

Setting the Stage for Expert Advice? An Analysis of National Expert and Advisory Committees in China

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ABSTRACT

One major initiative for improving the quality of policymaking in China is to consult expert advisors. Based on an analysis of the expert and advisory committees (EACs) established by China’s national government, this paper finds that most of these committees provide technical support and research-based advice to policymakers. Some of these committees have contributed to more open policy processes and enhanced the state’s responsiveness by providing alternative policy views and access venues for the public. The increasing number of national EACs and the plurality of policy advice indicates the growth of a more heterogeneous policy advisory system that stretches across the government’s structural boundaries. Following a study by the OECD, this paper suggests ways to improve the institutional arrangement of China’s national EACs.

Keywords: expert and advisory committees in China, expert advice, policy advisory system, policymaking, authoritarian regime

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¿Crear el ambiente para la asesoría de los expertos? Un análisis de los comités de expertos y asesores nacionales en China

RESUMEN

Una iniciativa importante para mejorar la calidad de la creación de políticas en China es consultar a asesores expertos. Al basarse en análisis de los comités de expertos y asesores (EACs) establecidos por el gobierno nacional de China, este documento halla que la mayoría de estos comités proporciona apoyo técnico y asesoría basada en investigación para los creadores de políticas. Algunos de estos comités han contribuido a procesos políticos más abiertos y mejoró la capacidad de respuesta del estado al proveer perspectivas políticas alternativas y acceso a lugares de encuentro para el público. El creciente número de EACs nacionales y la pluralidad de la asesoría política indica el crecimiento de un sistema de asesoría política más heterogéneo que se ubica a lo largo de los límites estructurales del gobierno. Siguiendo un estudio de la OCDE, este documento sugiere maneras para mejorar la estructura política de los EACs nacionales en China.

Palabras Clave: comités de expertos en China, asesoría de expertos, sistema de asesoría política, régimen autoritativo

为专家咨询铺路？一项针对中国国家专家咨询委员会的分析

摘要

提高中国决策质量的一个重要举措在于咨询专家顾问。本文通过对中国中央政府设立的专家咨询委员会(EACS)进行分析，发现这些委员会大多为决策者提供技术支持和基于研究的咨询意见。其中一些委员会为更加开放的政策进程作出了贡献，并通过为公众提供多种政策观点和访问渠道增强了政府的应变能力。日益增多的国家EACS和多元化的政策咨询表明，一个更加多样化的政策咨询体系正在形成，该体系将跨越政府结构边界。本文基于经合组织(OECD)的一项研究，对改进中国国家EACS的制度安排提出了建议。

关键词：中国专家咨询委员会，专家咨询，政策咨询体系，决策，专制政权

1. Introduction

The government's arms-length expert and advisory committees (EACs) are important institutions that provide evaluation, expertise, information, and strategic foresight. These committees also present the perspectives of stakeholders and offer alternative perspectives for improving the quality and legitimacy of government decision making (OECD 2017, 38). Numerous discussions have been held concerning the best institutional design for enabling these policy advisory bodies to provide relevant, high-quality recommendations to policymakers (Bressers et al. 2018; Weimer 2010). However, little systematic research has been done on such advisory institutions in nondemocratic regimes. Some researchers argue that the rulers of authoritarian or hybrid political systems seek to limit policymaking roles for technocratic elites, and they wish to exclude wider public participation (Gilley 2012; Huneus 2000). Other observers suggest that authoritarian governments share power with various elites through advisory and participatory institutions, as a means to pre-empt societal challenges against their regimes (Boix and Svulik 2013; Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007). Indeed, many studies have found that the Chinese government has established new access venues for societal voices, and it is receptive to research-based expert advice (Almen 2016; Truex 2017; Zhu 2013). However, China's power-sharing institutions often lack transparency, and they can be ineffective due to conflicting commit-

ments and monitoring problems (Boix and Svulik 2013).

Since the 1980s, Chinese policymakers have attached greater importance to expert advice in policymaking. External experts such as university scholars have been recruited to serve as internal policy advisors to the top Party leaders (Shambaugh 2001). Many studies have examined the various roles of experts in China's policymaking process (Ma and Lin 2012; Zhu 2013), but little attention has been paid to the institutions that bridge the gap between external expert advisors and policymakers. What are the roles, institutional attributes, and the influence of advisory bodies that offer expert advice in China? This question is pressing and relevant, given the increasing influence of resourceful, knowledgeable nongovernmental actors in the nation's policy processes (Li and Wong 2019; Teets 2017; Zhan and Tang 2016; Zhu and Xue 2007). This question is also relevant for the comparative literature on policy advisory systems, which is concerned with the quality of policy advice in polycentric governance environments (Craft and Howlett 2012; Veit, Hustedt, and Bach 2017).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing studies on the institutional attributes of policy advisory bodies and the roles of expert advisors in policymaking in the Western democratic context. Second, we survey the political context, historical development, and the current roles and operations of national EACs in China. Third, we relate our findings to those of pre-

vious studies on China's policymaking system, and to the broader comparative literature on expert advice and policy advisory systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Policy Advisory Bodies and the Use of Expert Advice in Policymaking

Policy advisory bodies are composed of policy experts or professionals who act as knowledge brokers or translators between research-based evidence and its use in policymaking (Hawkins and Parkhurst 2016). These advisors generate and apply evidence to balance important but conflicting values in policy development, such as efficiency versus fairness (Weimer 2010, 155–56). Compared to science advisors inside the bureaucracy (whose advice is more readily available to policymakers), governmental arms-length advisory bodies have more independence, transparency, and diversity of expertise. They are therefore more likely to have a longer-term impact on complex policy issues (European Commission 2015). These advisory bodies are similar to think tanks, as they seek to balance scientific credibility with wider access to policy processes (Medvetz 2012). They differ from think tanks in that their funding mainly comes from the government, whereas many think tanks are funded by a variety of societal actors, ranging from business corporations to individual donors. Although advisory bodies may seek to incorporate diverse expertise, values, and interests within a single

institutional setting, think tanks often have clearer ideological and policy preferences, especially in situations where high-profile, active advocacy is more likely to secure them societal resources (Rich 2004).

