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The construction of China's national interest: between top-down rule and societal ideas

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6 Scholars' ideas, domestic structures, and the official construction of China's national interest

On 25 October 2017, a day after a resolution enshrined “Xi Jinping Thought” into the PRC's constitution, Renmin University in Beijing announced the establishment of a research center dedicated to “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想研究中心) (Financial Times 2017). The center's mission is to ensure Xi Jinping Thought “enters class materials, classrooms, and brains (进教材、进课堂、进头脑) (光明日报 (Guangming Ribao) 2017). In terms of research, the center is supposed to bring together “top academic resources nationwide in an effort to build a domestic first-class platform and base for research and dissemination of the latest achievements of Marxism in China” (ibid). Shortly after, at least 20 universities and colleges established similar centers (ibid). These centers for Xi Jinping Thought established at universities across China's provinces are widely seen as signs of increased ideological control over Chinese universities, including scholars who work there (Gan 2021; Taber 2018). This chapter details the intensification of such ideological controls as a change in domestic structures and examines how it affected Chinese scholars' influence on the official construction of China's national interest.

Since there is no perfect transmission belt between scholars' ideas and the official construction of China's national interest, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, it is necessary to examine domestic structures as conditioning factors for scholars' influence on the official construction of the national interest. In this chapter, I provide quantitative and qualitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest. I show that scholars' proximity to the state and the state's openness to their input facilitate and constrain scholars' influence on the official construction of the national interest. When scholars are close to the state, and the state is open to scholarly input, thinking back to the family road trip metaphor, when they sit in the driver's seat, scholars have the most influence on the official construction of China's national interest. When scholars are distant from the state, and when the

state is not open to their input, metaphorically speaking, when they are in the trunk, they have the least influence on the official construction of China's national interest. Finally, when scholars are close to the state and when the state is not open to scholarly input, when they sit in the co-driver's seat, and when scholars are distant from the state and when the state is open to their input, when they are in the backseat, they still have some influence on the official construction of China's national interest.

6.1 Quantitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest

For scholars' ideas to influence the official construction of China's national interest, shifts in policy substance must first appear in scholars' contributions to foreign policy debates and then in official foreign policy statements. In addition, there must be evidence of close links between the two, as discussed in Chapter 4. In line with the hypotheses deduced from my theoretical argument, I expect that the highest number of policy shifts is influenced when scholars are close to the state and when the state is open to their input and that the lowest number of policy shifts is influenced when scholars are distant from the state and when the state is not open to their input.

Based on the analysis described in Chapter 4, I identified 36 instances in which scholars influenced policy shifts in the official construction of China's national interest. All expectations about the conditions under which they influence the official construction of China's national interest deduced from the theoretical argument are fulfilled: As expected, when scholars are close to the state and the state is open to their input, thinking back to the road trip metaphor introduced in Chapter 3, when scholars are in the driver's seat, they influence the highest number of policy shifts (67 percent). In contrast, when scholars are distant from the state and when the state is not open to their input, when they are left in the trunk, the percentage of influenced policy shifts is lowest. In fact, the empirical evidence shows that scholars did not influence any policy shifts under these conditions. When scholars are close to the state, and when the state is not open to their input,

they influence a lot more policy shifts (25 percent) than when scholars are distant from the state and when the state is open to their input (8 percent). Table 6.1 provides an overview of the quantitative evidence indicating that the expectations about the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest were fulfilled.

Table 6.1: Quantitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest

		Scholars’ proximity to the state	
		close	distant
The state’s openness to scholars’ input	open	<i>In the driver’s seat</i> Most influence expected 67% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the backseat</i> Some influence expected 25% of policy shifts influenced
	closed	<i>In the co-driver’s seat</i> Some influence expected 8% of policy shifts influenced	<i>In the trunk</i> Least influence expected No policy shifts influenced

The analysis of the shifts in policy substance which scholars influenced provides quantitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, there are clear limits to such a frequentist understanding when examining scholars’ influence on the official construction of China’s national interest. I, therefore, bolster my claims by providing qualitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest in the next section.

