

Think Tanks

Think tanks play an unparalleled role in shaping American public opinion, media narratives, and US government policy. For this reason, they are high-value targets for lobbying and influence activities by foreign governments and nongovernmental actors, including those from the People's Republic of China.

Think tanks in the United States date to the early twentieth century, when industrial capital and private philanthropy (led by the likes of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew W. Mellon, and Henry Ford) began to endow private nonprofit research institutions at a time when there was increasing government demand for expertise on a growing range of public policy issues. Over the past century, think tanks have come to play ever more vital roles in the American public policy process, and they contribute both directly and indirectly to public education, a richer public dialogue via the media, greater civic engagement, and better-informed government policy formulation.

Of the approximately 1,800 think tanks in the United States today, about half are research institutions located within US universities. For the purpose of this section, however, only those think tanks located in nonuniversity private sector settings are considered. Most of these think tanks and research institutions enjoy tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, which stipulates that they are restricted from legislative lobbying as “action organizations.” Institutions that receive this tax-exempt status must either be charitable philanthropic organizations or research organizations (think tanks) that operate in a supposedly nonpartisan way and in the general public interest. Because they are largely privately funded through donor contributions, US think tanks compete tenaciously for support, professional expertise, and public impact.

Roles of Think Tanks in American Society

The universe of think tanks in the United States is very diverse, and each think tank performs different missions for different audiences and clients through different means of output. Four roles are especially relevant to discussions of Chinese interest and potential influence seeking.

The first and most important role is educating the public and better informing the “policy community.” The majority of mainstream think tanks consciously perform these functions through a variety of mechanisms: publishing books, articles in

journals, shorter “policy briefs,” or “op-eds,” and by contributing to policy “task force” reports on specific issues; holding public seminars, briefings, and conferences; speaking to the print, television, radio, and electronic media; and maintaining informational websites that disseminate publications of the think-tank videos of events on a worldwide basis.

The second role is to influence government policy. This is done through face-to-face meetings with government officials, providing testimony before congressional committees, track-two discussions, emails and other communications aimed at targeted audiences, and a wide variety of publications.

The third role, undertaken by some, but not all, US policy think tanks, is to provide specific research on a contractual basis for government agencies that is generally not for public consumption.

The fourth role is to provide personnel to go into government service for fixed periods of time through the famous American “revolving door,” whereby think tanks become “governments in waiting” for ex- and would-be officials until just after an election, when there is usually a large-scale turnover of personnel in Washington as each new administration is formed.

In American think tanks, selection of general research topics can be influenced by outside sources (management, external funding agencies, or government policy shifts). But the final selection is usually subject to mutual agreement, and the findings of research are not supposed to be dictated by outside pressures. At the same time, both US think tanks and university research institutes are expected to maintain analytical independence from their funders. If the funding body does seek to interfere with a research project or promote its own agenda, there is an established expectation that its funding should be rejected. More often than not, there is a process of mutual consultation between researcher, think tank, and potential external funding bodies—through which interests are de-conflicted and grants are negotiated to the mutual satisfaction of all parties. While this is the optimal scenario, there have been cases revealed in the US media in recent years in which such principles were abridged.

The Role of China in American Think Tanks

It is against this general backdrop that the role of expanding Chinese influence on American think tanks needs to be considered. What follows are the findings gleaned through interviews with seventeen think-tank analysts from eleven Washington- and New York-based think tanks¹ that explore the nature of interactions that US think-tank specialists have recently been having with Chinese counterparts. The analysts are all

recognized China experts (with the exception of one who is more broadly an Asia expert but has extensive experience with China-related projects) who have served as directors of programs or centers in their respective institutions. About half have served in the US government. One directs a think tank that is partially supported by Chinese government funds. The interviews were all conducted in 2018.

China has become a priority field for US think tanks concerned with international relations, and most now have staff members (often several) devoted to researching and publishing on China. Many possess PhD degrees, Chinese language skills, and have lived in or visited China over many years with some originally from the PRC. Some stay on staff for many years, while others work on short-term (two- or three-year) contracts. Most think tanks also employ student research assistants and interns (including those from China).

There is significant interaction between American and Chinese think tanks—as think-tank researchers need to visit China as well as host and receive visitors in the United States to be well informed and to perform their own research work. Most interviewees reported hosting or participating in ad hoc meetings in their home institutions with visiting Chinese officials or scholars on a regular basis; although two do not host any meetings with Chinese, they will attend such events if hosted by others. All but one of the interviewees travel to China for their work: to deliver lectures, to participate in conferences or Track 1.5 or Track 2 dialogues, and to do research for articles, books, and reports.

A number of scholars noted a marked shift in the nature of their interactions with Chinese colleagues and research projects over the past few years. While long-standing Track 2 dialogues continue on issues such as cyber policy, nuclear policy, and US-China interactions in third countries and regions, overall they seem not as open, robust, and productive as in the past. Indeed, several long-standing Track 2 dialogues have been curtailed or stopped altogether—with scholars reporting that it is increasingly difficult to establish sustained dialogues that are meaningful with Chinese think tanks because of new rules, restrictions, and uncertainties. For instance, Chinese institutions (both think tanks and universities) must now obtain central-level government approval, such as vetting dialogue topics and foreign participants, before being able to host foreign participants in China. New Chinese government regulations generally limit Chinese think-tank scholars and university professors to one foreign trip per year, and even go so far as to hold passports to make even personal travel more difficult.

