

## **‘Think Tanks’ as the ‘Soft Power’ Tool in the Foreign Policy of the People’s Republic of China**

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**Abstract:** The topicality of investigation of this issue is determined by the fact that, the international policy of the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as PRC) is one of the most important indicators of the situation in the world. It determines not only the political, socio-economic situation in the Asian-Pacific region (ATP) but the world political climate as well. In these latter days, the necessity of formulation of the new theoretical and practical approaches to investigation of the forms and trends of the China’s Foreign policy becomes more obvious and topical. Today, the ‘soft power’ policy is one of the most effective and relevant means of implementation of the Foreign policy strategy for any state claiming to be the leader in the system of international relations. The objective of this study consists in revealing the specifics of operation of the ‘Think Tank’ (hereinafter referred to as TT) as the ‘soft power’ mechanism. For implementation of the goal set the history of development of the scientific and analytical institutions in the sphere of international relations in China will be studied. In the course of the study, we will provide the classification of the existing ‘Think Tanks’ and also consider the mechanisms of operation of the ‘soft power’ policy and specify the main channels of pathways of the analytical center exposure on the Foreign policy of the PRC. The materials of the research may be useful to the specialists studying, the international relations, history and policy of China, research associates and college teachers of humanitarian disciplines. They are also recommended to graduate and postgraduates students of higher school with advanced research training.

**Key words:** Soft power, think tanks, Foreign policy of the PRC, research and development centers, analytical centers

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### **INTRODUCTION**

‘Soft power’ is one of the most effective and relevant means of implementation of the Foreign policy strategy for any state claiming to be the leader in the system of international relations. The people’s Republic of China constitutes no exception to it as one of the leaders of the multipolar world being established. Along with that, the ‘soft power’ (another term ‘soft impact’) of the country had been the priority trend until, recently which ultimately threatened to result in the negative consequences as it would promote to spreading and strengthening of the myth ‘about the Chinese threat’, entrenchment of the public prejudice relating to China and its policy. The people’s Republic of China is the key player on the international stage and due to the fruitful operation of the variety of ‘Think Tanks’, research and analytical institutions today, China has become one of the centers of the international diplomacy and policy.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Along with the relatively ‘closed’ structures dealing with the issues of spreading the ‘soft power’ of China, development of theoretical guidelines as well as analysis of the results of pursuance of the policy in this sphere are performed by the ‘Think Tanks’ that are common in China. According to, the agency Xinhuashe, as of 2008 in the country, there were 2.5 thousand of research institutions performing political studies.

According to, the American researchers, the number of central Chinese TT meeting, the criteria of the reference book ‘The Global Go-To Think Tanks’ (McGann, 2009) and affecting the process of making the political-managerial decisions made 428.

According to, the American classification, the ‘Think Tanks’ existing in the PRC are divided into a few kinds: official, semi-official and independent. The centers falling into the first category are directly related to the state

council and governmental authorities. The second category of the 'Think Tanks' incorporates the dedicated academic research institutes primarily from among those affiliated with the main Chinese 'Think Tank' the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (hereinafter, Academy). According to, the estimates of the American analysts, the completely independent TT financed from the national commercial sources or international institutions and commercial entities make only 5%. The staff number of each of them does not exceed 20 persons and the aggregate annual budget 450 thousand USD (Zhurbey, 2011).

Another typology of the Chinese 'Think Tanks' is proposed by Xuefeng (2006). They distinguish the official, semi-official (non-governmental) public institutions and public (private) analytical centers, i.e., research and development institutes related to companies, universities and non-commercial foundations. They are not completely independent of the government but they are more autonomous in terms of management than, the official research and development institutes. Their directors are appointed by the government and they are financed by means of the public funds and provide analytics to the state authorities. They enjoy more freedom as they may receive funds from the Foreign State institutions or international organizations.

Having analyzed, the internal structure of the Chinese 'Think Tanks' and the mechanisms of their interaction with other institutions, we decided that, the following classification of the PRC's research-analytical centers appears to be the most accurate one:

- Official TT
- Semi-official (quasi-independent) TT
- Public TT
- Independent TT
- 'Phantom' (quasi-governmental TT)

The official 'Think Tanks' are subordinated to and financed by the Government of the PRC and their employees enjoy the status of the public officials of middle ranking. The officers of such centers have access to different levels of confidential information. According to, the Chinese Civil Legislation, the official institutions conducting the political surveys are called Governmental ones. These institutions play an important role in the process of development of the governmental policy are in charge of the development of the line of policy, dissemination of information and organization of the research process with respect to political issues. The main task of the centers of such kind consists in preparation of analytical and practical guidelines with

respect to the current situation in the sphere of the 'soft power' policy. The key centers: the institute of the modern international relations of China, Chinese Institute of International Studies, Research Center for Development of the State Council.