6.2 Qualitative evidence for the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest

Since this dissertation aims to explain the observed variance in the official construction of the national interest, in particular the increased emphasis on *lead global governance* and the decrease in emphasis on *control the region*, the following presentation of qualitative evidence about the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China's national interest focuses on these two issue areas. However, scholars did not influence shifts in policy substance related to these two areas when the state was not open to their input and when scholars were close to the state. In order to be still able to describe Chinese scholars' influence on the construction of the national interest under this condition, the presentation of qualitative evidence will incorporate depictions of scholars' influence from other components of the construction of China's national interest, where appropriate.

When scholars were close to the state and the state was open to their input, metaphorically speaking, when they were in the driver's seat, scholars substantially influenced the Chinese government's ambitions of taking on a more proactive role in setting international rules. Xin Qiang's analysis, published in 2014, indirectly relates to the Chinese government's ambition to play a more active role in setting international rules that it put forward a year later in its Government Work Report. He argues that while there is nothing wrong with establishing a code of conduct for the South China Sea, the U.S. should not ask China to comply with such international rules (Xin 2014). This hints at a certain dissatisfaction with international rules. A year earlier, Liu Jianguo (2013) directly foreshadowed the Chinese government's position of playing a stronger role in setting international rules. Two years before the Chinese government shifted its position, he argues that "actively participating in the process of drafting and refining international law and international rules" was one of the prerequisites for China's sustainable security strategy (Liu, Jianguo (刘江永) 2013).

Under the same conditions, scholars influenced the Chinese government by voicing a more pronounced take on multilateralism in two ways. First, scholars set the scene for this shift in policy by criticizing how other countries pursued multilateralism. They thereby underscore the necessity of China developing its own form of multilateralism. In a description of the evolution of China's strategic environment since the establishment of the PRC, the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are accused of pursuing "violent multilateralism." In addition, Japan is accused of balancing against China, specifically by spreading "violent multilateralism" through its alliance with the U.S. (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2014). Similarly, Liu Jiangyong (2015) argues that in today's world, international peace and security are seriously threatened by the simultaneous confrontation of "violent extremism" and "violent multilateralism" (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2015a). He also describes Japan as pursuing "violent multilateralism" under the Abe government. Second, scholars explain that the Chinese government should adopt its own form of multilateralism. Liu Jiangyong, (2015) for instance, argues that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China should make its voice heard to promote "peaceful multilateralism" and build a sustainable and secure world (Liu, Jiangyong (刘江永) 2015b). Both the introduction of the term "violent multilateralism" and the suggestions of how the Chinese government should behave instead can be directly linked to the Chinese government voicing a more pronounced take on multilateralism in its foreign policy statements.

When scholars are close to the state and the state is not open to their input, when they are in the co-driver's seat, they influence a few shifts in policy substance related to the component of the construction of China's national interest *defend China's territory, political system, and citizens*. Wang Yiwei (2018) describes the ambition to treat "both symptoms and root causes" of policy problems and argues that the Chinese culture and economy are particularly well suited for it (2018b). Liu Jiangyong (2016) and Liu Changmin (2018) develop the notion "great power game" (大国博弈) before it appears in the official construction of China's national interest. Liu Jiangyong (2016) characterizes "the game of great powers" and the "strategic adjustment of great powers" as key

features of the international environment (Liu Jianguo (刘江永) 2016). Liu Changmin (2018) applies the notion of a “great power game” to U.S.-China relations (Liu, Changming (刘昌明) 2018).

When scholars were distant from the state and when the state was open to their input, that is when they sat in the back seat, they influenced the policy shift that describes China as developing its own form of multilateralism. Liu Changming (2012), in particular, describes Obama’s “smart power diplomacy” extensively. He argues that it combines “strategic contraction, multilateralism, great power coordination, allied collaboration, and image building” (2012, 71). At the same time, the U.S. still retained the use of hard power to defend its interests as a last resort.