When dialogues do occur, another noticeable recent trend has been a decline in candor and greater uniformity in what Chinese interlocutors say. One US think tanker noted, “The conversations have declined in productivity,” while another commented

that he had “moved away from Track 2 because China does not have much to say beyond the Xi Catechism. Even in private conversations, we are not getting anything interesting.” And yet another indicated that he no longer participates in many joint events because they need to be “framed in a way to fit the Chinese narrative, including the speakers, agenda, topics and writing.” Achieving true candor in such dialogues with the Chinese side has long been difficult, as Chinese interlocutors routinely stick to “talking points” and stock slogans, stay strictly “on message,” and are afraid to say anything in front of their peers that might subsequently get them in political trouble back home.

One US analyst commented that at a recent conference in Beijing, Chinese scholars demonstrated little interest in putting forth ideas for cooperation, a marked change from earlier meetings. This individual believes that tensions in the US-China relationship are at least partially responsible. And it is not only the Americans who see less utility in such dialogues. One Track 2 initiated by the Chinese side concerning global norm cooperation ended abruptly when the Chinese said they did not see any productive benefits, despite the willingness of the US side to move forward with the project.

While these are long-standing problems, they have gotten demonstratively worse during the Xi Jinping era. As one think tank scholar commented, “Collaboration has become much more difficult, more authoritarian, and finding a common definition of a program is more difficult. We could usually find areas on which to work collaboratively, but there is a gap in worldview.” One US think tank analyst who directs an innovative program to foster dialogue among rising American and Chinese strategic thinkers, which used to be hosted alternately in both China and the United States, has moved the program entirely out of China because of the repressive political atmosphere. Another institution has transitioned away from cooperative projects with China to emphasize bolstering the capacity of other countries in their dealings with China.

Many US think tank scholars have also become concerned that the relationship between Chinese and American scholars has regressed into a one-way street—with Americans providing intelligence to Chinese interlocutors, whose main purpose is to take the information back to their government. Indeed, some Chinese interlocutors arrive in the offices of American think tanks with barely disguised “shopping lists” of questions, which are presumably set by government “taskers” in Beijing. This is a regular occurrence, but it tends to spike when a high-level governmental visit or summit meeting is pending. A related Chinese goal is to transmit Chinese government policy perspectives to American think-tank counterparts.

Since 2010, American (and other foreign) researchers have encountered a progressively more restrictive research environment in China. One American scholar noted that a previous research project that involved on-the-ground interviews across many provinces was no longer possible. The registration and information requirements of the 2017 Law on the Management of Foreign NGOs is part of the problem, she believes, by severely constraining opportunities to conduct joint projects and research in China. It has also become exceedingly difficult to arrange interviews with Chinese think-tank scholars and government officials; many institutional libraries are now off-limits; central-level archives are inaccessible with provincial and local ones also increasingly circumscribed; survey research is impossible (unless in partnership with an approved Chinese counterpart, which is increasingly hard to find); and other bureaucratic impediments make it increasingly difficult for foreign think-tank researchers to undertake their basic jobs of researching China. At the same time, Chinese researchers working in the US are able to schedule appointments easily with their American counterparts and government officials, enjoy open access to American libraries and government archives, are able to conduct surveys anywhere, and may travel freely around the United States to do field work.

US Think-Tank Centers in China

Only two American think tanks operate real satellite centers in Beijing, and one does so in Hong Kong. Both Beijing centers are cohosted by, and located on, the campus of Tsinghua University. One has a robust program of research by Chinese fellows, brings in people from the think tank's other centers, has a young ambassador program for Americans and Chinese, and boasts a "wide open internet." One center uses its facilities primarily for presentations from the resident fellows and other visitors. Some talks are open to the public, but most are restricted to faculty and graduate students. The center's ambitions were originally greater: for example, to host a set of annual conferences with senior experts and officials on both sides. However, the Chinese side could not live up to its side of the bargain, demanding that senior US officials attend while not delivering Chinese officials of equivalent rank.

These two centers have also become caught up within the increasingly strained US-China relationship as well as the tightening political atmosphere inside China. According to one affiliated research fellow, "connections with the center are a liability because institutions and people can cause you problems if you don't say the right things." At least one of the centers in Greater China has occasionally limited its public programming from addressing sensitive political issues, because it did not want to jeopardize the institution's presence in China and Asia. Yet that think tank's other staffers and fellows have also proved adept at circumventing political restrictions by,

in one instance, inviting a well-known Hong Kong activist denied access at one center event to participate in an event at the US headquarters later.

Chinese Outreach to US Think Tanks

Chinese outreach to American think tanks takes several forms, including via embassy and consular officials, Chinese think-tank scholars, and representatives of China's state-run media.

Embassy and Consular Officials

Chinese embassy and consular officials meet frequently with many (but not all) of the interviewees. Sometimes their aim is to assess Americans' views on particular issues or offer feedback on particular articles (generally those that are critical of China). In one case, for example, a Chinese official stated that a particular analyst's understanding was "too gloomy," and in another that a scholar "didn't have the correct data." One think-tank scholar noted that Chinese officials use both threats and praise to try to influence her. On the one hand, they took her to lunch and expressed "concern with her mind set" indicating that she just "just do[es] not understand the situation." But embassy and Chinese government officials can also be effusive in their praise and offers of assistance, suggesting that she "knows too much about Chinese policy."

Oftentimes officials ask for meetings with think tankers to transmit messages after important Communist Party or government events. After the annual meeting of China's legislature (the National People's Congress) in 2018, for example, one think-tank analyst was invited to lunch, only to endure an hour-and-a-half lecture on how US media and analysts misunderstood the new change in presidential term limits and Xi's reform efforts. Another was visited by military attachés from the Chinese embassy in an effort to convey China's opposition to the Taiwan Travel Act, US Defense Authorization Act, possible prospects for US Navy ship visits, and submarine sales to Taiwan. In concluding his stern warnings, one attaché warned: "We are no longer weak, and can inflict pain on Taiwan, if the United States is not careful and does not abide by the Three Communiques."

