

The Boys Who Cried Wolf Warrior: China's Diplomatic Strategy in Latin America¹

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ABSTRACT. Objective/Context: This article examines the evolution of China's diplomatic strategy in Latin America in terms of how effectively Chinese diplomats have adapted to the demands of their country's multi-dimensional engagement with the region over the past three decades. This strategy underpins China's investments in the region and relates to regional integration and cultural cooperation issues. **Methodology:** The study draws on a database compiled by the author, tracking the careers of all senior Chinese diplomats in Latin America from 1990 to 2020. It is a qualitative study with quantitative data aggregation, comprising representative case studies. **Conclusions:** The author observes changes in how China's diplomats of the twenty-first century have embraced network diplomacy and enhanced their abilities to engage with foreign publics and governments. The competence of diplomats to get locally involved and demonstrate positive results has been tested, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the excesses of the so-called Wolf Warrior diplomacy appear to have been reined in. The study demonstrates a continuous evolution in the centrally crafted yet often competing efforts of the organizations involved in China's overseas operations, including ministries, Communist Party organizations, and educational institutions. **Originality:** By focusing on diplomats as key agents the study offers new insights into China's diplomatic and economic engagement with the region of Latin America. It also uses a novel database that will be publicly accessible following the publication of this study.

KEYWORDS: DIPLOMATS; network diplomacy; China foreign policy; Sino-Latin American relations; Communist Party of China.

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Los niños que clamaban Guerrero lobo: la estrategia diplomática de China en América Latina

RESUMEN. **Objetivo/contexto:** este artículo examina la evolución de la estrategia diplomática de China en América Latina en términos de la eficacia con la que los diplomáticos chinos se han adaptado a las exigencias del compromiso multidimensional de su país con la región durante las últimas tres décadas. Esta estrategia sustenta las inversiones de China en la región y se relaciona con cuestiones de integración regional y cooperación cultural. **Metodología:** el estudio se basa en una base de datos recopilada por el autor, en la que se hace un seguimiento de las carreras de todos los diplomáticos chinos de alto nivel en América Latina desde 1990 hasta 2020. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo con la adición de datos cuantitativos que ofrece unos estudios de caso representativos. **Conclusiones:** el autor observa cambios en la forma en que los diplomáticos chinos del siglo XXI han adoptado la diplomacia de redes y han mejorado sus habilidades de relacionarse con públicos y Gobiernos extranjeros. Se ha puesto a prueba la competencia de los diplomáticos para involucrarse localmente y demostrar resultados positivos, especialmente durante la pandemia de COVID-19, mientras que los excesos de la llamada diplomacia del Guerrero lobo parecen haber sido frenados. El artículo evidencia una evolución continua en los esfuerzos centralizados pero a menudo contrapuestos de las organizaciones que participan en las operaciones de China en el exterior, incluidos los ministerios, las organizaciones del Partido Comunista y las instituciones educativas. **Originalidad:** al centrarse en los diplomáticos como agentes clave, el estudio ofrece nuevas perspectivas sobre el compromiso diplomático y económico de China con la región de América Latina. También utiliza una novedosa base de datos que se hará pública tras la publicación de este estudio.

PALABRAS CLAVE: diplomáticos; diplomacia de redes; política exterior de China; relaciones sino-latinoamericanas; Partido Comunista de China.

Os meninos que gritavam “Lobo Guerreiro”: a estratégia diplomática da China na América Latina

RESUMO. **Objetivo/contexto:** este artigo examina a evolução da estratégia diplomática da China na América Latina em termos de quão eficazmente os diplomatas chineses se adaptaram às exigências do compromisso multidimensional da China com a região durante as últimas três décadas. Essa estratégia é a base dos investimentos da China na região e está relacionada a questões de integração regional e cooperação cultural. **Metodologia:** o estudo é baseado em um banco de dados compilado pelo autor, que acompanha as carreiras de todos os diplomatas chineses de alto nível na América Latina de 1990 a 2020. É um estudo qualitativo com a adição de dados quantitativos que fornece estudos de caso representativos. **Conclusões:** o autor observa mudanças na forma como os diplomatas chineses do século 21 abraçaram a diplomacia de rede e melhoraram suas habilidades no engajamento com cidadãos e governos estrangeiros. A competência dos diplomatas para se engajar localmente e demonstrar resultados positivos foi testada, especialmente durante a

pandemia de covid-19, enquanto os excessos da chamada “diplomacia do lobo guerreiro” parecem ter reinado. O artigo evidencia uma evolução contínua nos esforços centralizados, mas muitas vezes conflitantes, das organizações envolvidas nas operações da China no exterior, incluindo ministérios, organizações do Partido Comunista e instituições educacionais. **Originalidade:** ao concentrar-se nos diplomatas como atores-chave, o estudo oferece novas perspectivas sobre o compromisso diplomático e econômico da China com a região latino-americana. Além disso, utiliza uma base de dados inovadora que será disponibilizada ao público após a publicação deste estudo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: diplomatas; diplomacia de redes; política externa da China; relações com a China; América Latina; Partido Comunista da China.

Introduction

China has become a leading force in global politics; the predominant measures for this, however, tend to be the size and growth of the country's economy, the scale of its overseas investments and commercial relationships, or the relative capabilities of its military forces. Another crucial measure of China's global reach is the extension of its diplomatic network. Chinese and foreign media alike invariably underscore the centrality of the Beijing government and the Communist Party (often interchangeably) in China's domestic affairs. Nevertheless, when it comes to the country's activities overseas, the focus shifts to state-owned corporations and, more recently, to organizations such as the United Front Work Department or the “hidden agendas” of educational institutions such as the Confucius Institutes and academic exchange programs. Considering that China's government strategy and messaging are carefully crafted centrally, both at home and abroad, the highly visible impact of Chinese corporations on the international stage must be understood alongside the activities of Beijing's official emissaries—the diplomatic corps.

