Changing Windows on a Changing China: The Evolving “Think Tank” System and the Case of the Public Security Sector

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ABSTRACT The entrepreneurial “second generation” of Chinese policy research institutes (often called think tanks) that emerged during the 1980s played a pivotal role in the policy process of reform. Since Tiananmen, China’s growing commercialization is spawning a “third generation” of think tanks characterized by even more ambiguous links to sponsoring leaders and institutions, greatly expanded commercial links, greater exposure to Western theories and techniques, and the gradual emergence of wide-ranging “policy communities.” The extent of this change varies greatly across policy sectors, however. Generational change is evident in China’s previously unstudied network of public security (police) think tanks. Though clearly still of the “second generation” variety, these institutes have been in the forefront of importing and incorporating more sophisticated crime-fighting techniques and less class-based and conspiratorial theories of crime and social unrest.

Since their emergence in the early 1980s, China’s growing networks of government affiliated research institutes (colloquially referred to as “think tanks” by most foreign analysts) have become some of the most important windows through which foreign analysts can observe China’s usually opaque policy-making system. Foreign observers soon discovered that researchers at many of these institutes not only possessed impressive knowledge of internal policy debates, they were typically far less shy about meeting foreigners than regular government officials. Pioneering scholars of think tanks, such as the late Michel Oksenberg, were also quick to point out the pivotal policy role these institutions were playing in the mid-1980s reform efforts.1 By the late 1980s think tank researchers constituted one of the most regular and influential conduits of policy-related information. A 2001 computer search, for example, revealed at least 118 foreign press interviews over the preceding five years with international relations scholar Yan Xuetong, until recently affiliated with one of China’s most important think tanks, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).2

Careful scholars continually reflect on the changing quality of their sources – especially the levels of access, the unconscious constructs, the omissions and biases they introduce into any analysis – hence the metaphor of the think tank as “window.” These institutions may accord us a peek into the policy process, but they also limit, shape and structure how much we can see. The changing role of these institutions in China’s

1. Among the earliest sources to focus attention on the influence of research institutes was Oksenberg’s “Economic policy-making in China: summer, 1981,” The China Quarterly, No. 90 (1982).

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policy process, and their enduring impact on perceptions of that process, inspired a November 2000 conference entitled “China’s Think Tanks: Changing Windows on a Changing China” from which the current essays are drawn. The present essay has two purposes: to survey the broader trends in China’s think tank system reflected in these essays; and to introduce an important but long overlooked sector in this system – the think tanks in China’s public security system.

**Think Tanks and Policy-Making in the 1980s: First and Second Generations**

Most of China’s “first generation” think tanks – whose roots date back to the 1950s, 1960s and even to Yan’an times – were modelled on Soviet-style research institutes, and were tightly bound to particular ministries and their institutional missions. As adjuncts of traditional ministries, they were not initially of great interest to Western China analysts.

Only with the emergence of the new “second generation” think tanks in the early 1980s did Western observers begin to take notice. In what is by now a well-known story, many of these institutions were established in the early 1980s because key Central leaders, especially those who were of a more reformist orientation such as Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Hu Qiaomu, Zhao Ziyang and Deng Liqun, believed that the policy research they were receiving from traditional Party department and state ministries was inadequate for rapid economic reform and China’s entry into an increasingly complex world. They required policy options that were more empirically-based, less ideologically and bureaucratically hidebound, and more-innovative and cosmopolitan.

But the special informal structure of many of these institutions underscored the leadership’s deep lingering ambivalence concerning policy research. On the one hand, institutional distance from the regular Party-state bureaucracy was essential to promote innovation. On the other hand, the leadership did not completely trust the university system for advice (a university system that was, in any case, still emerging from the Cultural Revolution), nor was it willing to countenance the establishment of independently-funded research institutions. Hence, the emergence of often *ad hoc* think tanks personally patronized by individual leaders. As chronicled by Joseph Fewsmith, Barry Naughton and others, many of the most prominent “second generation” economic think tanks emerged from informal group consultations among a few key policy intellectuals and senior leaders, and initially were highly personalized in their structure. This trend is exemplified by Chen Yizi’s Agricultural Development Group, responsible for many key reforms of the early 1980s.3 The unclear

organizational ties and funding sources of these second generation think tanks were often a source of puzzlement to Western analysts trying to assess the policy influence of their views. The new think tanks were certainly more autonomous from traditional Party-state departments than their first generation predecessors, but solid proof of links between their policy proposals and specific central patrons often remained frustratingly elusive.