It is challenging to design policy advisory bodies, so that they can simultaneously gain the policymakers' trust, be more inclusive of citizen participation, and solicit independent, diverse, high-impact expert advice. Policymakers tend to use advice that they trust, and the evidence or insight that advisory bodies provide is not always free from bias. In addition, demand-driven policy analyses are not always able to identify emerging issues and innovative solutions (Sarkki et al. 2014). Some observers also worry that advisory bodies are undemocratic, because the complexity of expert analysis may exclude citizen participation (Jenkins-Smith 1989; Rayner 2003). To design implementable localized solutions, the values and input of citizens and stakeholders should be included, because these people have more information on what works in the local context (Korfmacher and Koontz 2003). Consensus among experts may provide a strong, clear message for policymakers to adopt the evidence provided. However, the impact of a specific policy option is often uncertain, and credible expert analysis is needed to explore various options for addressing uncertainties and representing implications. Such analysis often requires diverse expert views, the complexity of which may limit the impact of the advisory body's advice (Levidow and Carr 2007; Sarkki et al. 2014).

In Western democracies, institutionalized policy advisory bodies cater to policymakers' needs for expert advice. One of the narrower and more consensual approaches to providing expert advice is to use systematic reviews of robust research for assessing the effectiveness of policy interventions (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007). This approach has persistent appeal for policymakers, especially when government budgets are tight. One example is the Obama administration's use of methodologically rigorous policy analyses to evaluate the impact of government programs and (re)allocate government funding more effectively (Haskins and Margolis 2014). Similarly, the British government initiated a "What Works Network" to improve the quality of decision-making through better applications of evidence, especially for assessing the cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness of public service programs (What Works Network 2014).

The extent to which policy advisory bodies facilitate the use of expert advice in policymaking depends on the political context. The use of expert advice in deciding policy can be politicized in a more conflictual paradigm. In that case, partisan selections of evidence may challenge the notion of "evidence-based policymaking" based on research studies, expert knowledge, routine monitoring data, or information from stakeholder consultation (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007). Even so, the demand for policy analysis, defined as "systematic thinking about tradeoffs under nonpolitical assumptions" (Aberbach and Rockman 1989,

295), tends to increase in the midst of polarized policy debates (Bertelli and Wenger 2008). Many observers have long doubted the objectivity of the policy analysis used in reaching decisions on polarized, contestable, uncertain issues (Majone 1989; Parkhurst 2016) and issues involving competing interests and values (Aberbach and Rockman 1989; Greenhalgh and Russell 2009; Weible 2008). In addition to policy analysis, the policy advisory process involves "policy and political ideas relating to problem structuring, solution proposing and implementation approaches" (Halligan 1995, 139). Advice on such matters can involve competing policy processes, fire-fighting, policy steering (Craft and Howlett 2012, 91), and even the personal opinions and experiences of policy actors (Mirzoev et al. 2013).

The institutional design of policy advisory bodies is important for addressing the governance issues related to the use of expert advice (Hawkins and Parkhurst 2016). Policy advisory bodies face challenges in seeking to generate bias-free, evidence-based, adaptive, inclusive, relevant, timely, diverse, and independent advice (Morton and Seditas 2018). Transparency, accountability, credibility, and contestability are all important, internationally accepted governance principles for advisory bodies (Hawkins and Parkhurst 2016; Jasanoff 1990; OECD 2017). For example, in the UK, the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees (2011) highlights the principles of accountability, openness and transparency, balance of expertise (including that of lay persons), diversity of mem-

bers (in terms of gender, age, or background), independence, objectivity, up-to-dateness, and representativeness. In the United States, the appointments and operations of over 1,000 advisory committees of the federal government are required to be open to public participation. The views and expertise of committee members are to be balanced, representative, objective, and accessible to the public. Any conflicts of interest for the committee members must be declared (Ginsberg 2009).

2.2 Policy Advisory Bodies and the Use of Expert Advice in China

The creation, communication, and use of policy advice varies across political systems, or over time within each country, depending on differing official norms, routines, and everyday practices (Halligan 1995; Vesely 2013). In authoritarian regimes, rulers have less incentive to share information with challenging policy actors, because the rulers control more resources and access to decision-making venues (Sabatier and Weible 2007, 200). Rulers can incorporate political elites (including experts), contain policy conflicts and maintain existing policy frames (Lam and Chan 2015). In a hegemonic policy subsystem, the policy advisory network is less accessible by alternative policy advisors (Craft and Wilder 2017). However, the rulers still have to share power with other institutions such as advisory bodies to alleviate commitment or monitoring problems, and to sustain the regime's survival (Boix and Svobik 2013). Therefore, advice is solicited from a variety of consultants, even though the in-

fluence of these advisors may be limited to refining the more technical aspects of policy (Craft and Howlett 2012).

Since the 1980s, growing numbers of collaborative or power-sharing relations have been formed between China's leaders and various experts in the process of policymaking. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Chinese intellectuals and scientists, especially those whose views differed from those of the dominant Party leaders, lacked the means to do independent research, or were denounced by the government and lived in disgrace (Goldman 1981). Post-Mao leaders perceived that to change China's economic backwardness, experts with scientific and technological knowledge needed more autonomy to conduct research and contribute to the nation's industrialization and modernization. When Deng Xiaoping took over the Party leadership in China, he proposed that the scientific achievements of researchers were just as important as their political loyalty (Deng 1977). The Party elevated the social status of scientists who supported the official political values and who contributed to scientific achievements (Wang 2011a, 2011b). Alternative policy views by intellectuals and policy experts were increasingly tolerated, and experts were encouraged to advise the state, so long as they did not publicly challenge the Party's rule by organizing political associations independent from the state (Bonnin and Chevrier 1991; Goldman 1999).

