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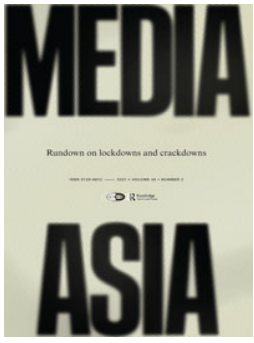
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The media and think tanks in China: The construction and propagation of a think tank

DECHUN ZHANG Ⓜ

With China's rapid growth as a regional and global power, think tanks in China have received increasing attention from politicians and academics, mostly due to the achievements of academic and processing policies. Recently, collaborations between the media and think tanks have become increasingly tight. This article aims to explore China's think tank industry and their relationship with the media by interviewing two members of staff from one of China's most prominent think tanks and observing the Institute for six months. This study has found that China's think tanks have a close relationship with the government and the media. The traditional Chinese Confucian culture and the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" have a significant role in the think tanks' political behavior. This leads the think tanks to play the role of being an advocate of the government. Although social media, to some extent, liberalizes the work style of China's think tanks, the think tanks' use of social media still follows the traditional media logic to facilitate the government's interests. Overall, the study argues that Chinese think tanks show features of being a "Government-lead non-governmental organization" with a semi-official identity to complement the official authorities.

Think tanks are a developing industry not only in China but throughout the rest of the world. According to the 2020 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report by the Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program (TTCSP), there are more than 11,175 think tanks globally, with 3,389 think tanks in Asia. This accounts for the largest number in the world. Europe and North America follow Asia. However, the term think tank is somewhat challenging to define since a think tank is characterized by being a shifting object.

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Think tanks can be altered by their environment (culture, economics, history, and political environment) and they are also subjective because of the qualifying criteria at the academic level. Generally speaking, the United Nations Development Program (2003) defines think tanks as "organizations engaged regularly in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy, are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies" (p. 6).

After China's economic revolution in 1970, it has experienced almost 50 years of rapid growth. China has become one of the world's largest economies and one of the peer competitors against America. It is also acknowledged that think tanks play a significant role in developing a country. Chinese political leaders have increasingly paid more attention to the development of the think tank industry (Qi, 2018; Zhu, 2011). Think tanks in China have a role in academia and contribute to the public debate concerning political issues and even play a role in the policy-making process (Li & Qi, 2018). Despite the various political issues that are still sensitive topics to discuss, Zhu (2020) argues that think tanks have a role in Chinese political decisions. Based on the type of sponsor, there are different kinds of think tanks in China. For example, there are government-funded think tanks, private think tanks, and university-funded think tanks (Li & Qi, 2018). Moreover, different think tanks mainly focus on various topics such as international relations, economics, academics, etc. Meanwhile, the media in China also has a tremendous influence on public opinion and Chinese politics, although it is strictly controlled by the Chinese government (Brady, 2008). Moreover, social media can supply platforms for people to use to offer political information and a broad range of discussion forums (Zhang, 2020a). Think tanks, as independent non-profit organizations, have their own communication channels (websites, blogs, conferences, publications, etc.). The media and think tanks have developed a close relationship (Qi, 2018). However, research on think tanks is relatively limited and the available research mainly focuses on their definitions and institutional structures. There is even less research on ascertaining the relationship between the media and think tanks.

To explore the relationship between the media and think tanks, this study used qualitative interviews and observations at one of the most prominent Chinese think tanks. This article suggests that Chinese political think tanks are still influenced by Confucian culture and political structure with a relatively low ability to influence policymaking. China's think tanks play a more complementary role as an advocate of the official authorities. Meanwhile, China's think tanks with a semi-official identity regard the media as a public sphere to disseminate the government's interests. The article begins with a literature review focused on the definition of think tanks, followed by a summary of the role of think tanks, the media environment in China, and the relationship between the media and think tanks. Afterward, this article reports on the results based on the interviews and observations. Finally, all results will be reported and discussed.

Literature review
Think tanks and China

Think tanks can hardly be defined universally but they can be described using different parameters. The lack of clear-cut categorization is probably the cause of so much confusion, disorder, or ignorance regarding the matter. Rich (2000) stated that think tanks are independent NGOs that can influence political processing via their experts to offer ideas. Weaver (1989) claimed that a think tank is just a non-profit public policy research industry. Moreover, a more critical definition posited by Kelley (1988) is that a think tank is an arrangement by which millions of dollars are removed from the accounts of willing corporations, the government, and the eccentric wealthy and given to researchers who spend much of their time competing to get their names in print. Other definitions have been provided by other authors, focusing on either a single definition or a classification. For example, Dror (1983) states that think tanks are excellence islands that apply full-

time interdisciplinary scientific ideas to the depth of policymaking or they serve as a bridge between power and knowledge. Abelson (1996) maintained that think tanks are independent, non-profit organizations composed of individuals concerned with a wide range of issues. Although there is no universal definition of think tanks, scholars generally describe think tanks as independent non-profit organizations with a dedication to the general interest.

