purpose of Zheng He's missions was "the enforcement of the Chinese tributary system on the countries of the Indian Ocean",⁸⁶ and Wang interprets the expeditions (and other adventurous policies pursued by the Yongle emperor in Mongolia and Vietnam) as a natural result of Ming hegemony in seeking to extend the Sinocentric order to new lands.⁸⁷

Yet an explanation for Ming expansion of the tributary system as resulting from the Ming's role as "system manager" of an international order explains too much.⁸⁸ The fleets were *uniquely* large and costly endeavors that ended almost as suddenly as they began. Structural factors cannot explain why the voyages began when they did, why they stopped so quickly, or why the bureaucracy was so opposed to them. Moreover, such an argument would require that the Ming court reaped material benefits in keeping with of its outlays. As we discuss below, the evidence shows that the fleets focused on distributing material goods instead of profits.

General Explanations

International-relations theory suggests a number of rival explanations. Perhaps the most prominent category focuses on military competition. The argument enjoys some face validity. Both the Ming fleets and the Apollo missions had military connections. The Ming expeditions carried as many as 300 ships and 28,000 men in the largest single voyage.⁸⁹ As Dreyer writes, "Zheng He's fleet ... was an armada, in the sense of the Spanish Armada of 1588: its primary purpose was not to fight other fleets but to transport Chinese troops who could be disembarked to overcome resistance on land."⁹⁰ The expeditions therefore "overawed local authorities

⁸⁴ Finlay 2008.

⁸⁵ Kang 2010;Zhang 2015.

⁸⁶ Dreyer 2007, 3.

⁸⁷ Yuan-kang 2012, 143.

⁸⁸ Yuan-kang 2012, 152.

⁸⁹ Finlay 1991.

⁹⁰ Dreyer 2007, 81

without fighting on many more occasions” in pursuit of their objectives.⁹¹ Similarly, all but two of the Apollo astronauts who walked on the Moon were active-duty military personnel (and one of the civilians, Neil Armstrong, had earlier been a naval aviator), and the Saturn rockets that launched their spacecraft ultimately derived from technology developed for military purposes.

But neither the Ming expeditions nor the Apollo missions were militarily cost-effective. The Ming faced or initiated security challenges in Vietnam and in Mongolia, near their core areas. The vast sums the court directed toward the expeditions had no bearing on these military campaigns, nor were they directed against any “over-the-horizon” threat. Spending on Apollo-specific technologies crowded out other aspects of the space program and military investment. Besides, U.S. policymakers believed that they led the Soviets in military exploitation of space even without Apollo. NASA Administrator James Webb and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara argued for increased spending on manned space exploration *despite* its lack of military payoff: “[m]ajor successes, such as orbiting a man as the Soviets have just done, lend national prestige even though the scientific, commercial or military value of the undertaking may by ordinary standards be marginal or economically unjustified.”⁹²

This discussion highlights the importance of differentiating the “space race” that began with the Soviet launch of Sputnik in October 1957 from the manned lunar missions of the 1960s. Sheehan, for instance, offers a realist interpretation of the the “space race” of the late 1950s and early 1960s emphasizing the material benefits of the post-Sputnik race: “the acquisition of military capability, both in terms of missiles able to deliver nuclear weapons and satellites capable of securely performing reconnaissance missions”. But he carefully distinguishes this competition from the material implications of the race to the Moon, in which spillover potential was much lower.⁹³ For example, after the development of the Minuteman system, U.S. ICBMs employed solid propellants, while NASA’s rockets used liquid propellants, a divergence that limited technology transfer.⁹⁴ Moreover, as early as 1961, policymakers realized that Saturn-sized rockets would likely not meet any military need.⁹⁵

Realists might assert that intangible security benefits flowed from the lunar race specifically and the space race more generally. But this only begs the question of why space emerged as a field of competition at all. Thinking about why space exploration quickly developed into a contested field supports our contention about the importance of *symbolic* assets in ordering social hierarchies. Evidence about Soviet decision-making under Khrushchev suggests that prestige considerations mattered substantially. Although the scale of Western and non-aligned shock at Sputnik surprised Khrushchev and the rest of the Soviet leadership, they quickly moved to exploit the Soviet lead

⁹¹ Dreyer 2007, 129

⁹² Webb, James E., and Robert McNamara, “Recommendations for Our National Space Program: Changes, Policies, Goals”, 8 May 1961, online reproduction of files from John F. Kennedy Library, <https://research.archives.gov/id/193859>.

