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ABSTRACT

Think tank experts and their opinions have acquired a very influential position in China's public diplomacy. While the presence and roles of think tanks is rarely questioned within developed democracies, their position in emerging powers and the developing world is debatable. This article argues that the landscape of the think tank sector in China—indeed the biggest developing country and the most powerful emerging economy—has changed over the course of the last decade. By providing a detailed account of the evolution of this sector in China, the intent is to enlarge think tank studies beyond liberal contexts and to overcome limitations about the study of Chinese think tanks. As demonstrate by the expanding role of think tank networks in the Belt and Road Initiative they have been able to secure a special niche with regard to foreign policy and diplomacy, notwithstanding China's authoritarian political environment.

KEYWORDS

Think tanks; knowledge regimes; knowledge networks; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); public diplomacy

Introduction

It is widely recognized in the literature that think tanks play a prominent role in influencing decision-making in liberal democracies (Shai and Stone 2004; Rich 2005; McGann 2007, 2011; Medvetz 2008, 2012; Wiarda 2010; Abelson 2014). Yet, the influence of think tanks may be equally relevant in contexts marked by authoritarian traits and limits for democratic practices. China, in particular, increasingly has seen the development of think tanks with an international focus as a top priority for its public diplomacy agenda. However, given the political framework of a country run by a single party, many have questioned the extent to which think tanks could meaningfully project a positive image of the country at the international level. This article further unravels this puzzle with the aim to analyze the role played by think tanks in public diplomacy outside Western-democratic contexts. A critique of the think tanks literature in liberal societies is beyond the scope of this article. In the case of China, however, the arena of governance in which civil society operates can be understood as a distinct sphere.¹

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¹An alternative to the Western-led approach in describing the space between the state and civil society has been the definition of the *third realm* adopted by Philip C. Huang. Starting from the civil justice system of late imperial China, Huang divided the socio-political system into three blocks of different size: the small entity at the top being the State, the large one at the bottom being society, and in the middle, the third realm, where civil society organizations operate, resulting on a mix between the intertwined relationship of state's power and the society. See Philip

Especially in the case of think tanks, but similar to other civil society organizations, alliances with state agencies and politicians are often a means through which actors gain influence within the state rather than a mechanism for promoting accountability and legitimacy. Considering that scholarship on think tanks in the West has been critical of the early establishment of this sector in China, it is time to evaluate the implications derived from think tanks' relations with the Party, given that their role in global politics has changed as much as China's relevance in international affairs.

Investigations into Chinese policy research organizations have identified how they share many similarities with their Western counterparts, but also identifies key points of difference (Shambaugh 2002; McGann 2007). Likewise, previous studies have focused on the relationship between Chinese policy research organizations and elite groups and policymakers, noting that the definition of think tanks prevalent within liberal contexts cannot be applied straightforwardly to the Chinese political system (Zhao 2012). Other studies provide detailed and systematic analyses of how such organizations conduct their activities in China (Shai and Stone 2004; Zhu 2013; Abb 2015; Hua 2017). There exists a vast array of Chinese think tanks; yet, the foreign-policy research sector still remains heavily state-dominated. The majority are government-affiliated institutes geared primarily towards a domestic audience operating under strict observation from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Nevertheless, among rising global powers, China with its think tank sector is considered to be the only country able to provide a systematic alternative blueprint to replace the Western-dominated liberal international order (Brozus and Maull 2017). In sum, although think tanks in China are influenced by the relations they have with the government and its agencies, there is a need to understand what normative roles, if any, they can play in the context of China's political and economic transformations at the international level.

In 2013, Chinese think tanks started an intense process of "internationalization" following the call of the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, to modernize China's system of governance with the intent "to build new think tanks with Chinese characteristics". As a response to this call, all leading think tanks engaged with a process of "modernization", with the ultimate goal to transform themselves into high-level quality research institutes with considerable international influence. The changing role of policy research institutes in China has led some observers to define a "Golden Age" of think tanks.² In parallel with their traditional activities, like functioning as advisors to the government, today's think tanks host myriad public events, organize international conferences and activities, and participate in high level forums and summits. Chinese think tanks have thus emerged as essential actors in Chinese foreign policy and diplomatic practice.

Nevertheless, think tanks are also expected to operate as civil society organizations independent from the state sector, or at least, with sufficient autonomy from governments. This is because seminal definitions of think tank most cited in the literature converge significantly regarding their political and financial independence.³ Even more

C. Huang, "Public sphere/Civil Society in China? The Third Realm between State and society: paradigmatic issues in Chinese Studies III", 1993.

²Tang Yuankai, "Golden Age of Think Tanks. Research and Ideas play an increasingly important role in China's policymaking", 27 May 2014, available: http://www.bjreview.com.cn/print/txt/2014-05/27/content_620991.htm (accessed February 2019).

specifically, it is often taken for granted that think tanks possess influence and international credibility only if they function “as both symbols and products of a pluralist democracy” (Nylen 2018, 269). To believe so, however, “would immediately exclude virtually all of the Chinese think tanks that have emerged in recent decades, on the grounds they lack sufficient independence from the one-party state in that country” (Abelson and Brooks 2017, 3). Therefore, as argued by Patrick Kollner, Xufeng Zhu and Pascal Abb, because national think tank sectors are heavily affected by the particular context in which they exist, their development in mainland China requires a reconsideration of prevailing assumptions that they can only prosper in democratic contexts when they are independent from the government (2018). Jane Hayward’s account, in particular, combines the relevance of the national political culture with the class implications of the internationalization of China’s experts. As Chinese experts have become “globalized” and merged with the transnational class of experts and technocrats, new powerful groups in China are today more allied to global capital. Such a process has inevitably increased political contestation within China’s policymaking space, thereby affecting the international dimension of China’s new-type think tanks (2018).

