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The Rise of China's New-Type Think Tanks and the Internationalization of the State

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China's government is promoting new-type think tanks. These are often treated with scepticism by Western observers, due to their lack of independence from government and operation within a controlled intellectual environment. In this article, I heed recent calls by scholars to analyze think tanks, and how they develop, in their particular national political contexts. In China's case, this is a powerful one-party state undergoing internationalization: usually understood as increased foreign exchanges, engagement with international institutions, and rising influence globally. In contrast, I view internationalization as the reorganizing of China's state institutions and social structure in order to integrate with the global capitalist system. Through these processes, China's policymaking community is converging with a powerful transnational class aligned with global capitalist interests. Think tanks are implicated in these processes, and are therefore involved in shaping capitalist class dynamics within China. This is a cause for concern and debate among policy makers, regarding "civil" think tanks in particular, which are non-governmental and privately funded. Drawing on interviews with Chinese think-tank scholars, and examining policy debates on the development of think tanks in Chinese academic and policy journals, I argue that the sphere of think tanks has become an important site of political contestation concerning China's internationalization and the impact of class power on national policy making. Western observers, too often viewing independence as the key criterion for evaluating China's think tanks, miss the significance of these debates. The relations between think tanks and government institutions must be understood in this political context.

Keywords

China, think tanks, policy making, internationalization of the state, globalization, technocracy

Introduction

China's think tanks have experienced a boom in recent years. Their number, organizational types, sources of funds, and overall prominence in policy making have increased dramatically. The central government plans to identify and approve fifty to a hundred "new-type" think tanks by 2020, which will receive special recognition by the Party Central Committee. Their role is to serve the government by "promoting scientific and democratic decision making, promoting modernization of the country's governing system and ability, as well as strengthening China's soft power."¹ Many Western observers are sceptical of Chinese think tanks, which are typically criticized for their lack of independence from government and the fact that they operate within a controlled intellectual environment. The assumption underlying such statements is that think tanks which are more

“independent”—usually a reference to private funding—will better be able to represent the interests of society against the state. In this article, I advocate that China’s think tanks should be taken seriously on their own terms. I address the following questions: Why is the Chinese government promoting new-type think tanks? And how is their development, and the role they play in policy making, being shaped by the social and political context in which they are situated?

This is, in part, a response to the need—now well-recognized by think-tank scholars—to examine the national political cultures within which think tanks operate. This is not simply to address the fact of China being a one-party state, the usual starting point for analysis. Perhaps paradoxically, the national political context is intricately bound up with China’s integration into the global capitalist system. Thus, the central government’s promotion of think tanks forms part of the process by which China is becoming increasingly globally interconnected. Widely referred to by scholars as China’s “internationalization,” this is usually understood in terms of increased international exchanges, promoting China’s image on the world stage, strengthening China’s voice in global policy making, and engagement with foreign and international institutions.² I build on these accounts to examine the class implications of China’s internationalization. As China’s policy advisors merge with the transnational class of experts and technocrats by which the world capitalist order is governed and managed, powerful groups within China have emerged which are allied to international capital. Chinese academics and policy makers well recognize the impact of this on the development of think tanks, and the issue has become a prominent topic of debate. New-type think tanks have thus become, I argue, sites of political contestation concerning the influence of capital, both domestic and global, on China’s state apparatus. Their development, including their relationship to government institutions, is being shaped through these contested processes.

English-language scholarship on Chinese think tanks has burgeoned in recent years. Recent studies research think tanks in particular sectors,³ or the policy communities which emerged around certain prominent issues or debates.⁴ Other studies examine individual think tanks, documenting

their development over time, or key moments in their history.⁵ A growing body of English-language scholarship by Chinese scholars largely examines institutional issues, different organizational types and strategies, and the structural and personnel changes taking place as China's think tanks rise in stature and influence.⁶

Scholars of think tanks, sensitive to their Anglo-American origins while cognizant of their burgeoning internationally since the 1990s, recognize the need to analyze their particular national political and cultural contexts.⁷ To this end, recent work has deployed the theoretical perspectives of global assemblages,⁸ and knowledge regimes.⁹ This latter approach uses typologies to identify different types of regime, examining the organizational and institutional machinery by which ideas are produced, their changes over time, and how these relate to the respective national political economies more broadly. The approach has been applied to China to escape the Anglo-American bias that previously affected much of the scholarship.¹⁰ Silvia Menegazzi's account, in particular, combines a knowledge regimes perspective with Diane Stone's concept of the *global agora* to analyze how Chinese think tanks function in the sphere of transnational policy making.¹¹