For decades, Washington had the most extensive diplomatic network in the world. However, as its size, scope, influence, and morale have steadily declined during the Trump administration and failed to recover under President Biden due to congressional roadblocks (Burns 2019; Feinberg 2022), the dynamics of influencing global affairs have shifted: according to a recent study by the Lowy Institute in Sydney, it is now the People's Republic of China that has the numerical lead, boasting 276 diplomatic posts—including embassies, consulates, and permanent missions to international organizations (Lowy Institute 2019). Moreover, the number of embassy staff has risen, their average

age has decreased, and professional training and internal knowledge transfer are being enhanced across the board (Wang and Li 2017).

This development is due to the recognition by Beijing that China's rise as a major stakeholder and the expanding presence of its corporations and citizens worldwide have put growing demands on its diplomatic service. The role and abilities of Chinese diplomats as representatives, communicators, and negotiators on behalf of their government are increasingly tested, in many cases, by less-than-sympathetic foreign publics and governments. Over the past ten years, the Chinese government has become aware of these challenges and has sought to restructure and strengthen its foreign service in multiple ways. There is still much room for improvement to keep up with the rapid growth of the country's overall strength: in terms of diplomatic personnel relative to its population, or expenditure as a percentage of gross national product, China still lags the United States and Japan by a large margin (Doherty 2019; Wang 2016).

A case that illustrates this tendency and its continuing challenges is the region of Latin America. As the most distant frontier in China's "Going Abroad" strategy,² it has experienced the impact of China's dramatic economic growth only since the beginning of this century: an exponential growth in bilateral trade, a rapid rise of mergers and acquisitions by Chinese corporations, billions of dollars in loans, and a wide range of cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges. Official visits to the region by China's top leadership have increased to become a near-annual event between 2008 and 2019, and forums for high-level multilateral cooperation have bloomed. This multidimensional trend (Shen and Blanchard 2010) has been supported by a growing and increasingly versatile body of diplomats on the field, who have gained considerable visibility in the process.

The central question this article addresses is: How has Chinese foreign diplomatic engagement in Latin America evolved to keep pace with the country's goals, and how effectively are Chinese envoys to the region able to establish and maintain the demands and priorities of their government? A subsidiary question is: How free are they in the form and modalities of their engagement? By tracking the careers and movements of Chinese diplomats across Latin America since 1990, we can identify trajectories and patterns of engagement that illuminate Beijing's drive to enhance the pursuit of its domestic and international goals. By profiling some of its emissaries against the background of China's broader

2 Often known by its Chinese name 走出去战略 (*Zouchuqu* Strategy), this going-abroad drive was initiated by the administration of Jiang Zemin to expand the presence of Chinese businesses abroad and integrate more closely with the global economy in view of China's joining the World Trade Organization in 2001.

approach to the region, a picture emerges of a varied and increasingly refined diplomatic strategy (Liu 2001). The evidence shows how China's diplomats, despite their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy (Heine 2013) and are working self-consciously and with considerable latitude to improve their cross-cultural communication.

Since 2018, media in the US and several European countries have highlighted a particular aspect of Chinese diplomacy: the phenomenon of “Wolf Warrior” diplomats (McDonell 2021). The term was derived from a 2017 motion picture of the same title (Wu 2017) and has been used to describe assertive Chinese diplomats who use provocative language on social media and shout at or insult foreign counterparts (Martin 2021)—behavior previously considered acceptable only from representatives of some Western powers. This emphasis sits well with the US strategy of pushing back against a rising China but is also misleading as it is not statistically representative.

Finally, the paper acknowledges the changing dynamics of the organizations involved in China's overseas operations: the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce, the Development and Reform Commission, and organizations within the Chinese Communist Party, such as the Central International Liaison Department and the United Front Work Department. This offers a basis for further contributions to the heated debate about China's likely forward trajectory as a responsible stakeholder, a spoiler, or a free-rider in the global system (Kastner, Pearson, and Rector 2018). It suggests that even as China abides by the most existing rules and institutions (Heilmann *et al.* 2014), the country is increasingly punching its weight in the realization of its own goals and is more willing to take reputational risks in that pursuit.

1. The Politics of China's Overseas Work in the Twenty-First Century

Modern Chinese diplomacy emanates from the phrase “外交无小事, 大权在中央” (*In foreign affairs, there is no small matter, and the power resides in the center*), widely attributed to the supreme diplomat of the early People's Republic, Premier Zhou Enlai. It recognizes the importance of consistency in messaging and the value the Communist Party attaches to central control. In practice, this means that junior diplomats and early-career ambassadors typically spend long stretches at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) or the International Liaison Office of the Communist Party's Central Committee (IDCPC) in Beijing. That said, China's diplomacy has long been dominated by “economic diplomacy.” As Pang Zhongying has pointed out, this is only gradually shifting: until quite

recently, Beijing's overriding goal was to keep a low profile and emphasize a neutral "non-intervention" policy (2009).

However, following the 18th National Party Congress in November 2012 and the instalment of Xi Jinping as General Secretary of the Communist Party, President of the People's Republic, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, we witnessed several important innovations in the country's diplomacy, under the headline of 中国特色的大国外交 [*Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*] (Chen 2014, 39)—a motto at once grand and somewhat vague, but not meaningless. It translates into giving greater prominence to diplomacy in China's global projection, an incremental prioritization of national interests, and the pursuit of heightened influence in world affairs. In practice, it called on Chinese diplomats not only to maintain ongoing dialogues with foreign governments and deal with external crises and challenges but to ensure a peaceful and stable external environment for China's development and actively participate in the shaping of this environment in a strategic manner—an ambitious goal best summed up using the concept of *Sinicization* coined by Peter Katzenstein (2012): making the world a more amenable space and more suitable the center. We may think of this as a more subtle and less invasive variation of the British introducing their own educational and administrative institutions to their colonies.³ Beyond a shift in practice, this outlook further implies that China is willing to assume more "great power responsibilities"⁴ and aims to push back against the *Pivot to Asia* strategy presented by US President Barack Obama in 2012 (Chen 2015).