On other occasions, Chinese embassy officials ask for meetings to warn think tanks against hosting speakers on topics often related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Tibet. Several think-tank analysts reported that they or others in their institutions had received calls from senior Chinese embassy officials regarding projects related to the Dalai Lama, in one case stating, "This is very troubling—it will have consequences." As far as the analysts were concerned, however, there turned out to be no consequences. Another received a complaint from the Chinese embassy after the think tank hosted

a delegation from Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—but again there were no discernible consequences. In a separate case, a senior Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official warned that a particular interactive website focusing on Chinese security issues was “anti-China.” In response, the think tank invited contributions by a prominent Chinese think-tank scholar: “The content of the website didn’t change, but the official didn’t complain again.” In another instance, the Chinese government withdrew an offer to a US think tank to host Foreign Minister Wang Yi after that think tank refused to disinvite a Taiwanese speaker for a separate event.

Chinese officials have also requested that US think tanks bar certain scholars or NGO activists from participating in discussions with senior Chinese officials. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke at one high-profile Washington think tank, the embassy requested the guest list in advance and then demanded that several individuals—including at least one senior China scholar—be disinvited. The think tank refused. In yet another case involving the director of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, Fu Ying, a US think tank was strongly advised to exclude a well-known China specialist as a condition for a meeting going forward. Think-tank analysts report that in most cases, but not all, such requests have been rejected and events continue as planned.

Generally speaking, PRC visitors either steer clear of or limit their contact with think tanks that have strong relations with, or extensive funding from, Taiwan. One analyst who writes extensively on Taiwan and PRC-Taiwan relations finds that Chinese officials typically do not engage with him. At one time, there was a conflict between an event that he was hosting for a Taiwanese official with a significant event that same afternoon hosted by a colleague that featured very prominent Chinese and American officials. The Chinese embassy instructed them to move the Taiwan event, but they refused. Both events took place with no apparent negative repercussions.

Think Tank to Think Tank

As noted above, Chinese officials and think-tank counterparts reach out to American think-tank China specialists for the purposes of information/intelligence collection and influencing US policy debates. One Chinese scholar reported to an American think-tank analyst that that every time an American expert meets with a Chinese interlocutor, a report is written afterward. Another Chinese visitor indicated to a leading Washington think-tank expert that China's Foreign Ministry has staff dedicated to tracking the activities and publications of about twenty leading American-China specialists.

Any number of Chinese think tanks sponsor meetings and conferences in China and the United States with American counterparts. In some instances, the Chinese

partners are well-known government entities. The Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations and the University of International Relations, both of which have links to the Ministry of State Security (MSS), host conferences on US-China relations and/or Track 2 dialogues. So do the Foreign Ministry–affiliated China Institute of International Studies, Chinese People’s Institute for Foreign Affairs, and the China Foreign Affairs University. The Charhar Institute is also involved in such activities, although its institutional linkages are unclear.

More recently, Chinese think tanks professing to be independent from direct government control (despite being required to register formally with a government entity) have begun to actively engage US counterparts. The think-tank Intellisias is one such organization that has sponsored dialogues with US scholars. The Center for China and Globalization (CCG) is another, with more than a hundred researchers and staff. According to several US think-tank analysts, CCG’s founder and head actively solicits invitations to speak in US think-tank settings. In May 2018, however, Senator Marco Rubio publicly questioned why the CCG head’s CCP affiliation—most particularly his work with the CCP’s United Front Work Department as a standing director of the China Overseas Friendship Association—was not publicized. A subsequent article in *Foreign Policy* about the Rubio letter—which did not include the fact that the US think tank had planned to mention the CCG head’s CCP affiliation at the event itself—was published and deterred the Chinese scholar from speaking at the event. He later appeared, however, at another US think-tank event without his government affiliation noted and without provoking attention from any member of congress.² For such Chinese think tanks, organizing conferences can give them a significant boost in prestige at home. One Chinese think-tank director informed an American think-tank analyst that he received several hundred thousand dollars from the university’s party secretary as a bonus for bringing such a prestigious delegation of Western China watchers to China.

Finally, a group of several senior Chinese government officials and think-tank scholars from different institutions has emerged as an important generator of China-US think tank cooperation. This group includes such well-known figures as Fu Ying (director of the NPC’s Foreign Affairs Committee), Wang Jisi (director of Peking University’s Institute of International and Strategic Studies), Yuan Peng (president of CICIR), and Wang Wen (executive dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University), who are all well funded and able to pay for the activities of the Chinese side, as well as travel and hotel stays for Americans who participate in their projects in China.

Fu Ying emerges as the senior figure in a growing number of US-China interactions. According to several think-tank analysts, she works hard to structure projects in ways to ensure the best possible outcome from the Chinese perspective. This includes, for example, partnering primarily—although not solely—with scholars who are

considered to be more favorably disposed to the Chinese government perspective and ensuring that those with challenging views are excluded. One analyst noted that former Hong Kong chief executive C.H. Tung's and Fu's relationships with US think-tank scholars and presidents provide them with frequent opportunities to speak before large public audiences at prestigious American venues and to advance an official Chinese narrative while gaining a certain added legitimacy at home.

Fu is also explicit in her desire to cultivate relations with think-tank experts she believes may enter government. Following the election of Donald Trump, she “rushed in to see” one think-tank analyst with ties to the new administration and a flurry of embassy officials followed. However, when it became evident that said analyst would not be going into the administration, there was no more interest. In addition, at a meeting around a project on US-China relations advanced by Fu, she noted that she hoped some of the people would be entering the government; otherwise it would not prove to have been worth much to have done the project.