The account presented here builds on existing scholarship in two ways. First, rather than providing an institutional or historical analysis, I heed Diane Stone's call to examine the "sources of power of these organizations, and how they garner and wield societal and policy influence."¹² Second, since I am concerned with the development of think tanks within the context of China's integration with global capitalism, I deploy the theoretical perspective of *the internationalization of the state*, drawing the analytical focus towards how China's new-type think tanks are implicated within emerging constellations of capitalist class power operating both within and beyond the nation-state.

While researching this article, I spent three years as a postdoctoral researcher at a leading think tank in Beijing, where I gained on-the-ground insights into the world of Chinese policy making. I held numerous discussions with think-tank scholars and policy makers, both within my

home institution, and in other prominent Chinese research institutions. These discussions included informal conversations with colleagues, as well as more formal, semi-structured interviews, which I conducted with scholars at university think tanks, and government research institutions. Some interviewees' names and institutions are withheld by mutual agreement to maintain confidentiality.

The article is organized into six parts. First, I discuss how China's new-type think tanks are often treated with scepticism in Anglo-American media. This derives from traditional assumptions about think tanks within liberal democracies, and simplified conceptions about policy making in China's "authoritarian" state. Challenging these underlying assumptions opens up space for more nuanced analysis of how Chinese think tanks operate. Second, I discuss how Chinese scholars and policy makers explain the purpose and role of new-type think tanks, and how traditional conceptions of think tanks are being re-evaluated for the Chinese context, in particular the notion of independence. Third, I introduce the theoretical concept of *the internationalization of the state*, focusing on issues pertaining to the restructuring of society and state institutions, and the transformation of class dynamics, as the nation-state accommodates to the requirements of the world capitalist economy. This provides important insights into the social and political environment in which China's think tanks operate. Fourth, I discuss how the field of Chinese policy making has been internationalized throughout the reform period, aligning with the requirements of global capitalism through both social and discursive transformations. Fifth, rather than focusing on how "internationalized" policy makers are promoting China's interests on the world stage, I instead examine how new-type think tanks are a means for policy makers to further integrate with the transnational technocratic class, the *global technocracy*, which oversees how the world economy is governed and managed. Think tanks are therefore implicated in the strengthening of capitalist class dynamics within China. Sixth, I examine how this issue is being debated within China, regarding civil think tanks in particular, which are privately funded. I argue that the sphere of think tanks is an important site of political contestation concerning China's internationalization and the impact of

class power on national policy making. In a brief conclusion, I raise a number of questions which warrant further study.

China's Think Tanks Conundrum

It appears paradoxical that China's central government is promoting think tanks while re-exerting ideological discipline within the Party, and within research institutes.¹³ This contradicts the principle of free and public exchange of ideas generally considered necessary for think tanks to flourish. Unsurprisingly, recent accounts by journalists and pundits are sceptical of Chinese think tanks. A typical example appeared in *The Economist*:

[T]ruly independent think-tanks are not something the Communist Party really wants—they are a feature of civil society as liberal democracies define it, not as the party defines it ... Those “think-tanks” with the most influence in China do not write for the public but for a much smaller audience ... They are trusted instruments of the Communist Party and the state ... The biggest danger of this emperor-advisor relationship is that it rewards advisors who tell the emperor what they already think[.]¹⁴

This account rests on two problematic sets of assumptions. The first is a traditional understanding of what think tanks should be, derived from their Anglo-American origins: independent from government, operating within a free marketplace of ideas, and embedded within civil society.¹⁵ The second is an understanding of the Chinese party-state as a closed, unitary entity from which policy decisions emanate top-down. China's think tanks are thus portrayed in somewhat orientalist terms as authoritarian, pseudo *others* against an ideal type represented by liberal democracies. This obviates rigorous analysis of how they actually operate.¹⁶ Once both sets of assumptions are critiqued, a more nuanced account becomes possible.

