

# Rethinking think tanks functionality in contemporary China

## Cases from Financial and Environmental Governance in East Asia

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XXVII Cycle

### Summary

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 three essential functions within the Chinese decision-making system: they collect analyses and recommendations for consideration by Chinese leaders; they provide analyses and research filling a ‘knowledge gap’ within state bureaucratic apparatus based on specific funding procedures; they provide empirical evidence and often recommendations in order to influence policy decisions, especially with regards to societal and environmental problems.

Whilst expectations about the potential of China’s think tanks as a mean to promote democracy in the PRC rest inadequate, to account them only as organizational means to the party-state or to exclude them from civil society at large is also unadapt in grasping or explaining adequately the present think tanks’ scenario within the Chinese context. At the same time, because think tanks already conquered a particular *niche* within Chinese political and social life, they deserve to be analyzed not only with regards to civil society, but indeed, also to politics.

Within such framework, the thesis rely upon an in-depth study of two cases, namely addressing think tanks' functions with regards to financial governance in East Asia and green institutes dealing with China's environmental governance in South-East Asia.

In the first case, it is acknowledged that East Asia in Beijing's eyes is now a highly strategic area of interest. Indeed, it is becoming a crucial region in the world as China is becoming a crucial power in world affairs. In the last decade, remarkable efforts have been made by East Asian countries in order to institutionalize their cooperation with the PRC, particularly at the institutional level such as ASEAN or APEC. In this light, it seems that Chinese think tanks are playing in this field an active role, representing a critical juncture in track II diplomatic dialogues, but also in informal meetings usually organized by think tanks organizers working in private associations or GONGOs. The second case is related to research institutes and think tanks working in the field of environmental governance, where a growing body of expertise dealing with environmental problems and climate change emerged in the last decade, in particular, following China's involvement in the United Nation Forum on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1997.

The two case-studies herein analyzed confirmed the hypotheses initially suggested: on the one hand we should consider think tanks as a 'resource' filling a knowledge gap within the Chinese political system; on the other, the political opportunities offered by domestic and international forces profoundly affected their work and structure and therefore, their functionality. Lastly, the issue area within which think tanks perform certain duties is also a clear leitmotif affecting their functionality. The two cases also reinforced the (re) classification I proposed to fully grasp the changing reality about to the Chinese think tanks' world that is, to consider also those institutes which, given their hybrid nature, were previously excluded from analyses based on definitional approaches.