

# The evolution of Chinese public diplomacy and the rise of think tanks

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**Abstract** The evolution and change of Chinese public diplomacy can be seen from panda diplomacy, the Confucius Institutes, Chinese mass media’s “going out” strategy as well as various international events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. Some substantial studies have found that these Chinese public diplomacies could not help much in terms of improving China’s image or enhancing Western understanding of China. This article aims at examining the latest Chinese policy instrument—think tanks—to see if they can boost Chinese soft power. In addition, this article illustrates the Chinese think tanks from an institutional perspective by studying their contribution in the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative through the case studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY). The Chinese think tanks have played an important role in targeting foreign publics and working on track II diplomacy. However, there is still room for improvement. The major sources of this article are derived from published materials, websites of Chinese institutions and interviews.

**Keywords** Chinese public diplomacy · Soft power · Think tanks · Track II diplomacy

## Introduction

China’s charm offensive around the world has received increasing attention in recent years. It can be seen in the increasing number of Confucius Institutes erected across the continents of Asia, Africa, America, Europe and even Oceania, the expanding Chinese state media with various foreign language channels in the press and broadcasting overseas as well as numerous cultural festivals and exchanges. As early as 2007, Joshua Kurlantzick pointed out that the Chinese government has determined to develop its soft power through public diplomacy to enhance the positive image of China and lessen the concerns of a “China Threat” (Kurlantzick 2007). The former President of China, Hu Jintao, further illustrated the rationale behind Chinese public diplomacy. In 2012, Hu wrote an article in *QiuShi* (求是), a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) journal, criticizing what he saw as Western attempts to divide and weaken China through ideological means. Hu also called for the build-up of Chinese soft power, which he argued, was underutilized and did not match up with China’s international status (IFENG.COM 2012).

Public diplomacy is perhaps something new to the Chinese leaders, but it has become an important means to rejuvenate China’s historical brand as a great power. This can be seen from the current Chinese President Xi Jinping’s proclamation of the “Chinese Dream” (中國夢) and “National Rejuvenation” (民族復興) (China Daily 2017a; South China Morning Post 2013). China’s Han and Tang dynasties were once regarded as the center of the world for their vibrant culture and advanced military capability. The

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emperor of the Tang dynasty was even named “Heavenly Qaghan” (天可汗), who managed and maintained regional order, and people from East Asia and the West went to China for networking, learning the Chinese language and even copying Chinese models from clothing to the tax system (Lewis 2009). Another eminent period was the early Ming dynasty, when the Seven Great Voyages expanded China’s tributaries not only in Asia, but also to the eastern coast of Africa (Fairbank 1969, p. 455). However, the so-called “Century of Humiliation” had turned China into a second-tier power in international relations, with the activities of Western imperialism in the late nineteenth century, internal chaos during the Warlord Era in the early twentieth century and the Japanese invasion during World War II. China was not politically stabilized until the end of the civil war in 1949, and China’s isolation from the international community continued up to the 1970s. Throughout this time, China’s image in the international community did not improve. However, the successful economic reforms since 1978 have changed the context, and China now aims to regain its former prestige and reputation. The questions at hand are how can Beijing achieve this goal, and what are the major policy instruments to do so?

This article first discusses the evolution of Chinese public diplomacy and its continuous application of ‘panda diplomacy,’ the establishment of Confucius Institutes overseas, the internationalization of Chinese mass media as well as various events such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. These initiatives are interpreted as falling short in improving China’s image in the international community. The second part of this article addresses a different approach by specifically examining the rise of Chinese think tanks in the context of China’s soft power promotion and public diplomacy. One crucial consideration is whether the role and function of these think tanks are different from those in the West. Last but not least, this article illuminates the evolution of the Chinese think tanks from an institutional perspective by studying their contribution to the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative. Ultimately, this article argues that China has been patient and flexible in exploring various policy tools in its public diplomacy. Chinese think tanks have played an increasingly important role in targeting foreign publics and working on track II diplomacy. However, there is still room for improvement.

### **The shaping and branding of Chinese public diplomacy**

The Chinese government classifies the evolution of its public diplomacy according to political leadership. In the era of Mao Zedong from the 1950s to the 1970s, China

made use of “Civic Diplomacy” (民間外交) to break international isolation during the Cold War (also known as “People’s Diplomacy”) (Yang 2011). Deng Xiaoping put “Civic Diplomacy” into a different context by increasing foreign exchange and understanding with other countries, which helped create a stable environment for China’s economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s (Yang 2011). The term was changed during Jiang Zemin’s era in the late 1990s and early 2000s to “All-directional” diplomacy, though the function and aim were the same as in Deng’s era (Yang 2011).

Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping were the most engaged leaders in Chinese public diplomacy, probably because of the successful economic reforms under their leadership, which gave China plenty of funding to improve its public diplomacy. In addition, since the 2000s, the “China Threat” theory started to prevail in the international community, heightening in Beijing’s view the need to improve its public image.

The policy instruments of Chinese public diplomacy have also been transformed from civilian exchanges in the 1950s to more sophisticated projects, such as the Confucius Institutes in the 2000s. In responding to China’s international isolation for joining the Korean War, Mao adopted a “Civic Diplomacy” approach, which aimed to liaise with and sustain a diplomatic relationship with other countries. The “Civic Diplomacy” was composed of official, semi-official and civilian elements stemming from various groups and ordinary people in foreign countries targeted by China. Examples are the founding of the Chile-China Cultural Association in 1952, the Mexico-China Friendship Association in 1953 and the exploration of trading opportunities between China, Argentina and Chile in the 1950s (Sun 2015a). During a Japanese Industrial Exhibition in Beijing in 1956, Mao also met with the Japanese business sector to illustrate Beijing’s determination in developing civilian exchanges between the two countries (Li 2011).

Another interesting civilian exchange was made through panda diplomacy. The Chinese consider the panda to be of significant value since it can only be found in China, where it is also a rare species even within its western province. The panda has therefore been chosen as the best symbol to represent China. According to Falk Hartig, the first ‘panda diplomacy’ can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty when Empress Wu Zetian gave a pair of pandas to the Japanese emperor. In 1941, Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek offered the US two pandas in recognition of American assistance. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao sent the first giant panda to the Soviet Union in 1957, followed by another pair of pandas to the US in 1972. The same gesture also extended to Japan, Germany, France, Spain, the UK and Mexico (Hartig 2013, p. 60). The political message of panda diplomacy was strong and



clear especially when China switched from the side of the Soviet Union to the US in 1972, while other pandas were sent as a good will gesture and to enhance China's image in foreign publics. When celebrating the first birthday of a panda cub, Bei Bei, in the US, Chinese President Xi Jinping's wife Peng Liyuan once said that "the giant panda is China's national treasure. Bei Bei's birth is the fruit of collaboration between China and the United States and a strong symbol of our friendship" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016). Besides, *China Daily*, a state-run newspaper, pointed out the importance of panda diplomacy because the animal is regarded as a messenger of peace (China Daily 2017b). Thus, pandas have become not only a national brand of China, but a global brand that helps China to project a peaceful identity and mutual friendship with other countries.

Since the 2000s, the Chinese government has paid more attention to public diplomacy, and Beijing has aimed to rebrand the role of China in the world. The Confucius Institutes were first proposed by Lu Qiutian, a Chinese Ambassador to Germany, and his idea was well received by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. While the primary purpose of every Confucius Institute is to encourage the learning of Chinese language and culture by foreign publics, the institute is also considered a way to balance, if not to challenge, American cultural influence (Hartig 2016, pp. 99–102). However, some Confucius Institutes were forced to close down, such as those at the University of Chicago, Penn State University and Stockholm University, because of concerns over their operational transparency and academic freedom (Volodzko 2015). For some, the Confucius Institute is regarded as a propaganda tool from Beijing that even further stimulates concerns about the "China Threat" overseas (Zhou and Luk 2016).

The state media's "outreach" strategy is perhaps the most direct attempt to influence foreign publics. A classic example is China Central Television (CCTV), which has increasingly become more internationalized since 2000 with the addition of a 24-h English-language channel, French and Spanish-language channels in 2004 and Arabic and Russian-language channels in 2009. However, CCTV has also encountered problems. In particular, it has to strike a balance between the party line and market forces, journalistic professionalism and a limited foreign audience, since most viewers are still Chinese located abroad (Zhang 2011). Also, according to research on Chinese media in South Africa, the CCTV channel there could only target middle or upper income people because of the affordability of the cost of subscription for satellite television. Similarly, the *China Daily's* distribution rate in South Africa is far from satisfactory (Wu 2016). In the digital era, Chinese media such as *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *Global Times*

and *China Today* have also sought to expand their readership by providing online services to offer alternative news narratives on China's peaceful development (Simons 2015). However, the fact that more Chinese media is reaching different parts of the world with different means does not necessarily mean that foreign publics are naturally agreeing with Chinese viewpoints. Apart from the Chinese media, the foreign media in China should also be given special attention as they are the agents who report Chinese news abroad. Since the Chinese government does not share the same attitudes or concepts of journalistic professionalism, it remains to be seen if Beijing is able to shape the preferences of those foreign journalists based in China. A fundamental conflict remains between Western journalistic standards and China's 'Party Line,' which is a threat to press freedom from the Western perspective. Steven McDonnell, a foreign journalist in Beijing, explained the difficulty to obtain the facts when the actions of foreign correspondents are monitored by China's public security service (Sun 2015b).

