

## **Aggressiveness in Chinese Foreign Ministers' Responses to Journalists During Press Conferences, 1996–2016**

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Chinese foreign ministers' press conferences are significant occasions for journalists to learn about the country's policies and attitudes toward heated and important issues. This study analyzes and measures Chinese foreign ministers' aggressiveness in response to journalists' questions at press conferences between 1996 and 2016 with an IDAAA (initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability) framework. The results indicate that foreign ministers become significantly less aggressive over time and that the higher China's gross domestic product ranking is, the more aggressive they are and vice versa. In addition, Chinese foreign ministers tend to be more aggressive toward sensitive questions, foreign journalists, and those from countries with worse diplomatic relations with China, and they tend to be less aggressive toward nonsensitive questions, domestic journalists, and those from countries with whom China has good relations. Finally, foreign ministers with overseas educational experiences are less aggressive than those who did not receive this type of education.

*Keywords: press conference, aggressiveness, diplomacy, international relations, China*

Press conferences play increasingly important roles in the national diplomatic agenda as an essential means to conduct "sunshine diplomacy" (Clegg, 2011, p. 127) and as a vital form of modern public diplomacy (Larsson, 2012). Foreign ministers' press conferences, in particular, have become an international concern due to their high-level, sensitive content. Two examples of Chinese foreign ministers' (CFMs') responses to journalists' questions at press conferences illustrate different approaches to the same question. At a press conference in Beijing on March 11, 1996, CFM Qian Qichen replied to a question about China's human rights record posed by a journalist with *German Business*:

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We have always advocated that the issue of human rights should be a dialogue rather than confrontation. Last year, President Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton met in New York. President Clinton expressed the hope that the issue of human rights should not result in confrontation but dialogue. We are in favor of this view. Unfortunately, there still seems to be brewing an anti-China resolution at the human rights meeting now which we are against. (Liu, 1996)

Twenty years later, at a joint press conference by Canadian and Chinese foreign ministers in Ottawa on June 2, 2016, a journalist from the Web outlet iPolitics asked the same question about China's human rights record to Canadian foreign minister Stéphane Dion. After Dion responded, CFM Wang Yi delivered a withering reply:

Your question was full of prejudice against China and an arrogance that comes from I don't know where. This is totally unacceptable to me. Do you understand China? Have you been to China? . . . I want to tell you that it's the Chinese people who most understand China's human rights record—not you, but the Chinese people themselves. You have no right to speak on this. (Buckley, 2016)

Both questions focused on China's human rights record, but the two CFMs responded very differently. Although Qian expressed opposition, his attitude was humble, and his words were restrained, gentle, and cooperative. In contrast, Wang's response had an aggressive tone, took a tough stance, and sparked intense confrontation with curse words. In the diplomacy of press conferences, foreign ministers' manners and attitudes toward journalists are not a trivial matter. Eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and statements not only reflect foreign ministers' personal behavior preferences but also convey diplomatic signals about countries' images, which have political implications (Rabie, 1992).

Wang's tough response triggered widespread controversy in the international press and a diplomatic crisis as the Canadian government expressed dissatisfaction to China's foreign ministry. Some have observed that, as China's power has increased, its leaders' responses to foreign journalists have become more aggressive (Swaine, 2015; Yahuda, 2013). At press conferences in the diplomatic field, what circumstances trigger such intense responses from CFMs? Why do Chinese foreign ministers treat some journalists aggressively but others more agreeably? How can CFMs' aggressive responses at press conferences be explained? These remain open questions in journalism, politics, and diplomacy that need to be studied further.

Over the past 60 years, politicians' press conferences have attracted much attention and extensive research (Cater, 1956; Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & Beckett, 2012), but these studies have left some gaps. First, they have focused mostly on press conferences in developed countries, especially the United States (Clementson & Eveland, 2016; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013; Kumar, 2003). Little research has examined developing countries, such as China (B. Wang, 2012). Second, despite many systematic studies on the aggressiveness of journalists' questioning style (Banning & Billingsley, 2007), politicians' responses, and especially the aggressiveness of their responses, have been neglected (Wu & Zhao, 2016). Third, researchers have focused on press conferences by heads of state, such as presidents and prime ministers

(Clayman & Heritage, 2002; N. Moore, 2010). Press conferences by other senior government officials, especially foreign ministers, have received little attention (Cohen, 2015; D. Zhang & Shoemaker, 2014). Fourth and finally, in the era of globalization, politicians' press conferences have become international phenomena involving journalists from all around the world (Wu, Cheng, & Chao, 2017), but research on the subject has focused primarily on the traditional context of the domestic perspective. A theoretical contribution of this study is to discuss the response behaviors of politicians in the contexts of international relations and diplomatic strategies.

Since 1996, CFMs have held solo press conferences, including on-site interpretation services in English and Chinese, in Beijing during the two national sessions (National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference). This annual event has entered a sustainable, institutionalized operation mode (Yi, 2016). The aims of this article are (1) to present quantitative research on CFMs' aggressiveness in their responses to global journalists based on textual materials from their press conferences from 1996 to 2016, (2) to identify the main factors influencing CFMs' aggressiveness, and (3) to investigate the trends in CFMs' aggressiveness from 1996 to 2016.

### **Literature Review**

The earliest governmental press conferences can be traced to those held in the 1870s by the German foreign ministry (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, pp. 199–202). Following the two world wars, the United States, Britain, Sweden, and other countries improved the governmental press conference system by establishing standardized, sustainable relations with journalists (Kumar, 2005). Studies of governmental press conferences have adopted two main perspectives.

One perspective examines journalists' behavior characteristics, roles, and functions in press conferences. Scholars have proposed a "lapdog" model (Rottinghaus, 2008, p. 386), an "independent watchdog" model (Tannen, 2013, p. 178), an "attack-dog" model (Moore, 2013, p. 33), even a "junkyard-dog" model (Moore, 2013, p. 35) and other theoretical frameworks to perform in-depth studies of journalists' treatment of politicians. Journalists' aggressiveness at press conferences has been a focus of research for two decades. From the longitudinal perspective, journalists have become increasingly adversarial in their treatment of government officials in the postwar era (Kumar, 2003). Some studies have pointed to 1972 which was a watershed year when President Nixon took office, and the Watergate scandal and anti-Vietnam War movement happened (Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, & Beckett, 2010). From the horizontal perspective, journalists' aggressiveness differs according to demographic and professional attributes. Frequent press conference participants are more aggressive than infrequent participants, and women journalists are more aggressive than their male counterparts (Clayman et al., 2012). Clayman and Heritage (2002) constructed a set of evaluation systems with five dimensions (initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability) to quantitatively analyze the characteristics of aggressiveness. The researchers also developed a program to measure the level of aggressiveness encoded in journalists' questions, which has produced a series of high-quality research outputs (Clayman et al., 2012).