After Xi took office, he started to highlight the policy consultation's role in improving the government's decision-making. Qi (2018) argues that this situation reflected that the top Chinese political elites admit that think tanks are necessary for modernizing China's governance system. China's think tanks could have a critical impact on society, contributing to more than just the academic issues of our civilization (Li & Qi, 2018). Think tanks could play a role as strategic political advisors able to influence policymaking by developing new concepts and ideas, boosting the success of various political agents (Zhu, 2020). Weaver (1989) classified think tanks as universities without students, contract researchers, and advocacy tanks. However, Chinese think tanks evolved from China's actual condition. There are also many think tanks in China, with some Chinese think tanks being government-sponsored where there are scholars who often work in patron-client relations with political leaders (Maxwell & Stone, 2005). Others are based on universities; some are considered to be private think tanks (Qi, 2018). According to Abb (2015), there are some specific differences between American think tanks and Chinese think tanks based on financial support, their interactions with officials, their mission, the media environment, and their targets. It is a unique feature of the Chinese political system that the Chinese government sponsors non-governmental organizations (NGOs), resulting in a so-called government-led non-governmental organization (GONGO) (Yang, 2016). GONGOs in China mainly receive funding from the government and receive public funds as an extension of the state (Froissart, 2013). Abb (2015) also found that all kinds of Chinese think tanks rely on the government's financial support, are hard to approach, have a more diverse institutional culture, and face a more strict media environment than American think tanks. Abb (2015) concludes that the US think tanks have more broadly targeted consumers than Chinese think tanks.

More and more Chinese scholars have begun explore the nature of China's think tanks. Zhu and Xue (2007, p. 453) define China's think tanks "as stable and autonomous organizations that research and consult on policy issues to influence the policy process." Meanwhile, the Chinese government also offers an official definition of what a think tank is. So long as the non-profit organizations research strategic issues and public policies, they can be eligible for government support and be regarded as think tanks (Qi, 2018). In other words, China's think tanks have Chinese characteristics. Li and Qi (2018) suggest that Chinese characteristics refers to the Chinese ways and styles that the think tanks should embody. Qi (2018, p. 35) further argues that China's think tanks "affiliated to the party, government, and military are most closely integrated with the governing system." No matter what kind of think tanks are in China (government-sponsored, university-based, or private), they all have, to some extent, a close relationship with the party, the government, and the army (Qi, 2018). Overall, think tanks in China have a close relationship with the Chinese political authorities.

The Role of Think Tanks in China

Theoretically, in order to analyze the role of think tanks in policy and policymaking, Foucault's (1990) concept of knowledge and power has become a useful concept (Richardson, 1996; Xue & Kerstetter, 2018). It is worth noting that either knowledge or truth is usually regarded as the foundation for establishing or forming power. Therefore, the policy can be used as a political process or as a form of decision-making that may be appropriated as "truth" by exercising power (Richardson, 1996, p. 283). Therefore, the intellectuals' political participation is a result of their

status as individuals in society, especially in the political system (Xiao & Dai, 2020). Richardson (1996, p. 283) argues that intellectuals should pay more attention to the power behind the policy: why and who gives the truth (Richardson, 1996, p. 283). Richardson (1996) further concludes that power not only exists in political structures, institutions, and social relations; it is also expressed through the language and texts generated by specific agencies or embedded in institutional contexts. The two positions of truth and power are not mutually exclusive and could be readily fused depending on the policy processes or contexts.

Increasingly more scholars focus on examining the role of think tanks in policymaking. Barley (2010) notes that American companies expanded their contributions to think tanks to increase their influence on federal government decision-making in the 1970s and 1980s. Rich (1997, p. 11) defined think tanks as "independent, non-interest-based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policy process." However, some scholars challenge whether think tanks have enough of an influence on policymaking. Rashid (2013) notes that think tanks may seek out changes in the policymakers' priorities and draw attention to new or previously unaccentuated policy issues at the stage of agenda-setting. McGann and Weaver (2017, p. 3) maintain that think tanks usually serve as a mediator between the government and the public; they identify, clarify and evaluate current or emerging problems or proposals. They play a role as an informed and independent voice in policy debates and provide a constructive forum to exchange ideas among critical stakeholders in the policymaking process. Garsten (2013, p. 142) suggests that one of the typical features of think tanks is that they "work to influence agendas outside the regular decision-making channels" (Garsten 2013, p. 142), but they have no formal role in politics (Allern & Pollack, 2020). Although previous researchers are skeptical about the direct impact of think tanks on decision-making (Allern & Pollack, 2020; Lalueza & Girona, 2016), it still widely accepted that think tanks could play a role in attracting the public imagination (Stone, 2013). Furthermore, Stone (2013, p. 4) suggests that "by looking not at the degree of influence but at the role think tanks see themselves playing, the contributions they see themselves making to the policy process," one can analyze the role of think tanks in policymaking.

