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Institutional habitus, state identity and China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Foreign ministries play a critical role in international relations and are the medium through which diplomacy is performed. Yet, in international relations scholarship, foreign ministries are relatively neglected as an object of scholarly analysis¹ and feature very little around discussions of state's identity. Zooming in on the habitus of MOFA both as the 'tool of investigation' and 'topic of investigation'² (Wacquant 2011) and using China's MOFA as a foil, I suggest that foreign ministries develop dispositions, perceive the social world around them and react to the world from these orientations. The implication of this, then, is that foreign ministries are contributive to state's identity. In that way, I develop the concept of *institutional habitus* to understand China's MOFA and the ways in which this habitus is sustained and performed through physical artefacts and its institutional inhabitants. In doing so, I push the case for the importance of Foreign Ministries' habitus to its state identity. This rendering of habitus responds to sociology's invitation to extend Bourdieu-inspired analysis towards organizations and organizational change (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Swartz 2008) and, more broadly, complements existing theorization of state identity by showcasing an important but omitted source of identity: the foreign ministry. Using China's MOFA as an illustrative case to both concretize habitus and highlight the fecundity of the concept is germane for at least two reasons. First, China's MOFA is a paradigmatic case, where "strong instances of particular patterns of meaning" are clearly present (Leonard 1989, 54; see also Flyvbjerg 2006, 230-233) owing to the prevalence of history, discipline and control across bureaucracies in China (e.g. Harding 1981; Bakken 2000). As a 'first-cut' example, the exemplary case is best suited to accentuate the concept most clearly and concretely. Second, IR tends to minimize China's rise "as a potentially theory generating event" where it "has yet to systematically appeal to the core IR theoretical community" in spite of its importance (Pan and Kavalski 2018, 291). This paper thus seeks to properly recognise China's rise and the attendant international

¹ For exceptions see (Hocking and Spence 2002; Neumann 2012) At any rate, my contention is most scholarship sees foreign ministries as a variable to access and understand other IR phenomenon but not to study foreign ministries on its own terms as a generator of IR phenomenon.

² Original emphasis.

political effects “as an ‘up-stream’, theory-generating event in IR” (2018, 290). In that way, the empirical findings of China’s MOFA ought not to be parochially restricted but to be considered as having indubitable theoretical effects for IR.

I argue that Chinese MOFA’s organizational habitus manifest and preserve itself through three ways: first, through the iterative re-inscription of institutional memory and invocation of history; second, through displays of fealty; and thirdly, in organizational and personal self-regulation, discipline and taciturnity. This paper makes two primary contributions. First, I make a case for the importance of China’s foreign ministry to its state ‘actorness’ and identity. When scholars speak of ‘State X is doing Y’ or ‘State X condemns State Z’ - it is not the state ‘acting’ or ‘doing things’ but, often times, a state’s foreign ministry (or a state institution) that is acting on behalf of the state. If we take, as a starting point, that all social activities are conducted by and through humans (Schouten 2012, 6), how is this ascribed ‘actorness’ reconciled with the fact that it cannot be said to possess any real agency shorn of its agents?³ My argument here is that the Chinese foreign ministry ‘give content’ to the state such that it makes possible to speak of states ‘doing things’ in and on the world. The implication from the interrogation of the Chinese case is that Foreign Ministries, in the general, must be paid greater attention in theorizing state identity. It must be emphasized that I am not claiming that MOFA is the only representation of the Chinese state or the only institution that forms the content of China’s state identity but wish simply to show that perceptions of China’s identity by other officials, diplomats and representatives are commonly derived from China’s MOFA and its diplomats.

Second, I contribute to the practice turn through the conceptualization of *institutional habitus*. This maneuver heeds Joseph and Kurki’s call for practice theorists to pay greater attention to the “relation between structures and practices” (2018, 87) which they assert has been ignored.⁴ Further, while ‘practices’, ‘field’ and ‘capital’ has received valuable attentions; less so can be said of Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ particularly in exploring ‘group habitus’. Pouliot’s scholarship on the security practices of Russian and NATO interlocutors is one important

³ Wendt would disagree as he advances a ‘states-as-conscious-agents’ hypothesis where he claims that consciousness is a “transaction between the mind and its environment” (2015, 277-278). This view is far from consensual as the state-as-person notion remains contentious (Kustermans 2011; Epstein 2010, 331), much less the states-as-conscious-agents proposition.

⁴ The authors write how (in my view with some merit but also not unproblematically) practice theorists ignores structure as “many of the problems with current practice theory is the inability to adequately abstract, and thus conceptualise, ‘structure’ (or whatever we would call underlying social context) due to a shallow or surface ontology” (Joseph and Kurki, 2018, 85)

⁵ See Nexon & Neumann (2017) on field and Nexon & Musgrave (2018) on capital as two recent examples.

exception in theorizing ‘group habitus’ (Pouliot 2010) and this research builds on that work. Indeed, habitus is a powerful tool in explaining social reproduction, cultural perseverance and is key to unlocking and understanding how practices unfold. Accordingly, observing how institutions develop and hold a habitus, gives us an analytical perspective to understand, imagine and study institutions and political communities in exciting new ways particularly in accenting the role materials play in organizations. This paper is interested in (1) how the habitus is sustained and instantiated and (2) the effect of habitus sustenance and iteration on diplomatic practices for MOFA and its agents. A puzzle that animates this discussion on MOFA’s habitus and state identity is this: *in what ways are diplomatic interactions between Chinese diplomats and the Other significant?* As will be clear in the following sections, an important upshot of this interaction is that the Other derive significant meaning and, consequently, impute China’s identity from these interactions. What is more, the Chinese case will help illuminate how the habitus can produce unintended consequences.⁶ That is to say, the institutional habitus can compel actors to undertake certain practices despite its inimical effects.

There are four sections in this article. In the first section, I will briefly discuss the practice theory approach in IR and how this literature has studied diplomacy and foreign ministries. In the second section, I discuss Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and show how IR will benefit by admitting the concept of *institutional habitus*. In the third section, China’s MOFA is presented as a case to concretize *institutional habitus*. A total of 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted from 2015-2017. Of these, 8 were Chinese diplomats and 25 were non-Chinese diplomats. 4 further interviews were held with Chinese non-diplomats. These include a former diplomat, a government official and two academics in a think-tank sponsored by MOFA.⁷ The interviews were all conducted in Beijing, China. The Chinese diplomats’ rank ranged from third secretaries to a Director of a geographical desk and, while they are not taken to be representative of the broader personnel make-up of China’s MOFA but given the level of secrecy and difficulty with access to MOFA, this sample nevertheless provides an precious insight into MOFA’s organizational habitus. Non-Chinese diplomats who have had at least three years of direct work experience with Chinese diplomats were also interviewed. This provided valuable interpretations of MOFA’s diplomats and organizational workings, which proved crucial in investigating representations of China in the Other.

⁶ I am grateful to reviewer 1 for suggesting that I discuss the unintended effects of the habitus.

⁷ All identities are anonymized.

In the fourth section, I engage with the scholarship on state identity and underline the critical role foreign ministries adopt in identity construction and show why this recognition is important. This is empirically illustrated with the Chinese case to demonstrate how agents sketch China's identity from its MOFA. I conclude by emphasizing how Bourdieu's habitus is fertile territory to conduct IR research on state identity and as a heuristic tool to interpret organizations.

The Bourdieu-animated 'Practice Turn', has enriched IR's scholarship in various ways in taking 'practices' as its basic unit of analysis. For example, practice theorists in IR have shown how practices beget international-social hierarchy (Pouliot 2016); produce power in multilateral arenas (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014); spur national and international diplomatic knowledge production (Neumann 2012); and create conditions for ineffective international humanitarian intervention (Autesserre 2014).

It is also in diplomatic studies that PT has found the most purchase. Focusing on the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and the politics of knowledge production, Neumann argues how knowledge production 'at home' tends to reproduce the status quo such that "a bureaucracy left to its own devices will produce texts that resemble their predecessors and one another" (2012, 64); in essence, creating discourses where the entire Ministry can support. This can sometimes produce inimical effects, particularly when policy reports, drafts and the knowledge produced, is not nimble enough to update itself in relation to the changing currents of international politics.