Another perspective investigates politicians' behavior characteristics, roles, and functions at press conferences. Although research in this field is relatively scarce, politicians' behavior characteristics have

been described in two models: a confrontational model and a cooperative model. In the confrontational model, politicians try to control the agenda of press conferences, treat journalists hostilely, and often cause conflicts between politicians and journalists (Edwards & Wood, 1999). For instance, U.S. president Richard Nixon was disgusted by and even resisted interviews with journalists, but a series of investigative reports exposed scandals involving him, eventually leading to his resignation (Hager & Sullivan, 1994). These politicians had neither an appropriate understanding of journalists' role nor a respect for their questions, leading to tensions and a credibility gap between the government and the media. Such interactions have not only caused a great loss of image for politicians and government officials but have also been condemned by public opinion (Reedy, 1976).

In the cooperative model, politicians treat journalists with humility and cooperation as the government's friendly partner (Kumar, 2003), especially as politicians have increasingly recognized the power of public opinion in modern society (Eriksson & Östman, 2013). Politicians attempt to establish mutual trust and understanding in good relationships with journalists and play the role of cooperative partners for the sake of resource exchange (Larsson, 2012).

Politicians' attitudes toward the media might also be related to the life-cycle stage of their administration. During the first few months in office (the honeymoon period), politicians test and discover the attributes of journalists, exhibiting friendship and cooperation to demonstrate their affinity (Manheim, 1979). However, after the cordial honeymoon period, politicians tend to adopt different approaches to control the agenda of press conferences. They attempt to manipulate the place, frequency, and style (solo or joint) of press conferences, control the topics, exclude journalists whom they do not favor, and display increasing aggressiveness (Kumar, 2003; Lammers, 1981; Manheim, 1979).

Since China's implementation of broad reform and the opening-up strategy, the nation has rapidly integrated into the international community. The number of press conferences held by the Chinese government has increased along with international interest (Zhang & Shoemaker, 2014). However, little research has examined the level of aggressiveness of Chinese foreign ministers' responses at news conferences. This article makes a theoretical contribution to fill that gap.

### **Factors Influencing CFMs Aggressive Responses at Press Conferences**

This study focuses on five factors that might influence the aggressiveness of CFMs' responses to journalists at press conferences: the country's economic status and bilateral relationship, question topics, journalists' origin, and foreign ministers' educational background.

#### ***Economics Status: High Versus Low Gross Domestic Product Ranking***

Economics, particularly China's economic history, is the first factor that might influence aggressive responses by CFMs at press conferences. Starting in the 1840s, China was suppressed diplomatically by Western developed countries and suffered the bitter experience that a "weak nation has no diplomacy" (Ravenhill & Jiang, 2009, p. 28). However, since 1978, China's economy has sustained remarkable growth. In 2010, China became the world's largest goods exporter and had the largest foreign exchange reserves.

Even with slightly slower economic growth in recent years, China remains the biggest contributor to global growth (Zhang, 2015). Previous studies (Johnston, 2013; Xiang, Primiano, & Huang, 2015) have indicated that, with China's economic growth, its national power has grown, even aggressive, in diplomacy. Therefore, China's gross domestic product (GDP) ranking might affect foreign ministers' attitudes toward journalists. They remain humble and low-key when China's GDP ranking is low but become aggressive when GDP is high.

### ***Bilateral Relationship: Friendliness Versus Tension***

Bilateral relationship is the second factor that might influence foreign ministers' behaviors. In the era of globalization, the heads of the ministry of foreign affairs are known as the diplomats-in-chief who play key roles in the international political system. Their public activities reflect their nation's interests and will (Hager & Sullivan, 1994). Therefore, CFMs must consider the status of bilateral diplomatic relations when responding to foreign journalists. To a certain degree, foreign ministers' manner of response at the international platform of press conferences is a barometer of the status of bilateral diplomatic relations. Clearly, in the complex, changing global political system, bilateral relations fluctuate, and hence the prevailing relations at foreign ministers' press conferences vary over time. Sometimes bilateral relationships can be described as an intimate partnership or friendship (a period of good relations between China and a foreign country). At other times, relations might be characterized by tensions (a period of poor relations between China and a country) due to intense diplomatic disputes or even military conflicts. Chinese foreign ministers might show a lack of interest in journalists from countries with whom China has poor relations but enthusiasm for those from nations with good relations.

### ***Question Topics: Sensitive Versus Nonsensitive Questions***

Government officials' response behaviors might vary by the topic of questions at press conferences (Clayman et al., 2006). In Mainland China, there might be significant differences in how politicians respond to sensitive and nonsensitive questions. From Chinese politicians' perspective, sensitive questions primarily refer to the Chinese political system (e.g., human rights, direct election of national leaders, and the freedom of the press), military issues (e.g., U.S. missile defense on the Korean peninsula), and national sovereignty (e.g., Taiwan's independence, the Dalai Lama and the Tibet issue). Chinese politicians regard these questions as directly related to the state's image and core national interests and, to a certain extent, as challenges to their political dignity. Consequently, they usually insist on taking serious, tough positions on these sensitive questions and respond aggressively to them (Wu & Zhao, 2016). In contrast, their responses to nonsensitive questions, such as those about economics, trade, and culture, tend to be relaxed and gentle.

### ***Country of Origin: Domestic Versus Overseas Journalists***

Journalists' country of origin might influence politicians' aggressive responses. CFMs' press conferences are usually international affairs attended by domestic and foreign journalists (Zhang & Shoemaker, 2014). Recent world politics has been characterized by right-wing populism, evidenced in public support for Donald Trump, Theresa May, and Rodrigo Duterte (Gusterson, 2017), and nationalism has played an increasingly prominent role in contemporary diplomacy. Researchers have argued that since 2008, the

Chinese central government has become more willing to follow popular nationalist calls to take a confrontational position against Western powers (Zhao, 2013). At CFMs' press conferences, domestic journalists generally represent populist forces, and foreign journalists tend to represent antipopulist forces. Chinese foreign ministers might respond differently to journalists from other countries. Domestic journalists might have different positions than foreign reporters and tend to safeguard the interests of their state, which are generally consistent with foreign ministers' positions. Consequently, CFMs usually appreciate domestic journalists. In contrast, foreign correspondents often have more complicated positions, consider their own nations' interests and positions, and seek opportunities to ask questions that intensify disputes and provoke confrontation in international relations. These contentious questions can lead to more aggressive responses from Chinese foreign ministers.

