



Think tanks with Chinese characteristics

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Abstract

The year 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of the Chinese government's announcement of the strategy to build 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics'. As thousands of new think tanks launched across the country, has the Chinese government attained its strategic goals including advancing the scientific and democratic decision-making and the modernization of the national governance system and capacity? What key questions concerning think tanks remain unsolved? And what prospects on new think tanks could be expected? To answer these questions, this essay reviews five books written by representative Chinese think tank scholars and practitioners. It argues that while China has made progress in terms of quality, quantity, and institution building of new think tanks, as the books under review demonstrate, some major challenges remain. Among them, the most severe is that China has yet to develop a competitive idea market and cultivate an open think tank culture. This essay concludes by arguing that there is a long road ahead for China to shift from a big think tank country to a powerful think tank country.

Keywords

Chinese characteristics, Chinese think tank, decision-making, idea market, think tank industry

Xufeng Zhu, Jing Zhao and Yuan Kong, *Digital Advocacy: Chinese and Global Think Tanks in the New Media Era*, Social Sciences Academic Press: Beijing, China, 2022; 374 pp., ISBN 9787520198684, ¥ 128

Huiyao Wang and Lu Miao, *Daguo beihou de 'disi liliang'* [The 'Fourth Power' behind Great Powers], CITIC Press Group: Beijing, China, 2018; 283 pp., ISBN 9787508667126, ¥ 49

Xufeng Zhu, *Reform and Opening-Up and Think Tanks in Contemporary China*, China Renmin University Press: Beijing, China, 2018; 146 pp., ISBN 9787300301631, ¥ 38

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Wen Wang, *Think as a Tank: How China Influences the World*, People's Publishing House: Beijing, China, 2016; 255 pp., ISBN 9787010170756, ¥ 55

Lili Wang, *Intellectual Capital: The Core Competence of Chinese Think Tanks*, China Renmin University Press: Beijing, China, 2015; 240 pp., ISBN 9787300206844, ¥ 58

Introduction

The rise of China as a global superpower has been widely thought as the most consequential geopolitical event in today's world politics. Looking back in history, however, one may find that it is extraordinarily difficult for any rising powers to achieve their goals to be a new *status quo* power (aka established power) without generating a war with the existing *status quo* power. As suggested in some recent research, only 4 out of 16 rising powers in the past 500 years succeeded (Allison, 2017). Only by taking many variables into account could one understand the mechanisms behind a rising power's success. Yet students of international relations (IR) or history may find at least a key variable almost appears in all successful cases. And that is the role of think tanks, or policy institutes, which are dedicated to performing public policy research and serving national strategic demands. The quantity and, more importantly, the quality of think tanks are increasingly deemed as a criterion for measuring the distribution of power among major countries. They could even be employed to predict the success rate of a rising power. Therefore, examining the development of Chinese think tanks should provide not only a valuable perspective to understand the country's rise but also its domestic and international strategic behaviors, the relationship between the Chinese government and society, and the interactions between China and the United States, the existing *status quo* power, and the rest of the world. In fact, as will be discussed in more detail below, the Chinese government has elevated the construction of 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics' to the level of national strategy in 2013. As the strategy enters its 10th anniversary in 2023, it is high time to revisit the Chinese think tank industry and evaluate the emerging idea market.

To this end, this essay reviews five books published by some representative Chinese think tank scholars and practitioners. These books provide plenty of basic information about Chinese new think tanks. Besides, they try to illustrate the ecosystem of Chinese think tanks from different perspectives. Wen Wang's *Think as a Tank: How China Influences the World* (2016) focuses mainly on how Chinese new think tanks could influence world politics. Xufeng Zhu analyzes the development of Chinese think tanks since the inception of the reform and opening-up in *Reform and Opening-Up and Contemporary Think Tanks in China* (2018). He also provides some latest analysis of Chinese think tanks in terms of the usage of new media in his latest book entitled *Digital Advocacy: Chinese and Global Think Tanks in the New Media Era* (2022). Huiyao Wang and Lu Miao demonstrate the strategic importance of what they call the 'five power model' (*wu li moxing*) of think tanks in their co-authored book *Daguo beihou de 'disi Liliang'* [The 'Fourth Power' behind Great Powers] (2018, hereinafter referred to as *The 'Fourth Power'*). In addition, the authors put forward some proper suggestions for boosting the development of new think tanks in China. In *Intellectual Capital: The Core Competence*

of *Chinese Think Tanks* (2015), for example, Lili Wang argues that China could rise as a world power should it achieve its ‘rise of knowledge’ by strengthening its intellectual capital with new think tanks.