Also scrutinizing diplomats, Adler-Nissen and Drieschova (2019) argues how word editing technologies, such as the Microsoft Words 'track-change' function, shaped the power dynamics and outcomes of EU negotiations among diplomats in drafting official texts. Cooper and Cornut, for their part, call to attention the practices of 'frontline' diplomacy. In doing so, they push back against tendencies in PT studies of diplomacy that examines diplomats and Foreign Ministries at 'home'. Instead, they illustrate how diplomats at the 'frontlines' – diplomats at the G20 summit and at overseas embassies – can be a transformative force in international politics.

In his ethnographic take on 'face-saving' within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Nair underlines how such practices, informed by norms of the 'ASEAN Way'

“fosters in-group identity and cohesion” and prevents conflict (2019, 2-3; see also Loh 2018, 386-88) but the author does not draw a direct theoretical link between practices and state identity. Indeed, what is missing from this rich body of practice-based work on diplomacy and foreign ministries, is the lack of any systematic theorizing of state identity despite the literature’s recognition of diplomats producing international identity effects (e.g. Adler-Nissen 2014; Neumann 2012). Against this backdrop, my wager is that the concept of habitus can help us better understand identity and identity effects of international organizations. As Pouliot and Cornut observe, “diplomatic studies have a lot to learn from practice theory; so does practice theory from the study of diplomacy” (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015, 298). What is more, within the PT enterprise, with its avowed focus on ‘practices’, Bourdieu’s other key ideas that informs practice theory in IR is often neglected. In that connection, the concentration on habitus in this paper seeks demonstrate how this concept can be used to fruitfully studying political institutions and its identity effects.

Institutional habitus as a Heuristic Device

Bourdieu writes that habitus are:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (1990, 53)

Habitus allows for the range of possible strategies and practices in a particular social field⁹ to unfold when actors compete to acquire more resources or gain more capital. By that same token, institutions as actors in their respective social fields, participate in, possess, accumulate and deploy capital and fight for resources – be that revenue or ‘national interests’. While habitus’ value is amply documented in sociology; it has not seen its potential fully realized in IR. How can we conceive of a habitus operating at the institutional level adapted for use in IR? Didier

⁸ I use the terms ‘organizational habitus’ and ‘institutional habitus’ interchangeably.

⁹ Field is “a set of objective power relations imposed on all those who enter the field, relations which are not reducible to the intentions of individual agents or even to direct *interactions* between agents” (Bourdieu 1985, 724).

Bigo writes that habitus “is...both individual and collective”, further explaining that the habitus connects actors to their practices “by enacting them into the subjective structures of action, position taking, and thoughts of the agent” (2011, 241)

There is also a connection between ‘collective agency’ and habitus where “although more difficult to discern, collective agency exists in the daily routines of life at least as much as in overt social movements.” (Callaghan 2005, 4) In other words, the exercise of collective agency or practices borne from the organization, is more than simply the practices of individuals arrayed together: it has a structuring effect on practices that is not readily apparent or easily seen. That said, we have to be careful not to conceive of institutional habitus ‘everywhere’. Leander, says “even if one could overcome the non-trivial difficulties involved in analyzing and describing the habitus of one individual from one of these categories, the question is how useful this analysis would be for the analysis of other members of the same category” (2008, 23). Emirbayer and Johnson cautions against reification, writing that “one might speak here of an organizational habitus, were it not for the dangers of reification inherent in such a usage, dangers to which Bourdieu himself points whenever he invokes such generalizing notions as the class or group habitus” (2008, 19). Critically, however, that does not mean rejecting the concept:

What remains truly useful, at any rate, about the notion of an organizational habitus is its highlighting of the fact...that organizations, even business firms, are never driven solely by considerations of self-interest in the narrowest sense; they are also driven by interests specific to the game in which they are taking part, interests, to be sure, perceived and acted upon in different ways depending on the different positions these organizations occupy within the field at hand. (2008, 19)

What is also useful to stress here is that socialization does not stop once an individual enters adulthood. If anything, the work organization becomes *the* key site of socialization and, as an upshot, the moulding of one’s habitus (2002, 33). That organizations are sites of socialization is not new (Wanous 1992, 187-234) but recognising that organizations develop dispositions, orientations and modes of practices that has effects beyond the individuals that fill it adds an extra dimension to our accounts of institutions in IR.

In IR, scholars have hinted at this. Barnett in his study of the United Nations and the Rwanda genocide notes how organizations contains “discourse and formal and informal rules that shape what individuals care about and the practices they view as appropriate, desirable, and ethical

in their own right” (Barnett 2002, 5). Crucially, he observes how “bureaucratic categories and organizational boxes do more than simply separate relevant from irrelevant information. They also *produce social optics that policymakers and bureaucrats use to see the world*”¹⁰ (Barnett 2002, 60). In other words, organizations mediate and guide how agents navigate the social world.

Pouliot was most direct about how group or organizational habitus can be useful to IR. In conceiving a ‘Russian habitus’, he explains how, “in any groupings, there typically exists a body of dispositions that similarly characterizes members due to their shared history”. This in turn, implies that members of the same group tend to “think from the same shared premises” In that way, the concept of habitus in IR, allows one to see how “diplomats and state representatives come to embody the state in practice” (2010, 87). Zarakol and Subotic also conceptualize a state habitus in their study on ‘cultural intimacy’ and the ontological security of states. They argue that this concept helps us better study emotions in IR: “habitus...allows us to attribute emotional reaction to states without reducing it to the behavior of a few people or claiming that all citizens of the state endorse a particular action” (2012, 918).

Building on these scholars’ ventures into a ‘state habitus’, I scale below the state to look at state institutions – specifically the foreign ministry and its identity effects. This awareness (of the individual-organization habitus nexus) opens up intriguing ways to study institutions and political communities.

In that respect, the concept of an institutional habitus enriches our understanding of institutions in at least three ways. First, because of the insistence of doing studying the ‘doings and sayings’ of actors that PT demands (Pouliot 2008), habitus concretizes the abstract in the everyday. As we shall see, the concept enables social-ideational elements of an organization - ‘culture’, ‘routines’, ‘social optics’ and ‘history’ - to be empirically documented and fleshed out. Second, it complicates our state-centric epistemologies by adding an interstitial layer or ‘image’¹¹. The payoff from this is that far from seeing local, global and transnational institutions as epiphenomenon or peripheral, we can understand how institutions can be key drivers of global politics in their own right. Third, beyond the scant literature above that directly engages with

¹⁰ Emphasis added

¹¹ This nuances Kenneth Waltz ‘three level’ images of understanding war through (1st) human nature, (2nd) regime type and (3rd) international structure (1959).

habitus (or hint at it), the paper seeks to revitalize the concept and place it front and centre of practice theorists' concerns in IR.

At this juncture, it is germane to make clear how a conceptualization of institutional habitus differs from bureaucratic politics, what can be loosely termed 'organizational culture'¹² and the "community of practices" approach. The difference with the first is clear – bureaucratic politics is concerned with intra-organization politics, conflicts and the effects that these engender. It takes the politics - particularly an agent centric one - as the driver of change/stability (Allison and Zelikow 1999, 255-294) whereas institutional habitus sees the organization collectively as an actor, in its own right, acting on the world beyond merely being a function of organizational politics. The distinction, though, between institutional habitus and organizational culture, at first glance, seems foggier. Indeed, there are affinities between them; particularly organizational culture's emphasis on the collective values and beliefs and habits (Needle 2004). However, there are at least three important ways they differ. First, "conceptualizing organizational culture as habitus may give the organizational researcher the opportunity to avoid static and one dimensional accounts of organization and to infuse the dynamic nature of the organizational culture" (Özbilgin and Tatli 2005, 864). Thus, while the habitus of MOFA may be like 'fish in the water' in the diplomatic field, it can be seen as maladapted in the domestic political field and its associated struggles for stakes.

Second, it is unclear how organizational culture, as an amorphous force guiding the organization and its agents, works in practice. Bourdieu warns us against moving from a descriptive observation that fits the regularity to a rule that "directs, governs and orients behaviour" as if practices ineluctably follow some conscious law – such as cultural codes. In the case of culture doing 'unconscious regulating', it places the motivator of social action into a kind of "Deus ex machina, which is also a God in the Machine" (Bourdieu 1990, 40). Third, and most crucially, an institutional habitus (unlike 'culture') does not in itself arouse social action. What it does, instead, is to generate the possible conditions for practices to emerge, reiterate and sustain itself. Institutional habitus then, is not an untethered guiding law but is "acquired in the course of individual history and function in their *practical* state, for *practice*"¹³ (Bourdieu 1984, 467). In that way, the introduction of institutional habitus allows for a heuristic

¹² Beyond the important dimensions already highlight here that distinguishes institutional habitus, it must be underlined that the method of studying both the institutional habitus and the practices it begets calls for an approach that is sensitive to the *actual practices* of what agents and institutions do.