Of course, that was the point. It was the very ambiguity of their status that permitted the think tanks to play their pivotal, innovative role in the highly fluid policy-making process of the 1980s, when they added that element of flexibility that is essential to the politics of any great reform movement. In the well-known alternating policy cycles of “opening up” and “clamping down,” reformist leaders like Zhao Ziyang needed a place where bold, risky policy innovations could “incubate” until the political mood and balance of power were favourable for pushing them forward. The think tanks thus became havens for “policy entrepreneurs” who were unable to promote their reform proposals within the traditional ministry system. Bankruptcy Law author Cao Siyuan was a classic case: for years he unsuccessfully shopped this reform all over the Beijing industrial bureaucracy until he finally found a sympathetic ear as a researcher at the State Council’s Technical Economic Research Centre, a think tank run by one of Zhao’s closest economic advisors, Ma Hong.4 Conversely, during periods when more conservative leaders and views held sway, the hazy institutional ties of these think tanks afforded top reformist leaders a certain “deniability,” and allowed them to distance themselves from controversial proposals that remained temporarily beyond the pale.

Ultimately, the demands of China’s growing global engagement gradually compelled changes among the remaining first generation think tanks as well. The pathbreaking research on these topics by David Shambaugh, Bonnie Glaser, Phillip Saunders and Banning Garrett on foreign policy and defence think tanks over the past two decades has chronicled the slow evolution of analytical views within such institutions as the CICIR – gradually moving away from Marxist ideological views of world politics to very traditional Western notions of “realism” and sovereignty, and slowly towards more sophisticated concepts of world politics, such as “interdependence.” Here, in their most recent analyses, Shambaugh, Glaser and Saunders still find this progress proceeding, albeit very slowly. Even the think tanks of one of China most devoutly Leninist bureaucracies – the public security system – have gradually, tacitly recognized that Marxist class-based and conspiratorial theories of crime and social protest are completely inadequate to address the post-Mao explosion of crime and unrest (see below).

Think Tanks Since Tiananmen: Trends Towards a Third Generation

The impact of the Tiananmen crackdown on the think tank system varied enormously across policy sectors. The repression initially devastated many economic and political reform think tanks — especially those that were closely tied to Zhao Ziyang — producing what Fewsmith has characterized as a two-year stunned silence within this community.5 Several of these institutions closed, and many of their key personnel either faced imprisonment or had to escape abroad, either to “study” or into exile. Many traditional ministerial think tanks revived themselves by snapping up much of the best young talent that remained in China.6 For public security think tanks, the disaster of Tiananmen helped redefine the entire research agenda, initially touching off bitter debates about the blame for the demonstrations and their mishandling, but eventually forcing analysts to reflect with unprecedented sophistication about many of the social, economic and political origins of social unrest (officially labelled “mass incidents” or “sudden events”) in a reforming socialist society. By contrast, Tiananmen does not figure as a key turning point for think tanks in the military, international relations and foreign policy sectors, and the authors writing here do not note widespread purges, departures or reorganizations after 1989.7

The present authors suggest that as a result of the powerful commercialization of Chinese culture and society, there is now emerging what might be called “third generation” characteristics among many think tanks and think tank scholars, making them less dependent upon ministries or leadership “patrons” than their 1980s predecessors. Nearly all these authors note how the marketization of employment, income sources, housing, international travel, publication and information sources has radically reshaped the context in which think tanks function. It is now far easier for analysts to get published, or even build entirely autonomous scholarly lives outside their government think tanks. Even for institutions that remain subordinate to traditional bureaucracies, these socio-economic changes have greatly lengthened the organizational “leash” that controls the scholars that work in them.

