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Diplomatic Control, Foreign Policy, and Change under Xi Jinping: A Field-Theoretic Account

Dylan M. H. LOH

Abstract: This article outlines how Xi Jinping has exercised control over diplomatic actors, particularly China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and draws out the effects of this control for the ministry and for Chinese foreign policy. Leveraging Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “field,” I demonstrate how Xi has – through processes of socialisation, restriction, and displays of fealty – bred local diplomatic field incentives in which actors exhibit more loyal, assertive, and disciplined behaviour. Next, I introduce the idea of “transversal disruption” – the potential of local fields to disrupt and introduce change on and in overlapping fields, and vice versa. Practice theorists have relatively little to say about inter-field effects, and this article seeks to fill this gap by showing how field rules in the transnational diplomatic space can change when fields meet. I illustrate the above through three cases of field encounters: the multilateral Track II diplomacy field; the transnational fields of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); and, the China–Malaysia bilateral diplomatic field.

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Keywords: China, Xi Jinping, fields, practice theory, diplomacy

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Introduction

Much has been said about Xi Jinping's centralisation and accretion of personal power and authority. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the modality through which such power-accretion efforts are exercised and their implications for China's foreign policy. This article¹ takes two approaches to addressing this gap in the literature on contemporary Chinese foreign policy: First, focusing on China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), it examines how Xi has increased control over diplomatic actors. Second, it maps out what this accumulation of power means for the ministry and the effects of this on Chinese foreign policy. It argues that MOFA has been socialised into a more politically disciplined outfit that predisposes itself to robust diplomatic behaviour. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) conception of "field," I contend that we can profit from a more field-sensitive account that recognises the productive and generative effects of fields. This robustness owes itself, then, to a transformation of the "diplomatic field" and the ministry itself rather than an unmediated Xi-directed assertiveness. In that way, the idea of "transversal disruption" becomes key – the potential of local fields to disrupt and introduce change on and in overlapping fields, and vice versa. I argue that the domestic diplomatic field, through Xi's strategies of socialisation, restriction, and displays of fealty, promotes and rewards diplomatic assertiveness.

Furthermore, I suggest that at the point of field overlaps and embeddedness, the potential for disruption – and, consequently, change – is ever-present. I illustrate this through three cases of field encounters by Chinese diplomatic actors occurring within transnational spaces. This is supplemented with a series of participant observations undertaken from 2013 to 2017 in Track II and official/semi-official diplomatic settings, and 18 in-depth interviews with diplomatic actors. The latter were conducted in Beijing (2016, 2017, 2018), Shanghai (2017), and London (2018). From the 18 interviews, nine were with non-Chinese diplomats, five with current and former MOFA officials, three with academics closely affiliated with MOFA,

1 I would like to thank Jaakko Heiskanen, Ayse Zarakol, and K. C. Lin for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am grateful to Phil Entwistle, the reviewers, and the editorial team – particularly James Powell and Petra Brandt – for their suggestions and advice. All errors are my own.

and one with a student at the Chinese Foreign Affairs University (CFAU). Interviewing non-Chinese diplomats, who have had extensive interactions with Chinese counterparts, is important because it allows me to triangulate data from MOFA sources. Moreover, non-Chinese subjects are also often able to bring to attention diplomatic practices that Chinese envoys themselves may not be able to articulate. With regard to participant observation data, these were drawn from my experience working in a Singaporean think tank from 2013 to 2015 where I was involved in Track II and Track 1.5 forums involving Chinese interlocutors. I also leveraged participant observation data obtained in closed-door conferences held in 2016 and 2017 in Beijing by CFAU, where I had the chance to directly interact with MOFA officials at their headquarters and observe their press conferences.

This analysis is important for two principal reasons. First, Xi has strengthened his power comprehensively (Economy 2014), assumed top posts in all state and party apparatus including those on foreign affairs (Li 2016), as well as removed constitutional term limits on the presidency (Loh 2018a). This represents a significant change from the previous two administrations. On that point, Brown observes how “Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, maintained a low profile, barely figuring in international affairs. His silence [...] was infamous” (Brown 2017: 64). In contrast, he adds that Xi’s leadership is “more willing to speak openly about external issues” (Brown 2017: 64). Lampton (2015) concludes, meanwhile, that Xi’s decision to create a National Security Commission (NSC) in 2013 was a tool to help him better coordinate domestic and foreign policy, the upshot of which is that he has “control over internal security, foreign, and military policy that his predecessor Hu Jintao did not possess” (Lampton 2015: 775).

Foot (2014) argues that under Xi, China has embraced a more activist foreign policy – primarily through the United Nations, via an increased budget and greater peacekeeping contributions. This, she writes, is a departure from Deng Xiaoping’s “lay low and bide your time” (韬光养晦, *tao guang yang hui*) dictum that guided the Hu era, as China under Xi seeks to become more “globalist” (Foot 2014: 1087). Zhang similarly avers that China has become more assertive under Xi while at the same time “vigorously seeking to maintain a peaceful external environment” (Zhang 2015: 7). Yan (2014) states that Xi’s more robust policy allows it to make an increased number of friends

and is contributive to China's rejuvenation project. This, he stresses, is achieved through: searching for shared strategic cooperation; placing morality over economic interests; and, developing nuanced friendships with countries depending on the "character of China's relations with that country" (Yan 2014: 170). Disputing the view that China's assertiveness has harmed her national image, Yan insists that relations with the United States, European countries, and developing nations have improved.

Ferdinand (2016), in studying Xi's "China Dream" and its spill-over effects on foreign policy (particularly the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI – the key enterprise in that external dimension of the China Dream), comments that:

While economic development issues still play a big role in structuring policies, the dream of restoring China to its traditional place in world affairs begins to loom over them. (Ferdinand 2016: 956)

Second, Mao Zedong aside, Xi's power grab is unprecedented; the full effects of it have yet to be understood. It is also apparent that foreign policy and diplomatic success appear central to Xi's power consolidation efforts. The 19th Party Congress, for instance, underscored the necessity for China's foreign policy to be more proactive, essentially dropping Deng's mantra of biding one's time. In fact, the emphasis at the 19th Party Congress on China's international role had "never been stated as emphatically nor linked so decisively to China having turned a corner toward greatness" (Swaine 2018: 2). In that regard, nationalistic appeals to a domestic audience for the purposes of international status-signalling cannot be disregarded (see Pu 2019). This was behind Xi's and China's manoeuvres when whipping up nationalist feelings as part of registering the country's displeasure at South Korea's decision to deploy the US's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system in 2017. Thus, we see citizens supporting governmental moves to stop tours to South Korea, ban "K-Pop," and to cease buying South Korea-made products – moves that seriously undermined South Korean businesses in China (Hancock and Wang, 2017). The fact that foreign policy success is important to political leaders may seem banal, but for Xi foreign affairs are fundamental to his domestic rule and legitimacy (e.g. Economy 2018: 64–66). Myriad foreign affairs issues – such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue, and the trade war with the US – have important consequences for the authority of the Party and the president.