It is worth mentioning that, among the main authors of these books, Wen Wang, Lili Wang, and Xufeng Zhu are from university-affiliated think tanks, while Huiyao Wang and Lu Miao are running the same non-government think tank. Both Wen Wang and Lili Wang are working at Renmin University of China (RUC), with the former being the executive dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies (RDCY) and the latter the deputy dean of the National Academy of Development and Strategy (NADS). Xufeng Zhu is the executive dean of the School of Public Policy and Management (SPPM) and director of the Think Tank Research Center (TTRC), a think tank affiliated with SPPM, Tsinghua University. Huiyao Wang is the founder and president of the Center for China and Globalization (CCG) while Lu Miao is the co-founder and secretary-general of the CCG. Almost all these think tanks were established after 2013 except that the CCG was founded in 2008. Although these think tanks were set up in the past 10 years, they have already achieved outstanding performance in some national and international think tank rankings. According to the most globally recognized ‘2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index (GGTTI) Report’, the CCG and RDCY are on the list of the ‘Top 100 Think Tanks Worldwide’ (McGann, 2021). The CCG has also been ranked China’s best nongovernment think tank since its inception. The NADS was selected into first batch of 25 ‘China Top Think Tanks’ (CTTTs) pilot units by the Leading Group for Overall Reform of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2015 and ranked No. 1 in the ‘Top 100 University Think Tanks’. Inaugurated in 2018, the TTRC could be dubbed as ‘think tank’s think tank’ – an institute conducts research mainly on other think tanks – and is among one of a few think tank research institutes being able to continuously publish reports on think tanks (Tsinghua News, 2022).

In sum, the five books under review are representative. By reviewing these books, one could have a general picture of the recent developments of new think tanks in China. This essay will first examine the rise of China’s new think tanks, then explore their advancement and shortcomings, and finally look forward to the outlook for the Chinese think tank industry. The essay concludes with the argument that while new think tanks have made and will continue to make contributions to China’s rise, they seem to be forging ahead toward an idea market of Chinese exceptionalism.

Rise of new think tanks under the campaign-style governance

In ancient China, emperors relied on ‘brain power’ (*Zhinang* in Chinese) to secure their reign. Take for instance scholar-bureaucrats (aka scholar-officials, *Shi dafu*). They enjoyed dual identities as a government official and prestigious scholar, playing a role somewhat similar to today’s ‘policy advisors’. Jixia Academy (*Jixia xuegong*), an institute hosting these scholar-bureaucrats that are parallel to nowadays’ think tanks, could be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). The first modern think tank launched after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS),

which was instituted in November 1949. Some more government-affiliated policy research institutes, or what some people call ‘internal brains’ (*neinao*), appeared one after another. Few ‘external brains’ (*wainao*), including university-, enterprise-, and social-organization-affiliated think tanks could be found in China until the reform and opening-up policy was initiated in 1978. But thanks to the CPC’s active promotion, the past 10 years between 2013 and 2023 have witnessed a burst of all types of think tanks across the country.

The rapid development of Chinese new think tanks in the past decade should be attributed to two factors. The first one is the CPC’s accurate assessment of situations facing China at home and abroad. Externally, China’s rise to be a global superpower gained momentum as it overtook Germany and Japan in 2007 and 2012, respectively, as the world’s third and second biggest economy. Beijing was hence confronted with growing pressure from Washington, which made its intention to contain the rising power more obvious with the implementation of the so-called ‘Pivot to Asia’ (subsequently renamed ‘Rebalancing to Asia’) strategy. Since the second term of Barack Obama’s administration, Washington ramped up its efforts to ‘rebalance’ Beijing’s growing clout by further entangling itself in tricky issues like territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Domestically, China’s reform has entered a ‘deep-water zone’ (*shen shui qu*), as reaffirmed by the newly elected central leadership of the CPC in November 2012. This tested the political wisdom of Chinese political elites and the resilience of the country’s political system. The changing situations inside and outside China called for the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. In this context, new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics dedicated to modernize the national governance were naturally given more missions.

Put differently, building new think tanks is highly correlated with the assessment of the domestic and international political situations by China’s ruling party. It could also be argued that it is highly correlated with the requirement of reform and opening-up in the new era. As Zhu argues in the preface of *Reform and Opening-Up*, the fundamental reason why the CPC constantly emphasizes the scientific and democratic decision-making, improves the decision-making advisory system, and strengthens the construction of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics lies in that ‘The scientific nature of the national decision-making has a bearing on the direction of the reform and opening-up’ (p. 1).