Chinese president Xi Jinping has also encouraged Chinese think tanks to “go global”—establishing a presence within the United States and other countries as a way “to advance the Chinese narrative.” In 2015, the Institute for China-America Studies (ICAS) set up shop in Washington, DC, as a 501(3)(c) nonprofit organization. ICAS is funded by the Hainan-Nanhai Research Foundation, which receives its seed funding from the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, a Chinese government-supported entity, as well as from the China Institute of the University of Alberta, Nanjing University, and Wuhan University. The head of ICAS, Hong Nong, retains ties to these institutions. ICAS maintains a small staff of researchers as well as a diverse board of international experts from China, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Indonesia. ICAS projects focus on the central issues of the US-China relationship, including US-China cooperation, maritime security, North Korea, and trade relations. Hong herself focuses on the South China Sea and the Arctic policies of non-Arctic Council member countries, of which China is the largest and most significant. The institute also holds an annual conference.

While President Xi's call to establish think tanks was contemporaneous with the establishment of ICAS, Hong has made it clear that the decision to set up ICAS in DC came as a result of an effort by her and some of her colleagues both in China and in Canada to understand better how American think tanks operate. She was asked to lead ICAS, and she then selected a board of directors, as well as advisory members. She views the mission of the think tank as being to serve as a bridge in perception between the United States and China. Hong does not want people to view the institute as advancing a Chinese government perspective or as wearing a “Chinese hat,” but she believes that in DC there are too few voices that reflect a Chinese (not necessarily

government) perspective. While she acknowledges that there is not much diversity in the nature of the views represented by ICAS—there is no overt criticism of Chinese government policies—she is hopeful that once ICAS gains greater standing, it will be able to attract senior scholars from other institutions with a greater range of views to write for its website.

More recently, Chinese publishing entrepreneur Zhou Zhixing has established the US-China New Perspectives Foundation, with offices in both Los Angeles and Washington, DC. As of yet, these offices have no track record of activities or publications. It is likely that more such think tanks initiated with or without formal Chinese government support will follow in the United States.

Think-Tank Funding

Different US think tanks have different funding models. At least one type (Federally Funded Research and Development Centers, or FFRDCs) is funded entirely by the US government, while several others accept some US government funding, as well as money from other governments on a contracted work basis. Three think tanks interviewed accept no US or other government funding: One is funded entirely by central operating funds from an endowment, while two others rely on a mix of foundation and private support. One think tank's work is funded entirely by foundations. Most interviewees allow Chinese funders to pay for travel and meeting costs to Beijing for conferences, while a few categorically do not—either because of regulations or on the principle of conflict of interest.

At least one think tank differentiates between funding that is dedicated to its work in Washington and that which supports its center in China. For the center in China, a US-based scholar has raised funds from the China Development Bank, Huawei Corporation, and private entrepreneurs from Hong Kong. This same think tank has a “China Council” of donors (including Chinese Americans, but no Chinese nationals) that supports the think tank's activities. Some US institutions refuse to accept funds from China-based commercial entities, although they are occasionally willing to accept donations from their US-based subsidiaries. Other think tanks, however, accept funds from Chinese corporations and individual businesspeople. One has taken money from Alibaba America for a particular event celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of WTO accession; another has taken money from the Chinese real estate firm Vanke for a project on the environment. A Chinese businessman, Fu Chen, supports work at one China center that also has several prominent Chinese businesspersons on its board. One has an advisory council with Chinese Americans, and yet another think tank is building an advisory council that will include Chinese, but only those who have become American citizens. (This analyst is also considering accepting private Chinese money but not money from Chinese state-owned enterprises.)

C.H. Tung and his China-US Exchange Foundation (CUSEF) have emerged as a leading funding source for several think tanks, providing financial assistance for a variety of projects ranging from supporting book research and writing, to funding collaborative projects, to promoting exchanges. CUSEF's work in this area extends back to the mid-1990s (for more on CUSEF, see the section on universities in this report). The interviewees differ, however, in their assessments of whether CUSEF funding reflects direct linkages with Beijing. As one analyst noted, "C.H. is a special figure because he is half Hong Kong and half PRC." Another commented that he currently has the potential to undertake a joint project with C.H. Tung and will "probably do it for the money and the contact." Another has accepted funds for work on cultural exchange and climate change, while yet another is far more circumspect, describing Mr. Tung as an "open united front agent" in his capacity as vice chair of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress. Many of the partnerships CUSEF establishes in conjunction with US think tanks represent efforts to find common ground, particularly in line with PRC initiatives and policies, for example: "The New Model of Major Power Relationship Research Project 2014," "Taiwan Arms Sales Research Project 2014," and the "Pacific Community Initiative."

CUSEF also funds a number of annual exchange programs, including for members of Congress, state and local officials, historically black colleges and universities, as well as several journalist delegations, including one for students of journalism. CUSEF often partners with the Center for American Progress, the American Foreign Policy Council, and the East-West Institute. However, each partnership is different. The Center for American Progress, for example, pays its own way in its work with CUSEF. CUSEF also funds projects with think-tank analysts who are not China scholars, such as a project on US-China relations in the Arctic. One think-tank analyst who was involved in the CUSEF-funded "Creating a Pacific Community" project became uncomfortable with the overall orientation of the project and dropped out.

C.H. Tung is personally proactive, often visiting the United States and meeting with think-tank experts. On one occasion, he encouraged an American scholar to write an article together with a noted Chinese scholar on the South China Sea. He also offered to establish a massive program with one institute in which the think tank would train Chinese Party School officials on free market economics (the idea was eventually rejected by the think tank). In addition, CUSEF has funded the publication of at least two books in which US analysts were involved. In both cases, the analysts state that C.H. was "hands-off" in the process. Yet, in another instance, when a US scholar approached the CUSEF for possible funding of a major book on US-China relations, the foundation insisted on two conditions: that half of the contributors be Chinese scholars, and that the foundation would have the right to review the manuscript prior to publication. The American scholar in question refused these conditions and looked elsewhere for support.

