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LEVIATHAN

Conditional Autonomy in Chinese Think Tanks: A Study of CICIR vs. Unirule

Jackson Paul Neagli *explores the 'conditional autonomy' framework, which explains the relationship between the Chinese party-state and domestic think tanks.*

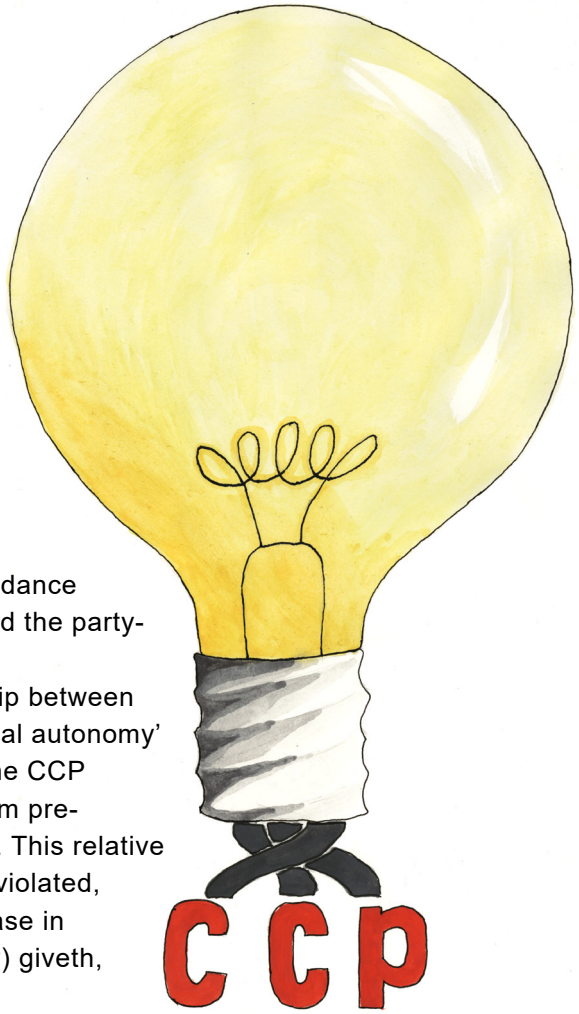

Illustration: Harriet Getley

Since the beginning of reform and opening in 1980, domestic think tanks have come to play an increasingly important role in the Chinese policymaking process, which has itself become more 'consultative' in nature (Shambaugh 2002, 575-576). Especially in the field of international relations, think tanks have found greater financial resources and seen demand increase for their information services (Shambaugh 2002, 575). This reflects the party-state's realization that existing state institutions were incapable of generating the research required to make appropriately informed decisions regarding China's complex integration into the international system (Li 2002, 34). The increasing importance of think tank guidance to Chinese policymakers requires that academics examine not only that guidance itself, but also the changing relationship between think tanks and the party-state.

This article deploys a novel approach towards the relationship between the Chinese party-state and domestic think tanks: the 'conditional autonomy' framework. This framework asserts that policies or ideologies the CCP perceives as threatening to its authority, defined as freedom from pre-emptive restrictions ('prior restraint') on speech and publication. This relative intellectual freedom comes with a series of conditions which, if violated, lead to the revocation of that think tank's autonomy. As is the case in much of the Chinese polity, the CPP (Chinese Communist Party) giveth, and the CPP taketh away.

The key 'condition' upon which China's think tanks are granted autonomy is the preservation of CCP legitimacy. Threats to party legitimacy take two forms: explicit affronts (i.e. openly criticizing the party) and implicit affronts (i.e. promoting policies or ideologies the CCP perceives as threatening to its authority). Highlighting events that cast the party in a negative light - e.g. the Tiananmen massacre, or the present economic downturn – are typically construed as an implicit affront to party legitimacy.

This article applies the 'conditional autonomy' framework to two think tanks with drastically different relationships to the party-state: the state-controlled China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and the independent Unirule Institute of Economics. A comparison of these think tanks' research and corresponding treatment by the party-state validates the 'conditional autonomy' hypothesis and furnishes valuable clues as to why the CCP has eschewed a prior-restraint model in favour of the conditional autonomy framework.