The increasing diversification of China's overseas activities—including especially a growing protagonism of non-government actors such as Chinese multinationals that came with the country's opening-up policy in the 1980s and the *Going Out* campaign of the late 1990s—brought with it difficulties in the central coordination of foreign policy and ensuring national priorities and desired outcomes. Therefore, incoming Party and government leader Xi Jinping urged major institutional reforms in foreign affairs and diplomacy to strengthen overall planning and coordination. The administration restructured border and maritime enforcement agencies, began to establish a unified coast guard, and created the

3 Of course, the French and the Spanish did the same in their respective colonies, and in all three cases, language was a centrepiece of the colonial effort. The British repeated this pattern when they, belatedly, introduced democracy to Hong Kong prior to the 1997 handover. Similarly, the US imperialist project of the late twentieth century has focused on installing the democratic system in as many countries as possible in an effort to make the world more amenable to American interests.

4 大国责任, also translated more literally as "big country responsibility," as discussed several years earlier by Singapore-based scholar Zheng Yongnian (2004).

Central National Security Council with Xi as its chairman. Following a carefully crafted publicity campaign celebrating the 16th anniversary of the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* formulated at the 1954 Bandung Conference, China's diplomatic propaganda machine moved gradually away from former leader Deng Xiaoping's approach of "maintaining a low profile and biding one's time" (韬光养晦) towards a focus on "taking initiative and being enterprising" (主动进取). Chen Zhimin explains that China strove to achieve a progressive and proactive diplomacy: Beijing has encouraged its overseas to actively participate in shaping the external environment and consciously resolve or hedge foreign challenges from the source (2014, 40). To this end, the new government developed a fresh diplomatic discourse around ideas such as the "Chinese dream," great power diplomacy, and the BRICS cooperation mechanism. Diplomacy is to be governed by the four themes of "friendship, good faith, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness" (亲诚惠容) within President Xi's trademark notion of a "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind" and the more tangible frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Maritime Silk Road.

China's structural emphasis on bilateral diplomacy and, specifically, on partnership diplomacy has been well documented (Feng and Huang 2014, *cf.* also Beck, Muller, and Seabra 2020). Nevertheless, beyond that, Chen emphasizes how this has translated into diplomatic practice: partnership diplomacy strategically uses personal connections and network diplomacy to further differentiate relations with individual states, aiming to shift relationships with some countries and regions under a central direction. For countries that challenge China's principal interests, diplomats are encouraged to take the initiative to cool down relations and reduce perceived proximity (Chen 2014, 41). So, while the recent phenomenon of China's "Wolf Warrior diplomats" may be in part an expression of individual preferences, it is also more likely an intentional "bark" encouraged centrally than a series of diplomatic *faux-pas* (Xiang 2020; Martin 2019). It is what former Deputy Foreign Minister Fu Ying referred to when she warned that a country's discursive power to influence ideas and values of others depends on the coherence and sincerity of its public discourse—and, by extension, on the coherence and sincerity of its public representatives on the global stage (Fu 2020). We now turn to Latin America to explore what changes in the structure and goals, discourse, style, and formation of China's foreign service might mean in practice.

2. The Case of Latin America

As noted above, Latin America was the last region to develop a significant and dynamic relationship with China. Some observers make the case that the

People's Republic had not historically attempted “to construct either an ideologically driven or geopolitically purposeful strategy in Latin America” (Phillips 2010, 179). Given Latin American socialist experiments over the past century and the recurrence of certain revolutionary movements of Maoist thought and guerrilla tactics,⁵ it is tempting to identify patterns and direct connections, but these tend to be misleading.⁶ The nature of this relationship, comparatively unburdened by history, is why a study of contemporary China's diplomatic strategy and activities in Latin America offers a fresh and instructive spotlight on how China views its role and future path in the world. The fast pace of this development over the past two decades and its dynamism—frequently referred to by Chinese scholars in terms of “gigantic leaps” or “leapfrog progress”—makes an informed analysis of this relationship particularly relevant (Creutzfeldt 2012).

After establishing diplomatic missions in most major countries of the region in the 1970s, the People's Republic adopted a practical approach to this transpacific *rapprochement* that began in 1980 with an agreement with Mexico. It sent over a hundred young officials to Mexico to learn Spanish and become more attuned to Latin American cultures and realities. Several of them were later selected to become diplomatic representatives to the region (Harris 2007, 7). Beyond that, China committed funds for training, education, and research on Latin America, principally through the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Central Party School. This focus has been incremental and consistent: both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping recognized the importance of improving knowledge of world regions and financed initiatives to expand the discipline of Area Studies in China (Ren and Liu 2020). Since 2010, successive government policies have supported the development of increasingly high-quality Latin American and other area studies centers across the People's Republic, not only to research and teach but as a targeted effort to inform China's foreign policy-making and diplomatic corps. China now boasts as many as sixty centers focused on the Latin American region alone, aimed at better understanding the chronic challenges of Latin American economies and societies (Myers, Barrios, and Guo 2018).

5 There is evidence of Maoist political pamphlets making their way to Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and early CCP guerrilla tactics were studied with interest by insurgents. Also, left-wing leaders from the region were invited to China and given the opportunity to shake hands with senior leaders. However, there is no hard evidence to suggest that Beijing *actively* sought to foment insurgency or guide political movements at any moment during the twentieth century.

6 In particular, US analysts have described patterns of Chinese support for left-leaning governments (e.g., the “Pink wave” during Latin American elections in the early 2000s), but such conjecture can be summarily dismissed by looking at Chinese support for center-right governments (e.g., the Pacific Alliance, *cf.* Creutzfeldt 2018).