### ***Educational Background: With Versus Without Overseas Educational Experiences***

Foreign ministers' overseas educational experiences might affect how they respond to journalists. In the era of globalization, politicians need to integrate international perspectives into policy making and diplomatic practices (Tung & Miller, 1990). Previous studies (e.g., Hager & Sullivan, 1994) have shown that politicians' educational experiences can greatly affect their choices about public activities. There seems to be a close relationship between politicians' overseas study experience and foreign policy. Most of the Communist Party of China's senior founders had experience studying in the Soviet Union, and, consequently, during the initial period of the People's Republic of China, they opted for a pro-Soviet foreign policy.

In this study, an overseas educational experience refers to a systematic education at an overseas university of usually no less than four years, leading to a bachelor's or higher degree (we exclude short-term training and travel experiences). Several studies have shown that systematic higher education is the key stage in shaping individual personality and moral development (Myyry, Juujärvi, & Pessa, 2013), which play important roles in the construction of politicians' values and cross-cultural understanding and have profound impacts on their professional behaviors (Wang, 2009). Research has indicated that Chinese politicians' diplomatic behaviors may be related to their early overseas educational experiences (Wang, 2009). For example, under Chairman Mao Zedong, who did not have any experience of studying abroad, China had tense relationships with developed countries, and he preferred a confrontational foreign policy in diplomatic relations with the West. In contrast, Deng Xiaoping had more than five years of experience studying in France in his youth, and after taking office, he advocated reform and the opening-up policy and tended to establish cooperative diplomatic relations with Western countries.

At press conferences, foreign ministers must address various international affairs that require a global vision and a doctrine of pluralism to respect diverse cultures. Thus, foreign ministers' manners of responses to journalists might depend on their overseas educational experiences, which can help them establish international connections and understand other countries' cultures. Those who have had overseas educational experiences tend to be more liberal, take a more objective stance in international affairs, and respond to a variety of questions with tolerant, open attitudes (Tsang, 2002). However, foreign ministers without overseas educational experiences and little knowledge about foreign cultures might take a tough stance and respond aggressively to sensitive questions (Reardon, 1998).

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Based on the preceding discussion, five hypotheses are proposed.

- H1: The higher China's GDP ranking is, the more aggressive Chinese foreign ministers are in their responses to journalists during press conferences. The lower China's GDP ranking is, the less aggressive Chinese foreign ministers are.*
- H2: Chinese foreign ministers are more aggressive in their responses to journalists from countries that have poor relations with China and are less aggressive to journalists who are from nations with whom China has good relations.*
- H3: Chinese foreign ministers are more aggressive toward sensitive questions at press conferences and less aggressive toward nonsensitive questions.*
- H4: Chinese foreign ministers are less aggressive toward domestic journalists and more aggressive toward foreign journalists.*
- H5: Chinese foreign ministers with overseas educational experiences are less aggressive toward journalists, and foreign ministers without overseas educational experiences are more aggressive toward journalists.*

Based on these hypotheses, the main factors that influence aggressive responses of CFMs are explored with two research questions:

*RQ1: What are the main factors that affect the aggressiveness of Chinese foreign ministers?*

*RQ2: Does the aggressiveness of Chinese foreign ministers' responses increase over time?*

To answer these questions, we investigate the changing trends and patterns of foreign ministers' aggressiveness during press conferences over a 20-year period.

### **Research Method**

#### **Data Sources and Collection**

Since 1996, all the CFMs' annual press conferences have been televised live, and mainstream newspapers published full records the following day, providing reliable data sources. The data for this study come from the People's Daily database,<sup>2</sup> which contains the full texts from the press conferences of five

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<sup>2</sup> From 1996 to 2016, there are 21 records of CFMs' full reports of the annual press conferences in the People's Daily database. We copied them and then built a new database.

CFMs: Qian Qichen (April 1996–March 1998), Tang Jiaxuan (March 1998–March 2003), Li Zhaoxing (March 2003–April 2007), Yang Jiechi (April 2007–March 2013), and Wang Yi (March 2013–March 2016). In the total 21 documents, the unit of analysis is question turn duration—or a journalist's questions and the CFM's corresponding responses. The 291 question turns during the period 1996 to 2016 were subjected to content and coding analysis.

### ***Coding Scheme***

Clayman and Heritage (2002) developed a framework for describing journalists' aggressiveness and a corresponding coding scheme to evaluate journalists' aggressiveness. Wu and Zhao (2016) redefined Clayman and Heritage's (2002) coding system and developed the IDAAA framework to describe the level of politicians' aggressiveness in response to journalists' questions and a corresponding evaluation system of politicians' aggressiveness in five dimensions: initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability (for more information, see Wu & Zhao, 2016, pp. 450–451). This coding scheme has been applied in quantitative research on Chinese premiers' aggressiveness at press conferences (Wu & Zhao, 2016). The present study applies the IDAAA coding scheme to explore CFMs' aggressiveness at press conferences. The original IDAAA coding system is modified slightly to make it appropriate for the context of CFM press conferences.

### ***Dependent Variables: Measures of CFMs' Aggressiveness***

This research uses the five IDAAA dimensions as dependent variables. Their definitions and encoding schemes are described as follows.

*Initiative* refers to the extent to which foreign ministers choose or control the content of their responses, which reflects the degree to which CFMs manipulate the agenda of press conferences. Faced with many questions, foreign ministers usually do not passively respond directly to all questions but rather select certain ones or even choose not to answer some questions (Clementson & Eveland, 2016). Therefore, foreign ministers' initiative can be measured through the selection frame used in their responses to journalists. Four selection frames are defined as follows: (a) Direct answers are responses to all questions raised by journalists (coded as 0,  $n = 192$ , 66.0%); these are regarded as passive and as displaying the weakest initiative. (b) Combined answers are a general response to a series of questions (coded as 1,  $n = 25$ , 8.6%) and are regarded as a positive response. (c) Selective answers are responses to some questions in a series (coded as 2,  $n = 59$ , 20.3%), avoiding sensitive questions and selecting suitable questions according to the country's diplomatic strategy or the CFM's own preferences; these are considered an active response. (d) Avoidance of answering questions includes irrelevant answers, beating around the bush, and skillfully avoiding sensitive questions; these are regarded as not real responses to questions (coded as 3,  $n = 15$ , 5.2%) and as exhibiting the strongest initiative.

*Directness* refers to the extent to which foreign ministers' responses are forthright and honest rather than obscure and cautious, reflecting the level of CFMs' respect for reporters. CFMs' directness can be measured by the use of courteous language in their responses to journalists, which can be divided into three categories: (a) Praise of journalists is used by foreign ministers to perform populist gestures and get



close to reporters (coded as 0,  $n = 36$ , 12.4%). For instance, CFM Li Zhaoxing once praised a Reuters journalist: "You are so right. It also is very interesting. . . . You have said a universal truth." This type of response represents CFMs' most tactful behavior toward journalists. (b) The use of formulaic courteous language, such as thank you, to express general respect for journalists (coded as 1,  $n = 83$ , 28.5%) is relatively tactful. (c) No frame of polite language occurs when foreign ministers directly answer questions raised by journalists (coded as 2,  $n = 172$ , 59.1%); this is CFMs' most direct response to reporters.

