

# A HUNDRED THINK TANKS BLOOM IN CHINA

## ABOUT

The Chinese have long been obsessed with strategic culture, power balances and geopolitical shifts. Academic institutions, think-tanks, journals and web-based debates are growing in number and quality, giving China's foreign policy breadth and depth.

*China Analysis* introduces European audiences to these debates inside China's expert and think-tank world and helps the European policy community understand how China's leadership thinks about domestic and foreign policy issues. While freedom of expression and information remain restricted in China's media, these published sources and debates provide an important way of understanding emerging trends within China.

Each issue of *China Analysis* focuses on a specific theme and draws mainly on Chinese mainland sources. However, it also monitors content in Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which occasionally include news and analysis that is not published in the mainland and reflects the diversity of Chinese thinking.

### Introduction

by François Godement

A red thread runs through the history of Chinese thought, dividing “state intellectuals”, as the noted scholar Merle Goldman called them, from more independent thinkers – whether they subscribed to the Taoist invocation of the individual being, or to the compelling obligations of the Legalist school, which bound the supreme ruler as much as his subjects. Throughout Chinese history, the state – and, today, the Party – has taken varying approaches to these three types of thinkers, approaches again well described by Merle Goldman as phases of “freeze” and “thaw”.<sup>1</sup> This divide helps to understand the topic explored in this issue of *China Analysis*, and sheds some light on the apparent contradiction at its core: China, which is right now repressing lawyers and activists and promulgating a harsh law on NGOs, is at the same time pursuing the development of think tanks, including nominally non-governmental institutions, and is even having a debate about their role.

At the root of the Party's current approach is a recognition that think tanks – or state intellectuals – perform a dual function in China. In a state without a public court of opinion, think tanks provide rulers with views that are meant to be informed and rational, or in other words, moderate: the function of the “prince's adviser” (conseiller du prince), as the French thinker Raymond Aron called

<sup>1</sup> Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

it. The other function, which coincides more broadly with “soft power” as Chinese officialdom sees it, is to broadcast Chinese views of the world.

Our exploration seems to indicate that at the moment, there is perhaps a shortage of those capable of performing the first function, and a surfeit of those ready to fulfil the second. On the “prince’s adviser” function, several authors criticise the lack of independent thinking among Chinese think tanks. From the think tank located at the heart of state power, a wish is expressed for fewer, but better, think tankers. A well-known think tanker based overseas complains that there are not enough independent thinkers. However, this should not be mistaken for a call for more critical thinking or more political participation: the very same think tanker has just publicly denounced “lawyers (who) have lost their status by stirring up social activism.”<sup>2</sup>

The moral – and very practical – dilemma is, of course, not unique to China. He who pays the piper tends to call the tune, which means that state-funded think tanks are likely to produce ideas acceptable to the state. In this regard, it is worth noting that Xi Jinping’s China is also encouraging the development of privately funded think tanks. A striking example of this kind of think tank already existed before 2012: the Unirule Institute of Economics published, for example, some of the most interesting studies on the structure of the Chinese state economy. Unhappily, one gets the sense that newer outfits are much less likely to come up with independent thinking; rather, they often seem to simply jump on the latest bandwagon. The numerous centres and conferences related to the One Belt, One Road Initiative are a case in point.

Nonetheless, the Chinese Party-state is serious about filling the space between power and populace, between China and international opinion. It wants to be kept abreast of all developments, and it is ready to pay to achieve this. It understands the role that think tanks fulfil as service providers influencing the views of everyone – from the leaders to the led. It is a safe bet to say that there are more think tankers in Beijing and other centres in China than there are in any other country save the United States. In this area, too, a long-term competition is under way.

<sup>2</sup> Zheng Yongnian cited in Guo Kai and Wu Yan, “Lawyers should not break law by stirring up trouble”, China Daily, 8 August 2016, available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-08/08/content\\_26379949.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-08/08/content_26379949.htm).

## Independence and influence: The future of Chinese think tanks

Silvia Menegazzi

A Chinese government plan to construct think tanks with “Chinese characteristics” has sparked intense debate among the country’s academics. The plan suggests that the political elites intend to gain greater control of this key sector of policymaking, which could mean that think tanks become more inclined to serve the interests of the Party in the coming years.<sup>3</sup>

In October 2014, speaking in front of a group tasked with developing guidelines for policy reform, President Xi Jinping said that China’s think tanks had developed rapidly in recent decades, and that they now played a leading role in shaping the country’s social development and economic reform programme.<sup>4</sup> However, the president noted that Chinese think tanks still lack a substantial “international reputation” (国际知名度, *guoji zhimingdu*) or significant “influence” (影响力, *yingxiangli*). Xi said that “constructing think tanks with Chinese characteristics is a major task in order to develop scientific decision-making, democratic decision-making, China’s national governance, and modernisation, as well as to strengthen China’s soft power”.<sup>5</sup> After this meeting, a plan to institutionalise and develop the think tank sector in China was drafted.

On 1 January 2015, the Communist Party (CCP) General Office and the State Council General Office released a document setting out the guiding ideology, basic principles, and general objectives for the development of a new kind of Chinese think tank – the “Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” (hereafter, the Opinion). According to the document, think tanks should be oriented towards long-term research projects, information gathering, and consultancy services. Their staff should possess a high level of expertise and they should build up influence. They should have a well-developed organisational structure and the capacity to generate sustainable funding. They should be able to develop multi-level academic exchanges at home as well as internationally.

3 “Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” (关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见, *Guanyu jiaqiang Zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe de yijian*), State Council General Office, 1 January 2015 (hereafter, “Opinion”, State Council General Office).