⁹³ Sheehan 2007, 8-9.

⁹⁴ Faro, Matthew, 2012, “Ballistic Missile Technology 101—Rocket Fuel,” <http://csis.org/blog/ballistic-missile-technology-101-rocket-fuel>, and “Table of US ICBM Forces,” NRDC, <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab3.asp>.

⁹⁵ For instance, Summary Minutes of the Meeting of the National Aeronautics and Space Council, *FRUS* Vol. XXV, Document 367.

in space, blocking the scientific priorities of the USSR's space establishment to use first satellites and then human space missions to trumpet Communism's superiority.⁹⁶

Another strand of explanation might posit that economic incentives justified such massive investments. These explanations strain credulity. The principal critics of both the Ming and the Moon missions attacked them precisely on grounds of waste and extravagance, which the imperial court and the White House rebutted on grounds of nonmaterial gains. Chinese emperors, including Yongle, occasionally used tributary exchanges to mask profitable—but unseemly—trading ventures, as in the case of Yongle's missions to Central Asia.⁹⁷ Although the Chinese economy benefitted from the goods (like ambergris and cobalt) that the treasure ships returned with,⁹⁸ even these commercial exchanges were seen to play a part in the tribute system, since such goods were understood as “tokens of submission in the form of native products” that allowed the foreign rulers access to Chinese culture.⁹⁹ Little evidence supports claims that the exchanges in the maritime expeditions amounted to the same level of profit. In the U.S. case, specific claims about the economic benefits of the space program tend to conflate the lunar program with other uses of space, such as earth observation and telecommunications. Otherwise, they rest on nebulous long-term benefits.¹⁰⁰ Such arguments also tend to ignore or downplay the opportunity cost of human space exploration compared to alternative modes of exploration. Although the first manned circumlunar voyage occurred in 1968, robotic missions to the Moon proved feasible as early as the Soviet Luna missions in 1959, which hit the Moon's surface and photographed its far side. Perhaps the strongest argument against the economic benefits for the Ming and the Moon voyages comes from the rapidity with which successive imperial and presidential administrations discontinued them.

Finally, perhaps domestic politics played a role in both cases. One type of explanation highlights the role of sectoral interests in shaping states' decisions. We are unaware of historians who argue that such factors instigated the Ming expeditions, and although congressional lobbying shaped how—and where—NASA spent its budget,¹⁰¹ evidence that such considerations prompted the Kennedy administration to undertake the project remains scanty at best, as we detail below. Another version of this category of explanation might suggest that a need to secure greater domestic support drove Kennedy's policy. However, we find little evidence that such motivations played a significant role in his decision-making compared to considerations of international prestige. Contemporaneous public opinion polls belie the retrospective idea that the Apollo missions enjoyed popular support. A May 1961 Gallup poll—just days before Kennedy announced the Moon goal—found that 58 percent of respondents rejected spending the estimated \$40 billion to carry out a manned Moon mission.¹⁰² A June 1961 poll found a plurality of 46 percent of respondents opposed a manned lunar program costing \$7 billion to \$9 billion;

⁹⁶ Fursenko and Naftali 2007, 149-152; Sheehan 2007, 28-29.

⁹⁷ Cham 1988, 261.

⁹⁸ Finlay 2008, p. 337.

⁹⁹ Finlay 1991, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, the contributions of NASA officials and others to a symposium on the *Freakonomics* blog: <http://freakonomics.com/2008/01/11/is-space-exploration-worth-the-cost-a-freakonomics-quorum/>.

¹⁰¹ Dallek 1997, 72-77.

¹⁰² Roper Center, USGALLUP.61-645.R002A.

only 42 percent supported it.¹⁰³ Launius's review finds only one poll, in 1965, in which a majority of Americans favored sending astronauts to the Moon before the Apollo 11 mission.¹⁰⁴ (Even immediately after Apollo 11, only 53 percent of respondents reported they believed Apollo was worth the expense.)