On the flip side, there are certain risks in placing so much weight on global ambitions.² Indeed, some of these risks are now manifesting. Take China's aforementioned grand – but ambiguous – BRI. International actors such as Japan, Malaysia, and the European Union are already pushing back against it. The EU (minus Hungary), for instance, released a statement in April 2018 denouncing the BRI (Elmer 2018), while Malaysia's prime minister sounded a warning on how it could be construed as a new form of colonialism (Hornby 2018). Such pushback, if sustained, could undercut Xi's domestic legitimacy. In that regard, the China–US trade war has had the effect of undermining his authority; the Chinese government came under intense scrutiny and criticism in 2018, meanwhile (Deng 2019).

This research adds, then, to the developing literature trying to make sense of contemporary Chinese foreign policy under Xi. As this scholarship tends to focus on Xi's control of foreign policy through the military and great power politics (e.g. Lampton 2015; Kou 2017), this article contributes specifically by analysing instead his control over diplomatic actors – which is relatively ignored in the literature. Unlike his predecessors, Xi has considerable autonomy to implement and achieve his foreign policy objectives. How and in what way has Xi “caused” this assertiveness? As pointed out above, the scholarship has hitherto linked Xi and China's military assertiveness together. In contrast, there has been little offered on the effects of Xi's power drive on MOFA and on diplomatic actors more generally. Thus, using the Chinese case as my foil, I engage with and build on the practice turn literature in arguing for more field-theoretic analyses in understanding foreign policy. With that aim in mind, mapping the diplomatic field in China adds to the international practice literature by showing how field theory can be instantiated empirically.

The article proceeds as follows: First, engaging with the literature on practice theory (PT), I make a case for the centrality of “fields” in investigating international relations puzzles. Next, I describe how a shift in the Chinese domestic diplomatic field has resulted in a corresponding realignment in diplomatic actors' orientation and practices. While doing that, I furnish a way to better use fields as units of analysis – specifically, through the identification of both primary and secondary actors and via the (hierarchical) mapping of the relationship

2 I thank one of the reviewers for raising this point.

between them. Finally, I illustrate the productive and generative effects of fields in and of themselves and at the point of overlap and/or embeddedness, through examples of transnational field encounters and transversal disruptions.

Practices in International Relations and a Shift in the Field

The turn towards practice starts from the basic assumption that “social realities – and international politics – are constituted by human beings acting in and on the world” (Cornut 2017: 2). Recent practice scholarship has demonstrated the value added to the International Relations discipline by shifting “our focus from reflective deliberation and conscious instrumental and normative decision-making to the daily practices of habitual sayings and doings” (Hopf 2018: 687). Adler-Nissen (2014) reveals how diplomatic practices that created exclusion – namely, the United Kingdom’s and Denmark’s opting out of the EU – nevertheless fostered closer ties and integration within the EU through the stigmatisation of norm-breakers, and also served to reinforce existing norms too. Further, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014) illustrate how power surfaces in social contexts and how state representatives’ social mastery in translating “skills” into power and influence proved to be a major factor in the decision to intervene in Libya in 2011. Focusing on the distinction between tactical and strategic practices and the reflective nature of practices, Bode (2018) argues meanwhile that agents’ practices through and as UN officials, member states, and non-governmental organisations have influenced the UN Security Council’s decision-making process. Given the limitations of space, I can only broach the literature on PT here. Suffice to say, however, PT has shown its worth when studying IR matters – and particularly diplomacy (Pouliot and Cornut 2015: 298).

Yet, as evinced in the sketch above, most of this scholarship is heavily practice-centric, in that it takes practices as its fundamental unit of analysis. It is well-noted that “social fields are the macro concept that structure Bourdieu’s thoughts and that represent the entry point for Bourdieu’s further concepts” (Walther 2014: 8). Despite its importance, “field” as a theoretical thinking tool has not received due attention. Conversely, Adler-Nissen rues how practice scholars tend to “read the structuralism side of Bourdieu,” with this representing

the risk of “losing the main advantages of the recent ‘turn to practice’ [in IR]” (Adler-Nissen 2012: 14) as change and contingency escape analysis.

However, it seems that the reverse is actually happening – we are prioritising practices at the expense of other conceptual (structural) tools. In that regard, I agree broadly with Hopf – who writes that PT scholars of all stripes have largely “ignored the fact that social theories of practice include reflection in their theorization of goings on in the world” (Hopf 2018: 705). Without dismissing the validity of reflection and agency in practices, my goal here is to elucidate how we can think of change through fields. What is more, while there is nothing to prevent the application of PT to non-Western locations, the practice agenda remains firmly in the orbit of European scholars concerned with European IR, leading to claims of Eurocentrism in PT (Bourbeau 2017: 11–12). Here, I aim to underline Bourdieu’s concept of field in understanding diplomacy, highlighting the productive, generative, and restrictive effects of the field – and the effects which come to the fore when fields meet.

Understanding Fields

Bourdieu says this of the field:

In analytical terms, a field can be defined as a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are defined objectively in their existence and in the determinations that they impose on their occupants, agents or institutions by their current and potential situations (*situs*) in the [wider] structure of the distribution of different currencies of power (or of capital), possession of which provides access to specific profits that are up for grabs in the field, at the same time, by their objective relations to other positions (domination, subordination, equivalents and soon). (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 20)

That is to say, a field is a relatively autonomous and hierarchical spatial-social arena where agents vie for resources and benefits while occupying positions within this system. It is both material (physical artefacts and concrete resources, such as money) and ideational (norms and practices of the field, or “competence”). This autonomy, however, is never absolute. Cohen explains how

all fields are defined by two poles, the heteronomous pole where external principles of legitimation are prevalent and the autonomous pole where the internal principle of legitimation is prevalent. (Cohen 2018: 253)

This highlights how fields are always subjected to internal and external principles, even as the impact of these principles varies. There is a shared sense of what rewards, stakes, and capital are useful and attainable. Bourdieu calls this the “doxa,” which is the “immediate belief in the facticity of the world that makes us take it for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 73). Bigo further explains how the field is not just

a collective but it is a field of individuals and of the institutions they make, as the field will not exist independently of human action and reflexivity. (Bigo 2011: 238)

Thus, one can think of a field as an “arena” wherein actors cooperate and compete within a bounded area or formal and informal rules. It is revealing to hear what Bicchi and Bremberg write about European diplomatic practices and field:

European diplomacy should first and foremost be understood as a field of practice which is not primarily demarked by geography, but by what is at stake to the actors involved. (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016: 396)

They further add that:

This means not only that European diplomacy is fuzzy at its borders, but also that it makes little sense to distinguish between European and national practices when it comes to diplomacy and foreign policy. (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016: 396)

While I agree that a field (of practice) is not primarily marked by geography, I depart from these two authors in maintaining that it makes sense to distinguish between local fields/practices and supranational fields/practices. Making this distinction is crucial. While autonomous fields overlap and map onto each other, they sometimes misalign too. What are the consequences when this happens? As will be clear in my case studies, such instances are potentially fertile spaces in which to effect change.