First, according to Thomas Medvetz in his study of think tanks in the US, think tanks must endeavour to foster political influence, secure funding, garner publicity, and maintain a creditable scholarly reputation. The requirement to cater to all four at once “powerfully limit[s] think tanks capacity to challenge the unspoken premises of the policy debate, to ask original questions, and to offer policy prescriptions that run counter to the interests of financial donors, politicians, or media

institutions.”¹⁷ Indeed, some think tanks deliberately perpetuate the discourse of independence while cultivating political connections behind the scenes.¹⁸ RAND, for example, a US government-backed defence think tank, was transformed into a non-profit corporation to disguise its close connections with the Air Force.¹⁹ Ethnographical research on the formation of British healthcare policy shows how think tanks worked backstage to build ties with government ministers and corporate donors not only to get their ideas heard, but to establish what ideas would be palatable to government officials. The healthcare debate thus took place largely behind closed doors without public consultation.²⁰ Such studies demonstrate that the supposed free marketplace of ideas is constrained by the political topography of the day even in Anglo-American democracies, while the notion of think tanks as located within civil society and representing the interests of the public, as opposed to the state, is ambiguous at best.

Second, while this account implies a unitary state with decisions emanating from above, studies of the mechanisms of Chinese policy making demonstrate that, in fact, it involves processes of contestation taking place both inside and outside the state apparatus. The fragmented authoritarianism model, for example, emphasizes the importance of negotiations and bargaining between competing bureaucracies and localities within the government structure. This is to achieve a centralized set of policy guidelines which are then implemented in various ways by different branches and regions.²¹ Xufeng Zhu’s work demonstrates how regional government think tanks and private policy entrepreneurs, both of which have limited access to the central institutions of power, have managed to influence national policy making at the highest levels by capturing media attention and mobilizing public support.²² Jessica Teets’ model of consultative authoritarianism shows how state institutions strategically collaborate with civil society organizations, often able to deploy their own sources of funding, in order to solve various social problems.²³ These analyses demonstrate that there is scope for think tanks to have a meaningful role in policy making, both inside and outside government institutions. Why, then, are China’s leaders promoting think tanks now, and

what role will they play?

China's New-Type Think Tanks

Scholars within regular government research institutions are skilled at gathering data and drafting political speeches, but not trained at sophisticated interpretation or proposing new strategies.²⁴ Instead, the bureaucracy was designed with conformity in mind. Government researchers are unwilling to risk losing promotion opportunities by suggesting unconventional ideas, while rigid controls on staff numbers obstruct efforts to bring in new recruits with fresh ideas.²⁵ New ideas are “stovepiped,” passed upwards to superiors within institutions, rather than exchanged for debate with scholars outside.²⁶ This insularity is conducive to institutional conflict, with different ministries competing for influence and central budget funds instead of offering disinterested policy advice.²⁷ With China’s growing role in world affairs, and the blurring of domestic and international policy boundaries requiring more complex forms of analysis, this system is no longer considered adequate.²⁸ Officials have expressed frustration that in international deliberations, particularly with the US, Chinese negotiators are repeatedly outwitted by their counterparts with better trained advisers.²⁹

China’s new-type think tanks are to consist of full-time, professional, specialized researchers, in order to provide a more sophisticated community of experts. Broadly speaking, there are three main types. Official think tanks are government institutions, semi-official think tanks are set up by government institutions and managed by state-approved personnel, while civil think tanks are non-governmental and mostly privately funded.³⁰ There is no fixed model, however. University think tanks, for example, are sometimes called “civil” despite being housed within larger official institutions, and are funded by a mixture of private endowments, government funds, and contributions from the host university’s foundation. The list of the first twenty-five nationally approved new-type think tanks was released in December 2015.³¹ These are to be affiliated to the

Central Propaganda Department, through which their uncensored reports will be transmitted directly to the top leadership, receiving special priority within the relevant bureaus. This is designed to diversify and accelerate the channels of expertise into central policy making.

Such think tanks cannot be dismissed due to their institutional connections to government. As James McGann and Kent Weaver acknowledge, “in countries where sponsorship by a government ministry is a legal necessity for a think tank to exist, excluding organizations with an organizational link to government would convey the misleading impression that those regions host no think tanks at all.”³² Indeed, the growing importance of Chinese think tanks is internationally recognized, with China listed as having 435 think tanks—the second highest number in the world—in the reputable Global Go To Think Tank Index.³³ As such, China’s think-tank scholars have been making efforts to re-evaluate the term “independence.” Xufeng Zhu argues that think tanks should be regarded as independent if they constitute an “independent legal personality” which determines that they work to serve the public interest, rather than a parent company—whether a government institution or a private corporation.³⁴ Angang Hu, head of the Institute for Contemporary China Studies (ICCS) at Tsinghua University, one of the first twenty-five national new-type think tanks, proposes that independence be determined by three criteria: autonomy in selecting topics of research, autonomy in conducting research, and the ability to publish independently.³⁵ Under the current system, a list of over one hundred “commissioned topics” (*weituoketi*) is compiled from various government bureaus which think tanks have discretion to choose from. Research on commissioned topics cannot be published openly without permission, but think tanks can pursue their own research separately.³⁶