In the case of the Ming, we argue that "domestic" legitimacy, in a sense, played an important role in the decision for the expeditions. However, describing the audience for whom the Yongle emperor performed as "domestic" smuggles in anachronistic language. The Ming Dynasty ruled not a nation-state but an empire combining attributes of domestic and international politics. The audience for the Zheng He expeditions included the court, elites beyond the court, and other actors distributed across a transnational empire, as well as the outer peripheries of Ming imperial influence.¹⁰⁵ Sectoral influences mattered a great deal in affecting the Ming expeditions—but only in terms of ending them.

In both cases, standard international-relations accounts offer explanations for why both categories of voyages ended, but this only makes their origins and pursuit all the more puzzling. However, the relevant mechanisms track better with the symbolic politics of hierarchy framework we develop in this paper.

The Apollo Project and the Accumulation of Symbolic Stock

Kennedy had only been in office for a few weeks when the Soviet Union launched cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit, the first human in space.¹⁰⁶ In many ways, this Soviet triumph was "a worse blow to US prestige than the Sputnik launch ... since by 1961 the American people and US allies abroad were aware that the US had been engaged in a competition to launch an astronaut before the Soviet Union."¹⁰⁷ Just over a month later, Kennedy addressed the U.S. Congress in a special State of the Union message to propose the goal of landing an astronaut on the Moon by the end of the decade, telling the legislators "No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind or more important for the long-range exploration of space, and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."¹⁰⁸

Overwhelming evidence demonstrates that Kennedy chose to pursue a manned mission to the Moon because not only because of U.S. claims to leadership of the "free world" but the intense competition to demonstrate the priority of democratic capitalism as the most progressive and successful political model in world politics.¹⁰⁹ Without that competition, it is unlikely Kennedy would have focused on manned space exploration in general or a Moon mission in particular. He

¹⁰³ Roper Center, USGALLUP.61-647.R030.

¹⁰⁴ Launius 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Recall our discussion of the implications of taking hierarchy seriously.

¹⁰⁶ McDougall 1985, 317-324.

¹⁰⁷ Sheehan 2007, 48.

¹⁰⁸ John F. Kennedy: "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs," May 25, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8151>.

¹⁰⁹ Logsdon 2010, 12.

had largely ignored space matters before entering the White House.¹¹⁰ In his otherwise bellicose inaugural address, he had singled out science, including space exploration, as an area of potential U.S.-Soviet cooperation.¹¹¹ As early as the day of Gagarin's flight, Kennedy sought to downplay the space race in favor of promoting American strengths in other scientific areas, including desalination.¹¹² Despite his reluctance, the media and international reaction to Gagarin's spaceflight convinced him over the following two days that "nothing [was] more important" than beating the Soviets in space.¹¹³

Even then, setting the goal of a moon landing stemmed not from some supposed romantic yearning for a final frontier but a calculated search for a benchmark where U.S. disadvantages vis-à-vis the Soviet Union—notably, its lack of a reliable heavy-lifting rocket—would be counterbalanced by its superior industrial and organizational potential.¹¹⁴ Kennedy pushed his advisers to investigate alternative national goals—putting a laboratory in space, a manned circumnavigation of the Moon, landing a robotic probe on the lunar surface, or (his last choice) "a rocket to go to the moon and back with a man."¹¹⁵ NASA advised that a manned lunar mission provided the only one of these goals for which United States enjoyed a sure chance of beating the Soviets.¹¹⁶

If feasible, Kennedy probably would have chosen a less costly benchmark as a way to demonstrate U.S. leadership. Apollo proved enormously expensive. The World War II-era Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic weapons, cost approximately \$22 billion in 2008 dollars; the Apollo project totaled \$98 billion. The Manhattan Project claimed a peak of one percent of annual federal spending; in its highest year, the Apollo program received 2.2 percent of the federal budget.¹¹⁷ It was unusual for the fiscally restrained Kennedy to endorse such a costly plan. Nor did these expenditures surprise policymakers: a Bureau of the Budget official recounts that "there was never a major decision like this made with the same degree of eyes-open, knowing-what-you're-getting-in-for" character.¹¹⁸ (Indeed, driven in part by concerns about cost, Kennedy even considered collaborative lunar exploration efforts with the Soviets in

¹¹⁰ Logsdon 2010, 6-11.