At this point, I need to add a clarification about the relationship between “transnational” fields and “transversal” disruption here.

Transnational fields refer to those that traverse national boundaries. Transversal disruptions meanwhile, as conceived here, are resultant effects of overlapping, cross-cutting fields, regardless of national boundaries. In this way, for example, while the field of multilateral diplomacy is transnational in nature, it retains a transversal quality – as it is “inherently intertwined and imbricated with national fields [...] as well as with transnational fields” (Pouliot 2016: 212). As such, the complex, cross-cutting qualities and the effects/disruptions that spring from this are best captured with the vocabulary of transversal disruption. Significantly, not all transnational fields – contra Bourdieu – are inherently competitive, bereft of cooperation, or naturally disruptive. Thus, the presence of transnational or overlapping fields should not be taken as an automatic implication of disruption – even if that possibility is always present. In the next section, I start with an examination of the local diplomatic field and describe some of the ways in which actors compete and cooperate, before going into the specific cases of transversal disruptions.

Chinese Diplomatic Field

Bigo provides information on quantifying a field:

To speak about a field supposes that empirical research has been carried out, which shows what is specifically at stake in the game played by the agents. From this specificity of the stakes involved, it is crucial to understand how agents position or distinguish themselves in that game, along what lines, what kinds of positions are taken in relation to others, and what kind of resources in terms of power they can mobilize in order to play. A field also supposes a certain period of time for the rules of the game to have an effect and to have a certain degree of autonomy. (Bigo 2011: 240)

In this regard, then, field is not merely a conceptual substitute for “context” or “space.” It goes beyond these concepts because it does not simply capture “background information” or the local sociocultural milieu, but demands a manifold rendering of social relations within and between institutions with its own regulative logic and specific historicity – focusing particularly on “struggles” over stakes (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 88–97). My construction of the diplomatic field in China involves three interrelated steps. First, building on Bigo and following Bourdieu’s insistence on the relational nature

of fields (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 96), I identify the primary and secondary players involved in the field. This involves mapping, hierarchically, the agents and institutions that constitute these players. Done this way, I can study the cooperative and competitive practices in the field in relation to MOFA. Second, I draw out the hierarchical relations between primary and secondary actors. Third and finally, I adumbrate the material/immaterial and normative/institutionalised boundaries of the field. Mapping the boundaries of the field is crucial to the application of field theory. While Bourdieu stresses how determining the “limits of the field is a very difficult one,” he also adds that “the boundaries of the field can only be determined by empirical investigation” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 100). He suggests that the limits of the field are located “at the point where the effects of the field cease,” and that “various means” must be used to measure the point at which “these statistically detectable effects decline” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 100). My approach here, then, is to identify: (1) the current participants and (2) the limits of their diplomatic and foreign policy influence.

The Chinese diplomatic field is demarcated by MOFA, as the central institution; the Central Foreign Affairs Commission; the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC); and, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), owing to its defence diplomacy work. Notably, there are several secondary actors within the diplomatic field that exercise some influence on the foreign policy decision-making process and the execution of diplomacy; these includes think tanks and (mainly Beijing- and Shanghai-based) universities, prominent academics, retired politicians/officials, and media outlets – each with varying degrees of prominence and influence. The criteria for assessing who these primary and secondary actors are remain both subjective and objective: They come from subjective self-referentiality (the actors noting their own contributions, limitations, and influence) and through objective assessment (measurements of direct influence/impact on the field, such as adopted policy recommendations and “face time” with MOFA and PSC leaders). This is triangulated from third parties in the field, wherefrom I draw information on specific actors’ influence and practices.

To locate actors in the field, I first determine what the most important stake in the field even is. In the Chinese diplomatic one, this would be “social capital” (translatable to “economic capital”); in very

specific terms: access to and impact on foreign policy and diplomacy. To be sure, despite this scoping, the definition of fields remains ultimately ambiguous – a point that I concede. However, it is important to remember that the field cannot be reduced to purely objective standards because it is, by nature, only an approximation. In particular, on this point the article pays attention to Jackson’s prodding that this “imprecision is worth accepting” so as to derive the “benefits that can be gained by thinking about social relations in general, and foreign policymaking in particular, in terms of relatively distinct ‘fields’” (Jackson 2008: 167).

After determining the stake, I establish the current possession of it by actors – which maps into its direct/indirect impact on diplomacy. In that way, whether actors are direct organs of the state and Party or not determines, for the purposes of external affairs, their rank. Attempts by actors to bring themselves closer to the centre of power in the diplomatic field can be seen as stake-accumulating activities. Moves to set oneself apart from others in the field by establishing a direct connection to top policymakers are also seen as hallmarks of distinction.

For example, one academic frequently trots out the lectures that he delivered to the PSC. This served as a distinguishing feature of him – the person – separate from the institution. Other secondary players in the field – particularly think tanks and academics – reference this scholar: “Advising the top leadership and giving them a lecture – that is the highest achievement!” (Anonymous 1 2016, 27 June). This reinforces not only the acclamation itself but also objectifies it as a valuable stake in the field.