Since the early 2000s, the Chinese government has relaxed ideological control and encouraged consultation with nongovernmental experts,

which led to a rapid growth of think tanks (Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018). To establish a more affluent society, the Party has sought to strengthen the nation's capacity for scientific governance. More specifically, it has aimed to "perfect the rules and procedures of making major decisions and base the decision-making on science (kexue) and democracy (minzhu)." The Party has decided that for important professional and technical issues, the decision-making process should include analysis by experts, technical consultation, and participatory evaluation. The Party has also established a wide network of experts and set up multi-mode policy advisory and information support systems (CCPCC² 2004).

In practice, seeking evidence-based advice from academics, professionals, and practitioners is no longer an ad hoc activity for the Chinese government. The process is increasingly institutionalized, with research institutes, EACs, professional associations, NGOs, international organizations, or commercialized media all having a growing impact on public policy (Francesch-Huidobro and Mai 2012; Zheng et al. 2010). Starting in the 1980s, Chinese governments at all levels established internal research offices and development research centers. These centers absorbed rising numbers of experts to serve as internal advisors (Naughton 2002). With the growing private sector, nongovernmental think tanks have mushroomed and become active policy advocates and advisors

(Zhu 2011). External scholars and experts are routinely invited to evaluate the performance of government-run or government-outsourced programs (Wang 2008a, 2008b; Zhao, Xu, and Yang 2015). In an authoritarian but fragmented political system, differentiated bureaucratic mandates create a demand for diverse, competing expert advice and policy framing (Hammond 2013; Mertha 2009). In some cases, alternative policy analysis and advocacy by experts contributes to major policy changes (Wang 2011a, 2011b).

Despite the more open and inclusive approach to policymaking which is noted by some scholars, many scientists still find that their access to policymakers and their influence on policy agenda is limited. Such influence is still largely reliant on having personal ties to top Party leaders (Besha 2010). Therefore, the operations of policy networks are relatively opaque and centralized (Zheng, De Jong, and Koppenjan 2010). The information and regulatory transparency of the government is not up to international standards (Biukovic 2008). Societal initiatives and dissenting voices are sometimes suppressed or constrained by the state (Cai 2008; Howell 2015).

Based on the findings of previous literature, we expect that government-affiliated advisory bodies in China mainly generate expert advice. They are subject to higher degrees of government control in generating and offering expert advice than private think tanks. The advice they provide is therefore less

2 China Communist Party Central Committee.

independent than private think tanks. We also expect that there is limited transparency in the operations of EACs in China, which restricts public scrutiny of how expert advice is used in policymaking.

3. Method and Data

The analysis presented in this paper is based on data regarding the operation of 122 national EACs, which were directly set up by government ministries, commissions, and bureaus, and were reporting to the State Council as of 2017. These 122 national EACs were identified by searching for agency websites, using the Chinese key words “expert committee (zhuanjia weiyuanhui),” “expert advisory committee (zhuanjia zixun weiyuanhui),” and “advisory committee (zixun weiyuanhui).” We coded the EACs’ news reports, official notices, charters, and by-laws to gauge their independence, transparency, and the diversity and relevance of their expertise, according to a coding framework (Table 1) that was adapted and synthesized from previous studies (Lavertu, Walters, and Weimer 2011; OECD 2017).

More specifically,

- To assess the transparency of EACs, we examined whether their establishment and their members’ appointments are publicly announced, whether the charters or by-laws are online accessible, and whether the press releases, minutes, and papers of their meetings are online accessible.
- To assess the independence of

EACs, we coded whether they are administered by their sponsoring government agencies, whether their members are appointed by the sponsoring government agencies, and whether their chairs are officials in the sponsoring government agencies.

- To assess the diversity and relevance of the EACs’ expertise, we coded the professional experience of their chairs and the tenures of the chairs and members.
- To illustrate the varied advisory roles, capacities, and forms of EACs, we identified and analyzed the cases of various particular EACs.

In the following section, we discuss the rationale for each of these measurement standards in detail.

4. Analysis

4.1 Background of National Expert and Advisory Committees in China

The national EACs were established by the Chinese central government during the 1980s to improve scientific and democratic policymaking. Deng Xiaoping stressed that the leading cadres needed to become more professional and knowledgeable in order to modernize socialist China (1980). The Vice Premier Wan Li argued that Chinese policymakers had to make complicated, difficult decisions in carrying out the economic opening and related reforms. Therefore, policymaking needed to become more scientific and based

Table 1. Coding Frame for National EACs

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Basic information | Committee's title Year of establishment |
| Transparency | Public announcement — of establishment — of members' appointments Charters/by-laws available online Meeting press releases, minutes, and papers available |
| Independence | Administrative affiliation Members' appointment Chairs' backgrounds: sponsoring government agency ^a or other |
| Expertise | Chairs' backgrounds Chairs' and members' tenures |

^a "Sponsoring government agency" refers to the agency which established each EAC.

on "soft science" (*ruan kexue*), which involves systematic, objective, and scientific analysis with the use of modern quantitative computing estimation and advanced technology. The leaders' decisions would now rely on much more than the personal experiences and collective wisdom of the leadership. Policy decisions needed the input of experts from various sectors, think tanks, and advisory agencies. The diversity and independence of policy research was encouraged (Wan 1986).