¹¹¹ John F. Kennedy: "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8032>.

¹¹² John F. Kennedy: "The President's News Conference," April 12, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8055>.

¹¹³ Quoted in Logsdon 2010, Kindle location 1786.

¹¹⁴ Jerome Wiesner to Kennedy, 20 February 1961, in *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS] 1961-63*, Volume XXV, Document 386.

¹¹⁵ Logsdon 2010, 80.

¹¹⁶ Dryden Notes, 22 April 1961, in *FRUS 1961-1963*, Volume XXV, Doc. 362. The early Kennedy evaluations closely mirrored the conclusions about Soviet capabilities reached by an Eisenhower-era National Security Council report years before. *FRUS 1958-1960*, Volume II, Doc. 442, Annex A.

¹¹⁷ Stine 2009, 6. These numbers are conservative. Launius (2012, 168) describes NASA as claiming almost 4 percent of all federal expenditures during Apollo's peak years, while Logsdon (2010, 2-3) estimates the total Apollo cost at \$151 billion in 2010 dollars.

¹¹⁸ Logsdon 2010, 118.

1963, after the initial shock of Gagarin's flight had worn off.¹¹⁹ Yet overtures along those lines never bore fruit.¹²⁰)

Kennedy reinforced the message that international considerations of prestige, not the intrinsic value of space exploration or space science, justified the expense in a tape-recorded November 1962 meeting NASA Administrator James Webb and other officials:

KENNEDY: Everything we do ought really to be tied to getting on the Moon ahead of the Russians.

WEBB: Why can't it be tied to preeminence in space, which are your own ...

KENNEDY: Because, by God, we keep—we've been telling everybody we're preeminent in space for five years and nobody believes it because they have the booster and the satellite. We know all about the number of satellites we put up, two or three times the number of the Soviet Union ... we're ahead scientifically. It's like that instrument you got up at Stanford which is costing us a hundred and twenty-five million dollars and everybody tells me we're the number one in the world. And what is it? I can't think what it is.

MULTIPLE SOURCES: The linear accelerator.

KENNEDY: I'm sorry, that's wonderful, but nobody knows anything about it! ... [T]he policy ought to be that this is *the* top-priority program of the Agency, and one of the two things, except for defense, the top priority of the United States government. I think that that is the position we ought to take. Now, this may not change anything about that schedule, but at least we ought to be clear, otherwise we shouldn't be spending this kind of money because I'm not that interested in space. I think it's good; I think we ought to know about it; we're ready to spend reasonable amounts of money. But we're talking about these *fantastic* expenditures which wreck our budget and all these other domestic programs and the only justification for it, in my opinion, to do it in this time or fashion, is because we hope to beat them and demonstrate that starting behind, as we did by a couple years, by God, we passed them.¹²¹

As Kennedy had foreseen, the eventual success of the Apollo missions yielded substantial symbolic returns for the United States. President Richard Nixon greeted the Apollo 11 astronauts onboard the USS *Hornet* after their splashdown in the Pacific Ocean, the centerpiece of his tour of U.S. allies around the world.¹²² The Apollo 11 astronauts toured 24 countries on the

¹¹⁹ National Security Policy Planning Paper, "Implications of Outer Space in the 1970s", undated ca. May 1963. *FRUS 1961-63* Volume XXV Doc. 381.

¹²⁰ See Logsdon 2010, Chapter 11; Sheehan 2007.

¹²¹ Transcript of Presidential Meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House on Supplemental Appropriations for NASA, 21 November 1962, via <http://history.nasa.gov/JFK-Webbconv/pages/transcript.pdf>.

¹²² Heppenheimer 1999. Available at NASA History Office. <http://history.nasa.gov/SP-4221/ch9.htm>.