It is this informed consolidation of goodwill and enhanced dovetailing of mutual interests that led Alicia Bárcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, to state in October 2021 that “cooperation between China and Latin America and the Caribbean offers an opportunity to reduce global asymmetries and support a transformative, inclusive economic recovery that promotes sustainable development” (CEPAL 2021). Most Latin American governments have begun to recognize Chinese expertise in building roads, railways, ports, and energy plants—undeniable necessities for economic and social progress. They have understood that China is at the forefront globally in renewable energy sources, industry guidelines for sustainable development, and many cutting-edge technologies. The Chinese also came through as highly visible helpers in the COVID-19 pandemic when they delivered at least 130 million dollars’ worth of face masks (Telias and Urdiñez 2020) and shipped vast quantities of vaccines to the region, breaking the crest of several waves of infection.⁷

Of course, China’s interest in the region is driven primarily by sharply growing trade and investment flows and is illustrated by the number of top leadership visits. The first Chinese premier to travel to Latin America was Zhao Ziyang in 1985, followed by Li Peng in the early 1990s. Since 2004, however, high-profile visits have been more frequent and increased even to become an annual event after the publication of China’s first Policy Paper for the region in November 2008. Regarding the choice of countries visited by successive leaders (Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao until 2012, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang since then), no pattern is discernible in terms of political leanings or investment priorities, though, inevitably, international summits such as BRICS in Brazil, APEC in Peru, and the China-CELAC Forum in Chile determined preferences and afforded the visits greater prominence in the media. As bilateral visits and exchanges at all levels increased, so did the desire to offer concrete plans: during his visit to Latin America in July 2014, President Xi put forward a “1+3+6” cooperation framework—one plan with three engines in six areas. The plan was envisioned as a five-year Cooperation Plan between China and the Latin American and Caribbean countries. The three engines were to place trade, investment, and financial cooperation as driving forces to ensure a comprehensive development of transpacific cooperation with the goal of achieving a trade balance of US\$500 billion within ten years and aiming for Chinese investment in the region of US\$250 billion. The focus was to be on six major areas: energy resources, infrastructure design, agriculture, manufacturing, technological innovation, and information

7 Much doubt has been raised about the effectiveness of Chinese-made vaccines, but leading science journals have highlighted the value of early provision of vaccines (Mallapaty 2021).

technology. These formal frameworks set the agenda for bilateral and multilateral meetings and lend themselves to some analysis; they fail, however, to capture the strengths, weaknesses, or real prospects of China's engagement with the countries of Latin America. This is where tracing the careers and movements of Chinese diplomats across the region can be a tool to help illuminate Beijing's drive to enhance its pursuit of domestic and international goals.

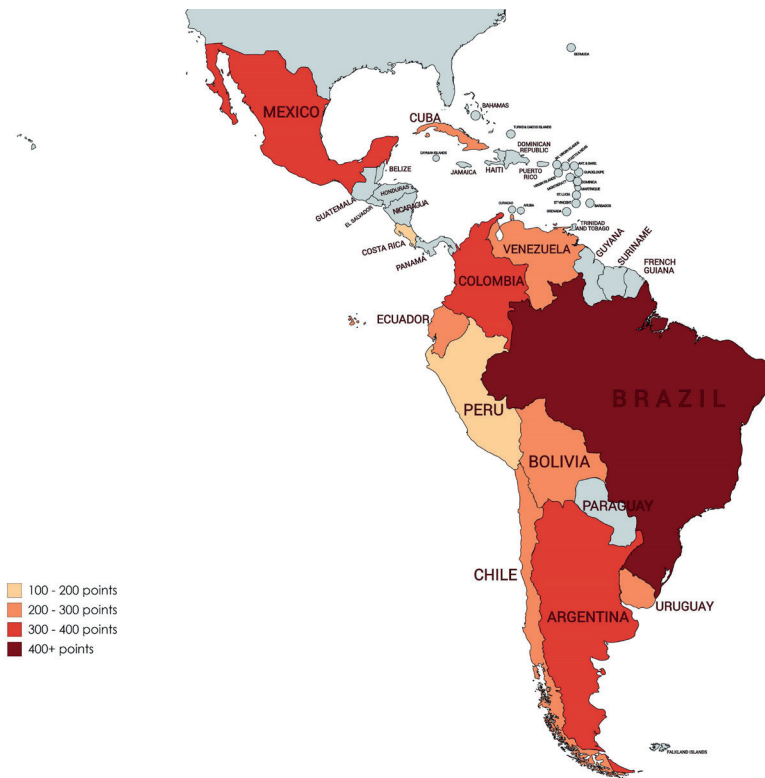
3. Methodology

My research over the past several years shows that although economies with larger populations and markets (principally Brazil and Mexico) or rich natural resources (primarily Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil) have naturally loomed larger on Beijing's list of priorities, the experience, style, and ability of diplomats on either side also seem to have had a discernible impact on outcomes. For instance, Beijing's conspicuously significant commitment to Venezuela in the shape of successive billion-dollar loans-for-oil coincided with the ten-year ambassadorial posting to Beijing of Rocío del Valle Maneiro González, as well as a series of seasoned diplomats from the Chinese side. Inversely, the lack of activity on any front between neighboring Colombia and the People's Republic until 2018 coincided with the presence of rather reserved and soft-spoken Chinese emissaries who kept a low profile in the national conversation. I gathered data on over eighty Chinese ambassadors posted to the twelve principal capitals of Latin America and the Caribbean since 1990 and ascribed point values to each based on their career trajectory, experience, and diplomatic ranks at the time of each successive posting. In cooperation with a former Chinese diplomat to Mexico, I fine-tuned relative values for each individual as they rose through the ranks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 3rd or 2nd Secretary to 1st Secretary, Minister Counsellor, and Ambassador, and what rank they held while ambassador (if any), ranging from Deputy General Director and General Director up to Under Secretary. For each professional profile, I created an individual file, noting the sequence of postings and successive roles between various ministerial departments and embassies and compiling published articles and interviews granted, along with media reports and social media posts in the host countries.