Another key factor explaining the rapid rise of think tank lies in the paramount leadership’s deep involvement in pushing forward the development of new think tanks, providing more impetus to develop much more quickly. This factor could be interpreted as what some scholars called ‘campaign-style governance’, which refers to a centralized top-down governance approach over a relatively concentrated period of time through the use of a sequence of orders from superior leaders and of concerted resources (Zhou, 2012). Indeed, the burgeon of think tanks in China since 2013 has largely been driven by Xi Jinping who laid much emphasis on the strategic role of think tanks in promoting the scientific and democratic decision-making. Shortly after he was elected President of PRC and General Secretary of the CPC, Xi gave some long comments in April 2013 on the construction of ‘new-type of think tanks with Chinese characteristics’. He pointed out that think tanks are an important part of China’s soft power and will play an

increasingly significant role, advocating that the country should attach great importance to and actively explore the organizational and management forms of Chinese new think tanks. It is widely accepted that this is the first appearance of the expression of 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics' (*Zhongguo xinxing tese zhiku*) and the first time that building new think tanks has been elevated to the level of national strategy, as Zhu observes in *Reform and Opening-Up* (p. 42) and Wang and Miao in *The 'Fourth Power'* (p. 47).

The importance of new think tanks development has further been confirmed in the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform* (hereinafter referred as *The Decision*) adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC on November 12, 2013, stating that the Chinese government will 'strengthen the building of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and establish and improve the consultation system on decision-making'. The document also put forward the concept of 'modernization of the national governance system and capacity' for the first time, claiming that 'The overall goal of deepening the reform comprehensively is to improve and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics, and to promote the modernization of the national governance system and capacity' (China.org.cn, 2014). As part of the CPC's efforts to optimize the consultation system on decision-making, the CPC's Leading Group for Overall Reform headed by Xi Jinping was established during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC. In October 2014, the sixth meeting of the Leading Group for Overall Reform of the CPC adopted the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* (hereinafter referred to as *The Opinions*), which was jointly issued afterward by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council General Office on January 20, 2015.

The Opinions defines 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics' as 'non-profit research and consultation organs that focus on strategic issues and public policy, and that aim to serve the scientific, democratic and law-based decision-making of the party and government' (Xinhua News Agency, 2015). A growing number of think tank experts and practitioners are debating the concept of 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics', nevertheless. It is mainly because the definition does not illustrate what think tanks are not 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics', which should not only be 'new-type' but also should be 'with Chinese characteristics'. Therefore, two perspectives could be applied to better understand the concept. From the longitudinal perspective, 'new-type' think tanks are those that should be differentiated from think tanks that China once had in the past. From the horizontal perspective, think tanks with 'Chinese characteristics' are usually compared with their overseas counterparts, particularly those from the United States. As Wang and Miao argue in *The 'Fourth Power'*, Chinese new think tanks are different because they 'serve the people as their ultimate purpose' (in comparison with think tanks in other countries) and are supposed to 'play a greater role . . . in promoting the scientific decision-making' to tackle with numerous challenges in China (in comparison with think tanks in the past) (pp. 48–49). In this case, the major significance of new think tanks is self-evident. According to *The Opinions*, new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics

are an important support for the scientific, democratic and law-based decision-making of the party and the government. . . New-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics are an important content of the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. . . New-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics are a key component of the national soft power. (Xinhua News Agency, 2015)

As an important component of intelligence resources, think tanks are thought by *The Opinions* as ‘the most precious resources of a country and a nation’. In addition to emphasizing the strategic significance of new think tanks, *The Opinions* also puts forward guiding ideology, basic principles, and general objectives, as well as opinions about management structure reform, institutional guarantee systems, and organizational leadership for better developing Chinese new think tanks. *The Opinions* has therefore become the first comprehensive and systematic programmatic blueprint regarding the construction of Chinese new think tanks, providing the overall goals of and action orientation for building a Chinese idea market. *The Opinions*, along with comments by Xi as well as some policy documents, embarked on a golden age of the development of Chinese new think tanks.

Toward an idea market of Chinese exceptionalism?

Starting with Xi’s comments in 2013, ‘new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics’ have witnessed rapid development over the past decade. Beijing has accomplished notable progress in terms of quality, quantity, institutional building, and think tank culture.