*Assertiveness* refers to the extent to which foreign ministers' answers are predetermined or partisan rather than unbiased or neutral, which reflects the degree of CFMs' authority at press conferences. CFMs might act assertively to use their authority to refute or criticize journalists' questions. Therefore, assertiveness can be measured by the frame of refutation or criticism in their responses, which can be divided into two categories: (a) No frame of refutation or criticism (coded as 0,  $n = 240$ , 82.5%) is the least assertive response by CFMs. (b) Using a frame of refutation or criticism (coded as 1,  $n = 51$ , 17.5%) is the most assertive response. For example, Wang criticized CNN journalists' questions about the South China Sea arbitration: "I respect your right very much to raise this issue, but I really do not want you to make a so-called court pre-break now. Are you aware of the results so far?"

*Adversarialness* refers to the extent to which foreign ministers provide answers contrary to journalists' expectations, which reflects the degree of confrontation between CFMs and journalists at press conferences. Adversarialness can be measured by the frame of denying or deflecting topics in answers to journalists' questions, which can be divided into three categories: (a) Neither denying nor deflecting topics indicates that the foreign minister accepts and admits the journalists' question or criticism (coded as 0,  $n = 231$ , 79.4%) and displays the least adversarialness. (b) Deflecting topics means that the foreign minister does not directly deny but rather avoids the journalists' questions by deflecting responsibility or accusing others (coded as 1,  $n = 11$ , 3.8%); these answers exhibit stronger adversarialness. (c) Denying topics means that the foreign minister directly denies the journalists' questions (coded as 2,  $n = 49$ , 16.8%). For instance, Tang directly denied a question from the *Financial Times* about "the relationship between the increasing military budget expenditures with the policy on Taiwan," saying "I think that you should not artificially tie together the increasing military budget expenditure with policy on Taiwan, which are problems in two different categories." This type of response displays the strongest adversarialness.

*Accountability* refers to the extent to which foreign ministers justify their decisions or public activities, which reflects CFMs' use of rhetoric at press conferences. They might use rhetorical devices, such as precise figures, storytelling, and lyrical language, to enhance their responses to journalists. Therefore, accountability can be measured by the rhetorical frames that foreign ministers use to answer journalists' questions, which can be divided into three categories: (a) A rhetorical frame, or the use of storytelling, analogy, and allusions in response to questions (coded as 0,  $n = 123$ , 42.3%), shows the weakest accountability. (b) A no rhetorical frame, as when a foreign minister responds to journalists' questions briefly, without using rhetoric (coded as 1,  $n = 144$ , 49.5%), displays stronger accountability. (c) A no explanation frame, as when the foreign minister simply states his position or policy without giving an explanation or when the foreign minister expresses anger (coded as 2,  $n = 24$ , 8.2%) displays the strongest accountability. For example, in the quotes at the beginning of this article, CFM Wang did not provide an

explanation when answering the Canadian journalist's questions about China's human rights record but instead castigated the questioner.

### ***Independent Variables***

This study has five independent variables, with the following encoding schemes.

*China's gross domestic product ranking.* The World Bank releases the GDP rankings of countries in the world economy every year. From 1996 to 2016, China had the following rankings: 1996–1999, 7; 2000–2001, 6; 2002, 5; 2003–2004, 6; 2005, 5; 2006, 4; 2007–2009, 3; and 2010–2016, 2.

*Bilateral relationship.* The status of the bilateral relationship between journalists' country (region) or origin and Mainland China is measured by the numbers of protests made by the China Foreign Ministry, as recorded annually in the ministry's yearbook. The number of public protests against a country increases if China has significant international disputes, military confrontations, or other conflicts (e.g., territorial disputes) with it. This is defined as a tense bilateral relationship (coded as 0,  $n = 37$ , 12.7%). If there are no protests recorded in a year, it is defined as a friendly bilateral relationship (coded as 1,  $n = 164$ , 56.4%). China's neighboring countries have more territorial disputes with the nation, and the media from those countries are more interested in bilateral territorial disputes; the media from Western countries, however, is more likely to ask questions about China's internal affairs, such as the country's human rights record or political unrest.

*Topic of questions.* This variable is classified into two categories: sensitive topics (coded as 0,  $n = 78$ , 26.8%), including the Chinese political system, military issues, and national sovereignty; and nonsensitive questions (coded as 1,  $n = 213$ , 73.2%).

*Region of origin countries.* This variable is classified into two categories: domestic journalists (coded as 1,  $n = 90$ , 30.9%) and foreign journalists (coded as 0,  $n = 201$ , 69.1%).

*Overseas educational experiences.* This variable is classified into two categories: CFMs with overseas educational experiences (Qian Qichen, Yang Jiechi, and Wang Yi; coded as 1,  $n = 178$ , 61.2%) and foreign ministers without overseas educational experiences (Tang Jiaxuan, Li Zhaoxing; coded as 0,  $n = 113$ , 33.8%).

In this study, the time of the CFMs' press conferences (1996–2016) serves as the covariate.

To complete this discussion of the five factors that may affect the response behaviors of CFMs, we should point out the limitations of the model and, in particular, other factors that may influence CFMs' responses. These factors include the foreign minister's personality (obedient vs. independent; Lee, 1995), the foreign minister's experience giving press conferences (novice vs. veteran), the wording of questions (strongly worded questions vs. well-worded questions), and overall diplomatic needs in certain periods. Moreover, the journalists' aggressiveness might influence CFMs' response manners. Due to space restrictions, this study does not consider these other factors in the model.

### ***Coding Reliability***

Studies have indicated that this five-dimensional coding scheme (the IDAAA framework) is effective in the study of politicians' aggressiveness (Wu & Zhao, 2016). This study uses Scott's pi coefficient to test the reliability of the five dependent variables (initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability), which return values exceeding or equaling .93 (.93, .98, .95, .96, and .97, respectively). Among the independent variables, the credibility of the sensitivity of questions is .96, and that of the others is 1.00. In short, the reliability of all the variables coded meets the requirements for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), which indicates that the coding scheme is reliable.

### ***Statistical Analyses***

This project uses SPSS v22.0 in three-step data analyses. First, descriptive analysis is performed to determine the statistical distribution of the independent and dependent variables. Next, before using the regression models, the possibility of serious multicollinearity among the independent variables is assessed. The variance inflation factors of the five independent variables were calculated and found to all be less than 1.5. Therefore, multicollinearity among the independent variables has no impact on the results (García, García, López Martín, & Salmerón, 2015).