What is evident is a high level of regional specialization by Chinese ambassadors, to a degree comparable to the United States foreign service, but not seen in the Latin American postings of other major economies: the vast majority of top diplomats from countries such as Germany, France, the UK, and Japan have wide-ranging experience the world over but are rarely posted more than once to the region. The regional specialization is expressed in consistently rising point values as

careers have crisscrossed the continent.⁸ Postings in the positions of Secretary are typically between two and three years, while an ambassador remains in one position for a little over three years on average. Almost every posting abroad is preceded by at least two years of working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), usually within the Department of Latin American Affairs. Only the ambassadors to Brazil and Mexico routinely carry the high rank of Under-Secretary within the MoFA. Linking the seniority of individuals to specific countries on a map (see Figure 1) suggests that the ambassadors to certain countries are consistently more senior: the figures for Brazil are the highest, followed by Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina.

Figure 1. Cumulative points per country (1990-2020) for Chinese ambassador ranks



Source: own elaboration based on data gathered by the author.

8 Establishing such point values is derived from text coding in discourse analysis. It does not aspire to be a precision tool but makes tendencies visible and comparable.

Given that Brazil is also the most populous country and the largest economy in the region—and it is followed by the three countries named in both parameters—this would suggest a purposeful correlation in terms of strategic priorities, much as can be found in the selection of diplomatic envoys of other major countries.

It should be noted, of course, that outside of Latin America, too, Chinese diplomats have made critical connections with Latin American counterparts in Washington, DC: the Hall of the Americas at the Organization of American States, the InterAmerican Development Bank, and other regional forums (Myers 2020). China is keenly aware that the debates within these institutions, even on internal policy, shed light on the countries' policy priorities and diplomatic dispositions while enabling them to gain insights into regional dynamics and individual country priorities, goals, and needs.

4. Changing Tendencies over Time

Such strategic and well-informed engagement with other countries was not a feature of earlier generations of Chinese diplomats. In her book, Liu Xiaohong (2001) explored the evolution of Chinese diplomats from the foundation of the PRC in 1949 up until the 1990s. Leaning on Max Weber's notion of charisma, Liu argued convincingly that each generation is deeply marked by the human factor, considering this relevant for understanding the relationship of diplomats with their compatriots and the local population in the country of their posting, and also the impact of charismatic national leaders—starting with Chairman Mao. Liu showed how Chinese ambassadors transformed from the ideologically-driven, militaristic ambassadors of the 1950s to more cosmopolitan and experienced diplomats of the 1990s. This transformation signaled a gradual professionalization of China's foreign service, reflecting both the nation's rise on the world stage and changes in China's internal political environment.

The professionalization, Liu explained, could be tracked through four generations of Chinese diplomats, each with their own distinct characteristics. The first generation, from 1949 to 1954, was represented by 17 ambassadors, most recruited from the military. While they stood out for their loyalty to Chairman Mao and for leadership in the Revolution, they lacked education and foreign experience. The second group, from 1954 to 1966, comprised 77 ambassadors as China expanded its diplomatic relations. These ambassadors were more educated and experienced than the previous cohort and recruited from the military, provincial governments, and universities. This generation also saw the increasing institutionalization of Chinese diplomacy, with the formation of a supporting interpreter system and Zhou Enlai's "3-3-3 system" (1/3 of diplomats in Beijing,

1/3 in embassies, 1/3 in personnel reserves) to ensure both foreign and domestic training. The third generation of diplomats, from 1966 to 1984, represented a transitional generation between the political appointees of the second generation and the career diplomats of the fourth. Although many of these 179 ambassadors started out in non-diplomatic careers, the majority had accumulated experience in foreign affairs by the time of their appointment. In fact, despite the banishment of several experienced diplomats by the Cultural Revolution, most third-generation ambassadors knew a foreign language, were recruited from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and had an average of twenty years of working experience.

Liu's fourth generation served as ambassadors from 1984 until the early 1990s. They were professionals with expertise, area specialization, and a sophisticated understanding of international affairs. They were recruited from a pool of younger, better-trained diplomats at leading positions within the MoFA. Most were educated at China's foreign language universities, and almost all had had foreign language capabilities. Characterized by broadminded and cosmopolitan attitudes, the fourth generation made efforts to objectively present events, develop rapport with diplomats from other countries, and convey an appreciation of other cultures. Liu suggested the emergence of a distinct fifth generation of diplomats in the 1990s, trained in foreign languages and social sciences. Many, she hoped, would have gained a wide range of perspectives through graduate degrees abroad, be freer and bolder politically, driven by pragmatic rationale instead of ideology.

Considering China's official representatives to Latin American countries over the past couple of decades, it is true that pragmatic considerations have been the priority in their day-to-day work, as they have accompanied an unprecedented expansion of trade and rapid growth in Chinese corporate presence abroad. However, these twin phenomena directly impacted the quality of staff in two ways. Firstly, the best young linguists and university graduates were drawn into international business and finance, often relinquishing secure government careers in favor of well-paid postings abroad as interpreters and managers. For instance, China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) in Beijing, a prime training ground for the country's diplomats, saw the transfer of its graduates into MoFA careers drop as low as 30%.⁹ This, in turn, meant that those who did continue into diplomatic service commanded less respect among business representatives, making it harder for them to corral corporate leaders in the projection and promotion of national interests abroad. Seniority and Party rank are crucial to a smooth coordination of all aspects of policy and governance (both domestically