This article builds on previous research in the China-focused think tank literature, and specifically, on two important contributions: (1) that national think tank sectors are heavily influenced by the political context in which they exist (Stone 1998, 2004; Kollner, Zhu, and Abb 2018); and (2) that they remain essential actors in how narratives, discourses and strategies about foreign policy and diplomacy are generated, framed and discussed in international affairs and global governance (Zimmermann 2016; Menegazzi 2017). This article does not aim to assess the extent to which a specific institute affects policymaking in China, or whether, if, and how a specific policy has been implemented because of a think tank advice on that policy. Rather, it intends to discuss their growing relevance in light of China’s ascending role at the international level. In doing so, this article seeks to answer the following questions: what role do think tanks play in shaping China’s public diplomacy? Can they disseminate political narratives, ideas and strategies in line with the Party’s interests? To answer these questions this article proceeds as follows: the next section points to the complexities surrounding how best to understand the role of think tanks within a non-western, authoritarian political context; then, it provides further theoretical insights contextualizing the functionality of think tanks as affected by the national context in which they are established. As such, the article relies on the Knowledge Regimes framework and use it as a theoretical reference to discuss think tank networks in China’s public diplomacy. In this regard, it combines studies about policy research organizations and sources of policy ideas with the analysis on the relevance of public diplomacy in international affairs outside the Western world. Next, it provides an account of the developments of this sector in China. It then turns to discuss the role of think tanks in the realm of public diplomacy with a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Finally, it draws conclusions that explain the important role of think tanks and their networks in targeting public opinion outside China about China’s international interests and policies. Overall, this article aims to further open up space for discussion of the theoretical potential derived

³The debate about perceptions dealing with the political and financial independence of think tanks is still alive and kicking. See for instance: Chafuen (2016).

from analyzing the intricate relationship between national context/regime type think tanks and the decision-making process. A key finding of this article is that it identifies the evolving contribution of think tanks to the diplomatic decision-making apparatus notwithstanding China's authoritarian regime.

The Problem of Studying the Unfamiliar: China's Knowledge Regime and the Think Tank Conundrum

The nature of China's political regime makes think tank studies challenging, compared with other countries in the world. Because think tanks in China developed far from a pluralistic-liberal environment in which all major think tanks were established worldwide, there has been a tendency to consider them as a sort of "second-order" of think tanks.⁴ However, in the case of China, this is misleading—not least because experts, academics, and public intellectuals have always played an influential role in political decision-making processes. In fact, this is typical within socialist countries, as Gu and Goldman (2004) showed in their research, in which they identified how a need for the knowledge expertise of different segments of intellectuals, that is, engineers, social scientists, military specialists and economists, were essential in guaranteeing the legitimacy of communist and post-communist regimes in economic development and reform. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the prominent role played by scientists, technologists and experts has been central to the making of major decisions concerning social and economic development. The 863 Program—a State High-Tech Development Program established in 1986 with the purpose of making China financially independent from foreign technology—is one area of economic planning and policymaking in which the role played by scientists and technicians was crucial to China's major strategic decisions (Ru 2020).

The connection between the government and the "think tank sector", or policy experts more broadly, is thus an important, but often controversial, connection to be studied with regard to China. While the vision of a monolithic, strongly authoritarian party stands at odds with the existence of independent civil society organizations, it is evident today that the strong propensity of the Chinese leadership to count on experts and organizations is in step with the times and highly internationalized.⁵ Chinese think tanks are thus models of this paradox: they are not independent from the government, but ultimately, they possess similar characteristics (in terms of organizational structures, personnel, mission and aims) to their Western counterparts. However, problems will arise if we study Chinese think tanks from early research and definitions drawn from a variety of cases that are, for the most part, rooted within a Western-led tradition. To date, numerous studies have explored the rise of think tanks and their relevance in the policymaking process (Weaver 1989; Higgott and Stone 1996; Stone 1998, 2013; Scott 1999; Parmar 2004; Rich 2005; McGann 2007; McGann and Sabatini 2011; Abelson 2006; Pautz 2011; Anguelova-Lavergne 2012; Salas Porras and Murray 2017; Jezierska 2018). In contrast, less research has been conducted on the establishment

⁴On this point, see for instance Wang and Hu (2017)

⁵Li Wei: Promoting to Build High-Quality New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics Through Reform and Innovation", DRC, 3 February 2015, available http://en.drc.gov.cn/2015-02/09/content_19531716.htm

and developments of the think tank sector in China. Accordingly, in the US or Britain, think tanks are expected to be either independent research organizations or charities and non-profit organizations, but especially “eschewing formal ties to government, political parties, universities and other organizations” (Higgott and Stone 1996, 17). In the West, the belief is strongly held that think tanks are capable of building and maintaining a consistent mixture of networks wherein the ultimate goal is the notion (and promotion) of liberal democracy (Scott 1999). Moreover, these actors are expected to reinforce and encourage the “Western-preferred” image of democracy (Scott 1999, 148). Chinese think tanks do not act as a vehicle for democratic entrepreneurialism, nor do they push forward political pluralism. We should, however, make a distinction between those who employ these arguments to critique Chinese think tanks as unable to provide meaningful policy advice and as merely serving to provide intellectual arguments, in order to justify authoritarianism in China, and those who, aware of the consistent marginalization in the literature about the functional dimension of think tanks within developing or illiberal settings, argue that a liberal democratic context is not the most important precondition available to think tanks in order to perform their functions. Think tanks have already established a very special niche within China’s political environment. It is true that think tanks in China maintain very strong interactions with the government; yet their role has certainly become more consultative. It is worth mentioning that scholars in the West have also complicated the relations that think tanks maintain with the government in liberal democracies, problematizing the assumption that these are straightforwardly civil society organizations. Diane Stone for instance, notes a considerable degree of overlap between think tanks and other organizations in society, given that, “the precise nature of think tank ‘independence’ is an awkward problem which must be treated with flexibility” (1998, 5). Stone also suggests that only by studying them cross-nationally can we better understand the kind of engagement they maintain with governments and their variations as organizations vis-à-vis society. As Thomas Medvetz notes, the real conundrum pertains to the fact that “the boundary of the think tank category is an object of subtle but perennial contestation among social actors and groups” (2012, 34). In other words, rather than trying in vain to define think tanks in terms of their autonomy from the government, it is important to study their social and political relations in order to understand their meaningful role in the social world. Such perspectives can move us beyond discussions of think tanks (and civil society more broadly) that take as their starting point efforts to define the boundaries between the governmental and non-governmental. After all, such distinctions are meaningless in the Chinese context. Scholarship in China as well as in the West recognizes how leading categories and conceptual frameworks used to describe China’s state-society relationship have often failed to explain the complex dynamics at play between the party-state and civic organizations. More simply, the fact that think tanks were often portrayed only as “catalysts” for democratic ideas left largely unexplained the phenomenon of a growing think tanks sector that has developed in the course of the last two or three decades outside Western contexts and, in particular, within non-democratic countries (Deng and Menegazzi 2018).