The in-depth analysis of conditions under which scholars influenced the official construction of China’s national interest shows that scholars influenced two important policy shifts related to the Chinese government’s growing ambitions to take on a leadership role in global governance. When scholars were close to the state, and when the state was open to their input, they substantially influenced the Chinese government to adopt a more proactive role in international rule-making and voiced a more pronounced take on multilateralism. The increased focus on *lead global governance* to the detriment of *control the region* fits well with the decline in relative salience observed for the two components of national interest in Chapter 5. Hence, quantitative and qualitative evidence supports the argument that scholars’ proximity to the state and the state’s openness to scholars’ input condition scholars’ influence on the official construction of China’s national interest. In the following, I assess how changes in domestic structures affect the state’s openness to societal input and subsequently impact the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest.

6.3 Changes in domestic structures and their effects on scholars

Xi Jinping's speech at the National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities (全国高校思想政治工作会议) in December 2016 marked a new level in the intensification of ideological control over universities. Alongside increased restrictions for scholars and changes in communicated priorities in the provision of research funding, it signaled to Chinese IR scholars that the state was less open to their input.

In his speech, Xi emphasized that higher education institutions were under the party's leadership and must adhere to Marxism as their guiding ideology. He further described the party's attempts to turn faculty and students into firm believers, active propagators, and exemplary practitioners of socialist core values. In his view, universities were to be turned into model places of stability and unity. He tasked party committees that already oversee universities with ensuring the correct direction of running colleges and universities. More concretely, party committee members were encouraged to go to colleges and universities more often and get in touch with students and faculty. He cast educators as "engineers of the human soul" (人类灵魂的工程师) whose firm support for the party should be reflected in their teaching. While ideological and political work is supposed to happen through classroom teaching mainly, he also hinted at intended changes in how academic disciplines were structured (Xi, Jinping (习近平) 2016a).

Debates among Chinese scholars on implementing what Xi had outlined focused on teaching (M. Chen 2017; Ding 2017; L. Tang 2020). However, severe repercussions for the climate at universities more broadly manifested since his speech. Most importantly, there was an increase in retaliatory action against scholars. Florence Yang (2021) lists cases of Chinese scholars who were investigated, suspended, or whose contracts were terminated. From 2017 onwards, she observes a steep increase in cases "where academics were dismissed or disciplined by university authorities" (2021, 12). Moreover, restrictions on scholars' work were introduced beyond targeting individual scholars. This shows that the strengthening of ideological control goes well beyond the classroom:

In addition to constraints on what can be taught, limits were introduced on research with individuals and institutions overseas, travel outside of China, and meetings with foreigners. There is also increased scrutiny over publications in Chinese and international outlets (Woodman and Pringle 2022, 643). These developments changed the political environment significantly and signaled to Chinese IR scholars that the state was less open to their input.

In addition, shifts in resource configurations, that is, the amount and ways in which the Chinese government administers research funding for the social sciences, are worth paying attention to for assessing the state's openness to scholars' input. Holbig (2014) lists five primary sources of funding for social science research in China, the National Social Science Fund of China, the Ministry of Education, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the National Natural Science Foundation, and local funding sources. The National Social Science Fund of China, administered by the National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (NPOPSS), which is directly in the Propaganda Department's orbit, is the most important funding source (Holbig 2014, 15). Perry (2020) argues that "the propaganda department's influence can be seen in the extraordinary number of major research grants earmarked for the study of "Xi Jinping's Thought". She further describes these grants as "lucrative and prestigious" and poses that there is considerable pressure on faculty to apply for them and "discrimination against those who are unwilling or unsuccessful in garnering them" (Perry 2020, 14f.).