4 Xi was speaking at the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms, which was established in December 2013.

5 “Why did Xi Jinping emphasise the idea of building think tanks with Chinese characteristics?” (习近平为何特别强调新型智库建设?), *Xi Jinping weihe tebie qiangdiao xinxing zhiku jianshe*?, *People’s Daily*, 29 October 2014, available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1029/c148980-25928251.html>.

The Opinion notes the important role that policy research plays in the government’s decision-making process, and recognises the shortage of institutionalised arrangements for consulting leading personalities and talents in policymaking. Moreover, the Opinion acknowledges that think tanks play “an irreplaceable role in international relations”, pointing out that they are very important to China’s soft power.<sup>6</sup>

### A Chinese theory of China

The publication of the Opinion feeds into an ongoing debate about the influence of public intellectuals, academics, and policy experts on China’s decision-making process. In response, many academics have spoken out about the current state of the Chinese intelligentsia. Zheng Yongnian, for example, who heads the East Asia Institute at the University of Singapore and who is particularly active in the Chinese intellectual debate, believes that the major problem of Chinese think tanks is not that they are backward compared to those in the United States or Europe, but a broader issue: the Chinese intelligentsia does not have a systematic critical viewpoint on the country’s political and economic development.<sup>7</sup> Intellectuals and academics tend to rely excessively on Western ideas, which prevents them from developing long-term solutions appropriate for the Chinese context.

Despite China’s improved economic performance over the last 30 years, Zheng argues that advice on policy implementation from experts and academics in China remains extremely limited. For instance, he says that Chinese economists have failed to provide systematic solutions to China’s economic difficulties. Zheng believes that experts in China have made only superficial contributions to Xi Jinping’s recent “supply-side” economic restructuring (供给侧改革, *gongji ce gaige*), as they did in the 2000s with the theory of the “Three Represents” (三个代表, *sange daibiao*).<sup>8</sup> Zheng argues that reform can only succeed if experts begin to recognise the need for China to establish its own supply-side economics, free from the influence of Western theories.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, his critics say that Zheng Yongnian himself has been too influenced by Western ideas, and that he has become today what Zhen Peng calls an “invisible nationalist” (隐形民族主义者, *yinxing minzuzhuyizhe*).<sup>10</sup> Zhen says

6 “Opinion”, State Council General Office.

7 Zheng Yongnian, “China has entered an era of intellectual shortage” (中国已经进入一个知识的短缺时代, *Zhongguo yijing jinru yige zhishi duanque de shidai*), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 29 January 2016, available at [http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq\\_0126/1183\\_2.html](http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq_0126/1183_2.html) (hereafter, Zheng, “China has entered an era of intellectual shortage”). Zheng Yongnian is the director of the East Asia Institute at the University of Singapore.

8 The “Three Represents” was a theory put forward by President Jiang Zemin in 2000: Jiang said the CPC was to represent “the development trend of China’s advanced productive forces, the orientation of China’s advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.” See “Three Represents”, *News of the Communist Party of China*, 23 June 2006, available at <http://english.cpc.people.com.cn/66739/4521344.html>.

9 Zheng, “China has entered an era of intellectual shortage”.

10 Zhen Peng, “Criticising the false rationalism of Zheng Yongnian”, (批评郑永年的伪理性主义, *piping Zheng Yongnian de wei lixingzhuyi*), *Gongshiwang*, 11 March 2016, available at [http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq\\_0311/2363.html](http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq_0311/2363.html) (hereafter, Zhen, “Criticising the false rationalism of Zheng Yongnian”). Zhen Peng is a researcher at Chinese Shandong University.

that, living overseas, Zheng Yongnian has become a simple “trumpeter” (吹鼓手, *chuigushou*) (from abroad), and this is why his ideas are often not in line with those of the Chinese government.<sup>11</sup> Zhen argues that times are changing, and that left-wing forces in China should “raise their heads”.<sup>12</sup>

### Independence and influence

Zheng Yongnian criticises the lack of independence from the government of think tanks in particular and Chinese public intellectuals in general (公共知识分子, *gonggong zhishifenzi*), on the grounds that this means that they cannot be objective in formulating policy and providing advice. For Zheng, impartiality and independence are universal standards (普适性的标准, *pushixingde biaoazhun*) that are more important than influence.<sup>13</sup>

Others argue that public intellectuals and experts in China are influential, whether they are independent or not. Nie Huihua identified what he sees as mistakes in Zheng’s judgement of Chinese think tanks. Nie says that Zheng is wrong to think that intellectual circles have a vital role in Chinese decision-making; rather, they are the “icing on the cake” (锦上添花的功能, *jinshangtianhua de gongneng*) in policymaking and policy implementation. However, this is changing, and Nie complains that Zheng Yongnian has “remained silent about major transformations while talking only about minor ones” (避重就轻, *bizhongjiuqing*). For example, although it is not easy to candidly discuss sensitive topics in China, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has left its mark on numerous recent policies, such as the One Belt, One Road infrastructure initiative, and the supply-side plan. It has discussed and criticised these policies without holding back, and has proposed new ideas for their implementation.<sup>14</sup>

The question of the “Chinese-ness” of think tanks and their relationship with the party-state is increasingly important as reforms make these think tanks more visible and active at the international level. Chinese scholars believe that international experience will help think tanks to develop and become more powerful actors in the decision-making process. But at the same time, they recognise that having a good relationship with the government is a fundamental

precondition if think tanks are to be allowed to continue their activities.<sup>15</sup> The Opinion is premised on maintaining this delicate balance between international exposure and political control of think tanks, so they can become central tools in China’s domestic governance and soft power abroad. This will make implementing the Opinion all the more complicated. The extent to which think tanks will be able to provide systematic, long-term research and policy advice to China’s leaders will depend to a large extent on how they balance their proximity to government with the new opportunities produced by their international experiences.