Since the 2000s, scientific policymaking has been gradually institutionalized. The Hu Jintao government proposed that "significant issues of high professional and technological complexity shall undergo expert analysis,

technical advising and policy evaluation." The government was directed to "extensively contact experts and scholars, and establish multiple modes of policy advisory systems and information support systems" (CCPCC 2004). Indeed, the State Council Work Rules (2003) stipulated that any major policy recommendations submitted by national government agencies to the State Council must be based on strategic research or development plans, and they must have gone through analysis and evaluation by experts or by research and consulting agencies. Therefore, before the State Council makes major decisions, it must seek and consider expert advice. A recent version of the State Council Work Rules (2013) reiter-

ates that expert analysis shall be one of the mandatory stages³ in major policymaking processes. The Rules also stipulate that public participation and the transparency of policymaking shall be strengthened. Figure 1 shows that in response to such directives, the number of national EACs has been rising since 2000.

Several of the earliest national EACs in China were established in the 1980s. For example, the National Family Planning Commission (NFPC) established the first expert advisory group in 1984. The then-vice-premier Wan Li highlighted the case of formulating population and family planning policy as an illustrative example of scientific policymaking through quantitative and systematic analysis (1986). The NFPC appointed 13 experts as members of the advisory group. These experts came from Renmin University, Beijing Economics College, Beijing Medical University, Beijing University, the China Population Intelligence and Information Center, the NFPC, the Science and Technology Institute, the All-China Women's Federations, and the China Social Science Academy Population Research Center. The members were specialized in diverse areas, including demographic theory, population economics, population statistics and prediction, population sociology, and biomedical science. These experts were tasked to provide training for cadres, offer professional advice to cadres in government, conduct population growth projections, formulate popula-

tion control plans, and collect information from domestic and overseas communities to inform decision making (NFPC 1986).

To enhance the scientific formulation of long-term policy, the central government has mandated that five-year plans must go through expert analysis before being approved by the government and announced to the public. The national and provincial development and reform commissions must establish expert committees to incorporate the opinions and analysis of experts from various sectors in the formulation of economic and development plans. The central government further stipulates that when formulating national and provincial work plans in specific policy areas, at least one-third of the experts consulted must be specialists in alternative policy areas (State Council 2005).

The first Five-year Plan Expert Committee was established in 2005, comprising 37 governmental and non-governmental experts. This committee's tasks included providing advice for drafting the five-year plan, producing expert analysis reports before submitting the plan for government approval, plus monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the plan (State Council 2005; National Development and Reform Commission 2006).

Other national ministerial agencies soon followed, and many more EACs have been established since 2004 (Figure 1).

3 Other stages include public participation, risk evaluation, legal compliance checks, and collective decision making.

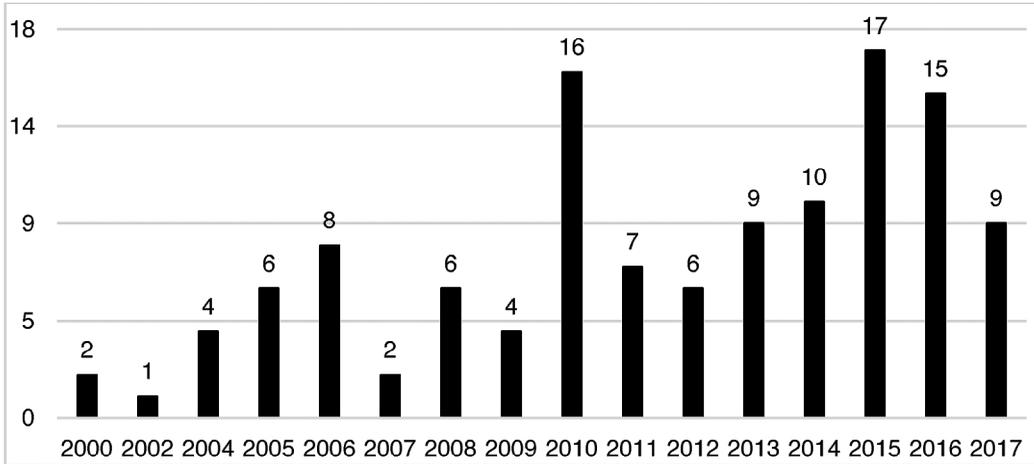


Figure 1. The Number of New National EACs (2000–2017)

Source: Author's database

Another important factor that explains the increasing demand for expert analysis is the changing educational background of political leaders in China. Compared to their predecessors, the current policymakers in China are probably more capable of using expert advice to inform their decision making. Among the 376 members of the 18th CCPCC selected in 2012, 26.3% have Ph.D. degrees and 51.1% have Master's degrees. Half of these degrees were obtained between 1995 and 2004 (Li 2016, 129). With more emphasis on sustainable development and effective social management by the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao governments, China promoted more cadres who were trained in economics, management, social sciences, and law.⁴ As documented in the literature, such training backgrounds may be helpful for enabling high officials

to make use of relevant research and professional analysis in policymaking (Carpenter 2001; Sabatier, Loomis, and McCarthy 1995; Valdes 1995). Party leaders are also exposed to international theories and ideas regarding governance through short-term training in universities or visits to observe government programs in the United States, Canada, the European Union, Singapore, or other countries (Li 2016).

Six of the seven top leaders of the current central government of China have obtained education to the Master's level or above. Two of them used to be researchers in universities and government-sponsored think tanks (Li and Thorton 2018). President Xi Jinping has urged the Party cadres to learn from experts and improve scientific policymaking by conducting systematic, careful research and investigation (CCP Pub-

4 Among members of the 18th CCP Central Committee, 11.1% are trained in engineering and science, 28.7% trained in economics and management, and 38.2% trained in social science and law. In contrast, 45.6% of the members of the 16th CCP Central Committee (selected in 2002) were trained in engineering and science, 6.7% in economics and management, and 11.8% in social science or law (Li 2016, 192).

licity Department 2016). These leaders and cadres seek to strengthen the influence of policy research conducted by think tanks. The central government emphasizes that academic debates and a greater diversity of views on policy should be encouraged. The allocation of government resources for policy research is to be competitive and open, with government information made more credible and transparent to the public. The research methods and analytical tools or techniques used should be increasingly innovative. The institutional arrangements for think tanks to submit their research findings to the government and for government departments to respond to the policy recommendations from think tanks are to be further established (CCPCC and State Council 2015; Li 2017, 3–56).

