

The Marginalization of Chinese Social Think Tanks: Causes and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

With the surge of “think tank fever” in recent years, the development of social think tanks has gradually attracted the attention of the government and the public. On January 20, 2015, an official document, *Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of Social Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*, was issued, symbolizing the unprecedented proposal of the concept of a *social think tank*. 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 policymaking. However, while domestic social think tanks have seen an upsurge, they have never been the nucleus of decision-making structure, and have even been marginalized for a long time. If think tanks in China are attracting more attention, why do social think tanks fail to follow up? Adopting the analysis framework of think tanks’ influence in China proposed by Xufeng Zhu, this article argues that with the lack of effective mechanism for presenting policy suggestions, unsustainable sources of funds and talents, and the shortage of experience due to a short history under a unique environment, social think tanks in China are facing greater challenges.

This article begins with an overview of the rising trend of the social think tank in China, reviewing its short history and depicting its unique features and environment, before proceeding with a discussion focusing on the manifestation of the marginalization of China’s social think tanks. It then compares these traits with the framework adopted for the purposes of this paper, which allows for careful scrutiny of the influence of think tanks on government and society and explains why social think tanks are at risk of being

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marginalized in China. Through highlighting the shortage of conveying channels, stable investment, other critical resources, and a conducive atmosphere, it concludes that only by reforming the decision-making system and improving the capability of think tanks step-by-step, such as promoting specialization of policy studies, establishing talent cultivation mechanism, encouraging donation to social think tanks by cutting taxes, etc., can China's social think tanks be prevented from further marginalization.

Keywords: think tank, social think tanks, marginalization

La marginación de los think tanks sociales chinos: causas y consecuencias

RESUMEN

Con el aumento de la “fiebre de los think tanks” en los últimos años, el desarrollo de los think tanks sociales ha atraído gradualmente la atención del gobierno y del público. El 20 de enero de 2015, se emitió un documento oficial, Opinión sobre el fortalecimiento de la construcción de think tanks sociales con características chinas, que simboliza la propuesta sin precedentes del concepto de un think tank social. Con el rápido crecimiento en número y escala, varios campos de investigación y canales diversificados de entrega de productos intelectuales, los think tanks sociales chinos están desempeñando un papel cada vez más poderoso en el asesoramiento sobre la formulación de políticas. Sin embargo, si bien los think tanks sociales nacionales han experimentado un aumento, nunca han sido el núcleo de la estructura de toma de decisiones, e incluso han sido marginados durante mucho tiempo. Si los think tanks en China están atrayendo más atención, ¿por qué los think tanks sociales no hacen un seguimiento? Adoptando el marco de análisis de la influencia de los think tanks en China propuesto por Xufeng Zhu, este artículo argumenta que con la falta de un mecanismo efectivo para presentar sugerencias de políticas, fuentes insostenibles de fondos y talentos, y la escasez de experiencia debido a una corta historia bajo un Entorno único, los think tanks sociales en China enfrentan mayores desafíos.

Este artículo comienza con una descripción general de la tendencia al alza del grupo de expertos sociales en China, revisando su breve

historia y describiendo sus características y entorno únicos, antes de continuar con una discusión centrada en la manifestación de la marginación de los grupos de expertos sociales de China. Luego compara estos rasgos con el marco adoptado para los propósitos de este documento, que permite un cuidadoso escrutinio de la influencia de los think tanks en el gobierno y la sociedad y explica por qué los think tanks sociales corren el riesgo de ser marginados en China. Al destacar la escasez de canales de transporte, la inversión estable, otros recursos críticos y una atmósfera propicia, concluye que solo reformando el sistema de toma de decisiones y mejorando la capacidad de los think tanks paso a paso, como promover la especialización de políticas. Los estudios, el establecimiento de mecanismos de cultivo de talentos, el fomento de la donación a grupos de expertos sociales mediante la reducción de impuestos, etc., pueden evitar que los grupos de expertos sociales de China sigan siendo marginados.

Palabras Clave: think tank, think tanks sociales, marginalización

中国社会智库之边缘化：起因与结果

摘要

随着近几年“智库热”的激增，社会智库的发展已逐渐吸引了政府和公众的关注。2015年1月20日，（中国）发布了一项名为《关于加强中国特色新型社会智库的意见》的官方文件，象征了“社会智库”概念的首次提出。随着数量和规模、不同研究领域、智力成果交付的多样化渠道的快速增长，中国的社会智库正在政策制定咨询上发挥着日益强大的作用。然而，尽管国内社会智库趋势高涨，但其从未成为决策架构的核心，甚至长期以来处于边缘化的地位。如果中国的智库正吸引更多关注，为何社会智库却未跟上脚步？通过采用由朱旭峰提出的中国智库影响力分析框架，本文主张，因缺少用于提出政策建议的有效机制，不可持续的经费与才能来源，和由独特环境下的短暂历史所造成的经验短缺，中国的社会智库正面临更加严峻的挑战。

本文首先概述了中国社会智库的上升趋势，重审了智库的短暂历史并描述了其独特的特征与环境，接着探讨了中国社会智库被边缘化的表现形式。随后用本文目的所采用的框架，

对这些特征进行了比较，进而就智库对政府和社会产生的影响进行严格检验，同时解释了为什么中国的社会智库处于边缘化的风险之中。通过强调缺少传输渠道、稳定资金、其他关键资源和一个有益的环境，本文结论认为，只有通过改革决策体系并逐步提升智库能力，例如推进政策研究的专业化，建立才能培养机制，以减税的方式鼓励对社会智库捐款等，才能防止中国社会智库的进一步边缘化。

关键词：智库，社会智库，边缘化

1. Social Think Tanks in China

1.1 *The Rise of Social Think Tanks in China*

The term *social think tanks* mainly refers to groups that provide decision-making and advisory services on public policy, which differ from government-run think tanks, university-based think tanks, or any other categories. “Social think tanks are research institutes and consulting organizations which are neither government-sponsored nor state-owned, serving for providing intellectual products.”⁴

