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*Opinion*

## Why China and the US need to worry about the war on think tanks and free thought

- Xi Jinping's discomfort with the pluralism of think tanks is matched by the US distrust of Confucius Institutes and Chinese students
- Policy intellectuals are increasingly needed in a complex world, and it is the high responsibility of Beijing and Washington to keep the conversation flowing



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Illustration: Craig Stephens

Right, you don't have to remind me: the Chinese civilisation of 3,000-plus years has at the ready ancient sayings for almost everything that comes up in life – sort of like the French who “always have a word for it”.

Well, we Americans are not voiceless ninnies without our own cultural verbiage, and, for what I am about to argue, our best insipid phrase would be something like “Don't Throw the Baby Out With the Bathwater” or “Look Before You Leap” ... you get the idea.

Here's the policy point: consider for a moment the think tank, a seemingly non-glamorous dull-as-dishwater subject. But it's not: in such a tank, the sharpest sharks of the human mindset swim probing, relentlessly, hungrily. For such intellectual jaws, America is rightly famous – the daunting Rand Corporation on our West Coast, the influential Centre for Strategic and International Studies on the East, and so on.

But in China ? Surprise! Although often knocked by Western sociologists for having a civil society that's pathetically paper-thin, China does have countless think tanks. Many add invaluable depth to Chinese public policy that help drive the country's economic development in sane directions. Instead of mindlessly measuring China's development in terms of "black GDP numbers", think-tank thinker Hu Angang, wily but controversial, pushes for a new metric of "green GDP" growth. Environmentalists around the world offer praise for "Chairman" Xi Jinping's emphasis on this transcendent and possibly existential challenge, especially in comparison to America's Donald J Trump, who appears oblivious to all evidence, from US think tanks or anywhere else.

Almost everyone concurs that China's 2001 entrance into the World Trade Organisation was a monumental tipping point in its acceptance of globalised economic citizenship. But this epochal decision did not come easy for China. It was only with the involvement of major brainiacs in think tanks such as the Development Research Centre and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (not to mention behind-the-scenes input from key US government officials like President Bill Clinton's trade negotiator Charlene Barshefsky) that Beijing was able to walk into the WTO era without losing too many steps, much less falling on its face.

Yet some of China's institutes would appear to be (to deploy a rank Americanism) "tanking" – in disfavour to the extent that they irritate with intellectual independence. Recently, a rather famous one, the Unirule Institute of Economics, went "poof" – a sudden footnote fading into China's past. Others are said to be shivering from the cold blasts out of Beijing like some Antarctic penguin stripped of his tuxedo.



Leading Chinese economist Mao Yushi, recipient of the Cato Institute's 2012 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty and a vocal critic of former leader Mao Zedong, founded the Unirule Institute of Economics in 1993. The independent think tank was forced to shut down after local authorities in Beijing declared it "unregistered and unauthorised" in August 2019. Photo: Reuters

Why? It's possible that Chairman Xi is uncomfortable with his think tanks because of the implicit pluralism – that more than a single unified intelligent path exists to advance China's march towards renewed greatness, and that accordingly the Communist Party as the sole putative policy beacon should have no monopolistic grip on the best thinking.

Or perhaps their importance and prominence on the political landscape might give rise to a new class of charismatic thinkers that will make China's modern emperor system seem more dated than the Little Red Book.

Note, too, that in many cases, strong-minded thinkers who sit atop these bubbling tanks of policy ideas are "returnees" – educated abroad, often at US universities and institutes. Perhaps the Ministry of State Security is whispering into Xi's ear that some have been turned by American intelligence, just as the FBI tells Congress and anyone else who'll listen that China's Confucius Institutes planted in the West are no more than Petri dishes for snarky Commie spies.

Against narrow-focused, one-dimensional reductionism on both sides of the Pacific, no wonder China-US relations are squeezing out possibilities with unthinking momentum.

Should the Chinese government proceed to suck the life out of its think-tank-type institutes – forcing them to toe policy lines that may be officially approved but may also be tragically misconceived – its vaunted economic development record will come under risk and stress. The Xi government may widen its power bandwidth by downsizing the egos of leading think-tankers, but in the process may pull the plug on the open intellectual energy needed to push onward a Goliath economy of almost 1.4 billion people.

And there's a further hitch in negative thinking. China and the United States, even under inspired utopian imagination, will never wrap themselves cosily around each other like some geopolitical double helix. Historically and genetically, they are too different for that. But, they can find a stabilising measure of peace, with a prudent parallelism of shared interests and openly acknowledged disagreements that are mediated, mollified or minimised through mutually deft diplomacy.

Not all vital diplomacies have to flow through official channels to be properly received. Over the decades, America's think tanks and institutes have served as tributaries and backwaters that float to their counterparts on the mainland ideas and proposals for possible further distribution to higher authorities in Zhongnanhai.

## **By throwing cold water on Chinese think tanks, the Xi government would shrink its intellectual policy space and produce a constricted China**

China's "returned" thinkers also are vital for a sophisticated sense of how America's establishment thinks (or doesn't). There is no better way to achieve quality understanding and cross-cultural karma than to live amid the other.

Just as the Trump administration's visa squeeze on international students (not to mention that unnecessary Confucian Institute "crackdown") is beyond crazy, by throwing cold water on Chinese think tanks, the Xi government would shrink its intellectual policy space and produce a constricted China. History has well recorded what a closed China will produce.

As our American argot would have it, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. As annoying – and sometimes smug – as policy intellectuals can be, they are increasingly needed in a world that isn't getting easier to comprehend or to keep peaceful and secure. This is the high responsibility of both Beijing and Washington. So look before you leap.

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