However, when applied China, it is more complicated. Zhu (2020) suggests that China's think tanks conduct professional consultations to influence decision-making through interpersonal relationships. Zhu (2011) notes that every think tank in China, whether it is government-sponsored or a non-governmental organization, depends on internal and external factors to determine its role in the policymaking process. Zhu (2020) suggests that China's think tanks are primarily affiliated with their respective political parties or are organizationally linked to the government. Zhu (2020, p. 298) further maintains that personal ties play a vital role for the think tanks that "largely depend on the administrative status of the people in the society in which orderly hierarchy is deeply embedded by political power." In other words, the personal ties between the political elites and think tanks play a significant role in China. Zhu (2020) further concludes that China's think tanks largely depend on personal relations and the administrative linkages of policymakers and other political elites to influence policy rather than public debate. Chinese Confucian culture and "bureaucracy-oriented" tradition play a vital role in Chinese politics (Zhu, 2020). In China, where there is only one ruling political party, think tanks, even those considered to be non-governmental organizations, inevitably have more or less of an administrative affiliation with the Chinese government (Menegazzi, 2017). The close relationship between think tanks and government shapes the organizational structure of Chinese think tanks (Zhu & Xue, 2007) and its behavioral strategies when it comes to influencing policies (Zhu, 2009). Thereby, the connection with political power is the most critical factor in Chinese think tanks (Zhu, 2020).

The close tie between the government and think tanks implies that China's think tanks impact on political policies. Zhu (2011, p. 673) argues that "as advocates in the public sphere, think tanks have the opportunity to influence government decision." Zhu and Xue (2007) define China's think tanks as stable and autonomous organizations that research and consult different policies. To influence politics, think tanks need to use their expertise to impress the decision-makers and other political elites (Zhu, 2011). One of the think tanks' fundamental tasks are to conduct research and participate in academic activities. However, Shai (2004) went into more detail to introduce the role of think tanks in China. Shai (2004, p. 148–152) concludes that Chinese think tanks play a role as (1) information filters that offer political elites their analyses of raw data, (2) policy defenders that help the current political leadership to promote and legitimize their position, (3) promoters of new ideas that introduce new ideas to the mass media and foreign countries, and (4) as interlocutors which help the Chinese political leaders to collect information from foreign researchers by attending conferences to better help Chinese policymakers understand foreign powers. Overall, the Chinese think tanks have a close and mutual relationship with the Chinese government.

The Media Environment in China

The media in China has a tremendous influence on public opinion and Chinese politics, so much so that "in the past few years, people have witnessed the declining power of the communist party of China, which is the result of the social and economic reform movement" (Huang & Xu, 1997, p. 317). Mass media has undergone structural changes on the management front. Gang and Bandurski (2011, p. 38–39) find that "through the period after 1992 can be described as one of commercialization and structural transformation, the commercialization of the Chinese media further gained momentum." The Chinese government also opened the domestic media market for international newspapers and media houses after 2000 (Gang and

Bandurski, 2011). Therefore, some believe that China's media could supply a public sphere for people or organizations to discuss the issues at hand.

However, whether the media in China contributes to the public sphere is a contradictory issue. On the one hand, Zhao (2013) believes that the party still plays a vital role in the Chinese media system despite the central government's apparent erasure of centralization. The Chinese government's propaganda content has changed significantly since the goal has been transformed from an idealized utopia to the more practical purpose of promoting its legitimacy (He, 2000; Zhao, 1998). On the other hand, with the development of more business and professional media, "supervision by public opinion and the media have the right to represent the rights of supervision from the public officials, which is closer to the news survey reports and other forms, it is closer to freedom of speech" (Bandurski & Hala, 2010, p. 31). However, although China's media environment seems to have become freer, it is still widely accepted that traditional Chinese media is either the government's mouthpiece or is closely supervised by the government (Qi, 2018). Traditional Chinese media thus reflects the Chinese government's political position (Zhang, 2020b).