I now present the process that I used to locate CFAU as a secondary actor: First, I assess its direct effect on diplomacy. Are their views sought by MOFA and PSC? How aligned are they with these diplomatic players? I supplement this through field interviews with actors who signal their alignment and closeness to MOFA. Objectively, I establish whether those who occupy leadership positions at CFAU (its leadership team is staffed with current and former MOFA officials) are directly linked to MOFA, and how some scholars also take up positions within MOFA itself (an infrequent occurrence). Finally, this account is corroborated by three other sources – staff at MOFA, interviewees from Renmin University, and interlocutors from

Peking University. Piecing it all together, I thus categorise primary and secondary actors in the following way:

Table 1: Primary and Secondary Actors

Primary Actors	Secondary Actors
PSC	Retired officials
MOFA	Think tanks
Central Foreign Affairs Commission	Key universities
PLA	Academics
International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)	Media and “public opinion”

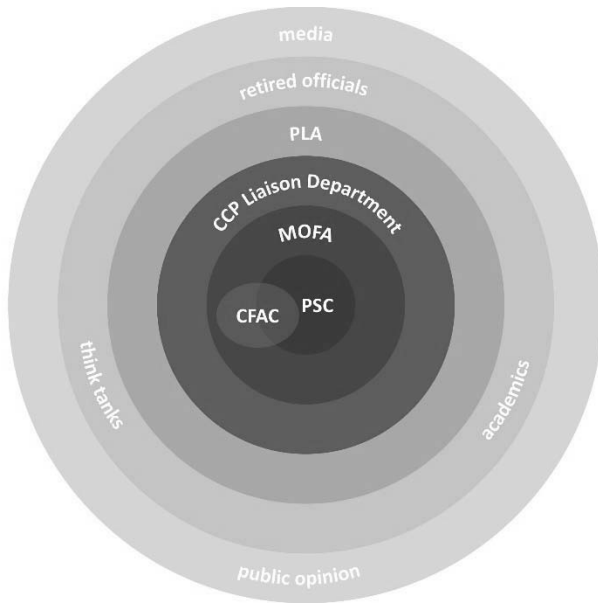
Retired officials are influential because they usually remain active in an unofficial “semi-retired” role, either within former or new units. These include, among others, Zhu Chenghu (former PLA), Yao Yunzhu (former PLA), Yang Yi (former PLA Navy), Sha Zhukang (former Chinese ambassador to the UN), Wu Sike (former special envoy on Middle East Affairs), and Yu Hongjun (former ambassador). Regarding think tanks, the most influential are the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences of the PLA, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China Institute of International Studies, and the China Foundation for International Studies (see also, Zhao 2012: 128–129; Glaser 2012: 92–93).

Regarding key universities, the ones identified here are CFAU, Renmin University, Tsinghua University, Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Fudan University, and Shanghai Jiaotong University. Regarding academics, these individuals are usually affiliated with the influential diplomatic think tanks and universities. Academics count among their ranks Chinese scholars respected both domestically and internationally. These include individuals like Yan Xuetong (Tsinghua University), Gao Fei (CFAU), Ruan Zhongzhe (China Institute of International Studies), Yang Jiemian (Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, SIIS), Chen Dongxiao (SIIS), Qin Yaqing (CFAU), Shi Yinghong (Renmin University), and Wang Jisi (Peking University) among others. With regard to the media, the more influential outlets are identified as China Central Television, the

Global Times, *Xinhua*, *People’s Daily*, *PLA Daily*, and *China Daily*. Finally, it might seem odd to include “public opinion” because, unlike the other inclusions here, it is obviously not an actor. Nonetheless, diplomatic officials, PSC leaders, and secondary actors frequently reference public opinion as a force in restraining and affecting China’s diplomacy and foreign policy (Anonymous 2 2017; Anonymous 7 2017).

Figure 1 below portrays the hierarchical relations wherein the actor closest to the core has the largest effect on diplomacy:

Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Diplomatic Field in China



Source: Author’s own elaboration.

This chart is an ideal-type, and should not be taken to map unerringly into the “reality” of the field. In that regard, while I identify specific actors and institutions, the ones listed for each category are not exhaustive. The chart illustrates, rather, only who the typical, main actors are in each category. Furthermore, fields are always shifting and players move about within their games. For instance, while different

academics and think tanks have varying influence on diplomacy, they are, nevertheless, grouped together in the diagram to locate them within the field in a general way for the sake of clarity. Therefore, the composition of the field here automatically results in a static snapshot of it because of the temporal-spatial limits of the research.

Having mapped out the local diplomatic field, I turn my attention now to the empirical analysis. How does a shift in the carrots and sticks of the field affect primary and secondary players? I argue that three interconnecting processes of selection and socialisation, restriction, and displays of fealty are at work vis-à-vis primary and secondary actors in the field of diplomacy.

President Xi Takes Control

When Xi first took power in 2012, hopes were placed in the president being a liberal reformist (Branigan 2012). Those hopes were dashed as Xi undertook sweeping reforms, including his much-publicised anti-corruption drive, consolidating and strengthening his power further (Economy 2014). Xi's disquiet over his predecessor's foreign policy was obvious; Lampton mentions how the new president "doesn't sound like someone fully satisfied with the foreign policy and domestic security policy-making processes that he inherited" (Lampton 2015: 762). Previous administrations largely stuck to Deng's aforementioned biding your time directive. Under Xi, however, this changed to "striving and doing something" (奋发有为, *fen fa you wei*) – lending itself to a more activist and globalist diplomacy for the country.

Part of this drive to impose his vision of foreign policy means Xi exerting control over MOFA, as well as the relevant key players in the Chinese diplomatic field. In that regard, Xi's reorganisation of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading (Small) Group to the institutionally more important Central Foreign Affairs Commission in March 2018 is reflective of his ongoing desire to "upgrade" China's diplomatic apparatus. Looking at his speeches, we can certainly observe how Xi's personality and thinking shaped his world view. Indeed, Lam's (2016) analysis of Xi's speeches – in contrast to those of Hu and Jiang Zemin – points very clearly to a discernible shift from the thinking of previous administrations. For example, Xi's discourse and ideology

perpetuate the CCP's status as "perennial ruling party." When Hu Jintao was state vice-president and president of the Central Party School (CPS) (1998 to 2002), the fourth-generation leader asked scholars and specialists at the CPS and other think tanks to examine a plethora of evergreen parties in the world—and to see what the CCP could learn from them. (Lam 2016: 411)

He and Feng (2013) reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of Xi's speeches. They observe that while Xi's world view shares similarities with Hu's, the former is inclined towards an international strategy that is more assertive. At any rate, in the diplomatic field, Xi's power-accretion efforts have resulted in a subsequent shift of the field (structure) itself. Hence, I have attempted to tease out these structural effects – which, subsequently, filtered downstream to diplomatic actors. The following sections will detail some of these effects.