As many members of national EACs are full-time expert analysts in think tanks affiliated with universities, research institutes, or enterprises, the government's initiatives to increase the resources available for policy research and to facilitate the members' access to policymakers serve to strengthen the advisory capacity of EACs. At the same time, EACs provide a convenient institutional channel for think tanks to access policymakers. The central government has identified 25 high-end (gaoduan) government-sponsored think tanks to conduct experiments with institutional reforms. The proposed reforms include permitting more autonomy in managing government grants and personnel appointments. A national board of high-end think tanks has been established to bridge the gap

between the central government's need for policy research and the research capacities of the think tanks. By the end of 2016, approximately 100 research projects commissioned by more than 10 central government policymaking agencies had been completed (Guangming Daily 2016).

4.2 Advisory Roles

Compared to think tanks, which are highly diverse in their policy research focuses and expertise repertoires, EACs are largely organized around particular policy and epistemic communities. In other words, although EAC members are drawn from various institutions and regions, they share knowledge and concerns about specific policy issues.

Among the 122 EACs, most are titled as expert committees or expert advisory committees (106). Eleven are titled as advisory committees, and the rest use other titles. These EACs are tasked to carry out policy analysis and evaluation, provide technical support, and offer research-based advice on major policy issues to their sponsoring agencies. For example, the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) specifies that the responsibilities of the Large Medical Device Management Expert Advisory Committee include providing analysis, technical support, evaluation, and advice for the formation and implementation of work plans and other policies. The members of such committees can also access government documents and data for the purpose of performing their advisory activities (NHFPC 2013).

In 2015, the National Forestry Bureau (NFB) established an expert advisory committee and issued a set of operational by-laws. These by-laws stipulate that the committee shall (1) carry out research projects on policy issues as prioritized by the central government, and shall advise the bureau on these issues; (2) advise the bureau on formulating and implementing major policies, regulations, and mid-to-long-term plans; (3) advise on and evaluate major technological issues and engineering projects (National Forestry Bureau 2004).

For policy domains where the public shows great interest and concern, EACs play a role beyond providing technical and research-based advice. They commonly help with facilitating coordination among diverse experts and engaging the public. For example, in 2012, the National Food and Drug Regulation and Management Bureau established an expert committee. The main roles of this committee are to provide research support for policymaking, formulate risk-monitoring plans, and give technical support for investigating and managing food safety crises. Additionally, this committee's experts are tasked with promoting general knowledge about food safety and providing consulting services on food safety for the public. These functions are important components of an effective food safety control system (Jia and Jukes 2012). The membership of the committee demonstrates that its sponsoring agency aims to bring

together the diversity of expertise and perspective from various agencies and stakeholders, as a means to alleviate the institutional fragmentation of the food control system. These committee members include officials from the National General Administration of Quality Supervision (NGAGS), the provincial bureaus for quality and technical supervision, plus various experts from universities, research institutes, laboratories, risk assessment centers, and food industry associations. These people are specialized in areas ranging from dairy industry operations, standard setting, grain and oil processing, and subsidiary agricultural products (NGAGS 2012).

4.3 Transparency

Transparency of advice is important to ensure public trust in the government's capacity to make well-informed policy decisions (OECD 2017). However, the transparency and openness of China's national EACs is generally low. Most of the committees' charters or by-laws (if any) are not available to the public (Table 2). A significant number of the EACs' chairpersons and members are unknown, as the documents of official appointments are not publicly accessible (Table 3).⁵ Although there are press releases about the convening of some EACs, only a few EACs have released their meeting minutes to the public, and no papers produced by the EACs are available to the public.⁶ For one example of limited transparency, the Nu-

5 See the column "Not applicable" in Table 3.

6 For one example of relative transparency, the expert advisory committee of the State Council Work Safety Commission is reported to have convened a mid-year meeting on August 25, 2017, at which the advisory work was reviewed and new tasks were planned for the committee members. See <http://>

clear Safety and Environment Expert Committee, which is appointed by the National Nuclear Safety Administration (NNSA), issued a summary of its meeting in 2006, documenting the meeting agenda, the names and opinions of the committee members who attended, and the names of the other attending representatives (NNSA 2006).

To enable committee members to conduct policy research, they are allowed to access government data and archives that are not available to the public (Ministry of Health 2010; NHFPC 2014). However, in many cases, the committee members are required to keep committee meeting discussions confidential, unless prior permission is obtained from the sponsoring government agencies (China Ocean Bureau 2012; Ministry of Health 2010).

4.4 Independence

The government has a high degree of control over the memberships of EACs. Almost all EACs are appointed by their sponsoring government agencies (Table 3). For example, the Charter of the Ethnic Education Expert Committee stipulates that committee members shall be nominated by relevant agencies, and appointed by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education 2014). In the case of the Population Health Informatization Expert Advisory Committee, the chair, deputy chair, and members are all nominated by the secretariat of the sponsoring government agency,

namely the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC 2014).

Government control over the appointment of EAC members is meant to ensure that the advice from these committees is relevant to the government's work agenda. For example, a by-law of the National Forestry Bureau Expert Advisory Committee stipulates that the committee chair shall be the head of the bureau, who shall propose the advisory projects and tasks of the committee, inform the committee of the bureau's work, and approve the work plan of the committee (National Forestry Bureau 2004). The charter of the National Environment Advisory Committee provides that the chair shall be the head of the National Environmental Protection Bureau (NEPB),⁷ and the vice chairs shall be well-known experts and deputy heads of the NEPB, who are responsible for scientific and technological work (NEPAC 2006).