To test the five hypotheses and answer RQ1, five multivariate ordinal logistic regressions are used to predict the five dimensions of foreign ministers' aggressiveness with five independent variables and one covariate (time). Two models are used to answer RQ2: (a) five simple ordinal logistic regressions with one independent variable (time) to predict the five dimensions of foreign ministers' aggressiveness and (b) five multivariate ordinal logistic regressions with five independent variables and time as control variables to predict the five dimensions of aggressiveness. In addition, the dependent variables are ordinal and multicategorical variables, so their mean values have theoretical and practical applications (Srinivasan & Basu, 1989). Therefore, the mean value of foreign ministers' annual aggressiveness in five dimensions is calculated to explore its trajectory over time.

## **Findings**

### ***Testing the Five Hypotheses***

H1 posits that the higher China's GDP ranking is, the more aggressive foreign ministers are and that the lower China's GDP ranking is, the less aggressive foreign ministers are. There are no significant differences in CFMs' response behaviors of assertiveness and adversarialness ( $p > .1$ ; see Table 1). However, there are highly significant differences in their behaviors of initiative, directness, and accountability ( $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $p < .001$ , respectively). In other words, the higher China's GDP ranking is, the more initiative, directness, and accountability foreign ministers display; the lower China's GDP ranking is, the weaker initiative, directness, and accountability foreign ministers display (Wald = 4.68, Wald = 3.71, and Wald = 32.93, respectively). Thus, H1 is supported in three dimensions. We also find that, when Mainland China's GDP rankings were in the lower third globally before 2008, foreign ministers Qian Qichen, Tang Jiaxuan, and Li Zhaoxing gave relatively low-ley, humble responses to journalists' questions.

However, after China became the world's second-largest economy in 2010, foreign ministers Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi exhibited tougher behavior in their responses.

H2 proposes that foreign ministers are more aggressive toward journalists from countries with whom China has poor relations and are less aggressive toward journalists from countries with whom China has good relations. The results show no significant difference in foreign ministers' directness and adversarialness ( $p > .1$ ) but significant differences in their initiative and assertiveness ( $p < .05$  and  $p < .01$ , respectively) and differences in their accountability ( $p < .1$ ). In other words, the better bilateral relationships are between journalists' origin countries and Mainland China, the less initiative, assertiveness, and accountability foreign ministers will show; the worse bilateral relationships are, the more initiative, assertiveness, and accountability foreign ministers will show. For example, since 2013, Japan and China have been deadlocked in a dispute over the Diaoyu Islands, and CFMs have been significantly more aggressive in responses to Japanese journalists. Similarly, Sino-U.S. relations have become tense due to arbitration issues in the South China Sea, and CFM Wang Yi has dealt more aggressively with U.S. journalists' questions. Therefore, H2 is also supported in three dimensions. In addition, during the honeymoon period of relations between China and the Republic of Korea, CFMs were friendly to questions asked by South Korean journalists. However, after the United States sent the THAAD missile defense system to South Korea, CFMs changed their tone toward South Korean reporters.

H3 holds that foreign ministers are more aggressive toward sensitive questions and less aggressive toward nonsensitive questions. The results show no difference in foreign ministers' initiative, directness, and accountability ( $p > .1$  for all) but highly significant differences in their assertiveness and adversarialness ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .01$ , respectively). In short, when confronting sensitive questions raised by journalists, foreign ministers are more assertive and adversarial but less assertive and adversarial in response to nonsensitive questions. In the data, it can be observed that, at press conferences, CFMs give tough responses when asked about China's basic political system, national sovereignty, and human rights records. When reporters' questions involve these areas, CFMs usually become serious and even angry. Their responses to nonsensitive questions are much gentler. Therefore, H3 is supported in two dimensions.

H4 predicts that foreign ministers are less aggressive toward domestic journalists and more aggressive toward foreign journalists. The results show no significant difference in foreign ministers' initiative, directness, adversarialness, or accountability ( $p > .1$ ) but a significant difference in their assertiveness ( $p < .05$ ). In other words, foreign ministers are less assertive toward domestic journalists but more assertive toward foreign journalists. Therefore, H4 is supported in only one dimension. We observe that CFMs are generally friendly toward domestic journalists from the Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and CCTV but tough on some foreign reporters who pose confrontational questions. For instance, journalists from *The New York Times* have had few opportunities to raise questions at CFMs' press conferences, and an Al Jazeera woman reporter was even excluded from a press conference in 2012.

H5 posits that foreign ministers with overseas educational experiences are less aggressive toward journalists' questions and that foreign ministers without overseas educational experiences are more aggressive. The results show no significant differences in the assertiveness and accountability of foreign ministers with and without overseas educational experiences ( $p > .1$ ) but very significant differences in their

initiative, directness, and adversarialness ( $p < .001$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $p < .05$ , respectively). Foreign ministers with overseas educational experiences show less initiative, directness, and adversarialness than those without such experiences. For example, foreign ministers Qian Qichen and Yang Jiechi, who had overseas university learning experiences, displayed a relative affinity toward journalists' questions. However, ministers Tang Jiaxuan and Li Zhaoxing, who did not have overseas university learning experiences, gave tougher responses to journalists' questions. These results are consistent with expectations. Therefore, H5 is supported in three dimensions.

### **Main Factors Influencing the Aggressiveness of Foreign Ministers**

As shown in Table 1, the five independent variables have significant influences on foreign ministers' aggressiveness.

**Table 1. Test of Five Hypotheses.**

	Initiative LE (Wald)	Directness LE (Wald)	Assertiveness LE (Wald)	Adversarialness LE (Wald)	Accountability LE (Wald)
GDP ranking	0.50 (4.68)**	0.51 (3.71)***	0.39 (1.31)	0.45 (2.49)	0.504 (32.93)***
Bilateral relationship (friendly)	0.92 (6.34)*	0.51 (1.09)	1.18 (7.40)**	0.30 (0.54)	0.66 (3.06) <sup>†</sup>
Topic of questions (non-sensitive)	0.22 (0.45)	0.17 (0.18)	1.79 (19.15)***	1.03 (8.31)**	0.11 (0.11)
Region of origin (domestic)	18.53 (0.00)	18.53 (0.00)	5.10 (3.84)*	16.30 (0.00)	2.10 (0.98)
Overseas educational experience (without)	-1.66 (21.92)***	-3.41 (19.49)***	0.01 (0.00)	-0.84 (5.42)*	0.17 (0.29)
$\chi^2$	198.83	180.00	169.98	149.76	145.99
Pseudo $R^2$	.15	.41	.19	.10	.24

Note. LE = location estimate; GDP = gross domestic product.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .1$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

According to the effect size, the independent variables can be divided into three groups. First, economics (GDP ranking), politics (bilateral relationships), and educational background (overseas experiences) have highly significant influences on foreign ministers' response behaviors in three dimensions. Therefore, these three factors best predict foreign ministers' aggressiveness. Second, the sensitivity of questions has a significant influence on foreign ministers' aggressiveness in two dimensions (assertiveness and adversarialness). Therefore, these are the second most important factors predicting foreign ministers' aggressiveness. Finally, journalists' region of origin (countries) has a significant influence on foreign ministers' aggressiveness in only one dimension (assertiveness), which is the third most important factor predicting foreign ministers' aggressiveness.