A Primer on Chinese Think Tanks

The 'reform and opening' of the 1980s witnessed a tripartite transformation of the Chinese polity: the state changed from an ideology-oriented regime to a performance-oriented regime, the economy shifted from planned to market, and Chinese society evolved from collectivism to relative pluralism (Zhao 2010). This transformation of state, economy, and society created an opening through which China's think tanks emerged. As policy-oriented research institutions, think tanks were well-equipped to aid the transformation from planned to market economy, and enhance efficiency in the new performance-oriented regime.

Chinese civil law supports the heuristic division of think tanks into 'semi-official' and 'civilian' categories (Zhu and Xue 2007, 338). Semi-official think tanks like CICIR are led by state-nominated personnel and funded by state supervising agencies (Zhu 2009, 338). Though they have the greatest amount of influence over the policy process, their research agenda is circumscribed by state priorities and directives (Zhu 2009, 338). Civilian think tanks are less closely affiliated with the state, though many do have official supervisory units (Zhu 2009, 338). Semi-official and civilian think tanks have different strategies for influencing policy: semi-official think tanks rely on formal bureaucratic linkages to state authority, whereas civilian think tanks utilise interpersonal networks between scholars, decision-makers, and other persons who command elite or public influence (Zhu 2009).

Despite the increased autonomy that think tanks have enjoyed over the course of reform and opening, it is clear that Beijing has established strict boundaries for think tank scholarship (Li, 2002, 34). Concepts like the 'Four Cardinal Principles' are deployed by the party-state to signal that certain topics are out-of-bounds (Li 2002, 34). As a result, scholars tend to avoid potentially sensitive issues which are less likely to be published (Li 2002, 42). Indeed, Abb (2015, 545) finds that a core function of Chinese think tanks is to justify the government's policies to the Chinese public, often through media appearances.

China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations

CICIR is China's largest and most well-funded foreign policy think tank, with 380 staff members (Glaser and Saunders 2002, 597-616). Because it is supervised by the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Office and Ministry of State Security (MSS) (Shambaugh 2002), CICIR functions as the central government's primary civilian intelligence organ and enjoys direct channels to members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) (Glaser and Saunders 2002, 511). Preparing briefings for PBSC members' foreign junkets is one of the CICIR's core responsibilities, and CICIR is the only think tank known to furnish daily intelligence briefings to all members of party-state leadership (Glaser and Saunders 2002). CICIR also enjoys the unique advantage of a 'special documents room,' where researchers can access classified party, state, and military resources (Glaser and Saunders 2002, 608). CICIR is permitted to forward analyses directly to the secretaries of senior leaders, the Central Committee General Office, and the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Office – channels only available to a very small number of research institutes (Glaser and Saunders 2002, 608-9). Additionally, CICIR is represented on two state-led committees which provide access to high-level policymakers: the Committee for National Security Policy and Foreign Policy Advisory Committee (Abb 2015).

CICIR leadership have historically had careers in China's intelligence service, equipping the think tank with additional connections to top party-state decision-makers (Shambaugh 2002, 583). Given that CICIR is directly funded by MSS, and the Foreign Affairs Leading Group remains CICIR's key research consumer, CICIR is best classified as a distinctly semi-official think tank with attributes of a Soviet-style intelligence agency (Shambaugh 2002, 583).

An assessment of abstracts from four issues of CICIR's publicly available journal *Contemporary International Relations* suggests that CICIR research largely supports the orthodox party-state perspective towards issues in modern international relations.[1] *Contemporary International Relations* is regarded as the most important international relations policy journal in China (Shambaugh 2011, 360-61). In the articles

1 This article surveys the May/June 2018, September/October 2018, November/December 2018, and January/February 2019 editions of *Contemporary International Relations*, all of which are publicly available on CICIR's website (http://www.cicir.ac.cn/NEW/public.html).

available online, meaningful debate on foreign policy issues is limited, criticism of Chinese foreign policy is absent, and scholars tend to confirm the efficacy of government policies rather than analyse them critically. Several exemplary articles are considered in greater detail below.