In some cases, the government maintains control over the members' appointments as a means to avoid conflicts of interests on the part of EAC members. For example, the Charter of the National Food Safety Risk Assessment Expert Committee (NFSRAEC) requires that members shall avoid any risk assessment work that is related to their own interests. The committee members may lose their memberships if they are involved in commercial activities in the name of the committee (NFSRAEC 2011). The Charter of the

www.chinasafety.gov.cn/newpage/Contents/Channel_21356/2017/0825/293618/content_293618.htm. Accessed December 24, 2017.

7 This committee is now renamed the Ministry of National Environmental Protection Advisory Committee.

Table 2. Public Information about EACs

| | Is public information available? | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----|-------------------------|
| | No | Yes | Online accessible: 27 |
| Charters or by-laws | 72 | 50 | |
| Members' appointment | 47 | 75 | Online inaccessible: 23 |
| Establishment of EACs | 5 | 117 | |
| Meetings' materials | | | |
| Minutes | 119 | 3 | |
| Press releases | 59 | 63 | |
| Papers | 122 | 0 | |
| 0 | | | |

Table 3. Independence of EACs

| | Sponsoring government agency | | |
|---|------------------------------|-----|----------------|
| | Yes | No | Not applicable |
| Administrative affiliation ¹ | 119 | 3 | 0 |
| Members' appointment ² | 120 | 0 | 2 |
| Chairs' background ³ | 75 | 139 | 37 |

Note: 1. "Administrative affiliation" indicates whether an EAC's secretariat is an officer in the sponsoring government agency; 2. "Members' appointment" indicates whether members of the EACs are appointed by their sponsoring government agencies; 3. "Chairs' background" indicates whether the chairs of the EACs are current or retired officials of the sponsoring government agencies. "Chairs" include the chairs of subcommittees or working groups of the EACs, and therefore, the total number of chairs exceeds 122.

Disease Prevention and Control Expert Committee provides that expert members shall not publicly promote themselves in the name of the committee without prior authorization. Expert members can also lose their memberships if they accept monetary rewards

or gifts when participating in activities in the name of any committee members (Ministry of Health 2010). However, some expert committees related to medical and health issues, such as the Child Medicine Expert Committee or the Rare Disease Diagnosis, Treat-

ment, and Safeguards Expert Committee, have no formal rules for regulating conflicts of interest.

Surprisingly, only a relatively small percentage of EACs and their subcommittees are chaired by officials from their sponsoring government agencies. Among the 155 chairs of EACs and their subcommittees, 67 are chaired by incumbent or former government officials of the sponsoring agencies, and 88 are chaired by nongovernmental actors, many of whom come from think tanks. This finding shows that the government attaches importance to the expertise of these advisory bodies. We explore this point further in the next section.

Despite the usual pattern of limited transparency and tight government control, in some cases, the advisory committees have formal rules concerning how to reach consensus among their members, and on how the EAC's advice is to be incorporated into policy output. For example, the charter of the National Food Safety Risk Assessment Expert Committee (NFSRAEC) stipulates that its members have the responsibility for drafting the national plan of food safety risk assessment and evaluation, and for prioritizing the various risk assessment projects. The reports and advice produced by this committee must be approved by its plenary meetings before being submitted to the Ministry of Health. When there is no consensus among its members, consensus shall be reached by a vote of the committee members. The NFSRAEC's institutionalized advisory process and

its influence on policymaking may be largely due to its legally mandated role to carry out risk assessments to ensure food safety (China National People's Congress 2015; NFSRAEC 2011). A formal and transparent mechanism to resolve divisions among EAC members is important. Otherwise, the sponsoring government agency may simply cherry-pick research findings to support its own policy preferences.⁸

4.5 Expertise and Capacity

An important dimension of an advisory body's capacity to influence government policies is its level of expertise. The backgrounds of the chairs of such bodies reflect the government's desire to ensure that these advisory bodies have relevant and suitably diverse expertise (Table 4).

Many committee charters and by-laws stipulate that the members shall have relevant, diversified expertise and experience. For example, the charter of the National Environmental Protection Advisory Committee (NEPAC) states that "the director shall be the Chief of the NEPB (National Environmental Protection Bureau), the deputy directors shall be renowned experts, and the deputy chief in charge of technology work of the NEPB and the other members shall be renowned experts, government leaders, members of the China Science Academy, or members of the China Engineering Academy" (NEPAC 2006).

In the case of the Public Cultural Service System Building Expert Committee (PCSSBEC), the charter specifies

8 From an interview with an expert in population policy, April 28, 2017.

Table 4. Diversity and Relevance of Expertise

| | Government officials with think tank experience | Government officials without think tank experience | Think tanks | Social organizations | Public service units | Enterprises/companies | Unknown |
|--------------------|---|--|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Chairs' background | 25 | 49 | 78 | 12 | 26 | 21 | 37 |
| Chairs' tenure | 1 year | 2 years | 3 years | 4 years | 5 years | 6 years | Unknown |
| Members' tenure | 2 | 6 | 19 | 3 | 15 | 0 | 77 |
| | 2 | 6 | 18 | 3 | 15 | 1 | 77 |

that one-third of the committee members shall be experts and scholars who have conducted high-impact policy and theoretical research. One-third shall be administrative and managerial personnel who have participated in making major national-level policies and plans, and another one-third shall be frontline public cultural practitioners who have over 10 years of experience and advanced professional qualifications (PCSSBEC 2011). In some cases, EACs also stipulate the areas of expertise in which their members must be specialized. For example, the charter of the National Food Safety Risk Assessment Expert Committee (NFSRAEC) specifies that its members shall be specialized in medical science, agriculture, food, toxicology, nutrition, and related disciplines (NFSRAEC 2011). The Charter of the National Recreational Agriculture Expert Committee requires that the member experts be specialized in fields directly related to agriculture, resources, ecology, economics, sociology, history, or culture (Ministry of Agriculture 2015).