Hu argues that within Chinese political culture the interests of the government and the public are not considered separate as in liberal democracies, therefore the conceptual problem of think tanks serving the government rather than civil society does not arise.³⁷ A number of think-tank scholars I interviewed stated that the confidentiality of exchanges between scholars and officials enables criticisms to be made freely. According to one interviewee, Chinese leaders have privately

urged think tanks to be forthright in their criticisms for the good of the Party—criticisms that could not be made openly.³⁸ Another high-profile scholar told of how he had entreated top leaders to rein in corruption within the Politburo. While subsequent events appear to show these recommendations were heeded, had they been made openly they would have been regarded as a personal attack on the leadership, and publicly discredited.³⁹

The Internationalization of the State

Analyzing think tanks in their national context is therefore necessary. Yet, in today's integrated world it no longer makes sense to analyze policy making as contained within national borders.⁴⁰ Scholars have long examined how policies are transferred, or diffused, between nation-states, through processes of convergence or learning, for example.⁴¹ Many such studies, however, are vulnerable to the critique of “methodological nationalism,” comparing nation-states as bounded, sovereign units.⁴² Other analyses examine how multiple institutions, at both national and international levels, operate across borders to form epistemic communities, or knowledge networks, to influence global policy.⁴³ Think tanks are adept operators in this respect, with “their multiplicity of tailored narratives and capacity to adapt quickly in different argumentative and institutional fields.”⁴⁴ China's leaders' promotion of think tanks as part of their international strategy is therefore unsurprising.

The field of transnational policy making is not neutral, however. As institutions ally and compete to determine which kinds of knowledge become hegemonic, “ideas backed with power ... are most likely to be influential.”⁴⁵ In a capitalist world economy, policy ideas which achieve dominance tend to reflect the requirements of global capital.⁴⁶ A body of scholarship of particular insight here highlights how “globalization” is constituted not just at the global, or transnational level, but also by multiple processes “oriented towards global systems and agendas” occurring deep within nation-states themselves.⁴⁷ This includes forms of institutional, social, and spatial

restructuring as the state, “at once the subject and the object of the globalization process,” transforms to accommodate to the requirements of international capital.⁴⁸

As recounted by Robert Cox, first, a consensus is formed between nation-states concerning the requirements of the world economy. This takes place “within a common ideological framework (i.e., common criteria of interpretation of economic events and common goals anchored in the idea of an open world economy).”⁴⁹ Participation is hierarchically structured, with the US dominating in recent decades by the successful promotion of an ideology grounded in neoclassical economics.⁵⁰ In the under-represented nations, implementation is made possible “by people who have been socialized to the norms of the consensus”—that is, by local staff who likely graduated from the universities of advanced capitalist countries, or held posts at major international financial institutions.⁵¹ This international cohort, while containing many internal conflicts—not least differing national loyalties—is allied in its commitment to securing the needs of international capital.⁵² This amounts to a *global technocracy*: a powerful class of managers and experts whose role is to negotiate and facilitate the policies of the global ideological consensus. This technocracy, significantly, is not subject to democratic accountability. Rather, these “[l]ocal technocratic elites ... bypass the formal channels of government and other social institutions subject to popular influence.”⁵³

At the national level, the state itself, consisting of an ensemble of institutions, is conceived as a structural apparatus which mediates how social forces within the nation-state interact and compete for control of government institutions. As such, it is “shot through with many class antagonisms and struggles.”⁵⁴ A state which is *internationalizing*, in this perspective, is one where those class forces aligned with the interests of international capital have achieved dominance. The internal structures and institutions of states are then adjusted “so that each can best transform the global consensus into national policy and practice.”⁵⁵ Authority is delegated to both subnational and supranational levels for the purposes of promoting processes of capital accumulation.⁵⁶