<sup>11</sup> Zhen, “Criticising the false rationalism of Zheng Yongnian”.

<sup>12</sup> See Zheng Yongnian, “The supply-side reforms needed by entrepreneurs” (企业家需要什么样的供给侧改革, *Qiyehuajia shuyao shenmeyang de gongjicegaige*), *Ifeng.com*, 2 March 2016, available at [http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160302/47655767\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160302/47655767_0.shtml).

<sup>13</sup> “Zheng Yongnian: I am very pessimistic about so-called Chinese think tanks” (郑永年: 我对中国所谓的智库很悲观, *Zheng Yongnian: Wo dui Zhongguo suoyou de zhiku hen beiguan*), *Gongshiwang*, 29 January 2016, available at [http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/ggqz\\_0129/1332\\_2.html](http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/ggqz_0129/1332_2.html).

<sup>14</sup> Nie Huihua, “Mr. Zheng Yongnian, it’s easy to talk but getting things done is another matter” (郑永年先生站着说话不腰疼, *Zheng Yongnian Xiansheng zhenzheshuohuabuay-aoteng*), *Gongshiwang*, 29 January 2016, available at [http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq\\_0129/1317.html](http://www.21ccom.net/html/2016/gmq_0129/1317.html). Nie Huihua is an economist at Renmin University of China.

<sup>15</sup> Huang Renwei and Fu Yong, “To Build New Type of Think Tanks by Learning from International Experience” (中国新型智库建设与国际经验借鉴, *Zhongguo xinxing zhiku jianshi yu guoji jingyan jiejian*), *Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu*, No. 6, 2015, pp. 3-11. Huang Renwei and Fu Yong are both researchers at the Shanghai Academy of Social Science.

## China's new think tank diplomacy

Pascal Abb

Foreign policy has long been an important research area for China's think tank sector, and the Central Committee's 2015 plan to build "think tanks with Chinese characteristics" further stresses the national importance of Chinese foreign policy think tanks (FPTTs).<sup>16</sup> According to the directive, the emergence of "unprecedentedly complex and difficult global issues" means that the government needs better foreign policy advice, and FPTTs are described as "important carriers of national soft power" that are expected to conduct public diplomacy and other exchanges in order to "strengthen China's international influence and the power of its discourse".

As a result, Chinese FPTTs are quickly expanding their portfolio of activities, their international networks, and their public profiles. This article will examine the ways in which Chinese think tankers and other experts have taken on these new roles, their ideas about how to perform these roles, and their opinions on the overall progress of China's FPTTs. Although the current think tank boom has been met with widespread enthusiasm, it is important to note that think tank development is still shaped by China's authoritarian political environment. In order to avoid frustration later, their international partners should maintain a realistic view of the opportunities and constraints faced by Chinese FPTTs.

### Quality versus quantity

In Chinese debates about the future of the country's FPTT sector, commentators agree that China's rapid emergence as a pivotal global actor has placed much greater demands on these institutes. In the past, Chinese diplomats have often had to hash out positions and conduct negotiations on issues like climate change without much intellectual support – think tanks should now become a kind of "early warning system" and provide more timely advice to officials.

However, as shown in a recent debate in a prominent Chinese international relations journal, think tankers are split on how best to achieve this. Some, like Zhu Feng, call for FPTTs to have greater independence and more control over their own research agendas so as to boost creativity and avoid groupthink.<sup>17</sup> According to the author, "Chinese FPTTs must position themselves as an independent 'social force' (社会性的力量, *shehuixing de lilian*) in order to be able to provide different options and different voices on international issues", and this would ultimately benefit the government. At present, "too many think tanks only

work to obtain leaders' endorsements (批示, *pishi*) and explain policies [...] but the real value of think tanks is to provide diverse options for how to respond to serious and complicated international issues".<sup>18</sup> This points to the basic contradiction faced by state-dependent institutions in an authoritarian state: on the one hand, they are expected to improve policy outcomes, but on the other, they are often restricted to legitimising and interpreting decisions that have already been made.

Others put forward a more conservative vision. Lin Limin argues that, because of its size, China has too many experts, which means that high-level decision makers are flooded by competing policy suggestions.<sup>19</sup> In his view, the solution is to focus on quality over quantity, by fostering an "elite of the elite", who would presumably be given privileged access to decision makers. Zhao Minghao also identifies a mismatch within China's "marketplace of ideas", but sees the main problem as being on the supply side: think tanks should develop a better "policy feeling" and greater sensitivity

"For Zhu Feng, 'too many think tanks only work to obtain leaders' endorsements'"

towards political demands by "analysing leaders' speeches and other key materials to find out what is troubling policymakers, and focus their research accordingly".<sup>20</sup>

This exchange can be seen as a snapshot of a much broader debate on China's future: whether the country should persist with a top-down, state-centric approach, or whether it should open up greater space for civil society.

### Internationalisation and "telling the China story"

Even without fundamental political and social liberalisation, however, Chinese FPTTs have already taken on many new roles and activities, especially in terms of international outreach. In the coming years, these will be showcased as China embarks on its first project of truly global scope: the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) infrastructure initiative, intended to upgrade transport links across Eurasia.

Think tanks are closely involved in this project. They are expected to provide know-how for its realisation and to carry out strategic coordination with international partners. According to Shi Yulong, the issues surrounding OBOR are "far more complicated and difficult than drawing up national development strategies and policies, which opens a vast space for think tanks to display their unique capabilities".<sup>21</sup>

18 A "pishi" is basically an official's endorsement of an internal policy suggestion, which is considered a great distinction and mark of influence for the author.