¹³ Original emphasis

concretization of what organizational culture frequently reference: norms, values, history and practices.

Finally, institutional habitus differs from the CoP (Wenger 1998) approach in at least two significant ways. First, the location and importance of objects is not a central concern of the CoP. In contrast, I take seriously (as can be evinced in overall practice approach) the role of objects as a force-in-itself. Secondly, because of this emphasis on materiality, the conception of institutional habitus is wedded to an ‘actual’ physical organization. While a CoP can certainly include organizations, it is much more amorphous - ranging from people regularly meeting for lunch to overseas diasporas (Wenger and Snyder 2000). Finally, and also on a related note, due to its emphasis on social learning, co-participation and spontaneity, CoP, because of “the organic, spontaneous, and informal nature of communities of practice makes them resistant to supervision and interference” (Wenger and Snyder 2000, 140). By contrast, Foreign Ministries in general, and certainly in China’s MOFA, supervision and interference¹⁴ from the organization is the norm. I now turn to describing China’s MOFA and its institutional habitus in the next sections.

I suggest three conditions that allow for the development of the organizational habitus¹⁵. First, the habitus of an individual and the organization needs to be, more or less, synergistic and thus mutually socializing. That is to say, the habitus of an individual and the organization do not, majorly, contradict. This is best seen in the employment process of organizations where the individual is attracted to a company and the company successfully hires the individual. Beyond the instrumental benchmarks (qualifications, work experience, salary etc.), ‘fit’ is an increasingly important criterion in hiring decisions (Wanous 1992, 44-46). There is no denying that one’s habitus can come in conflict with an organizational habitus as in the case of ‘forceful admission’¹⁶ or when individuals (or the organization) discover that their habitus – world view, dispositions, skills etc. – are at odds. There will also be cases where organizational norms prove incongruous with actual organizational practices as is in the case of the African Union

¹⁴ See also (Kerno 2008) on CoP’s limitations on understanding organizational hierarchy.

¹⁵ The implication of an institutional habitus is that it can be further abstracted to a ‘state habitus’. Scholars have alluded to this; Subotic and Zarakol posit “that modern states may be conceptualized as exhibiting attitudes similar to emotion because they represent collectivities shaped by narratives which in turn constitute a common habitus” (2012, 917).

¹⁶ Examples of ‘forceful admission’ can happen from the position of the individual or the organization, i.e. parents sending a child to a school that she dislikes, or an organization compelled to accept someone that is subpar because of a leader’s insistence.

community (Glas 2018). In these instances, a split is likely to eventually emerge where the individual exits the organization or undertakes mitigating strategies;¹⁷ in doing so, the organization ‘sharpens’ and sediments its habitus. Describing recently departed Chinese diplomats, a Southeast Asian diplomat notes how: “they left for higher pay and the work hours are long. Those who don’t ‘buy into MOFA’ cannot stay long” (Interviewee 1, Personal Communication, 2 August 2018). Simply put, there must be some level of mutual socialization and *conformity* between the individuals and organization. Institutions with too many innovative agents would prove difficult for the sedimentation of culture, practices and memory to take hold as it gets pulled in different directions (or for it to continue existing). Discussing the turnover rate of MOFA with a Chinese envoy, he notes that “it is natural for big organizations to have people leave. This is same for other companies and organizations. We can afford to choose because the core people stay that have the right values and motivation” (Interviewee 2, Personal Communication, 6 July 2018). This is indicative of how MOFA is able to retain a ‘core’ set of values, norms and inhabitants that sustains the institutional habitus.

Hence, there must be persistency of institutional work-culture, habits, dispositions and perceptions for one to identify a habitus (see also Pouliot 2010, 31-33 & 50). That said, I must add that institutions do not unceasingly reproduce themselves or that agents inexorably tend towards compliance and conformity. The literature on organizational socialization suggests a more fluid and complex dynamic between rule following and discretion (e.g. Oberfield 2010; Feldman 2000). In an important study on institutional ‘practice breakdowns’ at the Cambridge University Boat Club, Lok and De Rond (2013, 205) explain how “institutional scripts can be stretched to temporarily fit practice performances that appear to diverge from them without necessarily causing permanent structural change” where institutional inhabitants act to contain and restore these practice breakdowns, thus preserving structural integrity. By doing so, “the basic organizing principles” on which practices rest on “are inoculated against the practice performances that appear to challenge them” (2013, 186). This “institutional plasticity”, allows change to take place and yet, at the same time, recognize that emergence and presence of practices that contest the organizing principles and institutional habitus without fundamentally altering its quality and character. Besides, habitus (particularly Bourdieu’s later works) had always held the potential for change and virtuosity (Bourdieu 1984, 466; Bourdieu 1990, 57;

¹⁷ For instance, the individual can engage in foot-dragging or implement decisions slowly (Lipsky 1980). A full exploration of how and under what conditions can conflicting habitus emerge is an important topic but one that this paper does not examine.

Hopf 2017) To that end, Vandenberghe reflects how the “transformative capacities of the habitus” must be appreciated (Vandenberghe 1999, 50).¹⁸

Second, the institution in question must have some ‘history stability’. This allows institutional memory to develop, which I contend, is crucial to sustaining and re-inscribing an organization’s habitus; it should have a durable historical continuity to allow for habitus to take hold. I understand that the vagueness of ‘history stability’ may be wonky but this wonkiness is acceptable to take into account the contextual specificities of each institutions within their field. There is no Archimedean point that an institution ought to cross before it can be said to have developed a habitus. What is usually evinced from interviews with Chinese diplomats is the gravity they place on history - usually the institution itself, the Party and certain heroic diplomats’ history. One source discloses that “there are no formal IR history course but there is certainly training on modern Chinese history that begins from Mao. That is most important” (Interviewee 3, Personal Communication, 24 June 2018). It is revealing that, compared to other foreign ministries where IR knowledge is typically requisite, Chinese diplomats and diplomats-to-be do not have these demands as most of its talent pool comes from foreign language schools (Interviewee 3, Personal Communication, 24 June 2018). Finally, there must be an adequately meaningful field for the development and deployment of its habitus. Just as it is meaningless of speak of a habitus for the hermit, it would be meaningless to speak of an institutional habitus that does not participate, cooperate and compete with other actors in a social field. In other words, it must not be a transient institution that does not support a critical mass of agents within it.¹⁹

If we believe that the sum is larger than its parts, then the ‘organization’ as the key configurative principle in one’s life-course is not merely the aggregation of habitus of

¹⁸ While not the thrust of the research here, change in institutions and institutional habitus is intriguing. One way change happens, is through the ‘hysteresis effect’ where old habitus does not yet fit the field because of some crisis or major structural force changing the organization, practices or in the habitus of others. Bourdieu point to the “the presence of the past” where the routines and practices have not yet adapted to the changed environment and context (1990, 62) where actors seem out of step in their practices through an outdated habitus. Pouliot and Neumann showed how outdated diplomatic practices of Russian actors’ “deep-rooted, historically inherited dispositions generative of diplomatic practices that looked clumsy and untimely in the eyes of foreign diplomats” (2011, 106). In other words, their habitus endured despite the changing context. In contrast, in their analysis of a British organization operating in post-communist Ukraine, Kerr and Robinson surmise that the habitus of Ukrainians undergone a ‘hysteresis effect’ and that the reorientation of the habitus was a process of ‘creative transformation’ in which dissident Ukrainians tested out the new context and innovatively reoriented their habitus to interpret the operations of domination in the new corporate context (2009, 847).

¹⁹ It needs be said that this is not meant to be a definitive guide for identifying institutional habitus but to serve as guiding sign-posts to show how organizations can develop habitus.

individuals. As a ‘structuring structure’, it informs and shapes agents’ habitus as it enters the institution. As a ‘structured structure’, it derives its work culture, practices and habitus from its agents. The institution - owing to its collective historicized institutional memory and registry of practices - lasts longer than any agents. Consider how the individual’s embodied habitus ‘consists of a set of historical relations “deposited” within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporal schematic perception, appreciation and action’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 16). Similarly, while an individual may leave the institution, this does not ‘remove’ the agent’s effect on the institution entirely, as its practices are ‘deposited’ in the form of material documents, doctrines, in social relationships and the cultural makeup within the organization.

