

The Role of Think Tanks in China – The Case of CASS

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Increasing Role of Think Tanks in China

Think tank is a relatively new concept and identification in China, although policy-oriented research institutions have existed for a long time. As think tanks, the research institutions must conduct independent studies and provide fresh ideas and recommendations, whether financed by public funds or non-public funds. With the changing environment, the demands on think tanks have significantly increased. Since China adopted reforms and an opening up policy in 1978, think tanks have played important roles in both domestic and external affairs. Think tanks have now become very active in various areas by conducting research and providing independent ideas and recommendations to the policymakers of the government and the Chinese Communist Party.

The reasons for the increasing role of think tanks in China are understandable since the policymakers are no longer capable of making decisions simply by themselves. Before the reforms and opening up, decision making seemed simple and easy due to the centralized planning system and clearly defined general principles on foreign policy, especially from the dictatorial top leaders of the party. Since the reforms and opening up policy, China has changed to a

market economy and has become integrated into the global market, which makes decision making on economic policy more complex and difficult. Government agencies are no longer capable of making policies by themselves, and thus they need both research analysis and recommendations from the outside. Due to the rapid and unpredictable changes in the global economic and political environment, the demand for research is both urgent and multiple. This nurtures the development of think tanks with different features and roles. Because the world is changing so rapidly, China's policy making on external relations also needs timely analysis and recommendations from experts and scholars outside of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, foreign affairs have also become very comprehensive — covering political relations, economic issues, and also human security. With China's emergence its roles in international affairs are also different — moving from inward-looking (self-interest) to external-looking (international responsibility). It is clear that the emergence of many think tanks is the result of the change in China itself.

Seven Types of Think Tank in China

It is estimated that there are more than 2,000 think tanks in China. In general, there are seven types of think tank in China:

(1) Research institutions under government agencies. Almost every ministry has its own affiliated research institution (including the Development Research Center directly under the State Council). These institutions conduct relatively independent or assigned policy-oriented analysis relating to the issues of the affiliated ministry.

(2) Academies at both central and local level (each province has one social science academy). Although these academies are academic research institutions, they are also asked to be think tanks for the government and the party to conduct policy-oriented research and give advice on economic and social development.

(3) Research institutions in universities. There are numbers of research institutions in universities now that conduct policy-oriented studies either under contract to government

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Famous billboard of Deng Xiaoping, who led the reform and opening up policy, in Shenzhen, one of the most successful Special Economic Zones created by his reforms.

agencies or by themselves. The Ministry of Education encourages the research institutions to conduct policy-oriented studies by providing research funds.

(4) Research institutions in the party schools at the central and local level. The role of the party schools in China is unique since they train party officials on the one hand and also provide policy recommendations on the other. Professors at the party schools are usually very open-minded since they have to be active in supporting the party's reforms and opening up policies.

(5) Research institutions under the military, including two central research academies and institutes in the military universities. With the new security requirements of the Chinese military, research capacity-building has become urgent and critical. Strategic security studies done by these institutions under the military have become important in security policymaking.

(6) Research institutions established by the media, including research centers under news agencies and newspapers. These institutions use their advantage in collecting information and materials and can provide timely assessments and policy recommendations to the government.

(7) Emerging non-public research institutions established by non-public foundations or state-owned companies, or financed by other resources. Their research results are generally more independent and critical, and they have become more and more active in policy-oriented research and also influential to the public by publishing their independent reports or making comments on current policies through the media.

Increasingly Important Role of Independent Policy Assessment

Each of the above institutions has a special role to play since the demands on think tanks are diversified — economic and political, social and culture, domestic and international. In general, think tanks have played their roles by (1) publishing research reports, papers and books covering both domestic and international issues, (2) submitting policy reports to the government, either at the request of government agencies or as designed by the research institutions themselves, and (3) providing direct consultancy as advisors or experts. The involvement of think tanks has increasingly become a necessary process in policy decision making since their views and recommendations help government agencies make decisions more effectively.

As a matter of fact, experts and scholars from the think tanks have

become increasingly active and involved in the policymaking process. Apart from submitting research reports to the government, they also participate in drafting policies and laws directly, as well as working in various expert groups and advisory committees, or attending consultation meetings organized by the State Council or other government agencies. These experts and scholars all have a high educational background either in China or abroad, and unlike government officials they usually have their own ideas and speak out what they think.