Organizing and holding mega-international events can also draw world attention and enable China to rebrand itself as a rising great power. Through the themes of "harmony, people's wellbeing, sustainability, and technological innovation," the messages of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 World Expo in Shanghai showcased China's willingness to protect the environment and China's image as an advancing power (d'Hooghe 2014, p. 283). Wang has argued that the World Expo was a process of nation branding that allowed China to project its national image through national pavilions and a patriotic rhetoric to illustrate Chinese viewpoints and perspectives on the world (Wang 2013a, p. 9). However, these international events could not substantially shape China's positive image among Western countries. According to a recent international poll, most of the respondents in countries like Canada, the US, the UK, France, Spain and Turkey view China's influence mainly as negative (Globescan 2017).

### The rise of think tanks

As the above traditional means of public diplomacy have not met the high expectations of Beijing, at the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress in 2013 moves were made to explore if think tanks could help to strengthen Chinese soft power (Chen 2015). Chinese President Xi Jinping later followed up on the subject in a meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform (中央全面深化改革领导小组) in October 2014 by affirming that a "new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics is an important and pressing mission," which can improve the quality of public policy at the domestic level as well as



increase Chinese soft power at the international level (South China Morning Post 2014). In 2015, the report “Opinions on strengthening efforts to build think tanks with Chinese characteristics” introduced a progressive plan for establishing professional Chinese think tanks with global influence by 2020 (Xinhua 2015). In February 2017, Chinese President Xi further indicated a green light for the development of non-governmental think tanks (South China Morning Post 2017).

Even though China has a comprehensive plan to boost the performance and influence of think tanks, there are still some outstanding issues to be solved. In terms of quantity, the number of Chinese think tanks is evidently far behind the US. According to a report by the University of Pennsylvania’s Lauder Institute, China had 435 think tanks in 2016, the second most in the world. However, the number of think tanks in the US far outnumbered those in China (1835) (McGann 2017). In terms of quality, the Chinese think tanks cannot offer practical solutions for government. By referring to OBOR as an example, Fu Ying, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress, commented on the researchers of Chinese think tanks:

...there are too many macroscopic interpretations. What the decision-makers desperately need is research supported by data in specific areas, such as logistics, security and culture. The new type of think tanks should find their positions and adapt their research to the new situations at home and abroad to meet the practical needs of decision-makers. (Fu 2015)

Fu’s view suggests that the Chinese government has a high expectation for its think tanks, particularly because of the importance of OBOR. A study points out that OBOR covers Asia, Europe and Africa with 64 percent of the world population and 30 percent of world GDP. Ports linked with OBOR range from Darwin, Australia, Melaka Gateway in Malaysia, Kyauk Pyu in Myanmar and Gwadar in Pakistan, to Cherchell, Algeria, Piraeus in Greece, and even Margaret Island in Panama, extending the proposed scope of the project. There are also related projects in energy infrastructure, industrial parks, bridges, tunnels and railways, which add to the links between the economies of Asia and Europe, such as the railway from Yiwu to London via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium and France. However, there are potential risks that China has to deal with, such as coordination mechanisms, clashes of political values between countries and regions, excessive Chinese exports and the financial sustainability of infrastructures (Huang 2016). Apart from economic gains, OBOR probably could offer Chinese leaders legitimacy at home and geo-political influence for shaping global governance abroad (Ferdinand 2016). However, OBOR has been perceived by others suspiciously as a kind

of “Marshall Plan” to extend Chinese economic and political influence as a “Trojan horse,” realizing Beijing’s hegemonic ambitions around the globe (Financial Times 2015 and Time 2016). Similar to the previous situation on the expansion of Confucius Institutes, if Beijing cannot explain the intention of OBOR effectively, a new round of “China Threat” concerns will arise.