Nowadays, think tanks in China can be divided into two categories: semi-official think tanks and non-governmental think tanks. To some, they are “stable and autonomous organizations that research and consult on policy issues to influence the policy process” (Zhu 2013, 6). More precisely, the two categories represent their organizational

identity: government-sponsored semi-official think tanks (事业单位 *shiyedanwei*), which are public institutions founded and sponsored by the government; and non-governmental think tanks, which include policy research institutes registered either as enterprises (企业 *qiye*) or as civilian non-profit institutions (民办非企业单位 *minban fei qiye danwei*). From the above classification government-run agencies have been excluded as think tanks because they are not autonomous organizations; yet, the Party also often sponsors semi-official think tanks. However, limits persist when applying Western definitions of think tanks to the Chinese context (Zhu 2009, 2011, 2013). In fact, when discussing independence from the government, at least two different meanings apply to China. The first concerns the extent to which an institute in China is allowed to operate autonomously—and effectively—from the government. The second is a broader understanding linked with the assessment of the formal legal identity of think tanks. To this extent, semi-official think tanks are “the most important component in the policy research and consultation system outside the government in China”, although “not completely independent because they are not independent legal persons founded by the government” (Zhu and Xue 2007, 454). Among official policy circles in China think tanks are classified as (i) Party-state and military think tanks; (ii) institutes affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Science; (iii) University research institutes; and (iv) civilian think tanks (Yu 2013; Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences 2014). In order to overcome theoretical and analytical uncertainties with regard to the relationship they maintain with the Party researchers have extensively used the second classification, including official organizations affiliated with the Party.

Some of the aforementioned aspects of Chinese think tanks appear extremely relevant when dealing with their international dimension. Studies on the role of think tanks and their influence in international politics has attracted considerable attention from scholars. Zimmerman believes think tanks to be “creators, developers and advocates of specific policy agendas” (2016, 175). According to David Shambaugh, although promoting the preferred self-image of China, there is more to the role of think tanks than just repeating official propaganda, and the relationship they maintain with the Party stands as an example of how China seeks to project official policies abroad (2020, 143). In view of the blurred boundaries they maintain with the government, the approach here follows earlier arguments developed by other scholars proposing a parsimonious approach applied to think tanks, given their remarkable difference in terms of types and definitions in different regions and countries worldwide (Stone 2007; Pautz 2012; Kollner, Zhu, and Abb 2018). To eschew the definitional conundrum, the concept of knowledge regimes is extremely valuable for the purpose of studying this sector in China, as it provides a real alternative to how think tanks can be categorized, depending on their functionality and their national context (Menegazzi 2017, 29). Being knowledge organizations, think tanks are elements of so-called knowledge regimes, defined by Ove Campbell and John Pedersen as “the organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate” (Campbell and Pedersen 2014, 3). While the approach makes clear how a certain knowledge regime reflects the political and economic institutions that are typical of a specific country, it also contributes to us knowing more about the normative role of think tanks in the context of China’s political and economic transition (Menegazzi 2017, 30). Simply put, because knowledge regimes are affected by the organizational

structure of their surrounding political economy, each knowledge regime is nationally specific (Campbell and Pedersen 2015). In this light, Maslow remarks that the concept of knowledge regime remains essential in order to capture the complex relation at play between the think tank sector and the policymaking process, as they operate at the nexus of public and private policy advocacy and yet can be heavily influenced by the national context in which they operate (2018).

More simply, the knowledge regime framework represents a novel opportunity to explore how knowledge influences public policy and it unpacks the way in which knowledge agents and political structures mesh (Nachiappan 2013). Applying this approach to better understand China-led think tank networks is instructive and valuable for three main reasons. First, it enables a clear explanation of how China's knowledge regime evolves in response to the shifting priorities of the leadership in office in parallel with the relevance of think tanks to provide them with relevant policy advice in the context of international affairs. As the rise of China has become a central force in global politics, the size of its diplomatic networks has grown with this. While it is certainly true that the policy process remains heavily centralized and is managed by a tight structure of a few powerful individuals, the influence of experts and other numerous stakeholders remains extremely relevant in contemporary China. Second, such analysis also suggests the evolution of a transnational dimension of Chinese think tanks and therefore, of China's knowledge regime. The institutions of global policymaking are underdeveloped and evolving (Stone 2015, 3). Evidence offered by the various BRI-related think tank networks indicate that Chinese experts are far more involved in the transnational policymaking process and that China is ambitious to propose its own model of "knowledge networks"—here defined as networks of experts (based in universities, think tanks, foundations) that produce knowledge and inform policy makers on relevant issues in global governance and international affairs. Last but not least, the knowledge regime framework sheds light upon the development from old to new public diplomacy. Whereas old public diplomacy is mostly government-led and thus state-centric, the new form of public diplomacy "focuses more on exchange and collaboration and emphasize dialogue, relationship building and the role of non-state actors" (Hartig 2016, 2). The crucial point, therefore, is that investigations about Chinese knowledge networks also highlight new practices of public diplomacy in a changing environment, in which the communicative actions of think tanks contribute to this paradigmatic shift from old to new public diplomacy, but without eclipsing the interests of the Chinese Party-state.