9 This information is based on my conversations with several CFAU students and graduates between 2012 and 2017.

and abroad), so when the overseas representatives of state-owned enterprises outrank local diplomats within the Communist Party *nomenklatura*, the response and cooperation level is lower.¹⁰

As it is helpful and possible to identify overarching tendencies in China's foreign service staff, the fifth generation can be said to have come and gone without achieving the impact Liu had envisioned—a victim of China's commercial expansion globally and the country's integration into multilateral institutions. What followed at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, was a groundswell of national pride and an "assertive turn" in Chinese foreign policy in the wake of the Financial Crisis of 2008—a watershed moment that coincided with the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party and the accession of Xi Jinping to the position of Vice President. Beijing published strategic policy papers for various global regions, and Chinese energy and telecommunications companies became highly noticeable actors worldwide. Similarly, public diplomacy regained its centrality in China's foreign affairs—the poster child being the global roll-out of Confucius Institutes and various exchange programs from 2004. Embassies restructured their expenses by hiring local staff as drivers, receptionists, and security staff (though *never* as cooks), freeing up funds for more specialized Chinese staff from a more varied list of agencies and even think tanks (Martin 2021, 161).

Better informed and with more robust backing at home, Chinese ambassadors fanning out from 2009 onwards had gained status and confidence: it can be affirmed that they constitute the People's Republic's sixth generation of diplomats. They have the backing of a more self-confident and financially sounder nation, and a more varied toolbox at their disposal. They have resources to travel more widely, garner greater attention in the media and among economic and political elites of their host countries, and form alliances with representatives of Chinese corporations for mutual benefit. This is manifest in press mentions and the frequency of radio interviews, in the number of public appearances at social, educational, and political events, visibility in social media posts, and an increased cohesiveness of the business community. The following section illustrates some examples.

5. Chinese Diplomats at Work

Former US diplomat William Burns observed that "diplomacy may be one of the world's oldest professions, but it's also one of the most misunderstood. It's

10 Several Chinese business representatives in Peru and Colombia made me clear in interviews between 2011 and 2016 that they disregarded their diplomats' cues because their own superiors outranked the ambassador in Party rank. Cf. also Leutert (2018).

mostly a quiet endeavor, less swaggering than unrelenting, oftentimes operating in back channels, out of sight and out of mind” (2019). By profiling some of its emissaries against the background of China's broader approach to the region, a picture emerges of a varied and increasingly refined diplomatic strategy. The evidence shows how China's diplomats, despite their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy and are working self-consciously to improve their cross-cultural communication. The personality and strategy of individual diplomats carry even more weight, as the “pervasive overstaffing,” typical at many levels of China's government (Li 2016, 42), is not reflected at its embassies. As of 2021, no Chinese embassy in Latin America employed more than 55 staff members (in Mexico City) and most hover around 20, not including local employees as receptionists, consular administrators, security guards, drivers, and cleaners. This contrasts with as many as 600 employees at the United States' largest embassy in the region in Bogotá.

a. Yang Wanming 杨万明 – The Continuous Ambassador¹¹

Few public officials have courted controversy as aggressively as Brazilian Education Minister Abraham Weintraub,¹² and when he suggested in April 2020 that the COVID-19 pandemic was “part of a Chinese strategy for world domination,” China's foreign service community in Brazil felt compelled to respond. While Li Yang—Consul General in Rio de Janeiro¹³—reacted heatedly to the Minister's tweets in the press, Ambassador Yang stepped calmly into the fray. These were two parallel responses aimed at appeasing indignant compatriots while simultaneously keeping the high-value Brazil-China economic partnership on a level.

Ambassador Yang arrived in Brasilia in December 2018, a month before the inauguration of volatile new president Jair Bolsonaro. His purpose was just that: to ensure that Beijing's most important relationship in Latin America was not derailed by a radical political shift. He was posted there directly after holding the top diplomatic post in neighboring Argentina for four years and in Chile before that. He switched with remarkable ease from his Spanish environment to Portuguese, though he trips up occasionally during longer conversations with Brazilian business leaders. Born in 1964, Yang studied Spanish at Nanjing University in the 1980s and economics at the Academy of Social Sciences before entering the Foreign Service, where he moved swiftly through the ranks as he alternated

11 Ambassador Yang tweets @WanmingYang since 2015, in Spanish until 2018, nowadays in Portuguese.

12 Weintraub resigned abruptly on June 20, 2020.

13 Counsellor Li left Brazil in early 2020 and now tweets @Li_Yang_China from MoFa in Beijing.

postings in Mexico and Argentina with periods at the MoFA's Latin American Department, which he directed from 2007-2012.

Ambassador Yang's posting to Chile (2012-2014) coincided with Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Santiago, during which he made his memorable speech advocating for transpacific ties in the spirit of "Trusted Friends Forever" (Wen 2012). Chilean trade with China grew only modestly during his tenure. He laid, however, the groundwork for subsequent successes, allowing Chile to attract major asset acquisitions by Chinese companies. The purchase of Pacific Hydro by a Chinese corporation was a considerable breakthrough; two years later, Tianqi Lithium acquired a US\$4 billion stake in one-fourth of Chile's main lithium producer.

During his time as envoy to Buenos Aires (2014-2018), bilateral trade remained stable, but investment grew at an astounding pace, and Yang became deeply involved in one of China's most consequential investments in the region: a space control station in Patagonia. There was considerable pushback from the Macri administration (2015-2019), with added pressure from the United States, but China stood firm. And just as Yang had arrived in Argentina well in advance of a change in government, in 2018, he was posted to Brazil's capital a year ahead of the election, in this case, of controversial populist Jair Bolsonaro.