Given the importance of the rise of Chinese think tanks and OBOR, the remaining part of this article attempts to illustrate the role of think tanks in OBOR and to discuss their main means and efforts to facilitate its success. The role of think tanks in the context of soft power and public diplomacy will be conceptualized, and the differentiation between Chinese think tanks and Western examples, as well as Chinese views on current think tank development, will be discussed. Relevant empirical evidence will also be provided to illustrate what Chinese think tanks do and how they function in OBOR. Last but not least, some challenges and observations on think tank public diplomacy will be discussed. Since there are 435 think tanks in China in a variety of categories—party-affiliated, semi-official, university institutions and non-governmental—this article will focus on the influential Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) as case studies.

### Understanding think tanks in the context of soft power and public diplomacy

Chinese think tanks have received much attention in recent years. Existing literature has explored and discussed the necessities for employing track II diplomacy (semi-official or non-official channel) in Chinese public diplomacy. This article assumes that the rise of Chinese think tanks is indeed part of the supporting infrastructure to facilitate the OBOR. Such track II channels may offer some flexibility in promoting OBOR and building up a foundation for cooperation between China and other countries. Paradoxically, the nature of Chinese think tanks is somehow different from those in the US or the West. There are few empirical studies on think tank impact on Chinese public diplomacy. To answer these questions, this section discusses the uniqueness of Chinese think tanks when compared with the West by conceptualizing the current theoretical framework of think tanks in international relations, such as their relationship with the government, independence and autonomy.

The study of the relationship among Chinese soft power, public diplomacy and think tanks is indeed a relatively new area; thus, some clarifications should be discussed here before going forward to compare and contrast the think tanks between the West and China. Joseph Nye (2004, pp. 11–12) coined the term soft power to mean cultural and



political values and a legitimate foreign policy to be differentiated from popular culture. Nye (2004, pp. 99–118) further pointed out that public diplomacy is a way to wield soft power through handling foreign press, facilitating strategic communications, maintaining long-term relationships with key individuals, and promoting values and norms overseas. Jan Melissen (2005, pp. 4–5) also believes that public diplomacy “is one of soft power’s key instruments” to serve foreign publics, involve non-governmental institutions and reach out to individuals. Yang (2011), a former Chinese Foreign Minister, recognized this in a speech in 2011:

Many countries in the world, in particular major countries, are paying greater attention to the development of soft power, mainly values, models, political propositions and culture. Public diplomacy, which is a product of the times, is an important vehicle for the development of soft power (Yang 2011).

The Chinese government makes it explicit that think tanks in China are expected to enhance Chinese soft power. One may query the Chinese understanding of “soft power” and how think tanks could achieve this goal. Joshua found that Beijing has a different understanding of Nye’s original definition, whereby soft power includes “...not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations” (Kurlantzick 2007, p. 6). In terms of content, the traditional Chinese school of thought led by Sun Zi and Mencius sees economic development and achievements in science and technology also as elements of soft power (Wang and Lu 2008, pp. 427–430). Clearly, the Chinese conception of soft power covers more than Nye’s definition. Generally, Chinese think tanks are expected to provide consultancy services for China’s “going out” strategy and build up a positive image of China in the international community (Chen 2014, p. 33).

While the Chinese government aims at strengthening think tanks with Chinese characteristics, it also means that there are differences between the think tanks in China and the rest of the world. Generally, Western literature defines think tanks as organizations that focus on policy research and analysis that could brief policy makers with some suggestions on both domestic and international issues. Usually, these think tanks place their emphasis on objectivity and independence as a “critical balancing force” against the government, acting as one of the agents and actors of civil society (McGann 2011, p. 14). Others classify think tanks as elite organizations that business and non-profit sectors attempt to make use of for lobbying and shaping the government’s policy agenda; some argue that think tanks are more likely to be one of many interest

groups in a pluralistic society; others treat think tanks as part of an epistemic community in the decision-making process from an institutional approach (as policy organizations or experts invited by the government) (Abelson 2002, pp. 49–55). Although there are various definitions of think tanks, it is apparent that they can be separated in terms of the closeness of their relation with the policy-making process.

