

Understanding the Development and Roles of Think Tanks in East Asia and Beyond

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What the talk is about

- Provide perspectives on think tanks;
- discuss development of think tanks in East Asia;
- offer conclusions (based on *Pacific Affairs* special issue).

A traditional take on think tanks: Ideas, information, and public policy

Ideas matter in politics. But usually ideas need to be embedded in and diffused by means of an organizational infrastructure to be able to make an impact on nat'l & int'l politics. TTs can provide such org'l infrastructure.

Need for expertise in gov'tl decision making: Both in "information poor and information rich societies," policy-relevant information is needed that is "understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful."
(Weaver/McGann 2000)

Apart from bureaucracies, academia & other non-gov actors, TTs can be a source for such information.

A more sober take on think tanks: The production of political knowledge

- As “ideas organizations” and “knowledge brokers,” TT are involved in shaping the production of political knowledge, not least due to their participation in public and policy-related discourses and networks.
- Knowledge production always involves the articulation of perspectives and is part of a competition between particular interests, including those of TT funders.
- TTs are arguably not objective or impartial knowledge brokers but rather contribute to the blurring of the boundaries between interest and knowledge.

Why think tanks need to be taken seriously as political actors

- 1) TTs have reached a critical mass in many countries;
- 2) they are established with the explicit mission to inform or influence, either directly or indirectly, government policy; and
- 3) they seek to “establish themselves as indispensable repositories of expertise, technical skill, professional experience, rational thinking and policy opinion, providing solutions for [policy makers], and content for the media.” (Hernando Gonzalez et al. 2018)

TTs as a global phenomenon

TTs long been considered an Anglo-American phenomenon. Today, **TTs can be found across the world**. Some put their number at over 7,800 (McGann 2018). Europe (2,045), North America (1,972, incl. 1,872 in the US) and Asia (1,676) are said to host the largest numbers. **China**, currently in the midst of a think tank boom, is now home to the second-largest number of think tanks world-wide (512 TTs). **TTs exist in different kinds of political regimes**.

By now common wisdom:

The “U.S. experience with think tanks may not be readily transferable to other settings.” (Weaver 1998)

Types of think tanks

Diane Stone (2005) suggests a useful globally applicable **typology** of TTs. Distinguishes five types **based on** their primary institutional affiliation or **linkage**, viz.

1. civil society TTs established as nonprofit organizations;
2. policy research institutes located in or affiliated with a university;
3. governmentally created or state-sponsored TTs;
4. corporate-created or business-affiliated TTs; and
5. political party TTs and TTs established by candidates running for political office or by former high-ranking policy makers.

Thinking about TTs: Conceptual issues & analytical frameworks

Given diversity of TTs, attempts to define them have proven elusive. **The term TTs remains “slippery,” ambiguous.**

Own definition:

TTs are organisations whose *main* mission is to inform and influence public policy on the basis of research and analysis.

We concur with Pautz (2011), Stone (2004) that particular **attributes** that have been used to capture the essence of TTs, such as their non-profit character or “independence,” should either be dropped altogether or at least be analytically disentangled.

What do think tanks do?

- **Divergent perspectives** have been offered in literature to account for what think tanks do.
- From a **neo-pluralist perspective**, TTs have often been characterised, if not idealized, as “bridges between knowledge and power,” operating in a “market-place of ideas and policy advice.”
- In order to function as “catalysts for ideas and actions,” TTs are said to assume a number of **specific functions or roles**: conducting basic research, providing advice to policy makers, evaluating gov’t programmes, facilitating “issue networks” and the exchange of ideas, supplying personnel to government, and interpreting policies and current events for the media.

What do think tanks do?

- In a more conceptual vein, Plehwe points to the “**multi-directional transfer capacity**” of think tanks in terms of consulting, formatting, and editing, which is necessary for relevance-making, i.e., for turning academic knowledge into media, policy and other public and private formats.
- Critical observers have emphasized the **symbolic**, rather than instrumental, **functions** that TTs can take on, arguing that they often do little more than provide legitimacy to the existing agendas of policy makers and other elites by providing the “right” evidence and arguments.