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Institutional Habitus

China’s MOFA was founded in September 1954 (外交部 2013)²⁰ after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. MOFA had over 3000 employees in the 1990s, is currently estimated to have over 5000+ diplomats and support personnel under its organization (中国新闻 2009)²¹ and is the key site for the execution of foreign policy and diplomacy. Despite its centrality to foreign policy, it has not received due scholarly attention and is often, erroneously, written off as ineffectual and ‘weak’ (Sun 2016). Nevertheless, MOFA has come a long way since and has enhanced its professionalism (Glaser and Saunders 2002) and seen its diplomatic corps grow. I caption four concrete ways how MOFA’s standing has increased in recent years. The first is the elevation of Yang Jiechi (China’s top foreign policy official) into China’s elite policy-making party body – the 25-member Politburo - at the 19th Party Congress (Chong 2017). Second, the institution is getting greater material support with its diplomatic spending in 2017 rising to US \$7.8 billion almost doubling the spending in 2013 (Bloomberg News 2017). Third, MOFA’s overhaul under Xi will see “most agencies to stop replacing staff in Chinese embassies by next year, giving ambassadors direct control over their portfolios”²² in contrast

²⁰ Its institutional predecessor was the 中央人民政府外交部 (Zhong yang ren min wai jiao bu)/Central People’s Government Ministry of Foreign Affairs which was set up in October 1949 (外交部 2013).

²¹ Interviews with Chinese MOFA officials and non-Chinese diplomats throw up different figures ranging from 4000 to 6000. Official reports from 2009 puts it at 5000 diplomats working overseas but notes these were ‘from different ministries’ and under MOFA, there were 2500 diplomats working overseas. (中国新闻 2009)

²² Next year being 2019.

to the past where different embassies were influenced by different ministries. Substantially, MOFA now “wield a veto over financial and personnel decisions at embassies” with a Bloomberg report further stating that the “Foreign Ministry could weaken the very agencies such as the Commerce Ministry that have helped China establish interests around the globe, but the government has decided has it’s worth the risk” (Bloomberg News 2018). Finally, the ‘Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group’ – the highest strategic decision making body for foreign policy was restructured and renamed ‘Central Foreign Affairs Commission’ – elevating its status and importance with Xi as Chair and Vice-President Wang Qishan as Deputy Chair (于泽远 2018). It needs saying that this paper is not making the case that MOFA is able to act independently of Xi and the Politburo Standing Committee. Far from it, this recent diplomatic robustness and activism could only have been possible with the top leaders enabling it. This also indicates that top leaders have placed greater emphasis on diplomatic work and, consequently on MOFA to take on a bigger role in areas that were not traditionally considered under its purview such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Chen 2018; Yu 2018).

I also hasten to add to add that the importance of MOFA has ebbed and flowed throughout its history.²³ For instance, when the Foreign Ministry was first established, its was a very important (domestic) institution due to Zhou Enlai’s leadership (Kissinger 2011). As space is limited, I am unable to further discuss the historical shifts of MOFA. Suffice to say, in contemporary literature on China, the ‘weakness’ of China’s MOFA is generally taken to be unequivocal.

Mapping the Habitus

Plotting the institutional habitus of MOFA requires some methodological innovation. In more precise terms, I rely on MOFA statements and agent’s diplomatic practices (accessed through personal interviews) that informs MOFA’s habitus. I triangulate the data through third party interviews – non-Chinese diplomats with experience working with their Chinese counterparts. To be clear, I am not tracing the historical development of MOFA’s habitus. Instead, I am examining how the habitus is sustained and instantiated; the effect of habitus sustenance on diplomatic practices; and its effects on state identity. That is to say, I am necessarily taking a

²³ I thank one of the reviewers for stressing this point.

synchronic snapshot of a diachronically constructed habitus.²⁴ The following sections will draw out particular features of MOFA's organizational habitus. Within the discussion of each 'strand' of the habitus underlined, a discussion on the effects of that particular feature will follow.

Institutional Memory and History

Just as personal biography and memory are critical for the unfolding of one's habitus, so too is institutional memory crucial for the emergence of an institutional habitus since it furnishes the organization "some measure of consistency and continuity to function" (Autesserre 2014, 44). In a way, institutional knowledge "flattens and shoehorns history into already established boxes and cubicles; information that is sought is information that conforms to already established modalities" (Barnett 2002, 59). This self-reinforcement allows for the stability from which a durable 'we-ness' appears and reveals itself in organizational *beliefs*, knowledge, frames of reference, models, values and norms as well as organizational myths, legends, and stories", "*behavioural routines*, procedures and scripts" and "in *physical artifacts*, which embody, to varying degrees, the results of prior learning"²⁵ (Moorman and Miner 1997, 91-93).

Building on them, I define institutional memory as the "*stored material and immaterial knowledge, beliefs, norms and behavioural routines that may be used in the present*" and turn to the specific case of China's MOFA. One instantiation of this material artefact embodying institutional history is through texts – particularly the texts foreign ministry personnel rely on for meetings and briefings. Cornut observes how newly arrived diplomats "usually rely on briefing notes written by their predecessor. This helps to preserve a form of institutional memory, but it also reinforces existing frameworks of analysis" (2015, 393). Evidence from the Chinese case affirms Cornut's conclusions. MOFA spokespersons, in their daily press briefing, rely extensively on a thick book of notes which is pre-prepared (although the questions are not made known beforehand). Remarkably, having sat through three press

²⁴ One may argue that what I am doing can be better achieved through an examination of individual's habitus instead of invoking an institutional habitus. There are at least two reasons why an organizational habitus is needed. First, aggregations of individual's habitus cannot reveal the effects of the structure (institutional habitus) on their own as effectively as an investigation of the institution itself. Second, organizational habitus has greater analytical precision as the object of study is MOFA's effect on agents rather than agent's effects on MOFA.

²⁵ Author's original emphasis. The stress on behavioral routines following from organizational memory is analogous to Bourdieu habitus driving 'practices': "(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice" (1984, 101)

briefings²⁶, and seen many others online²⁷, almost all questions have a ‘ready-made’ response drawn from the book. Further, despite the vastly different personalities off and on stage, the responses on stage were similar. In essence, the book, as a physical artefact (beyond the substantive content) ‘held’ organizational norms and beliefs. MOFA itself described the press briefings, which only became a daily affair in 2011, as an extremely important duty with “more than a dozen assistants behind the team and this team has the backing of the entire MOFA and even other ministries and commissions” (中国政府 2013). What is more, the genealogy of MOFA’s press conferences are taken by MOFA themselves to demonstrate how far the organization has come since ‘reform and opening up’ in terms of transparency, progress and professionalism. 2003 is also marked as ‘the year of the press spokesperson’ because of the SARS virus outbreak and how well and frequent the Health Ministry’s spokespersons – learning from MOFA’s system – broke the news (中国政府 2013, para 28).²⁸

Thus, the presence of these notes further serves to *remind the individual of appropriate ways of Chinese diplomatic behaviour*. The importance of material things has been observed by others. Pouliot reflects how “warheads are like pieces on a chessboard – they inscribe the rules of the game in things which then acquire a material existence of their own... material things can take on a symbolic life of their own” (2010, 301). The inscription and preservation of institutional memory and history is important for the sustenance of the institutional habitus.

In all my interviews with Chinese diplomats, textual objects (and the act of referencing them) are always present. One non-Chinese envoy comments that “the Chinese are very professional and well prepared. Always come with the necessary notes and research documents.” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, 19 June, 2017). In two different interviews with Chinese envoys, a thick file brought along for the meeting was never used but conspicuously present. It was symbolically there – its functional use supplanted by its symbolic use: as a material thing reminding the diplomat of the correct utterances and demeanour. What is more, China’s MOFA have an entire team dedicated to this, fact-checking, making sure the responses

²⁶ These took place in 2016, 2017 and 2018 in MOFA headquarters.

²⁷ Clips of its press briefings (from 2016 to 2018) were accessed on the Associated Press YouTube channel. I have watched least 60+ MOFA press briefings.

