

The Role of Chinese Think Tanks in Foreign Policy Making: Growing Influence and Political Limitations

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Abstract:

The astonishing economic development in the last twenty years has made remarkable transformations to China. In the backdrop of these transformations, China is increasingly facing up to some formidable and multifarious challenges both domestically as well as in foreign policy related issues. It is for this reason that think tanks are on the rise and become more visible and apparently more influential as the demand for sound and innovative policy initiatives, are on the rise in China. Scholars around the world are paying more attention, exploring their characteristics, their modes operandi, and more importantly their role in policymaking apparatus. This paper examines the growing role of Chinese think tanks in foreign policy making, and their influence on policy debate with the use of policy analysis.

Introduction:

“It used to be easy to be a Chinese diplomat. You just memorized the two phrases that defined the current policy and repeated them over and over. It’s much harder now. You have to know about everything.” – Former Chinese Diplomat

In the last couple of decades China has become an axis of transformation and is engaged with regional & multilateral organizations, at times even shaping their agendas in restricted ways. Policymakers in China are paying close attention to increasingly diverse international issues. Furthermore, leadership in China have begun “to look at the world through a set of lenses which are far less tinted and jaded with the vestiges of history and ideology than in past years”.¹ China’s traditional insecurity, over-confidence, prerogative way of thinking, and obscure

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moralism has diminished and play increasingly less role in its relations with the international community. These transformations supplicate the query as to what is origin of these new foreign policy ideas?²

Foreign policy think tanks or policy research institutes in China have become more visible and has begun to play an ever important role not only in the collection and formulation of information, but also giving their input in the form of analysis, and intelligence on diverse foreign policy related issues. Their role has increased in the last twenty years as decision-making on foreign policy has become more pluralized, as well as there is an increased demand for regional and functional expertise and access to information. This has led to the establishment a rich range of research institutes that are focusing on foreign policy research and analysis in China. While, bulk of these institutions are existed for decades and were established in the mid of 20th century, however, most of these were built around Marxist-Leninist ideology.³ Analysts in these inferred information and events to reflect Mao's three world's theory, the certainty of great power war thesis, and the conviction that China being a revolutionary power is combating the "imperialist" United States and "revisionist" Soviet Union. Moreover, the quality of the research and analysis produced by these organizations was further hampered by organizational traits associated with traditional bureaucracy. Due to a highly upright integrated bureaucracy most of foreign policy research institutes were compartmentalized wherein "analysts seldom talked with one another and often produced redundant and out-dated research".⁴

However, the operations, outlooks, and expertise of these policy research organizations have started to transform in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They began to evolve in terms of "functions, responsibilities, and influence."⁵ As a result, their relevance to both

public and internal/governmental debates and policymaking has become more pertinent and more amplified.

Scope & Limitations of the Study:

It is worth mentioning here the limitations of this research. Given the constraints with the data on China's foreign policy-making and the political sensitivity of the subject, this paper is unable to disclose a direct linkage between the IR think tanks' policy advice and the changes that have occurred in China's policy-making. This could possibly be the case for some time to come until more academic freedom & more reliable access to official documents is allowed for the research of China's foreign policy-making process.

The paper has also not dealt with the recently emerged private international relations' research institutes. Needless to say, the sheer fact that private think tanks are allowed to exist is a breakthrough in Chinese political history, but their contribution in the process of China's foreign policy making remains trivial, if any. Since the private think tanks are supposed to represent the interests of different social groups and to remain independent from government control, when they are allowed to influence China's foreign policy-making process, it will indicate a change of nature in China's foreign policy-making – from pluralistic elitism to pluralism. It is difficult to anticipate as to when this will take place in Chinese politics, but so long as the trend of pluralization continues in the process of China's foreign policy-making there is no doubt that one day it will be materialised.

One input for this change to occur is Chinese international relations think-tanks. These institutions are already becoming prominent and for West's (U.S. or Europe) own influence in China, a swift

understanding of their workings and worldviews must be pursued and unfolded.⁶

Evolution of Chinese Think Tanks

Because of the complex and intricate nature of issues involved with China's foreign policy, the leadership in China has started to rely on the advice and expertise of specialists. Under Jiang and Hu, the influence of think-tanks on Chinese foreign policy process is growing where variety of channels have been created not only between the center and periphery but also between various and think tanks decision makers. During the twenty years, China's foreign policy think-tanks have contributed significantly in Chinese foreign policy making and policy advice. It is anticipated that their role will continue and grow as there will be further demand for policy input in policy circles in the years to come.⁷

Foreign Policy Research Institutes during Mao's China

During Mao's China there were only few international relations research institutes, including the China Institute of International Relations, founded in 1956 (named the Institute of International Relations at the time) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Afro-Asia Research Institute created in 1961 under the CCP International Liaison Department, and the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, established in 1965 and linked with the State Council and the Ministry of State Security. However, these International relations research institutes were not allowed to conduct policy research for three reasons: ideological prejudice, the bureaucratic establishment, and the assumed role of the research institutes.