Taiwan's TECRO also supports work at several think tanks. In rare cases—because one usually excludes the other—US think tanks end up accepting funds from both Taiwan and mainland China sources.

Visa Access

Most American scholars consider travel to China an important element of their ability to do their job—attending conferences, participating in delegations, and undertaking independent research. Given this imperative, the issue of visa access is a central one. While most analysts receive single-entry professional exchange (F) visas, a few routinely receive one-year multiple-entry F visas, while some have ten-year tourist (L) visas. Others receive double-entry visas, if proof of specific invitations are produced. One US think-tank scholar, a Chinese national, travels to China on a Chinese passport. While ten-year multiple-entry tourist visas are, of course, optimal—there is also a serious potential downside: namely, that they are for “tourism,” and, according to Chinese law, professional activities are not permitted. One senior scholar who holds a ten-year tourist visa was recently visited and interrogated at his hotel in Beijing after several days of meetings with Chinese think tanks and universities.

Several think-tank analysts expressed the opinion that Chinese officials are now paying more attention to the writings of American think-tank analysts—not only books, articles, and op-eds, but also social media. This is done not only to become familiar with changing views but to catalog who is supportive and who is critical of China's policies. One scholar believes that, as a result of a comment posted on Twitter, this individual was required to go to the Chinese embassy for an interview before being granted a visa. This had never happened in his previous decades of China-related travel. In another instance, Beijing attempted to enforce its sovereignty claims through the visa process. A visa was initially denied because an American scholar had stated that “Hong Kong” and “Taiwan” were places he had previously visited, instead of “Hong Kong SAR,” and “Taiwan, China.” Most of the scholars interviewed believe that the process of gaining a visa has become much more politicized and difficult in the past year or two, with much more scrutiny given to an applicant's political views. Among those interviewed, only one think-tank scholar reported actually being denied a visa. (However, there have been reports of other think-tank analysts being rejected who are reluctant to go public about their denials.) In addition, most of those interviewed observed that the Chinese embassy now often issues visas the day before or even the morning of departure, making the visa process laborious and nerve-racking.

Two interviewees reported that companies that specialize in expediting visa applications have indicated that their respective think tanks are on a blacklist that makes obtaining visas problematic. In one case, an interviewee related a case in which

a junior researcher was told not to list the think tank as her place of employment on her visa application or it might be rejected. (To avoid this scenario, the senior researcher reached out to a Chinese official to pave the way and the visa was issued.) In another instance, a visa expediter was banned from doing business with the Chinese embassy after it informed a think tank that it had landed on a list making it difficult to get visas.

A senior Chinese official told one think-tank analyst that responsibility for reviewing visa requests has shifted from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Public Security, thus creating many delays and difficulties. One US think-tank scholar reported that he has not only been advised on a number of occasions not to even apply for a visa but also has had a planned invitation to a conference hosted by an American company revoked because the Foreign Ministry told the company not to invite him. Others have been granted visas only for “personal” trips, with the proviso that they do no public speaking nor meet with anyone outside of family members or cultural figures.

Think-tank scholars report that on several occasions, when one member of a delegation has been in danger of not receiving a visa (or not receiving it in time), reaching out to the Chinese Embassy or consular officials (in one case threatening to cancel the delegation) has resulted in a favorable disposition. Two think tanks now routinely reach out to Chinese officials before submitting applications in order to pave the way. Nonetheless, a few think-tank analysts are concerned about being beholden to the embassy or the consulate and the shadow such dependency casts on their ability to continue their work. One analyst indicated that although he is asked to help other members of the think tank with their visa issues, he does not want to be in debt to the embassy and therefore does not offer to help proactively.

Chinese Media and Think Tanks

The Chinese media offer both opportunities and pitfalls to American think-tank analysts. A significant part of a think-tank analyst’s job is to influence official and public opinion—and the media, whether Chinese or Western, is an essential part of that process. Think-tank analysts are under no illusion, however, that the Chinese media can be trusted to present their ideas as they are delivered. As one interviewee underscored, “The desire of Chinese media is to make Americans see things the Chinese way—in a positive and beneficial light—and to present positive American views to the Chinese public. You have to be prepared that the Chinese media will have leading questions and know that they will not include critical things.” One senior US scholar has had multiple experiences of censorship, and one case of fabricated quotations, by Chinese newspapers. It is also apparent that Chinese journalists

increasingly flood public events put on by US think tanks in Washington, using the events as press conferences and to pose leading questions. While Western reporters are not immune to this type of behavior, the Chinese media undertake such distortions in a far more systematic manner, with a pointed political agenda that is usually determined by the government's current political "line."

With this in mind, US think-tank analysts have developed a varied set of approaches to their interactions with the Chinese media. Some see the Chinese media as an opportunity to get their views across to the Chinese public, even though, as one thinker acknowledges, he knows he may be censored in "inappropriate ways." Another stated that despite the obvious biases, he still gives a lot of interviews—to CCTV, CGTN, Xinhua, People's Daily, and the Shanghai Media Group, among them. At least one claims that while he does frequent CGTN interviews, he has never been censored.