19 Lin Limin, "Building Chinese think tanks: How to avoid overcrowding?" (中国智库建设: 如何避免“千智万库”挤独木桥, *Zhongguo zhiku jianshe: ruhe bimin 'qian zhi wan ku' jidu muqiao?*), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, April 2016. Lin Limin is a research professor at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

20 Zhao Minghao, "The building of FPTTs must turn towards the key point" (国际问题智库建设需扭住关键环节, *guoji wenti zhiku jianshe xu niuzhu guanjian huanjie*), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, April 2016. Zhao Minghao is a researcher at the Contemporary World Studies Center of the International Department of the Central Committee.

21 Shi Yulong, "Using think tanks to support and promote the building of 'One Belt, One Road'" (以智库为支撑推进“一带一路”建设, *yi zhiku wei zhicheng tuijin 'yi dai yi lu' jianshe*), *China Development Observation*, January 2016 (hereafter, Shi, "Using think tanks to support and promote the building of 'One Belt, One Road'"). Shi Yulong is direc-

16 "Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics" (关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见, *Guanyu jiaqiang Zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe de yijian*), State Council General Office, 1 January 2015.

17 Zhu Feng, "Problems to be pondered and tackled in the development of Foreign Policy Think Tanks" (国际问题研究智库发展中需要思考和解决的问题, *Guoji wenti yanjiu zhiku fazhan zhong xuyao sikao he jiejie de wenti*), *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, April 2016. Zhu Feng is a professor of International Relations at Nanjing University.

They could use this opportunity to “tell a good China story” (讲好中国故事, *jiang hao zhongguo gushi*), a task that Xi Jinping has set as part of the project to building China’s image internationally. To fulfil this task, think tanks are expected to explain the Chinese development model to foreign audiences who would like to emulate it. They are expected to facilitate strategic coordination with other major investment initiatives, provide advice and risk assessments on specific projects, and keep the Chinese government informed about developments in the norms and rules underlying globalisation. Apart from providing research findings to the government, think tanks should also “build a strong social foundation for the project” by engaging foreign partners in public diplomacy, carrying out regular exchanges with them, and conducting joint studies about the situation in countries that may be involved in the initiative, which the government can then use to make funding decisions. Shi believes that internationalisation should be a top priority for think tanks, since they will have to become more internationalised if they are to carry out their OBOR-related tasks and play their role on the world stage.<sup>22</sup>

With their strong capabilities in area studies, FPTTs are naturally suited to this project, and many of them have already joined networks like the “OBOR think tank cooperation alliance” (一带一路智库合作联盟, *yidaiyilu zhiku hezuo lianmeng*) and the RDI platform (Research and Development International) (蓝迪国际智库平台, *landi guoji zhiku pingtai*). These initiatives are designed to facilitate international exchanges and provide consultation to Chinese enterprises. European institutes will also be involved: the “16+1” group, made up of China and 15 Central and Eastern European countries, already includes a mechanism for regular think tank meetings, and the question of how to coordinate OBOR with European Union initiatives will likely feature prominently in consultations with West European counterparts.

A recent essay by Wang Lili, one of China’s leading experts on public diplomacy, outlines the ideal future role of FPTTs in creating international ties beyond traditional state-to-state interactions.<sup>23</sup> According to Wang, China’s economic rise has outpaced the development of its intellectual resources, and although China has a large number of think tanks, these organisations have little global influence compared to their Western counterparts. Wang believes that this is a major problem: think tanks are “the intellectual and informational backbone of the entire public diplomacy system”, and the global “battle of ideas” cannot be won without institutes that act as opinion leaders and agenda setters.

Wang suggests a more comprehensive programme of Track II exchanges between think tanks: Chinese institutes should be encouraged to develop new ideas, “especially on sensitive

tor of the territorial development and regional economic research institute of the NDRC’s Academy of Macroeconomic Research.

<sup>22</sup> Shi, “Using think tanks to support and promote the building of ‘One Belt, One Road’”.

<sup>23</sup> Wang Lili, “Building Chinese think tanks and expanding public diplomacy” (中国智库建设与公共外交拓展, *zhongguo zhiku jianshe yu gonggong waijiao tuozhan*), *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, March 2013 (hereafter, Wang, “Building Chinese think tanks”). Wang Lili is the deputy director of the National Academy of Development and Strategy at Renmin University of China.

security issues”, and should be able to pitch them directly to their foreign counterparts, testing them for “feasibility and acceptability” before they are officially proposed to the Chinese authorities. Finally, the author makes a number of suggestions to improve the think tank sphere in general. She says that more “specialised public diplomacy think tanks” should be set up, that the government should give tax incentives to encourage the development of non-governmental institutes, and the global “brand awareness” of Chinese institutes should be increased through more intense international cooperation and exchanges.<sup>24</sup>

Some of these ideas are already being put into practice. Since 2009, the Charhar Society (察哈尔学会, *chaha'er xuehui*), a non-governmental organisation, has emerged as China’s most prominent public diplomacy think tank. According to its founder, Han Fangming, “in a globalised civil society with intensifying network communication, strengthening diplomacy towards foreign public audiences, finding out their views, and giving them a better understanding of China will often yield results that interstate diplomacy cannot achieve”.<sup>25</sup>

"think tanks are expected to explain the Chinese development model to foreign audiences who would like to emulate it "

Likewise, governmental think tanks have found it hard to carry out “heart-to-heart dialogues and emotional exchanges”, whereas private initiatives like

the Charhar Society have had an easier time in getting their messages heard and accepted. By making use of their networks, they have been able to reach civil society actors that the government could not. According to Han, this is only possible because they are less constrained by official rules, and more attuned to the local customs of foreign partners. The Charhar Society may become a model for think tank activities beyond the state sector, since its operations are financed by donations, mostly from its founder and from businesses. It is also more of a platform than a bricks-and-mortar institute, keeping only a small administrative staff and relying on a pool of “fellows” employed at traditional institutes.