What do think tanks do?

- Some critical scholars understand TTs as civil society actors in a Gramscian sense, i.e., as orgs embroiled in the **struggle for (discursive) hegemony**.
- Indeed, there has been a notable **discursive turn in the study of TTs** for some time now, with some scholars zooming in on the role played by TTs as carriers of coordinative and communicative discourse.
- Whatever perspective is chosen to explain or understand what **TTs** do, they need to be taken seriously as political actors in their own right; **as part of broader epistemic communities, knowledge regimes, or policy advisory systems** at the national level and beyond; and as part of **particular discourse or advocacy coalitions**.

Think Tanks in East Asia

- Despite the **proliferation of TTs in East Asia**, we still know surprisingly little about the functionality and operations of such orgs in this world region.
- The **factors that have aided TT development in the US**, such as numerous points of access to pol. deliberation and policymaking as well as a tradition of philanthropy, are **far less pronounced, if they exist at all, in many East Asian nations**, some of which are known for their state-led development models.
- We thus need to examine what **particular contextual conditions in East Asia have shaped the trajectories and traits of TT sectors** in this world region.

Think Tanks in East Asia

- Brief **review of literature**: Is there a generalizable “East Asian experience” or are there at least recurring patterns that characterise TT development in this world region?
- Broadest generalizations by Nachiappan et al. (2011): regional TT development characterized by the **closeness of many TTs to the state**, and more particularly to state bureaucracies, as well as a **pronounced thematic focus** of many TTs **on** matters of **economic development**.
- Argue that TT development in the region needs to be understood against the backdrop of the operations of **“developmental states”** in East Asia, in which capable & socially insulated elite state bureaucracies are said to have orchestrated effective industrial, technological, and corporate development policies.

Think tanks in East Asia

- **Analytic leverage** provided by the “development state” model is **insufficient** to understand and explain the trajectories and traits of TT sectors in East Asia.
- For one, whereas state clearly played major role in guiding the postwar economic transformation of Japan, ROK, Taiwan, Singapore & China, **state developmentalism** has **not** been a **universal feature** across the region.
- Moreover, scholarly depictions of dev. state model have tended to **overestimate state agency** and to overlook or play down **divergence of state-society relations** in countries concerned.
- In any case, experiences with state developmentalism **did not produce uniform effects** on trajectories and traits of nat'l TT sectors in East Asia.

Think tanks in East Asia

- Despite substantial differences in the use of TTs by state agencies in exemplars of the dev. state in East Asia, **some commonalities** among East Asian TTs in terms of the **templates used** at the time of their establishment.
- First, a number of TTs in East Asia—focusing mainly, but sometimes not solely, on foreign and security affairs—were explicitly modelled on the **“old guard” of international studies institutes** such as CSIS in the US or Chatham House in the UK.
- Different process of mimetic isomorphism in the (formerly) socialist countries in East Asia—China, DPRK, Vietnam & Mongolia—where the **Soviet state-run research institutes** served as the model to emulate.

Think tanks in East Asia

- In Soviet originals & East Asian transplants, **ideological constraints and censorship** often limited the spectrum of political analysis and the research agenda, while opportunities for substantive policy impact resulted from the **patronage of high-level pol. leaders**.
- In China, TTs' **institutional linkages** to central & provincial gov'ts, executive agencies, the CCP, the army **shaped their status & channels for policy access**.
- This feature has generally held, **despite growing marketization of Chinese economy**, emergence of civilian & private TTs, dramatic rise in the supply of policy professionals with the capability to influence policy, and a generally expanding intellectual public sphere.

Conclusions (based mainly on *Pacific Affairs SI*)

- At a more descriptive level, SI testifies not only to the **diversity of TT sectors** in East Asia but also to **reg'l applicability of Stone's linkage-based TT typology**.
- **Govt'ly created or state-sponsored orgs** dominate TT sector in authoritarian **China**. Some of the TTs created or financially supported, by the state in China (& Taiwan) are nested within unis or belong to larger academies, indicating either a degree of **hybridization** or simply a **change in institutional affiliation over time**.
- Only few **civil society-based TTs** in China but such orgs play a prominent role in **Taiwan**, as well as in **Japan & ROK**, where they have gained traction in recent years.