Several US think-tank scholars indicate that they keep track of their interviews, and if they are misquoted, they stop speaking to that journalist. One notes that he refuses to do interviews on sensitive political issues, such as party congresses. Another indicates he will only do live television as a hedge against being censored, while another indicates he will only be interviewed in written email form. Two analysts refuse to give interviews to Chinese media at all, with the exception of those that occur in the immediate aftermath of a public talk when an analyst is approached by Chinese journalists. In one case, an analyst reported that Xinhua conducted an in-person background interview after she refused to write an op-ed, but she was willing to share her views (which were negative). Xinhua then drafted a full, positive-sounding op-ed in her name, which they planned to publish without her approval. She successfully blocked it, and her institute now has a blanket ban on interviews with the Chinese press unless there is a special reason. This is intended to send a message that they do not believe the Chinese media can be trusted.

The opportunity to earn money through interviews was mentioned by one scholar. She noted that CGTN pays \$150 per interview. The network warned her, however, that if she was too critical of the Chinese government, she would not be invited back. CGTN also indicated that she should be "more like" another think-tank analyst who had become a regular on CGTN.

Writing and Publishing in China

The majority of the think-tank analysts who have been interviewed for this section have refused to write op-eds for Chinese newspapers, with several stating that they have had bad experiences in which content has been censored. One scholar reports several instances of pieces being commissioned by *Global Times*, only to have his piece spiked after submission because of its controversial content. Others, however, have

written for Chinese publications and have not experienced any such issues. Several analysts noted that they have heard that their articles and reports have been translated into Chinese in *neibu* (internal circulation) channels for consumption by think tanks and government officials. One interviewee commented that if what she writes is positive, it is published openly; if it is critical, it is only published internally.

A number of interviewees also reported that their work had been improperly published on Chinese websites. Sohu has taken think-tank reports and put them online without permission; one analyst forced the company to take them down from the web. Another scholar reported that a Chinese think tank at one point claimed she was one of its fellows and posted bogus content on its website that it alleged she had written.

While some of the think-tank scholars interviewed have had their books translated into Chinese by mainland presses, most have not. A growing number do not try, recognizing that significant parts of their books would never make it past the censors. When informed privately by the translator of her book that large portions were being excised, one scholar halted the Chinese publication process. Another scholar battled for two years with the Chinese publisher after the contract had been signed between the Western and Chinese publishers. The State Press and Publishing Administration demanded more than seventy deletions, finally settling on five with the agreement of the scholar. In the end, however, the Chinese publisher informed the scholar's publisher that the book could not proceed to publication because of "unfriendly remarks" the scholar had been making in the media. Most US scholars simply do not bother with mainland publishers and look for publication opportunities in Taiwan or Hong Kong. Several US scholars believe that there are pirated copies of their books or at least partially translated copies available within China. At least one scholar found that a search on Baidu yielded half of her most recent book online.

Not all scholars are willing to sacrifice the opportunity to be published in China. One analyst reported that a senior non-China expert at their think tank permitted his book to be published in China, even though several pages had been mistranslated and the editors had actually created some new passages that did not exist anywhere in the original text. Even the title and subtitle of the book, as well as the author's own professional title, were incorrectly identified.

Public Voice

The issue of censorship also arises in the context of how think-tank analysts present their own views publicly, especially when in China. On the whole, think-tank scholars show determination to raise sensitive topics and be forthright in presenting their views. But it is an understandable human instinct to want to be polite and diplomatic while still conveying one's own views honestly. As one scholar, who also does a lot of

consulting, noted, “Access to China is my livelihood.” At the same time, he argues, “I never say anything contrary to my views, but I write in a way that is less shrill.”

Another scholar noted, “I don’t self-censor, but there is no need to launch a polemic every day of the week . . . polemics get your visa cut off. China’s greatest power is the power of visa control.” A third commented, “I don’t censor the substance, but I may modulate what I say.” He argued that he sometimes indulges the sensibilities of the PRC in order to get his deeper point across. As another analyst noted, “I avoid sensationalizing. I am willing to be critical, but I try not to make attacks on Xi.” And different interviewees distinguish between writing and speaking: “I do not compromise on writing, but I am cautious in interviews: I will say the same message but indirectly, not confrontationally.” One analyst said, “I make sure that if I go into battle, I do so thoughtfully, not accidentally.” She tries to be very strategic about the messages that she sends and tries not to weigh in on every small issue or bluntly charge, “You are wrong!” In a similar vein, one other scholar says he often uses an interrogatory, rather than accusatory, approach when raising challenging issues, such as human rights.

The knowledge that what an analyst says publicly reflects not only on the individual but also on the analyst’s institution also shapes at least one scholar’s thinking: “There is a conflict between protecting your institute and speaking truthfully. Whether it is over access or money. Sometimes I put the positive first—and then say . . . ‘but some people say.’ I might not start right off with Xi Jinping—I might be more indirect. In public meetings, there is a tacit understanding that you will not be super critical of China.” Another suggests that it is “very hard not to subconsciously self-censor.” This person indicated that when their institute does projects on counterterrorism in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, they are very careful about discussing China’s restive region of Xinjiang where up to one million Uighurs are presently believed to be in reeducation camps. In general, they do not take on projects concerning Taiwan or Xinjiang.

Interviewees expressed a deep sensitivity around the issue of Taiwan and how to refer to the island and its officials. One analyst observed that in an invitation, his institute would not identify Taiwan’s representative to the United States as an “ambassador,” but during the event, he would indeed orally introduce the official as the “ambassador.” Or as another scholar noted, “I am tactful but keep to my original point of view. I don’t change the substance. On Taiwan, in private conversations, I use President Tsai—but I also maintain neutrality in public to ensure that is acceptable to Taiwan and the PRC.”

Two analysts stated that they do not self-censor “at all.” They understand the temptation, but they try to write and say in public exactly what they would in private.