### Political control and domestic function of FPTTs

China is currently in the throes of “think tank fever”, but, as Chinese experts never tire of pointing out, its FPTT sector still faces substantial challenges. Some are transient and can be overcome through a scheme to develop the sector, but others are structural and stem ultimately from China’s political system – although this point is rarely acknowledged in public. Most notably, the ideological pressure on intellectuals has risen sharply under Xi Jinping,

<sup>24</sup> Wang, “Building Chinese think tanks”.

<sup>25</sup> Han Fangming, “China’s public diplomacy strategy must attach importance to the role of non-governmental think tanks” (中国公共外交战略应重视民间智库作用, *Zhongguo gonggong waijiao zhanlüe ying zhongshi minjian zhiku zuoyong*), *Southern Weekly*, 16 November 2011. Han Fangming is a businessman and member of the People’s Political Consultative Conference.

and repeated warnings not to spread “Western values” or “improperly discuss central government policies” have had a chilling effect on policy discourse in China.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, although FPTTs have now established a much larger presence in the media, their role in public discourse is often restricted. Because of the need to provide so-called “public opinion guidance” (舆论引导, *yulun yindao*), especially on sensitive foreign policy issues, FPTT statements are often propagandistic in nature and focused on endorsing or interpreting government policies, rather than delivering new ideas or making genuinely critical assessments. Since the push to build “new-type think tanks” will be overseen by the National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (NPOPSS), a division of the Propaganda Department, this is unlikely to change.

Finally, the recent expansion of the government’s anti-corruption campaign has also had an impact on the work of Chinese scholars: new budgetary restrictions, red tape, and shrinking “grey areas” have complicated international exchange activities. In 2016, a new internal regulation limited overseas travel for Chinese academics to a maximum length of five days per country. This puts internationalisation under threat, and makes serious field research practically impossible.

Western scholars and policymakers must be aware of these constraints and the reasons behind them when engaging with Chinese FPTTs. However, despite the difficult political environment, exchanges should be kept up – should the winds shift again, China’s think tanks may be able to realise their new roles much more fully, and investments in partnerships now could bear even greater fruit in the future.

## How viable are private Chinese think tanks?

Angela Stanzel and Abigael Vasselier

Since 2013, China’s President Xi Jinping has been calling for the establishment of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics (中国特色新型智库, *zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku*). The overall goal of this initiative is to improve the consulting mechanisms available to decision makers and to increase China’s soft power. To help achieve this, the Central Committee published its “Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” in January 2015. The document’s main focus is on large state-run think tanks: it proposed a plan to set up 50 to 100 more of these.<sup>27</sup> But as well as governmental and university think tanks, it calls for the development of “civilian think tanks” (民间智库, *minjian zhiku*), in particular linked to big private companies and media groups. The expression “civilian think tanks” obscures major differences between these organisations, both in terms of their relationship to the government, and ultimately their capacity to influence policymaking.<sup>28</sup>

So many new Chinese think tanks are emerging so quickly that it seems impossible to keep track, to distinguish governmental from non-governmental organisations, or to distinguish research from consultancy institutions. The new top-down approach to transforming think tanks, as well as the proliferation of institutions, brings various challenges for Chinese think tanks, (both old and new). These challenges range from finding sufficient funding to establishing expertise and remaining independent from the state. As the following debate shows, these issues are a particular concern for non-governmental think tanks – and for some are even a matter of survival.

### The emergence of media think tanks

Wang Yan says that the Chinese leadership and official media’s focus on the development of think tanks has caused a “Think Tank Spring” (智库春天, *zhikun chuntian*). She quotes an expert who says that the number of Chinese think tanks could double within a year. She describes the enthusiasm as that of a crowd following the latest fashion trend (赶时髦, *ganshimao*), scrambling to be first (争先恐后, *zhengxiankonghou*), and thoroughly confused (一哄而上, *yi hong er shang*). As a result, some scholars are concerned that this “Spring” will develop into a(nother) “Great Leap Forward” (大跃进, *da yuejin*): a movement with no clear direction or organisation.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Nectar Gan, “China’s President Xi Jinping warns Communist Party schools against ‘Western capitalist’ values”, South China Morning Post, 1 May 2016, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1940396/chinas-president-xi-jinping-warns-communist-party>.

<sup>27</sup> “Opinion on strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” (关于加强中国特色新型智库建设的意见, *Guanyu jiaqiang Zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe de yijian*), State Council General Office, 1 January 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Wang Yan, “Mainland China’s new think tank boom” (大陆新兴智库热潮, *Dalu xinxing zhiku rechao*), *Phoenix Weekly*, 7 June 2015 (hereafter, Wang, “Mainland China’s new think tank boom”). Wang Yan is a journalist at *Phoenix Weekly*.

<sup>29</sup> Wang, “Mainland China’s new think tank boom”.

Wang Yan says that the fastest growing cohort is non-governmental think tanks, as opposed to organisations directly supervised by the party-state (such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Central Party School, and the Development Research Centre of the State Council). The diverse landscape of non-governmental think tanks ranges from organisations established by the media sector, generally by the major publicly-owned outlets, to public policy think tanks such as the Centre for China and Globalization (中国与全球化智库, *zhongguo yu quanqiu hua zhiku*). This was founded in 2008 by scholars trained abroad, and focuses on studying China's development in relation to globalisation. Wang also notes that an increasing number of think tanks are actually consulting firms on the US model, such as the Horizon Research Consultancy Group, which has specialised in market research on companies in China since 1992.<sup>30</sup>

Most media think tanks have only arrived on the scene in the past year or so. Gao Yang writes in *Time Weekly* that this new generation of think tanks appeared after the publication of the "Opinion" in January 2015 – just as the 2008 financial crisis triggered the creation of a number of non-university think tanks, which eventually became the mainstream Chinese think tanks.<sup>31</sup> Media think tanks have mainly been created by the major public media outlets, such as the Liao Wang Institution (瞭望智库, *liaowang zhiku*), which was founded by Xinhua news agency, and the People's Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Unit (人民网舆情分析室, *renmin wang yuqing fen xi shi*), affiliated with the online branch of People's Daily.