The loosening institutional bonds are also compelling foreign analysts to rethink their assumptions about the degree to which think tank scholars “represent” the views of their institutions. In this context, the impact of commercialization in China’s publishing industry and mass media has been especially vexing. The number of outlets for analysts’ publications has exploded, including many profitable venues that are not under the control of their work units. Several well-known think tank scholars, such as Yan Xuetong and Chu Shulong, have even left their longtime institutions for the academy, where they can now augment their income with

6. This point was stressed by Barry Naughton in his presentation to the conference.
7. See the essays by Shambaugh, Glaser and Saunders, and Gill and Mulvenon.
profitable stints as TV “talking heads,” a capacity in which they often seem to speak only for themselves. Moreover, with even official government think tank-sponsored publishing houses now operating on a for-profit basis, publishers are increasingly desperate for books with sensational theses that will make money – a phenomenon never more discouragingly apparent than in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Consequently, it can no longer be assumed that just because a book is published by an official press – even one affiliated with the military, state security or police systems – it represents the official thinking or policy of that unit, or even a significant minority school within that unit.8

Even as the economic think tanks suffered disproportionately from Tiananmen, they were also most greatly transformed by subsequent socio-economic changes, and they probably best exemplify the third generation trend. These institutions now enjoy much freer access to crucial data, looser travel restrictions and fewer security strictures than national security-related institutions. The products they generate now also find a significant market completely outside the Party and state. With financial autonomy has come much greater intellectual autonomy, including the emergence of well-funded think tanks that are outside formal bureaucratic systems or even, in a few cases, genuinely private. Naughton argues that this greater independence may well have come at the price of decreased policy influence. At the same time, open competition may also be creating pressure for stronger, higher quality economic analysis.9

Notwithstanding the increasing openness of the external media, many organizational habits of Chinese think tanks die hard. For instance, our authors on military, international relations and foreign policy think tanks all note the continued bureaucratic tradition of “stovepiping” of official research, that is, that research tends to be held only within the system of the institute’s superior department. Evolution toward more regular horizontal ties among fellow researchers at other think tanks or universities is proceeding very slowly, and relatively free-wheeling Western-style policy communities are still far off. These authors find that the resulting research continues to be compartmentalized, redundant and steeped in the biases of individual bureaucracies.

The Emergence of the Public Security Research Institute System

The rise of China’s little-studied system of public security research institutes was driven by many of the same challenges that typified other second generation think tanks: a recognition among senior Party and security leaders that pre-1978 ideological constructs and policies were inadequate to address the dramatic social order changes of post-Mao Chinese society. In the wake of the violent 1983–87 “stern blows” (yanda) anti-crime campaign, a consensus began to emerge about the

8. See the article by Mulvenon and Gill.
9. I am indebted to Barry Naughton and Joe Fewsmith for these points.
need for innovative policies and modern technology (from both domestic and foreign sources) to professionalize crime-fighting, social control, law and the organization of state coercive capabilities. Peng Zhen, the long-standing head of Party political-legal work, powerfully summarized the growing consensus concerning the inadequacy of traditional Marxist-Maoist “class-based” theories for understanding the explosion in crime by pointing out the obvious: more than 30 years after the establishment of the PRC, the vast majority of criminals were no longer members of “enemy classes” that had been crushed during the 1950s. They were members of the working class who had lived their entire lives in a socialist society.

These new social order challenges soon touched off wide-ranging debates over virtually all aspects of Maoist approaches to social control, raising the question of how China could create a more modern, professional, disciplined police force. The Cultural Revolution and subsequent market-oriented reforms had devastated not only the formal police system but also the organizational core of the Maoist social control system – the vast networks of citizen security activists on which China’s undermanned police system depended to monitor threats to order. Moreover, a major long-term “high tide” of crime began in Mao’s last years and accelerated through the early 1980s. The terrific violence of the 1983–87 campaign represented a reactionary response, relying upon a revival of 1950s-style “campaign policing.” But when crime rates resumed their high levels and upward trend almost immediately after the campaign, reform-oriented security officials increasingly began arguing that campaigns were no longer effective, and new approaches to crime-fighting and prevention were needed. The problems the police faced were as much technical as ideological: increasingly they confronted criminals who were well-armed, organized, mobile, and outfitted with modern communications equipment that most Chinese police could only dream about owning. Debates also emerged over how to handle dissidents and cope with the growing number of demonstrations in Chinese society. On all of these issues, China’s system of public security think tanks and universities quickly emerged as a pivotal battleground for addressing the legal and security implications of reform. Consequently, for Westerners they represent a tremendous underexploited source of information on official thinking and trends about crime, unrest and state coercion in China.