In the September/October 2018 issue of *Contemporary International Relations*, Zhou Xinyu's article 'The Rise of Local Political Philosophies in Emerging Powers: Taking Ubuntu in South Africa as an Example' asserts that the rise of Ubuntu political philosophy 'indicates a trend of emerging powers trying to build local political philosophies to surpass the Western political discourse system' (Xinyu 2018, 37). Zhou's argument notes increasing pushback against 'universal' Western values, which the party-state view as infringing upon its sovereignty.

Yu Xiang's article in the same issue, 'China-US Trade War and Its Future,' asserts that 'The Trump administration's hostile trade actions against China since the beginning of this year violate World Trade Organization rules…Bullying is only one approach President Trump can choose, but arbitrary threats are no solution' (Xiang 2018, 55). This article supports Beijing's interpretation of the present trade war and invokes China's WTO membership to highlight its position as a responsible member of the international community, another tenet of CCP legitimacy (Taylor and Xiao 2009, 711).

Dong Yifan and Wang Shuo's article 'EU Economic Protectionism and its Prospects' is summarised with the assertion that 'Over the past two years, the EU's economic protectionism has risen again…the basic cause of these latest trends is the relative decline in the overall strength of the EU' (Yifan and Shuo, 2018, 61). Accusations of EU protectionism and assertions of a weakening EU support party-state narratives regarding China's rise by characterising Chinese policies as responsible participation in the global economic order despite unfair treatment by established powers.

Unirule Institute of Economics

Unirule Institute of Economics was established in 1993 by academics fleeing from the party-affiliated Chinese Academy of Social Sciences ('CASS') in the wake of the post-1989 crackdown (Zhu and Xue 2007), when CASS's embrace of liberal ideas drew the ire of PLA leadership (Shambaugh 2011). Unirule was a purely civilian think tank with no institutionalised connections to official authorities (Zue and Xue 2007). Compared to CICIR, Unirule was miniscule, with roughly 35 total personnel (Zhu and Xue 2007, 459). However, the undersized think tank commanded a surprising degree of respect: Western media sources report that Unirule was actively consulted by government officials (Buckley 2018), a conclusion verified by Chinese academics (Feng 2019).

Of the publications available on Unirule's website, many are highly critical of the CCP, both implicitly and explicitly. Unirule appears unafraid to broach sensitive issues, including China's current economic downturn, which party censors have instructed domestic media outlets to avoid (Hong 2019; Hancock 2018). In a late-2018 article, then-Unirule President Sheng Hong asserted that the Chinese legal system 'is pushed to the limit with utmost flaws when guided by the Marxist and Leninist thoughts where the state is viewed as the machine of violence and the laws a tool of the ruling class' (Hong 2019). More recently, Unirule's founder Mao Yushi asserted that 'China is still a despotic country. I wish China would become a country of democracy, rule of law and constitutional order soon' (Yushi 2019).

Application of the Conditional Autonomy Framework: Unirule's Untimely Demise

Publications available on the Unirule website in 2018-2019 plainly violate the primary 'condition' of the conditional autonomy framework: preservation of CCP legitimacy. This section explores the recent history of Unirule Economic Institute as an example of how the party-state might curtail the autonomy of think tanks that repeatedly threaten CCP legitimacy.

On July 11th, 2018, Unirule's landlord locked employees out of their Beijing offices (Buckley 2018). The leasing company responsible for closing Unirule's offices claimed that it had done so after it was instructed to end the lease by local police (Buckley 2018). Unirule's eviction from its Beijing office has been linked to a Unirule article entitled 'Our Dread Now, and Our Hopes', written by Xu Zhangrun of Qinghua University, which

directly criticized Xi Jinping (Zhangrun 2018). Xu has subsequently been suspended by Qinghua and placed under investigation (Xie and Xinqi 2019).

In November 2018, Unirule Consulting had its business license revoked by the Beijing Haidian Bureau of Industry and Commerce, on the basis that Unirule had been carrying out 'illegal online education activities' (Feng 2019). As a result, Sheng Hong announced that the Unirule Institute of Economics would cease operations (Feng 2019).