First, think tanks embraced an exponential growth in China. In response to the government’s call to build more ‘new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics’, numerous existing non-profit and for-profit organizations transformed into ‘new think tanks’. Meanwhile, a huge number of new think tanks were established. According to some statistics cited from *The ‘Fourth Power’*, more than 5000 policy research institutes came into being between 2014 and 2015 in the name of ‘new think tanks’ (p. 56). It should be noted that a large number of nongovernment think tanks are in the spotlight. More importantly, the quality of Chinese new think tanks has been improved rapidly with their influence being widely acknowledged. Among these newly launched think tanks, 29 have been selected as CTTTs pilot units under the supervision of the CPC’s Leading Group for Overall Reform. With more efforts to ‘go global’ being invested, including either by inaugurating new offices in other countries or by conducting joint research with their international counterparts, more Chinese new think tanks enjoy growing global reputation and influence. Compared with 429 modern Chinese think tanks that were recognized by the ‘2012 GGTTI Report’, the number tripled to 1413 in the ‘2020 GGTTI Report’, turning China into the country with the second largest number of modern think tanks (McGann, 2021).

Second, China’s think tank research network has undergone enormous changes. The past 10 years (2013–2023) have witnessed a sharp rise in the number of think tank research and think tank researchers. By searching with the theme ‘think tank’ on the website of China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), a leading online Chinese

publishing platform, this author finds that the total number of journal articles published between 2002 and 2012 is 1322. This figure stands in sharp contrast to the total number of 20,130 in the recent decade (2013–2023). Accordingly, the number of scholars devoted to think tank research increased greatly. In the past 10 years, about 1400 students pursuing masters and doctoral degrees chose a think tank-related topic as the topic of their thesis. Only around 70 graduates did that 10 more years earlier, though.

Besides, researchers tend to apply more diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. Traditionally scholars tend to study think tanks from the perspective of public policy (Chen, 2014; Xue, 2014). Since 2013, more perspectives and methods, including those of libraries (Chu and Tang, 2018), intelligence (Li and Li, 2015), and IR (Zhou, 2023), have been applied to promote the studies and construction of think tanks. New approaches have been introduced as well. To some extent, the five reviewed books reflect these trends likewise. *Reform and Opening-Up, The 'Fourth Power', Intellectual Capital*, and *Think as a Tank* adopt different qualitative research methods while *Digital Advocacy* uses quantitative research method with big data. More specifically, *Reform and Opening-Up* mainly utilizes longitudinal study, *Intellectual Capital* employs multi-disciplinary theoretical concepts and frameworks while *Think as a Tank* and *The 'Fourth Power'* mainly relies on the case study method, analyzing the development of RDCY and the CCG, respectively.

Third, China has made evident progress in institutional building. China has established a diversified think tank system. James G. McGann, the founder and director of the University of Pennsylvania's Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) that produces the annual GGTTI reports, divides think tanks into seven categories, that is, autonomous and independent, quasi-independent, government-affiliated, quasi-government, university-affiliated, political-party affiliated, and corporate (for-profit) (McGann, 2021: 14). Instead of mechanically adopting the widely referenced typologies, the growing number of Chinese think tanks fall into seven groups based on China's political and social realities. In accordance with *The Opinions*, the seven groups include the party and government department-affiliated, academy of social sciences-affiliated, school of the party and of administration-affiliated, military-affiliated, scientific research institution-affiliated, university-affiliated, and enterprise and social organization-affiliated. The standard of classification of think tanks reflect the unique ecosystem of think tanks in China. As semi-official think tanks, think tanks affiliated with academies of social sciences, with schools of the party and of administration, and with militaries could rarely be found elsewhere outside China but seem to be ubiquitous in this socialist country.

China has also built an think tank operating system, 'in which connected think tanks work in cooperation with a due division of labor', as Zhu argues in *Reform and Opening-Up* (p. 78). This enables academic communities, research funds, and media to actively participate in the construction of a larger think tank network. The three actors are 'connected with think tanks in different forms, forming a complete operating system of think tanks', with think tanks being the suppliers of ideas and policy plans that provide decision-making consultation to the government (pp. 78–98). In other words, the three actors and think tanks as well as the Chinese government have formed an operating network in which flows of fund, knowledge, and information interact, contributing to a 'balanced supply–demand relationship' on idea products (*sixiang chanpin*) while

guaranteeing the survival of think tanks. Nevertheless, such a balanced relationship should only be seen as an ideal type given the central role the CPC and Chinese government play in the operating system. However, it provides the direction of efforts in future.