The situation of Chinese think tanks is indeed different from that in the West. As Zhu Xufeng points out, Western classifications are not fully applicable to explain the case in China. For example, the independence of think tanks can be determined by whether they can operate autonomously when their policy research is not affiliated to a government agency, whereas the main function of Chinese think tanks is exactly to support the government decision making process as an “external brain” (Zhu 2013, p. 17). Chen Kaimin doubts the degree of independence of Chinese think tanks since they were created to serve Chinese leaders’ decision making processes. Even the CASS cannot provide various viewpoints as it is formally a part of the government (Chen 2014, p. 35). Wang Lili finds that American think tanks are largely independent from government and political parties. In contrast, European think tanks have a close relationship with political parties. Wang suggests that Chinese think tanks should emphasize both institutional independence and national interests by working closely with government and party, this being in line with China’s national conditions (中國國情) (Wang 2015, p. 10). Wang argues that the development of Chinese think tanks should not copy the Western model since China is an emerging great power in the developing world. Thus, Chinese solutions can offer some insights for the countries of the Global South to help them with modernization and participation in the networks of globalization (Tao et al. 2013, p. 18). Overall, the Chinese think tanks seem to be very close to the Chinese government. In a sharp contrast to the West, given the special political system in China, Chinese think tanks cannot be regarded as a critical balancing force against Beijing, and they are not agents or actors of civil society, since they serve rather than monitor the government.

Regarding the role and development of Chinese think tanks, some common trends are evident in Chinese literature. First, apart from offering policy advice and shaping the policy agenda, Chinese think tanks should also shape foreign public opinion with the rationales of Chinese policies and values through international conferences, cooperation and exchanges (Tao and Juan 2013, p. 16). Second, since public diplomacy basically targets foreign publics, non-official institutions and the general public, think tanks should help to establish an international network to explain Chinese foreign policy, promote China’s national image and spread Chinese discursive power



**Table 1** Ranking of Chinese think tanks worldwide (non-US)

Rank	English name	Chinese name
14	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)	中國現代國際關係研究院
26	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)	中國社會科學院
34	China Institute of International Studies (CIIS)	中國國際問題研究院
71	Development Research Center of the State Council (DRC)	國務院發展研究中心
79	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS)	上海國際問題研究院
98	Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies (RDCY)	重陽金融研究院
120	Unirule Institute of Economics	天則經濟研究所
142	Center for China and Globalization (CCG)	全球化智庫

(Zhang 2013, pp. 33–38). Third, think tanks can facilitate track II diplomacy, which can be used for testing new ideas and ideologies as well as solving regional conflicts or disputes between countries through negotiations, especially in situations when the government is not suitable to get involved (Wang 2013b, p. 29). Fourth, there are some common problems, for instance the focus of research is mainly on the major economic or political powers, such as the US, Russia and Japan, instead of on China itself; most of the research outcomes are theoretical rather than practical with strategic implications; there is a lack of short- or mid-term practical policy research; the “revolving door” among government officials, scholars and policy analysts is under-developed; and the level of international exchanges is limited (Tao et al. 2013, p. 19).

There is still a lack of relevant empirical evidence that can help to illustrate the role of Chinese think tanks in shaping or implementing public diplomacy. Thus, the question here is not theoretical but practical: is there a gap between the theoretical suggestions and actual practice? Wang Wen comments that the empirical studies on the effectiveness and functions of think tanks in public diplomacy are extremely limited, and the only representative case is probably the report on the G20 Think Tanks Summit in 2013 where the RDCY helped to facilitate communications and exchanges among various think tanks and policy experts from the G20 countries (Wang 2013c, pp. 39–45).

The section below attempts to enrich the study of Chinese think tanks by identifying relevant empirical evidence that they have contributed to public diplomacy in the case of OBOR.

### Role of think tanks in OBOR

Based on the literature discussion above, this article assumes the following roles and functions of Chinese think tanks in facilitating OBOR:

1. Policy advice such as data, reports or other policy publications
2. Promotion efforts that target foreign public opinion, such as conferences, exchanges and presence in international mass media
3. Evidence that improves China’s image and enhances Chinese discursive power in terms of explaining Chinese viewpoints, sharing innovative ideas and acting as advocacy groups (Zhao 2016).<sup>1</sup>
4. International networks for short- and long-term cooperation
5. Examples of track II diplomacy

However, given the number of Chinese think tanks and their numerous research outputs, this article narrows down its analysis to cover two influential think tanks, the CASS and RDCY. A comprehensive study is further complicated by the fact that since the proclamation of OBOR, there are more than 300 newly established Chinese think tanks that focus on various issues of this project, and think tanks in general have already published more than 400 books related to it (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service 2017). CASS and RDCY were chosen because these two think tanks are listed in the *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* as being in the top 150 worldwide (non-US), and there are only 8 Chinese think tanks that are shortlisted (McGann 2017). The decision was also based on accessibility. A formal request for an interview or a visit to a top Chinese think tank was often neglected or ignored. Some institutions do not provide any contact details such as the emails or phone numbers of their policy experts. Since by definition public diplomacy should mean engaging with the general public, these difficulties in communication are noticeable and surprising. In the end only interviews with CASS and RDCY could be arranged, steering the research to focus on these two institutions (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> Zhao argues that Chinese discursive power can be classified as “right to speak,” “power discourse,” “power of the media,” “soft power” and “diplomatic skills.” From Zhao’s analysis, the Chinese government understands its discursive power as “setting facts straight, innovating rules, and making breakthroughs in social practice.”