Ambassador Yang, square-jawed and with a tall forehead, exudes confidence and professionalism, and though he rarely smiles, he engages keenly and purposefully with his audience. He has adopted the greeting common among Latin American men of shaking the right hand of his opposite while grasping the upper left arm, becoming thus a true goodwill striker in this arena of China's global strategy. The executors of Belt and Road Initiative—infrastructure, energy, and mining companies—are hopeful that they might one day build routes across the continent, and Ambassador Yang has successfully navigated the political elites of Latin America's Southern Cone in this regard. This is a striking example of Beijing's strategy of nurturing able diplomatic staff and furnishing them with regional expertise, a reliable pattern observed in many iterations over the past thirty years.¹⁴

b. Li Nianping 李念平 – The Regional Outsider

When Li Nianping was designated ambassador to Colombia in September 2015, his nomination broke with a long-standing tradition of fluent Spanish speakers representing Beijing in the Andean capital. Aware of this shortcoming

14 Over the past three decades, a further 15 Chinese diplomats held as many as three—or in two instances, four—ambassadorial posts in Latin American countries, after multiple postings in the region at lower ranks. This count includes only one woman, and all of them retired prior to 2016. In this light, the career of Yang Wanming is not entirely typical but quite remarkable: born in 1964, he has still several years shy of retirement age.

in a country that prides itself on speaking the “purest” Castilian accent in the Americas, he brought a highly trained interpreter. He went on to break with other traditions by traveling to parts of the country his predecessors had never dreamed of; he encouraged his interpreter to give the voyages a high degree of visibility by posting them on her Facebook page. He toured farms and oil wells, attended coffee tastings and church services, climbed mountain peaks, and danced with members of indigenous communities.

Though unfamiliar with the culture that surrounded him, he brought with him the suave and winning confidence of a man of the world, having spent most of his career in German-speaking countries—Colombians rather appreciated his “European” background. Ambassador Li’s tenure coincided with the historic 2016 Peace Accord between the Colombian government and the FARC Guerrilla Group, allowing for greater freedom of travel and cautious interest from overseas investors. He ushered Chinese businesses in and doubled the number of corporations registered in the country, giving new impetus to cross-sectoral coordination and support through the creation of the 中资企业联合会 [Colombian-Chinese Business Association]. He capped it off by orchestrating the state visit of President Ivan Duque in July 2019, the first visit by a Colombian head of state to China in seven years.

Only a few months older than his colleague in Brazil, Li’s extra-regional trajectory could not be more different, and yet it is not unique: other diplomats whose career took them through Europe are Chen Guoyou 陈国友, ambassador to Ecuador after several stints in Italy; also Dong Xiaojun 董晓军, who rotated globally before becoming head of the mission in Uruguay from 2015-2018, when he was posted as ambassador to Bulgaria; more recently Ma Hui 马辉¹⁵ was named chief envoy to Cuba following several years in London after having climbed the career ladder at the IDCPC’s Section VII for northern Europe and the UK. Short of being a new trend, these examples nonetheless evidence an opening-up of career options for Chinese diplomats. As it would appear, in the MoFA’s planning, considerations of personality and ability to deliver certain results outweigh linguistic or cultural familiarity.

c. Lan Hu 蓝虎 – The Confident Youngster

Chinese telecommunications firms in Latin America are well-known for their brash young executives. Similarly, China’s mining and engineering giants

15 Ambassador Ma tweets from @MahuiChina since October 2019, primarily in Chinese and English, rarely in Spanish. Like Counsellor Li Yang, his tweets frequently feature sarcastic critiques of Western—especially US—policies and politicians.

like to send ambitious youngsters to cut their teeth bidding for projects in the region. Recently, the MoFA, too, has promoted younger men in their mid-forties to head up embassies. One of them is Lan Hu, who was nominated ambassador to Colombia at the end of 2019 at the age of only 46.¹⁶ Since his arrival, his appearances on national television and radio programs have contributed to disarming deep-seated prejudice against Asians among Colombians (Creutzfeldt 2018). In public encounters, he swerves between the nerdy technocrat and a youthful enthusiasm, and he knows the region well thanks to his previous postings to Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela.

Lan had large shoes to fill after his predecessor had laid the groundwork for a more considerable involvement of Chinese companies in a country traditionally much more oriented toward the United States than other South American countries. Although the Duque administration has stalled and prevaricated on the 2016 Peace Agreement, China made significant inroads in mining and infrastructure projects, most notably when a Chinese consortium began building the capital's first metro system in 2020 with an initial price tag of US\$5 billion. It maintains a high trade surplus with Colombia, with annual exports over US\$10 billion. Building on his predecessor's success in drawing ever more Chinese companies to the country, Ambassador Lan is adept at reassuring the business community that commitment is strong and unaltered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

d. Wei Qiang 魏强 – The Tweeting Party Liaison¹⁷

The nations of Central America and the Caribbean constitute the last cluster of diplomatic allies with Taiwan; after 2009, Beijing had kept a tacit truce with the country it considers a renegade province. But following an initiative by Panama's president Juan Carlos Varela, China's officers in Panama City began quietly laying the groundwork for a transition, which occurred in July 2017 to great fanfare and accompanied by the signing of 19 agreements.¹⁸ The man chosen to head the first embassy of the People's Republic in this country is a seasoned Latin Americanist inside the Chinese diplomatic community: Wei Qiang, the director of IDCPC Section V, responsible for Latin America and the Caribbean.

16 Two other representatives of this generation are Zhang Run 张润 who became the ambassador to the Dominican Republic in 2018 at the age of 46, and Liang Yu 梁宇, now in Peru, who was only 48 when he took up his first post as ambassador, in Bolivia in 2017.

17 Ambassador Wei tweets @weiasecas since November 2017, in fluent and often flowery Spanish.

18 Being the highest-volume user of the Panama Canal, Beijing had long maintained an "Office"—an unofficial embassy in effect—at the top of a commercial building in the centre of Panama City. Given the historical ties of the United States with this small but strategically important country that had liberated itself from partial US occupation as recently as 1999, the transition President Varela set in motion also carried symbolic weight.