Gao stresses how active these organisations have been since their creation in 2015. They have succeeded in building on the existing networks and brands of their associated media outlets to develop their own influence. Often, they are already within the system, since – to take one example – Xinhua news agency has been providing advice and consultancy services to the government for years. Still, these organisations are in their infancy, and have some way to go before they are as influential as their longer-established counterparts. For instance, Gao notes that no media think tanks were among the top 15 of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences' "2015 report on the influential Chinese think tank".<sup>32</sup>

Gao says that most media think tanks are not profitable, or only barely, for the founding media outlets. His article discusses the difficulties facing new media think tanks, which struggle to survive financially, to establish themselves among the many well-established think tanks, and to carry out meaningful research.<sup>33</sup> Wang reports wider dissatisfaction among think tanks outside of the governmental system, because they lack funds and feel they are largely ignored by the government.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Wang, "Mainland China's new think tank boom".

<sup>31</sup> Gao Yang, "Why are new media becoming think tanks?" (新媒体为什么都在做智库?, *Xin meiti weishenme dou zuo zhiku?*), *Time Weekly*, February 2016 (hereafter, Gao, "Why are new media becoming think tanks?"). Gao Yang is a journalist at *Time Weekly*.

<sup>32</sup> Gao, "Why are new media becoming think tanks?"

<sup>33</sup> Gao, "Why are new media becoming think tanks?"

<sup>34</sup> Wang, "Mainland China's new think tank boom".

## The trade-off between influence and autonomy

Because of the haste with which they were established and the lack of funds available to them, a large number of the new institutions have neither the expertise nor the resources to produce scientific, objective, and independent policy research. Wang says that among the institutions linked to the government – she cites the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, attached to China's Ministry of State Security – there appears to be confusion about the content and direction of the new think tank policy. The question of think tanks' relationship with the government and their ability to influence policy remains highly opaque. Wang describes civilian think tanks as being both "open

"A large number of the new institutions have neither the expertise nor the resources to produce objective, and independent policy research"

and secretive" (公开而隐秘的群体, *gongkai er yinmi de qunti*).<sup>35</sup>

In line with Wang's assessment, Meng Ziyi, Ye Yu An, and Liu Jie Fei's article in *Financial Times China*

highlights the contradictions inherent in the new civilian think tanks. Yi Peng, director of the think tank Pangu (盘古, *Pangu*), expressed optimism about the development and influence of his own think tank in an interview with the *Financial Times* in September 2015. Pangu was established in 2014, and benefited from the favourable environment created for think tanks after the 18th Party Congress. It has produced large numbers of reports: two months after Pangu's launch, it had already published nine, dealing with topics in economics, finance, urbanisation, the internet, and other areas.<sup>36</sup>

Pangu presents itself as a success story – an example of a private entity that has managed to influence the Chinese media. For instance, on 18 April 2014, the People's Daily published Yi Peng's commentary on urbanisation on their webpage. Pangu might even have some influence in the government through unofficial communication channels such as academic committees. Yi says he believes it is a "responsibility to suggest good advice to the government" (经世致用, *jingshi zhiyong*). He thinks the most important challenge for think tanks is to provide content on topical and fashionable issues. In 2014, for example, Pangu published some 30 pieces on urbanisation. In 2015, their research focused on the One Belt, One Road (一带一路, *yi dai yi lu*, OBOR) infrastructure initiative and its impact on the regional economy. Pangu seems to be particularly effective in focusing on topics of current interest to the government, but its founder says that they have to be careful about this, since it can lead to excessive concentration on certain issues. Some 50 pieces related to OBOR were available on

<sup>35</sup> Wang, "Mainland China's new think tank boom".

<sup>36</sup> Meng Ziyi, Ye Yu An, Liu Jie Fei, "One Era, Two Think Tanks" (一个时代, 两个智库, *yige shidai, liangge zhiku*), *Financial Times China*, 23 September 2015 (hereafter, Meng, Ye, and Liu, "One Era, Two Think Tanks"). Meng Ziyi, Ye Yu An, and Liu Jie Fei are journalists at the *Financial Times China*.



Pangu's website between January and September 2015.<sup>37</sup> As with the numerous articles produced on the topic by most Chinese think tanks, there are questions about the originality of this research.

In contrast to Pangu's steady growth, the Financial Times' authors discuss another think tank, the Unirule Institute of Economics (天测经济院所, *tianzi jingji yuan suo*), which has encountered more difficulties since its foundation in 1993. One of Unirule's biggest challenges is simple financial survival. It depends on public funding and consultancy services to maintain its operations, and researchers have even had to contribute their own funds to keep it afloat. Unirule evolved from an independent non-government organisation to being affiliated to a commercial consulting firm. Since then, it has launched several fundraising campaigns, with some success: from 2010 to 2014, enterprises and private companies (such as Lenovo) showed increased interest in providing it with funds. However, its situation remains precarious – it has relocated eight times in the past 20 years, moving from Beijing city centre to the outskirts of the capital.<sup>38</sup>

Unirule's research focuses on macroeconomics, including public policy, reforms, business, law, and the constitutional system. Unirule also aims to research more neglected issues, such as inequality within Chinese society, which relates to human rights. One of the challenges that come with dependence on public funds is the struggle to stay independent, especially on such contentious issues. In 2009, Shen Hong (a founding member and executive director of Unirule) mentioned the principle of neutrality (中立原则, *zhongli yuanze*) in an interview with China News Service, explaining that the organisation's assessment of the implications of policies for the public interest should be neutral and not subject to any kind of influence.<sup>39</sup> While Pangu and Unirule at first seemed to have a similar status, Unirule's choice of topics seems to have cost it a lot. Still, Unirule's originality should not be overstated: its output remains close to the official line.