As a key component of institution building, mechanisms to influence Chinese public policy have also formed. The way with the strongest sense of ‘Chinese characteristics’ that think tanks participate and influence public policy is via submitting internal reference (*neican*). In addition to this most effective channel, some other major ways for think tanks to influence policymakers include conducting government-commissioned project, attending panel discussions, giving courses and trainings to officials, and so on. Another channel worth noting is through the media. As noted by Wang and Miao in *The Fourth Power*, Chinese think tanks have formed a multilayered structure in which official think tanks are closest to policymakers, and then come semi-official think tanks. Nongovernment think tanks are in marginal positions in terms of the distance from policymakers (pp. 186–193). Due largely to this reason, nongovernment think tanks have to stay highly visible in new media. By doing this, they could survive in an increasingly competitive idea market (*sixiang shichang*) where all think tanks are proposing policy ideas and solutions. Put differently, these nonprivileged think tanks have to keep a high profile in new media to influence public policy, either by attracting the attention of policymakers indirectly or by informing the public directly. As shown in *Digital Advocacy*, almost all new think tanks in China have been making full use of new media outlets – WeChat, Sina Weibo, Toutiao and the like – to spread their research to seek social influence and gain reputation. It finds that in the past 4 years nongovernment think tanks like the CCG and Charhar Institute are most recognized in new media in comparison with official, semi-official, and university-affiliated think tanks (pp. 41–50). All new types of think tanks compete for influence and reputation via this mechanism, jointly advancing the democratic and scientific decision-making and promoting the national governance system and hence governance capacity.

Furthermore, think tank evaluation and ranking systems have been gradually set up. Think tank evaluation and rankings are of great importance because they could be a symbol for discourse power. The institutes that are running think tank evaluation and ranking systems and releasing think tank reports are the key actor, which is referred to as ‘academic community’ in *Reform and Opening-Up*, in the think tank operating system (pp. 79–85). Their importance has been demonstrated in *Think as a Tank*, which claims that it is because of the poor performance of Chinese think tanks in the GGTTI reports that caused Xi Jinping’s concerns and led to the ‘think tank fever’ soon in 2013 (p. 70). There are several representative think tank evaluation and ranking systems in China. The Center for Think Tank Studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences is the first think tank research institute launched in 2009. The annual Chinese Think Tanks reports published since 2014 became more popular. The most widely recognized is the annual China Think Tank Index (CCTI) report, which is jointly released by Nanjing University’s Chinese Think Tank Research and Evaluation Center and Guangming Daily’s Think Tank Research and Release Center. This is the first think tank evaluation and ranking system based on the web impact of think tanks in China. The Chinese Think Tank Big-Data Index (CTTBI) by the TTRC, which is now under the directorship of Xufeng Zhu, is China’s first think tank evaluation and ranking system that uses big data.

Last but not the least, Chinese think tank researchers and practitioners have formed their critical views regarding the construction of new think tanks, which contributes to the formation of think tank culture in China. All five books under review emphasize the necessity of learning relevant theories and experiences in building think tanks from Western countries to build a powerful think tank industry in China. By drawing on experiences of prominent US think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and Brookings Institution, *The 'Fourth Power'* constructs a 'five power' (i.e. idea innovation power, research supporting power, social communication power, international output power, and policy influence power) model of think tank innovation operation and argues that the model could contribute to China's ascension to global superpower (p. 26). *Intellectual Capital* reviews the development of think tanks in the United States and United Kingdom and points out that 'the core competence of think tanks is intellectual capital' (p. 32) and suggests that 'it is urgent that China . . . strengthen its intellectual capital' (p. III).

On the other hand, these books also underline the importance to combine China's national conditions and historical traditions. Analyzing the famous statement in the classic *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa*) – 'the highest form of generalship is to defeat the enemy with strategies' (*shang bing fa mou*), *Think as a Tank* suggests how Chinese think tanks might learn from *fa mou* (defeat the enemy with strategies) to enhance their abilities to persuade, explain and propagate (pp. 22–23, p. 45). It further argues that think tanks' mastery of *fa mou* is 'the standard configuration for great powers' peaceful development' (p. 43). *Reform and Opening-Up* divides the history of Chinese think tanks since the era of reform and opening-up into four phases and reaches the conclusion that 'the large-scale emergence of research institutions in social sciences in China is closely related to the process of China's reform and opening-up' (p. 34). Based on a more balanced comparative perspective, *Digital Advocacy* compares the new behaviors of Chinese and global think tanks to seek social influence and reputation by employing mass data of new media (what the author calls 'digital advocacy') and constructs a comprehensive evaluation system for Chinese and global think tanks.

