

## **‘Professionalization’ of Chinese International-Relations Think-Tanks in the 1990s: A Content-Analysis Approach**

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### Summary

Think-tanks have enjoyed increasing attention among scholars of Chinese foreign policy in recent years. But so far, surprisingly little is known about the way these institutions evolved. Many scholars agree that international-relations think-tanks started to play a more important role in foreign-policy decision-making procedures as their work began to be ‘professionalized’ in the 1990s. They agree on this in spite of having a framework to systematically measure what ‘professionalization’ actually means. This paper attempts to go a step further to identify, define and characterize this shift towards professionalization. Using content analysis, articles by think-tanks are compared in three different cases since the beginning of the 1990s. A shift in the method of argumentation employed in the articles is revealed as more recent articles provide a less normative and more theory-based interpretation of international events.

Manuscript received on 2011-04-27, accepted on 2011-10-14

Keywords: Think Tanks, Peoples Republic of China, Foreign Policy Analysis, Content Analysis, Foreign Policy

### **1 Introduction**

Scholars analysing foreign policy-making in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have largely concentrated their research on decision-making procedures. According to them, the old paths via which decisions were made on a central level became more open to other actors, especially during the 1990s. Scholars have described a trend towards “increasingly open decision-making” (Zhu & Xue, 2007, p. 47) that has enabled other actors and institutions that had previously been excluded to take part in the process (Cao, 2004; Dickson, 2003; Unger & Dittmer, 2002).

International-relations (IR) research institutes, or think-tanks (known hereafter as ‘TTs’), are one type of actor who plays a role here. This is a rather special one, too: while they used to play a minor role in research and were criticized for being too closely attached to the government, they started to enjoy more academic attention in the course of the past decade. Only a few scholars continued to identify them as being part of the bureaucracy (Mohanty, 1998, p. 587); most labelled them as semi-governmental actors that needed detailed analysis (Liao, 2006; Glaser & Saunders, 2002; Li, 2009; Zhao, 2005). They are now seen as providing additional ways to