Also the influential ideological factors not only in China's foreign and domestic policy-making, but also in the study of social

science subjects, including international relations, (under the tight control of Marxism-Leninism—Mao Zedong Thought) foreign policy specialists were not allowed to conduct any research that might diverge from the Marxist theory of class struggle. Although, there were a number of scholars who advocated “a degree of pluralism and intellectual participation in political decision- making in the 1950s”⁸, however, given the suffocating political situation and because of ideological underpinings the central government condemned such opinions. Thus, the study of international relations prior to the late 1970s was limited to the international communist movements and the national liberation movements and policy studies other than those supporting or elaborating official policies were not allowed to see the light of the day.

Foreign Policy Research Institutes in the Post Mao's China

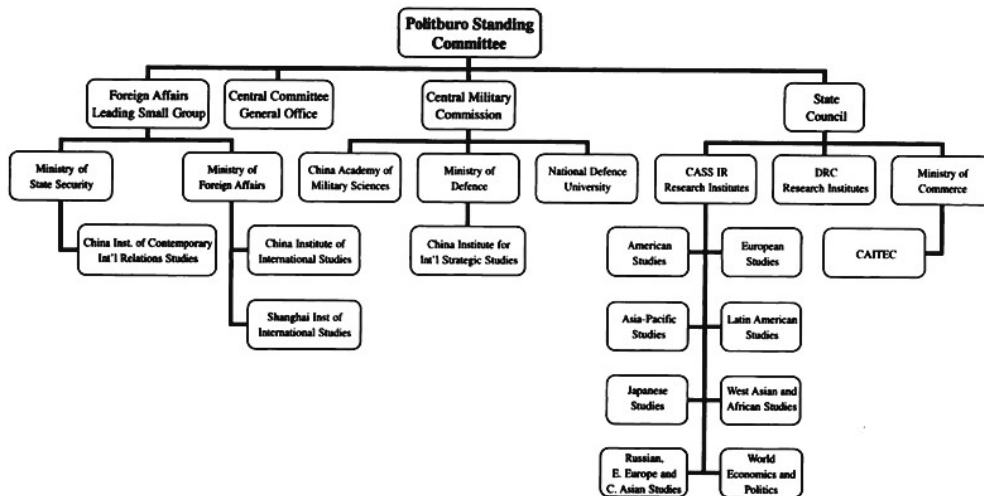
In late 1970s post-Mao China, when the new generation of leadership led by Deng Xiaoping assumed power, they attached greater weight & value to institutional procedures in the making of policy. Foreign affairs think tanks have expanded in number and in the scope of their participation for two reasons: First, the new leadership, unlike Mao, did not enjoy the charisma and authority; thus personal significance had to give way to bureaucratic process. And secondly, when pragmatic outlook replaced ideological considerations in post-Mao Chinese foreign policies, economic development was given the first priority. Thus, without more professional advice it became impossible for the new leadership to make sound decisions on foreign policies. Under these circumstances, Chinese research institutes especially those dealing with foreign affairs, international economic cooperation and national security, started to play a role as “think tanks” in China's foreign policy process. By offering a broader range of advice with more innovative suggestions, the foreign

affairs think tanks enabled the Chinese foreign policy-making process to be characterized by continuity, consistency and moderation. In late 1970s number of research institutes on foreign affairs and strategic studies were established or re-established in China in order to provide the top Chinese leaders with information and policy advice in foreign affairs. [Here a perceptive & dispassionate observer may sense the undertones of Confucianism in Chinese thought & policies as opposed to an outright commitment to Marxism]

These newly resumed foreign policy research institutes were primarily subordinate to the central government departments, such as CICIR under the Ministry of State Security and the China Institute of International Studies (CHS, formerly the China Institute of International Relations). The new institutes on international studies were also established, that included, the Development Research Centre (in 1981) under the State Council, the China Centre for International Studies (in 1982 and merged with the CIIS in 1998), and the Institute of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation from 1997 onwards), under the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (Ministry of Commerce from 2003 onwards). A semi-private think tank, the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, was also founded in 1979 and headed by the former PLA Deputy-Chief of the General Staff Wu Xiuquan. In December 1984, the Centre for Peace and Development Studies was established in Beijing; it was affiliated with the China Association for International Friendly Contact, but also had ties with the General Political Department of People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of State Security.