Pressure from Think-Tank Boards or Outside Influencers

Interaction between think-tank analysts and the members of their institution's boards of trustees varies significantly. Some engage frequently, socialize, and consult on China-related issues—while others have virtually no contact. Only three interviewees reported incidents of attempted interference. In one case, a prominent former board member complained to the head of the think tank about an article that was “too tough” on China. However, no pressure, besides the obviously intimidating impact of having a piece of writing singled out by an overseer, was brought to bear on the scholar. In another case, a board member tried to pressure a think-tank president to avoid hosting the Dalai Lama, but failed. A third instance involved the Hong Kong political activist discussed earlier. The tendency can also work in the other direction. One scholar indicated that his board is very involved and has lately become tougher on China in recent years, focusing on “how do we still counter China, yet still engage.”

Chinese Nationals in US Think Tanks

American think-tank analysts differ in their assessment of the risks and rewards for hosting Chinese scholars as visiting fellows or employing Chinese nationals on staff, with most suggesting that it is better to have them inside the think tanks to understand how they are thinking and working. One analyst said he “assumed some or all would be interrogated” when they returned to China. “RAND,” he said, “should be worried.” One researcher noted that she is “careful to keep Chinese nationals from attending sensitive meetings featuring US officials or military officers,” but otherwise welcomes them to events.

Only one Washington think tank hosts Chinese scholars on a regular and continuous basis (although Washington-based universities do so more often), including them in programming and most meetings, even when funded by a Chinese host institution. Scholars at this institution view them as valuable for gaining insights and for training purposes. Another think-tank analyst who has hosted visiting fellows from China pointed out that two prominent Chinese scholars who spent time at their institution went back and wrote “important papers.” Still, some expressed concern over all the “bright young Chinese showing up on Mass [Massachusetts] Ave.” and the potential that they might have for reporting back to Beijing. The scholar noted that think tanks want young people to “plow through the Chinese literature,” and this means hiring Chinese nationals, Chinese Americans, or Taiwanese because of their language abilities. Some analysts expressed concerns that think-tank analysts who are of Chinese nationality (either nationals or American citizens) may face special pressures from the imputation that as ethnic Chinese, they are susceptible to Chinese influence and control.

Broader Concerns

Think-tank analysts voiced a range of concerns around the issue of Chinese influence-seeking activities in the United States. One is the deliberate effort to manage US perceptions and to frame issues in ways that are favorable to the Chinese Communist Party. As one analyst noted, “This requires pushback, which is tough work.” While many believed that they could adequately defend themselves against efforts to influence them, noting as one did that the “the general capacity of US society to push back is not bad,” they worried about their colleagues who were not knowledgeable China experts and might therefore be more easily deceived. For example, one scholar pointed out that with US-China cooperation, the incentive is to come up with shared values and ideas. He noted that in the case of the Sanya Initiative (the US-China dialogue featuring retired military officers from both sides), he has had to “talk them (the American participants) off the ledge; they think they are being tough, but they are mistaken.” This same analyst sees the American media as complicit in echoing Chinese perspectives, noting that when Xi Jinping delivered his speech in Davos in January 2017, few reporters understood that the Chinese were in the midst of a major propaganda campaign to promote globalization 2.0. He also suggests that there is “de facto self-censorship” of entire areas of scholarship: human rights for one. Another analyst noted that outside of the National Endowment for Democracy, she does not see much foundation interest in normal discourse in this issue either.

One scholar worried about growing Chinese control over all areas of US-Chinese interaction: “The Chinese are following people, bugging our hotel rooms. There is imbalanced control that serves CCP interests not ours. There is lack of serious training by the US side on how to deal with Chinese influence.” The potential for Chinese money to give China leverage over American think tanks also provoked a degree of anxiety. Several scholars expressed concern over funding issues, noting that reliance on a single funder with an agenda makes scholars vulnerable. In addition, one scholar worried that the amount of money China is spending to promote its views, whether through think-tank cooperation or the Chinese media (such as CGTN paying for its interviews) means that China will ultimately be able to “buy its way in.”

A number of analysts believed that the involvement of the US government in these issues will only make things more contentious. There is concern that Washington will overreact. As one analyst noted, there is a type of “binaryism in Washington, in which you must be ‘for or against’ China; you are either friendly to China or producing stuff that says China is evil.” This scholar, along with several others, raised the issue of the rise of anti-China sentiments, such as the “yellow peril” and McCarthyism, and expressed concern about Chinese Americans and anyone who has interests with China coming under attack. One analyst mentioned the Committee of 100, a collection of prominent Chinese Americans, as being particularly vulnerable to unfair attack.

Another analyst noted that we need “a granular view on issues of sharp power.” He pointed in particular to Confucius Institutes, arguing that he would not accept Confucius Institute–sponsored research, but was fine with language training, although it would be better to get them off campuses. He laughed at the idea that they were “effective instruments of Chinese propaganda.” Along these lines, a few individuals indicated that they were less concerned about Chinese influence in the social sciences and more concerned about reports that Chinese students and postdocs in scientific research labs bring restricted technologies back to China.

Finally, there were calls from some analysts for far more reciprocity than currently exists. These analysts felt that the playing field between the two countries was out of balance and argued that there should be a much stronger dose of reciprocity and “hardball” in US-China exchanges, arguing that the American side should curtail or cut off contacts until Chinese institutions were willing to operate at a level of openness similar to that found in their American counterparts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

American think-tank scholars working on China face an increasingly challenging research environment. But in this challenge, they are hardly unique. Members of the media and the civil society/NGO world also share similar, even more daunting, challenges. The process for obtaining visas has become more onerous; the quality of engagement with Chinese counterparts has declined and become more difficult; and opportunities to do field-based research, as well as archival work, have diminished. Track 2 dialogues are viewed with increasing skepticism as to their value by more and more US scholars and policy specialists, who find their Chinese colleagues ever more unable and/or unwilling to share their perspectives in an open and meaningful manner. Many think-tank analysts are responding by limiting their Track 2 efforts and changing the way they conduct their research.