Chinese Think Tanks in the Xi Jinping Era: A New Global Industry

Since Xi Jinping took office in 2012, think tanks have acquired a recognized status in the eyes of the new administration. Efforts have been made to ascertain how the government apparatus intends to construct the idea of having "a new type of Chinese think tank", in order to increase their role within the Party decision-making mechanisms, as well as China's soft power abroad. For instance, in 2013, the Chinese Press Agency Xinhua announced that think tank experts would be consulted publicly to discuss how to contribute ideas about the concept of a "China Dream". On that occasion, Liu Qibao, Head of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, encouraged the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) "to promote the

international influence of Chinese academics with theories and discourses that are understandable and convincing for the world”.⁶ Later, in October 2013, the new leadership proposed a strategic plan to deal with such organizations in China. In the words of Xi Jinping:

Building a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics is an important and pressing mission. It should be targeted on promoting scientific and democratic decision making, promoting modernization of the country’s governing system and ability, as well as strengthening China’s soft power ... think tanks affiliated to all departments, including the Party, the government, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Army, enterprises, as well as non-governmental think tanks, should be developed in a coordinated way, so that to form a think tank system with clear definitions, features and appropriate scales. (Xi Jinping, Xinhua website 2013)

What are then the so-called Chinese characteristics that think tanks should possess? The growing attention devoted to this sector by the Xi administration demonstrates that the relevance of think tanks in China has increased considerably, based on the importance attached to them by the party. The 2017 document published by the Chinese government “Several Opinions on the healthy development of social think tanks” is particularly relevant. The document is divided into six parts for a total of 23 paragraphs. Worth mentioning here is Part 2, titled “Guiding ideology and basic principles”. This part envisions think tanks as tools suitable for the task of strengthening the leadership of the party by adhering to the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory and Xi Jinping’s “new ideas and strategies for governing the country”.⁷ What is clear is, therefore, the Party’s commitment to cementing national sentiments among policy research organizations and their experts, and as a consequence, it is clear how loyalty to the Party is considered as the number one characteristic that think tanks must possess.

Following the 2013 announcement, in December 2015, the central government launched the “National High-Level Think Tank Pilot Project”, aimed at promoting the building of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. The project envisioned four types of institutes that embody the “typology” of policy research organizations in China: (1) government-affiliated comprehensive think tanks; (2) university-affiliated think tanks; (3) SOE-affiliated think tanks; and (4) non-governmental think tanks. A total of 25 think tanks were included in the launch of the new programme.⁸ More specifically two main elements define so-called New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (NTTCC): the establishment of new think tanks that are different from old and ministry-affiliated think tanks, in parallel with the objective to reinforce China’s public diplomacy through Chinese think tanks (Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018).

In the West, Xi’s announcement raised doubts about the possibilities for China to develop real world-class think tanks (Guang and Economy 2015; Huang 2015). However, current attention towards policy research institutes is given primarily by the

⁶“Think tank urged to research ‘Chinese Dream’”, Xinhua, 28 May 2013, available: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-05/28/content_16537848.htm (accessed 22 September 2015).

⁷“关于社会智库健康发展的若干意见” (Several Opinions on the healthy development of social think tanks), 4 May 2017, Xinhua News Agency, available:http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-05/04/content_5190935.htm (accessed 4 May 2020).

⁸“National High-Level Think Tanks Pilot Project”, China Development Institute, available at: <http://en.cdi.org.cn/component/k2/item/143-national-high-level-think-tank-pilot-project>, accessed 17 May 2017.

official consultative role they perform vis-à-vis the Communist Party. The document issued by the CCP General Office and State Council General Office Opinion, affirmed that new think tanks in China are not only to be considered as “an important component part of national soft power”, but they are expected to play an “irreplaceable role in international relations”, in order to provide “a fine image of Socialist China, promote Chinese culture and contemporary China’s value view to march towards the world and send China’s voice out on the international stage” (State Council 2015). In China, President Xi’s announcement generated an intense debate among scholars and policymakers about the future path of Chinese think tanks, and in particular, how to achieve an equally recognized status with their Western counterparts. Chinese think tanks perform a wide range of activities: they collect information for leaders in Beijing, as well as for CCP’s cadres and officials at the regional, provincial and local levels; they interact with national and international media, shaping public opinion’s, ideas and discourses on major issues with regard to foreign policy debates; and they provide consultancy services to national and international organizations.

In recent years, scholars have increased their observation and produced significant research on Chinese think tanks (Greenhalgh 2005; Liao 2006; Zhao 2012; Li 2014; Glaser 2015; Li 2017). Zhu Xufeng’s accounts, in particular, show how think tanks have become important policy participants in China’s policymaking environment and how important expert opinions can be in a context like China (2013, 2018). According to Hayward, explaining the mechanisms of the Chinese policymaking context demonstrates how a process of contestation usually takes place both inside and outside the state apparatus, contradicting the view that only within liberal democracies do think tanks contribute to political discussions. For too long Chinese think tanks have been described with an orientalist bias that limited our understanding of their meaningful role in policymaking (Hayward 2018). Instead, in the past decade, the developments and changes that occurred within China’s foreign policy think tanks, in terms of public relations activities, media presence and policy advice to decision-makers, allowed them to achieve a very influential position when it came to shaping public debates on international issues (Abb 2019). Attention increased particularly following the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress held in 2013, during which proposals about the possibility to strengthen the role of think tanks at the international level were initially discussed. Then in 2014, at the sixth meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform, the Chinese President Xi Jinping affirmed that the idea to build “think tanks with Chinese characteristics” (中国智库特色 *zhongguo zhiku tese*) was considered to be a key priority to its administration.⁹

Li and Qi noticed also that so-called new-think tanks with Chinese characteristics generated a real “think tank fever” in China, which reflected the ambition by the current leadership to depict an international image of China as an economy and military superpower (2018). According to Xue, Zhu and Han (2018), official recognition by the Chinese leadership is also a major driving force for the increased success of think tanks’, which has also resulted as a main condition for explaining their increasing

⁹“Why did Xi Jinping emphasise the idea of building think tanks with Chinese characteristics?” (*Xi Jinping weihe tebie qiangdiao xinxing zhiku jianshe ?*), People’s Daily, 29 October 2014, available at <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/1029/c148980-25928251.html> (accessed 17 October 2016).

relevance and authoritative position at the global level. More recently, Wuthnow and Chen investigated the dimension of privately-founded, non-governmental think tanks (PTTs) in the Xi era. China's PTTs community has expanded as a result of the campaign launched by the Xi Jinping administration in 2015 to encourage "new think tanks" (新型智库 *xinxing zhiku*), but they argue that, with respect to large state-run institutes, PTTs still possess fewer advantages in scale, funding and access to officials (Wuthnow and Chen 2020).