²⁸ Indeed, there are multiple ministry-sponsored publications dedicated to the history and the practices of press conferences such as 外交部发言人揭秘 (wai jiao bu fa yan ren jie mi/The Secrets of the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson) (中国政府 2013).

are not only correct but more importantly, politically correct, where “more than a dozen assistants behind the team and this team has the backing of the entire MOFA and even other ministries and commissions” (中国政府 2013, para. 18).

This can be counterproductive sometimes. One Chinese interlocutor opines, “our diplomat read from prepared remarks to the outside world a lot of times. We do not give the right remarks to make people believe [our positions]. They are not making people believe in them, creating some difficulties” (Interviewee 6, personal communication, 27 June 2017).

Second, the history of the organization unravels through the constant socialization into the history and ethos of the organization. One Chinese diplomat states: “To understand us [MOFA], you need to read the history of our Communist Party” (Interviewee 7, personal communication, 1 July 2017). This re-inscription and valorization of the past is symptomatic of the broader clarion call of ‘不忘初心’ (*bu wang chu xin*) - to remember the glorious achievements of the party. This also meant that history (of MOFA and of broader ‘Chinese history’) constantly flows through its diplomatic practices. One Chinese respondent relays how “a lot of what is going on in the South China Sea is driven by history, by China’s perception of itself as a ‘victim’. That’s how you see the ‘victim mentality’ coming up. Chinese MOFA’s actions and direction can be seen like this too” (Interviewee 8, personal communication, 27 June 2017).

Deaths of former diplomats also present an opportune moment for MOFA to memorialize and entrench the ‘traditions’ and ‘ethos’ of the organizations. For instance, at the memorial service for Wu Jianmin, a diplomat eulogized him saying that his car accident (which happened late at night) is because of his work ethic - working late, his obligation to the motherland and his heavy sense of duty (Sina News 2016). The work of another diplomat – Li Shengjiao – was also memorialized a year after his death in 2017 when Chinese diplomats and officials came to remember his deeds, particularly his diplomatic achievements in international maritime law and boundary demarcation issues (SCMP 2018). Zhou Enlai, China’s former Premier and first Foreign Minister, is arguably the most memorialized diplomat. His death and 诞辰 (*dan chen* or ‘birth anniversary’) are often high-profile Ministry ‘benchmark dates’ with top diplomatic officials delivering evocative, heart-felt eulogies. For example, in 2008, at the 110 ‘birth anniversary’ of Zhou, the then-Ambassador to North Korea delivered a speech dedicated to him, saying that his “alarming abilities allowed him to immensely contribution to China’s

diplomacy”, further noting that “he was the founder and pioneer of diplomacy and the Foreign Ministry in China and he dedicated his life to world peace. Thus, his memory and legacy is a precious asset to the Ministry” (刘晓明 2008). This theme is repeated in 2018 at this 120 ‘birth anniversary’ with state-sponsored publication highlighting his frugality: “He received many gifts from others but he never had designs on them and lived an incorruptible live” (人民网 2008)

Such efforts to valorise and regularly commemorate deceased diplomats²⁹ are solidarity-building organizational rituals that help to physically, socially and materially ‘remember’ *personal diplomatic histories* of MOFA actors. A PRC envoy adds that “this is a good opportunity for officials and MOFA itself to remember these important people”. When pressed on the benefits of such a move, he says “it is important for any organization to know its roots. Especially when we are doing important work for the country” (Interviewee 7, personal communication, 1 July 2017). Another consequence of this aspect of MOFA’s habitus is that its agents are inclined to refer to history and situate current issues in historical context giving off (rightly or wrongly) the impression that Chinese diplomacy is, in the words of several diplomats, ‘traditional’. One oceanic envoy remarks how “when you have diplomats behave like that, you cannot but wonder if they actually have a mind of their own” (Interviewee 10, personal communication, 25 June 2017). A non-Chinese diplomat attest to this reliance on historical knowledge:

The Chinese [MOFA] have remarkable memory. They will be able to look through their files and can cite precisely what you said in 1950. They keep detailed records of everything you say, and this can be easily referred to. I have personally experienced this. They pull out things I have said before many years ago! (Interviewee 11, personal communication, 19 July 2017).

To give another example, in response to a question posed by a journalist on a trip organized by Taiwan to take foreign media to disputed islands, MOFA spokesperson Hua Chunying said “I noticed this is the third time you asked. First, at an earlier press briefing, Second, after the *liang*

²⁹ Others include the memorials for Luo Tianguang (兆明 2008); Qian Qichen – former Foreign Minister (李肇星 2017); and Wang Hairong (记者 2017).

*hui*³⁰ when you asked Foreign Minister Wang Yi and now you ask again” (Associated Press 2016). This is suggestive of the eidetic memory of the organization. In interviews with Chinese subjects, they frequently appeal to the ‘correctness’ of history and how the world community agrees with them. In relation to that, a Western diplomat tells me how his Chinese colleagues “never seem to be able to think that they can do any wrong. They frequently remind us that China is a victim of history.” (Interviewee 5, personal communication, 19 June, 2017). Additionally, from the press briefings, whenever ‘controversial’ questions (such as the South China Sea disputes or human rights issues) were brought up, spokespersons almost always invoke how ‘the international community agrees’ or ‘this is also the view of the international community’³¹ to show the moral correctness of their stance. The persistent and almost automatic pull towards history serves as a justificatory mechanism for many of its diplomatic practices, essentially anchoring and stabilizing them in incentivizing particular diplomatic practices. So, we see in the South China Sea disputes, the assertive appeals of historical moral rightness have increasingly become commonplace, particularly after 2009 (Li and Loh 2015).

I hasten to stress that owing to their longevity and importance, organizational memories and the politicization of these memories affect Foreign Ministries of all stripes. What degree and shape this institutional memory take, is an empirical question. In that connection, this account of China’s MOFA illustrates the potential productivity of recovering Foreign Ministries’ institutional memory and its international political effects.³²

Political Loyalty and Fealty

In 2009, at the 11th National People's Congress Standing Committee, a law governing diplomats abroad, (中华人民共和国驻外外交人员法) “People's Republic of China Diplomatic Missions in Foreign Countries Act” was adopted (中国新闻 2009b). This is the first ever piece of legislature for diplomats in modern China. Significantly, the legislation switches the sequence between “*rights and obligations*” for diplomats into “*obligations and rights*” and, notably, disallows resignation of diplomats stationed abroad. The government

³⁰ Refers to ‘two meetings’, here referencing the National People’s congress and National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

³¹ Based on live observation at MOFA’s headquarters and over 60 clips of MOFA’s press briefings.

³² I thank one of the reviewers for raising this point.

stressed that this switch is to prioritize obligations expected of diplomats before their rights. Under article eight of the legislation, it stipulates (in the first section) that diplomats must be loyal to the country and its people. The third section obliges personnel to be faithful to their duties and to work hard while the sixth section asks one to be obedient, compliant and have work discipline and *not resign while stationed abroad*³³ (中国新闻 2009c). It is worth remembering that this legislation pre-dates Xi's ascension in 2012. Therefore, it needs stressing that while Xi plays an important role in promulgating China's image, changes to professionalize MOFA and, indeed, to discipline its habitus started before Xi's term. At any rate, the use of particular words in the legislation is revealing, with “忠于” (*Zhong Yu/loyalty*) repeated no less than three times in an endeavor to discursively augment loyalty, obedience and duty. Indeed, assessments of applicants into MOFA rests not only on academic credentials and knowledge mastery but also on political persuasion and discipline. A respondent affiliated with MOFA says:

If we were to choose, will choose one that will make great contribution to China. Of course, the number one [criterion] is 忠诚 (*Zhong Cheng/loyalty*) and then, second, personal contribution - meaning sacrificing yourself and working through midnight. (Interviewee 13, personal communication, 4 July 2017).³⁴

Such is the emphasis on political loyalty that students who have studied international relations or other social sciences abroad – even in prestigious Universities find it difficult to enter MOFA because, in the words of a Chinese diplomat “their educational experience overseas may contradict our ideology”, further adding that “it may have some issues with what the organization stands for. This time [commencement of undergraduate studies] is particularly sensitive as they are very impressionable” (Interviewee 14, personal communication, 3 July 2017). A Chinese envoy who studied in Japan told me straightforwardly “First, it is rare that this [his overseas education] can happen. Because of my studies here, *I am ranked lower in the Ministry* compared to someone who studied in China. In fact, I am trying to move to another Ministry or a SOE, which is more cosmopolitan” (Interviewee 15, personal communication, 1

³³ Translation and emphasis my own.