There are differences among social, government-run, and university-based think tanks in terms of independence, flexibility, and funding sources. Most research topics in government-run think tanks are assigned and commissioned by the government. On the one hand, official think tanks have sufficient research funding and enjoy a high level of openness to

information and data. On the other hand, their independence is relatively poor. University-based think tanks have strong talent, yet a lack of practice leads to research that is divorced from reality. Although all kinds of think tanks are responsible for providing policy suggestions for policy-makers in the government, social think tanks in China have three unique functions compared to university-based and government-run ones.⁵

First, they help diversify the government’s decision-making model and promote the improvement of the decision-making structure. Second, they help the government absorb the opinions of the masses and promote the exchange and interaction between government and society. The opinions of social think tanks come from enterprises, social organizations, institutions, and individuals, representing areas that could be easily ignored by government. Third, they help integrate social

4 Xu Pan, “Research on the Evaluation and Promotion Strategy of the effectiveness of Social think tanks in China,” PhD diss. (University of Science and Technology of China, 2017), 9.

5 Wandong, “The Participation of Social Think Tank in Government’s Decision-Making: Function, Environment, and Mechanism,” *Theory Monthly* 10 (2015).

contradictions and coordinate the balance and justice of various interests. Compared to official think tanks, social think tanks are non-profit; therefore, it is possible to study problems without being tied to special interests and they are less subject to the interference of superiors. In this way, as spokespeople for the pluralistic social subject in the government decision-making process, social think tanks can play a screening function of opinion integration and interest expression by identifying, concentrating, and conveying the interests of society.

Government, corporate, foundation, and individual donations are the main sources of funding for Chinese social think tanks. In China, more than 90% of think tanks are official and semi-official, and the government's financial allocations account for a large proportion of these think tanks' income.⁶ According to interviews of the directors of several Chinese social think tanks, most influential and large-scale think tanks receive governmental financial support, corporate and individual membership fees, and donations from foundations or individuals. Small think tanks rely mainly on self-raised funds, donations, and consulting fees from enterprises. At present, there are three main approaches to collaboration between social think tanks and enterprises: conducting research projects for enterprises; signing medium and

long-term contracts with enterprises on specific research topics; and leading experts in social think tanks to serve as senior consultants' trainers in certain fields.⁷ Evidently, there are financial problems in Chinese social think tanks. From the perspective of the demand side, it is difficult for many think tanks to attract social donations due to undisclosed information, a lack of transparency, their limited credibility, etc. It is similarly difficult to obtain government and enterprise research requests as well. From the point of view of the supply side, neither entrepreneurs nor foundations have sufficient attention and demand for social think tanks, resulting in limited donations. In addition, the insufficiency of diversity of fundraising sources for social think tanks is also the main obstacle for Chinese think tanks to grow and develop.

In recent years, a number of social think tanks have emerged and developed rapidly in China. They have become an important part of China's think tank system, complementing the traditional framework. Tang Lei, a scholar at the Institute of Information Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, once pointed out that the development of Chinese social think tanks in the past 30 years can be divided into three stages: the middle and late 1980s was the initial stage, the period from 1990 to 2003 was the second stage, and 2004 to present is the third stage. The first two

6 Miao lv and Wang Huiyao, "Discussion on the Importance of Diversified Funding to Chinese Think Tanks," *Science and Management* 37, no. 4 (2017).

7 Zhong Manli and Yang Baoqiang, "Innovation and Construction of Social Think Tank: Two Dimensional Perspectives on External Synergy and Its Internal Operation Mechanism," *Journal of Intelligence* 37, no 11 (2018).

periods are considered to be a period of development. Since 2004, private think tanks have experienced a period of adjustment, but the numbers have still maintained rapid growth. In addition, Tang Lei suggests that after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the number of private think tanks has been fast-growing. In fact, in January 2015, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of a New Type of Think Tank with Chinese Characteristics*, which indicates a new era for the construction of Chinese social think tanks.

Suffice it to say, with the overall evolution of Chinese think tanks, the climate of social think tanks in recent years has improved. On the whole, the launch of *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of a New Type of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* is a symbol. The activity of Chinese social think tanks has rapidly increased and their influence, both at home and overseas, has expanded. Libo Ren, director of the Grandview Institution, a private think tank founded around 2013, points out that “[t]here are about 200 private think tanks that have grown up with us at the same time,”⁸ demonstrating the widespread “think tank fever.” A total of 37 social think tanks are included in the China Think Tank Index (CTTI) system, which is comprised of the Research

Center of China’s think tanks at Guangming Daily and Nanjing University. But these are merely the most active ones. In the “Global Think Tanks Report 2017” compiled by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania (TTCSP), five Chinese think tanks are listed as “the best social think tanks in the world of 2017.”⁹ Obviously, the trend includes the development of social think tanks in China. On the one hand, after the initial period, China’s social think tanks are no longer scattered or isolated, but have formed a certain scale, which is different from government and university think tanks. China’s social think tanks, such as the Center for China & Globalization (CCG), have gradually become an independent force, influencing government decision-making.

1.2 The Uniqueness of Social Think Tanks

Although the power of Chinese social think tanks is rising, it is necessary to reconsider the substantial impact on the entire think tank structure due to the social environment, institutional arrangements, development history, etc.

First, social think tanks face more policy risks in China than other think tanks. The characteristics of independence and objectivity, as well as the government’s ambiguous attitudes, place social think tanks in a risky position, since China’s laws are stricter with respect to the management of non-gov-

8 Yu Jin, *China Think Tanks Development Report (2012): The System Construction of the Think Tank Industry* (Beijing: Hongqi Publishing House, 2013), 20.