From 2013, the international activities of Chinese think tanks proliferated, resulting in a growing tendency for institutes to participate in international academic activities, global forums, scholarship exchanges and many other events. Secondly and even more importantly, their activities have grown in parallel with China's international initiatives, that is, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to Tan and Li, it is quite difficult for the Chinese government to exhaustively safeguard global and national interests without a substantial strategic and well-planned research agenda behind these processes (Tan and Li 2018). In this light, *ad hoc* think tank networks have been created, in order to support China's recent initiatives. Viewed historically, the establishment of the first institutes in the early 1960s came as a result of the need to fulfil one but specific task for the government and the leaders in office: to help Chinese policymakers, think while dealing with a growing number of international issues (He 2002). From the 1980s onwards, the trust and credibility of think tanks among the country's leaders became stronger, due to China's need to reform and open up to the outside world. In these years, the government in China recognized "the enormous benefits that would accrue from encouraging the nation's best scholars to study critical domestic and foreign policy issues and advice officials on possible course of action" (He 2002, 34).

Chinese Think Tanks and Public Diplomacy

Chinese think tanks have been defined as "strategic actors entrenched within the most restricted circles of Chinese politics" (Menegazzi 2016). Today, China is one of the few countries in the world possessing the largest number of institutes (507) third only to the US (1871) and India (509) (McGann 2019). The activities think tanks perform as a part of their internationalization strategy are essential in the process of foreign policy discussion and formulation in China. Here, the focus on the internationalization of activities concerns the growing involvement of think tanks in a series of diplomatic mechanisms, such as participation in international multilateral forums and highly institutionalized networks. These allow policy research organizations and their experts to become actors "on the stage" and to influence foreign publics by promoting a positive image of China and its international policy agenda. This comes as no surprise, given that they are a major tool in promoting Chinese public diplomacy and soft power abroad. Despite governmental institutes founded at the turn of the 1970s and the 1980s once appearing to be less internationalized than the more recently established think tanks, the majority are now at the forefront of the government's efforts to boost China's public diplomacy, while establishing a policymaking-consultancy system in step with the times and particularly functional to build China's image in the world.¹⁰ Regarding the empirical discussion that follows, this article is not intended to call into question the contestation of the positive image projected by China's public diplomacy. Instead,

it shows the knowledge networks through which Chinese think tanks disseminate political narratives, ideas, and strategies outside China and in line with the Party's interests about the BRI. The overall objective is thus to highlight the fact that, even within authoritarian contexts, think tanks are relevant actors in the practice of public diplomacy.

According to van Ham, public diplomacy is all about communication. It is a strategy that “fits well in a world where the networks and the fluid relationships among multiple actors with fuzzy roles abound” (2010, 116).¹¹ The concept of public diplomacy (公共外交 *gonggong waijiao*) has increased its relevance in the Chinese lexicon in the last two decades. As Zhao Kejing explains, in China the term always had a double meaning. Traditionally, it meant “external propaganda” and referred to raising global awareness of Chinese achievements and to the construction of a new image of China for overseas audiences. More recently, the term has chimed with ideas of people-to-people diplomacy, that is, the role played by ordinary people in foreign affairs (Zhao 2015). Therefore, think tank experts are important policy instruments in the hands of the government. Other than providing policy advice, experts establish international networks to explain foreign policy and to facilitate track two activities,¹² all of which contribute to the dissemination of a Chinese perspective in international affairs.

International fora are in fact the cornerstones of influence and “knowledge exchange” and what is more, they offer “a neutral territory where people feel more comfortable and have an opportunity to mingle” (Stone 1996). They represent a unique opportunity in the coming together of different interests, lowering transaction costs and establishing a fair basis for cooperation and discussion. Without them, there would have been considerably higher costs (Perez 2014). Wei Ling, Head of the Asian Studies Institute at the China Foreign Affairs University, considers diplomatic initiatives in which think tanks participate to be of primary importance to East Asian “relational networks” (关系网络化的地区 *guanxi wangluohua de diqu*), in which culture and ideational processes prevail in diplomatic moments (Wei 2010). Similarly, Qin argues that *relations* are power, and that relational governance, equal to rule-based governance, allows individuals to negotiate socio-political arrangements in order to achieve sustainable and long-term cooperation practices (Qin 2016, 2018).

In the last few years, Chinese knowledge networks have become key players in these relational platforms, in which experts are invited to meet and discuss relevant topics in international affairs. The participation of think tanks in China's diplomatic agenda stands today as a major strategy to establish domestic and foreign policy networks to represent Chinese interests abroad. Some events have already achieved a high level of institutionalization, and cooperation between China and third countries has been profound through the activities of such networks. An example is the China–Africa Think Tanks

¹⁰For instance, in the 2018 Global Go To Think Tanks Report, China's Top 3 institutes are all government-led organizations, that is, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS); and the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). See McGann (2019).

¹¹The debate on public diplomacy intensified its relevance within International Relations scholarship. Broadly speaking, public diplomacy is intended as an instrument used by states and non-state actors to influence thoughts, ideas and behaviors in foreign countries, as well as to mobilize actions to advance a country's interests and values. The civil society dimension of public diplomacy in Europe and North America is traditionally less visible in regions such as East Asia, where public diplomacy is largely intended as a governmental national strategy (Melissen 2013).

¹²For the purpose of this article, the term track two refers to “unofficial activities involving academics, think tank researchers, journalists, and former officials, as well as current officials participating in their private capacities”. See Ball, Milner, and Taylor (2006).