## CASS

CASS is renowned for its breadth and depth of research projects and topics, with 43 research units in various divisions covering philosophy, history, economics, social, political and legal studies, international affairs and Marxism. CASS has been very active in policy research and proposals for OBOR. In 2015, CASS published a series of briefings. *The Silk Road Economic Belt National Conditions* covers various information on the 34 countries within the OBOR area such as a country's basic background, political, economic and investment conditions, its bilateral relations with China as well as risk assessments,<sup>2</sup> and the second volume includes another 38 countries' conditions.<sup>3</sup> *The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* is an edition that discusses the project's economic foundations, the possibilities for corporation, the views of other countries, regional connections for infrastructure as well as regional cooperation.<sup>4</sup> CASS has kept on publishing relevant materials on OBOR, also in English: *A Field Investigation Report on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, *The Alignment of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Bright Road of Kazakhstan: Problems and Perspective*, and *The International Risk and Cooperative Space Expansion of the Road and Belt Initiative: The Example of Sri Lanka* (Li 2017). These publications no doubt provide some facts and data as well as some practical advice not only to the Chinese government, but also to foreign publics. Differing from the Chinese reports written for the government, the CASS publications in English instead target foreign governments as a form of political communication in explaining Chinese intentions (Liping Xu 2017, personal communication).

Since June 2015, CASS has also maintained a database for OBOR (一帶一路數據庫) through Social Sciences Academic Press, which is available to the public (Yīdài yīlù shùjùkù n.d.). The database gathers news, experts' comments and statistics and data from 73 countries, including countries that are currently not closely related to OBOR such as Japan and India. Each country profile is divided into six categories, namely politics, economy, society, history, diplomacy and culture, and contains basic information such as national characteristics, geographical location, administrative districts, natural environment, population, ethnic and religious background and cultural heritage. Each category includes access to policy papers,

policy briefs and other relevant publications. However, at present the site is only available in the Chinese language.

Regarding international networks and track II diplomacy for OBOR, CASS is currently transforming itself to meet the increasing demands of the Chinese government. According to Xu Liping, a Director of the Center of Southeast Asian Studies and Chief of the Department of Asia-Pacific Social and Cultural Studies at the National Institute of International Strategy, an affiliation of the CASS, CASS will transform itself into China's foremost global think tank in the near future. CASS has already planned some joint research projects with institutions in Singapore, Indonesia, and other South and Central Asian countries. More overseas offices will be established to deepen the network between the CASS and foreign publics (Liping Xu 2017, personal communication). CASS has also played a role in track II diplomacy by working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce and the General Office of the CCP on various policy projects related to OBOR. CASS's track II diplomacy is mainly about organizing forums, launching dialogues and building up independent communications with foreign think tanks and experts. According to Xu, CASS submits reports and internal proposals to the central government for policy considerations. There are also an increasing number of English language materials available that target foreign governments and publics. The former supports the implementation of OBOR, and the latter aims to increase Chinese discursive power, if not merely inform others of Chinese intentions. However, there is a lack of available concrete evidence as the policy advice materials have not been made public (Liping Xu 2017, personal communication).

Another researcher interviewed for this article, Liu Zuokui, Director of the Department of Central and Eastern European Studies at the Institute of European Studies of CASS (and also the Director of 16 + 1 Think Tanks Network Secretariat Office), pointed to a newly founded institute, the China-Central and Eastern European Institute based in Budapest, Hungary. Though the institute is owned by CASS, it operates independently, allowing other Chinese think tanks to connect with the outside world. The independent status enhances China's image by allowing for more nuanced views on Chinese information and perspectives. It also assists China in seeking long-term cooperation with central and eastern European countries (Zuokui Liu 2017, personal communication). Aside from that, CASS has also helped to liaise with European newspapers and mass media by explaining the 16 + 1 initiative [economic and cultural cooperation between China and 11 European Union (EU) member states and 5 Balkan countries]. Knowing that the EU remains skeptical about the increasing Chinese influence in Eastern Europe, the 16 + 1

<sup>2</sup> See the website of Pí shū shùjùkù, [http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx\\_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=4054736](http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=4054736), accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>3</sup> See the website of Pí shū shùjùkù, [http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx\\_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=5985388](http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=5985388), accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See the website of Pí shū shùjùkù, [http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx\\_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=4137025](http://www.pishu.com.cn/skwx_ps/bookdetail?SiteID=14&ID=4137025), accessed 11 August 2017.



