

Rethinking think tanks in contemporary China

Cases from Financial and Environmental Governance in East Asia

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In the last decade, it has been widely recognized within the literature that think tanks in contemporary China are growing in numbers and enlarging in terms of sphere of action. Yet, despite the efforts made so far, analyses do poorly at explaining their real functions within the Chinese policymaking system, limiting analyses to organizational structures and definitional approaches when dealing with such organizations. Advancing a new conceptual framework and an alternative classification, here, we propose to ‘rethink’ Chinese think tanks according to their *functionality*. In doing so, the thesis hypothesizes and demonstrates that the current fourth generation of think tanks in China performs few essential functions within the Chinese decision-making system, depending on three specific conditions: the type of the institute; the political opportunities and the policy field within which think tanks operate. Despite within such scenario, the greatest dilemma still rests the divide between a growing civil society on the one hand, and the ‘resilient authoritarianism’ of the Chinese Communist Party on the other, we believe that the Chinese decision-making system does not exclude civil society *at priori*, but rather, that its political mechanisms and structures advance numerous challenges to the orthodox practices within which civil society actors and organizations usually operate.