Meanwhile, alongside the development of China, social media is becoming increasingly popular among the Chinese. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2019), approximately 854 million in China are Internet users, and 99.1% of them, 847 million, have accessed the Internet via a mobile network up until June 2019. Simultaneously, the number of microblog users has increased significantly in the last decade, from 63 million in 2010 to 350 million in 2018 (Statista, 2018). Zhang (2020b) argues that digital media plays an increasingly vital role in Chinese politics. Shirky (2011) and Morozov (2012) proffered that social media's authoritarian regime role is hotly debated. Some believe that social media will play a positive role in increasing the public's access to information, engaging in public

speaking, and coordinating massive and rapid responses that constrain the authoritarian governments' ability to act without appropriate oversight (Shirky, 2011). Furthermore, digital media, like online forums and social networking sites, is available for Chinese citizens to use to arrange online political activities (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). However, others are more skeptical, either because they believe that low-cost activities on social media will act as a replacement for real-world action ("slacktivism") or because they believe that authoritarian governments are becoming better at utilizing the same tools to suppress dissent (Morozov, 2012). Zhang (2020a) further posits that although viewed as liberal in the Chinese media environment, social media also follows the media logic that is dominated by the Chinese government. Overall, although the previous studies debate the role of social media in China, it widely accepts that social media in China could play a role as a public sphere to reach the public (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Zhang, 2020b).

The Media and Think Tanks

Think tanks and the media now have a close relationship (Cook, 1998; Rich & Weaver, 2000). Cook (1998) suggests that media visibility is one of the think tanks' tasks, and this situation has became increasingly popular (Misztal, 2012). Abelson (2013) even argues that media visibility has become the main primary factor used by the think tank to measure its effectiveness. Think tanks build media relations departments to control any press inquiries and to maintain a close relationship with different media outlets in order to gain more attention from the media (McDonald, 2014). Consequently, the think tanks' ability concerning policy recommendations has been dramatically improved (McDonald, 2014). Overall, Lalueza and Girona (2016) further concluded that having a close relationship with the media is the most common strategy through which think tanks mobilize the public opinion on political communication.

Moreover, some scholars also argue that the media and think tanks have a mutual relationship (Hall et al., 1978). Rashid (2013) suggests that media needs to demand insights from the experts in the think tanks. The media cooperates with the think tanks that espouse similar ideologies in order to seek out their expertise (Rashid, 2013). Bennett (1990) notes that the range of insights reported by the media depends on the degree of disagreement between the government and the legislative elite. This implies that the growth of think tanks may change the news. There is an incentive-based structure of interdependence between the think tanks and journalists (Anstead & Chadwick, 2018). Chadwick (2013) further argues that social media plays a vital role in think tanks as well. However, Rashid (2013) notes that digital media play relatively less of a role than traditional media in policy-making for think tanks. Overall, it reflects what Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993) found in that movements need the news media for three primary purposes: mobilization, validation, and scope enlargement.

Due to the economic revolution and the rapid development of the media in China, the collaboration between China's think tanks and the media has become increasingly intensive. The think tanks' analyses published in the media are now more nuanced (Bondiguel & Kellner, 2009). They also found that foreign policy commentators in the media are now seen of as the third power in Chinese foreign policy after the government, think tanks and universities (Bondiguel & Kellner, 2009). Qi (2018) suggests that the Chinese media has significantly increased the media coverage of think tanks and engaged in various think tank activities. Yang (2011, p. 28) discovered that "there are some specific ways in which Chinese think tanks cooperate with media: participating in the drafting of Party and Government program documents; releasing of the press conference; and airing government's views at academic gatherings, public events, and media." In other words, the media is a channel through which China's think tanks transmit information to the public. Zhu (2011) mentioned that

when policymakers draw up different policy options on a specific topic which has not been formally accepted, they will try to influence the public opinion through the media first. It could be argued that China's think tanks aim to attract media attention in order to influence national policy-making (Hayward, 2018). Meanwhile, along with China's development, China's think tanks have started to transform their role as "soft power agents" to enhance China's image and promote China's interests (Menegazzi, 2017; Xiao & Dai, 2020). The think tanks' collaboration with traditional media and social media has become increasingly vital. Overall, the media collaborates with think tanks for intellectual support in their news reporting and research while the government expects the media and think tanks to work together to educate the domestic and international public on the government's ideology and policies (Qi, 2018).

Methodology

This study used the example of one of the most prominent think tanks in China to explore the relationship between mass media and think tanks. This think tank is ranked relatively high among China's think tanks with the rank of TTCSP. Meanwhile, although this think tank claimed that it is a non-government organization, it also has a political background. It was established by former government officials and former Chinese diplomats. The management of the think tank combines government funding and independent funding which should facilitate a more in-depth and broader discovery into how China's think tanks use the media. Overall, this article believes that since this think tank is one of China's most prominent think tanks and has unique features, this will facilitate the author in exploring the relationship between the mass media and China's think tanks.

