

## INTRODUCTION

# Think Tanks and Policy Analysis in China: New Rules and New Roles

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Think tanks have become an increasingly more important research topic in the fields of political science and public policy<sup>2</sup>. Since the New Millennium, international scholars on think tanks have expanded their research landscapes from previous studies on think tanks within Western

political culture to different political systems<sup>3</sup>. Researches on Chinese think tanks emerged when observers within and outside China have realized that the traditional “fragmented authoritarianism” framework would be inevitably outdated since the new social policy actors have been playing increasing more salient roles in the policy process<sup>4</sup>. However, while China’s economic

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2 Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2009); Thomas Medvetz, *Think Tanks in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); James G. McGann, Anna Viden, and Jillian Rafferty, eds., *How Think Tanks Shape Social Development Policies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

3 Philip Schlesinger, “Creativity and the Experts. New Labor, Think Tanks, and the Policy Process,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no. 1 (2009): 3–20; Diane Stone, Andrew Denham, and Mark Garnett, eds., *Think Tanks Across Nations: A Comparative Approach* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Anthony M. Bertelli and Jeffrey B. Wenger, “Demanding Information: Think Tanks and the US Congress,” *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 2 (2009): 225–242; James G. McGann, *Democratization and Market Reform in Developing and Transitional Countries* (London: Routledge, 2010); John L. Campbell and Ove K. Pedersen, “Knowledge Regimes and Comparative Political Economy,” in *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*, eds. Daniel Béland and Robert Henry Knox (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167–190; Jesper Dahl Kelstrup, “Quantitative Differences in Think Tank Dissemination Activities in Germany, Denmark and the UK,” *Policy Sciences* 50, no. 1 (2017): 125–137.

4 Murray Scott Tanner, “Changing Windows on a Changing China: The Evolving ‘Think Tank’ System and the Case of the Public Security Sector,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002): 559–74; Barry Naughton, “China’s Economic Think Tanks: Their Changing Role in the 1990s,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002): 625–635; Bonnie S. Glaser, Philip C. Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002): 597–616; David Shambaugh, “China’s International Relations Think Tanks: Evolving Structure and Process,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002): 575–596; Andrew C. Mertha, “Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process,” *The China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995–1012; Zhu Xufeng, “Government Advisors or Public Advocates? Roles of Think Tanks in China from the Perspective of Regional Variations,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 207 (2011): 668–686; Pascal Abb, “China’s Foreign Policy Think Tanks: Institutional Evolution and Changing

achievement over the last four decades can be traced to the successes of a series of key policy decisions made by various levels of government, the Chinese policy making process has still largely been regarded as a “black box” for outsiders. Therefore, there is so far still limited understanding on the extent to which practices and principles of think tank participation have contributed to the Chinese policy making.

The Chinese party and state leaders have consistently stressed the important role of think tanks in major policy decisions, advocating “Decision making scientification and democratization” through the establishment of a whole set of strict systems and procedures. For example, then President Hu Jintao proposed important guidelines in the Report for the 17th National Congress to improve decision-making information and intellectual support system, to enhance transparency and public participation in decision-making and to expand the role of think tanks in the decision-making process. Moreover, current President Xi Jinping actively promoted the establishment of ‘New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese

Characteristics’ (NTTTCC) and the improvement of policy consultation mechanisms in 2013<sup>5</sup>. The Chinese central authority selected twenty-five “pilot high-end think tanks” endowed with substantial top-up government funding to support their research in 2015<sup>6</sup>. The term “NTTTCC” has two elements. The first one is “new-type,” which means the Chinese leadership is eager to build think tanks that are different from existing and ministry-affiliated ones in China. The other is “with Chinese Characteristics,” indicating that the developmental patterns of Chinese think tanks should not simply copy those of Western counterparts but should play roles in “telling Chinese stories and spreading Chinese voices” through public diplomacy.

These think tank policies of NTTTCC were very much welcomed by academics and practitioners and have considerably inspired think-tank experts’ passion in participating in the institutional reform. Many have called the NTTTCC campaign as “the new spring of development of Chinese think tanks”<sup>7</sup>. Many new think tanks mushroomed and think tanks have been

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roles,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 93 (2015): 531–553; Zhu Xufeng, *The Rise of Think Tanks in China* (London: Routledge, 2013); Silvia Menegazzi, *Rethinking Think Tanks in Contemporary China*. (Springer Nature, 2017); Lan Xue, Xufeng Zhu, and Wanqu Han, “Embracing Scientific Decision Making: The Rise of Think-Tank Policies in China,” *Pacific Affairs* 91 (1) (2018): 49–71.

5 Xinhuanet, “Zhongguo gongchandang dishibajie zhongyang weiyuanhui disanci quanti huiyi gongbao” [Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee], (2013), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/12/c\\_118113455.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/12/c_118113455.htm), accessed 1 August 2016.

6 www.gov.cn, 2015, “Liu Yunshan zai guojia gaoduan zhiku jianshe shidian gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao jiji tuijin zhongguo tese xinxing zhili jianshe” [Liu Yunshan emphasizes to promote the construction of NTTTCC at the working conference of National Top Think Tank Pilot Program], [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/02/content\\_5019044.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/02/content_5019044.htm), accessed 1 August 2016.