*The Structure of Public Security Research Institutes*¹⁰

The network of public security think tanks has expanded greatly in the past two decades. In 1996 the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) had 11 research institutes and 10 affiliated factories directly under it, with 44

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others under provincial-level Public Security Bureaus (a little more than one per province), and a further 48 in various prefectural and municipal departments. It appears that a substantial number, if not a majority, of these institutes deal with fire-fighting technology, and these will not be dealt with here.

Any review of public security think tanks must also note that the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Legal Research Institute (LRI) includes current and former MPS staffers and graduates of the top political-legal universities who perform important policy research and advise the leadership on internal security and legal policy. Scholars from the CASS/LRI also annually publish an extremely useful short article on social order trends, future forecasts and policy evaluations in CASS’s widely read and respected volume Social Trends Blue Book (Shehui lanpi shu). These articles in recent years have frequently pointed out shortcomings in current central government policing policy, in particular the 1996 “stern blows” anti-crime campaign.

This paper principally introduces the four major think tanks directly under the MPS, memorably named the Number One, Number Two, Number Three and Number Four Public Security Research Institutes. These institutes play a wide variety of roles, from research and acquisition of foreign policing technology, to commercial ventures, computer research, forensic pathology and other crime lab work, establishing co-operative ties with foreign police departments and criminal justice institutes in the US and elsewhere, to social and institutional survey research and policy advising.

MPS Number One Research Institute (Gonganbu di-yi yanjiusuo)

Established in 1960 in Beijing, the Number One Institute is apparently the oldest and among the most technologically “cutting edge” of the MPS research institutes. Directly subordinate to the MPS, the Institute is one of the largest public security research facilities, with total personnel of over 1,200, including over 700 technical staff in 1998. The institute’s wide-ranging technological research and product development includes police weapons (including guns and stun guns), communications (such as local networks, secure and mobile systems), technology for criminal

11. GAYWQS, p. 1294.
13. Other significant think tanks working on public security issues about which little information is available include the MPS Science and Technology Information Institute (Gonganbu keji qingbao suo), MPS Shanghai Institute and Factory Number 822, MPS Shanghai Institute and Factory Number 832.
investigation, inspection, and surveillance (such as surveillance television, metal detectors and x-ray inspection equipment), police notification and anti-theft alarm systems, explosion-proof and bullet-proof equipment, and documentation/identification systems (such as anti-counterfeiting and ID card reading technology). The Number One Institute not only engages in indigenous invention, but also serves as one of China’s key conduits for foreign borrowing and joint ventures in security technology. The Institute likes to stress its extensive international technological contacts with leading security firms, for example communications projects with Holland’s Rohill Corporation and computer card technology with Sun Company.15

The commercialization that helps shape third generation think tanks is most prominent in the work of the Number One Institute. With the emerging non-government market for security equipment in China, and demand growing throughout Asia, the Institute generates significant revenue by marketing communications and other security equipment through its affiliated corporations, which include Zhong Dun (China’s Shield) Security Technology Development Corporation, Shen Dun (Spirit Shield) Company, and other unspecified independent and joint venture firms. Shen Dun has had a state import-export certificate since at least 1993, and in 1997 officially reported annual exports in excess of US$1 million.16

MPS Number Two Research Institute (Gonganbu di-er yanjiusuo)

The MPS Number Two Research Institute is China’s premier forensic science research institution, and in many ways is China’s equivalent of the famous Federal Bureau of Investigation Laboratory in the United States. The Institute is located in the Muxudi section of west-central Beijing, probably on the grounds of the Chinese People’s Public Security University.17 In 1996 the Second Research Institute had a total staff of over 400, up from 374 in 1991. These included more than 40 “high-level” technical specialists and over 100 “mid-level” technical specialists.18

As the country’s top criminal science lab, the Number Two Institute undertakes crime scene and evidence investigation in “major, difficult and questionable criminal cases” entrusted to it by central departments and provincial legal authorities.19 The Institute also performs research and development on new criminal investigation and forensic science technologies, including detection and identification of DNA, blood and