In the period following the late 1970s, eight institutes on international studies were established or resumed within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Also three research units: the institutes on the Soviet Union and Eastern European (now on East European, Russian and Central Asian) Studies, Latin-American Studies, and Middle East studies (became a part of the Institute on West Asia and African Studies since 1978) were established. They were originally attached to the CCP's International Liaison Department. There were five newly established institutes that included; the institutes on World Economics and Politics, American Studies, Japanese Studies, West European Studies, and Asia-Pacific Studies.

Figure 1 Governmental and the CASS Foreign Policy Think Tanks



Several academic department and institutes were also resumed and established at different universities, such as, Departments of International Politics resumed at Peking University, the People's University in Beijing and Fudan University in Shanghai, and IR research institutes such as the

Institute of International Relations and the Centre for American Studies at Peking and Fudan Universities, and the Centre for European Studies at the People's University were established in the mid 1980s. However, prior to the early 1990s, these university departments and institutes focused mainly on academic research and education, with only a marginal role in China's foreign policy process.

Typology of Chinese Think Tanks

In Chinese language, two terms used to translate the phrase “think tank”, *zhinang tuan* and *sixiang ku*. Both terms have slightly different meanings and depend on the contexts in which they are used. *Zhinang tuan* refers to a small group of people working as a policy advisory to the top decision-makers. Its meaning is closer to the term “brain-trust.” but it is used to translate both notions without much difference.⁹ On the contrary, the concept of *Sixiang ku*” is literally translated from English and is often used to refer to policy research institutions.¹⁰

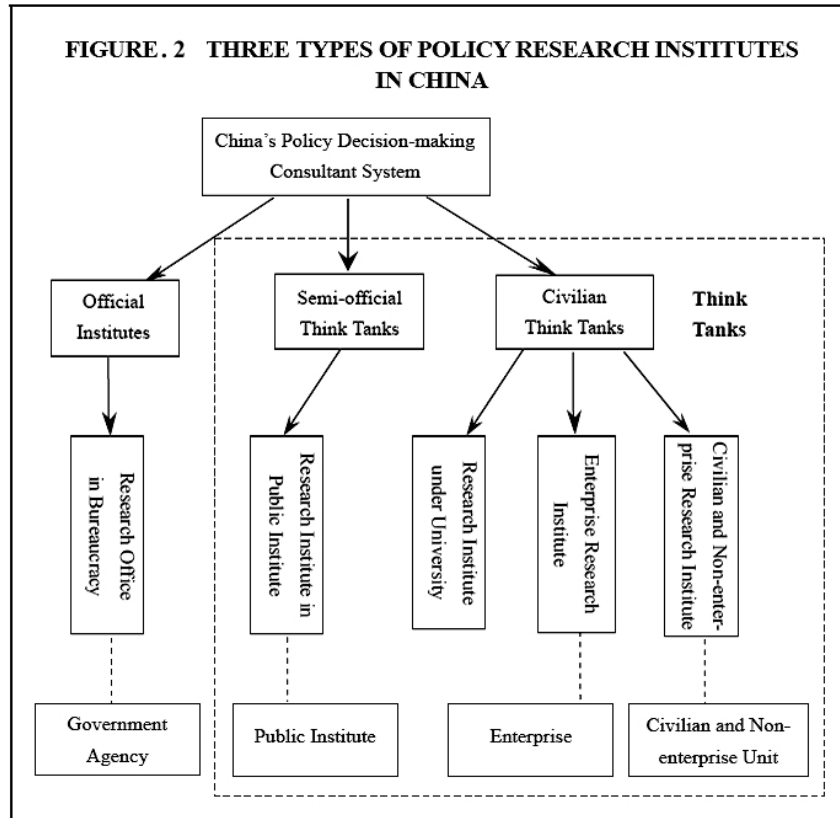
Since there is disagreement among scholars on the definition of a think tank, however, certain typologies have been created to categorize the verity of think tanks that exist today¹¹, moreover they also acknowledge that some of these think tanks cannot be simple be packed into any one of these categories.¹² Albeson has recognized five categories that are: (1) Universities without Students, (2) Government Contractors, (3) Advocacy Think Tanks, (4) Legacy-Based Think Tanks, and (5) Policy Clubs.¹³ McGann and Weaver have argued for four types of think tanks: (1) Academic (university without students), (2) Contract Researchers, (3) Advocacy Tanks, (4) and Party Think Tanks.¹⁴