Think Tanks Network of CASS has also invited the representatives of the EU Commission to observe and attend the 16 + 1 meetings (Zuokui Liu, 2017, personal communication). Similar to the track II policies mentioned above, CASS also offers some track 1.5 activities such as providing training to high-ranking government officials and outlining some suggestions to corporations that are interested in doing business in Europe (Zuokui Liu 2017, personal communication).

Overall, CASS has played a great role as a think tank in terms of providing policy advice and research, but its role in Chinese public diplomacy in the case of OBOR remains unclear because of insufficient sources. The growing number of published English-language materials by CASS is indeed a good attempt to target foreign publics. Another concern is whether CASS can reach more foreign publics through the international mass media, which may help to improve China's image and increase the Chinese narrative capability of OBOR by explaining it as win-win cooperation with mutual benefits. Moreover, the CASS's efforts to build up international networks and facilitate track II diplomacy are yet to be seen as it takes time to examine the effect.

## RDCY

Established in 2013, RDCY is a relatively young Chinese think tank. Though young, the revolving door of RDCY works very well, since its membership/staff currently includes 96 retired politicians, bankers and scholars from a dozen countries [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.a]. The existing four research programs focus on global governance, the 'belt and road,' eco-finance and major power relations. RDCY claims that it is the first Chinese think tank that has put serious efforts into serving the OBOR project [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. For example, the research team of RDCY visited 43 countries near or along the OBOR route to gather the latest data and information for a series of internal proposals and reports for the Chinese government [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. RDCY has already published substantive research outputs that address various concerns and suggestions, such as *Facilities Connectivity: Building an Interconnected World*, *Unimpeded Trade: Together on the Road to Wealth*, *Financial Integration: Facilitating Economic Integration* and *Connecting People: Forging a Bridge of Friendship*. These are published in English, Chinese, French, Russian, Arabic and Korean (Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) 2017). In terms of accessibility, the RDCY's publications are more attractive to the

OBOR countries as Russian is common in Central Asia. The same situation also applies to Arabic as a common language in the Middle East and French in Africa.

Networking is also one of the strengths of RDCY. RDCY organized the "12 Countries Think Tank Forum" in June 2014 by inviting policy analysts and diplomats from China, Russia, five Central Asian countries, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the US to conduct discussions on OBOR behind closed doors. The forum is probably the very first dedicated to OBOR in China [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. Thereafter, RDCY arranged bilateral talks with think tanks in Turkey, Iran, Nepal, the US and Kazakhstan. In June 2016, RDCY collaborated with the American think tank, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), on an international seminar on the significance of OBOR. The seminar was open to the public [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. In addition, RDCY also organized the Silk Road Think Tank Association Conference with the China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS) in February 2017, with around 200 participants from 93 think tanks and institutions in China (Jia and Liu, cited in Chinese Social Science Net 2017). Such conferences are helpful to coordinate opinions and proposals on OBOR, which can be used to target foreign publics later on, especially since CCCWS is under the International Department of the Central Committee of the CCP.

Track II diplomacy can also be found in RDCY. One example is the Silk Road Economic Belt Cities International Forum in 2015 that helped to finalize the final destination of the YXE International Container Train in Madrid. The former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, together with retired national leaders and diplomats from Slovenia and Pakistan, not only attended the forum, but also liaised and communicated with their governments to facilitate the deal [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. Another example is the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is an important supporting institution of OBOR. When RDCY invited Jin Liqun, the then Secretary-General of the Multilateral Interim Secretariat of AIIB for a talk on OBOR in 2015, dozens of foreign ambassadors and diplomats in Beijing attended the event. Since the talk gave Jin a chance to elaborate his views on AIIB, it assisted his public profile and so also the support from other AIIB member states for him to be the first president of the AIIB [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b].