### ***Trend of Foreign Ministers' Aggressiveness Over Time***

As shown in Table 2, in the simple regression models in which time is the only covariant, there is no significant change in foreign ministers' initiative at press conferences from 1996 to 2016 ( $p > .1$ ).

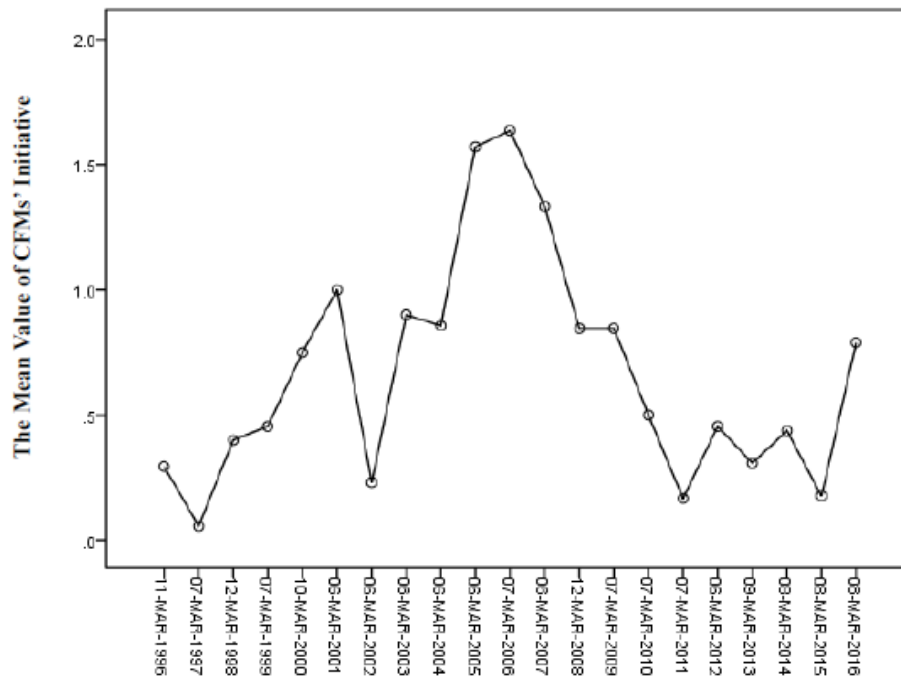
**Table 2. Change in Chinese Foreign Ministers' Aggressiveness, 1996–2016.**

	Initiative	Directness	Assertiveness	Adversarialness	Accountability
	LE (Wald)	LE (Wald)	LE (Wald)	LE (Wald)	LE (Wald)
Simple regressions	3.49 (0.35)	-6.55 (69.58)***	-2.35 (8.60)**	-1.49 (4.16)*	-4.38 (45.62)***
Multiple regressions	-2.38 (0.96)	-1.96 (36.57)***	2.95 (0.71)	4.46 (2.36)	-6.00 (5.57)*

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

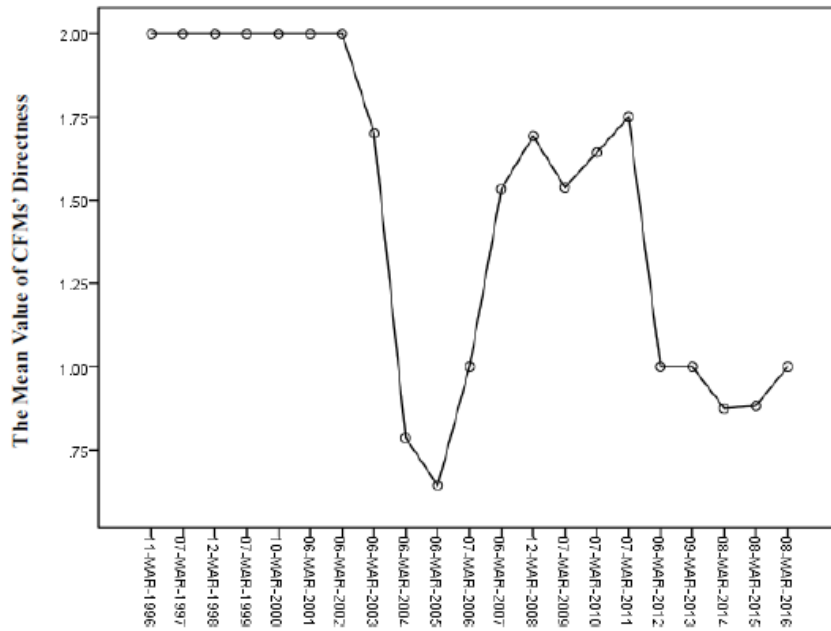
However, there are significant changes over time in their directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability ( $p < .001$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $p < .05$ , and  $p < .001$ , respectively). The location estimate coefficients of regression are negative, indicating that foreign ministers' directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability weaken over time. In the multiple regression model of five independent variables and time, there is no significant change in foreign ministers' initiative, assertiveness, and adversarialness ( $p > .1$ ), but there are very significant changes in their directness and accountability over time ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively). In summary, apart from many special cases, CFMs' response behaviors to journalists' questions have changed dramatically over the past 20 years, and the general trend is not strengthening but gradually weakening.

To gain a more detailed picture of changes in CFMs' aggressiveness over time, we analyze the evolutionary processes of the annual mean values in five dimensions. As shown in Figure 1, foreign ministers' initiative is represented by a W-shaped fluctuation from 1996 to 2016, and the direction of the path's evolution is not clear. However, Figures 2–5 show that, except for several special values, foreign ministers' response behaviors have gradually trended downward in four dimensions (directness, assertiveness, adversarialness, and accountability). Figures 2–5 also suggest that certain special nodes played key roles in the downward trend of foreign ministers' aggressiveness: 2005, 2007, and 2008 were three key turning points when foreign ministers' aggressiveness dramatically declined, probably due to special events. In 2005, an unprecedentedly widespread H7N9 avian flu epidemic broke out in Mainland China, and responding to the lessons learned from the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Chinese government decided to disclose information. Similarly, when hosting the Olympic Games in Beijing amid the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, the government somewhat eased control of information and acted tolerantly toward media reports. As a result, the relationship between the government and the media improved.