Ambassador Wei impersonates the blurring of the lines between these two institutions, having seen several postings to embassies in the region. His Spanish is flawless, and he takes great pleasure in the puns and quips that define Latin American humor but is equally happy to switch to the stilted language of polite academic exchange. He uses both styles with alacrity on the media platform Twitter. With over twenty-one thousand tweets and almost eighteen thousand followers, Wei is “Beijing’s most active social media user in Latin America” (Youkee 2020).

Panama’s importance in the changing tides of US-China relations goes well beyond the country itself, which has far more to do with the strategic role of the Canal in global trade, seeing as an estimated 6% of global value in goods transit through here. The COVID-19 pandemic added further to the impact of the US-China trade war, leading to a contraction of Panama’s economy of almost 20%. Ambassador Wei has carried on his style of amiable engagement both online and in official dealings with Varela’s successor Laurentino Cortezco Cohen. He avoids assiduously engaging in the types of debates and controversies favored by some of his colleagues. Thus, he is part of a worldwide trend among Chinese diplomats to come across as more accessible and relatable, as well as an example of the country’s embrace of public diplomacy (Song and Han 2017, 138).

6. Organizations

The two principal government entities responsible for China’s global strategy are the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and Commerce (MofCom). Most ambassadors are employed by the MoFA, including those who made their career at the IDCPC or even the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Nevertheless, there is occasional competition for top diplomatic posts from MofCom and other organizations.¹⁹ The intertwining of Party and State is a defining feature of China’s political system, and the IDCPC has evolved from the Party’s global outreach department into a politically well-connected arm of the MoFA (Li 2016, 57). Some observers see the revitalization of the Department as part of Xi Jinping’s efforts to re-centralize political power within the Party (Hackenesch and Bader 2020, 10).

Despite some infighting over who sets the tone at individual embassies, for China’s corporations and entrepreneurs, the most valuable information on foreign markets is invariably the annual reports researched and published online by the MofCom’s commercial attaché at every Chinese embassy. The 对外投资合作国别

19 Conversations with an anonymous source formerly employed at a Chinese embassy in Latin America, 2020.

指南 [Country guides for foreign investment and cooperation] are detailed reports that can run to over 200 pages and are updated annually. In contrast to other countries, however, there is no “revolving door” between Chinese corporations and the diplomatic service.²⁰ Instead, it is not uncommon to find scholars from the Institute of Latin American Studies in Beijing taking up mid-level positions at embassies in the region, and several ambassadors have landed senior posts at leading international studies institutes after returning home. For instance, after leaving the embassy in Santiago de Chile in 2020, Xu Bu徐步 became the director of the China Institute of International Studies; Chen Duqing 陈笃庆, after a fulfilling career at the head of several Chinese missions abroad, was named in 2015 the director of the Brazilian Studies Center of the Institute of Latin American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Furthermore, all retired senior diplomats automatically become members of the Chinese People’s Institute for Foreign Affairs (CPIFA). In this way, the insights won by China’s diplomats are fed back into the ecosystem of China’s international politics and composted for the better growth of forthcoming generations.

7. Conclusions

Stuart Harris perceptively notes that “China does not expect partnerships to eliminate conflicts, [but] it does expect that conflicts on individual issues will not prevent cooperation on the bigger economic, political or strategic issues” (2007, 8). China’s strategic development of its diplomatic corps in Latin America suggests that it has nurtured diplomats with the character and abilities to grow and maintain such partnerships. Led by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Beijing government has created a professional foreign service corps that can keep pace with the role of one of the world’s leading economies and look the leaders of its multinational business in the eye. By building a large and varied body of diplomats with regional expertise and global acumen, China is able to pursue its domestic and international goals and participate actively in global and local conversations. As suggested in the introduction, the evidence shows how China’s diplomats, despite their internal hierarchies, have embraced network diplomacy and are working self-consciously to improve their

20 Several Latin American countries and even the United States have been known to send business leaders to represent their country abroad, sometimes risking putting short-term entrepreneurial interests ahead of national priorities.

cross-cultural communication and raise their country's ability to influence the global discourse on critical issues.

The paper points to a variety of Party and government entities involved in China's overseas operations but also highlights how relevant the MoFA's evolution is in proactive coordination with the political leadership at home and the priorities of state-owned enterprises spread across the globe. Wendy Leutert has explored lateral transfers of executives between state-owned companies and emphasizes how these may be critical to understanding China's politics and economics in the future (2018, 17). The same can be said of the need to gain better insights into the transfers of Chinese diplomats between countries and even track their personal connections with corporate representatives. There is no evidence of close links between the MoFA and the United Front Work Department; Chinese ambassadors today strive to be more accessible and transparent, whereas the United Front works indirectly and informally through multiple channels. While the Xi Jinping administration has worked to strengthen the Party within the government by centralizing processes and tightening the hierarchies, it has also allowed ministries to lead with their strengths. The Latin American Department of the MoFA is a remarkable example of such strengths, and other major powers with interests in this region of the world could do worse than taking some pages out of the Chinese diplomatic playbook.

The profiles featured above are snapshots of individuals who are part of a far larger apparatus. Each biography is unique; their characteristics, while representative of many in China's diplomatic services, should not be simplified or generalized. Rather, several envoys leading China's diplomatic efforts in Latin America are individuals whose approach offers a counterweight to the assertive tone of a small number of their peers dubbed "Wolf Warrior diplomats": the assertive approach of the latter group is an exception to the rule and largely absent from China's strategy in Latin America. The principal goal of Beijing's envoys to the region has been, it appears, to build goodwill through greater visibility and approachability and ensure a favorable environment within which China's investment and commercial goals can grow. Hopefully, this approach will inspire other scholars to pursue further studies of Chinese diplomats and their engagement with host countries, allowing for deeper and more diverse analyses and possible predictors of China's diplomatic strategy.

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