7 “Tansuo jianshe zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku” [Exploration of new-type think tank with Chinese characteristics], *Guangming Daily*, 25 December 2014; “Yi gaige chaungxin tuijin gaozhiliang

spotted during the decision-making process for major policies concerning national economic and social development. However, many important questions remain unanswered. What new roles do experts and think tanks play in the policy process in China? How do different think tanks participate in the process of production of analytical advice or advocacy to decision makers? What are the organizational structures and formal or informal rules within the processes of decision making to absorb analytical information from within or outside the government?

In addressing these questions above, in August 2017, Tsinghua University and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology co-organized a two-day workshop, “Policy Analysis in China: Policy Professionals, Think Tanks, and Policy System” at Tsinghua University, aiming at bringing together cutting-edge researches that seek to address questions above based on a better understanding of theories and practices of policy participation by think tanks in China. 30 paper proposals were submitted to the workshop and the committee accepted 15 full papers to be presented at the workshop. After the workshop, the guest editors invited 7 papers (two of which was authored by authors who did not present their papers at the workshop) to be submitted to the special issue of the *China Policy Journal*. Finally, after two or three rounds of reviews and revisions, the special issue accepted six articles. This special issue attempts to

seek a better understanding of theories and practices of think tanks in China by exploring a series of questions concerning the structure and process of policy making in China. Focusing on the different cases in which think tanks have played new roles within the new rules established within the new political and policy ecology, we explore formal and informal institutions shaping the interaction among think tanks, policy makers and other policy actors, and analyse the input, process, output and outcome of their policy involvement.

### ***The Contributions to This Special Issue***

The first paper “Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks’ Policy Influence: A Case Study on the Influence Mechanism of CIIS and SIIS over BRI Policymaking” conducts a case study on the central-level China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and the provincial-level Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS) to analyze the mechanism of their influence over China’s “Belt Road Initiative” (BRI) policymaking. With a comparison between two official foreign policy think tanks, the CIIS and the SIIS, Xin Hua reveals that China’s power and resources for BRI-related policy making are largely concentrated within central and top leadership, which might be further strengthened by the latest round of adjustment on central party and state institutions initiated in March 2018. Furthermore, the links of CIIS and SIIS

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zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe” [To promote the construction of quality new-type think tank with Chinese characteristics in a reform and innovation manner], *Chinese Economic Times*, 3 February 2015.

with business, academia, and media are varied.

The second paper focuses on University-based think tanks in China. In their paper “The Influence of Think Tanks on China’s Mid- to Long-term Strategic Planning: A Case Study of the Institute of Contemporary China Studies at Tsinghua University”, Ji-ang Jiaying and Yan Yilong argue that University think tanks are significant and valuable sources of great ideas and thought in China. With a detailed case study of the Institute of Contemporary China Studies (ICCS) at Tsinghua University, which was selected as one of the 25 “pilot high-end think tanks”, the authors emphasize the special roles of the ICCS in providing critical intellectual support for China’s Five-year Plans, which are China’s major public policies in relation to national development. This study finds that think-tank development has three aspects: one is to increase research capability, the second is to influence decision-making by applying the results of researches, and the third is to disseminate knowledge and transform it into social productivity. The authors finally propose some suggestions for the development of university-based think-tanks in China.

The third paper addresses the status of social think tanks in the policy system in China. With the rapid growth in number and scale, various research fields, and diversified channels of delivering intellectual products, Chinese social think tanks are playing an increasingly powerful role in advising on policy-making. However, in their paper

“The Marginalization of Chinese Social Think Tanks: Causes and Consequences”, Chen Dingding, Xia Yu, and Wang You argue that it is undeniable that Chinese social think tanks have never been the nucleus of decision-making structure, even confronted with “marginalization” for a long time. This article argues that with the lack of effective mechanism on presenting policy suggestions, the unsustainable sources of funds and talents, and the short of experience due to a short history under the unique environment, social think tanks in China is facing greater challenges.

In the fourth paper entitled “Setting the Stage for Expert Advice? An Analysis of National Expert and Advisory Committees in China”, Li Wei argues that one major initiative to improve the quality of policymaking in China is to consult expert opinions and use policy analysis in decision-making. In recent years, more expert and advisory committees have been established by the central government in China. Based on the analysis of 122 expert and advisory committees established by China’s central government agencies, the paper finds that policy advisory bodies have created administrative linkages for experts of think tanks to directly influence decision-makers by policy research and analysis. The policy advisory bodies have also contributed to a more open policy processes and enhanced the authoritarian regime’s responsiveness by providing a venue of access to decision-making for the public. Unlike the advisory structures in plural and competitive political systems, China’s national expert and advisory committees

provide an institutional setting where divergent policy views from various actors can be reconciled and incorporated into the policy decisions.

The fifth paper “Social Media and Big Data Evaluation of Think Tanks in Contemporary China” is co-authored by Zhu Xufeng and Zhao Jing who use a big data method to capture think tank activity data for comprehensively assessing their influence on social media. Currently, Chinese think tanks have begun to embrace the media

to expand their social influence. This study constructs and utilizes a database with three kinds of think tank activities in social media and builds a two-level *think tank big data index* (TTBI). The paper reveals that different types of think tanks exhibit their social influence and patterns on various social media platforms. The big data method proposed in this paper can resolve the technical bottlenecks of objective evaluation and provides a new dimension for the analysis of think tanks.