Conclusions

- **Northeast Asia's democracies** exhibit the **most diverse TT sectors**; they feature not only many government-created or state-sponsored TTs but also numerous corporate-created or business-affiliated orgs.
- Finally, **TTs linked to individual pols** who are either running for or have held office are particularly evident in **Taiwan** and also present in **Hong Kong**.

Conclusions

Two broad analytical conclusions emerge from the SI.

- **Context matters for TT development** and, more specifically, TT systems are greatly influenced by the particular political context in which they exist.
- The **political contextual factors** that impact the trajectories & traits of East Asian TT landscapes vary not only across countries but also **operate at different interactive levels:**

Conclusions

- i. at the level of the **inter- and transnational context** within which think-tank sectors develop;
- ii. at the level of **domestic gov'tl systems and their openness to external policy advice** & other TT services;
- iii. at the level of **individual pol leaders** interested in engaging with TTs or using them to push their agendas.

In view of the potential complexity of these interactions, **generalisations about the impact of political context on TT development are fraught with danger.**

Conclusions

Re (often neglected) inter- & transn'tl context of TT sector development:

- China: steady **integration into the global capitalist system** since 1978 & country's **growing global status and ambitions** have resulted not only in fundamental changes in the state's official policy discourses but also in growing demand by policymakers for timely policy advice and a desire to "tell Chinese stories and spread Chinese voices" at the global level through public diplomacy.
- **Global financial crisis as critical juncture**, speeding up China's rise in global affairs and resulting in growing expectations vis-à-vis domestic TTs.

Conclusions

- However, **GFC** also alerted Chinese pol leaders to limited capabilities of extant TTs, thus providing an **important backdrop to concerted policy of TT promotion** which got underway a few years later.
- Last not least, the **return of overseas-educated scholars** and the perspectives they have brought with them have contributed to development of TT sector in China.
- **Taiwan**: most important intern'l context factor impacting TT development has been country's **loss of diplomatic recognition**, which turned TTs into ever more valuable assets for the gov't in terms of establishing alternative networks, intelligence gathering, informal diplomacy, & for helping to project soft power at reg'l & global levels.

Conclusions

- **Japan:** establishment of numerous new TT in the 1980s and 1990s, “golden age” of TT development there, occurred in the midst of **growing trade & other frictions with the US.**
- Moreover, the **return of some Japanese scholars** who had gained first-hand experience in US TTs stimulated debates on how to further develop TT sector in Japan.
- While diffusion of relevant ideas and inst'l blueprints from US did not result in a wholesale revolution in Japan's TT sector, it played a **crucial role in the establishment of** what is now one the biggest TTs: **Tokyo Foundation.** Also informed the operations of one of the country's newer high-profile TTs, **Rebuild Japan Initiative Foundation** (renamed Asia Pacific Initiative in 2017).

Conclusions

Re impact of national gov'tl systems on TT development:

- **Inter- & transnat'l context** in which TT sectors develop **can also be connected to the nat'l gov'tl systems** with which these sectors are confronted, e.g.
- **increasingly transnat'l nature of Chinese policy-making** & growing complexity of China's foreign relations have increased demand for advice on affected "domestic" policy areas as well as on internat'l governance issues.
- Also, China-related contributions to SI caution not to jump to quick conclusions re **causal connections between** a country's **political regime type** and the overall size and growth of its **TT sector**.

Conclusions

- Current TT boom in China and substantial number of well-resourced TTs that existed before this boom suggest that **nondemocratic systems** may also, **at times, provide “fertile conditions for [think tank] proliferation and abundance.”** (Stone 2004)
- Findings support Mendizabal’s (2013) argument that “one must try to avoid the very easy assumption that democracy leads to more and stronger think tanks.” Whereas **democracy** can contribute to a more sustainable TT community, it is **not the cause of TTs’ existence.**
- Experiences of pre-democratization ROK and Taiwan also indicate that **democratic governance is not a necessary condition for substantial TT development,** whereas the travails of the TT sector in Indonesia signal that it is **not a sufficient condition either.**