The internationalization of the Chinese state thus concerns the transformation of China's institutional, spatial, and social structure to accommodate to the needs of the global capitalist economy. This includes regulating finance and taxation, determining property rights, producing a land market and an army of mobile, low-cost workers, and inculcating an ideology conducive to maintaining a stable, compliant population while these social upheavals take place.⁵⁷ These processes, always resisted, are shaped by ongoing contestations within state institutions, and through alliances with—or opposition from—social forces outside the state apparatus. This has been witnessed in China through the many cases of activism and protest around workers' rights and rural land expropriations, for example.⁵⁸ It is also evident in disagreements over policy making, such as the debates concerning the privatization of rural land, which remains under collective ownership.⁵⁹ This issue is highly controversial in China, where privatization is viewed by many as a licence for corporations to ride roughshod over peasant property rights. Importantly, these contestations are not nationally contained, the designs of global capital on China's rural land being a case in point.⁶⁰ The second half of this article examines how China's internationalization is shaping the development of think tanks.

The Internationalization of Chinese Policy Making

Chinese policy making has been internationalizing throughout the reform period via a set of distinct, mutually reinforcing social and political transformations. These occurred in part due to influence and funding—encouraged by Zhao Ziyang and other reformist leaders—from the IMF and the World Bank, as well as other overseas organizations such as the Ford Foundation and various American universities, which provided training programs, workshops and seminars, joint research projects with foreign economists, and trips overseas, including for the undertaking of PhDs at Western universities.⁶¹

First, the number of scholars studying abroad, particularly in the US, rose dramatically. The

Chinese government expended efforts to encourage their return following their studies.⁶² Overseas PhDs were considered preferable by many employers, and scholars were attracted back by the greater prestige and higher salaries. According to the Ministry of Education, from 1978 to 2007, 1.21 million students and scholars studied abroad, of whom 319,700 returned.⁶³ They were posted to top institutions, including leading universities in Beijing, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Rural Policy Research Office, the Ministry of Finance, and the Bank of China. Zhao Ziyang and others drew on these communities of Westernized experts to promote China's opening to the global economy, overcoming voices of opposition within the state bureaucracy.⁶⁴ While the thinking among these returnee academics was not monolithic, one significant development was an intellectual uncoupling of foreign trade from the concept of exploitation, and a positive reassessment of Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage compatible with the ideologies underpinning globalization.⁶⁵

Second, fundamental changes occurred in official state policy discourse, such that it became compatible with the neoclassical or neoliberal discourses characteristic of the global ideological consensus. This included a rejection since the 1980s not just of the Marxist theories of class struggle, but of the language of "class" itself, in favour of the Weberian discourse of "social strata." This was a strategy to inoculate against fledgling working-class movements just as an army of migrant workers was emerging. Reminiscent of the disappearance of class analysis from academia in 1980s Britain and America, China's working class was rendered "inarticulate," facilitating the political conditions for its subordination to the interests of global capital, which increasingly dominated the landscape.⁶⁶

Third, the Chinese government embraced scientific expertise and sought to recruit technocrats into the bureaucracy at all levels.⁶⁷ This was a deliberate strategy following the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution to produce a politically stable environment of managers and problem solvers conducive to economic development. It was accompanied by a turn towards scientific

analysis in policy making, presaged by Deng Xiaoping's emphasis on "seeking truth from facts" and later enshrined in the "scientific development concept" under Hu Jintao. Along with the expulsion of class, this operated to depoliticize—and remove all traces of Marxism from—Chinese policy discourse. The parallels with the turn to scientific expertise in the US from the 1950s are striking.⁶⁸ Those efforts were led by the RAND Corporation, which was established in the US during the Cold War to produce theories and ideas to combat, and undermine, Marxism and socialist politics more generally.⁶⁹

Fourth, a close alliance formed between this new technocratic class and an emerging entrepreneurial class,⁷⁰ forming "a crooked fusion of marketization and bureaucratization" oriented towards capital, particularly international capital.⁷¹ These entrepreneurs, many of whom are also overseas-trained returnees,⁷² have been asserting their political interests by funding think tanks, and taking managerial roles within them. The China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE), for example, another of the first twenty-five national new-type think tanks, is a membership organization counting many leading entrepreneurs among its members, including from multinational companies, and has several top CEOs as vice chairs.⁷³ It is funded largely from their membership fees and donations.⁷⁴