To answer the research question, the author conducted empirical research in the Public Relations (PR) Department of the chosen think tank for six months to observe how the staff operate and interact with the media. During the observation period, the author also interviewed two staff

in the PR Department. One was the chief of the PR department who could offer the whole picture of the ideology of cooperating with mass media. Simultaneously, the other one was an intern in charge of managing the Institute's social media. This could offer a more in-depth insight into how the Institute uses social media. Before conducting the intensive interviews, the project was fully explained to the participants and their consent was given. Both interviewees used the same questionnaire. In terms of the questionnaire, the participants were required to provide the role that they play(ed) in the think tank as well as the following information: the nature of the PR Department, the relationship between the media and the Institute, the role of social media platforms, the strategies when using the media and social media etc. Both interviews were audio-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed for analysis, resulting in approximately 20 single-spaced transcription pages. The results are based on the author's observations in the PR department of the Institute and the answers of the interviewees.

Results

China's think tanks and PR department. Think tanks in China, regardless of the type of think tanks, are still highly controlled or surveilled by the Chinese government. The interviewees revealed that although China's think tanks have achieved marketization, they are still profoundly reliant on state funding. Moreover, the Institute has close ties with the Chinese authority. The founding chairman and chief sponsor of the Institute is a member with a high-ranking position of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Both interviewees also claimed that although the Institute claims to be an "independent" organization, all board members are former Chinese government officials or have close relationships with the Chinese government. To answer the Chinese policies' call, like the "Belt and Road," the Institute built the "Belt and Road Institute." Interviewees also mentioned that this

situation of the Institute does not constitute a single case in China.

The role of the staff who work in the PR department can be divided into three parts: (1) to contact or socialize with traditional media, (2) to organize activities and write newsletters or reports, and (3) to manage the social media platforms. The staff in charge of maintaining contact with the media are usually former established journalists or have close contact with media. Some are in charge of the Institute's social media pages. They are generally responsible for reposting articles from experts at the Institute which were initially published by a traditional media agency in order to reach the public. Moreover, they are also required to post newsletters. Every month, all interns have to calculate the overall number of readerships. Simultaneously, the staff also find the most popular articles and their writers seek out engaging topics for the next month to manage their social media platforms better.

Official media and institute. The interviewees suggested that China's think tanks build a relationship with the media through the staffs' personal ties and its reputation. For instance, over the years, the Institute has established a method by which it makes contact with the media: (1) through recommendations from employees who are former journalists or who have a good relationship with the media; (2) through activities to contact the media; and (3) the media takes the initiative to make contact with the Institute.

As previously mentioned, the staff in charge of making contact with the media are usually former journalists or have a good relationship with the media. They typically use their sources to contact the media due to this. For example, one staff member is the former chief editor of the Nanfang Daily and uses his resources to contact the media when needed. These are the most expressive and viable ways for the Institute to make contact with the media. As a think tank, it cannot avoid attending academic conferences, forums, or meetings. The PR department staff often participate in these sessions

as well. Furthermore, during a break or at the welcome dinner, the team take the opportunity to socialize with the media and distribute business cards in order to introduce Institute. The Institute also has a reputation, and the experts hired by the Institute are famous in their field. Therefore, when the media requires experts to explain or provide commentary on international issues, they will initially contact the Institute. In other words, nowadays, the Institute is not only research-oriented. It has also become a supplier of ideas. Moreover, the Institute has established an excellent log/data system to maintain all of the contact information derived from the media. The staff have also placed all of the journalists into one WeChat group. When the media requires an expert, they will send a request to the WeChat group. Furthermore, after the Institute makes contact with them, the media will send one or two journalists to follow the think tank. Whenever the Institute holds an activity or conference, the media will monitor and report on the relevant activity.

Cooperation with official media. After making contact with the media, the Institute usually builds a cooperative relationship. The methods of their cooperation include: (1) the Institute supplies articles or experts for interviews regarding heated issues; (2) the media attends activities where the Institute is present and (3) the media and the Institute cooperate to achieve the completion of a project. Whenever the media needs comments or ideas, they will contact the Institute's staff's PR Department. The Institute's team will then select an appropriate scholar who meets the requirements. However, the interviewees also noted that all of the materials that the experts write have to reflect the party and/or the government's position.

One of the interviewees mentioned a salient case in order to explain the Institute's relationship with the official media. He said two words: "public diplomacy," namely that government-censored "independent" non-governmental organizations can participate in foreign diplomacy activities in order to demonstrate and promote the Chinese

government's position. The chairman of the Institute visited South Korea several times in 2017 with his research team in order to talk with various politicians in South Korea and to find solutions to the two countries' relationship during the THAAD. The interviewees shared their feelings about the business trip to South Korea. Although the Institute claim it did not represent the government, it had a semi-official identity since many highly positioned officials received us. Moreover, the Chinese government's mouthpiece, People's Daily, and other influential official media aired the visit. The news organizations have demonstrated that the aired news only reflected the Institute's beliefs, but all of the information made available reflected the Chinese government's attitude. The news not only showed the Institute's condemning attitude towards the Korean government, but it also pushed the Korean government to stop THAAD. Moreover, the Institute wrote a few self-generated stories on some of the former high-ranking Korean officials' supportive attitude towards China and it contacted the Chinese official media to publish them. In other words, the Institute played the role of promoter, defender, and advocate of the Chinese government.

