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A Review of “The Rise of Think Tanks in China”

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Book Reviews

Xufeng Zhu
The Rise of Think Tanks in China
New York, NY: Routledge
210 pp., $145.00 hardcover
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The study of China’s policymaking process remains a fascinating field. There have been several paradigms in the past, from the “fragmented authoritarianism” model to the more recent “political pluralization” thesis of Andrew Mertha. The recent scholarship increasingly looks at the role of social actors in the policy process. This book focuses on one group of social actors, the think tanks. While studies on the relationship between international relations think tanks and foreign policy have been done in the past, this is perhaps one of the few book-length analyses of the role of think tanks in the domestic policy process.

Xufeng Zhu, the author, begins with a definitional exercise. Needless to say, China’s think tanks operate in a very different environment from the west. Hence, definitions and classification models of think tanks developed from the western experience may not capture the intricacies of the identity of China’s think tanks, especially regarding the issue of “independence” from the government. He proceeds with a legalistic approach, namely the registered status as the classification basis of China’s think tanks. Zhu builds his model of the think tanks’ influence and behavior on such classification. Hence, semi-public think tanks rely more on administrative networks to exert influence, and these think tanks have greater direct influence among the decision-makers. Nongovernmental think tanks tend to rely more on social networks and exert indirect influence through academia and the public.

Zhu makes use of case studies and the quantitative approach. He selects seven think tanks and conducts background research on them. The more important contribution to scholarship, however, will be the innovative quantitative approach. Thanks to its opacity, the policy process remains essentially a “black box” to outsiders. How to measure the influence of think
tanks in the policy process can only be an educated guess at best. Here, Zhu makes important contributions to operationalize measurements of China’s think tank influence. Zhu argues that there are three forms of think tank influence: among the decision makers, the academia, and the public. Each form of influence can be measured by two indicators. Influence among decision-makers can be measured by the frequency of political leaders’ commentaries on think tank reports and the number of invitations to attend government’s seminars. Influence in academia can be measured by publications in important academic journals and think tank leaders’ attendance of national conferences. Influence in the public can be measured by press reports and press interviews. Zhu calculates the data from a survey he administered in 2004.

The reporting of data analysis, however, remains the part of the book that needs to improve the most, not because of the scientific validity of Zhu’s data analysis but because of the difficult-to-read English here. It is apparent that many sentences, while grammatically correct, are poorly constructed, awkward, and often read like some mechanical translation from Chinese. In order to understand this part of the book, this reviewer had to rely on the Chinese version of the book (published in 2009 by Tsinghua University Press).

Zhu’s main conclusions from data analysis and hypothesis testing are important, but they are not surprising. For example, the hypothesis “The more developed the think tank networks, the greater the think tank influence” is expected even without the sophisticated analysis performed here. The more interesting part is the regional analysis, in which Zhu divides China into four regions in terms of think tank influences: very limited influence, burgeoning but limited influence, influence among policymakers, and influence among civil society. In the concluding chapter, Zhu clearly prefers think tanks to develop along the line of civil society rather than being close to the policymakers, for he fears that this will lead to an “elite alliance” between political, economic, and knowledge elite that will be detrimental to the overall reforms of the country.

This book helps us understand the role of think tanks in China’s policy process, but we are far from getting the whole picture. I would suggest an in-depth case study of how a think tank’s idea eventually becomes a policy. Also, importantly missing here are interviews with policymakers. Such interviews could tell us a lot about how they choose to adopt or not to adopt think tank ideas.

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