China Joins the Global Technocracy

The new-type think tanks which have emerged in this internationalized policymaking field play an important role in transmitting the global ideological consensus into Chinese policy circles, aligning China's internal policy making with its requirements, while adapting it for China's national conditions. The work undertaken by Angang Hu and scholars at the ICCS, for example, contribute to these processes. Hu conducted postdoctoral research at the Department of Economics at Yale in 1991, and at the Centre for International Studies at MIT in 1998. He regularly recruits scholars for the ICCS with graduate training from leading UK or US institutions. These scholars produce reports

for China's top leaders summarizing and explaining the publications of major international institutions such as the World Bank and the UNPD, and interpreting their significance for China. As high-level consultants in the drafting of China's national Five-Year Plans, they then seek to incorporate and adapt the principles contained in these international publications into working policies within China.⁷⁵

Hu regards promoting internationally recognized development standards within China as part of his role. In 2009, the ICCS teamed up with Brookings to push for an agreement between US and Chinese leaders on climate change at the Copenhagen summit. The ICCS compiled an internal report attempting to persuade China's leaders that the new Obama administration was sincere in its intentions to cooperate, and calling on them to heed their recent Olympic slogan, "one world, one dream," but the endeavour was not successful.⁷⁶ More recent work has involved transmitting to China's leadership the significance of the core criteria of the Human Development Index. Although the ICCS does not directly seek funding from international organizations, Hu believes his institute benefits both through working with them on collaborative projects, and from having access to their databases and reports free of charge, particularly those of the World Bank, the WTO and the WHO, which the ICCS draws on regularly in producing its own reports. Hu also routinely gives reports and presentations on Chinese policy matters to conferences and high-level meetings at international institutions, and understands his think tank as a two-way "bridge" between China and those involved in global policy making.⁷⁷

Another prominent example of how Chinese policy makers are joining the global technocracy is the career trajectory of economist Justin Yifu Lin. Lin is a professor at Peking University, and one of the vice chairs of the CCIEE. He received his PhD from Chicago University, renowned for its promotion of neoclassical economics. He played an important role in the WTO debates, persuading more conservative leaders of the benefits of opening China's domestic economy to international market competition.⁷⁸ He was chief economist and senior vice president of the World

Bank from 2008 to 2011. He was a founding faculty member in 1994 of the influential think tank China Center for Economic Research (CCER) at Peking University, where he helped to redesign the economics curriculum to be “more in line with the American model, particularly the “Chicago model.””⁷⁹ In 2008 the CCER became the National School of Development (NSD). In 2013 it was listed in the top five think tanks in the category of “highest professional influence” in the national rankings compiled by the Think Tank Research Center of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, the first of its kind in China.⁸⁰ In 2015, the NSD was named one of China’s national new-type think tanks. According to the NSD’s website, it seeks to provide research for “China’s national development and [the] new global order.”⁸¹ Within the NSD, Lin heads the Center for New Structural Economics (CNSE). This promotes a new framework for economic development rooted in neoclassical economics and centred on market-led growth.⁸² The center works in cooperation with several major international institutions, including the World Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Its aims include the formulation of policies for China’s Silk Road strategy, and the promotion of China’s entrepreneurial activities in Africa.⁸³ When asked why the Chinese government was putting such effort into promoting new-type think tanks, Jiajun Xu, the CNSE’s executive deputy director, responded that China “really wants to be perceived on the international stage as a stakeholder in this international system and they want to be a positive force behind the reforming of the current international financial institutions and any other kinds of global governance issues.”⁸⁴

Rising Alliances of Capital

Brookings Institute scholar Cheng Li has pointed to an emerging “tripartite elite” of overseas trained scholars, internationally connected entrepreneurs, and technocratic officials which is coalescing within China’s think tanks, citing the CCIEE, where Justin Lin is a vice chair, as one key location where this occurs.⁸⁵ This powerful cohort may begin to act in its own interests, argues

Li. He mentions a well-known case where officials, property developers, bankers, and public intellectuals cooperated to further their interests in the real estate market. “Only time will tell,” he warns, “whether these fascinating changes in the composition of Chinese think tanks will contribute to profound and positive developments in decision-making and elite politics—or whether this new confluence of political, economic, and academic elites will spell trouble for China’s near-term future.”⁸⁶ What Li is pointing to is an emerging capitalist class—merged with the global technocracy and having policy influence domestically—with a set of interests which, while by no means monolithic, is collectively oriented towards promoting forms of capital accumulation.