At the same time, a small but growing group of well-funded Chinese scholars and officials are proactively seeking to shape the American narrative and American views of China. They are doing so by supporting and funding joint projects with American partners in ways that reflect Chinese government priorities, but they give them the opportunity to choose and work with only those American scholars viewed by China as sympathetic to China’s goals. To date, these efforts do not appear to have influenced the US debate over China in a significant manner, but it is important to be aware of the money and effort being thrown at the endeavor.

Chinese funding of American think tanks remains limited. C.H. Tung, through his China-US Exchange Foundation, is to date the most common source of financial support, although most report his funding as “hands-off.” A few Chinese companies

have also bankrolled a limited number of American think-tank activities. However, American think tanks with centers in China have actively engaged in fund-raising from mainland Chinese sources. With only a few exceptions, American think-tank analysts do not foresee that Chinese money will become a significant factor in their work at home any time soon, although because of endemic funding shortages at most nonprofits, worries about reliance on Chinese money are not unfounded.

Chinese media relentlessly solicit American think-tank scholars' opinions for consumption within both the United States and China. At least one outlet pays participants for their time and makes it clear that criticism of China is unwelcome. Censorship of written work is common, even expected, so that few interviewees expect to have their books published in China. American think-tank analysts appear most annoyed when their work is illegally and/or incorrectly published on Chinese websites. In most instances, they seek to have the work taken down from the web.

American think-tank analysts have a highly developed understanding of Chinese efforts to influence their views—whether in the form of heavy-handed criticism from the Chinese embassy for an article or a proposed meeting with someone like the Dalai Lama, a Hong Kong dissident, or via more subtle efforts that arise through joint projects funded by Chinese partners. To the last one, all interviewees for this study indicated that they refuse to be pressured into changing their practices. Some think-tank scholars acknowledge that they try to be diplomatic in their public discourse on China—but insist that they do not change their overall message, only their tone or choice of wording. Some argue that they save their tough language to deliver the most important messages. But some also admit to acceding to Chinese demands on how to present Taiwanese officials in public settings—such as in the announcements of a meeting on the think tank's website—but then adopting the Taiwanese preference during the meeting itself. The general view—although not shared by all—was that seeking to avoid unnecessarily insulting or upsetting the Chinese is the better strategy. But most agreed that the arena of acceptable parlance was shrinking and that pressures were growing.

As an antidote, the American think-tank community should understand that its position is one with significant leverage. Chinese officials and scholars seek to use think tanks as venues for visiting Chinese officials, as legitimating partners for Chinese-supported research projects that will influence the American narrative, and as important sources of information concerning the changing US political landscape. The American scholars should celebrate their principles of independence, use the leverage their institutional frameworks provide to resist incursion, and constructively push for greater reciprocity. Some specific recommendations include:

Promote Transparency

- Think tanks should—in partnership with universities—jointly and regularly produce summaries of difficulties in China-related research (access to regions, agencies, persons, visas, etc.) and make these available to each other and to US officials. The latter, in turn, should be mindful of the reciprocal nature of think-tank work and how the inability of American scholars to secure meetings with Chinese officials and scholars when Chinese scholars are afforded such privileges is harmful to the stability of the overall relationship.
- Think tanks should publicly disclose the source of funding for events, publications, and other activities. If think-tank leaders elect to solicit funds from Hong Kong or mainland Chinese sources, they should be transparent about from where the money came and how it is being used, to ensure that there is no opportunity for the Chinese funder to harmfully affect the research agenda or outcome.

Promote Integrity

- A Code of Conduct should be worked out among US think tanks—perhaps in conjunction with American university China studies centers—to establish “do’s and don’ts” in their exchanges with Chinese institutions. Once this is worked out among American institutions, then counterparts in other democratic countries should also be approached with an eye toward establishing multilateral Codes of Conduct.

Promote Reciprocity

- US think-tank representatives—the presidents and senior China scholars—should arrange a meeting with the Chinese ambassador to express their collective perspectives on these issues and call for changes. Such a meeting could be usefully coupled with a jointly signed letter of concern by directors of all major US think tanks.
- If any member of any think-tank delegation is denied a visa, the delegation should cancel the trip. It sends a profoundly wrong signal to proceed, if China is able to control the composition of a delegation. The think tank should also consider a moratorium on Chinese officials visiting or speaking at the think tank until the visa issues are resolved. The same principle may be applied to Chinese think tanks that refuse to receive American scholars for visits. In such cases, US think tanks should seriously consider not hosting residential stays for Chinese visiting scholars from institutions that do not offer parallel opportunities for American scholars in China. (At present, only the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Shanghai Institute of International Studies permit foreign scholars in residence.)

- The US government should not unilaterally grant Chinese think-tank or university scholars ten-year visas, as it has been doing, without exacting across-the-board reciprocal treatment for US think-tank and university scholars. At the same time, the US government should also advocate consistently on behalf of US think-tank and university scholars who have been barred from visiting China.

Two core values cut across all of our concerns: *freedom of speech* and *reciprocity*. As a democratic society, we should tolerate *no* infringements—overt or covert—on our freedom of speech and freedom of analysis concerning China. A “leveling of the playing field” in terms of upholding the principles and practicalities of reciprocity in our exchanges with Chinese counterparts is needed, because it is an essential part of making the relationship both more equitable and reciprocal and more stable and thus durable.

NOTES

1 These include: the American Enterprise Institute, Asia Society, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Brookings Institute, Center for American Progress, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Council on Foreign Relations, International Peace Institute, Institute for China-American Studies, Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, and Stimson Center.

2 We have slightly revised the above discussion from our original report to reflect additional facts.