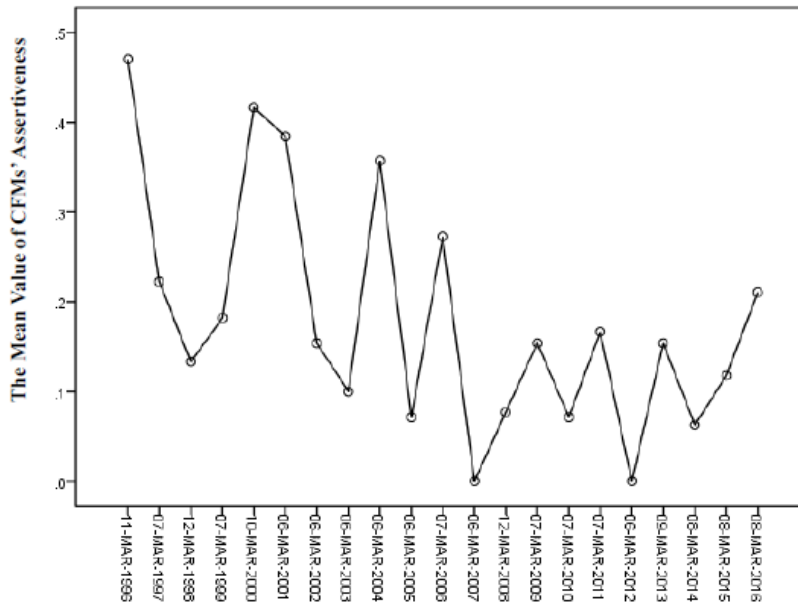


**Figure 1. Change pattern of the mean value of CFMs' initiative over time.**

However, Figures 2–5 also show that foreign ministers' aggressiveness had declined not in a straight line but in spiral since 1996. In other words, a dynamic game mechanism between foreign ministers and journalists was at work in press conferences. Foreign ministers might make some compromises when answering challenging questions raised by journalists, but not permanent, unlimited concessions; instead, their concessions are intended to adjust to specific circumstances and even enable a strong counterattack. In addition, foreign ministers' response behaviors to journalists can recur due to certain factors. For example, Figures 2–4 suggest that, from 2012 to 2016, foreign ministers' directness, assertiveness, and adversarialness increased, perhaps due to China's deteriorating diplomatic environment (e.g., the Diaoyu Islands dispute and the South China Sea issue).

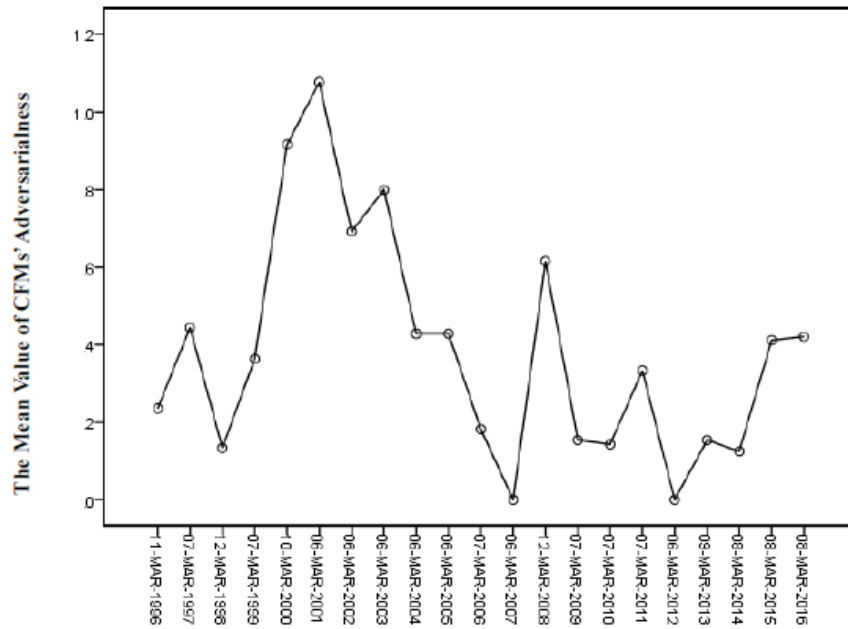


**Figure 2. Change pattern of the mean value of CFMs' directness over time.**

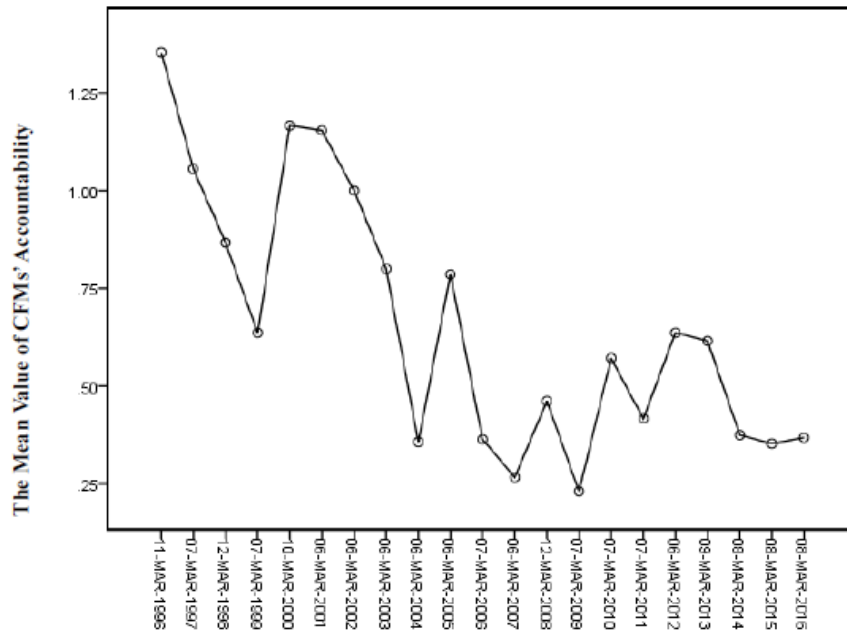


**Figure 3. Change pattern of the mean value of CFMs' assertiveness over time.**





**Figure 4. Change pattern of the mean value of CFMs' adversarialness over time.**



**Figure 5. Change pattern of the mean value of CFMs' accountability over time.**

### Conclusions and Discussion

In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. China is a growing military power in the western Pacific (Robertson & Sin, 2015), and the Chinese government is deeply involved in global issues. Accordingly, Chinese foreign ministers have high levels of exposure in international diplomatic affairs. Their public behaviors not only attract much attention in the international community but can also spark controversy in the global media arenas. Although Chinese officials profess that the nation is rising peacefully, some observers in the West think that China is changing its traditional foreign strategy—"hide the capabilities and bide the time" (Zhao, 2015, p. 378)—and that Chinese leaders are exhibiting more aggressive attitudes in international affairs (Hinck, Manly, Kluver, & Norris, 2016). Therefore, this article presents an empirical analysis of Chinese foreign ministers' aggressiveness in press conferences from 1996 to 2016. Several theoretical contributions are made and conclusions drawn.