Furthermore, when the Institute organizes an activity or plays a role in an event, the Institute will generally invite journalists to write a news article on the activity, highlighting its role. The interviewee highlighted that when the journalists write these news reports, they usually do not focus on the activities themselves but instead highlight the efforts that the Institute puts forth and the political meaning behind the events. The Institute regularly participates in drafting the party and government program documents and it releases information at scheduled press conferences. Lastly, usually, the media and the Institute collaborate on one project.

It is interesting to mention that the interviewees joked that the media and the Institute have a "subordinate" relationship. The interviewees further explained that it does not mean that the Institute serves or works for the media. It implies that the Institute values the chance to expose itself outside

of the traditional forms of media. China's think tanks regard the official media as the agent or mouthpiece of the government. China's think tanks believe that airing on the national traditional media (People's Daily, Xinhua News, Global Times, etc.) is an award for their organization, reflecting that their ideas are recognized by the authorities and demonstrate their close ties with the Chinese government. Moreover, the interviewees also hinted that the think tank members have mixed feelings about foreign media. On the one hand, foreign media provides an excellent opportunity to express the Chinese government's ideas, boosting the limited attention that they get from political leaders. They could show a supportive attitude towards the Chinese government on foreign media to attract the government's attention. On the other hand, the institute is afraid of talking to foreign media and even domestic journalists from the Hong Kong media. When working with foreign media, the Institute is cautious about their expressions in case they make a mistake that will annoy the political elites and the public.

Social media and the institute. The Institute uses a strategy called "multilevel layout." This means that the Institute uses numerous social media platforms to appear in front of as many people as possible. The Institute has seven social media platforms: Yidianzixun (一点资讯), a TouTiao Page (今日头条), a Sohu page (搜狐号), a NetEase page (网易号), a QQ page (企鹅号), a WeChat subscription (微信公众号) and a Facebook page. The interviewees highlighted that the Institute manages its social media with the aim of garnering more publicity. Social media platforms provide the perfect opportunity for ordinary people to learn more about the Institute. To attract readers, they employ the following strategies: (1) posting five original articles or reposting articles from the media seven days a week; (2) using an informal and attractive style to write articles; (3) focusing on engaging topics and (4) writing a monthly report.

The articles posted on social media are usually first-hand articles on current hot issues written by

experts from the Institute or reports from the media. The interviewees claimed that the Chinese public is immensely interested in China's conflicts with other countries (trade wars, the THAAD deployment controversy, the Diaoyu Island conflicts, etc.), and domestic unstable political incidents like the Xinjiang incident. The Institute staff usually choose an engaging topic to post on their social media pages. However, according to The State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT), those topics are sensitive and should not be mentioned in public. Although the Institute has close ties with the government, the articles and perspectives demonstrate China's positive side; it is still hard post on the social media page. The staff who work in Public Relations diligently check and copyedit the first-hand articles to determine if there are any sensitive words and to rewrite the pieces if necessary. To attract more readers, the authors usually use an attractive and informal style to write the headlines and often write the title in the form of a question. Moreover, the Institute staff write a monthly report to conclude the top five highest readership articles as a way of seeking out heated topics and responding to them immediately. When a new heated issue relating to international relations occurs, the Institute will quickly assign scholars to write a commentary on the issue. However, the interviewees also hinted that the Institute barely replies to the audiences' comments to avoid taking a political position unless they clearly favor the general government's interests.

Furthermore, the interviewees noted that the Institute's purpose in terms of media usage and social media utilization has both similarities and differences. In terms of the nearness of media usage and social media utilization, the interviewee hinted that all content has to favor the government's position. It has to defend the government's legitimacy and interests. For instance, the Institute booked hotels owned by the Lotte Corporation during its visit to South Korea. However, the Institute canceled the booking immediately after Lotte publicly supported THAAD. Afterward, the Institute used its social media platforms to announce the cancelation of the booking and to condemn Lotte's behavior. Both interviewees demonstrated that this behavior, on the one hand, reveals the 'loyalty' to the Chinese government. On the other hand, it aims to reinforce the Chinese government's relentless attitude towards THAAD in order to trigger the public's sense of nationalism to strengthen the government's rule. Moreover, when the government promotes new ideas and policies, both traditional media and social media utilization play an educating and promoting role for the public. However, media usage and social media utilization have diverse target audiences. The media is used for government officials, scholars, or individuals who have specific background information relating to the field. This is done to influence policy processing or prove the Institute's high ability and reputation. However, social media platforms are purposefully used to garner publicity. In other words, it is primarily employed to increase the Institute's reliability and validity and to promote the government interests to ordinary people.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study found that China's think tanks have Chinese characteristics when operating, which is aligned with Li and Qi's (2018) study. China's think tanks have a close relationship with the government. Many scholars share the same belief in that think tanks are closely associated with the authorities or other political parties, called "(new) partisans" (McGann, 2007) or "party tanks" (McGann & Weaver, 2017). Furthermore, this study also found that China's think tanks mainly depend on government funding to operate. Abb (2015) shares the same idea in that approximately 75% to 85% of the Chinese think tanks' budget is from the Chinese government. It is therefore not surprising that all of China's think tanks inevitably have more or less of an administrative affiliation with the Chinese government (Li & Qi, 2018; Menegazzi, 2017; Zhu, 2020).