Unirule had already been targeted by the party-state on several occasions prior to 2018. Unirule's Chinese language website was blocked by government authorities in 2012, 2016, and 2017 for various critical publications (Wu and Cai 2017). In mid-2017, Unirule was evicted from its main office in Beijing, forcing the think tank to relocate to the residential community from which it would subsequently be evicted from in July 2018 (Gan 2018).

Unirule's closure in July 2018 was executed in a manner intended to cause minimal damage to the party-state. Authoritarian regimes have inherently fragile legitimacy, and an overreliance on repression decreases the likelihood that the public will accept the regime as lawful (Nathan 2016). Cai (2008) theorises that authoritarian regimes can preserve their legitimacy by assigning coercive responsibilities to local governments – hence, Unirule's websites were shuttered by the Beijing municipal cyberspace administration, Unirule's lease was terminated by the landlord rather than the government, Unirule Consulting's business license was revoked by the Haidian Association of Industry and Commerce, and Xu Zhangrun was punished by his employer rather than police. The central party-state has trod carefully around Unirule, perhaps reflecting the think tank's influential position among social elites.

Why 'Conditional Autonomy' instead of 'Prior Restraint?'

The conditional autonomy framework raises a critical question – if legitimacy is so central to the regime, then why would the party-state allow dissenting think tanks like Unirule to operate in the first place? While Cai's theory of coercion offers a partial response to this question, two additional factors further incentivise the party-state's reliance on the conditional autonomy framework as opposed to a 'prior restraint' model.

First, following the advent of the internet and the subsequent information revolution, the state is simply incapable of exercising prior restraint and enforcing pre-emptive bans on speech. Instead, by deploying the conditional autonomy framework, and making examples out of dissenters like Unirule and Xu Zhangrun, the party-state can somewhat neutralise the environment for dissenting speech by linking autonomy to certain conditions that speech must fulfil. This strategy mitigates the risk of critical speech without recourse to overt censorship and does not require the immense concentration of resources that would be necessary to execute a 'prior restraint' strategy in the information age.

Second, in post-reform China, leaders likely recognise that an unnecessarily restrictive network of social controls, especially on speech, could damage the economic prosperity upon which the regime's legitimacy heavily depends. As much as the CCP despised Unirule, it may have recognised the benefit of a dissenting perspective to avoid the pitfalls of groupthink in formulating economic policy. This attitude may be reflected by the party-state's embrace of non-binding and opaque – but nonetheless publicly available – 'notice and comment' opinion solicitation procedures during the drafting of laws and regulations (Balla 2015).

Conclusion

This investigation has explored the relationships of two think tanks with the Chinese party-state, ultimately concluding that although research institutions have considerable autonomy in post-reform China, this autonomy is highly contingent on fulfilling state-defined conditions. Within this 'conditional autonomy' framework, Chinese think tanks are required to consider the implications of their research for party-state legitimacy before publishing, and the violation of this key 'condition' of their autonomy can have dire consequences, as Unirule's closure demonstrates. The Chinese state has managed to create an institutional ecosystem in which all actors can be said to have 'autonomy,' but within which exists a deeply chilled environment for speech that threatens the CCP's legitimacy (Link 2002).

The recent closure of Unirule marks a potential watershed shift in the Chinese party-state's approach towards think tank governance. Prior to Secretary-General Xi Jinping's ascension to the head of the CCP, Unirule's critical perspective was generally tolerated. The crackdown on Unirule – which began in 2012 and culminated with the closure of the think tank in 2018 – follows closely with Xi Jinping's consolidation of political and ideological control over the same period. Chairman Xi has made 'correct' ideological guidance a cornerstone of his leadership strategy, evidenced by the circulation of 'Document No. 9' as early as 2013, and more recently with the publication of remarks regarding 'public opinion guidance' and 'media integration' (Pan, 2016). The closure of Unirule makes it difficult to escape the conclusion that the political-ideological tide has turned against the once relatively permissive environment for Chinese think tanks, as 'Core Leader' Xi stifles all potential avenues of dissent in his drive to solidify his status as the 'People's Leader.'

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