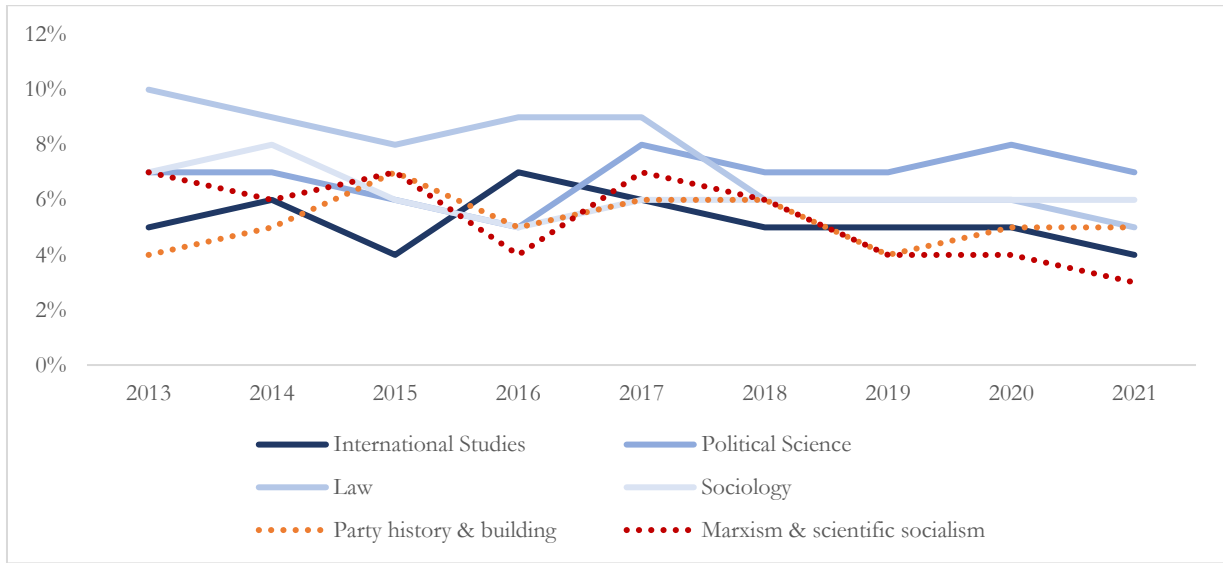
Shifts in the Chinese government's calls for research funding, especially in calls for the most prestigious funding lines, further signal the tightening of ideological control. Building on Holbig's work, I examined shifts in the funding calls issued by the NPOPSS between 2013 and 2021. The examined "major projects" funding line is the most prestigious and well-funded project line. For this line, the NPOPSS publishes a list of topics scholars can apply for each year (Holbig 2014, 21). Based on this analysis, I identify signals for a decrease in the state's openness to Chinese IR scholars' input on three levels: the overall weight attributed to IR compared to other disciplines, references

to CCP ideology across disciplines, and references to official foreign policy slogans in the topics listed for IR scholars.

First, I examined how much weight the NPOPSS attributes to IR compared to other disciplines.²⁷ I assume that the more topics are listed for a discipline, the more the state is interested in input from scholars working in this area. To measure this, I compare the number of topics listed under “International Studies” to the average number of topics per discipline. Based on the yearly average, International Studies ranks in the middle, alongside Marxism, Party History & Party Building, Philosophy, Media Studies, Library and Information Studies, and Physical Education. More research topics are listed based on the yearly average for Law, Political Science, various economic disciplines, and sociology. An overview of how much weight is attributed to the different disciplines can be found in the appendix. More importantly, Figure 6.1 shows that the proportion of research topics listed for International Studies has decreased constantly since 2016. The same patterns can be observed for adjacent disciplines, particularly Political Science, Law, and Sociology. In contrast, disciplines closely related to the CCP ideology, first and foremost Party History and Building, Marxism & Scientific Socialism became more important around 2016. From these trends, I gather that Chinese IR scholars infer that the Chinese state has become less interested in their input since 2016.

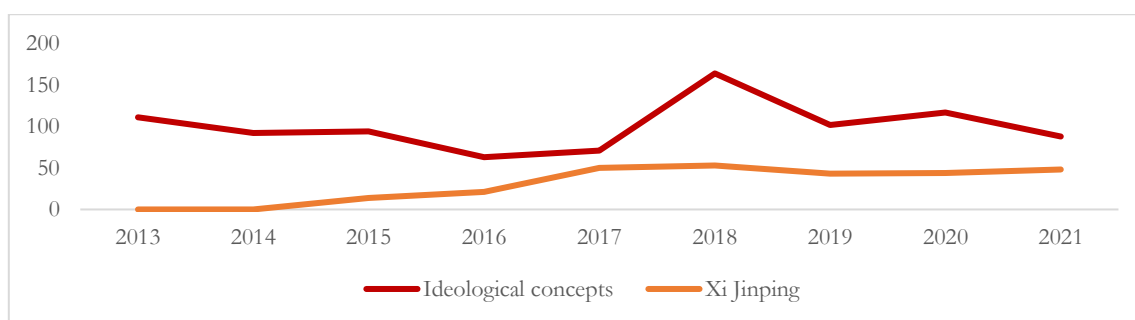
²⁷ Academic disciplines are structured differently in different countries. In some countries, International Relations would be considered a sub-discipline of Political Science, in other countries, it appears more like a separate discipline. Leaving such discussions aside, I followed the categories put forward by the NPOPSS and focused on the category “International Studies”.