Despite the divergence over the definition of “think tanks.” the common feature that can be gleaned from the above interpretations is the “non-profit.” Which means that “think tanks” have to attract funding

from either government agencies or private sector for specific research projects; “competition” is therefore unavoidable and even crucial. Secondly, except for advocacy think tanks that are linked to specific political ideologies most think tanks in the West are non-governmental organizations and conduct “independent” policy studies. They may have close working relationship with government agencies but are not organizationally subordinate to them and thus enjoy more freedom in research and in expressing opinions.

Based on the classifications by James McGann and Donald Abelson, but considering the Chinese practice, this paper will divide Chinese think tanks into three groups. According to their significance in China's foreign policy process, organizational affiliation and the focus of their research are:

- i). Official/Government think tanks;
- ii). Semi-official/Academic think tanks;
- iii). Civilian/University-affiliated think tanks.



Official/Government thinks tanks

The Yan'an period saw the first wave of official policy research organizations appearance in China during the.¹⁵ However, these organizations were expanded in the 1950's and 1960's and largely followed the Soviet model affiliating to specific ministries and their institutional agendas.¹⁶

This group is not covered by McGann and Abelson's catalogue; however, these research institutes are the most significant among the Chinese foreign policy think tanks. Although, these research institutions are subordinated to and sponsored solely by the central government but are different from the administrative government departments. Its staff

members are paid the same as other government officials with the same rank but unlike other government officials they do not have any administrative power or responsibilities; they have no role in decision-making but are only responsible to provide policy advice to the top leadership. These features are not only different from their Western counterparts but also vary from the traditional Chinese political system where policy advisers were also government officials. China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) is a classic example of Government think tank.

Established in 1956, the institute consists of senior diplomats, pre-eminent scholars and leading area-study experts in the domain of foreign affairs, who are able to conduct research on foreign policy related issues. The focus of CIIS is on vital strategic concerns and produces creative and comprehensive solutions and conclusions. The institute has been able to establish exchange network of scholars worldwide and regularly holds meetings with foreign counterparts sending its scholars for participation in international conventions. In order to review the latest international developments the CIIS also hosts a large conference at the end of each year.

The China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) consists of seven research divisions namely: American Studies, Asian-Pacific Studies, East European, Central Asian and Russian Studies, International Politics, South Asian, Middle Eastern and African Studies, Western European Studies, World Economy. It has an editorial board, library and Information center and also published a journal entitled *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (China International Studies) on quarterly basis. Irregularly began its publication from early 1951 but has become one of the best selling foreign policy journals in China and its subscription reached nearly

10,000 copies per issue by the 1990s. The CIIS also co-edits Survey of International Affairs with Shanghai *Guoji xingshi nianjian* (Institute of International Relations).¹⁷

Despite its close institutional links and personal ties between its researchers and the decision-makers, the CIIS was not much significant in so far as China's foreign policy advisory realm is concerned until recently for a number of reasons. Firstly, the lack of a tradition of foreign policy advisory body in Communist China enabled the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to form a “bureaucratic assumption that every worth knowing things was already known ‘in-house’”¹⁸. Thus the Ministry of Foreign Affairs relied on other channels to generate information and policy advice, such as a special division, the Fourth Division of the Information Department (ID4D), which was responsible for generating and analysing the most up-to-date information from three channels: (1) cable communications from Chinese missions abroad; (2) foreign media; and, (3) daily bulletins on diplomatic activities.¹⁹ Secondly, most of CIIS researchers due to their diplomatic experiences in dealing with the routine business of China's foreign affairs tended to focus on tactical aspects of China's foreign policy issues rather than focusing on long-term and comprehensive studies. Thirdly, many CIIS staff members were experienced diplomats. They may have had great insight and good ideas relating to international affairs, but they generally lacked systematic training for policy research.