Forum (CATTF), in which the representative institutes for these countries have established a relationship that allows them to exchange opinions ahead of strategic discussions carried out on important matters (political, economic and cultural cooperation) in individual countries by their leaders. Successful stories include think tank cooperation set up in relation to the countries of Central America and the establishment of a cooperation platform with policy research organizations in The West Indies (The China-LAC Think Tanks Forum). Through its involvement with these international meetings and their associated fora, China has improved its diplomatic relations and its international image. At the global level, among one of the most successful examples is the attendance of Chinese think tanks during the G20. At the 2015 summit, China had more think tanks represented at the “Ideas Bank” (T20) than any other Asian country. In Hangzhou, the T20 platform established by China counted more 500 experts from different countries. Through the T20, China promotes ideas in which officials anticipate how and when the government will ratify or endorse decisions made during the summits. Chinese leaders believe their country to be a proactive participant vis-à-vis new initiatives and multilateral practices (both governmental and non-governmental activities), as recently testified by the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the BRICS New Development Bank. In light of the substantial participation of think tank experts in Chinese diplomacy and policymaking, members of think tanks enlarged their activities, not simply providing policy recommendations or reviewing and evaluating controversial policies, but specifically “channelling messages and acting as negotiators in second track activities” (Sun 2004).

China’s Knowledge Networks and the Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, President Xi Jinping put forward the Belt and Road Initiative, a significant development strategy aimed at strengthening economic cooperation between more than 60 countries and numerous international organizations worldwide. In March 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDR), together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, jointly issued *The Push to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road*. Since then, numerous public events were held, with the intent to spread knowledge on the BRI to foreign audiences, among which the Belt and Road Forum represented its flagship event. The latest 2019 edition saw the attendance of more than 100 heads of states from all over the world. In parallel with governmental initiatives, the Chinese government strongly emphasized the role of think tanks vis-à-vis the BRI. In June 2016, President Xi affirmed at the Silk Road Forum in Warsaw that think tanks need to play a leading role in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative.¹³ In April 2019, he remarked once again that think tanks can boost BRI cooperation to a higher level.¹⁴ According to Vangeli, the input of think tanks and academics has been instrumental in advancing the BRI since its onset (2019, 425). While Chinese and foreign think tanks have increased bilateral cooperation

¹³Li Wei, “Think tanks need to play a leading role in advancing the Belt and Road Initiative”, Development Research Center of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 25 July 2017, available: https://web.archive.org/web/20190808200823/http://en.drc.gov.cn/2017-07/25/content_30242333.htm (accessed 23 September 2019).

¹⁴Cao Desheng, “President calls on think tanks to boost teamwork, Belt, Road, construction” ChinaDaily.cn, available: <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/25/WS5cc0b37da3104842260b8266.html>, (accessed 27 May 2019).

since the BRI was launched in 2013, Chinese-led think tank networks have emerged as a central mechanism for research cooperation, ideas discussion, policy consultation, and numerous other activities. The most important of these knowledge networks are the Silk Road Think Tank Network (SiLKS) and the Silk Road Think Tanks Association (SRTA)—both established in 2015—and the Belt and Road Studies Network (BRSN) launched four years later, in 2019. In parallel with think tank cooperation, the Chinese government is simultaneously promoting networks led by universities or university-affiliated research centres such as the University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR) and the University Alliance of the Belt and Road (UAB&R), both established in 2015.

The Silk Road Think Tank Network (SiLKS)

SiLKS is the oldest network and it emerged as the “flagship network” where the government envisioned a strategic role for think tanks in facilitating policy discussion and coordination. As part of China’s interest to enrich its strategies of public diplomacy, there has been strong support from the central government to promote think tank cooperation among the countries involved in the BRI. In 2017, Liu Qibao, Head of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, affirmed the government’s commitment to work towards cooperative ties between Chinese and overseas think tanks for the implementation of the BRI.¹⁵ SiLKS was launched in Madrid at the Silk Road Forum on October 28, 2015, and followed by the first official forum, the “Silk Road Think Tanks Association Conference” held in Shenzhen, China on 23 February 2016. The network today comprises more than 40 members, with a major government-affiliated Chinese think tank leading the project, the Development Research Center of the State Council (DRC). It also includes major international partners such as the OECD Development Centre, Chatham House (UK), EBRD and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). SiLKS is defined “an open and inclusive network” with “think tanks, international organizations, government agencies, companies and non-governmental bodies all welcomed to join as partners”.¹⁶ As a major objective of the BRI is related to the role performed by Chinese enterprises in building infrastructure projects overseas, a main function of SiLKS is also to provide the government with policy advice on to how strengthen its internationalization strategy. In an article published by the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), SiLKS is defined as the main platform that helps coordinate and further harmonize the development of science and technology, thanks to the maximization of the intellectual contribution provided by the role of technical experts in determining policy orientation vis-à-vis the BRI (Wang 2016). Furthermore, through a series of people-to-people exchanges and scientific and technological cooperation strategies, SiLKS makes use of the think tanks in the countries along the Silk Road to promote the project on a long-term intellectual basis. The overall target of the network is to cement think tank relations between China and the countries involved along the BRI and to deepen people-to-people dialogues through implementing an innovative platform. According to Stephen Perry, Chairman of the 48 Group Club,

¹⁵“CPC publicity chief urges Belt and Road think tanks cooperation”, ChinaDaily.cn, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/14/content_29341591.htm, accessed May 19 2017.

¹⁶“Declaration of SiLKS”, DRC, available: http://en.drc.gov.cn/201510/30/content_22355908.htm, accessed 15 March 2016.

UK, apart from consultative services and policy suggestions, SiLKS also functions as a “business facilitator” by promoting business communication strategies within the network (Perry 2015). Cheng Guoqiang, Director of the Department of International Cooperation of the Development Research Center of the State Council (DRC), believes SiLKS to be an open and diversified communication platform, willing to offer strategic policy suggestions (Cheng 2014). More generally, the network presents a favourable image of how China conducts infrastructural projects and investment plans overseas. China’s global economic expansion through BRI-related project would not pose political or economic threats to the West; nor it is dictated by imperialistic dynamics, but it simply stands as a result of globalization processes.¹⁷

The Silk Road Think Tanks Association (SRTA)