Selection and Socialisation

MOFA personnel are drawn mainly from the top universities in Beijing and Shanghai – mostly Peking University, Tsinghua University, CFAU, and Beijing Foreign Studies University, owing to its language training. First, students from these universities (and across the country) are drawn into the foreign service through the annual civil service examination. Second, CFAU (and to a limited extent Peking and Tsinghua Universities) supplies a significant portion of its top students to the ministry. This is done in two ways. The first involves faculty members identifying suitable candidates and submitting a list of around 30 names a year to MOFA, who will then proceed to place them after the necessary tests and training (Anonymous 1 2016, 13 August). Second, MOFA would, from time to time, give CFAU a quota – for example "10 males, 2 females" – to fill. Finally, unique to CFAU and some academics from influential think tanks, those who are senior enough and deemed good enough have the opportunity to "transfer" to MOFA while retaining the option of heading back to academia after working at the ministry for three to five years (Glaser 2012: 133; Bondiguel and Kellner 2010: 9).

Those deemed unworthy are weeded out via the selection process. One academic who was seconded to Japan said: "The embassy thought I had something to contribute through my participation in conferences and writing reports" (Anonymous 2 2017). This "good enough" quality does not simply refer to capabilities but also political

discipline and policy orientation. This does not mean, however, there are no disagreements – they happen often, but within limits. The same academic noted: “We do have disagreements but on nothing fundamental or anything too critical,” further adding that “once a decision is made [...] we must support it and we most definitely cannot write [anything bad about it] or go public disagreeing [with it]” (Anonymous 2 2017).

“The first quality that the MOFA looks for is loyalty, political loyalty” (Anonymous 3 2016), noted one MOFA aspirant who failed to get through to the latter stages of the selection process. He added that while grades are important, they are somewhat secondary to one’s political leanings and discipline in obeying and following orders. While this was always the case, he stressed how this has increasingly become a key criterion under Xi. This account was corroborated by a MOFA source who noted that: “Of course one’s political loyalty and discipline is one of the most important considerations.” He added that there is no shortage of talent to promote nor is there any shortage of people applying to MOFA; thus, loyalty is a key consideration (Anonymous 4 2018).

This is not to be understood merely as loyalty to one’s country, but also as a kind of political loyalty. In that regard, when an agent enters the institution where they will henceforth work, the socialisation process accelerates. The learning of what is “right and wrong,” the “dos and dont’s,” is well documented in socialisation theory (Clausen 1968). Bourdieu (1984) himself wrote extensively on the reproduction of social structures in schools, and notes how agents are socialised and learn through “institutional inculcation” and training. Suffice to say, the socialisation process that agents are put through in MOFA and indeed the entire diplomatic apparatus under Xi enjoins, as a Southeast Asian diplomat put it, such individuals: “To be firm and to be able to get their message across very forcefully and skilfully.” This diplomat also observed how: “There is an ongoing emphasis to professionalise MOFA more under Xi. He needs to rely on MOFA more for his foreign policy vision” (Anonymous 5 2017).

Restriction

Beyond restrictions on their movements, public disclosures, and friends, agents are also advised not to participate in alumni meetings and not to meet with foreigners unless on official business. They are

not allowed (as is the case for civil servants in China) to travel abroad for personal reasons, and their non-diplomatic passport is held onto by the state. This restriction of speech, body, and relations was most pronounced in 2016 and particularly 2017 in the lead up to the 19th Party Congress. One Chinese interlocutor, a secondary actor, told me how the atmosphere is “more restrictive now than before” (Anonymous 10 2017).

Meeting diplomats, researchers, and reporters is part of normal diplomatic activity. In China, however, foreign ministry personnel are not allowed to meet individually with visitors; they must meet in at least pairs (Anonymous 9 2016; Anonymous 6 2018). This practice departs from that of most other countries, where diplomats are free to have one-to-one meetings. Speaking from experience, it is only with Chinese diplomats that I have encountered situations where there at least one other person present. There are several reasons for this, chief among them preventing wayward messaging, keeping up surveillance and restricting the movements and utterances of agents. A North American envoy noted: “We simply cannot be friends with them, not for want of trying but it is just not possible” (Anonymous 15 2017). This was substantiated by other diplomatic actors, who saw a “friendship problem” as being particularly acute with the Chinese. A European diplomat recalled how he invited his Chinese counterpart for dinner at home and, to his surprise, the latter turned up with a couple of other colleagues dressed and behaving in a very “officious manner” – turning what was intended to be a friendly, private interaction into one that was semi-official, if not entirely official (Anonymous 8 2016). By way of comparison to the past, one Commonwealth diplomat recollected that:

When I was in the UN in New York in 1998, the Chinese diplomats were very friendly to me. I was particularly close to this current high-ranking diplomat. Close on a very personal level, where he would ask their friends and family to host me. In fact, I would even bring stuff from their family to them and vice versa when I went to Beijing. He and his wife would come to my house very often too! Back then, the junior ministers from China very happily accepted our beer and food in our homes. Maybe they were very deprived, so with some food and drinks, they become very grateful! [laughs]. (Anonymous 16 2018)

Displays of Fealty

During a meeting, Geng Shuang – one of MOFA’s spokespersons – was asked how the outside world should understand the sometimes opaque Chinese foreign ministry. He replied: “Study the Communist Party, and you will understand China; and you will understand the Foreign Ministry” (Personal communication, 2017). Yang Jiechi, one of China’s most important foreign policy figures had to pen a long op-ed piece praising Xi Jinping’s thought on diplomacy. Yang was fulsome in his emphasising of how the president had “great foresight and a comprehensive perspective” and that “General Secretary Xi Jinping’s thought on diplomacy is a comprehensive and profound system of theories with rich connotations” (Zhang 2017). Wang Yi, MOFA’s foreign minister, was equally effusive in his praise in his own essay, writing that Xi’s diplomatic thought “also innovates upon and transcends the past 300 years of traditional Western international relations theory” while dubbing him a “reformer and a pioneer” (Martina, Blanchard, and Birsel 2017: paragraph 5).

Already, the president has installed key allies to important posts and removed people with links to either Jiang or Hu through either retirement or corruption purges. Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang, Sun Zhengcai, Xu Caihou, and Guo Boxiong, to name but a few, are senior party cadres who have been purged as part of his anti-corruption drive. They were also senior party members who have not previously clearly displayed personal loyalty to Xi. This is not to say that the failure to pledge loyalty is the reason for political purges, but merely to draw attention to the importance of such pledges and how they may have a bearing on one’s political future. Under Xi, the field has shifted such that tribute-paying has become established practice (Lau 2015). Beyond written words and speeches, actors are expected to embody this new spirit. Diplomats frequently cite their subordination to Xi and the Party. Whenever questions of decision-making in foreign policy come up, answers invariably end with “the president is the decision maker.”