15. GAYWQS, p. 1294; Gongan yanjiu, No. 1 (1998), rear cover advertisement for First Research Institute.
17. As of 1991 the address was Muxudi Nani Building 17, which appears to be a Public Security University address. EISCO, p. 75.
18. In 1991 of the total staff of 374, 326 were described as “professional” staff, of whom 74 were high level engineers or senior and deputy-level forensic pathology specialists, 92 were mid-level engineers and pathologists, and 147 were assistant-level engineers and forensic technicians. EISCO, pp. 75–76.
19. GAYWQS, p. 1294; EISCO, p. 75.
semen, poison, wounds, diseases and other trace evidence, analysis of documents, handwriting and fingerprints, criminological photography, and computer technology.

The Institute also has an important role to play in gradually building China’s legal system. Among its most important duties is training forensic scientists and investigators in advanced criminological techniques for central, provincial and local law enforcement units. In recent years reformist Chinese criminologists have argued with increasing frankness that a major cause of police and procuratorial abuses in China, as in other countries, has been the technical incapacity of many law enforcement authorities to prove their cases without resort to confessions – frequently extracted by coercion or torture. For public security reformers, the professionalization of police investigatory skills is a key prerequisite to strengthening legal procedure and protecting the legal rights of accused citizens while maintaining the state’s capacity to fight crime. Chinese procuratorial and public security analyses of the torture problem also note that when police and prosecutors have been prosecuted for torture, this has often resulted from well-trained forensic pathologists discovering the abuses during autopsies.20

MPS Number Three Research Institute (Gonganbu di-san yanjiusuo)

Established in 1978 and located in Shanghai, the Third Research Institute is apparently the MPS’s top computer and high-tech communications research and development facility. Sources from the early to mid-1990s stated that the Third Institute’s research specialities included computer applications technology, wire image transmission and unspecified forms of “special electronic communications technology.” Like the MPS First Institute, the Third Institute also works on alarm systems to alert police to crimes in progress. A 1991 source indicated that the Number Three Institute had a total staff of 424; a comparison of staff statistics in 1991 and 1996 sources indicates that the Institute’s professional engineering and technical staff expanded modestly during the 1990s.21 One of the important “unknowns” about the Number Three Institute is whether it is engaged in developing systems for monitoring dissent, religious activity and criminal activities on the Internet, although its research portfolio would strongly suggest that this is one of its research foci.

21. EISCO, p. 76; GAYWQS, pp. 1294–95.
MPS Number Four Research Institute (Gonganbu di-si yanjiusuo) and the Chinese Police Studies Society (Zhongguo jingcha xuehui)

The establishment of the Number Four Research Institute in 1986 and of the Police Studies Society in 1992 represented a recognition by senior Public Security officials that they needed to improve their policy and organizational research on policing and social order management. Occupying a large, handsome new white tile and brown marble building just inside the main gates of the People’s Public Security University campus, the Institute is directly under the MPS, and acts as the executive offices for the Police Studies Society. Its policy research writ is broad, encompassing sources and trends in crime and social unrest, anti-crime policy proposals, social order management systems, juvenile and youth crime, and proposals for reforming, reorganizing and professionalizing the public security corps. The Number Four Institute and the Police Studies Society also publish Gongan yanjiu (Policing Studies), China’s premier journal of police policy research.

The Number Four Institute and Police Studies Society have become major conduits for international police exchanges. They regularly dispatch delegations to study foreign police practices, and arrange reciprocal visits and training missions. These delegations also reportedly help arrange equipment purchases, joint production ventures and intelligence sharing arrangements with foreign police and intelligence services. The Institute publishes a journal devoted entirely to research on foreign police systems, and nearly every monthly issue of Gongan yanjiu contains at least one report based on these trips. These reports have become a key source for disseminating information about foreign policing practices and trends in criminology. The Number Four Institute also notes that these contacts help propagandize China’s police abroad “to expand the influence of China’s police in world police circles.”