In general, RDCY has offered valuable opportunities for exchanges between China and the OBOR countries through conferences and forums. The use of different languages in policy reports that aim at foreign governments and publics





may help to improve China's international image and address Western concerns that OBOR is a "Trojan horse." Although both CASS and RDCY have the same goals and similar policy instruments, it is indeed difficult to assess how foreign audiences have read their reports or received their narratives. RDCY's policy experts show up very often in the mass media, but most of the outlets are still in China, except in a few instances in which RDCY has had the chance to express its views in Western media such as the *Financial Times* [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China (RDCY) n.d.b]. Nevertheless, RDCY has shown its capability and influence in the establishment of international networks as well as the facilitation of track II diplomacy such as the negotiations for the YXE International Container Train from Yiwu to Madrid and the informal seminar of Jin Liqun mentioned above. These have enabled the think tank to communicate and exchange ideas with others and attempt to shape the preferences of foreign diplomats and experts.

## Conclusion

The evolution of Chinese public diplomacy has involved a rebranding process. By using various policy instruments, Beijing has relentlessly promoted China internationally. Major shifts have occurred in terms of the methods and scope of Chinese public diplomacy. It is clear that Beijing has not merely aimed at boosting exchanges and understanding between people in China and other countries, but has had a much more ambitious goal in mind to rebrand China from a weak country that suffered a "Century of Humiliation" to a great power in the coming century.

However, China is facing various challenges ahead as it gradually recognizes the need to enhance its public diplomacy. The various policy instruments, such as the Confucius Institutes, mass media and international events, have yet to succeed in shaping a positive image of the rise of China. According to the Chinese government paper, "Concerning Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics," Chinese think tanks are expected to bear multiple responsibilities: building up a good image of a Socialist China; boosting Chinese culture and values in the international community; expressing Chinese concerns in various international platforms; and enhancing China's international influence and discursive power. More importantly, Beijing has set a timeline that there should be some Chinese think tanks with international influence and prestige by 2020 (Xinhua 2015). Thus, think tanks become the latest policy instrument of China's public diplomacy because previous policy tools such as mass media, international events and Confucius Institutes (and pandas) cannot deliver the kinds of

results required. While there has been an increase in the number and importance of think tanks, it is still too early to judge their effectiveness for public diplomacy. Nevertheless, the public diplomacy that is still predominantly shaped by the Chinese government's top-down decision-making processes continues to neglect the recipients' attitudes, interests and responses (Creemers 2015, p. 317). Besides, China does not have the necessary coordination methods and presentation skills to deliver its public diplomacy, and sometime these efforts even generate negative feelings abroad (Zhao 2015, p. 196). One example is the heavy-handed Chinese security that protected the 2008 Beijing Olympic torch relay from protests about human rights, Chinese involvement in Sudan's Darfur crisis and Tibet. More importantly, as Wang puts it, the critical problem at hand is how to transform the "'Made in China' brand into a dynamic 'Create/Initiate in China' concept" (Wang 2008, p. 270).

This article, by examining empirical evidence, intends to judge the significance of Chinese think tanks in public diplomacy. The two cases of CASS and the RDCY show that they have already offered a considerable amount in terms of policy research with objective data and practical policy suggestions. Whether CASS and RDCY are able to achieve the Chinese leaders' expectation is indeed another question. Based on the current evidence, RDCY is more capable than CASS in promoting Chinese ideas to foreign publics through its publications in multiple languages as well as various conferences and forums. This is also the case for its networking activities and track II diplomacy that has facilitated negotiations and provided informal exchanges of ideas outside of governmental settings. RDCY seems to be more active and eager to explore international meetings and dialogue for mutual understanding. However, while RDCY provided internal reports tailor-made for enhancing its influence, CASS is a much more complicated institution with different branches. Nevertheless, this still has advantages for presenting its views to the outside world. Thus, the comparison and critical judgment may not be fair to the CASS. As Liu Zuokui explained, CASS functions as a government-backed institution; therefore, its primary goal is to offer policy analysis and explain Chinese policy rationales to foreign publics, so domestic prestige and publicity are not a top priority (Zuokui Liu 2017, personal communication). It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article to judge or measure how foreign publics perceive CASS and RDCY. Such evaluation would involve a large scale of survey of foreign publics, including think tanks, by inviting them to comment on the performance of Chinese think tanks and whether their views on China have been changed positively.



## Interviews

Interview with Xu Liping at CASS, Beijing, 15 Jun 2017.

Interview with Liu Zuokui at CASS, Beijing, 15 Aug 2017.

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