According to, the the semi-official TTs are the public institutions, mostly academic ones. They are founded by the government and are overseen by them as well. Such organizations are not completely independent as their management is appointed by the government and financed by sponsors (Governmental institutions). Such 'Think Tanks' feature a more independent management style, they are more free as they can receive additional funds from the Foreign foundations and fulfill orders from the other governmental institutions and authorities also international ones. These TT are the most essential component in the system of political studies and advices beyond the Government of China. They act like kind of 'information filters', 'advisors of political ideas', 'political interpreters' during the process of development of the Chinese policy. However, not all of its institutions are focused on implementation of political and Foreign policy decisions. Depending on, the subject matter and complexity of the analytical task, the dedicated institutions are involved in the development and solution thereof. Thus, the 'Think Tanks' of the second category do not participate in the continuous process of analysis and development of solutions relating to the 'soft power' policy. As the result, they exercise less impact than the 'Think Tanks' of the first category. Moreover, as a rule, their research issues feature theoretical and long-term nature and cannot be used in the current activities aimed at the policy implementation. In their activity, the 'Think Tanks' of the second category use the information obtained from the public sources and rarely use the classified data. However, they fulfill the important function of performing the large-scale research that requires analysis of the large volumes of public information, for example, relating to perception of China by the societies of the Foreign states (Nye, 2012). Besides, interaction with the foreign research centers is performed primarily by the centers of the third (rarely second) category. Some of the centers achieved succeeded in specializing in investigation of the specific issues like, for example, the Chinese Centre for the study of the 'soft power' culture on the basis of the Beijing Institute of graphic communications. The key centres: Tsinghua, Peking, Fudan and Shanghai University. The active creation of the public 'Think Tanks' started since 1992; the main field of their activity is to a great extent similar to semi-official ones. These centers fulfill the

following functions: provide information, analysis and advices to management; conduct the policy-related studies; perform educational work: many leading scientists lecture at universities, give lectures at governmental institutions; they print articles in the newspapers, participate in TV shows; initiate the public discussion of the urgent national and international issues publishing, the oppositional articles in the newspapers 'Nanfang City Daily', 'Beijing News', 'China Youth Daily' are the conductors of China to the outer world.

The public TTs are called to promote the new image of China being reformed in the West by developing cooperation both with the Foreign companies and with separate Foreign professionals but also participating in the international research projects. It is expected that such events would allow the Foreign researchers invited taking their own glance at the Chinese society and independently assessing the system of making of political decisions (McGann, 2012).

There are two kinds of the public 'Think Tanks'. They are created at the universities and colleges and are often headed by researchers that returned from an internship abroad. Their activity distinguishes through academic approach and the analytical products feature a less applied nature. These TTs design, the new concepts; maintain contacts with the learned society and the main source of financing thereof are the Foreign grants. An example of such TT is the Chinese Center for Economic studies created at the Peking University by Justin Lin Yifu.

The centers of the second kind are established by separate persons that have already become well known professionals. Previously they successfully worked at the semi-official 'Think Tanks' but left them, in order to, create the own research agencies according to their own ambitions and convictions. The Chinese analysts call them the 'public (folk's) research institutes' in the format of the non-profit or commercial organizations. For example, the institute of Economics 'Unirul' (Beijing, PRC) was founded in 1993 by the group of the economists researchers headed by Mao Yushi and the Center of economic monitoring and studies Dajun (Beijing, PRC) was founded by Zhong Dajun in 2000 as a joint stock company. Such centers operate on the contractual basis and strive for self-financing trying to diversify their research product and the customer base. The business structures constitute, the significant share of their clients. What is common to both groups is, as a rule, a small research format; however, they involved in the performance of work, the famous scientists that were socially-active had contacts with both the governmental authorities and those who criticized the government.