However, the past few years have seen an increasing role for the CIIS in China's foreign policy process. As of now the institute has emerged as leading research institutes among its counterparts working under the foreign ministries around the world, like the Royal Institute of International Affairs or the Japan Institute for International Affairs.²⁰

This change started with the appointment of former Ambassador Yang Chengxu as the CIIS President in 1996, partly due to Yang's external entrepreneurial acumen as well as internal policy conformity, and partly to the new financial resources from MEAL and the Ford Foundation.²¹ The other explanation for the change could be varying composition of the CIIS staff: the merger with the China Centre for International Studies in 1998 certainly helped the CIIS to strengthen its "analytical expertise,"²² also the CIIS recruitment of new graduates from top-ranked Chinese universities who were sent abroad for training also enabled them to have a higher quality research team. In addition, the declining status of the other counterpart's institutes, i.e. China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) might be another reason of the enhanced role & significance of the CIIS in China's foreign policy advisory.

Semi-official/Academic think tanks

In general, semi-official think tanks are independent legal bodies founded by the government who act as their supervisor unit. Under Chinese law, semi-official think tanks are "public institutions".²³ The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (*Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan*) is China's biggest and most important academic research organization in the fields of philosophy and social sciences. It became independent in May 1977 growing out of the Department of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and consists of 32 research institutions and 3 research centres, which carry out research activities covering as many as 300 disciplines of different grades; among them 120 are key disciplines. Its core agenda include promotion of research and undertaking and fulfilling significant state funded research projects keeping in view China's internal conditions, its strategies and trends for socio-economic development; its task also includes organizing

academic exchange between the Academy and foreign countries. The total number of the research staff members is 3,045, of whom 1,531 have senior professional titles, whereas 909 of them are intermediate professional titles.²⁴

Of their eight institutes on international studies seven deals with area studies on America, Eastern Europe, Russia, Middle Asia, Japan, Europe, West Asia, Africa, Latin America and Asia Pacific, whereas, only one is on world Economy & politics. The motivation behind the formation of these institutes was based on the “perceived policy needs” and the expectation of advisory roles for social scientists.²⁵

However, the CASS institutes used to play a less important role in China's foreign policy advisory than their counterparts in the government for two reasons: First, their location was more distant from the centre of decision-making; secondly, their research works were often regarded as too academic and not relevant enough to policy.²⁶ The significance of CASS has also been affected by political factors, especially after certain major political events. As Goldman observed, “in the wake of the Tiananmen incident, if the work of social scientists “presents information that contradicts the party's view of society or the party's interests, it is unlikely that it will be listened to and can easily be suppressed.”²⁷ In spite of that the recent decade has witnessed a closer linkage between the academic research of CASS IR specialists and their policy analysis; and, the influence of the CASS think tanks in China's foreign policy process has also shown a noticeable growth.

Civilian/University-affiliated think tanks

The third group of think tanks consists of the international relations institutes affiliated with universities, which may contain few or no undergraduate students at all. They are the least influential think tanks in

China's foreign policy process for two main reasons: the research done by the university institutes is largely academic in nature, and there are limited channels for university think tanks to be heard other than the so-called brain storming session for scholarly discussion on China's foreign relations. Normally at the end of each year the Government officials summon these kinds of forums, inviting prominent scholars from various academic think tanks for general discussion on China's foreign policy issues. Hence, these Civilian or academic think tanks are much less influential and play a very little role in the "agenda-setting" in China's foreign policy. However, they have had substantial influence in developing, examining and criticizing alternatives in policy-relevant realms or in helping to create images of other countries.²⁸ Having said that, some universities affiliated with government ministries, such as the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU) have more influence than their counterparts.

The University was founded in 1955 at the personal urging of the late Premier Zhou Enlai.²⁹ At present, Mr. Wu Jianmin, (chairman of International Bureau of Exhibition and former Chinese Ambassador to France) is the President of CFAU. The CFAU is affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is better positioned to provide policy advice than most other university institutes. Although, the primary task of the institute has been the teaching of international studies; international business & law as well as foreign languages, the specialists at the CFAU in general have a better opportunity to access primary documents on China's foreign policies, and are often asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to submit policy recommendations regarding specific issues. China Foreign Affairs University has been given special attention from Chinese government ever since it was established. Premier Zhou Enlai,

Vice Premier Chen Yi, Vice Premier Qian Qichen and other foreign ministers all have paid a visit to the University.