Figure 6.1: Proportion of research topics listed per discipline in NPOPSS funding calls



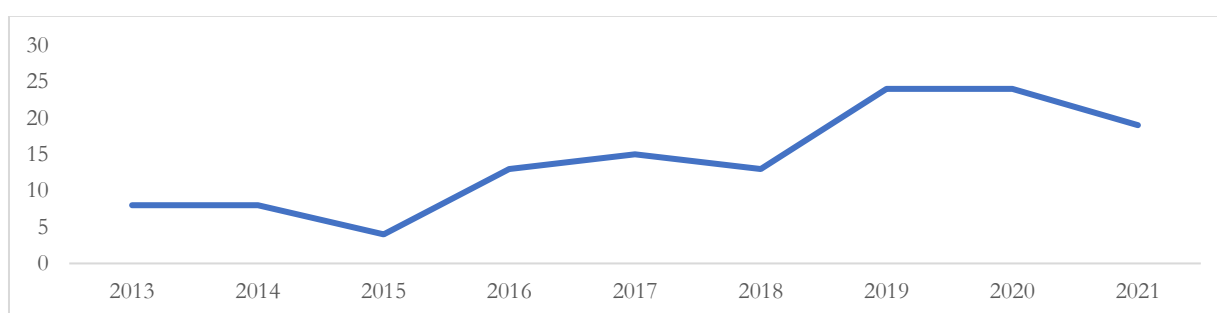
Second, I examined shifts in how frequent terms that reflect the CCP’s ideology appear in the suggested research topics. If only to increase their chances of winning these prestigious grants, I assume that scholars pay close attention to how the topics are framed and what role the Chinese state attributes to ideology. If the number of references to ideology in the project calls increases, I assume Chinese scholars infer that the Chinese state is less open to listening to diverse input from societal actors. Figure 6.2 shows that right after 2016, there was a steep increase in how often ideological concepts were mentioned in the NPOPSS funding calls. At the same time, Xi Jinping’s name featured more frequently between 2016 and 2019. Both trends suggest that after 2016 the CCP’s ideology featured much more prominently in the NPOPSS’ funding calls conveying to Chinese scholars that the state was less interested in hearing diverse input.

Figure 6.2: Number of yearly mentions in NPOPSS' funding calls



Third, more frequent references to the Chinese government's foreign policy slogans indicate increased ideological control. Figure 6.3 illustrates shifts in how frequently the research topics listed referenced prominent foreign policy slogans, specifically the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese Dream, community of shared future for mankind, community of shared interests, democratization of international relations, five principles of peaceful coexistence, harmonious world, an important period of strategic opportunity, type of great power relations, peaceful development, socialism with Chinese characteristics, win-win cooperation. In line with the other trends observed, after 2016, the Chinese government's foreign policy slogans featured much more frequently in the list of possible research topics in the NPOPSS funding calls.

Figure 6.3: Number of references to foreign policy slogans in NPOPSS' funding calls