The Chinese government's creation of a favourable environment for think tanks has led to the flourishing of non-governmental think tanks. These new organisations face the same challenges and opportunities as think tanks anywhere else in the world: in terms of funding, independence, impact, and visibility. However, the constraints and limits upon them, especially the need to obtain government support, might make this new generation of think tanks short-lived.

37 Meng, Ye, and Liu, "One Era, Two Think Tanks".

38 Meng, Ye, and Liu, "One Era, Two Think Tanks".

39 Meng, Ye, and Liu, "One Era, Two Think Tanks".

## Politburo Study Sessions: A chance to influence Chinese leaders?

Kata Julianna Szabó

Expertise is a much sought-after commodity in Chinese decision-making circles. The Politburo is constantly in need of new information to help it to meet the domestic and international challenges of the day, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) values the tradition of learning from history.<sup>40</sup> In order to satisfy these strategic and traditional requirements, a unique system adapted to Chinese particularities was invented by the party: the Politburo's "collective study" mechanism (集体学习, *jiti xuexi*). Using this system, external expertise can be channelled into the Party in a manner that is institutionalised and controlled – and therefore risk-free for the party-state.

Intra-party study mechanisms have existed since the 1950s, but analysts usually date the establishment of the Politburo's collective study mechanism to 26 December 2002, when President Hu Jintao announced that party officials should strengthen their study skills.<sup>41</sup> Officials have done this by attending lectures on topical issues and discussing their relevance for policy. These study sessions are primarily seen as a platform for the dissemination of information, where experts from outside the CCP have the opportunity to share their ideas with the core of the Chinese leadership. But Chinese political analysts agree that the mechanism increasingly provides an opportunity for experts to set the policymaking agenda.<sup>42</sup>

### Evolution under Xi Jinping

The structure of the study sessions has changed little since the time of Hu Jintao; the main difference is where they are held.<sup>43</sup> In the past, study sessions were organised exclusively at Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the CCP and the central government. However, under Xi Jinping, a new trend has emerged: sessions are now sometimes

40 Liu Shaohua, "CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years" (中央政治局3年30次集体学习, *Zhongyong zhengzhiju 3 nian 30 ci jiti xuexi*), *Renminwang*, 4 February 2016, available at <http://www.chinaelections.org/article/851/240812.html> (hereafter, Liu, "CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years"). *Renminwang* is the website of People's Daily. Liu Shaohua is a journalist for the *People's Daily*.

41 Wang Lixin, "The structure of national learning abilities: from collective study sessions of the Politburo of the CPC Central Committee to individual research" (国家学习能力的建构——以中共中央政治局集体学习制度为个案的研究, *Guojia xuexi nengli de jiangou – yi zhonggong zhongying zhengzhiju jiti xuexi zhidu wei ge'an de yanjiu*), *Fudan Political Science Review (Fudan Zhengzhixue Pinlun)*, 2015, Vol. 1, available at <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-FDZZ201500005.htm> (hereafter, Wang, "The structure of national learning abilities"). Wang Lixin is a researcher at the Department of Law and Political Science of the Shanghai Normal University.

42 Liu, "CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years".

43 The study sessions, which last around two hours and take place every 40 days on average, are thoroughly prepared. The lecturers are carefully selected. They are experienced professionals, mostly professors or researchers, who have domestic and international credentials in the selected topic. A topic or policy area is deemed relevant if it covers an issue that is traditionally important to the CPC, such as Marxist ideology or peaceful development, or if the issue is of pressing global or domestic importance, such as the rule of law, fighting corruption, or the economic crisis (Wang, "The structure of national learning abilities").

conducted on-site at factories or innovation parks. This first took place on 30 September 2013, when the current Politburo held its ninth study session at the Zhongguancun Science Park to discuss innovation-driven development strategies.<sup>44</sup> The change in setting corresponds to a change in the function of the study sessions: they are now aimed at achieving practical benefits from studying and providing better networking opportunities, not just channelling information into the government.<sup>45</sup>

Sessions have covered a wide range of topics over the last three and a half years, including development reform, domestic and international affairs, defence strategy, and the governance of the party and the country. The three most important topics of discussion in the sessions held by the 18th Politburo have been “reform and opening” (改革开放, *gaige kaifang*), “peaceful development” (和平发展, *heping fazhan*), and comprehensive “judicial system reform” (司法体制改革, *sifa tizhi gaige*).<sup>46</sup> Beyond these broad topics, the 18th Politburo’s study sessions have been particularly focused on economic issues, including the reform of the financial system, the transformation of the economy, and the housing industry. Marxist ideology and Party affairs are also more important than they were in the study sessions held for the 16th and 17th Politburo. In particular, the sessions have dealt with the history of anti-corruption efforts and their implications for modern China, and the issue of the “Three Stricts and Three Steadies” (三严三实, *sanyan, sanshi*) – a set of principles to which Xi wants Party members to conform.<sup>47</sup>

Wang argues that the CPC has proved that it is capable of renewing itself and adapting to the latest economic, technological, and societal developments in China. However, he stresses that there is still room for improvement. He thinks that the study mechanism could be made more effective if officials drafted policy recommendations based on the advice of lecturers, and if greater publicity was given to session reports and other study material, including discussion topics.<sup>48</sup> Overall, Wang wants to make the output of the sessions clearer and more open.