More and more often, the public centers criticize the economic policy of the state. As the result, the point of application of the research programs of such centers are the economy or less frequently, ecology but almost never the international relations. Such centers are created at the initiative of the researchers-economists, businessmen and public men and are financed exclusively using the private funds. They primarily count on the private donations and special-purpose subsidies (grants) within the frameworks of the national projects implemented or the staff training programs. They hold workshops and annual conferences regularly and profit from the publishing activity. The following may be referred the 'Think Tanks': non-commercial Unirule Institute of Economics created in 1993 and the non-commercial environmental organization Friends of the Nature) created in 1994. The 'Friends of the Nature' is the oldest environmental NPO in China that placed a bet on increase in the environmental awareness among the wide Chinese public. For a long time, such private analytical centers were remaining 'marginal' in terms of the possibility of impact on the power and the public opinion. In the sphere of international relations, it is nearly impossible to find an actually independent private 'Think Tank'. One of such exceptions is a 'small' and independent China Think Tank created in 2006. This is one of the three or four research centers in the area of international relations in China that is minimally controlled by the government but also enjoying less impact. This center unites about 200 top experts that conduct studies in the sphere of security, defence and military strategy since, more than a half of those employed are the military veterans. This center is partially financed by the governmental grants for implementation of special projects as well as through payment for workshops and trainings by commercial companies. The pre-requisite of success of such centers consists in the ability to provide the effective experts' support to the Governmental structures upon maintenance of the 'kindly critical attitude of the latter'. One shall also mentioned the activity of the Taiwan Fund of Jiang Jinguo named after the ex-president of Taiwan that finances the projects and gives grants to the Foreign sinologists also from Russian and the Eastern European countries. The activity of the research center for Foreign sinology created in 1996 on the basis of the Beijing International Studies University also deserves close attention. It deals with the development of the theoretical sinology in China and abroad and also finances some research programs of the Foreign researchers including those from Russia. The center has prepared and issued the following publications: 'History of teaching, Chinese in Russia

during the initial period', 'Brief history of the Orthodoxy in China', 'The history of sinology in Russia', 'The Russian Spiritual Mission in Beijing', etc.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The independent 'Think Tanks' are not related to the governmental authorities, therefore, they may treat policy pursued by the PRC's Government in a more critical way. The first of such organizations was the Institute of Social Development founded in 1988 by the company Stone Electronics. The most famous of them are the Institute of Public Relations 'Catey' and the company Gongmeng Consulting Co., Ltd. (often called just Gongmeng) located in Beijing.

Besides, another kind of 'Think Tanks' shall be mentioned, the so-called 'phantom' (quasi-governmental kind). Created for the purpose of making impression of a non-state scientific-research organization, it is being the tool of the government. According to, the American researchers such method is often used by authoritarian regimes to mask their tyranny under the guise of a prospering society. In China, such institution is the Chinese Institute of Development.

Thus, most of the Chinese 'Think Tanks' are within the jurisdiction of the Government authorities and their independence is limited. By contrast, the private analytical centers are restricted by the financial and other sources as well as by the policy of the state, thus are significantly behind in development.

Despite, the fact that many research projects of the centers affect different fields of activity; most of them, deal with political studies. Having analyzed the activity of most TT of the People's Republic of China, one may confidently speak of the 'Think Tanks' as the 'soft power' tools distinguishing the following mechanisms of implementation of this policy:

- Conduct of studies relating to the Foreign policy of the PRC
- Design of the own Chinese concept of the 'soft power' policy
- Active participation in the international research projects
- Holding of international forums, conferences, round tables
- Writing special works for Western organizations
- Active cooperation with mass media
- Involvement of the gifted youth in the study, in the PRC, Master's degree programme and doctoral studies also by advertising the activity of the academic 'Think Tanks'

The development of the Chinese Public diplomacy is restricted by the absence of the effective non-governmental mechanisms operating in this sphere. However, China seeks maximizing the efficiency of utilization of the existing Government authorities of the public diplomacy (Yan, 2012). On December 31, 2012, the dedicated organization in this sphere was created "The Association of Public Diplomacy". The specified authority uniting the prominent workers of the Chinese culture, art, policy sets itself the task of promotion of the China's interests with the use of the 'soft power' resources. The representatives of the association as well as the official representatives of the Chinese Government participate in the socially significant events performed on the territory of the PRC and abroad. At that the more relevant, the country is to China the more senior official speaks to the students. Thus, during his September tour across the countries of the Central Asia, the president of the PRC Xi Jinping performed before the students of the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan (Anonymous, 2013).