Although Abb (2015) suggests that state funding may not directly influence the think tanks' agenda, this study argues that the national budget

affects China's think tanks by making them sensitive to the state demands. It also explains why most of the think tanks in China built the "Belt and Road Institute" to cater to the current Chinese policy. Therefore, because of the central government funding, China's think tanks primarily cater to current Chinese government's policies. Furthermore, this study notes that think tanks play the role of advocate when exposed to traditional media as they defend and promote the Chinese government's interests and policies. When a Chinese think tank plays the position of advocate, it usually publishes articles on mass media platforms, accepts interviews, writes blog posts on the internet, and delivers public speeches to defend and promote the government's interests (Shai, 2004; Zhu, 2011). China's think tanks prefer to play the role of advocates because, firstly, their central funding is mainly from the Chinese government. Although Abb (2015) suggests that the state funding will not directly influence the think tanks' agenda, this article indicates that it will impact their expression and political behavior. Second, China's think tanks are now playing the role of "soft power agents" to enhance China's image and promote the government's interest (Menegazzi, 2017, p. 93; Xiao & Dai, 2020). The role of the think tanks is now more like that of an advocate rather than an adviser. Third, think tanks are reluctant to conflict with the authorities. Zhu (2020) suggests that political power is deeply embedded in the Chinese political structure. The orderly hierarchy is deeply embedded by the political power in China, and the Chinese "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" profoundly shapes think tanks' behaviors. Zhu (2020) also explains that China's think tanks mainly rely on administrative linkages instead of depending on the public debates to achieve influence. Fourth, this situation is also because the think tanks' political behavior is influenced by Confucian culture. Chinese think tanks refuse to directly resort to public opinion due to the influence of the Confucian spirit of "scholar-bureaucrat" (Shidafu) (Noakes, 2014; Wang, 2008). Furthermore, Zhu (2020) suggests that traditional Chinese Confucian

culture highlights loyalty. Therefore, in order to demonstrate their patriotism, China's think tanks prefer to play the role of government advocate. Meanwhile, in China, traditional Chinese media is either the government's mouthpiece or it is closely supervised by the government (Qi, 2018) and represents China's government position (Zhang, 2020b). Political power is embedded in the political structure, and Li and Cheng (2012, p. 128) note that in Chinese society, an existing "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" prioritizes an orderly hierarchy in which political power is heavily concentrated. Therefore, it is not surprising that think tanks in China prefer to play the role of advocate when they are exposed to the media.

Furthermore, this study also suggests that traditional Chinese Confucian culture and the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" could explain the mutual relationship between the media and think tanks. Bondiguel and Kellner (2009) mentioned that the mutual interaction between Chinese think tanks and the media is becoming more intensive. This study found the same pattern in that traditional Chinese media and think tanks have an interdependent relationship. Bondiguel and Kellner (2009) further argue that the think tanks in China still adhere to the traditional policy influence channels and that they are deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. In the Chinese traditional Confucian culture, personal ties or individual networks play a significant role in the political structure. Therefore, it is understandable why China's think tanks hire former established journalists to work for them. China's think tanks need the former established journalists' personal networks to build a close relationship with traditional Chinese media. Zhu (2020, p. 298) also further claims that "personal ties largely depend on the administrative status of the people in the society in which orderly hierarchy is deeply embedded by political power." If China's think tanks build a close relationship with traditional media, it reflects that they are recognized by a higher tier in the hierarchy of political power. Meanwhile, Chinese "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" also has a considerable influence on

political behavior (Michelson, 2007). The Chinese "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" highlights the importance of the recognition of the hierarchy of political power. Therefore, China's think tanks regard being aired on the traditional media as an award for their organization. As previously mentioned, traditional Chinese media plays the role of mouthpiece for the government (Qi, 2018), representing the hierarchy of political power in China. In a word, Chinese think tanks' connection with political power not only influences their structure (Zhu & Xue, 2007) but that it also has a significant impact on their behavioral strategies when it comes to building a relationship with the media and the process of influencing policies.