This issue has been recognized and debated within China for some time. At stake is the potential role of think tanks in either exacerbating, or ameliorating, class divisions which have emerged during the reforms. With the language of “class” no longer politically acceptable, the debate is usually couched in terms of whether think tanks will be co-opted by “powerful interest groups” (*qiangshi liyi tuanti*), often with reference to the real estate industry, or whether they will, on the contrary, speak for the interests of “weak groups” (*ruoshi qunti*) such as peasants and migrant workers. In 2009, for example, Lan Xue and Xufeng Zhu identified a shift occurring in China’s political structure from a monopolization of policy making by administrative elites, to its monopolization by an alliance of political and corporate elites.⁸⁷ If unchecked, they argued, think tanks would be absorbed into this alliance, impeding their purpose of representing marginalized groups.

Of particular concern are China’s civil think tanks, over which the government has less control. With no official restrictions on their private funding allowance, a few civil think tanks have attracted large amounts of corporate and foreign funds and, according to one interviewee, are outcompeting official think tanks in attracting the best scholars—particularly those trained overseas—by offering higher salaries.⁸⁸ Generally speaking, however, the development of civil think tanks is restricted, with statistics from 2013 showing that only 5 percent of Chinese think

tanks are civil.⁸⁹ This is in part due to a law passed in 2005 that required civil think tanks to register with the Civil Affairs Bureau and find local affiliation with an official institution, a hurdle that many failed to overcome. Many also have difficulty attracting funds, excluded from the government funding afforded to official think tanks in a culture which, in fact, does not commonly practice corporate or social donations. It has been claimed that, for this reason, civil think tanks are more susceptible to being influenced by funders, particularly foreign foundations and transnational corporations.⁹⁰ According to Kaimin Chen, for example, in 2008 the well-known liberal think tank the Unirule Institute of Economics accepted over two million Renminbi from overseas sources. This carries the risk, argues Chen, that these think tanks may adopt a “Westernized” (*xihua*) outlook. “Some think tanks in China,” Chen observes, “have even completely adopted Western economic theories for studying China’s socialist market economy, this should not be ignored.”⁹¹

The debate over civil think tanks is complex, but falls broadly into two camps. Those in the first camp argue for cultivating a donor culture to diversify think tanks’ funding sources. Those adopting this position are more likely to view the US think tanks system as a model worth emulating, pointing, for example, to the established system of regulations and practices in place there to prevent monopolization by a particular funding source.⁹² Yuling Ren, a member of the Counsellor Office of the State Council, argues that the reliance of most think tanks on government funding stifles their independence, and calls for tax incentives to encourage more corporate donations.⁹³ Indeed, as the government makes efforts to stamp out corruption as a channel of policy influence, a formalized corporate lobby system may emerge as the preferred alternative.⁹⁴ Qiao Liu advocates the development of a broad donor culture across the whole of society, including public interest organizations and individuals, to keep in check the influence of government, corporations, and foreign interests, and ensure that less powerful groups will always be represented.⁹⁵

Those in the second camp are more sceptical about the “free marketplace of ideas,” and more likely to be critical of the US think-tanks system in particular. For example, an article in the

Chinese military journal *Conmilit* warned against the impact of corporate interests on government policy making via the funding of think tanks.⁹⁶ The article draws heavily on an investigative piece in the *New York Times* on the influence of corporations on America's high-profile think tanks, in particular the connections between Brookings and the real estate industry.⁹⁷ Other scholars argue that China's think-tanks system should be contained within the state apparatus to prevent an imbalance of power in favour of any particular interest group. Shaoguang Wang and Peng Fan, for example, argue for a model of "centralized ideas and broad interests" (*jisi guangyi*) in which think tanks remain connected to government institutions, while their dispersal across different bureaucracies, regions, and levels of government allows for a plurality of concerns to be transmitted upwards to the centre through multiple internal channels.⁹⁸ This would allow, they argue, for overall coordination and more equal representation between divergent interests. Yongnian Zheng, a Chinese scholar based in Singapore, similarly advocates for a competitive "internal ideas market" (*neibu sixiang shichang*) contained within state institutions to maintain an equal playing field. He regards civil think tanks as a necessary supplement since, distant from political power centres, they are better able to reflect the concerns of society. However, he argues, as long as they lack the institutional and financial advantages of think tanks within the government system, there is no danger of them becoming the instruments of powerful lobby groups, as witnessed in America.⁹⁹