Constraints & Challenges for Development of Think Tanks in China

However, the development of think tanks in China still has many constraints and challenges. For example, think tanks try to maintain their “independent position” in their research and recommendations, but the government and the party usually ask them to support and explain current policies rather than present critical assessments, and hope they submit their critical views internally rather than make them public. As most think tanks in China are public institutions financed by the government budget, it is natural that they are asked to support government policies. Thus, think tanks try to find a balance between staying independent in their research and remaining friendly to the government. Non-public think tanks financed by private (or non-government) funds are still too few, and that is something that needs to be developed.

Introducing CASS — the “Top Think Tank” in China

Among the public think tanks in China, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) is considered the top and central think tank. CASS is also well respected by the international community and is listed among the top regional and global think tanks (No. 1 in Asia and No. 15 worldwide).

CASS was established in 1978 and it is now made up of more than 30 research institutes, more than 90 research centers and one graduate school with over 3,000 resident scholars (plus another 3,000 active retired scholars). CASS covers almost all areas of the social sciences, including philosophy, literature, history, law, economic studies and international studies. Although as a central research institution its basic feature is “academic”, it also acts as a central think tank by doing policy-oriented research and providing recommendations to the government and the party. Now CASS has been identified as a top think tank and brain trust for the central

government and the party, reflecting the increasingly important role of think tanks in China.

The research structure of CASS is divided into several academic divisions, ranging from humanities, law and sociology to economics, international studies and Marxism. Each division plays a different role in conducting policy-oriented research and providing policy recommendations. For example, the institutes on economic studies (eight institutes covering economics, industry, finance and commerce, as well as rural studies and population) have played very important roles in providing new policy recommendations for the change of the old planning system to the new market system. The institutes on social and development studies (two institutes on sociology and social and development studies) have been very active in providing policy recommendations on establishing the social security system. The institute of law has played a special role in developing the modern legal system by drafting new legal documents and providing legal advice to government agencies. The institutes of international studies (seven institutes covering world economies and politics, the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East, Russia and Central Asia, and American and Japanese studies) played a key role in the early stages of China's reforms and opening up by introducing foreign economic, political and social systems to the government. As China becomes a global power, the demand from the government for international studies increases significantly. Thus, international studies at CASS have been given more emphasis and support. Currently, CASS has published more than 40 kinds of academic journals and a great number of books and articles covering a wide range of domestic and international issues.

In general, as the "top think tank", CASS plays an important role in the following ways:

(1) As a government financed think tank, it is natural that CASS is directly involved in the policymaking process by providing research reports as requested by the central government and the party. The research reports are presented to the policymakers directly for consultation. Large numbers of policy reports from CASS were accepted by the government agencies, and many of them with top leaders' written instructions.

(2) Echoing public discussions and debates on the hot issues relating to the reforms and opening up policies, as well as economic, political and social development through the scholars' papers, books or media interviews. CASS scholars are always very active on the key issues of China's reforms and opening up, for example, the development of the market economy system, the emergence of the new class, the issue of social equity, the status of mobile labor, the economic integration into the international system and global responsibilities.



(3) Large numbers of scholars from CASS have been appointed as special experts and advisors both in domestic and international teams to do feasibility studies on government programs and projects, and to draft policy or legal documents. For example, scholars from the Institute of Law have participated in drafting almost all major new laws, and those from economic studies have been involved in drafting the documents for the annual economic conference organized by the central government, and those from international studies have been appointed as experts to participate in foreign relations committees, regional cooperation expert groups, and global groups on behalf of China.

However, it is not correct to identify CASS only as a think tank since most of the resident researchers are also doing their academic research work with little connection to current policies. These highly respected scholars from CASS in the areas of archaeology, literature, language, history, and philosophy actually have done little on current policy. There is a debate on the nature and role of CASS as "an academic palace" or as "a think tank" since some worry that by identifying CASS as a think tank it may lead it to be an ordinary policy research institution rather than a top academic organization. Nevertheless, financed by public funds, CASS has to show its value in supporting the government and the party in policymaking by providing high quality research results and acceptable recommendations. Thus, CASS's role as a think tank in China is inevitable and also highly desirable.

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