First, this research examines the characteristics of CFMs' response behaviors of aggressiveness at Chinese press conferences. The aggressiveness of foreign ministers and other politicians (e.g., presidents, prime ministers) has many similarities. Foreign ministers and journalists are interdependent and have mutual interests at press conferences (Wu & Zhao, 2016). Journalists' questioning behaviors play the role of watchdog (Clayman et al., 2006), whereas CFMs' response behaviors play the role of authoritative leader (Kumar, 2003). Aggressiveness is not only in "the behavior of the press vis-à-vis the politician, but in the behavior of the politician vis-à-vis the press" (Manheim, 1979, p. 62). Therefore, examinations of the relationships between foreign ministers and reporters should not neglect the aggressiveness of foreign ministers. As well, compared with journalists' aggressiveness in questioning, foreign ministers are skilled at concealing the aggressiveness of their response behaviors. Foreign ministers, who can dominate the massive machinery of government and control political resources, have priority in setting the agenda of press conferences (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2013) and, to a certain extent, can guide and control their contents. Foreign ministers can skillfully use rhetoric and image-repair strategies to deal with journalists' questions and easily resolve crises (Benoit, 2014). They are accustomed to smiling and applying excuses and rhetoric to evade questions and responsibility (Benoit, 2014). Due to such concealment, the aggressiveness of foreign ministers' response behaviors is often underestimated, but it should not be ignored. Similarly, in the area of diplomacy, foreign ministers' aggressive responses have special implications, perhaps sending a particular diplomatic signal or affirming the government's position.

Second, this research uncovers new factors that influence foreign ministers' aggressiveness. Scholars have reported that the administrative life cycle, economic conditions, and number of questions are the main factors influencing politicians' aggressiveness at press conferences (Wu & Zhao, 2016). This study examines five factors that might explain or predict Chinese foreign ministers' aggressiveness, and the results indicate that their aggressiveness is affected by three sets of factors. Economic and political variables are the key factors. China's growing economic strength makes CFMs' response behavior more confident, while their aggressiveness is also an objective reflection of the status of bilateral political and diplomatic relations. Considering the content of journalists' questions, CFMs usually respond aggressively to sensitive questions (about the Chinese political system, national sovereignty, and human rights issues). These contentious questions are the focus of Western public opinion, which largely reflects the dilemmas faced by Chinese diplomats. Finally, foreign ministers' personal attributes, especially whether they have overseas educational

experiences, are important factors explaining their aggressiveness toward journalists. CFMs with overseas educational experiences are less aggressive than those without overseas educational experiences.

Third, this research traces the evolution of CFMs' aggressiveness over the past 20 years. Some Western observers believe that Chinese leaders have engaged in more aggressive state image building in recent years (Wang, 2003). However, this study finds that, except for a few special cases, foreign ministers' aggressiveness gradually weakened from 1996 to 2016. CFMs' attitudes toward journalists at their annual press conferences have become not more assertive or aggressive but more friendly and cooperative. We can point to two possible reasons for this trend. First, the progress in China's public diplomacy due to the continuous reform and opening-up strategy has improved the nation's foreign relations. CFMs' press conferences are a product of China's opening-up strategy, and their original purpose was to explain the country's strategic decisions to promote exchange and dialogue. With China's opening up and increasing personnel exchanges, misunderstandings in China's foreign relations field have decreased. Second, a series of major events has directly improved the Chinese government's understanding of government-media relations. The 2003 outbreak of SARS in Mainland China spread widely, and hundreds of people died as the government attempted to conceal the truth. As a result, Beijing mayor Meng Xuenong and health minister Zhang Wenkang were fired, and the Chinese government began to pay attention to the release of news and to build more friendly relations with media (Zhang & Shoemaker 2014). Since then, in the 2005 avian flu event and the 2008 financial crisis, the Chinese government released information in a timelier manner. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government introduced several initiatives to facilitate interviews by foreign journalists, indicating a gradual change among Chinese officials in how they treat journalists and take advantage of modern public relations to strengthen coordination and cooperation with journalists (Zhang & Shoemaker, 2014). Despite China's increasing power, government officials try to maintain cooperative, friendly relations with most of the world (Ross, 2012).

It might be a common trend that politicians have engaged in less aggressive response behaviors at modern press conferences since the 1990s. Previous studies have shown that, from 1993 to 2015, Chinese prime ministers' aggressiveness decreased (Wu & Zhao, 2016). In this study, we found similar results for Chinese foreign ministers. Amid the development of globalization and modern political culture, governments have sought to improve media relations, and politicians have acted as partners, not dictators, in the treatment of journalists—undoubtedly a major step forward in the government-media relationship. Politicians who make appropriate compromises in dialogue with journalists exhibit not only their personal political literacy but the formal performance of the government in modern political civilization. Politicians should adopt a less tough stance in their treatment of journalists and build a relatively equal, harmonious relationship between government and media. In recent decades, as journalists have fought for the right to know the truth, national leaders have begun to treat journalists in a less dictatorial manner and adopt a gentler approach to journalists, the media, and public opinion. Of course, politicians' change in attitude should not be overestimated; they can still control the agenda of press conferences, evade questions, and even express anger. There remains a long way to go to realize fully equal dialogue between politicians and journalists.

The present quantitative research has some limitations. First, although this study examines five factors influencing the aggressiveness of foreign ministers, other factors might need to be tested. For example, CFMs' personality type and gender and the length of journalists' questions might be variables influencing CFMs' aggressiveness. Moreover, an ideology factor cannot be ruled out. CFMs in Chairman Mao's era were more aggressive, and at that time, there was nothing to say about economics. These factors were not considered here due to space limitations and difficulties of data acquisition. Second, the conclusions of this study are valid only within the studied sample range and duration. For instance, the present study examines only foreign ministers' aggressiveness at solo press conference but not documents and data from CFMs' joint press conferences. Finally, this project investigates foreign ministers' aggressiveness over a relatively short period (1996–2016). How might CFMs' aggressiveness evolve in the future? This question remains for future study.

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