Put simply, these reviewed books lay much emphasis on the combination of China's conditions and traditions with foreign (particularly the United States) experiences and theories to build Chinese new think tanks. This shows an integral trend in the development of Chinese new think tanks. Generally speaking, Chinese think tank experts have gradually formed their own understandings of think tanks by reflecting on foreign experiences. *Reform and OpeningUp* proposes the urgency to redefine the concept of 'independence' in the Chinese context so as to rectify people's partial understanding of it (p. 3). It asserts that 'independence should be a comparative independence', and it does not mean separation from the government as American think tanks usually claim (pp. 15–19). Instead, China's new think tanks are supposed to maintain a good relationship with Chinese government. Still they should stay alert; they must avoid their policy research to be influenced by Chinese government and any other interest groups. Therefore, the book proposes alternatively the concept of 'autonomy', which emphasizes 'the self-determination rights and autonomous behaviors of think tanks based on policy issues and policy research patterns' (p. 19, pp. 108–109). In *Think as a Tank*, Wen Wang also suggests the need to a comprehensive understanding of the concept of 'independence', claiming that

Chinese new think tanks need to prevent from not only being ‘antagonistic’ to the government but being ‘catering to’ it (pp. 28–29).

These books also indicate the importance of building China’s own ‘revolving door’. Seeing the construction of a revolving door of Chinese version as one crucial step toward institutional capital to build Chinese new think tanks, Wang argues in *Intellectual Capital* that ‘to open a modern revolving door requires [us] to learn from historical experiences on the one hand and combine with contemporary demands on the other’. She adds that the revolving door is conducive to the formation of the mechanism for talent cultivation and flow, which ‘is to the benefit of social mobility in China over the long haul’ (p. 201). *Think as a Tank* offers some details concerning the construction of China’s revolving door. It suggests selecting some scholars to assume a temporary post at all levels of government for personal training and development and selecting some officials to return to think tanks for training. By doing this regularly, it is argued that there will gradually be more ‘Henry Kissinger’ in China (pp. 123–128). This reflects Chinese scholars’ growing confidence as China’s overall strength continuously grows and its think tanks rise. As the title of Wen Wang’s recently published article suggests, China should ‘Look at US think tank confidently’ (Wang, 2022).

To summarize, China has achieved notable success in building ‘new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics’ in the past 10 years. But overemphasizing ‘Chinese characteristics’, be it China’s historic heritage, national condition, or current political system, would inevitably lead to an idea market of ‘China exceptionalism’. Further investigation suggests more challenges facing the country’s think tank industry.

A bumpy road ahead for Chinese new think tanks

While the CPC has successfully made China a home to thousands of new think tanks and somewhat modernized its governance, the country’s think tank industry encounters many shortcomings. In fact, doubts have always accompanied the development of new think tanks since the very beginning. For example, the way Beijing promotes the development of new think tanks that has resulted in the virtual explosion of policy research institutes has drawn harsh criticism. Yanzhong Huang, a senior fellow at the New York-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations, criticizes that ‘China is experiencing a think tank great leap forward,¹’ asserting that it would be ‘squandering a huge amount of resources’ but achieve little (Huang, 2015). Han Fangming, chairman of the nongovernment think tank Charhar Institute and deputy director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, expresses similar concern that ‘the development of think tanks demands enthusiasm . . . but should not thus stray into a great leap forward’ (Han, 2017).

The five books under review express concerns likewise about a possible ‘great leap forward’ and ‘think tank fever’. As a matter of fact, these books have indicated some prevailing problems China’s think tanks faced with and proposed plenty of suggestions to overcome them. For example, *Intellectual Capital* and *Think as a Tank* propose to build China’s own revolving door by sending more researchers in think tanks to the government and sending more officials to do research in think tanks. An effort to internationalize think tanks, *Think as a Tank* also suggests the recruitment of more foreign elites to

work in Chinese think tanks and more dialogues with think tanks in non-Western countries. *Reform and Opening-Up* calls for more actions to improve the quality of think tanks and build an active, well-organized idea market by setting up decision-making consultation system. *The 'Fourth Power'* argues that China needs to double down its efforts to develop nongovernment think tanks in particular. These books were published mainly between 2014 and 2018. While some problems have been solved, some remain unresolved. One may also find that some challenges remain if reading through *The Opinions*. In fact, challenges facing China's think tank development loom large with the development of new think tanks.

Take for instance China's revolving door. Former Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan's transition to the 'super think tank' China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE) as its chairman has been widely quoted to support the argument that a revolving door has somewhat taken shape in China. Indeed, the number of retired senior Chinese officials serving as semi-official and nongovernment think tanks has increased somewhat in recent years. A small number of think tank researchers have been occasionally sent to work in Chinese embassies in other countries or take temporary positions in government departments. Yet this could far more than be called a revolving door as what the United States has. If China does exist a revolving door linking government officials and think tank researchers, there should be only a 'half-open' one. The problem is that such a 'half-open' door offers little help for either government or think tanks. It would cast a shadow over the prospect of developing a competitive think tank industry and an open idea market in China.

