

Review - China's Rising Foreign Ministry

Written by Sarwar Minar

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SARWAR MINAR, APR 21 2025

China's Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy,
By Dylan M. H. Loh
Stanford University Press, 2024

The rise of China as a global superpower is marked by a debate on whether the rise has been peaceful or aggressive. Referred to as "assertiveness", China's recent *offensive turn* has fueled the debate and drawn further attention. While traditional narratives on the rise of China, particularly its assertiveness, focus on its rising military, top political leadership, and nationalism, Dylan Loh's *China's Rising Foreign Ministry* shows how China's assertiveness can be explained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The book shows some degree of independent influence of MOFA and considers political leadership as enabler of such role, not independent of the top leadership. The book contributes to a growing body of literature attempting to explain the sources of China's rise, especially its *assertive turn* on global stage. Some recent works emphasize the role of diplomats, such as Peter Martin's (2021) *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*. Others downplay MOFA's independent role, as in Dai and Liqiu's (2024) *Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs: From Policy to Podium*.

Wolf warrior diplomacy, assertive and often confrontational-style diplomacy adopted by the Chinese diplomats, begins to garner a lot of attention around 2019, though Loh points out that assertive diplomacy has been observable since 2009. The book focuses on the developments from 2009 to 2020, with reflections on the role of MOFA as the central driver and its "representational role" of assertive China (p.2). The author uses interviews, participant observation, textual materials, and artifacts analysis to investigate the internal dynamics of the Chinese government. He then applies practice theory, an analytical inquiry focusing on human/institutional "doings and sayings" (p.2) to study China, which adds to the tradition of applying conventional IR theories to study China. The book addresses timely but puzzling questions, including how China's assertiveness is represented and manifested, how other actors construct and understand China's behavior, and why its behavior is increasingly being evaluated as assertive by others (p.137).

The book is organized into five chapters. The introduction lays out the importance of MOFA and diplomats, while the first chapter covers existing literature, gaps in the field, and methods employed. The second chapter illustrates MOFA's communication and day to day practices, with a focus on diplomats' representation function. The third chapter lays out the formal and informal rules of the field of Chinese diplomacy. The fourth chapter shows that MOFA has a significant impact on foreign policy knowledge production, policy implementation, and coordination, and the fifth chapter illustrates how X (formerly Twitter) increases discourse power of Chinese diplomacy and delegitimizes non-Chinese diplomatic actors. The conclusion summarizes the findings, emphasizing that the material objects and structural setup play a crucial role in facilitating assertive diplomacy.

The book starts by laying out three gaps in existing literature on Chinese foreign policy: little attention to the role of diplomats, overly state-centric analysis that ignores other actors, and an almost nonexistent reflection on the experience and practices of diplomats (pp.23-26). The author offers practice research-based account of how MOFA has emerged as an important actor and its role in the construction of Chinese assertiveness (p.24). He builds on and extends Bourdieu's sociology and practice theory in IR and applies it to non-western settings. He investigates "doings and sayings" in Chinese diplomacy, specifically assertive diplomacy, which has received little attention

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despite how consequential it has become for world politics (p.2).

In short, the book makes four key arguments. First, Chinese assertiveness is guided and represented by MOFA and its diplomats, not by the military, and MOFA ascended under President Xi (p.6). Such powerful influence since 2009 ultimately bolstered China's overall assertiveness (p.41). MOFA emerged as an influential actor and adopted a "representation role" for China, both in the international and domestic arenas, as evidenced by its assertive diplomacy internationally and its consecutive interventions in domestic military, economic, and governance issues (p. 138). MOFA received massive funding recently, and China overtook the U.S. in terms of the most diplomatic missions worldwide in 2019 (China came in at a hefty 276 missions) (p.139). Second, MOFA partially ascended through social media, specifically X, and the online presence and activities of diplomats (react, respond, critique, and so on) have become part of their performance appraisals (pp.7-8). Third, the book shows that MOFA's power constitutes three functional capabilities: "advising, implementing, and facilitating/coordinating" (p.9). MOFA possesses knowledge production capacity – it advises top leaders on various issues, from decision making to meeting foreign leaders, and this advice is taken as authoritative. MOFA has policy implementation capacity, not only in implementing order from above, but also in making certain moves of its own. MOFA also enjoys the ability to coordinate policy (pp.139-140). Diplomats now enjoy greater authority and freedom when engaging with policy, and greater flexibility to express themselves (p.140). Assertive diplomats emerged as synonymous to assertive China (p.138). Lastly, the book argues that Chinese diplomats construct how external audiences see China (e.g., perception, identity) and its assertiveness, through their interactions and text production (pp.9-10). The book presents a few cases on MOFA's increased assertiveness: Wang Yi's China visit, ASEAN's South China sea statements, the detention of Singapore's Terrex armored vehicles and the power of diplomatic protocol (pp.47-62).

Through this book, Loh advances practice research. His theoretical contributions include a focus on the role of materials objects (e.g., physical infrastructure) in practice research, and the introduction of the novel concept of "transversal disruption" to show how the local Chinese diplomatic field disrupted the transnational field (p.147). Loh introduces the concept of 'institutional habitus', "an institution's relatively durable worldview and disposition", and applies it to study China's diplomacy (p.98). By doing this, he upscaled concept of 'habitus' and offered a more dynamic view of organization (culture) against a static one (p.148). Drawing on Adler and Pouliot (2011), the author advances the definition of practice as "socially meaningful, competent and incompetent performances by individuals and institutions in and on the material world" (p.31). Empirically, Loh shows valuable talent and bravery in uncovering sensitive data which involves risks, the possibility of political backlash, surveillance, and even legal challenges. However, this also invites a critique, since (given the nature of the data, data collection procedure, and issue sensitivity) verifiability is difficult. Thus, the scope for checking for subjectivity is limited, as is, by extension, the scope for checking for interpretation or observer biases in the process. So, while checking for reproducibility is possible using Loh's data, the potential replicability of the findings (collecting new data) is limited (Brodeur et al. 2024).

In sum, the book addresses China's recent offensive turn and enriches growing literature on China's assertiveness. While some of the recent work downplayed MOFA's role (Dai and Liqiu, 2024), this book emphasized MOFA's significant role behind Chinese assertive diplomacy. It is an important addition to the field, in order to understand the changing nature of China's rise. The book advances existing practice research and makes a valuable addition to qualitative investigation on China's (assertive) foreign policy and helps reveal internal workings of the Chinese government. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the rise of China, its changing nature (especially its internal working), its foreign policy, assertiveness, as well as in practice research along with qualitative investigation more generally.

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