The Chinese government's recent moves to hamper the activities of Unirule are reported in Anglo-American media accounts as censorship of free speech.¹⁰⁰ This is true, yet to understand the issue only in such terms is to miss the broader context and significance of China's evolving class politics as the state internationalizes—in particular, the genuine concerns among progressive scholars and policy makers about the rising power of global corporate interests within China, which major civil think tanks such as Unirule represent. Unirule's close relationship with the Cato Institute, for example, a Washington-based pro-free market think tank well known as a vocal advocate for privatizing China's rural land, is significant in this respect.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

In this article, I began by advocating that China's think tanks be taken seriously on their own terms, and analyzed within their particular national political context. This is characterized by China's integration into the global capitalist system, a factor of crucial importance for analyzing think tanks, their development, and their role in policy making. Since the 1980s, through increased exposure to overseas educational establishments, international institutions, and funding sources, particularly those directly engaged with the production and maintenance of the global ideological consensus, China's technocratic policy makers have come to adopt discourses, ideas, and ways of thinking compatible with that consensus. In so doing, and through commensurate reforms to its economic system and institutions, China has been highly successful at integrating into the global capitalist system, manifested by its spectacular economic growth.

Through promoting think tanks, China's leaders are embarking on the next stage in this process. They seek to produce a community of highly trained, internationally oriented, globally competitive experts and technocrats capable of providing timely and sophisticated analysis and advice to relevant government bureaus, and of manoeuvring between the state and international institutions to impact policy making at the transnational level. They seek a more powerful voice in deliberations about how this global capitalist system is organized, with a view to shaping the global ideological consensus and, indeed, a new global order. Yet, at the same time, they endeavour to transform China's institutions and social structure to become compatible with the requirements of global capital—thus to *internationalize* the Chinese state.

As these processes take place, the cohering of an internationally oriented alliance of wealth, knowledge, and political power constituting a powerful emerging capitalist class raises a number of issues. First, as think tanks, even under government supervision, become accustomed to receiving more of their funding from non-government sources, this will have implications for which interests

they serve. Funders may not be able to influence think-tank reports directly, but corporations are unlikely to fund think tanks whose research record contradicts their interests. As is the case elsewhere in the world, it is hard to see how think tanks promoting workers' rights, for example, or the rights of peasants to their land in the face of incoming agribusinesses, are going to receive the same levels of corporate funding as those which promote perspectives considered more compatible with the interests of business and the free market. This issue is widely recognized in China as a cause for concern and is subject to ongoing contestation in policy circles. Scholars and journalists in the West, meanwhile, even despite admirable attempts to escape Anglo-American bias, too often continue to view independence as the key criterion for evaluating China's think tanks, missing the significance of these Chinese debates. At stake is how independence—regarded in the traditional sense as externality from government and privately funded—may lead to the co-optation of think tanks by the forces of capital, both within and outside China, and the resulting social consequences.

That said, think tanks specializing in different areas will reflect different views. Those affiliated to state-owned enterprises will likely advocate differently from those funded by international capital, while many think-tank scholars understand their role specifically as speaking for the weak and underrepresented. Meanwhile, the debate concerning overseas funding, and what conditions are to be attached, is continuing behind the scenes in high-level policy discussions. Some departments, such as the Ministry of Defence, are likely to come out against all foreign funding, while civil and university think tanks are more likely to be in favour; one interviewee suggested that a block on foreign funding would give the misleading impression to outsiders that think tanks were government-controlled.¹⁰² The question has arisen, moreover, as to what counts as foreign funding, with some proposing that donations from foreign corporations owned by overseas Chinese should have less restrictions attached.¹⁰³ Indeed, there is much optimism regarding these organizations as a future source of endowments, since they are considered both culturally Chinese, and familiar with a practice of philanthropy to which mainland enterprises are not yet accustomed.¹⁰⁴

Going forward, a number of questions warrant further study. What will be the social consequences of increased commercial funding into policy making? Are we witnessing the beginnings of a mass corporate lobbying culture in China of the kind that exists in the US? Will the establishment of a system of think tanks under government supervision, on the contrary, succeed in reining in such vested interests? What are the possibilities for political debate within a think-tanks system largely internal to the state apparatus? Or is this system best understood as a form of social and political surveillance, which will help to maintain social stability while deferring more democratic forms of policymaking? We cannot fully understand the development trajectory of China's new-type think tanks without paying attention to these contested issues.

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