Analyzing key problems facing the development of China's nongovernment think tanks helps to further understand the challenges the country's think tanks encounter. The significance of nongovernment think tanks, which include enterprise- and social-organization-affiliated think tanks in the context of China, is self-evident. Huiyao Wang and Lu Miao argue in their co-authored *The 'Fourth Power'* that 'if the development of nongovernment think tanks could be increasingly encouraged, China's policy market could then be activated and China's sustainable prosperity could also be promoted' (p. 197). However, nongovernment think tanks in China are confronted with numerous challenges. The very first challenge is lack of money. Indeed, China has already enacted its first *Charity Law* in 2016, and some items regarding donations are included. But a donation culture is yet to be cultivated, which makes it difficult for nongovernment think tanks to raise donations. One direct result of this severe challenge is that nongovernment think tanks are suffering from a desperate shortage of talents. To makes matters worse, few nongovernment think tanks could be invited to participate in internal policy discussions, which limits their capability to influence policy. This in turn puts these institutes in a more adverse position in terms of raising funds.

More critically, China's political environment has been increasingly stifling for nongovernment think tanks that tend to express different views. One case in point is the shutdown of the Unirule Institute of Economics. As one of China's most few influential private think tanks, the Unirule was founded in 1993 when China's reform and opening up was in its heyday. Dedicated to spreading moderate ideas on political and economic reform via publishing books and organizing seminars, the liberal think tank 'has contributed to the success of China's economic reform', as recalled by Mao Yushi, the

well-established economist and co-founder of the Unirule, in an essay celebrating the 20th anniversary of the institute (Mao, 2013). But maintaining the survival of this pro-reform institute had never been easy. It must seek funds to survive. But given the fact that Chinese government seldom purchases service from independent think tanks due to its reluctance to hear a dissenting voice, the Unirule had to accept any legal donations available – including those from foreign organizations like Ford Foundation and Asian Development Bank (Mao, 2013). It is because of such ‘contacts’ with foreign organizations that eventually brought about an end to the Unirule. In August 2019, local authorities definitively shut down the Unirule, which was accused of being ‘unregistered and unauthorized’. As an internationally recognized nongovernment think tank that was ranked 105th of the top think tanks worldwide in the ‘2018 GGTTI Report’, the Unirule’s shuttering was believed to be a ‘huge set back’ not only for China but also for ‘those Westerners who hoped, or dreamed, that China’s increasingly capitalistic economic ways would gradually pave the way for a freer political system’ (Editorial Board, 2019). Some foreign scholars even cited the closure of the Unirule as a sign that the United States may finally change its cooperative policy toward China.²

With that being said, there are several nongovernment think tanks that prospered during the same period. The most widely referenced examples are the CCG and RDCY. Despite their private funding, both have been closely connected with the Chinese government by recruiting retired high-ranking officials. Besides, they have been enthusiastically promoting government initiatives such as the Belt & Road Initiative with activities including policy analysis, media mobilization, and outreach overseas (Wang and Hu, 2017: 6). The two institutes gain their reputation both inside and outside China. Internationally, both have been ranked among the 100 top think tanks in the world in the GGTTI reports. Domestically, RDCY has been designated by Chinese government as one of three leading think tanks for China’s participation in Think20 (T20), a network of think tanks from the member of the Group of Twenty (G20) while the CCG is routinely involved in Track 1.5 and Track 2.0 diplomacy. The success of the CCG and RDCY, in a large degree, suggests the chances to prosper for Chinese nongovernment think tanks do exist should they closely follow and enthusiastically support official policy.

This triggers two key questions. The first one is that few of nongovernment think tanks could meet with success as the CCG and RDCY did. The minimum condition for any think tank to survive includes money, talents, and influence. A brief comparison between the Unirule and the CCG and RDCY, however, suggests that maintaining a sound relationship with the CPC and Chinese government is of vital importance. One may argue that the Unirule should make concessions by conducting some research that is allowed – or, at least is not forbidden – by Chinese authorities. But this would announce the death of the liberal think tank as well should it choose to do it. Despite the uniqueness of the case of the Unirule, it does demonstrate the hardship nongovernment think tanks may be encountered in China where people find it increasingly difficult to express freely in recent years.