Chinese think tanks have been increasingly promoting social media since the new millennium's start (Bondiguel & Kellner, 2009). This study found the same pattern in that think tanks usually manage 5 to 10 social media platforms and post, on average, five articles per day in order to gain publicity. This study agrees that social media is now playing a vital role in developing think tanks. Zhang (2020b) suggests that social media is now playing a crucial role in China's politics since it offers a public sphere to reach the public in turn (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). This study partially agrees that social media is a useful tool through which to approach the public. However, when examining the case of the social media use of think tanks, this study argues that social media has a relatively less real influence on politics while playing more of a role in terms of the think tanks gaining public support. Some scholars suggest that China's think tanks are now playing the role of "soft power agents" (Menegazzi, 2017, p. 93; Xiao & Dai, 2020). Think tanks utilize social media to advocate and defend China's interests and to promote China's image among the Chinese public.

Moreover, Fang and Repnikova (2018) suggested that digital media offers Chinese citizens the space to freely express their position. This study argues that it is partially true that think tanks have more room to choose topics on which to write the articles that are posted on social media and they can write in a more attractive and informal style to attract the public. Therefore, social media, to some extent, liberalizes the think tanks' political behavior. However, this article argues that it is insufficient to say that social media could help the think tanks break the boundary of Chinese Confucian culture and the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition." Zhang (2020a) proffers that although viewed as liberal in the Chinese media environment, social media still follows the traditional media logic that facilitates the government's interests. This study found the same pattern that although think tanks use social media to write articles and choose topics of discussion, they still need to follow the rule of Chinese Confucian culture and the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" promoted by the prevailing Chinese political power. The social media platforms of think tanks elaborate on the policy agendas to the public in a layman-friendly and engaging way. The final purpose of gaining publicity is also attracting the political elites' attention and to serve the authorities. However, unlike McGann and Weaver's (2017) finding, this study argues that China's think tanks do not play the role of mediator between the government and the public to offer a constructive forum for exchanging ideas and policy debates. The Institute barely replied to the audiences' comments to avoid being seen to be taking a political position. Thereby, China's think tanks are not autonomous decision-makers, but play a more role as a defender, promoter and advocates for political authorities.

This study further concludes that the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" of think tanks has features of being a GONGO. GONGOs mainly receive funding from the government and public funds as an extension of the state (Froissart, 2013; Yang, 2016). Moreover, "GONGOs parallel the activities of traditional NGOs but maintain close government ties, such as by having current or former government officials in their leadership" (Yang, 2016, p. 38). This study found the same patterns in that think tanks in China have a close relationship with the government, and that the think tanks are situatd by the current or former government officials.

National funding is their primary funding source. China's think tanks have features that make them GONGOs with a semi-official identity. China's think tanks air on both traditional media and social media and defend, promote and advocate for the government's interests and policies. Both the think tanks' use of the media and social media demonstrate what the government wants to say. This is not only because it is under the pressure of the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition." It is also because they are part of the authorities although they claim that they are "independent." Therefore, China's think tanks have GONGO features, which means that the government generally indirectly leads the direction of the think tanks. In short, the media use of the think tanks in China is primarily for promoting and defending policies. China's think tanks play a more complementary role in relation to the official authorities when explaining policy agendas to the public and shaping the public opinion on social media.

Overall, this study found that China's think tanks are GONGOs with a semi-official identity. China's think tanks have a close relationship with China's government. Furthermore, this study argues that political power is rooted in the administrative and personal ties between the political elites and think tanks. Thereby, the traditional Chinese Confucian culture and the "bureaucracy-oriented tradition" significantly impacts on the think tanks' behavior. It is evident that think tanks prefer to play a role as advocates and build a close relationship with traditional media due to the influence of political power, their personal network, and Chinese traditional cultural values. Since administrative affiliations and politically embedded personal networks have a significant impact on the process of proposing and adopting policy ideas rather than the expertise offered by think tanks, there are no competitive thought conflicts with the authorities. Although social media provides a freer space for think tanks to use to deliver a political speech, the social media utilized by think tanks still follows the logic of traditional media when it comes to facilitating the government's interests.

This article also has some drawbacks. This study only uses one of China's think tanks as a sample, thus it may not have uncovered general answers pertaining to all Chinese think tanks. However, at the moment, the Institute, as one of China's most prominent think tanks, is the perfect example in which to find solutions. Moreover, this study only engaged in two interviews plus participant observation. This is insufficient to determine and answer the research question properly. However, the two interviewees were the former chief of the PR department and a Social Media Specialist, offering relatively significant insights as a result. It would be more advantageous to utilize a quantitative number of think tanks and interviewees to determine the relationship between the media and think tanks in the future. Overall, this article still believes that it can contribute to exploring China's think tank industry and its relationship with the media.

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