Conclusions

- Re impact of the nature of gov'tl systems on TT development, two basic, important questions are whether an **evidence-based policymaking culture** exists within the gov't in question and whether **internal sources of policy advice**, provided by permanent civil service officials and/or by pol appointees in advisory roles, dominate in policymaking processes.
- With respect to the **role of bureaucracies** in nat'l policy-making systems and their impact on TTs, Japan article in SI, as well as studies on TT development in India, indicate that where permanent civil services—especially those imbued with a sense of elitism—jealously guard policy-making processes, TTs will find it difficult to impact agenda setting and policy deliberation.

Conclusions

Still, even in such settings TTs can be involved in the implementation of policies or assume **functions that bureaucracies cannot or do not want to formally take charge of**, such as providing platforms for exchanges with high-level visitors or engaging in Track II diplomacy.

Indeed, foreign policy TTs, in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, can be involved in a multitude of **roles**. Here are ten such roles:

1. Providing opportunities for interactions among scholars, policy makers, and other practitioners (**'salon'** function);
2. disseminating knowledge regarding int'l affairs to a broader public by means of forums, publications etc. (**'knowledge transfer'** function);

Conclusions

3. informing & (re-)shaping public opinion and discourse re foreign policy & int'l affairs by providing content to the media ('**pundit**' function);
4. (assisting in) setting relevant agendas and/or directly impacting on specific foreign policy decisions ('**consultancy**' function);
5. providing 'second opinions' to policymakers ('**sounding-board**' function);
6. legitimising emerging and extant policy positions of the government ('**intellectual cheerleader**' function);

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7. organising and/or engaging in Track 1.5 or Track 2 processes (**'informal diplomacy'** function);
8. helping to export specific agendas, e.g. democracy promotion, 'Belt and Road' initiative, and assisting like-minded actors/institutions (**'promoter'** function);
9. contributing to IR/Strategic Studies as fields of studies, e.g. thru publications, fellowships, teaching, supervising & mentoring (**'academic capacity-building'** function);
10. nurturing next-generation FP practitioners, e.g. by running diplomatic academies, training programmes, etc. (**'practitioner capacity-building'** function).

Conclusions

Finally, re individual pol leaders' impact on TT development:

- Contributions to SI note a few important episodes where the **agency of political leaders** mattered significantly.
- China: **Xi Jinping**'s personal initiative and involvement was clearly crucial for bringing about the current TT-promotion policy of the Chinese government,
- whereas the earlier engagement of **Zhao Ziyang** with reform-minded TTs resulted after Tiananmen not only in Chinese TTs having to take a very low profile for some time but arguably also in wariness on the part of party-state leaders about domestic TTs' potential to help stir unrest and thus the need to keep them under ideological control.

Conclusions

Individual pol leaders' impact (cont'd)

- **Taiwan & Japan:** While indiv. pol leaders had perhaps a lesser impact on development of the respective TT sectors as a whole, they were **crucial to the establishment of** a number of, in some instances high-profile, **additions to the TT landscapes** in question.
- Examples from Taiwan include **National Policy Foundation** (est. by then KMT chairman Lien Chan in 2000) and the **Thinking Taiwan Foundation** (est. by DPP chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen in 2012).
- In Japan they include veteran organizations such as the **Institute of International Policy Studies** (est. 1988 by former PM Nakasone), **Japan Institute of International Affairs** (est. 1959 by former PM Yoshida Shigeru).

Conclusions

- More generally, **openness of individual pol leaders** to engaging with TTs or, indeed, their interest in using them to push particular political agendas can help improve the fortunes of individual TTs or of entire TT sectors.
- Notably, **demand for TT services** on part of pol leaders not only depends on the **proclivities & interests of individuals in power** at a certain point but **can also shift over time** in conjunction with changing internat'l & domestic circumstances.
- Overall, SI shows that East Asia is home to highly diverse, in some cases very vibrant environments for TT development, reflecting the impact of distinct, multi-level political & other contextual factors. Hopefully, SI will stimulate **further conceptually informed, context-sensitive research on TT development** in East Asia and beyond.



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