9 “Global Think Tank Report 2007; Release of Seven Chinese Think Tanks on the World’s Top 100 List,” http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/think/2018-01/30/content_50355884.htm, 2018.1.30.

ernmental organizations. In this regard, it is difficult for social think tanks to obtain registration approval, which is an important bottleneck for development.¹⁰ It was pointed out in *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of a New Type of Think Tank with Chinese Characteristics* that the instruction of regulation on social think tanks is obviously different from that on other types of think tanks. In terms of private-run ones, guiding rather than promoting is emphasized, resulting in confusion about social think tanks' role in the construction of a new type of Chinese think tank system.¹¹

In China's political system, stability is the priority, given the challenges of governing a country with a diverse culture and large population. And therefore, the government has long strictly controlled the decision-making process. Participants outside official decision-making circles are under suspicion and the space for expressing opinions is relatively restricted. Confronted with the emergence of social think tanks, the government is not prepared to recognize their significance or contribution to the country's future development. From the perspective of the government, there is often a sense of being squeezed or potentially being threatened by the forces from the bottom, among which social think tanks are now an important part. According to the interview of a think tank scholar, some discussion and constructive ar-

ticles cannot be made public, the government does not really consult social think tanks, and the media also seems to consciously avoid opinions of scholars from social think tanks. Without policy support or legal guarantees, social think tanks are struggling and progressing slowly in China.

Second, the scale effect and steady influence of social think tanks have not been formed. On the one hand, compared to the United States and other Western countries, the mechanism of seeking intelligence and recommendations from social think tanks has not been established. On the other hand, the quantity and quality of advisory services provided by Chinese social think tanks have not yet met the intellectual needs of the government. Li Yang, the former Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, categorized China's think tanks into several circles according to their ability to influence decision-making. The core is the Communist Party of China (the Party) and government research departments, which lie between the academic and government sectors, enjoying the convenience of direct application. The second circle consists of official institutes, such as the Academy of Social Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Academy of Engineering system, whose research topics are more strategic. The third circle is made of university think tanks, which are more academic, while the external

10 "Building Social Think Tanks: Where Difficult and How to Solve," http://jspopss.jschina.com.cn/shekedongtai/01609/t20160922_3018598.shtml, 2016.9.21

11 Tang Lei, "The Preliminary Investigation of Chinese Folk Think Tanks in the Past 30 Years," *Social Science Evaluation of China* 4 (2016).

circle is comprised by all types of social think tanks.¹²

Third, social think tanks have limited influence in China due to their short history, marginalized position, low rate of result conversion, and cultural and societal traditions. Some scholars point out that, compared to official think tanks, there are common problems, such as weak influence and recognition, a lack of independence, poor management, unstable source of funds, and weak innovation ability.¹³ Because of the long disadvantaged status of social think tanks in the system, both access to information and influence on decision-making are limited. China's society is highly hierarchical, resulting in people being used to following rather than criticizing. Moreover, in people's subconscious, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) always act against the government and are perceived as troublemakers. Such organizations will only reduce the government's prestige and influence, endangering social stability. The preference for obedience and the misunderstanding of non-official organizations are the reasons that people are cautious about social think tanks and even attempt to limit their development.

2. The Marginalization of Social Think Tanks in China

Firstly, we have to define what marginalization is. Marginalization is a relatively abstract term, which

refers to its non-central and non-mainstream nature that is excluded by mainstream cognition. In describing Chinese think tanks, marginalization refers to their low status in the overall situation with small influence, which mainly reflects their small size and number and limited influence and communication.

2.1 Small Number and Size

The marginalization of social think tanks in China is firstly reflected in their number and size. This disadvantage is relative to other types of think tanks, such as government-led and university-based ones. The Chinese Think Tank Index System divides Chinese think tanks into nine categories according to their ownership: those run by the Party and governmental departments, those run by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, those run by the School of Administration of the Party Schools, those run by colleges and universities, those run by the military, those run by scientific research institutes, those run by enterprises, those run by social organizations, and those run by the media. The system contains a total of 602 think tanks, 341 of which are supported by universities, 66 of which are owned by the Party and governmental departments, 49 of which belong to the Academy of Social Sciences, 43 of which are run by the School of Administration of the Party Schools, and 37 of which are social think tanks.¹⁴ Although the data may not reflect the full picture, it

12 Wu Shan, "Chinese Think Tank Plans to Land, The First Batch of about 10 or So" national high-end think tank "will be licensed." <http://www.caijingmobile.com/detail/198516.html>, 2015.7.7.

13 Xu Pan, "Research on the Evaluation," p. 9.

14 "Think Tank Indexing System," <https://ctti.nju.edu.cn/CTTI/organization/toSearch.do>, 2018.4.24.

reveals the disadvantaged condition of social think tanks in the system. First, the number of social think tanks is far below the possible number, given China's huge population and decision-making demand. The proportion of social think tanks in China is significantly less than in the United States and other Western countries. According to the *Report on Global Think Tanks 2017*, the United States, as the world's largest think tank country, has 1872 think tanks, most of which are privately run, while China has only 512, among which are mostly university-based or government run.¹⁵ Second, the number of social think tanks is far behind that of university and government think tanks, resulting in a relatively low proportion. According to the Index System data, social think tanks account for only about 10% of the total, university think tanks account for around 56%, and government think tanks account for 32% or so. The inferiority of social think tanks is apparent.

In addition, the organizational scale of social think tanks in China is also different from that of government and university think tanks. First, they are smaller. Most traditional university think tanks rely on experienced academics to form a team, while social think tanks are built from scratch, which accounts for their smaller size. Second, the organizational structure is simpler. Compared to government and university think tanks, social think tanks are independent from sponsors with a redundant arrangement, so the

structure is relatively simple. Third, they receive less funding. Government and university think tanks usually have independent, stable, and sufficient sources of funding, while social think tanks in China rely on donations from and support of social resources, which are not as numerous or stable as government or university think tanks. Due to the differences in resources and operation, social think tanks in China are smaller than government and university ones. According to the interview of a think tank scholar, social think tanks in China are still in the early stage of development. The scale and number are small, and the professional level is not high enough, resulting in the misunderstanding that social think tanks have weak research capability and are unable to retain talented personnel.