This inevitably begs the second, related question, and that is to what extent China’s new think tanks could promote the democratic and scientific decision-making and thus advance the modernization of China’s national governance system and governance capacity. A quick answer to this question is ‘yes’. Some think tanks, particularly the 29

CTTTs pilot units, have been recognized by the CPC because of their timely, high-quality, and comprehensive policy research on domestic and foreign policy. These contributions should be beneficial to promoting the democratic and scientific decision-making and modernizing China's governance system and capacity. Zhu points out an interesting phenomenon in *Reform and Opening-Up*, and that is semi-official think tanks' 'strong autonomy and openness in policy research'. He adds that semi-official institute like the Development Research Center of the State Council 'broke the tradition of being consistent with the policies of the central government' (pp. 52–54). But this limited privilege of 'free speech' shared by some semi-official think tanks could never make up for the consequences of nongovernment think tanks' inability to express themselves freely. As mentioned above, nongovernment think tanks are farthest away from policymakers. But on the other hand, they are closest to the society. Therefore, the research they conduct and policy suggestions they raise could reflect the true voice of the society while they may be unaccepted for the government. Without the involvement of nongovernment think tanks that represent a wider public opinion, the democratic and scientific decision-making and the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity in China would incur more doubt.

China has yet to develop a highly competitive, open, and healthy idea market. To cultivate such a market, the CPC and Chinese government are supposed to play a central but limited role. All five books under review, as well as numerous essays and books by other Chinese scholars, tend to pay greater attention to the leading role of the party and government in the construction of new think tanks nevertheless. This seems to be rational – and even inevitable – due to China's highly power-centralized party-state system. An overemphasis on the central role of the party and government may, however, make it even more difficult to maintain a balanced supply–demand relationship in the think tank ecosystem. In the long run, it would also create an idea market, which is short of market-style competition but filled with Chinese exceptionalism. In a nutshell, there is a long bumpy road ahead for China to shift from a big think tank country to a powerful think tank country.

Conclusion

Think tanks play an invaluable role in China's ascension to global superpower. In order to overcome the internal and external challenges it confronted, China has initiated a campaign-style strategy to build 'new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics' under the leadership of then newly elected President Xi Jinping since 2013. For the purpose of grasping a general picture of China's new think tanks in the past 10 years, this essay reviews five books by some representative Chinese think tank scholars and practitioners.

As illustrated by these books, the CPC has made remarkable progress in the development of new think tanks. Not only were thousands of new policy research institutes established throughout the country in accordance with some key documents formulated by the party, but some strategic goals of the party were attained. According to these books, the scientific and democratic decision-making as well as the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity has advanced greatly since more

think tanks are engaging in the Chinese decision-making process. Moreover, China's soft power and national image are believed to have been improved.

On the other hand, these books also point out that China is now still confronted with a series of challenges. Among them, the major one is that China has yet to develop a competitive idea market and to cultivate an open think tank culture. There are many factors contributing to this result. But a critical one could be the dramatically shrinking space for public debate. Without a competitive idea market, however, it remains less likely that China could be able to build a powerful think tank industry that can compete with countries enjoying advanced think tank industry such as the United States. This essay concludes by arguing that there is a long road ahead for China's new think tanks.

Conventional wisdom suggests that policy research institute could play a crucial role in facilitating a rising power's pursuit of primacy. As China's rise continues, it will only rely more on think tanks. In this case, an analysis of China's think tanks and idea market is helpful to understand the country's strategic behaviors, the relationship between the Chinese government and society, and the interactions between China and the world. The five reviewed books provide us with valuable sources regarding the development of China's new think tanks in the past decade. Those who are interested in China's think tanks may be advised to read these books while referring to some latest published books and articles by foreign scholars. By comparing different texts, they are supposed to have a more comprehensive understanding of China's think tank industry.

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Notes

1. The term 'great leap forward' (*dayuejin*) derives from the Great Leap Forward, a 'campaign undertaken by the CPC between 1958 and 1961 to organize its vast population, especially in large-scale rural communes, to meet China's industrial and agricultural problems' but ended in disaster. Now the term is commonly used to describe a situation where a country or an organization takes actions in a manner similar to the Great Leap Forward. For more information about the Great Leap Forward, see The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2022).
2. On an international symposium held by the Nanjing-based nongovernment think tank Shangdao Institute for Social Research in Hong Kong in late October 2018, for example, James A. Dorn, then Vice President of CATO Institute, a Washington, DC-based libertarian think tank, told the author of this essay that the Unirule's growing pressure imposed by the CPC in recent years was a 'blow' to China's political reform. He added that the temporary closure of the liberal think tank in September 2018 had disappointed some political and business elites in the United States and may even cause the latter to change US China policy.

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