This does not, however, mean that there are no contending voices, or that MOFA has little influence. If anything, because of Xi, MOFA has grown bolder, more assertive, and more proactive in its diplomatic endeavours. This increased pace of praise has been quite clear; in 2012 to 2013, reference to Xi was not so apparent. Around 2014 to 2015, attributions to and praise of Xi started appearing during work

meetings (when I was based at a Singapore think tank) with Chinese interlocutors. Subsequently, in 2016 (when he was named “core” of the party) and 2017 Xi was ever-present in discussions on Chinese foreign policy, reflected also in MOFA-sponsored publications. For example the book 大国外交 (*Da guo wai jiao, Big Power Diplomacy*) (Bian 2018), obtained from MOFA, is fundamentally about Xi’s words and thoughts, rather than a concrete exposition of Chinese diplomacy. This is symptomatic of the other books institutionally underwritten by MOFA, and their increasing accreditation of Xi (e.g. Department of Policy Planning 2018).

As a central player in the field, the accentuated control of MOFA results in more discipline in the practices by the ministry – ones that incentivise activism and assertiveness, and dissuade “weakness.” This has some related knock-on effects for the secondary players. First, the scope of what they can say and do has been curtailed. Whether self-disciplining or otherwise, secondary actors have exhibited an increasing tendency to restrict information – but this is always delicately balanced with a desire to fill the gap that is left by official MOFA sources and meetings being much harder to secure. Second, and following on from my earlier contention, despite these restrictions secondary diplomatic actors have greater freedom of movement and speech compared to primary ones. This situation has not departed greatly from that of the past. What has shifted, however, is the amount of ostensible deference to President Xi and to primary actors such as MOFA. Secondary actors’ access to social capital (as noted, the most important stake in the diplomatic field), inside information, and to policymakers/leaders has been cut – alongside their opinions no longer being heard, either. Their subjection to the primary actors in the local field continues to be entrenched. Paradoxically, however, as access to official players such as MOFA diminishes, secondary players can positively position themselves to carve out niches.

Transnational Fields and Transversal Disruptions

It has already been observed that fields can overlap, and thus are imbricated with one another (Adler-Nissen 2011; Bigo 2011). This imbrication, however, has not often been looked at by PT scholars. One exception is Mérand’s (2010) study on the genesis of the Euro-

pean Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Challenging constructivist and realist accounts of the ESDP, Mérand deployed Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus," field, and "crisis" – in the form of external shocks – in putting forth a more nuanced account of the ESDP. He observed that there are two fields:

The European foreign policy field, where in EU diplomats vie for influence over EU policies, and what I call the "international defense field," centered upon military relations within NATO. (Mérand 2010: 343)

Mérand concerns himself with the institutionalisation and socialisation of the field and its structures into individuals' habitus, and the subsequent effects hereof. My concern here, however, is with the field itself, and the effects when: (1) changes takes place within it and (2) fields overlap. A deeply sociological view of institutions generally suggests a dynamic approach being taken to transnational fields. It highlights how inter- and transnational fields from time to time function as catalysts for significant changes, ones that would often be entirely politically unachievable on the national level – where such strategies are much more constrained by formalised politics and institutional frameworks (Madsen 2016: 18). Adler-Nissen argues that the transnational diplomatic field structures actors, calling it a "meta-field":

When national representatives meet, be it in multilateral and bilateral contexts, the state is no longer the structuring and dominant field of power as is the case in Bourdieu's work. Rather, it is a distinct field where they meet that structures their positions. (Adler-Nissen 2011: 328)

But let us also not forget that while the transnational diplomatic field is structuring, it is simultaneously being structured as well. While most scholars looked at it as a structuring force, it is more precise to see it, in fact, as dynamic: as both object and subject of structure. Having described the in-field shifts and the corresponding adjustments in actors' actions, I turn my attention now to addressing the question of "field encounters" – illustrated via concrete cases where fields meet, and supported by my observations from interviews with diplomatic actors in China.

Many scholars look at field movements from the perspective of actors "leaving," and then "entering" another field instead. This dis-

sonance, they argue, creates an impact on the actor and their actions. In contrast, I suggest that actors never completely enter or leave a field; rather, they are more or less situated in a relatively stable field and do not “break in/out” of – as the lexicon of entering and leaving suggests. Rather, actors are always enfolded in layers of fields, some of which are always stronger than most others – and that provides the girth for structural stability. That said, this constancy can be disturbed when fields come into contact. Häkli puts it thus:

Arguably, it is precisely this aspect of field theory in the study of transnational processes that should be developed further. Instead of looking at how the national and international fields “overlap” or “interact,” it is important to employ field theory to account for what dynamisms are at play in the emerging transnational realm of social thought and action, and how these processes relate to the nation-state as (one significant) context of action. (Häkli 2013: 347)

How, then, can we understand the transnational diplomatic field? Bourdieu stresses how fields can be used “at different levels of aggregation,” from one construction firm to the “housing economy” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 102; Bourdieu 1990). In this way, it is natural, then, that the transnational space represents an upward aggregation of the state-bound field. Thus, like local fields, it has its own structural logics, boundaries (although fuzzier), primary and secondary actors (although less anchored), and carries generative effects (on and in practice). I will highlight these effects in the transnational diplomatic space, where the primary players are the institutional and human participants of the represented countries; the secondary ones, meanwhile, are policymakers, academics, and think tanks. Key to power relations though, as I will demonstrate in my cases, is that China as an actor is hierarchically better placed than others in the transnational diplomatic field. Further, in the transnational field there is no arbiter in the sense that the state (and Party in China) can meta-define various capitals, meaning that the stakes are much more fluid and contested.

Rules of the Game

Bourdieu sees the field as a universe that institutions and individuals relate to and integrate with related rules (*regles*). While fields are relatively autonomous, Walther writes that Bourdieu

also qualifies that the autonomy is only relative, as fields are embedded in a social space. For instance, the intellectual field may also be influenced by the politic, the economy or religion. (Walther 2014: 8)

This is an important observation, because fields affect each other; more so closely related, embedded ones such as the diplomatic field. How should we understand *regles*? Here I will simply refer to them as the “field rules.” Unfortunately, many scholars have obfuscated and conflated “stakes,” “illusio,” “rules of the game,” and “doxa.” Here, it is most instructive to hear Bourdieu’s elucidation of these concepts:

We have stakes (*enjeux*) which are for the most part the product of the competition between players. We have an *investment in the game*, *illusio* (from *ludus*, the game): players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a “contract,” that the game is worth playing, that it is “worth the candle,” and this *collusion* is the very basis of their competition. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98)

Field rules do not conform neatly to *illusio*, as the latter talks about actors’ commitment to the game. Nor are they exactly about *doxa* – the presuppositions and beliefs in the game and stake itself. Wacquant (2011) further observes that these rules are not formal but tacit; yet, this does not mean that they cannot be formalistic. Indeed, many of them are formal. Hence, field rules rest on a dialectical relationship between the formalised and tacit.