The second network established in 2015 is the Silk Road Think Tank Association (SRTA).¹⁸ It was promoted by the External Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Fudan University. The membership is composed of so-called “governing units” that comprise major government-affiliated think tanks such as the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS) and the International Strategic Research Institute of the Central Party School (CPS). According to Article 7 of the Articles of Association of the SRTA, it is the Council—chaired among others by Zhang Laiming, Deputy Director of the Development Research Center of the State Council—that is responsible for making decisions on major issues such as the direction of the think tank alliance. As we read in the Declaration of Establishment, among the goals of the network are the creation of a platform to enhance knowledge and wisdom about the BRI project, the establishment of cooperative research framework based on win-win strategies in the light of China’s plan to promote regional cooperation and development on the development needs of China.¹⁹ The Silk Road Think Tank Association is the network promoting the “Health Silk Road” (健康丝绸之路) concept, through which China is pushing its efforts to recast itself as a responsible global health leader, launching a widespread public diplomacy campaign and sending medical aid worldwide.²⁰

The Belt and Road Studies Network (BRSN)

The Belt and Road Studies Network (BRSN) is the latest network launched by the Chinese government, in order to enhance think tanks cooperation along the Silk Road, and it should be considered as a sort of “network umbrella” comprising the previous two, as their functions and operations sometimes overlap. The network was

¹⁷“Professor of the John Hopkins University: Misdiagnosing the Chinese Infrastructure Push”, eSiLKS.org, available: <http://www.esilks.org/article/sid/TC0zkRE60>, (accessed July 3 2020).

¹⁸See for instance: “一带一路”智库合作联盟 – Belt and Road Think Tanks Cooperation”, available: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/“一带一路”智库合作联盟/17525322>

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰“一带一路”智库合作联盟发表倡议 呼吁共同开展“战”疫斗争” (“Belt and Road” think tanks cooperation alliance issued an initiative calling for a joint war against epidemic struggle), People’s Daily Online, available: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0424/c164113-31687276.html>, (accessed 2 July 2020).

inaugurated during the second Beijing Belt and Road Forum in April 2019 and comprises 56 members. Among these are renowned government-affiliated think tanks such as the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS), as well as foreign organizations, like the British Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The BRSN is coordinated by the Xinhua News Agency, the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China. Its President, Cai Mingzhao, is the Director of the State Council and Information Office (SCIO) and the current chairperson of the BRSN council. Major activities of the network are the annual gatherings of BRSN members. Participants convene in Beijing prior to the biannual Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, an international political and economic forum launched by the Xi administration in 2017 to discuss BRI-related issues and China-strategic plans. Among BRSN members, the network is perceived as instrumental to developing a new information policy of China, but especially to change perceptions about the country, given that “in the society of many countries along the way, a negative attitude towards China is maturing, and this opinion needs to be changed”.²¹ While SiLKS, SRTA and the BRSN all possess the characteristics and potential of international networks established to enhance cooperation in research and policymaking, the objective remains to sustain the country's geopolitical interests abroad, but even more to promote policy ideas and political narratives in line with the interests of the Chinese leadership. These networks can be considered as part of the government's strategy to raise think tanks international influence in line with the interests of the current administration to boost China's public diplomacy and soft power. The main organizations guiding the networks are well-established and powerful governmental agencies such as the Development Research Center of the State Council and the Xinhua News Agency—respectively the most important governmental institution in charge of policy planning and economic development and the largest Chinese news agency worldwide. Other relevant departmental and governmental bureaux include the National Development and Reform Commission, the highest organ in China in charge of formulate policies for social and economic development. Thus, policy advices related to the BRI and proposed by think tank experts are important tools vis-à-vis China's diplomatic strategies and political narratives.

At the same time, China's knowledge networks are part of a much larger project, one which saw China engage in a number of key initiatives in almost all fields of global governance: economic and financial cooperation with the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB); South-South cooperation with the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB); infrastructure building and sustainable development in Asia and Europe through the BRI, as well as China's ascending role in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and last but not least, transnational knowledge-building in the field of economic and infrastructural cooperation through SiLKS, STRA and the BRSN. The establishment of these networks is therefore not an isolated case through which to build support for China's global ambitions, but a mature instrumental diplomatic tool to provide further support to a wider architecture: the Beijing-based Silk

²¹Kubanychbek Taabaldiev, “Speech on the international forum for international cooperation at BRSN in Beijing”, (April 2019), available: http://www.brsn.net/cbwPublications/pub_en/detail/20190606/1005000000034981559785405593756865_1.html (accessed May 2020).

Road Fund—an investment fund established in 2014 and supported by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE), China Investment Corporation, Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank; and the Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce, a joint initiative by the international chambers of commerce led by the countries alongside the Silk Road.²² All these initiatives reflect Beijing's attempts to further harmonize China's position at the international level, in the context of the BRI project. The growing engagement of Chinese think tanks with regard to tracking two activities is therefore a direct consequence of the evolution of a global order in which China appears to be today as the “number two” power (Breslin 2015), but which requires, at this stage, a strong knowledge regime at play in informing, advising and shaping governmental policies to enable China to one day become the “number one” power. The build-up of research centres affiliated with Chinese universities with the intent to promote the BRI are representative of such a trend. In 2014, the Huaqiao University in Xiamen, Fujian province, had already established the Institute of Maritime Silk Road, among whose main activities was the training for personnel in the countries along the Maritime Silk Road area, and to facilitate the study of the BRI policies, including the study of Chinese language. A similar decision was made by Peking University, which announced in April 2018 the opening of a Belt and Road Institute to be led by the Guanghua School of Management.²³ While the effort on the Chinese side to reform and implement the quality of think tanks research and accountability is in line with those of their foreign counterparts, the major function of Chinese think tanks as instrumental diplomatic tools that are apt to enhance the foreign policy interests of governments around the world cannot be dismissed.

Conclusion

The article has explored the global engagement of China's knowledge networks with a focus on public diplomacy. Established with the need to reinforce BRI international visibility and activities, China-led think tank networks possess a strong potential to strengthen China's soft power abroad. From a Chinese perspective, think tank networks have been established with the intent to help government officials and state-owned enterprises to learn how to adjust China's model of development so that it complies with international standards, norms and procedures in different countries—from infrastructure-building to sustainable development and environmental standards. Nevertheless, most notably outside China, think tank networks such as SiLKS, SRTA and the BRSN are perceived to be instrumental to China's political and economic interests only, and still have little relevance to the implementation of BRI projects.