³⁴ My Chinese respondents replied in either Mandarin, English or, more commonly, a mix of both. I have translated them as true to form as possible and retained some original phrasing in Mandarin.

July 2018). The main effect of this constant referentiality is that discussions with official MOFA agents almost always include deference and pledges to President Xi as agents reaffirm their loyalty. This can be seen in the discourse of diplomatic officials as well. For instance, Former Ambassador Fu Ying's '看世界' (seeing the world) – a collection of her diplomatic speeches - that repeatedly pays homage to President Xi. Even as the book is purportedly about her views on world politics, almost every chapter opens with how Xi's ideas and direction shaped her and the Ministry's world view. (2018, 8, 30).

Organizational Discipline and Self- Regulation

One new rule flowing from the legislation governing overseas diplomats is the raising of the minimum age (from 18 to 23) for diplomats posted overseas. This is functionally useful as more mature personnel tend to have deeper academic credentials and longer work experiences (中国新闻 2009d). Another consideration, not officially articulated, is that older candidates are more mature politically and less susceptible to “dissenting views from host countries”, particularly those of western-liberal societies (Interviewee 16, personal communication, 5 July 2017). A longer gestation period also allows more training and inculcation towards the values and culture of the organization – in other words to allow for the aligning of an individual habitus to the institutional habitus. The cultivation of the individual and the alignment of their habitus cross over to the personal lives. An Oceanic diplomat explains how PRC diplomats are “professional and intelligent and clearly very disciplined” but when they “go out for lunch, dinner and drinks [with us] but they always see these informal social gatherings as ‘official’”. (Interviewee 17, personal communication, 25 June 2017).

One Chinese respondent puts it thus, “Chinese culture for diplomacy is very careful, there's a saying 外交无小事 (*wai jiao wu xiao shi*/no ‘small things’ in diplomacy) so must be very careful as a lot of small things can be amplified. Must be disciplined across all levels” (Interviewee 18, personal communication, 31 July, 2017). That discipline is a requirement and a pervasive trait may seem like an uninteresting point because all diplomats are expected to be professional and disciplined. Nonetheless, restrictions are rather unique to China, to the extent that Chinese diplomats are expected to surrender their personal passports, have their movement restricted such that they cannot go on vacations and have rules preventing one's resignation.

This was not always the case. A European diplomat recalled how he was able to meet his Chinese counterpart for weekly tennis sessions back in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Interviewee 19, personal communication, 19 July 2017). A Chinese public servant shares with me an anecdote of how “insulted” he felt when he asked his friend from MOFA out for lunch: “This is a friend I knew very well because we went to University together. So, I really felt insulted when he said he can only meet me if he brings along a ‘friend’. I am not even a foreigner!” (Interviewee 20, personal communication, 17 July, 2018).

The contemporary focus on discipline create conditions where Chinese diplomacy is not only assertive at the structural level but also at the individual level because of the tight sticking to scripts, norms and practices. That is to say, institutional habitus disciplines MOFA actors to conform to prevailing diplomatic practices. Such discipline (together with the increase in resources or ‘capital’), has given rise to a perceptible increase in diplomatic assertiveness through micro-aggressions in diplomatic encounters to confident, assertive diplomatic discourse³⁵. Indeed, several non-Chinese interviewees chorus the ‘feeling’ that Chinese diplomats are displaying more confidence and are willing to display this publicly and privately. When quizzed on what this assertiveness entails, several interviewees point to their ‘confidence’ and sometimes, ‘arrogance’. A diplomat sums this up “it’s not just [confidence] behaviour but also their demeanour, communication and how meetings are arranged” (Interviewee 21, personal communication, 1 July, 2018). These are not mere ‘willing’ acts but necessary ones. A source close to MOFA’s remarked: “of course they [MOFA] must conform and be that way [assertive], they cannot do it any other way.” (Interviewee 22, personal communication, 1 September, 2017). It is certainly valid to say that the three aspects of MOFA’s institutional habitus could apply in some way to other MOFA or state organizations. Nevertheless, I showed how Chinese MOFA differs in important ways to other countries: I illustrated how MOFA’s institutional habitus prevents MOFA officials from speaking their minds and creates hesitation for one-to-one meetings with others. This is not what we would normally associate with diplomats. The main reservoirs from which MOFA draws its employees has a considerable impact on the subsequent entrenchment of the institutional habitus. A South Asian respondent puts it this way “They are not flexible, a lot of them are linguists and not diplomacy trained, and they do things that go by the book. Means that part of that [training is] from linguistics:

this has consequences for their world view and ability” (Interviewee 23, personal communication, 25 June, 2016).

Further, and following the interviewee’s comment above, we can perceive how the adherence to discipline hinders smooth diplomatic interactions. Indeed, the examples above brings into sharp relief how the habitus can produce unintended effects, not only to the conduct of diplomacy, but as we shall see, to identity-formation as well. Chinese interlocutors justify their practices as ‘natural’ outcomes or as ‘how things are done’. Beyond this common-sense appearance, these are often attributed to the organization, by actors, in how the organizations effect their practices³⁶. Turning helpfully to a former diplomat, he rues how “you get numb to what you’re doing. But we are not 机器人 (robots) blindly following. When you are in the organization, you must and will believe” (Interviewee 24, personal communication, 27 April, 2018). In sum, beyond the general importance of history, loyalty and discipline, the quotidian diplomatic practices here show how they are both ‘structuring structure’ and ‘structured structure’ in that while these practices are conditioned, their very enactment also reinforce that very structure that structures them.

State identity

How does understanding foreign ministries’ habitus help us study identity? My next key contention is that Foreign Ministries play a critical role in giving content to state’s identity. If we take state identities to have both an internal and external dimension,³⁷ then the ‘external’ dimension of a state’s identity and its ‘actorness’, I contend, obtains primarily from its foreign ministries.

While the importance of national and state identity is well acknowledged (Wæver et al 1993, 22) there remains much debate over the meaning of it. Scholars sometimes also rely on state’s identity in their studies as a-given and self-evident, without properly conceptualizing and constructing ‘identity’ (Callahan 2006). Realists generally consider state identity as fixed,

³⁶ A key contention here is that one may not be able accurately access actors’ practices by asking them to account for it themselves. That said, one must not discount actors’ own rationalization of their practices. Indeed, that rationalization and justification post-hoc is a practice in itself.

³⁷ By saying that there is an internal and external dimension, I do not mean to give the impression that identity is ‘split’ or in opposition.

unchanging ‘billiard balls’ à la classical realism (Waltz 1979)³⁸. Despite the literature on liberalism seeing states as more complex intertwined entities, they nevertheless still hold states as ‘solid’ substances with countries managing their own affairs within formally demarcated territories (Keohane and Martin 2003). It is in social constructivist literature, that scholarship on identity is the richest and which challenges the rationalist, materialist understanding of identity (Epstein 2010, 328). Yet, the constructivist project here leaves some theoretical gaps. Berenskoetter explains

much of the constructivist literature focuses on the ‘Me’ and leaves the ‘I’ undertheorized; that is, it focuses on how a sense of Self is defined in relation to other states in the international system with *little consideration of internal sources of identity formation*³⁹” (2014, 266).

In that regard, many have attempted to do precisely that. Subotic (2011), for instance, shows how domestic political actors mobilize identity claims strategically in explaining divergent Europeanization between Croatia and Serbia. Elsewhere, others have made domestic factors of identity their main empirical concern (e.g. Hopf 2002; McCourt 2011; Kaarbo 2015, 202-203). What is more, there has been an over-attention, in constructivist literature, paid onto the socializing nature of state identities such that “the configuration of *national identity*”⁴⁰ is then “pushed into the background”. (Berenskoetter 2014, 267). On the other hand, Subotic and Zarakol claim the reverse, suggesting that “most IR scholarship brackets off domestic-level processes from scrutiny, it is often assumed that state identity is a given” further adding that domestic “sources of identity (e.g. nationalism) are conceptualized as if they manifest themselves independently of international relations.” (2012, 919). This problem is made apparent because the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’ tends to be studied in isolation. That is to say, not enough care is given to the dynamic interplay between the external and the internal sources of identity and how they affect each other.

