How the Global Industry of Ideas Has Spread in Asia

Peter Hayes
Think tanks have a complex taxonomy, reflecting their myriad forms and functions. Asia has begun to make distinct contributions.

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Chinese think tanks have a short history and are associated with the government. But there is hope as independent think tank numbers grow.

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Japan is losing out in the global competition for ideas and influence for lack of a vibrant think tank culture.
Seeking Influence: Chinese Foreign-Policy Think Tanks

By Liao Xuanli

The relatively recent rise of Chinese think tanks started in the 1980s as the country opened up to the outside world. With a tradition rooted in official ‘policy advisors’ under past Chinese political systems, the most influential think tanks remain associated with the government.

But with the numbers of more independent think tanks rising and policy challenges growing, writes Liao Xuanli, there is hope that private and university research organizations will find a greater voice in decision-making.

AS POLICY advisory organizations, think tanks began to appear in China starting in the 1980s in response to the government’s promotion of a “scientific policy process.” The past three decades have witnessed their rapid development, and the number has grown from a few dozen official institutions in the 1980s to 429 private and government-sponsored “think tanks” in 2014, making the country the second largest host of think tanks in the world after the United States, which has 1,830 (McGann 2015).

Such a remarkable development is certainly associated with globalization and China’s increasing interdependence with the rest of the world; it is no longer possible for the top leadership to make important policy decisions without the advice of specialists. Chinese President Xi Jinping argued in remarks in October 2014 that China needed to build high quality think tanks that have a greater influence on policy-making and international reputations.

Research on Chinese think tanks has also increased in recent years. In addition to various scholarly works on the subject, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) in 2013 began publishing an “Annual Report on Chinese Think Tanks.” In 2014, the Horizon Research Consultancy Group (HRCG), a private think tank, also published a report on the impact of Chinese think tanks. Despite criticism that its criteria for evaluating them missed out two essential factors — specialization and independence — HRCG argued that its report was more objective than the ones that are produced by James McGann’s Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCS) and SASS, which are based on surveys of journalists, policy-makers, donors and other experts in the field, instead of being based on an impact index associated with substantive data.

DEFINING CHINESE THINK TANKS

The history of think tanks globally goes back nearly a century, but no single definition has been applied to scholarly research. Although some view these institutions as “independent, non-profit organizations composed of individuals concerned with a wide range of public policy issues” (Abelson 1996, p. 3), others find it more convenient to define them based on the criteria formulated by Kent Weaver and James McGann. Weaver suggested three categories for think tanks: universities without students; contract research organizations; and advocacy think tanks (1989, pp. 564-67), while McGann divided them into seven types: 1) academic diversified; 2) academic specialized; 3) contract/consulting; 4) advocacy; 5) policy enterprise; 6) literary agent/publishing house; and, 7) state-based (1995, p. 71).

Much of the literature on Chinese think tanks classifies them into three categories: 1) subordinate to the government (the Communist Party, government agencies and/or the military); 2) associated with the Chinese academies of sciences and/or social sciences; and, 3) located within a university. Some recent literature has included private think tanks as a fourth group, largely due to their increasing contribution to China’s economic and social policy.

Nevertheless, when think tanks are mentioned generically, the discussion often goes far beyond the categories above and could be extended to include various associations, forums, foundations and mass media (e.g. Xinhua News Agency). As a consequence, the number of Chinese think tanks varies greatly depending on the source, from over 200 in the SASS 2014 report to over 400 in McGann’s report, and 2,000, according to Think Tanks of the Great Powers (daguo zhiku), a monograph by Wang Huiyao and Miao Lv.

A NEW THING

Another key factor that adds to the complexity is the fact that think tanks did not exist in the traditional Chinese political system. While the Chinese expression for “think tanks” — zhikao or sixiang ku — is literally translated from English, another word, zhinang-tuan, is more often used to refer to a small group of policy advisors acting on behalf of decision-makers (the phrases muliao or zhinang refer to individual policy advisors). In the traditional Chinese political system, policy advisors would play a similar role to that of think tanks today in assisting policy-making, but they did so as government officials, because no outsiders were involved in the policy-making process.

Precisely rooted in such a tradition, it seems fair to argue that the policy-making process in China is still largely influenced by the prominent policy advisors (zhinang) rather than the policy research institutions known as “think tanks.” This can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, key policy advisors enjoy exceptional advantages in assisting the top leadership to formulate policy strategies; on the other hand, the significance of a given think tank is not necessarily linked to its bureaucratic association, but rather has to do with the prominence of key individuals within the institutions.

CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE

Among policy advisors, Wang Huning can be cited as a typical example. Before formally becoming President Jiang Zemin’s policy advisor in 1995, Wang was a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. As the No.1 policy advisor to the top leadership, Wang not only made essential
The past three decades have witnessed the rapid development of think tanks in China, and the number has grown from a few dozen official institutions in the 1980s to 429 private and government-sponsored ‘think tanks’ in 2014, making the country the second-largest host of think tanks in the world after the United States, which has 1,830 contributions to Jiang’s “Three Representatives Theory,” but also helped draft the “Theory of Scientific Development” under President Hu Jintao from 2002. After Xi Jinping assumed leadership in 2012, Wang was promoted to be a member of the CCP Politburo — the most important decision-making body within the Communist Party. This is already an unusual experience for a policy advisor, but would have been impossible for a think tank researcher, not least because the latter would not be a government official.

Looking at the influence of Chinese think tanks, there seems to be a consensus in scholarly discussions that the “governmental think tanks” enjoy the most influence due to their access to classified information and the special channels they have to submit analysis. Think tanks within CAS and various universities are weaker, precisely because they are outside the centers of policy-making, and also because their research is more academic in orientation. The least influential groups are the private think tanks, which face both financial constraints and a lack of specific channels through which to provide policy advice.

That said, it is worth mentioning that key individuals within an institute can often matter more than bureaucratic affiliation. The Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), for instance, was ranked 64th among the top 100 non-US think tanks worldwide by the McGann 2014 Report, but it was missing from the HRCG’s report on the impact of Chinese think tanks. If the HRCG’s report accurately reflects impact, then we can assume that one of the key reasons SIIS had such a high international profile was not purely the impressive profile of its director, Yang Jiemian, but also that his brother, Yang Jiechi, has been China’s foreign minister since 2007.

Another example is the Institute of Modern International Relations (IMIR) at Tsinghua University. Established in 1997, IMIR is one of the newest institutes in international studies — by way of comparison, the School of International Studies (SIS) at Peking University was founded in 1960. In the HRCG’s Impact Report, IMIR was listed as one of the five most influential university think tanks, while SIS was ignored completely. If we were to believe the accuracy of the impact assessment by HRCG, a sensible assumption would be that two key figures, Prof. Yan Xuetong and Prof. Liu Jiangyong, who both used to work for the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations under the Ministry of National Security, helped boost the impact of IMIR.

To be fair, Chinese think tanks have gained some international recognition, despite their brief history and political constraints. The 2014 McGann Report listed three Chinese think tanks among the top 50 worldwide (excluding the US): the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (16th), the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (28th), and the China Institute of International Studies (33th), the latter of which is under the Foreign Ministry.

In terms of the performance, however, China’s think tanks didn’t fare as well as those from the UK, which has a total of 287 think tanks — the third highest number in the world. The UK had nine think tanks within the top 50. Germany, with 194 think tanks, the fourth highest in the world, had seven of its think tanks listed among the top 50 in the world.

THINK TANK CHALLENGES IN CHINA
There are three major challenges facing the official Chinese think tanks in their effort to produce high-quality policy research: financial dependence on the government; political constraints associated with the research; and the lack of competition. It is essential for think tanks to remain independent if they wish to produce unbiased policy research. But since the official think
tanks in China rely largely on government financial support, the impartiality of their research is often in question.

In addition to financial checks, the Chinese think tanks have also encountered political restrictions, especially when dealing with sensitive issues relating to China’s political system and/or foreign policy strategies. In June 2014, an official from the Central Disciplinary Inspection Committee, Zhang Yingwei, accused CASS of having been “penetrated by foreign forces.” The accusation triggered a lot of confusion and debate within Chinese academic circles, and could be potentially counter-productive for Chinese think tanks trying to promote their profile internationally.

The final challenge is a lack of competition in policy research, which has so far allowed official think tanks to play a dominant role. There is a certain level of competition among official think tanks, but the shared constraints have undermined their performance substantially. If the Chinese government wants to see a more vigorous and prosperous environment for policy research, it has to offer more room for private think tanks to develop, and place more trust in them as well.

CONCLUSIONS
China’s leadership has liberalized policy-making considerably over the past 30 years, which has allowed a greater role to be played by official Chinese think tanks; this has also encouraged private think tanks to engage in policy research. It is encouraging to see that China has the second largest number of think tanks worldwide, despite their recent origins, and to see at least a few of them ranked among the top 50 non-US think tanks. However, compared with their foreign counterparts, Chinese think tanks perform less impressively due to the constraints they face.

Official Chinese government think tanks are the largest group, but they are the least independent, both financially and politically. University think tanks have greater potential to produce more in-depth theoretical analysis that could underpin China’s policy strategies, but it is more difficult for them to find proper channels and opportunities to reach the top leadership with their thinking. Moreover, their research is often viewed as too academic for policy making. The smallest group is made up of private think tanks, which are weak financially and in their ability to influence the policy process. However, since they are independent from government financial restraints, they should be in a better position to produce impartial research, provided they can also be free from political constraints. What remains to be seen is whether the Chinese government will give them greater trust.

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REFERENCES