2.2 Limited Influence

However, it is arbitrary to judge the marginalization of social think tanks in China by number and size, because even a limited number of think tanks can have an unintended policy impact. To prove their marginalized position, their impact on policy is another piece of evidence. The fundamental goal of social think tanks is to provide the government with a reference for decision-making. Social think tanks are meaningless if they cannot convey information. At present, the role of social think tanks in the formation of policy is relatively limited.

First, the overall influence of social think tanks on informing policy is

15 James G. McGann, 2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report, https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?Article=1012&context=think_tanks, 2018.1.31.

weak. As a powerful social think tank in China, CCG submitted more than 60 reports to the government in 2015, more than 10 of which were adopted.¹⁶ After 2017, based on its annual report, CCG had conducted 60 projects (including many government-commissioned projects) and submitted 223 policy recommendation papers. Many of them have been read by leaders of the Party and government.¹⁷ According to the report, in the first year of its establishment, the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies of Renmin University of China submitted “14 reports to various departments of the CPC Central Committee.”¹⁸ In addition, PanGoal, a private-run think tank, finished a report on “key strategies in 37 countries.”¹⁹ To be sure, social think tanks have played a role in “making suggestions” and their influence is on the rise.

But these are only one side of the Chinese social think tank. Overall, the influence of social think tanks is far behind that of government and university think tanks. The *Impact Evaluation and Ranking of China's Think Tanks in 2017* report, released by the Research Center of Think Tanks of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in January 2018, takes the impact on decision-making as one of the core criteria for evaluation.

The evaluation criteria include leadership instruction, advice adoption, rule drafting, and consultation activities, which are based on a questionnaire, objective data evaluation and user evaluation, expert evaluation, field research, and so on. The report assesses the development of various think tanks in China,²⁰ pointing out that “from the perspective of comprehensive influence, the think tanks based on the Party, government, military, institutes, and other sectors of ministries are most influential, ranking relatively high.” The result is presented in Table 1.

From Table 1, we can see that the influence of the social think tanks is weaker than that of others. When it comes to “the impact on decision-making,” the disadvantages of social think tanks are even more obvious (Table 2).

It can be seen that none of the top 20 think tanks is a social think tank and that the majority are government think tanks, directly reflecting how little influence social think tanks have in terms of policy. As a think tank scholar indicated in the interview, most researchers in social think tanks have difficulty attracting attention from the media, society, or government. The marginalized situation is a result of the historical background and social atmosphere.

16 “Entering a Think tank for China and Globalization,” CCG, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0205/c14549-28114530-2.html>, 2016.2.5.

17 “These 10 CCG Studies Help You Decipher What Happened in 2017,” <http://wemedia.ifeng.com/43243030/wemedia.shtml>, 2017.12.31.

18 Cheng Li, “The Power of Ideas,” *World Scientific* 40 (May 2017); “An Introduction to the Pangu Think Tank,” *Pangu Think Tank*, 29.

19 “Introduction, Handbook of Pangu Think Tank,” *Pangu Think Tank*, 29.

20 “2017 China Think Tanks Report Impact Assessment and Ranking,” http://www.pjzgzk.org.cn/upload/file/20180206/20180206100240_629.pdf, 2018.1

Table 1. Source: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, *2017 China Think Tank Report*.

Category	Quantity		Rank	
	2017	2016	2017	2016
National Academy of Party and government organs	16	10	29.1	8.6
Ministry think tank	30	26	48.9	40.7
Local party and government think tank	7	9	68.3	72.4
Local Academy of Social Sciences	7	14	83.4	78.4
University think tank	19	21	50.3	48.9
Social think tank	23	20	52.4	56.7

*Local party and government think tanks include local party schools (schools of administration) and local government research think tanks

Table 2. Source: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, *2017 China Think Tank Report*.

Rank in 2017	Name	Rank in 2016
1	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	2
2	Development Research Centre of the State Council	1
3	Chinese Academy of Sciences	4
4	School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China	3
5	China Institute of Macro-Economics	5
6	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations	12
7	Chinese Academy of Engineering	7
8	Chinese Academy of Military Sciences	11
9	Chinese Center for International Economic Exchange	16
10	National Global Strategic think Tank of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	
11	Chinese (Shenzhen) Comprehensive Development Research Institute	15
12	National Defense University	8
13	Chinese Academy of International Studies	
14	Shanghai Institute of International Studies	13
15	National School of Development, Peking University	19
16	National Information Center	6
17	Chinese Academy of Governance	20
18	Chinese Academy of Financial Sciences	
19	National Institute of Development and Strategy, Renmin University of China	
20	National Laboratory of Finance and Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	

Second, social think tanks' impact on policy merely concentrates in few domains. On the one hand, as mentioned above, this is because among social think tanks, there are great differences in development and access to resources, research areas, and strong points. Some think tanks are capable of exerting a certain degree of policy influence. For example, CCG has a certain position in the field of international talent research, such as international migration and overseas returnees. Thus, it has great impact on the policies of these fields. In 2016, the central government adopted CCG's recommendation and formally joined the International Organization for Migration in June 2016. Moreover, on March 13, 2018, the State Council's organizational reform plan was submitted to the first session of the 13th National people's Congress for deliberation. Article 7 of the plan suggests establishing a State Migration Administration, which has been called for by CCG.²¹ One Belt One Road 100, a forum aims at establishing an online network for promoting Belt and Road Initiative proposed by Chinese government, focused on academic research, theoretical support, and discourse system construction. It provides the government with seven related papers, including "The English Translation of Belt and Road Should Be Clarified As Soon As Possible," "Scholars Believe That There Is A Misunderstanding Of Public Opinion In Belt and Road," "To

Promote Belt and Road Through Hong Kong's Advantage As An International Window," etc.²² The Intellisias Institute, a social think tank established in 2015, exerts policy influence on the field of major international issues. In 2016, it undertook research related to China's foreign affairs, the "Belt and Road Initiative," regional cooperation, and other issues, and received recognition and feedback from provincial and central leaders. It is natural that different social think tanks focus on different areas, which also allows them to focus their resources and supplement government and university think tank research. The pursuit of "big and comprehensive" policy is not conducive to the development of social think tanks, because it directly places them in a collision course with government and university think tanks.