In the forthcoming examples, I show how it is not the stakes that have changed, nor the *illusio* that has weakened, nor that actors have given up on the *doxa* of the game; rather, the field has had its rules altered. This modification does not necessarily (and often does not) result in abandonment or lessen their participation in the field. To wit, when actors shift between layers of fields, their movement is not clean nor tidy insofar as they “bring” their local field with them. That is to say, the local field is embedded in them, as they themselves are embedded in the local field. Likewise, the institutionalised internal/external structures, informal and formal practices, artefacts, immaterial and material resources carried literally and figuratively in their conduct and practices only make sense in the context of the field.

Actors are never simply actors, but actors on and of something. The field carries them, and they too carry the field with them.

Transversal Disruption

Disruptions always have an element of surprise that departs or does not comport with taken-for-granted assumptions and field rules. These disruptions, I argue, do not necessarily need to come in the form of crisis, nor is a “change in practice by practice” (Hopf 2018: 692–693) – as some PT scholars note. Instead, it is where rules are disrupted and subsequently altered to bring about a shift – but not one extensive enough to represent a rupture. I argue that when disruption happens, there are four possible effects: alignment, resistance, status quo maintenance, and reinforcement. This is demonstrated by three cases that highlight the potential disruptive effects ensuing when fields meet: the multilateral Track II diplomacy field; China–Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) multilateral fields; and, the China–Malaysia bilateral field.

Disruption and Alignment

In a Track II meeting in 2013, a Chinese delegate – a secondary diplomatic player (think tank affiliate and academic) – during one of his lunch breaks tore the page off all 18 member-countries’ booklets on which “Taiwan” was listed as a participant. Members returned to some shock, but stopped short of punishing the Chinese delegate. In fact, it was the Chinese delegates who intimated strongly that they would not tolerate any such “formal” reference to Taiwan again. China’s unhappiness and anger over the officialisation of Taiwan is well known; this anger, however, has become more pronounced, as primary and secondary actors become more emboldened and are further routinised into this ritual following Xi’s taking over.

Recalling this incident to a Chinese diplomatic contact, he opined that the way the delegate did this was “not right” but nevertheless there was “nothing fundamentally wrong with their action” (Anonymous 11 2016). It is also important to observe that while their unorthodox approach was aimed at changing a practice in the field, they nonetheless respected the logic of that space in how they wished to see such changes made. The same contact thus added:

We were not going to say that we are going to withdraw if changes are not made. Of course, we valued our participation and the organisation. *We still need to play by the rules of that organisation.* (Anonymous 11 2016; italics added for emphasis)

In this example, the secondary actors – through the highly visible act of disruption – caused a shift in the field that resulted in a subsequent change of field rules. This shift made the transnational Track II diplomatic field more aligned with the Chinese local one. The consequence of that episode was that regulations were tweaked such that Taiwan can now only be referred to as “Chinese Taipei.” The island nation is not given a seat at the table (literally), and can only participate as observers. This has left a lasting impact through the changing of both formal rules (procedures and regulations regarding Taiwan as a participant) and informal rules (micro-level aggression/shaming of Taiwanese participants).

The change of the field rules in this transversal space, engendered by Chinese actors, thus has chilling effects for Taiwan’s future participation in such events. In this context, countries are also compelled to make clear their “One China” position; simultaneously, micro-level aggression by Chinese officials/semi-officials against Taiwanese representatives continues to be reinforced and legitimised. In this way, we observe how a change in the field rules led to a consequent change in practices. Yet, the structure of the field itself was first changed through the practices of the Chinese actors who relied on their own field operative logic. This example thus illuminates both the “structuring” and “structured” nature of fields acutely. A secondary Chinese diplomatic player recounted: “We have to push for our interests. We have so many interests in the world. This is nothing special or shocking. It is very normal” (Anonymous 17 2017). In any event, he also admitted that:

We have our own way of doing things, and we bring that into the international arena. Sometimes, others disagree. But we are also aware in these places, we cannot just follow our own way all the time. (Anonymous 17 2017)

From the Chinese perspective, then, a tension exists in such spaces. On the one hand, there is a natural inclination (informed by the country’s own field logic and practices) to bring their operating assumptions and practices into this transnational space, yet there remains also a self-awareness that the transnational location is “differ-

ent” from the local diplomatic field and cannot be treated as such. An important point to stress here, in this Track II diplomacy space, is that China frequently pulls diplomatic levers in such a way that it has a knock-on effect on “official diplomacy.”

Disruption and Resistance

Another important transnational site is the China–ASEAN field wherein most of the related diplomatic activity happens. In that way, one sees intensified attempts to change the formal and informal field rules; in several sites, this is met with resistance however. Take the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in July 2012. Upon the conclusion of this meeting, a regular joint communiqué failed to be issued. Commentators attributed this to the “spoiler role” that Cambodia played in disrupting the joint communiqué – an outcome actively sought after by China (Loh 2018b). Fast forward four years to 2016, and a similar incident took place during the special China–ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Kunming, China. A strongly worded statement on the South China Sea was first released by Malaysia near the conclusion of the meeting. Less than three hours later it was cancelled, as Cambodia and Laos prevented the release of it. As co-chair, Singapore’s foreign minister left the meeting before it concluded. In the aftermath, Liu Zhenmin, China’s vice foreign minister, remarked that Singapore should “butt out” of the South China Sea issue. It was revealed that during the China–ASEAN Kunming meeting, Chinese diplomats were going around warning representatives from the other countries not to make references to the South China Sea – giving rise to ASEAN diplomats’ frustrations (Parameswaran 2016). China was insisting on ASEAN signing up to its statement or issuing nothing at all. Such meddling departs from “normal” diplomatic practice, and certainly does not fit into the transversal ASEAN field that valorises the “ASEAN way”: consensus-seeking, informality, non-interference, and respect for sovereignty. China’s visible and invisible interference disrupted these much-vaunted ASEAN practices and rules.

