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China's Think Tanks, the King's Counsellors

Compiled and commented Analysis

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Les Nouvelles de Chine

This section, prepared by the Asia Centre (www.centreasia.org), draws mainly on the press in Chinese, aiming to reflect the point of view of the People's Republic of China on international questions and issues related to Greater China.

China's Think Tanks, the King's Counsellors

Compiled and commented by Michal Meidan based on:

• Ma Changbo, "A review of the official research centres in China", *Nanfang zhouno*, 11 October 2007.

The article in *Nanfang zhouno*, published just ahead of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), attempts to shed light on the world, "both known and obscure," of the official Chinese research centres and their influence over decision-making in China. Chinese leaders have been making great play of their desire for their decision-making to be more "scientific and democratic":⁽¹⁾ in that context, the research carried out by *Nanfang zhouno* updates its readers on how relations between China's decision-makers and its research community have evolved and taken institutional shape.

The survey portrays the best known of the Chinese think tanks and identifies how they interact with the decision-makers; it also describes the various channels available to them for communicating their views: colloquiums, brainstorming sessions, reports, articles, and personal meetings when called in by political leaders. Looking more closely at the writer's depiction, it would seem that the think tanks' influence derives as much from the standing of the research institute as from personal affinities between leaders and experts.

Ma identifies two types of research centres, the first being the training establishments for officials, among them the Central Party School and the School of Administrative Studies, where leaders from different provinces can meet and exchange views with the experts.

Since the Central Party School provides guidance, advice, and training in the ideological field, it is not surprising to find journalists eager to scrutinise the commentaries of those who teach there, especially during Party Congresses and before important political announcements. The lecturers' regular exchanges with Party officials and their frequent participation in drawing up government papers make them reliable indicators of political trends. A notable illustration: as early as 25 June 2007, the official Xinhua news agency highlighted the importance of Hu Jintao's speech to the Central Party School as indicative of the political line to be adopted by the 17th National Congress.⁽²⁾

The School of Administrative Studies (*guojia xingzheng xueyuan*) also helps with official texts and contributes to research in the general areas of political and economic reforms. It recently carried out a study of the social security system for the State Council. It provides two such studies each year on average, commissioned by working groups composed of ministers, deputy ministers, or local leaders. The working groups pass on their reports to the State Council, and their conclusions are then opened up for informal discussions between government leaders and researchers. The State Council may eventually issue a statement on the subject, and a ministerial group will combine the "spirit of that statement" with the working group's conclusions to make improvements to the text. This final text is submitted to the State Council for approval.

Thus, in 1998, the School of Administrative Studies carried out research projects on reforming and supervising the banking system; in 2000, it examined how the policy of "developing the West" (*xibu kaifa*) should be implemented; in 2007, the two meetings were related to questions of social security and healthcare. The Central Party School is said to proceed in the same way, but tackling subjects in different areas.

The research centres depending directly on the State Council, such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CAS and CASS) or the powerful Centre for Macroeconomic Research of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), provide anywhere between 200 and 400 studies a year. They are also involved in researching and preparing texts for the five-year plans and for administrative regulations, mainly in the economic sphere, whereas the Schools contribute to

1. See Michal Meidan, "Democratic reform, as defined by the 17th National Congress," *China Analysis*, no. 16.

2. See Michal Meidan, "Democratic Debate is no longer silenced," *China Analysis* n° 14, July-August 2007.

preparing speeches for National Party Congresses or for plenary sessions of the Central Committee.

What are the channels of communication and influence that the think tanks use? The writer identifies many different avenues of communication between the institutions and the decision-makers, beginning with studies commissioned by the leaders, sometimes even on a commercial basis. The reports may deal with cross-disciplinary subjects such as macroeconomic regulation or social security, or more specialised questions arising within specific fields of competence; sometimes the experts are required to work directly with state-owned companies to support the implementation of a policy initiative. Most projects extend over a certain period, especially the preparatory research for five-year plans undertaken by the NRDC's research bodies. Others may be shorter or even emergency operations, as was the case during the Asian financial crisis or in the wake of 9/11.

The specialists may also exert their influence through the "internal" publications available to them. Their contributions are not necessarily commissioned by the authorities but are often read by senior officials, who may subsequently choose to follow up with personal meetings with the experts. Similarly, Ma reports that an official or his secretary may sometimes keep an eye on a specific experts' work, asking for internal studies to be passed on to him immediately upon publication. But the experts exert their most direct influence through the medium of personal meetings, on the sidelines of lectures or symposiums, at private interviews, or at study sessions of the Politburo, during which experts are brought in to expound on their specialised subjects.

In sum, the frequency of interaction and the number of reports that these research centres are required to produce have increased steadily since the start of the reforms and

opening up; but over the past decade they have proliferated as the questions addressed have become more complex and China's leaders strive to rationalise their decision-making procedures. The experts are more in demand. They are listened to more intently. Wen Jiabao himself declared that no specialist would ever suffer for his opinions.

It is noteworthy that the role and status of the centres specialising in international relations and those of the university centres are not mentioned here. We may also point out that while the Development Research Centre of the State Council is duly mentioned, few details are offered. While the experts' influence is sought after, their place in the system remains ambiguous: the report writer agrees to withhold his political recommendations unless explicitly asked to express them. However, for outside observers, given the frequent contacts between these experts and political leaders, any such recommendations do take on an official colouring. By way of example, at the time of the Asian financial crisis, when China had decided not to devalue the Renminbi, a researcher had indicated in the press his support for some flexibility in the Chinese currency. The result was destabilisation of the Hong Kong markets, and the situation was recovered only after the NRDC announced its public support for the stability of the currency . . .

Yet, there is no doubt that Chinese leaders are, more than ever before, willing to call in the experts on a variety of questions, and that the experts bring influence to bear – directly or indirectly, consciously or not – on the decisions taken by Chinese political leaders. The last word belongs to Ma:

"At the start of the reforms, it was the economists who were favoured; following the 15th National Congress it was the lawyers who were most sought after; but now the moment has come for the sociologists." •