GIANTSTEP-Apollo 11 Presidential Goodwill Tour,¹²³ and the Nixon administration sent lunar samples to 135 countries as tokens of U.S. friendship.¹²⁴ With astronauts having achieved their mission, the Nixon administration cancelled the final three planned Moon missions. In addition to diverting funds to the space shuttle, which was to be an affordable, reliable space transportation system, the Nixon administration instructed NASA to carry out cooperative ventures to symbolize the turn from rivalry to détente, culminating in the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, a linking of U.S. and Soviet spacecraft in orbit envisioned by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.¹²⁵

The Crisis of Legitimacy and the Ming Treasure Fleets

We lack the same kind of direct evidence about the calculations of the Yongle emperor and other actors in Ming politics like the tape recordings and memoranda for the Kennedy administration. Few records of the decision to undertake the voyage have survived. Indeed, most scholars accept that later generations of scholar-officials who opposed the missions destroyed the relevant archives.¹²⁶ Yet the available evidence strongly supports our argument that the court used the treasure fleets as a way of quelling doubts about the legitimacy of the Yongle emperor. Once the legitimacy crisis ended, the court no longer saw a reason to pursue the project. With imperial favor for the project withdrawn, its critics among the scholar-official class easily terminated subsequent voyages.

We described earlier the nature of the legitimacy crisis occasioned by the Yongle emperor's usurpation of the Jianwen emperor. To resolve this problem, Yongle turned increasingly to external policies: "in the Confucian view, a good emperor naturally attracted the so-called barbarians to 'come and be transformed'...The more embassies [Yongle received], the more legitimate [he] would appear to his own people."¹²⁷ Accordingly, the Yongle emperor embarked on an aggressive policy toward external polities, both those neighboring or nearly neighboring core Ming areas (like Japan and Korea) and those much farther abroad. The logic appears to have been clear: the larger the extent of the tributary system, the more legitimate the reign. The conclusion that the expeditions intended to "display the might of the Ming, bring known polities to demonstrated submission to the Ming, and collect treasures for the court"—all to further the legitimacy claims of Yongle—thus proves more plausible than any alternative.¹²⁸

The Yongle emperor ordered the construction of the fleets soon after seizing power.¹²⁹ Building the fleets required felling entire forests and "hundreds of households of carpenters, smiths, sailmakers, ropemakers, caulkers, carters and haulers, even timekeepers." It produced an armada

¹²³ Linn, Priscilla. 2009. "The Journey After 'One Giant Leap For Mankind'." *Dipnote: U.S. Department of State Official Blog*. <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2009/07/20/journey-after-one-giant-leap-mankind>.

¹²⁴ Kloc 2012.

¹²⁵ Sheehan 2007, 63-67.

¹²⁶ Needham 1971, 525 and Finlay 1991, 12.

¹²⁷ Rossabi 1998, 222.

¹²⁸ Wade 2008, 592.

¹²⁹ Wade 2008, 592.

that “Medieval Europe could not have conceived of.”¹³⁰ The 1405 voyage included seven ambassadors, ten deputy ambassadors, a few dozen supervisors, 800 sailors, and 26,000 soldiers and their officers.¹³¹ This accumulation of force was not merely for show. On each of the early voyages, the fleet and its embarked troops operated to suppress pirates and other outlaws as well as deployed against one or two local governments who attacked the fleet.¹³²

The Yongle emperor entrusted the command of almost all voyages to the eunuch admiral Zheng He. (The second mission was probably given to another eunuch, and eunuchs also filled most subordinate command roles.)¹³³ Emperors saw eunuchs as more trustworthy than officials, both because they lacked heirs (meaning they could not enhance their family’s status—at the extreme, by founding a new dynasty) and because, unlike the highly regarded scholar-officials, they were outcasts wholly reliant upon imperial favor.¹³⁴ Turning over such a major project to a eunuch official highlights that the mission was too important to be left to the regular civil government led by the kind of scholar-officials who had backed the Jianwen emperor.