On the other hand, different public policy issues need different decision-making reference models. In terms of public, pluralistic, and non-sensitive issues, such as economic, social, international, science and technology, cultural, etc., social think tanks have more space to make suggestions and are asked to participate more frequently. Constrained by the decision-making system, political environment, information flow, and other factors, social think tanks are not as active as government think tanks in politics and law, security, party building, etc. For example, the issue of international migration mentioned above is in fact a community

21 "State Council proposes establishing National Immigration Administration Bureau, CCG decade policy promotion achievement landing" <http://www.ccg.org.cn/Research/view.aspx?Id=8610>, 2018.3.14

22 <https://ctti.nju.edu.cn/CTTI/organization/searchDetail.do-retrieval?SolrId=1-504>, 2018.4.24

management issue in nature and faces a wide range of management objects with special characteristics. However, it is difficult for the government to grasp the trends of the international migration issue in a holistic and comprehensive way, which requires a “soft” organization, such as a social think tanks, to play the role of “connecting the official and social sectors” to find differences of opinion and focus on policies on international migration. Moreover, international affairs are also areas that social think tanks would naturally tend to explore. The independence of social think tanks facilitates their research on international issues. They have channels different from traditional ones for attaining information from foreign countries and can enhance foreign cooperation in the form of public diplomacy. They have favorable conditions for research on international issues and policies.

Third, the policy influence of social think tanks depends on special resources. There are several reasons why social think tanks lack policy influence. First, social think tanks lack formal channels to send reports to local or central governments. By contrast, government think tanks can undertake research and submit policy reports within their respective organizations, although their effectiveness is limited by other factors, such as their ability to reach out to government leaders. Second, social think tanks lack access to internal information, which means

that the quality of policy research produced by social think tanks is likely to lag behind government think tanks. Third, the inertia of government decision-making departments leads them to rely on the government or university think tanks as they used to, ignoring the effectiveness of social think tanks. Thus, social think tanks need to accumulate “special resources” to gain greater policy impact. The special resources here mainly include human resources, network resources, and social resources. First of all, having excellent human resources is the primary factor for having policy influence. The direct way to shape policy is to employ researchers with high academic qualifications and public intellectuals to produce policy reports with high quality. For example, the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies of Renmin University of China employs a total of 22 researchers, who are outstanding scholars both at home and abroad.²³ The Pan Goal Think Tank also forms a committee comprised of 175 academics.²⁴

Once mature research teams are built, the social network is the next priority. The revolving door mechanism is significant. On the one hand, social think tanks try to attract people with political backgrounds to their teams. On the other hand, social think tanks also use network resources to actively approach or even enter the government decision-making sectors, opening channels for social think tanks. For example,

23 “Research team of National people’s Congress in Chongyang,” http://www.rdcy.org/more_cy.php?Cid=717, 2017.4.24.

24 “List of Members of Pangu Academic Committee,” <http://www.pangoal.cn/tuandui.php?Pid=1>, 2018.4.24.

the Charhar Institute is a typical think tank, whose founder and chairman Han Fangming served as vice chairman of the National Committee for Foreign Affairs. Zhao Qizheng, former director of the Information Office of the State Council and director of the Foreign Affairs Committee, is the editor-in-chief of the *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, a publication sponsored by the Charhar Institute.²⁵ CCG is another instance. It hired a number of former government officials and executives of state-owned enterprises, such as the former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, He Yafei, as chairman and vice chairman as well as 37 vice-chairmen, 80 executive directors, and 38 directors, all of whom are elites in internal affairs, business, and academic circles. It has reserved sufficient network resources to enhance its policy influence and has also narrowed the distance between it and local and central departments. Therefore, limited by the distribution of special resources, there is a gap of policy influence among Chinese social think tanks. Moreover, the long-term maintenance of resources also expands the gap.

3.3 Limited Communication

In fact, the main functions of think tanks are to put forward new ideas for society and to guide public opinion and social trends.²⁶ China's social think tanks have made a lot of efforts in this regard. For

example, CCG held 156 large-scale forums and conferences in 2017, attracting Chinese and foreign media, such as CCTV news, making headlines and publicizing the research of CCG many times, which created a more impressive image within the public.²⁷ The Charhar Institute set up the International Council on Communication in 2016 as a permanent body, gathering members from the media industry and senior scholars at home and abroad.²⁸

However, the communication effect of social think tanks has not impressed the public, nor did it have a differentiated impact on the traditional and dominant influence of government and university think tanks. The public's understanding of social think tanks is still in its infancy. Overall, the definition and concept of the social think tank is not clear: the understanding of its function and positioning is not accurate and the acceptance of its research results is low. Therefore, compared to traditional think tanks, social think tanks are still in a marginalized state in terms of the voice and effect of publication.

First of all, due to their size, the influence of social think tanks is significantly weaker than media and university think tanks. Previous analyses have suggested that China's social think tanks differ from other traditional think tanks in size, so it is understandable

25 Luo Sichang, "The Chahar Society, The Chinese Think Tank that We Have to Pay Attention to", <http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0210/c387260-29073133.html>, 2017.2.10.