While the Number Four Institute itself has a relatively small permanent staff (in 1991 just 30 people of whom over half were translators, though recent visits suggest these numbers have increased), the Police Studies Society, Gongan yanjiu, and the large faculty of the Chinese People’s Public Security University are its vehicles for organizing research and debate over major policy issues. Since 1988 the journal has become China’s most influential venue for policy debate on policing and social order. For Western analysts, perhaps its most important feature is the monthly “Bureau Chief’s Forum” (tingjuzhang luntan), a selection of articles by provincial Public Security Bureau chiefs and other senior leaders. In the ten years from 1988 to 1998, it published over 40 articles by MPS leaders and more than 150 articles by either the chiefs or deputy

22. The Number Four Institute is also formally known as the “Public Security Research Institute” (Gonggong anquan yanjiusuo).
chiefs of provincial-level Public Security Bureaus. These articles are by no means vague, unanimous propaganda pieces. In recent years they have included frank debates over key issues such as criticizing the problems of “stern blows” anti-crime campaigns, making proposals for the reorganization of public security organs, the impact of Tiananmen, and which social groups constitute the Party’s key “class enemies” during the reform era. Given the broad scholarly interest in this topic, it is astonishing that these very frank articles are rarely exploited in Western academic and government research on China, despite the fact that they have not been classified as neibu for over a decade. In this respect, they almost certainly represent the most valuable and underutilized source on the thinking of top security leaders available to Western scholars and government analysts.

Gongan yanjiu has also opened up many new policy research topics such as the emerging challenges of financial and internet crime, organized crime, police corruption, the origins and proper handling of social unrest, “campaign” policing versus prevention and “comprehensive social order management,” drug abuse, prostitution, the reform of China’s household registration (hukou) system, the prospective impact of WTO accession on social order, the major problems caused by local Party control over the police, and the dilemmas of dealing with the pervasive problems of torture and police corruption in China. Policy discussions have ranged widely. In the heady months just before Tiananmen, even Gongan yanjiu published some surprisingly reformist pieces, including one widely read article calling for China’s police to become depoliticized and independent of control by any political party – explicitly (if somewhat naively) invoking the American FBI as a model. In the wake of the massacre the journal also carried articles by some rather unreconstructed and conspiratorially-minded neo-Maoists, including some senior provincial security leaders. Since about 1992 the most extreme of both viewpoints have been muted somewhat in the journal, but plenty of frank criticism and debate about the current policing system remains.

While the range of views remains broad, the heart of the Number Four Institute’s publications could be described as “reform Leninist” in tone: unwilling to criticize the core value of one-Party leadership, but calling for greater police professionalism, much greater respect for legal procedure, and enhanced professional autonomy. In particular, the journal has carried a large number of articles that are critical of what many public security officials view as meddlesome interference by local Communist

25. Ibid. p. 16.
A Window for Leaders on Attitudes within Social and the Police Corps

The question of how policy makers gain the “data” through which they interpret social reality has always proven elusive for Western scholars. Since its establishment, one of the major functions of the Number Four Institute, the Police Studies Society and the Gongan yanjiu staff has been to provide the Beijing leadership with a window through which to gain data on social problems and attitudes among the Party-state’s police corps. This includes carrying out numerous major survey research projects, including the survey of public and police attitudes towards social order. These have included remarkably frank studies of internal police attitudes towards major police problems. One example occurred in 1999 when the Institute solicited essays from police officers on their views of the major problems in China’s law enforcement practices. Strikingly, the Number Four Institute’s official analysis of these essays reported that the essayists ranked torture as the most prominent of police abuses and mistakes.27

The Number Four Institute’s report on this survey was squarely in line with efforts by many Chinese legal reformers to borrow criminal procedure reforms from more advanced foreign police systems, and also with the professionalizing focus of the Number Two Research Institute’s forensic training programme. Its report recommended gradual movement towards de-emphasis of confessions (as opposed to forensic evidence) as a source of convictions, the adoption of a genuine presumption of innocence, a right to remain silent, requirements that police warn suspects of their rights, and “exclusionary rules” of evidence to make tortured confessions inadmissible for conviction.28 These recommendations – in particular the “exclusionary rule” and the clear right of silence – are actually more reformist than the content of China’s recently revised Criminal Procedure Code.29

Among their other data-gathering projects, the Number Four Institute and the Police Studies Society have tried to strengthen China’s historically very weak social order statistics system, and help the leadership acquire survey research data on public attitudes toward social order. In this regard, some of their key projects have included conducting large-scale studies on “Improving Public Security Statistical Work,” “Crime Trends and Forecasts for the New Era,” “The Public’s Sense of Security: Indicators, Research and Evaluation,” major studies of crime in coastal

29. See Tanner, “Shackling the coercive state.”
and rural areas, and the impact of regional economic disparity on crime trends.