Liberalization of relations between, the 'Think Tanks' and the Chinese Mass Media is observed. Earlier the essential function of the 'Think Tanks', namely communicating the results of the studies to the wide public in China was not fulfilled due to the excessive censorship. By contrast, today the Western diplomats note the breakthrough in the issue of informing the Chinese audience on the attitudes of the 'Think Tanks' through mass media.

The Foreign policy journalists and news analysts in the mass media are being currently considered as the third force in the Foreign policy process of the PRC after the Governmental research institutes and universities. This became possible due to the fact that today the Chinese society is more educated and demonstrates the increased interest in the Foreign policy due to the access to the World Wide Web where there are hundreds or even thousands of forums, blogs on the pages of which the hottest issue of the international relations are discussed. Political forums, blogs, social networks occupy the niche of the non-state entities in the Foreign policy process in China; this, however constitutes the subject of another research.

The experts employed in the 'Think Tanks' at the Chinese universities are beyond the mechanism of effecting the foreign policy of the state; however some of them due to the personal contacts have access to persons making decisions. Chen Jian from the School of International Studies of the Renmin University and Sheng Dingli from the School of American Studies at the Fudan University give advice to the top public officials and their numerous followers enjoy the standing and reputation of their teachers to make career of professional diplomats. Today five Chinese universities (Beijing Daxue (Peking

University, Tsing Hua, Renmin, Fudan and Nankai) are recognized in the world as the prestigious centers of training of experts in the sphere of the Foreign policy, national security of China (Komissina, 2012). Return to the Confucian traditions in the modern China assigns additional weight to the figure of a 'professor'. In the nearest future the 'Think Tanks' in China will be more and more interested in involvement of the university professors. The weight of the university 'Think Tanks' in the new few years may exceed the weight and impact of the academic research and development institutes, i.e., semi-governmental political institutions. The intellectual products of universities are less academic and imply more practical application as compared to the products of the semi-governmental 'Think Tanks'. This is not a unique Chinese trend and it shall be noted that many German or French analytical centers lose in competition with the research departments of universities of these countries in the battle for the impact on the national governments or supranational structures of the European Union.

**Summary:** Many researchers, Western diplomats and politicians still underestimate the role and potential of the Chinese 'Think Tanks'. We tried to show briefly that the 'Think Tanks' of China became more notable and in many ways little by little become the important players of the political process. The research allowed us deepening our theoretical and empirical knowledge in the rather closed sphere of relations between the expert community of China and the political power. The study of the formal mechanisms of planning and implementation of the Foreign policy process is closer to the national researchers and observers and investigation of the 'Think Tanks' as the informal institutions provides us with the new prospects of understanding of the Foreign policy initiatives and decisions as well as induce thinking about the intellectual revolution going on in China.

Yet, the fact that the 'Think Tanks' had developed as much since, 1949 provides us rather with the idea of the culture, society and policy of China than with the understanding of the scope of impact exerted by the heterogeneous set of the public, academic and private 'Think Tanks' on the political environment and specific political decisions. Obviously, the 'Think Tanks' of China may make and do made their valuable contribution to the Foreign and domestic policy. The questions, the researchers are still trying to answer refer to how strong their impact is and in which ways it is exerted. The answers to these and other questions will allow developing additional ideas of the role and functions of these institutions in the Foreign policy process in China.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be drawn that, the study of the Chinese 'Think Tanks' allows opening the new possibilities for research in the sphere of the Foreign policy and Foreign policy process of the People's Republic of China. Until recently, the researchers believed that the 'Think Tanks' were a exclusively American phenomenon but as the study showed during the last few years the 'Think Tanks' occupied a more prominent position in the Chinese political process than could have been expected. The ability of the Chinese 'Think Tank's to directly or indirectly participate in formation of the Foreign policy and the readiness of the Chinese politicians, party organizers to ask them for advice lead to the conclusion that these structures start exercising a stronger effect on formation of the state policy than two or three decades ago.

As Donald Aybellson notes, very few researchers trying to evaluate or estimate the impact of the 'think tanks' carefully investigate how the political influence is won and what various obstacles are needed to be overcome (Mingjiang, 2009). At least, one shall realize that the 'think tanks' exercise different kinds of political influence at different stages of the political cycle. The increase in the number of the 'think tanks' in China suggests the growth of their impact. However, before drawing such conclusion, the researchers will have to pay close attention to the fact which contribution the think tanks' made in the specific foreign policy debates and whether the politicians working in different ministers adhered to their advice which is rather difficult due to the closed nature of the Chinese political system, in particular, during the process of development of the foreign policy.

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