26 Zhong Manli and Yang Baoqiang, "An Analysis of the Dissemination Ability and Impact Mechanism of Social Think Tanks," *Intelligence Journal* 8 (2017).

27 "These 10 CCG Studies Help You Decipher What Happened in 2017."

28 Luo Sichang, "The Chahar Society."

that there is a gap in the effect of publication. *2017 China Think Tank Report*, released by the Research Center of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in January 2018, also ranked the social influence of Chinese think tanks:

Table 3. Source: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, *2017 China Think Tank Report*.

Rank in 2017	Name	Rank in 2016
1	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	1
2	Chinese Academy of Sciences	4
3	Development Research Centre of the State Council	2
4	School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China	3
5	Chinese Academy of Engineering	7
6	China Institute of Macro-Economics	5
7	Chinese Academy of Governance	9
8	Institute of National conditions, Tsinghua University	13
9	National Institute of Development and Strategy, Renmin University of China	6
10	Chongyang Institute of Finance, Renmin University of China	12
11	National Defense University	17
12	Xinhua News Agency Center for World Studies	
13	Chinese Academy of International Studies	11
14	Chinese Center for International Economic Exchange	10
15	Chinese Academy of military Sciences	19
16	China and Globalization think Tank	
17	China Institute, Fudan University	
18	China (Hainan) Reform and Development Research Institute	
19	Chinese (Shenzhen) Comprehensive Development Research Institute	
20	Shanghai Institute of International Studies	

As can be seen in Table 3 above, the social influence of traditional think tanks, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the Development Research Center of the State Council, is dominant and stable. As with reports from previous years, government and university think tanks are shown to occupy the top 20; the situation is ba-

sically unchanged, reflecting their obvious traditional advantage. The disadvantage of the influence of social think tanks results from several reasons. First, social think tanks are the rising stars of Chinese think tanks. The shaping of the right to speak is a cyclical process. As mentioned earlier, it was only after the launch of the report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of

China in 2013 that the number of private think tanks exploded; thus, social think tanks are still a new thing in Chinese society, and their social influence is still understandably weak. Moreover, China's unique social environment and historical background mean that Chinese people have long recognized official think tanks and universities. To shape the social influence of social think tanks, the public's image of think tanks needs to be re-established, and the cost of that will be high. Secondly, social think tanks have far fewer media resources than government and university think tanks do. China's dominant government and university think tanks often have strong and long-term partnerships with the mainstream state media and social media, both at home and abroad, and they are willing to proactively seek traditional exchanges of resources to help them expand their social influence. In contrast, the media resources of social think tanks are relatively limited. In addition, the mainstream media also have think tanks, such as the Outlook Think Tank of Xinhua News Agency, the People's Think Tank, and the Guangming Daily Think Tank, which have already accumulated abundant communication experience and social influence. Generally speaking, the lack of media resources and communication experience of social think tanks dampens their impact on the public, the opinions of which also affect the decision-making system to a certain extent. Therefore, social think tanks have to pay attention to shaping public opinion, because the marginalized impact on policy and weak influ-

ence on public opinions are mutually constructed.

3. Causes of The Marginalization of Social Think Tanks

3.1 The theoretical framework of analyzing the origin of marginalization

To explain the marginalization of China's social think tanks, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the factors that determine social think tanks' impact on the policy-making process. Citing the work of Johan Galtung, Xufeng Zhu, professor at Tsinghua University and expert at China's think tank studies, noted that the framework of policy-making system is generally comprised of three parts: the nucleus, the center, and the periphery, ranging from the most influential to the least. Think tank experts are positioned within the nucleus. However, in the context of one-party rule, only semi-official think tanks and civilian think tanks, namely, social think tanks, are qualified as the "external brain" of the government, yet their status is not as striking as that of their counterparts in the West. In order to evaluate the mechanism of Chinese think tanks' influence, Zhu conducted a survey on 1124 eligible institutes in various policy fields across China based on four variables: 1) "expert knowledge," denoting experts' capability of transferring knowledge to policy impact; 2) "administrative linkages," denoting the connection between think tanks and their supervising units; 3) "person-

al ties,” denoting think tank experts’ individual relationship with decision makers; and 4) “organizational identities,” denoting the closeness between think tanks and their leading sectors. Owing to the absence of supervising units, expertise and personal relations appear to be of greater significance for social think tanks. Put another way, social think tanks with renowned scholars and close affiliations to decision-making sectors are more likely to be influential in China and vice versa.

3.2 The Underlying Imperfection of the Traditional Think Tank System

The marginalization of social think tanks is directly reflected by the imbalance of Chinese think tanks. The essential vitality of think tanks lies in their ability to make suggestions. However, in China’s think tank system, the policy influence of government and university think tanks is far ahead of that of social think tanks. Therefore, China’s think tank structure is imbalanced, caused by the dominance of government and university think tanks and resulting in the marginalization of social think tanks. The root of the situation is the imperfection of the domestic think tank system, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

First, local and central governments habitually rely on official or semi-official think tanks, which are rooted in China’s decision-making system. China’s decision-making system was formed during the early days of the establishment of the state. At the central level, China’s decision-making system is mainly composed of five major

actors: the Party, the government, the army, the law, and the people. Among them, the Party is the core actor. The “people” in the narrow sense mainly refer to the crowd and NGOs. Despite the fact that local and central decision-making increasingly emphasizes democratization and scientification and that decision-making has been gradually decentralized, it is still largely restricted to the interior unit of the Party and government. Thus, staff members from official and semi-official think tanks attached to the Party and government continue to be the first choice for government consultation. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, for example, has its own way of influencing policy and public opinion. “Our institutes and researchers are involved in domestic policy making at all levels,” said Li Yang, former Vice President of the organization. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Development Research Center of the State Council, and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, which are subordinate to the government, have built up a stable channel of participating decision-making, such as the “Two Sessions,” the National Party Congress, the Central Economic Working Conference, and national strategic studies, like the Five-year Plan, etc.