³⁸ The delineation between realism, constructivism and liberalism is often not so neat. An illuminating case in point is Mercer’s study on Anarchy and state identities (1995). Using social identity theory on intergroup conflict, Mercer reaches the same conclusion as Waltz in that “states are a priori self-regarding” (1995, 251) thus supporting the Waltzian self-help anarchic thesis.

³⁹ Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Original emphasis.

To that end, a relational reading of identity where “identity emerges as an effect of boundary production vis-à-vis differences or distinction between Self and Other” (Hagström 2014, 123) critiques constructivist’s interpretations of identity. Bucher and Jasper’s sounds a word of warning against tendencies in constructivism to reify identities and confer them a ‘substantial’ property. They suggest understanding ‘identity’ as ‘acts of identification’ in which some identities “will remain marginal, while others are made prevalent” (2017, 393), thus asking for a processual-relational understanding of shifting identities against fixed identities. Brubaker and Cooper further caveat how constructivist studies of state identity are “an uneasy amalgam of constructivist language and essentialist argumentation” (2000, 6). I agree that we must be vigilant against reification and essentialised apprehensions of identity but wish to push back against a ‘pure’ relational understanding.

Still, we have no deep understanding of how foreign ministries influence state’s identity and image. Thus, this article complements existing accounts that locate domestic forces as an important fount of state identity by showing how foreign ministries play a decisive role in informing state’s external identity through its diplomatic practices and interactions with Others. The interpretation of ‘foreign ministry’ - through the organizational habitus - is an iterative and ongoing (albeit relatively durable) one. Thus, the aspect of state identity under inquiry here does not fall into the ‘substantialist trap’ neither does it commit the error of being so mercurial (or purely relationally-attained) such that if it is everywhere; it becomes analytically inoperative (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1).

In teasing out the link between foreign policy and state’s identity; Ashizawa shows how “identity functions as a source of a state’s foreign policy” arguing that a state’s identity creates certain values and preferences that, in turn, creates conditions for a particular foreign policy inclination (2008, 595). In his conception of the state identity, the author writes

state identities are observed in the way policymakers (therefore, persons) conceive of them, while they think they are acting as an agent of their state. Further, and as a common practice, actions undertaken by those policymakers on behalf of their states are observed as their state’s foreign policy actions (2008, 575)

That is to say state identities manifest and express themselves through state actors and institutions; and no actor is more emblematic of that expression than Foreign Ministries. A

word about external-internal or national-state identity is in order. According to Tilley, national identity (internal) includes “formative history, ethnic components such as dress and language, and ideas about the collective political values” while state identity (external) refers to “qualities symbolically ascribed to the state by elites, meaningful to the international community and understood to determine the state’s foreign policy orientation” (2003, 46-47). Here, I am concentrating on state (external) identity and how Others in the world perceive this. In the earlier section, I explained how, Chinese MOFA’s habitus compelled it and its agents to perform certain diplomatic practices. The upshot of that is that these diplomatic practices form the materials upon which China’s external identity is constructed and perceived by self and Others. That is to say; diplomatic practices have concrete implications and meaning beyond utility in diplomacy. First, MOFA’s agents and institution’s assertiveness transposes unto ‘China’s assertiveness’. Second, habitus’ demands for personal discipline translates into a perception of Chinese ‘coldness’, impersonality and inaccessibility. In that way, the relational nature of identity is concretized in practice by showing how perceptions of China forms from ‘the other’. Morozov and Rumelili says this of relationality:

On the relationality of identity...The Self can never be the sole author of its identity, and ‘Self-centred’ analyses of European identity are simply overlooking the ways in which external/spatial Others, such as Russia and Turkey, are shaping European identity in different ways (2012, 29).

In focusing on the discursive practices of the Other, they zoom in on how Russia and Turkey, despite their subaltern status, were able to influence articulations of what it means to ‘be’ Europe. Contrarily, while there is certainly an exercise of discursive agency by Others in the Chinese case, Beijing has so far managed to resist these attempts. Actors from other countries frequently transfer the behavior of these diplomats as the content China’s diplomatic behavior and identity. A Western diplomat reveals that “China’s diplomacy is getting increasingly assertive and also not very transparent, we can see this from their diplomats here when we deal with them” (Interviewee 25, personal communication, 2 August 2017). A Southeast Asian diplomat discloses that China is

Definitely assertive - for sure. Some people call this assertive, some people call this a shift and a change. The quick answer is that they are stronger. They can increase diplomatic influence. China influence has seen a bigger influence in the last 5 years –

MOFA PRC pushing and driving it ⁴¹ (Interviewee 26, personal communication, 1 August 2017).

Yet another envoy underlines how Chinese diplomats are increasingly practicing “micro-aggressions” particularly over the South China Sea issue. While acknowledging that ‘China’ more than MOFA, he nonetheless adds that it “[feeds] into China’s increasingly assertive behavior on the world stage” (Interviewee 27, personal communication, 31 August 2017). One East Asian diplomat said how difficult it was for him to get access to Chinese diplomats and how this “affect how we deal with China” (Interviewee 28, personal communication, 27 July 2017). Note how these personal experiences supplies the broader feelings and perception of ‘China’ and Chinese foreign policy and diplomacy.⁴² A Chinese source adds (on Philippines’ decision to bring its territorial dispute before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2013) – “China’s diplomacy and military is ‘too rough’ in its response towards the Philippines. It is not a good way and surely the Philippines will respond in their own way” (Interviewee 29, personal communication, 27 June 2017),

A Chinese diplomatic interviewee candidly says:

when Xi entered the PSC in 2008, these changes slowly happened. This brought about a shift into a Chinese foreign policy characterized by a recognition of China’s power and capability. This sort of thinking then permeated scholarly community and MOFA. So, there is an effect there. (Interviewee 30, personal communication, 3 July 2017).

Speaking on behalf of the diplomatic community writ large, a non-Chinese diplomat opines

I think the diplomatic community here certainly share a sense that the Chinese diplomats are getting more confidence or assertive if you prefer. We talk about these things because we share information with close partners and across the board, its uncanny how our experiences are similar. To your question, yes. Obviously how they

⁴¹ Emphasis added.

⁴² Another case in point is the diplomatic behaviour of a Chinese Envoy – Du Qiwen – at the Pacific Forum Islands in 2018. He reportedly strode around the room and prevented Tuvalu’s Prime Minister from speaking (as he was due to speak on concerns of Chinese influence in the region) Tuvalu’s Prime Minister subsequently called on China to apologize and said that Chinese diplomats are ‘bullying’ other countries (Doherty and Davidson 2018).

behave and what we observe them doing matters in forming perceptions. They are not the only people we interact with. Our different desks have different sectors they reach out to. But it is definitely the key organization. (Interviewee 31, personal communication, 1 August 2017).

The concatenation of domestic actors and emergence of national identity in the Chinese context has not gone unconsidered. Whiting indicates how China's "national identity emerges in how the policy-making elite perceives and articulates the image of China in its relationship with the outside world" (1995, 296).⁴³ Also, the institutional habitus of discipline and self-regulation foreclose the establishment of deep interpersonal relations with other diplomats from other countries⁴⁴ giving rise to perceptions of the impersonality, inaccessibility and adds to the mystification of China. Diplomatic interviewees from other countries frequently lament the difficulty in getting the Chinese diplomats from "opening up" and from being friends. And while acknowledging their professionalism and organizational discipline, some build ties to form 'informal' diplomatic interlocutors from other ministries and party organs because they perceive MOFA to be economical with information, ironically undermining MOFA⁴⁵ in the process (Interviewee 31, personal communication, 1 August 2017). One Western diplomat underlines this difficulty:

It is difficult to get them into a room, but they are pleasant enough when I get the chance to speak to them. They stick to the official line and don't say much. There is general reluctance on their part. I think that is true for most Chinese bureaucracies. We do our best to share information but there is little reciprocity. (Interviewee 33, personal communication, 1 July 2017)

This 'accessibility problem' by some Western countries is corroborated by a Commonwealth diplomat who shares in some detail how "in 2010-2014, the Americans were having difficulty accessing Chinese diplomats. Even when some meetings took place, they [Chinese] refused to

⁴³ Although Whiting's 'policy-making elites' focus almost exclusively on Deng Xiaoping and PLA leaders, 'policy-making elite' here refer to MOFA and its agents.