The treasure-fleet voyages involved more complicated and social functions than the comparatively physically-determined mission parameters of the Apollo lunar missions. The expeditions comprise seven distinct voyages (1405-7, 1407-9, 1409-11, 1413-5, 1417-9, 1421-2, and 1431-3). The voyages covered an increasing distance: the first expedition visited Southeast Asia, Indochina, and modern-day Kolkata and Sri Lanka, while the sixth (the last under the Yongle emperor) visited as far as Aden and the East African coast.¹³⁵ Needham emphasizes that the expeditions were *not* voyages of discovery; Chinese merchants and others had described the Arab world and Eastern Africa as early as 860, and there were extensive commercial contacts with many of the ports that the fleets visited.¹³⁶

The principal purpose of the armadas was to expand the emperor-centric world order: “In the course of the seven Ming expeditions, forty-eight states became tributary clients of the Chinese emperor, many of them for the first time.”¹³⁷ In most instances, the trade goods the fleets carried sufficed to convince local potentates to enroll in the tributary system; when local rulers refused, “the Treasure-ships were intended not only to dazzle foreign peoples with their wealth and majesty but to overawe potential opposition with their might and firepower.”¹³⁸ Accordingly, when the expeditions returned to the Ming court, they often brought back not only valuable goods and ambassadors but even rulers from the polities they had encountered—visible signs of the extension of Ming prestige throughout the known world.¹³⁹ One historian of Ming foreign policy finds that these accomplishments helped fulfill the Yongle emperor’s need “to appear as a great and legitimate emperor before all his half-brothers and nephews, before the generals and

¹³⁰ Landes 1999, 95-96.

¹³¹ Finlay 1991, 12.

¹³² Finlay 1991, 12; Wade 2008, 49-51; Yuan-kang 2012, 144-146.

¹³³ Needham, pp. 489-90.

¹³⁴ Tsai 1996, 97. This phenomenon was well known in European courts as well. See Coser 1972, 574-581.

¹³⁵ Needham, pp. 489-90. See also Dreyer

¹³⁶ Needham, p. 494.

¹³⁷ Finlay, 1991, p. 10.

¹³⁸ Finlay 1991, p. 8. Wang 1998, p. 320, suggests that the court ran a loss on these exchanges in order to bribe foreign officials to join the tributary system.

¹³⁹ E.g. Wade 2008, p. 597.

officials who knew he was a usurper, and, indeed, before all his subjects” through gaining “endorsements from all the foreign rulers his armies could reach.”¹⁴⁰

Viewing the fleets as efforts to acquire symbolic capital in order to enhance legitimacy clears up several issues. It explains why the civil officials consistently opposed the voyages and viewed them as “examples of imperial waste and extravagance”—and why no distributional logrolling could have overcome such ideological objections.¹⁴¹ Moreover, it explains why the Yongle emperor invested such immense sums in the expeditions and why the various expeditions placed emphasis on bringing back ambassadors and exotic treasures, like giraffes from Africa, which were proclaimed to be *qilin*, mythological beings said to appear during the rule of an illustrious ruler.¹⁴²

The treasure-fleet voyages of the Ming Dynasty, then, began as an attempt to justify a coup by an usurper who sought to publicize his acceptance as the ruler of the entire world (a central conception in Chinese political thought), thereby silencing doubts about the legitimacy of his rule at home.¹⁴³ Much as the U.S. Apollo missions ended after their success, the Ming dynasty abandoned further expeditions once it no longer needed to display symbolic assets. As Dreyer concludes, “Imperial interest thus explains why the voyages commenced, and the withdrawal of imperial interest explains why the voyages ended.”¹⁴⁴

Discussion and Conclusion

As Goldstone observes offhandedly, the Ming voyages ceased “for the same reason the United States stopped sending men to the moon—there was nothing there to justify the costs of such voyages.”¹⁴⁵ But both governments had once seen those costs as justified—so long as they needed to secure symbolic capital to legitimate their superordinate position in their respective competitive fields. Indeed, comparing the two endeavors resonates with a number of important concerns in the new hierarchy studies.