The formation of this “inertia” is not only determined by the decision-making system of the government, but also by the need for scientific and timely decision-making. On the one hand, governmental think tanks are responsible to official departments, undertaking the duty of policy research.

Secondly, governmental think tanks have access to first-hand information within the government, ensuring the rationality and accuracy of decision-making. Third, the communication costs between government think tanks and decision-makers are low, guaranteeing efficiency in the process. Compared to the advising system of government think tanks that has been maintained for decades, the ways for social think tanks to participate in decision-making are still at the preliminary stage. How to decrease the government's dependence on official and university think tanks is the main question to respond to the marginalization of social think tanks at present. As a think tank scholar added, the channels for Chinese social think tanks to participate in government decision-making are currently still too narrow. For most of them, it is difficult to enter the decision-making field. Currently, the main forms of delivering opinions and suggestions are limited to publications, conferences, speeches, and participation in government-commissioned projects. The form of participation in the decision-making process is still imperfect. Another think tank scholar mentioned that the government's service-purchase mechanism has been imperfect, given that the efficiency of social think tanks to support decision-making needs is still low.

Second, the management system of social think tanks is immature. Compared to the stable position of government think tanks in the decision-making process, the various norms and service mechanisms for social think tanks are premature. On January 20,

2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the document *Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of Social Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*, which was the first time that the concept of "social think tanks" was formally defined. Social think tanks have long been neglected and official regulation started quite late, leading to several consequences. First, a mechanism for delivering advice to the inner circle has not been established. As mentioned above, the main approach for social think tanks to exert their policy influence is to rely on special connections to the top, yet most social think tanks have not established smooth and stable channels. In *Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of Social Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*, the focus is on regulating social think tanks by guiding them and setting up standards. Meanwhile, the Central Party School, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and other key institutes are encouraged to experiment on founding think tanks, emphasizing the exploration of the government-led pattern in the decision-making consultation system. *Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks*, released May 4, 2017, claims that the priority is on enhancing regulation, followed by the optimization of the environment and self-construction. Therefore, for China's current decision-making system, it is necessary to explore the paths in which social think tanks could participate in policy consultation, including the regulation and management thereof. In addition, in the *Opinion on*

the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks, more detailed arrangements are included: it is suggested that the participation of social think tanks in supplying suggestions should be guaranteed and that effective paths for social think tanks to get involved in policy-making should be expanded. Nevertheless, under the present circumstances, whether China's social think tanks will be capable of establishing their own channel of offering advice remains to be seen.

3.3 Restrictions on Unstable Capital and Talent Chains

In *Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks*, it is suggested that internal defects, such as a shortage of funds and a lack of talent, greatly stunt the growth of social think tanks. Indeed, the shortage of funds and talent faced by social think tanks seriously restricts the scale and quality of their development, which is also one of the important reasons for their marginalization. However, this is a common problem that restricts the development of think tanks in China as a whole, creating an even greater dilemma for social think tanks.

First, investment in Chinese think tanks is generally low. According to a survey from the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China, the overall spending of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was 2.33 billion Yuan in 2014, while the Development Research Center of the State Council only spent 130 million Yuan. Other well-known domestic think tanks, such as the China Institutes

of Contemporary International Relations, the China Institute of International Studies, and the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, rarely spent more than 60 million Yuan. However, the Global Think Tank Report shows that the annual expenses of the top 10 American think tanks are more than \$30 million. Although it seems that the national funds invested in think tanks are not low, the comparison shows that it is still far behind the level of developed countries. As non-profit organizations, think tanks need a certain amount of funds for their research, publication, talent employment, social services, etc. Without a stable funding supply, they cannot support their long-term operation. The problem of insufficient funding is faced by government and university think tanks as well, but it is even more challenging for social think tanks.

Secondly, the source of funds for social think tanks is unsustainable. Lan Xue, a scholar at Tsinghua University, has pointed out that without a stable source of funding, social think tanks relying on their own resources often find it difficult to attract high-level talent, maintain an objective and neutral research stance, and develop sustainably. It is true that the problem of money and talent goes hand-in-hand. However, it is not only environmental reasons but also internal shortcomings of social think tanks that give rise to the mishap. First, China lacks a social tradition of donation and people have low awareness of political participation and willingness to donate. A good atmosphere of donation and enthusiasm for public welfare will help the development of social think tanks and

the establishment of multiple funding channels, such as government grants, foundations, enterprises, and individual donations and investments. Second, the policy and influence of social think tanks has not been comprehensively formed in the public. Moreover, enterprises and individuals tend to be skeptical about the development space of social think tanks. As mentioned above, compared to government and university think tanks, the public recognition of social think tanks is not high, and their roles, functions, and development prospects are unclear. This lack of awareness also hinders the flow of social funds to social think tanks.

With regards to the current difficult situation for Chinese social think tanks, another think tank scholar shared three points. First, while economic independence requires a good funding environment, in China, official and semi-official think tanks squeeze the resource space of social think tanks. Second, identity issues have always been a key factor hindering their development, as the law sets a high threshold for the registration of social think tanks. Third, information and data are the basis for research and development, yet they are mostly controlled by the government in China. Therefore, it is difficult for social think tanks to obtain timely and effective information.