“The CFAU has earnestly implemented the Party’s guidelines for education and followed the 16-character code of conduct formulated by Premier Zhou Enlai in its efforts to turn out ethically qualified and professionally competent personnel for foreign service, namely, Unswerving Loyalty, Mastery of Policies, Professional Competency and Observance of Discipline.”³⁰

In general, following the incremental increase of the think tanks’ influence on China’s foreign policy process, the university think tanks appear to have become more active in providing the top leadership with policy recommendations since the late 1990s. This has been demonstrated by the growth in the frequency they are consulted by high-ranking leaders before foreign visits, and by the fact that university scholars have begun to conduct more joint-projects with the government think tanks. Some of them were even invited to join the visits made by high-ranking leadership. This new development is of special significance for the university think tanks, as it has not only given them better access to research materials, but has also enhanced opportunities for their ideas to reach the top leaders. Nevertheless, the joint-projects involving the university think tanks are often limited in scope and mainly focus on areas such as energy security and environment protection.³¹

The Future of Policy advice and Think Tanks in China

The growing importance given to think tanks in China can be attributed to at least three trends. First, the transition from a strong-man politics to collective leadership has compelled the policymakers to look for more legitimacy for their policy through quality input provided by Chinese think tanks. Secondly, China’s integration with global economy demands input from experts with professional competency, specifically in the

realm of foreign investment and finance. The third factor has been the growth of China's market economy that has not only created many interest groups and made the Chinese economic and socio-political structure pluralistic. The interest groups, involved in business sector, have tried to shape public opinions and mold government policy.

This pluralistic and elitist trend in China's foreign policy-making is very unlikely to revert; but will get strengthen in the time to come and will enable the think tanks to play a greater advisory role in foreign policy making. Indeed, the current and the succeeding generations of leadership will continue to conduct policy consultation with the government departments and IR think tanks. In addition to the general trend at the top of seeking scientific methods of policy-making, the increasing complexity of Chinese foreign relations also requires a greater involvement of the Chinese IR think tanks.

Cheng Li of John L. Thornton China Center made two observations regarding the future trends of think tanks in China. Firstly, it is anticipated that Chinese government think tanks will play the most significant role in the policy circles for foreseeable future. Moreover, these institutions will become more autonomous in terms of funding and setting their research agenda. Secondly, Chinese independent think tanks will grow in number and excel in expertise, and influence. One of the major attribute of a Chinese think tank is to bridge the political participation gap between the government and the people and thus to contribute towards its social stability. He contended that "the development of Chinese think tanks will definitely promote the communication and integration between China and the world."³²

Conclusion

There are certain essential questions to ask while understanding policy making in any country: who are at the top of political system and what are their respective roles and relationship in decision-making; and from where they get information? Second, what is the mechanism for coordination among major actors involved in foreign policy making?; Third, How influential are specialists and experts, and what channels are utilized expressing their opinion. Above all, it is imperative to understand how decisions are made and for whose interest?³³

Although, understanding the tortuous workings of a government is not easy, considering the complex nature of a country such as China, where information related to decision making is often hard to obtain. Since the emergence of China as global power is acknowledged fact due to its towering economy and ever increasing foreign direct investment that brought Chinese-made goods to global reach. In spite of the fact that Chinese leadership may be unknown to the world as well as less known and understood about Chinese foreign policy, by the international relations establishment. Moreover, policy-makers and researchers outside China that has interest in regional and international affairs know very little about complex nature and elements Chinese international relations hierarchy: its role, influence and worldviews. Most specifically, there is very less information about Chinese international relations think-tanks.

However, there is possibility to fully understand the structure of Chinese international relations think tanks or their modus operandi to influence foreign policy decisions. After the independence in 1949 China's relations with world became increasingly complicated as China formally established its diplomatic ties with outside world, the membership of United Nations (UN) and other regional and international

economic and political organizations and expanded its global trade. By the late 1980s, these developments affected China's foreign relations in a significant way. The economic relations drastically increased between late 1970s to the late 1980s; the involvement of more ministries and other organizations in foreign relations higher than any-time in the past; that enabled Chinese foreign policy community better informed and more experienced about the outside world. It is very important for the outside world including US and Europe's to establish and developed working relationship with China's foreign policy community so as to understand of their workings and worldviews be understood for their own influence in China.

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³² On October 23, 2008, the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings hosted a discussion on the role Chinese think tanks play in addressing China's internal and external issues, the parallel between these institutions and their American counterparts, and the political limitations they face today. Panelists also examined the interactions between the Chinese leadership and the country's prominent think tanks as well as their potential impact on China's future.

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