44 Liu, “CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years”.

45 “The Political ‘Secrets’ of the Politburo’s Collective Study Mechanism” (政治局集体学习的“政治密码”, *Zhengzhiju jiti xuexide “zhengzhi mima”*), *Xinjingbao*, 1 February 2016, available at <http://www.chinaelections.com/article/851/240780.html> (hereafter, “The Political ‘Secrets’ of the Politburo’s Collective Study Mechanism”, *Xinjingbao*). *Xinjingbao* is a newspaper issued by the Beijing Propaganda Department of the CPC.

46 Liu, “CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years”.

47 The “Three Stricts and Three Steadies” comes from an abbreviation of the Chinese phrase 严以修身、严以用权、严以律己，又谋事要实、创业要实、做人要实 (*yanyi xiushen, yanyi yongquan, yanyi luji, you moushi yaoshi, chuangye yaoshi, zuoren yaoshi*), which translates as “Be strict in cultivating one’s moral character, preventing abuse of power and disciplining oneself. Be steady in planning matters, starting undertakings and conducting oneself.” Xi Jinping coined this expression on 9 March 2014. See also Liu, “CPC Politburo holds 30 study sessions in 3 years”; “Behind the scenes of the 92 CCP Politburo study sessions” (中共中央政治局92次集体学习幕后揭秘, *Zhonggong Zhongyang zhengzhiju 92 ci jiti xuexi muhou jiemu*), *Jinghua Shibao*, 3 June 2014, available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/06/03/c64387-25093927.html> (hereafter, “Behind the scenes of the 92 CCP Politburo study sessions”, *Jinghua Shibao*).

48 Wang, “The structure of national learning abilities”.

## The intellectuals with access to the top leadership

The 16th and 17th Politburo, according to Chinese sources, mostly relied on scholars from an academic background – but under Xi Jinping, a more diverse range of speakers have been invited to give lectures, including, central and local government officials. Business people, too, are playing a more important role: for instance, during the Politburo’s visit to Zhongguancun, the CEO of internet company Baidu, Robin Li, was one of the lecturers.<sup>49</sup> The number of government-linked academic institutions – previously the main source of lecturers for the sessions – has gone down; for instance, during the first two years of Xi’s term, only two researchers from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) were invited, and there were no lecturers from the Development Research Centre of the State Council in this period.<sup>50</sup> Under Hu Jintao, these two institutions sent more lecturers to the sessions than any other organisation.<sup>51</sup>

Mo shows that foreign-based scholars often seem to have more influence than Chinese scholars”

Wang is in favour of this change, and suggests making the study mechanism more open by broadening the selection of lecturers still further.<sup>52</sup> However, mainland experts and their Hong Kong counterparts disagree on the role and importance of intellectuals from outside the CCP. Mainland analysts mostly consider that external lecturers add value to the decision-making process. But Mo Li, a Hong Kong author, argues that intellectuals in China must stick to the official party line in order to protect their careers, which limits their ability to influence policy formation.<sup>53</sup> Following this idea, could study sessions also include foreign-based scholars – or more specifically, Chinese scholars based in other countries, as well as foreign scholars without Chinese roots? Using the examples of the Singapore-based Chinese scholar Zheng Yongnian and US political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who were recently invited to Beijing to meet Xi Jinping in person, Mo shows that foreign-based scholars often seem to have more influence than those of Chinese scholars. Nevertheless, Mo states that dialogue between non-Chinese scholars and Chinese leaders is often a sort of “chicken and duck talk”, since the gap between their philosophies is too wide for them to easily understand each other.<sup>54</sup>

49 “The Political ‘Secrets’ of the Politburo’s Collective Study Mechanism”, *Xinjingbao*.

50 The two lecturers were academicians Bu Xianqun and Fang Ning, who discussed previous anti-corruption campaigns. Bu Xianqun also spoke on the evolution of Chinese governance. “Who are the ‘professors’ invited for the Politburo study sessions?” (政治局集体学习都请哪些“老师”, *Zhengzhiju jiti xuexi dou qing naxie ‘laoshi’*), *Beijing Youth Daily*, 26 March 2015, available at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2015-03/26/c\\_127621872.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/legal/2015-03/26/c_127621872.htm).

51 “Behind the scenes of the 92 CCP Politburo study sessions”, *Jinghua Shibao*.

52 Wang, “The structure of national learning abilities”.

53 Mo Li, “Foreign Researchers Entering Zhongnanhai: Fukuyama and Zheng Yongnian about the Freedom and Independence of Academic Research” (當外賓學者進過中南海——從福山和鄭永年看獨立自由學術人格, *Dang waibin xuezhe jinguo Zhongnanhai – cong Fu Shan he Zheng Yongnian kan duli ziyou xueshu renge*), *Zhengming Magazine*, March 2016 (hereafter, Mo, “Foreign Researchers”). Mo Li is a journalist at *Zhengming Magazine*.

54 Mo, “Foreign Researchers”.

Since 2002, the collective study mechanism has evolved from an opportunity for theoretical discussions into a platform for policymaking and networking. The most remarkable change is the broader recruitment of speakers. While their level of impact remains unclear, intellectuals from diverse backgrounds are now able to speak to the core of China's leadership.

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ECFR would like to thank Justine Doody for her help in preparing the text for publication.

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This issue of China Analysis was produced with the support of Daimler-Fonds im Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, and Stiftung Mercator.

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© ECFR August 2016

ISBN: 978-1-910118-84-9

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 7th Floor, Kings Buildings, 16 Smith Square, London, SW1p 3HQ, United Kingdom

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