⁴⁴ As always, there are exceptions to the rule. One Southeast Asian diplomat whose country enjoys privileged access to Chinese MOFA says "friendship can be cultivated. Once you find an opportunity to do them a favor, they will definitely remember and be grateful to you. It is possible to be friends and meet them one on one then" (Interviewee 39, personal communication, 24 June 2016). These examples remain rare.

⁴⁵ Auteserre in her seminal work on peacekeeping also makes a similar point such that routines and practices in 'Peaceland' (field of peacekeeping broadly conceived) can produce suboptimal, unpeaceful outcomes even if the intentions and strategies of intervening organizations was to keep peace (2014, 193 & 217).

give name cards making the Americans wonder if they were spooks and if China is not interested in engaging at all” (Interviewee 34, personal communication, 16 November 2018).

Another diplomat adds:

The Chinese are difficult to understand and closed. They self-censor as well. Difficult to negotiate with MOFA people or persuade them because they do not appear singularly. They are always accompanied by another at least so they can keep watch on each other. I have not met any really open official in my 10 years dealing with them. (Interviewee 35, personal communication, 9 July 2017)

It is sometimes not just Others that get this impression. Academics feel it as well. A Chinese academic with close links with MOFA confides

They don’t like to interact especially with international scholars. They are afraid of using English sometimes, especially for those whose English is not so good. Sometimes when they do interact, they do so to push a point or say certain things. Sometimes, this does not leave a good impression on other academics. I know because I myself sometimes don’t have a good impression of our own MOFA when they interact! [laughs] (Interviewee 36, personal communication, 11 July 2017)

A Chinese diplomat rejected this characterization when I put it to him that others have problems ‘being friends’ with them. When I probed further, asking what the reasons might be for the almost unequivocal thinking on MOFA’s ‘unfriendability’, he did not fundamentally dispute this observation and was unable to give me a satisfactory reply (Interviewee 37, personal communication, 16 November 2018). What is evinced here is that other countries (through their MOFA and officials) impute China’s diplomacy and its identity through its agents – it is how the rest of the world construct their view of Chinese behavior and identity. While it is true to say that this is the case for other countries’ MOFA; given the general lack of access to information, many officials can only get at China’s identity through these official channels. The examples above also crystalize how habitus can produce unintended, suboptimal outcomes. China certainly does not want others to think of it as ‘cold’, ‘inaccessible’ or ‘assertive’; yet, these are the very memes that consistently gets invoked by other diplomats.

One western diplomat told me how “they stick to official line and don’t really say much more. I speak to scholars to try and get multiple views but that is mainly because MOFA doesn’t like speaking to us!” (Interviewee 38, personal communication, 2 August 2017). In contrast, a diplomat whose country enjoys multiple channels of communication puts it thus “many others [countries] have problems [understanding China]. For us, we speak not only to them [MOFA] but also their Party organs, think-tanks, businesses and scholars. We have good access.” (Interviewee 39, personal communication, 24 June 2016). In other words, the key to perceiving China, broadly speaking, is its accessibility. One can also see MOFA’s influence when the accessibility issue is turned around. One diplomat tells me how a Chinese ambassador

has direct access to the Prime Minister in this country. And he will only speak to junior ministers and above. Such access, of course, lends him and the Ministry some arrogance because not all diplomats have such access. As far as I know, in most countries, because of China’s importance and because of the diplomats’ requests, Chinese ambassadors have very good direct access to host countries’ Ministers and key leaders. (Interviewee 40, personal communication, 16 November 2018).

MOFA, as the main interface of this, controls (by design or otherwise) how others perceive the state. Relatedly, I am not alleging that MOFA is the only source of China’s state identity nor that there are no internal contestations to its identity (see Abdelal et al 2006). The interactions of millions of tourists, businesses and students that go abroad surely matters. In relation to that point, Mahler (2000) rightly emphasizes the importance of non-state actors such as migrants and tourists in constructing diplomacy and international relations. In this relation, it needs to be said that this paper does not purport to capture the ‘essence’ of state identity neither is this the article’s goal.⁴⁶ Rather, the point here is to highlight the substantial yet largely unacknowledged role that Chinese MOFA plays in informing ‘official’ perceptions and foreign policy of others towards China: MOFA’s role in constructing China’s identity is rarely systematically theorized and scarcely empirically documented. More broadly, this speaks to the need to theoretically acknowledge and study Foreign Ministries and their identity effects. Institutional habitus help us ameliorate the ‘substantialist’ tendencies to reify identities by demonstrate how perceptions of identities form and stabilize from Foreign Ministries and its inhabitants’ interactions with others.

⁴⁶ I thank one of the reviewers for helping me to make this point clear.

Johnston, in his book on China's socialization, insist it "matter a lot, when explaining state behavior, how small groups, even individuals, are socialized through social interaction with other small groups and individuals in other states (and non-state entities)" (Johnston 2008, XV). One East Asian envoy's experience drives home this point (Interviewee 41, Personal Communication, 25 June 2016):

My ambassador has never met China's foreign minister. Two weeks before he was about to leave for his new posting in Europe, he received a surprise phone call from him, asking to meet him. He was so angry! Absolutely furious! He saw this as an insult because he (China's Foreign Minister) obviously knew our Ambassador didn't have the time to meet as he was moving posts. *We could see how their international relations and diplomacy was going to play out*⁴⁷.

Hence, we see here a particular capacity to coordinate – access to the Ministry, the Minister and the gaming of schedules and accessibility – brought to the foreground in sharp relief. In that way, the frequent, everyday interchanges between international diplomats are not neutral, insignificant moments but politically productive and purposeful in the making of China's diplomacy and state identity. One other point I wish to make is on identifying the markers of an organizational habitus. Just as we can map out the habitus of an individual only through its practices, in a related move, we can only identify the institutional habitus through its institutional practices and objects: the presence of intervening objects, collectively enacted practices, history, ethos and values of the organization. This is what I have sought to do here by illustrating the consequentiality and pervasiveness of pre-prepared documents, of organizational rituals such as memorialization of deceased, and the ubiquity of history that permeates the material and non-material elements of the organization.

Conclusion

Institutions are not merely the aggregation of individuals put together because they adjust and correct individual behavior in multifarious ways (e.g. Rogowski 1999; Bendor and Hammond 1992). As an interstitial entity – straddling the 'state' and the individual 'agent' - organizations

⁴⁷ Emphasis added

provide fertile grounds to study IR and pose new questions to old answers – particularly those of identity and practices of actors occupying the institution. Focusing on the China’s MOFA – this paper first makes the case for understanding organizations through their organizational habitus in IR. In that regard, I suggest three conditions which a habitus may develop: synergistic habitus and mutual socialization; presence of meaningful field for expression; and historical stability.

Next, through the Chinese example, I showed the effects of MOFA’s organizational habitus and highlighted how it can compel organizational inhabitants to produce suboptimal outcomes. Unlike an individual where the habitus resides permanently with her; an institution requires the habitus to be repeatedly sustained and re-inscribed to take hold and find meaning. This is done through three ways - iterative re-inscription of institutional memory and invocation of history in agents and physical artefacts; recurrent displays of fealty to the President; and organizational and personal self-regulation and discipline. Thereafter, I demonstrated how foreign ministries are critical institutions in forming state’s (external) identity and used China’s MOFA to highlight this. Johnston states how “Chinese leaders’ sensitivity to the international image made them responsive” to international opprobrium and expectations (Johnston 2008, 79). Being, quite literally, at the front stage of this image, China’s MOFA, not least through its press briefings, is the *first and, usually, only* institution that responds to such interactions. MOFA’s relevance and importance in managing and projecting China’s image and identity to China’s leadership cannot be understated.

A potentially fruitful area worthy of deeper investigation would be to perform a historical excavation of how an organizational habitus came to be. While I offered three conditions how a habitus may arise – these are meant as catalytic propositions and does not stem from a genealogical exercise. Such an endeavor would better allow us to understand how and in what conditions, an organizations’ practices, routines and habitus morph. Another particularly compelling area for future research would be organizational change. While there is no lack of work there, these tend to focus on a strictly ‘change/no-change’ dichotomy. The injection of organizational habitus entangles this dichotomy by letting in on how change can take place in periods of general ‘unchange’ and how stability can endure even in periods of disruption.

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