Another way to ensure the diversity of the EAC members is to limit their tenures. The length of tenure in EACs ranges from one year to six years (Table 4). Some committees also limit the number of terms that each member can serve. For example, the National Ethnicity Education Expert Committee provides that each term is four years, and each expert can serve for a maximum of two terms (Ministry of Education 2014). Age limits are also specified in some EACs' charters or by-laws. For example, members of the China Ocean

Bureau Expert Committee must be under 65 years old (China Ocean Bureau 2012). The members of the Disease Prevention and Control Expert Committee shall be aged below 65, and members of the China Science Academy must be under 70 (Ministry of Health 2010). Age limits also ensure that the expert members' knowledge and advice is up-to-date and of high quality.

Lay persons are excluded from membership in the EACs. Private non-governmental stakeholders are rarely included. For example, among the 66 members of the Urban Design Expert Committee, 26 are university professors, 27 are senior urban planners or architects from state-sponsored urban planning or architecture institutes, and 8 are senior urban planners or engineers from the government. Only three members are drawn from private designing companies, one comes from a state-owned designing company, and one is from a state-sponsored social organization (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development 2016). No ordinary citizens or social advocacy groups are involved.

For advisory bodies to influence government policies, sufficient resources and opportunities for inter-face communication are necessary. In this area, national EACs have limited resources. Their secretariat support is usually provided by the administrative staff of the sponsoring government agencies. Members of the EACs participate on a part-time basis. In some cases, the EACs and their sponsoring government agencies allocate funding

for their members to carry out research and convene conferences (National Safe Production Supervision Bureau 2005; NHFPC 2014; Wang 2014). However, the EACs do not meet very frequently. Only some of the charters for advisory bodies specify the frequency of meetings. For example, the State Council Safe Work Commission Expert Advisory Committee (SWCEAC) is mandated to hold plenary meetings twice a year. The SWCEAC has 10 subcommittees in various specialized areas, and each subcommittee is required to convene at least twice a year (SWCEAC 2015). The charter of the NEPAC (National Environmental Protection Advisory Committee) only states that the commission shall convene plenary meetings at least once a year (NEPAC 2006). From 2006 to 2013, the NEPAC held seven plenary meetings (China Environment Newspaper 2013).

4.6 Alternative Forms of Advisory Bodies

For major policies that need cross-ministerial coordination, special EACs are established at a level above the ministries and commissions, to advise the Leading Group (*lingdao xiaozu*) of the State Council and the CCPCC. For example, the Advisory Committee for State Informatization (ACSI) was established in 2001 to advise the State Informatization Leading Group (chaired by the Premier) on major issues in the development of information systems. Like many advisory bodies that are affiliated with ministries and commissions, the ACSI has its own charter. This charter stipulates that the committee's purpose

is to facilitate scientific and democratic policymaking for the state's informatization strategies. The committee members are responsible to advise and evaluate important documents submitted to the State Informatization Leadership Group, to provide advice on the strategies, policies, or plans for informatization developments, and to conduct research on informatization. The chair, deputy chairs, and members of the committee shall be nominated by the State Council Informatization Office, and be approved by the State Council Informatization Leadership Group. Their tenures shall be three years. The chairs who have four terms on the committee are all current or former leading officials in the relevant offices and ministries of the State Council. The members must also have wide social networks and expertise on informatization in relation to politics, economics, law, and technology (ACSI 2006, 2014).

The policy advice of the ACSI is based on research commissioned by the sponsoring agency. For example, from 2009 to 2012, the ACSI was tasked to study the national informatization managerial system, and it provided policy recommendations based on that research (Wang 2014).

Some cross-ministerial advisory bodies are established to assist the ad hoc State Council Leading Group to formulate specific policies (Table 5). These advisory bodies can be abolished when the Leading Group has completed those policy tasks (State Council 2008). For example, the State Council Health Care Reform Leading Group (SCHCRLG) was established in 2008. In 2009, this Leading Group was commissioned to fulfill the reform goals and implement reform decisions announced by the CCP Central Committee (CCPCC and State Council 2009). The Expert Committee of the SCHCRLG was es-

Table 5. Alternative Forms of National EACs

| | Examples | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | Title | Mission/goals | Chairs |
| EACs for the Leading Group of the State Council and the CCPCC | Advisory Committee for State Informatization | To facilitate scientific and democratic policymaking for the state's informatization strategies | Deputy director, the State Council Informatization Leadership Group |
| | Expert Committee of the State Council Health Care Reform Leading Group (SCHCRLG) | To assist the SCHCRLG to implement health care reforms | Director of the SCHCRLG Office |
| Ad hoc investigation teams | Ningbo-Wenzhou Express Rail Incident Investigation Team | To investigate the causes of the incident and assign accountability | Chief of State Administration of Work Safety |

tablished in 2012, and its membership was changed in 2015. All of the current 38 expert members are academics and practitioners from universities, public hospitals, or government think tanks. Their expertise is diverse, including professionals in social security policy, public health economics, medical science, Chinese medicine, public management, or law and regulation. Four members are experts from the United States, Hong Kong, and Macao, who provide advice related to overseas healthcare systems.

The advice of the SCHCRLG Expert Committee is highly relevant to the reform agenda that was announced by the CCPCC in 2009. For example, the CCPCC has suggested that various payment methods can be explored to monitor and constrain the growth of medical expenditures. Among the 38 EAC members, at least 5 have publicly expressed their views on proposed payment methods (Ge 2015; Jin 2017; Liu 2017; Xiao 2017; Zeng 2016). The expert members of the committee not only represent a diversity of expertise and experience, but they also carefully consider the interests of various groups when publicly expressing their opinions. The groups they must represent include patients, doctors, private hospitals, and drug producers (Ifeng Net 2010; Ke 2010; Zheng 2016).