In late 1988 and mid-1991, the Number Four Institute organized China’s first and second-ever “Nation-wide Sample Surveys of Popular Feelings of Security.” These were massive surveys of about 15,000 respondents, using a geographically and economically stratified random sample that was quite sophisticated compared to the existing state of survey research in China at that time. Respondents were asked such multiple choice questions as “How secure do you feel in society today?” “How good do you feel social order is today?” and “If there are female members of your family who work evening shifts, do you often feel that you need to send a male to escort them to and from work?” Despite the newness of survey research in China and many citizens’ understandable hesitancy to respond frankly, these surveys produced popular responses that were diverse, noticeably variable over time, and strikingly blunt in their divergence from official government characterizations of social order – all points which suggest that, notwithstanding any methodological failures, they probably succeeded in tapping into some significant underlying social attitudes. To the extent this is true, the surveys seem to reveal deep concerns among many Chinese over social order problems.30

Policy Advice

Experts from these policy research institutes have also participated in making major security policy decisions. In 1995–96 as the centre considered responses to a rising crime rate and a number of high-profile crimes, public security specialists from the MPS and its Research Institutes, the CASS Legal Research Institute, and the Public Security University were asked to study the prospects for a “stern blows” campaign. According to one source with access, many of these public security experts were far less supportive of a campaign than the political leadership generally, arguing that its impact on crime rates would prove fleeting, and that it would overtax the financial and manpower resources of the police that might better be devoted to crime prevention and social order management. In the face of some high-publicity crimes that deeply worried senior political leaders, these experts were eventually overruled and the campaign was launched in May 1996, resulting in several thousand executions. Over the long term, these experts’ forecasts about the futility of such campaigns in keeping crime down turned out to be quite correct. In the year after the campaign, Gongan yanjiu and the CASS Social Trends Blue Book carried several articles debating the effectiveness of such campaigns that in many cases had a palpable “we told you so” quality about them.31

30. GAYWQS, pp. 1288–1290.
The Role of Think Tanks in Shaping Public and International Opinion

Foreign scholars who interviewed think tank analysts during the 1980s could often safely assume that, in some sense, they represented the official policies or at least the informal organizational ideologies of their work units. But the growing personal and professional autonomy that marks the emerging third generation is forcing foreign analysts to work much harder to determine when these think tank scholars represent themselves alone or some larger entity. In the case of foreign policy and national security-related institutes, there is the additional burden of considering how frequently and under what circumstances think tanks analysts engage in official policy “signalling,” the passing of messages, lobbying Westerners on behalf of official positions, or even deliberate disinformation.

Among the present authors, a fairly strong consensus emerges. None denies that the professional context in which think tank scholars write and speak remains radically different from that in the West, and thus their views must be approached with forethought and caution. They nevertheless concur that China’s vast socio-economic changes and the loosening ties among leaders, factions, institutions and analysts have greatly eroded old assumptions about when an analyst might “speak for” certain departments, factions or top leaders. More than ever before, critical attention to the context in which think tank analysts express themselves is essential. The timing, venue and medium in which analysts’ remarks appear help determine whether their words are “official” and “authoritative” or whether they are simply speaking for themselves. The strong sense of these authors is that the great majority of the time, the most that can be assumed is that these analysts speak for themselves or quite possibly their institute. Much less commonly can it be assumed that they represent the official voice of their think tank’s parent bureaucratic institution. The authors on foreign policy, international relations and military think tanks agree that think tanks do occasionally take part in co-ordinated government efforts to “signal” official policy to foreign countries, but this constitutes a very small percentage of all their interactions, and is largely limited to the most tightly-controlled official publications (such as People’s Daily or Liberation Army Daily) or formal conference settings where senior Chinese officials take part. Obvious examples include the placement of pointed comments by some international relations specialists in People’s Daily during the 2001 US–Chinese tensions over arms sales to Taiwan and the Wang Wei/EP-3 reconnaissance plane incident. Outside foreign policy and national security sectors, these changes are even more apparent, and Naughton indicates that economic think tank scholars have been used to float or signal economic policy proposals far less under Zhu Rongji’s premiership than was the case during Zhao Ziyang.