In interviews with Southeast Asian diplomats, Chinese officials’ behaviour was often referred to as “undiplomatic.” “Within ASEAN, disagreements were plenty and these are fiercely contested – but there would still be mutual respect, give-and-take” noted one ASEAN diplomat (Anonymous 12 2017). Crucially, however, these diplomats

remarked that ASEAN members have come to expect such behaviour as it now undergoes a process of normalisation. Yet resistance from countries such as Singapore and Indonesia, as well as ASEAN itself, has been crucial in preventing further alignment with the Chinese diplomatic field. Singapore, for example, highlighted ASEAN's central role on the South China Sea issue (arguing against bilateralism), and also made its most public and forceful message yet in 2016 by singling out China (National Day Rally 2016). Indonesia too has resisted, for example by firing live rounds at Chinese vessels encroaching on its waters (Sands 2016), renaming part of the South China Sea the "North Natuna Sea" (Allard and Munthe 2017), and, more significantly, insisting that ASEAN needs to have a common agreement and joint stance on the South China Sea issue (Gutierrez 2017). There is thus a fight over ASEAN statements' wording when reference to the South China Sea is made. For instance, in 2016 and 2017 the usually strong language in ASEAN chairman and foreign ministerial statements was watered down through the removal of all references to the South China Sea; yet in 2018, these made a reappearance:

[...] concerns on the land reclamations and activities in the area, which have eroded trust and confidence, increased tensions and may undermine peace, security, and stability in the region. (ASEAN 2018)

Have there, then, been any lasting changes in the ASEAN field? There have indeed been some such shifts – ones not tectonic, but not insignificant either. First, the "rules of the game" – both the formal and informal ones – are now increasingly being contested, challenged, and weakened in this field. But, there is some resistance too. The act of resisting clarifies what the field rules are: what exactly does the ASEAN way connote, how to practice it, and how important it truly is. K. Shanmugam, then Singapore's foreign minister, maintained that ASEAN must keep speaking up on the South China Sea issue and not be silenced; otherwise, "if Asean keeps quiet and loses credibility, it would not be in China's interest" (Chang 2014: paragraph 2). It is this ongoing self-reflective resistance that is preventing the widening of cracks into fissures (Loh 2018b). For now, the rules of the ASEAN field have not changed – but if China is able to bring more countries into its orbit, (as Cambodia and Laos already are) the chances of ma-

terial and immaterial changes to the ASEAN field are high. One Southeast Asian diplomat noted that:

It is not in China's interest to split up ASEAN for good, but they are certainly prepared, under Xi, to push ASEAN very hard without too much care for ASEAN itself. (Anonymous 13 2017)

Beyond the multilateral arena, we also see other instances – for example, in the bilateral transnational field – where Chinese diplomatic practices creep in. Taking the China–Malaysia bilateral relationship as an illustrative case, two concrete examples spring to mind. The first is the apparent interference of the former Chinese ambassador, Huang Huikang, in Malaysia's domestic politics in 2015. In that incident, he appeared in an ethnically Chinese street in Malaysia when pro- and anti-government protests were raging owing to the 1MDB scandal. During his visit, ahead of a planned pro-government rally, he warned that:

Beijing would not fear speaking out against incidents which threaten the interests of the country, infringe upon the rights of its citizens in doing business, or disrupt the relationship between Malaysia and China. (Tariq and Chan 2015: paragraph 3)

This was widely seen as meddling in the domestic affairs of Malaysia, particularly by stoking up pro-Chinese sentiments during a particularly sensitive period for racial tensions. After being summoned by the Malaysian Foreign Ministry to provide clarification, Huang aides

told them he was very busy, and demanded instead that the Foreign Ministry officers instead go to the embassy to see him. Huang then went on to lobby Ong Ka Ting, Malaysia's special envoy to China, and several other ministers, who reportedly let him off the hook. (Parameswaran 2015: paragraph 5)

Next, in the Malaysian general election of 2018, it was observed that the Chinese ambassador, Bai Tian, campaigned for the incumbent candidate, Liow Tiong Lai, from the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) – which formed a major component of the then-ruling coalition Barisan Nasional. The Chinese ambassador was a constant presence at Liow's and the ruling administration's campaign rallies (Xi's image even appeared on MCA's campaign posters), leading to murmurs that Beijing was openly supporting the pro-China Najib administration (Ho 2018). Their gambit backfired. Mahathir Mohamad's Pakatan Harapan coalition emerged as the new government after the

election, and he moved swiftly to cancel the China-backed USD 20 billion East Coast Rail Link project and a natural gas pipeline project in Sabah, citing the unfair nature of the deal (Lahiri 2018). Mahathir also sounded a warning against “a new version of colonialism” in a thinly veiled reference to China made during a state visit to Beijing (Hornby 2018: paragraph 1).

When I suggested to a Chinese diplomatic source that China’s moves in Malaysia can be seen as interference, he was self-exculpatory: “This is being misunderstood. We always insist on non-interference. It is normal that China grows, and we have more resources, we expand and protect these” (Anonymous 18 2018). He also brushed off Malaysia’s moves, saying:

No, this is not a reaction to the so-called interference or “debt trap.” First, there is no such thing. Next, it is their negotiating tactic for the East Coast Rail Link. (Anonymous 18 2018)

What was left unsaid, of course, was that China has materially grown for decades, while the recent assertive turn has become most apparent over the last 10 years. As such, more pertinently, this diplomatic assertive turn has been only a recent development – and one directly coinciding with Xi’s efforts to exert full control.

Conclusion

In furthering the agenda of the practice turn, scholars have utilised Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, field, doxa, illusion, and practices to fruitfully study, as well as open up new avenues of research in, IR. However, within the central toolkit of ideas, the notion of the field has – comparatively speaking – been left out in the cold. I suggest that field-sensitive accounts can help advance the practice turn project.

Using China as the foil, I first described the contemporary Chinese diplomatic field. To that end, I gave a relational account of how fields can be identified, marked out, and analysed. Next, I catalogued the shifts taking place within the field and how this has resulted in a correspondent and constant realignment of actors. Finally, I introduced the idea of transversal disruption and outlined what this entails when fields overlap.

Empirically, I demonstrated how Xi’s quest for control in foreign policy has tweaked the local diplomatic field’s incentives and structure.

This change has given rise to bolder, more proactive actors – and, consequently, diplomacy. Lastly, I argued how disruption and change can happen in transnational diplomatic fields.

The results have been mixed for China; in some arenas they have met with success, in others with strong resistance. Significantly, the Chinese diplomatic field itself has not been successfully challenged or resisted to such an extent to cause them to reflect or rethink their own rules and incentives – even as countries such as Australia and New Zealand now actively resist China’s diplomatic “overreach” and purported campaigns of influence. Yet, the Chinese diplomatic field is such that no one would want to be the “bearer of bad news” and bring this up to the top leadership, as an East Asian diplomat explained (Anonymous 14 2017). When fields meet or are at the point of overlap, something happens. That “something” has long been neglected by practice scholars. I have sought to demonstrate how it matters, is productive, and has generative effects – while also holding potential for international political change too.

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