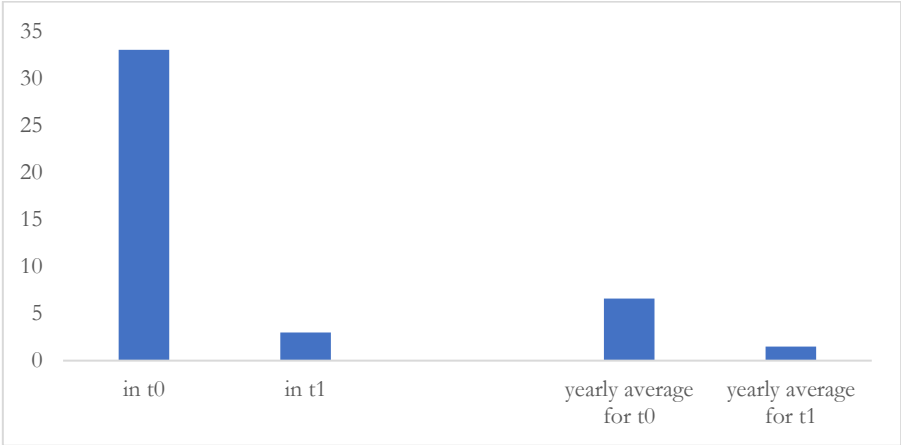
To sum up, Xi Jinping's speech at the National Conference on Ideological and Political Work in Colleges and Universities in December 2016, increased restrictions on scholars' work, and changes in funding priorities all signaled to scholars that the state was less open to their input.

6.4 The impact of changes in domestic structures on scholars’ ability to influence the official construction of China’s national interest

In this section, I examine the impact that these changes in domestic structures had on scholars’ ability to influence the official construction of China’s national interest. For this, I first compared the number of policy shifts they influenced before and after the change in domestic structures detailed above. Then I examine in-detail effects on the conditions under which scholars influence the official construction of China’s national interest.

As stated above, I identified 36 instances in which a scholar influenced a policy shift in the official construction of China’s national interest. However, big differences appeared in how many of these policy shifts were influenced by scholars, depending on whether the scholar published the contribution before or after the change in domestic structures. The overwhelming majority, that is, 92 percent of shifts in policy substance influenced by scholars, were influenced before the change in the domestic structures, that is, when the state was open to their input. In contrast, only 8 percent were influenced after the change in domestic structures. Since the time frames are not the same length (t0 covers 2010-2016, t1 covers 2016-2019), the yearly averages should be compared. Before the change in domestic structures, on average, 6.6 shifts in policy substance were influenced by scholars compared to 1.5 after the change in domestic structures. Figure 6.4 illustrates this.

Figure 6.4: Number of policy shifts influenced by scholars before and after the change in domestic structures



For scholars, the change in domestic structure meant that the state became less open to their input, significantly affecting their ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest, as Table 6.1 illustrates. After the change in domestic structures, when the state was less open to their input, scholars influenced a lot fewer policy shifts than before the change in domestic structures. Before the change in domestic structures, scholars close to the state influenced many policy shifts, while even scholars distant from the state influenced a few shifts in policy substance. After the change in domestic structures, the latter group did not influence any shifts in policy substance. Hence, when the state was not open to scholars' input, distant scholars no longer influenced the official construction of China's national interest. In addition, even the ability of scholars that were close to the state to influence the official construction of China's national interest was reduced significantly. Close scholars went from having the most influence on the official construction of China's national interest to still having some influence. In the road trip metaphor, they went from being in the driver's seat to sitting in the co-driver's seat. Distant scholars went from some influence to almost no influence. Metaphorically speaking, they went from sitting in the back seat to being put into the trunk.

6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I showed that scholars' proximity to the state and the state's openness to their input facilitate and constrain scholars' influence on the official construction of the national interest. Scholars close to the state influenced a lot more shifts in policy substance related to the official construction of China's national interest than scholars distant from the state. The in-depth examination of changes in domestic structures revealed that the state became less open to scholars' input after 2016. The state's decrease in openness to scholars' influence significantly affected their ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest. After the change in domestic structures, scholars close to the state hardly influenced policy shifts related to the official

construction of China's national interest, and scholars distant from the state did not exert any influence anymore.

In the next chapter, I examine how changes in domestic structures influence think tanks' abilities to influence the official construction of China's national interest. Just like for scholars, I first present quantitative and qualitative evidence for the conditions under which think tanks influence the official construction of China's national interest. Then, I detail how think tanks were affected by changes in domestic structures under Xi Jinping. Lastly, I assess how these changes in domestic structures impacted think tanks' ability to influence the official construction of China's national interest.