By contrast, the research institutes under the Ministry of Public Security apparently make relatively little effort to shape either domestic public opinion or international opinion about China. Indeed, there is a striking
sort of “dog that didn’t bark in the night” quality about this non-involvement. There are many policy-related topics on which these institutes could play a very powerful role in mass propaganda if they chose to do so, such as marshalling evidence that would testify to vast progress in China’s effort to build its legal system, or reassuring potential foreign investors of China’s social stability and low crime rate, or highlighting more heavily Sino-Western co-operation on fighting drug-trafficking and illegal immigration, or working to counteract the widespread image of brutality and corruption among the police corps, or disputing claims of special mistreatment by ethnic minority and religious activists.

Instead, these think tanks’ discussions of security and law enforcement policy are overwhelmingly limited to narrow circulation police and legal papers and journals. Very little gets into the popular mass media, unless the relatively narrowly-read national legal and police newspapers Fazhi ribao (Legal System Daily) or Renmin gongan bao (People’s Public Security Daily) can be considered “mass media.” A Lexis-Nexis search of both foreign and official domestic Chinese press for the past five years appears to confirm this point, uncovering virtually no attributed public statements by scholars of these research institutes or the People’s Public Security University. This is striking when compared with the dozens, hundreds or even thousands of press commentaries and interviews given by China’s best-known military, international relations and economic experts.

One of the few exceptions was the preparation of a report by the Fourth Institute on the personal evils and bad deeds of Li Hongzhi, founder of the falun gong, but even this report received little official press attention, notwithstanding the vast propaganda campaign directed against the falun gong. Another possible exception might be the Public Security think tanks’ involvement (the extent of which is unknown in the West) in the drafting of China’s periodic “white papers” on human rights or criticisms of human rights in the United States. But these “white papers” are not, for the most part, taken seriously by Western human rights monitors, governments or scholars either as a description of rights policies or actual conditions in China. In this sector at least, the think tanks are clearly not engaged in any high profile efforts to shape either domestic or international public opinion. Based on the available evidence, it is impossible to say to what extent this low profile approach simply reflects the historic secrecy of the sector or an unwillingness to undertake the kind of “opinion-making” that is so common among many of the other think tanks analysed in these essays.

To the extent that public security think tanks involve themselves in shaping Western opinion about China, they apparently prefer to focus fairly narrowly on their professional counterparts in policing and internal security in other nations. This very definitely involves police officials and directors of criminal justice training programmes in the United States, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom and the rest of Western Europe, with whom these institutes and the public security universities have extensive and growing contacts. The Public Security institutes also prepare a
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regular English-language magazine about recent trends in Chinese policing which is clearly designed for foreign police officials. In conversations with some local US law enforcement officials who have met Chinese counterparts, it seems clear that these meetings have engendered a certain amount of “professional sympathy” for Chinese police officials and the internal security challenges that they face. But the propaganda and policy value for China of such contacts is uncertain, since Western law enforcement officials are not for the most part significant actors in shaping Western governments’ policy or opinion about China, its legal system or human rights conditions.

Underexploited Resources

A final, universal concern among these authors is that Western researchers, especially governments, are not using the vast amounts of unique research materials from think tank sources to anything like maximum advantage. The unprecedentedly wide-open policy debate that takes place in these unclassified journals is a rich and greatly underutilized database on the range of policy opinions inside the Chinese government, and scholars who have exploited it have reaped a rich harvest. Their value would be magnified if more of such material were translated in the two most widely-read Western translation services: the Foreign Broadcast Information Service/World News Connection, and the BBC’s Summary of World Broadcasts. Often, these journals provide information that is simply unavailable elsewhere, as my own research indicates regarding the monthly debates among senior central and provincial police chiefs officials of Gongan yanjiu. The present essays cite numerous comparably valuable sources available from China’s think tanks, and urge far greater exploitation of these materials.