Although scholars differ on the degree to which the U.S.-led western alliance system and the Ming tributary system resemble each other,¹⁴⁶ both systems involved international fields centered around a dominant power with highly articulated systems of symbolic domination. This paper thereby highlights one of the more radical implications of the new hierarchy studies. Although some readers might object that our explanation focuses on ‘domestic’ politics in the Ming case and ‘international’ politics in the Kennedy case, once we view world politics through the lens of

¹⁴⁰ Wang 1998, p. 320.

¹⁴¹ Dreyer 2007, 165

¹⁴² Church 2004; Wyatt 2008. Compare with the gifts and tours of the Apollo Mission’s cultural artifacts.

¹⁴³ This explanation does not entirely account for the seventh voyage, but that objection is more easily overcome. The Xuande emperor both shared his grandfather Yongle’s skepticism of the Confucian literati and also faced a threat to his rule in 1425 when his uncle, the Prince of Han, attempted a coup against him (Cham 1998, 285). It is plausible, then, that similar motivations lay behind the Xuande emperor’s resumption of the treasure fleets as had motivated Yongle, but his sudden death in 1435 left makes further inference about his agenda difficult. See Cham 1988, 303-205.

¹⁴⁴ Dreyer 2007, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Goldstone 2000, 177.

¹⁴⁶ Khong 2013, Kang 2003; Kang 2003/2004.

hierarchy the warrant for treating ‘international’ and ‘domestic’ systems as radically distinctive unravels. Thus, it matters if we find similar processes and mechanisms at work in both systems.¹⁴⁷

Moreover, work on international hierarchy and in hegemonic-order theory tends to treat status-oriented behavior as the domain of rising powers and states otherwise located in an inferior position in the hierarchy of prestige. This focus proves particularly common in the analysis of “conspicuous consumption” of cultural and symbolic capital. The Apollo Program and the Ming Treasure Fleets both required translating economic capital into symbolic capital and carried with them significant opportunity costs with respect to accumulating military capital. They demonstrate that international-relations scholars need to pay much more attention to how superordinate powers pursue status and otherwise invest in establishing priority in historically specific fields.

The basics of this behavior should not surprise. As Clunan argues, “Status is a key source of authority in world politics, and as such is a resource to be competed and sought after.” As she further notes, “conflicts over status matter so much in world politics [because] they are about the right to exercise legitimate power.”¹⁴⁸ The United States, facing a rising challenger, and the Ming Dynasty, facing potential challengers to its superordinate status, both launched expensive expeditions to secure the legitimacy of their place atop the hierarchies of their respective systems.

Our analysis holds additional significance for international-relations theory. A number of scholars call for a realist-constructivist approach to world politics. The specific contours of this approach, however, remain amorphous.¹⁴⁹ This paper suggests how field-theoretic analysis provides a promising route for doing so. A Bourdieu-inspired approach that associates power with capital, fields, and field effects provides a way of combining insights from hegemonic-order theory with social-constructionist sensibilities.¹⁵⁰ In particular, viewing international order in terms of fields integrates concerns associated with power-political hierarchies, the social basis of domination, and competitive struggles over international position.

Finally, our study suggests, however tentatively, implications about whether Chinese space programs might spark a new space race. The United States only embarked on the Apollo Project because of the historically specific confluence between acquiring evidence of technological prowess and a broader multi-field struggle concerning the relative superiority of democratic capitalism and Marxist-Leninist communism. Those who for an ever-increasing human presence in the Solar System are likely to see their hopes dashed *unless* a similar ideological struggle develops—perhaps between democratic capitalism and Chinese-style authoritarian capitalism. In the absence of this, or some unforeseen developments, great powers are unlikely to invest heavily in an ever-expanding cycle of unproductive and costly human space exploration. That is, one that significantly exceeds Beijing’s current goal of matching the United States by sending humans to the Moon.

¹⁴⁷ The comparison also showcases the payoffs of what Acharya 2014. calls “global IR,” particularly in the form of comparing non-western and western international relations.

¹⁴⁸ Clunan 2014, 274, 275.

¹⁴⁹ Barkin 2003;Barkin 2010;Jackson 2004;Jackson and Nexon 2004;Jackson and Nexon 2009. For criticisms, see Bially Mattern 2004;Steele 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Compare Guzzini 1993.

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