There are, however, important lessons we can learn from Chinese think tanks in the context of international diplomacy and through the BRI case. First, Chinese think tank networks are established with the intent to support China's public diplomacy. Networks

²²See for instance: the Silk Road Fund website: <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enwap/27363/index.html>; the Silk Road Chamber of International Network: <http://www.tangwestmarket.com/projects/srcic/silk-road-chamber-of-internationalcommerce-introduction/>, accessed 21 March 2016.

²³“Peking University launches ‘Belt and Road Institute’ led by Guanghua School of Management”, PR Newswire, available at: <https://www.prnewswire.com/in/news-releases/peking-university-launches-belt-and-road-institute-led-by-guanghua-school-of-management-680568461.html>, accessed 29 April 2018.

such as SiLKS, STRA and BRSN communicate an image of the BRI as a project that is non-aggressive, highly-inclusive, and environmental-friendly, but particularly as the flagship of China's international diplomatic agenda. The discourse articulated by participant organizations and individuals in the networks fiercely presents a positive image of these networks and of the project, which "is not meant to dismantle the existing international order, but rather to bring about new initiatives for global cooperation to complement them".²⁴ If, on the one hand, China's international image through Chinese-led think tank networks has rapidly improved over the years, on the other hand, Beijing's self-promotion through BRI projects does not equal or guarantee soft power and discursive influence *tout court*. This article, however, has not dealt directly with the contestation of the positive image that China tries to project through think tank-led public diplomacy. More clearly, the research questions discussed through the article—What role do think tanks play in shaping China's public diplomacy? Are they able to disseminate political narratives, ideas, and strategies in line with the Party's interests?—have opened a new space for discussion about the strategic and communicative roles performed in the realm of public diplomacy by think tanks established within authoritarian contexts. The political narrative thus far envisioned by Chinese-led think tank networks seems to be aligned with the Party's interests. As a result of Chinese think tank-led public diplomacy in the era of the BRI, at least two important caveats can be identified: first, China is proactively changing the distribution of (non-Western) actors who participate in transnational policy debates; and second, it is proposing an alternative frame in which to contextualize the narrative about its ascending global role, namely, the "non-assertive China" narrative.²⁵

In general, these networks have enlarged scholarship and knowledge on key decision-making actors in the context of Chinese diplomacy. The practice of networking is an essential activity—only after Chinese think tank-organized networking activities can they make a difference in terms of international credibility acquired on the diplomatic front. Trying to learn from foreign experiences, these networks have been shaped similarly with their Western counterparts. However, because of the authoritarian context in which they are established, they all support political narratives sustained by the Party and state institutions, like the DRC, NDR or the Xinhua News Agency, thus becoming less attractive for democratic countries. It is important to note that the practice as well as the institutional context of China's public diplomacy has changed remarkably in the course of the last two decades. The most important state actor remains the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as happens in most countries. In China, however, a major role is also exercised by other state actors, such as the Office of Foreign Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the State Council Information Office (SCIO). These are the main public diplomacy actors, in charge of projecting an image of China as a responsible, developing country that is not seeking hegemony or disrupting the international order. There are, of course, a growing number of non-state actors that are also involved in China's public diplomacy system: academics from China's top

²⁴Jusuf Wanandi. "Speech delivered at the Inauguration of the Belt and Road Network (BRSN)" (April 2019), available: http://www.brsn.net/cbw-Publications/pub_en/detail/20190606/1005000000034981559783357180490409_1.html, (accessed 12 May 2020).

²⁵For further details about the debate on China's assertiveness in International Relations scholarship see, for instance, Chen, Pu, and Johnston (2014).

universities, NGOs, overseas Chinese communities, and intellectuals in think tanks (d'Hooge 2007). However, the BRI case has shown how think tank networks are today at the forefront in sustaining and promoting China's soft power. BRI think tank networks are working hard at disseminating Chinese ideas internationally by facilitating awareness and dialogue, so that countries along the BRI understand the country's main features and opportunities. Because these networks are established *de facto* under the government's supervision, political narratives in line with a positive image of the project must be taken for granted. BRI think tank networks therefore have a coordinative role aimed at increasing knowledge about China's place in the world, which combines the authoritative identity of China's knowledge regime together with authoritarian traits, that is, governmental actors in China's public diplomacy, namely, the DRC and the Xinhua News Agency. In this regard, they become knowledge actors providing coordinative discourse that refers "to the creation, elaboration and justification of policy and programmatic ideas among transnational or national policy communities" (Stone 2015, 3). Last but not least, China's Soft Power has grown stronger, compared with the past. General knowledge about China's soft power strategy used to envision traditional propaganda tools such as Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and international media. Too often, however, China's soft power campaigns were limited because "of the dissonance between the image that China aspires to project and the country's actions" (Albert 2018). More recently, it seems that the government has begun to understand the relevance of think tanks at the international level to represent governmental policies and ideas. In particular, the significance of using expert views to build an image of China supported by scientific and intellectual knowledge is eventually more difficult to discredit.

China's rise on the world stage resulted in substantial challenges with regard to the accountability of experts and the functionality of policy advice, that is, China's growing ambition to propose strategic planning *vis-à-vis* its ascending global role. The theoretical relevance of this article was meant to open further space for discussion when considering the role acquired by policy advice at the international level. Regarding empirical evidence, BRI-related think tank networks illustrate some consequences beyond the idea of building "think tanks with Chinese characteristics". Since the plan was launched in 2013, numerous research institutes in China have embarked on genuine discussions about the role of think tanks, while producing a considerable amount of quantitative data in the English language, which was totally unthinkable a decade ago. By acting as "catalysts for ideas", think tanks are able to support CCP's envisioned strategies concerning China's global role, as well as legitimizing a reliable political agenda based on accountable expertise and policy advice. In the future, research has to move beyond the determinism and bias raised in the past about think tank studies outside democratic contexts. Think tanks have to be studied taking into account their national political culture; however, it appears evident by now how influential the global context is within which the activities of think tanks are performed. Therefore, it cannot be underestimated, even when the object of the analysis originates from an illiberal society.

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