Members of the SCHCRLG Expert Committee have often expressed divergent views toward proposed reform measures in public. For example, on the issue of reforming public hospitals, Ge Yanfeng, an expert in a gov-

ernment-sponsored think tank, argued that public hospitals should not seek profits, and the government should inject more resources into public hospitals (Ge 2015). Meanwhile, Ke Yang, a university medical expert, maintained that primary care could be provided more efficiently by the market, and the public availability of medical care can be realized through government financing of medical insurance (Ke 2010). Both Ge Yanfeng and Ke Yang have served on the first and second terms of the committee (Tan 2015). Chen Jianpin, a manager of a public hospital group, and a new member of the committee in its second term, holds that through effective performance management, public hospitals can be both public-oriented and efficient (Chen 2013; Tan 2015).

Another form of EAC is the ad hoc investigation team. For example, according to the *Production Safety Incidents Report and Investigation Ordinance* (State Council 2007), experts can participate in government investigations of fatal production incidents. Also, members of the investigation teams must have relevant expertise, and have no direct conflicts of interest related to the incidents under investigation. For instance, the State Council formed an investigation team to investigate the Ningbo-Wenzhou Express Rail Incident, which killed 40 people. Initially, one vice chair and one member of the investigation team were incumbent officials of the safety supervision division of the Ministry of Railways. Another member of the expert subgroup of the investigation team was a researcher in a think tank affiliated with the Minis-

try of Railways. Some scholars, such as Xue Lan and Zhu Xufeng, suggested that officials in the Ministry of Railways should not be involved in these investigations, to avoid direct conflicts of interest. The State Council soon took this suggestion, removed those two members from the investigation team, and appointed more experts to increase the professional and experiential diversity of the team. The investigation team was mandated to base its conclusions on rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the facts and the scientific evidence. The experts also played a role in suggesting who should be held accountable for the incident, and what measures should be taken to improve railway safety (Central People's Government 2011a, 2011b; State Administration of Work Safety 2011).

5. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of 122 national EACs established by the China's central government agencies, and of three types of alternative EACs established by the State Council, this paper draws the following conclusions regarding the advisory roles, transparency, independence, relevance, and diversity of expertise found in China's various national advisory bodies.

First, the roles of national EACs largely focus on offering technical support and research-based policy advice to their sponsoring government agencies. For policy issues in which the public shows great interest, these bodies can also provide governance support, including the coordination of expertise

and consultation with the public.

Second, the transparency of national EACs is currently at a low level.

Third, the government has a high degree of control over the membership of national EACs, as it seeks to ensure the relevance of the members' advice for the government agenda. The government's control over professional ethics in the EACs varies widely, or is determined on an ad hoc basis. Surprisingly, the chairs of most EACs are not government officials.

Fourth, the backgrounds of the chairs show that the government attaches great importance to the expertise represented in EACs. Limiting the terms of service for EAC members also helps to routinely update and diversify the committees' pools of expertise. The EACs have limited resources, and they do not meet very frequently, which restricts their capacity to influence government policies.

Fifth, unlike the private sector think tanks in the West, many of which have become ideologically polarized and reflect the interests of their wealthier patrons (Drezner 2017), the memberships of EACs not only represent relevant expertise and experience, but also account for the interests of excluded social groups when offering advice on controversial policy issues such as healthcare reform.

We conclude that China's national EACs allow China's rulers to share power, mainly with technocratic elites. In general, the EACs in China have become more than stages for presenting expert advice. They also provide institu-

tional settings where expert advice and the divergent policy views of various actors can be incorporated into policy decisions. Some scholars describe this model of policymaking as a “consensus model” (Ma and Lin 2012), which stands in contrast to Western models based on competition between policy proposals (Weidenbaum 2011).

The internal–external and political–technical dichotomies of policy advice are blurred in the case of China. The process of change differs from that of the West. In the West, a more polycentric governance arrangement accounts for the plural sources and content of policy advice (Craft and Howlett 2012). For example, a recent survey of German advisory bodies shows that a majority of them have mixed memberships of scientists and societal representatives (Veit, Hustedt, and Bach 2017). In China, the increasing number of national EACs and the growing plurality of policy advice (e.g., the disagreements within the SCHCRLG Expert Committee) over the years shows a gradual change from a monolithic policy advisory system dominated by the government toward a more heterogeneous system that works across government structural boundaries. The structural location of think tanks in China has witnessed a similar path of change, expanding from inside the government toward greater semi-official and civilian participation (Zhu and Xue 2007).

The national EACs in China have great potential for contributing to policymaking by simultaneously using “inside or linear access” (Wang 2008a, 2008b; Zhu 2013) and outside advoca-

cy to influence policy decisions. The national EACs have created venues for think tanks to access decision-makers and policies. By offering alternative perspectives and articulating the interests of various social groups, the national EACs have demonstrated and contributed to a more open and responsive process of policymaking in China. The inclusion of diverse professional and social groups in these bodies has enhanced the government’s capacity for tackling technically and politically complex problems. This kind of capability is an important aspect of effective governance (Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett 2015). The limited degree of transparency and exclusion of ordinary citizens, however, tends to constrain the societal inclusiveness of EACs.

Following the OECD’s study (2017), this paper suggests that the effectiveness and public trust of China’s national EACs can be strengthened by improving their transparency, independence, and inclusiveness. More specifically, meeting records and supplementary papers need to be made publicly accessible. Advisory meetings that deliberate on policy issues of public concern can be opened to citizen observation and deliberation. The diversity of expertise and representation of membership can be more systematically stipulated. The ethical standards of EAC operation should be carefully regulated to deal with areas involving conflicts of interest.

This paper is a first step toward a better understanding regarding the role and institutional design of policy advisory bodies in China. Future research

can focus on in-depth analysis of the EACs' roles and their influence vis-à-vis other actors and alternative access venues in specific policy domains. Also, different types of EACs and EACs affiliated with different levels of government can be compared to identify their similarities and differences.

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