3.4 The Think Tank Itself Lacks Experience in Operation and Management

Compared to mature social think tanks in the United States and other Western

countries, Chinese social think tanks are faced with less favorable political and social environments. The experience of American and other Western social think tanks cannot be copied and applied to Chinese social think tanks. Therefore, China's social think tanks need to develop a Chinese path for the construction of social think tanks, which is still in the initial stage. At present, social think tanks face a shortage of funds and talent. When social think tanks are unable to establish a stable source of funds, they try to generate income by means of producing intellectual products and providing commercial consultation for enterprises to support their research work, which creates new operating costs and risks for social think tanks. In order to gain access to social capital, it is necessary to achieve widespread social recognition among enterprises, foundations, and other organizations. Nonetheless, start-up social think tanks in China assume a greater risk of failure in this premature think tank environment. In an interview, one think tank scholar argues that there are still many problems due to the lack of experience in China's social think tanks. First, as the management practice of think tanks has just begun, the degree of participation in decision-making is not high. In particular, social think tanks lack both credibility and policy support. In addition, social think tanks have not fully adapted to the needs of decision-making.

4. The Efforts of The Social Think Tank to De-Marginalize

If the scientization and democratization of public policy brought about the rise of think tanks, then in recent years the “think tank fever” in China has benefited from the diversification, scientization, and democratization of the government’s decision-making system. While there are more challenges and risks in the process of building social think tanks in China, this has not hindered the efforts of social think tanks to de-marginalize themselves in China. In order to promote China’s political decision-making system reform and to shape China’s soft power, the de-marginalization of China’s social think tanks is imperative.

Regarding the efforts of de-marginalization, it is critical for China’s social think tanks to reflect on the differences between themselves and US think tanks. The biggest difference is that American think tanks have spent a long period of time conducting management practices. For example, American think tanks usually adopt a board management system. The board of directors consists of senior bankers, politicians, entrepreneurs, and scholars. The board mainly conducts the function of administrative management and supervision, with specific responsibilities of reviewing and approving research projects and supervising the research process to ensure independence. Secondly, American think tanks have established good communication mechanisms with the policy-making sector. On the one hand, the revolving door mechanism of

US think tanks delivers professional researchers to government; on the other hand, social think tanks tend to absorb retired government officials. The mechanism not only provides social think tanks with professional knowledge from the government, but also strengthens the links between think tanks and the government. Thirdly, US think tanks have diverse sources of funding, including four main sources: book publishing and academic conferences; projects commissioned by the government; donations from foundations; donations from enterprises and individuals. Most importantly, private sectors that donate to social think tanks enjoy tax exemption. With the comparison of Chinese and US social think tanks, suggestions for Chinese think tanks to de-marginalize are clearer.

4.1 Optimize China’s Think Tank System and Promote the Specialization of Decision-Making Consultation

As mentioned above, there is an imbalance in the structure of Chinese think tanks, and the competitiveness of social think tanks on comprehensive issues is far less than that of government think tanks. However, social think tanks usually have unique advantages and social resources in some research fields, which help fill the deficiencies of government and university think tanks. Faced with the fact that the government and universities are still dominant in policy advice, both think tanks should take the initiative to plan professional development routes for social think tanks.

First, to improve the relevant domestic legal system, expanding effective ways for social think tanks to participate in decision-making consultation services on some low-sensitivity policy issues, such as social welfare, science and technology, and cultural affairs. Second, social think tanks need to be well positioned, highlighting their strengths and avoiding weaknesses. They should stress their distinctive features, integrate unique resources, and strive for achievements in specific fields, not repeating the work done by government and university think tanks. Finally, social think tanks need to play to their unique advantages of conveying opinions from the bottom to the top, promoting cross-sectional cooperation and diversified participation in providing advisory reports, policy plans, and strategy design, so as to make up for the shortcomings of government think tanks.

4.2 Encouraging Policies and Measures for Social Think Tanks to Provide Funds and Talents

China's Enterprise Income Tax Law stipulates that "[p]rivate non-corporate private think tank is exempted from enterprise income tax, and its public welfare business enjoys preferential tax policies." The *Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks* report also mentions that "[f]oundations and other organizations are encouraged to donate funds to set up or support social think tanks in accordance with the law." Enterprises, public institutions, other social organizations, and individuals will be encouraged to donate to or fund

the development of social think tanks. Pre-tax deductions for public welfare donations in accordance with the law will be granted. When a qualified social think tank accepts social donations, it may apply for and use the donations for public welfare undertakings. Although the Chinese government has gradually paid attention to the problem of a lack of funding and the talent shortage for social think tanks, which has brought some policy preferences, the supportive and encouraging policies in the system and procedures are still not perfect.

First, the government needs to strengthen preferred policies for social think tanks, or even reduce the operating burden through tax cutting. The 501(c) section of the tax law in the United States, for example, stipulates that all activities conform to being "run solely for charitable, educational, religious and scientific enterprise, for achieving the stated purpose of the tax law while net income cannot be used to make private benefit, and not violating the law nor interfering in elections" in order to enjoy tax cuts. Second, the government should cultivate and encourage social donation, shaping the importance of social think tanks and enhancing their influence on the public. Further, the government should guide former politicians and entrepreneurs to donate to, fund, and support the development of social think tanks. Finally, the government should establish a reliable mechanism of talent introduction for social think tanks and encourage high-level talents to join in. Improving the cultivation of talent and reward mechanisms of social think tanks will not only

benefit the development of social think tanks themselves, but also the development of all think tanks.

Conclusion

Surrounded by governmental and semi-official think tanks, China's social think tanks have developed in a unique context. The problem of marginalization is deeply rooted in the tradition of policy consultation. Without attention from decision-makers, the development of social think tanks is of the least importance, cutting the flow of funds and talent, which are the most critical components for running an institute, giving rise to a vicious circle of having fewer resources and a weaker impact. However, the rising trend indicates a changing environment. Finally,

we believe that the marginalization of Chinese social think tanks will continue for a long time. Because, first, it takes time to improve the think tank management system or promote social donation, and the progress of China's social and economic development and political reform directly affects the vitality of social think tanks. Second, China's social think tanks are still exploring a suitable and definite orientation for their own development. In China's unique political and economic environment, social think tanks cannot completely replicate the development path of Western think tanks but instead need to do more in the face of marginalization. The most important thing is to gain the trust and support of the Chinese government.