

THINK TANK DEVELOPMENT IN HONG KONG

KWONG Kin-ming & ZHAO Litao

EAI Background Brief No. 717

Executive Summary

1. After the 1 July 2003 demonstration with 500,000 people protesting against the government, think tanks have proliferated in Hong Kong. In 2011 alone, five think tanks were set up, compared with six between 1989 and 2003.
2. Hong Kong's society has become more politicized after 2003. Policy decisions have been driven by different public opinions. With a growing "war of ideas", more social actors choose to do policy advocacies by research rather than slogans through setting up think tanks.
3. Think tanks' founders are from different backgrounds such as property developers, investment bankers, engineers, professors, ex-senior civil servants, ex-legislative councilors and professors. Some of them had affiliations with political parties and social movements.
4. Think tanks have different policy advocacy strategies. They differ in terms of target audiences and activities. Some target more on policy makers while some more on the public. Besides doing research, some of them engage the public by providing courses on policy issues as well.
5. Think tanks research on a wide range of policy topics, such as environment, urban development, Hong Kong's competitiveness, political reform, and social policy.
6. Think tanks have seen their influence rising over time. The government has started to invite think tank representatives to give suggestions during the drafting of some important policy papers, like Policy Address.
7. Think tanks also have influence over public opinion, as shown in the protests against High Speed Rail Network construction in Hong Kong. An alternative proposal by a think tank had roused opposition voices. The government had to respond by dismissing the feasibility of the proposal.

8. Overall, however, think tanks' influence is still limited. Some key actors as business sectors, political parties and even the government give relatively low support to think tanks. They do not see think tanks as necessary for bringing about policy changes.
9. Business sectors can bypass think tanks as they have their own political networks and channels. Parties do not have strong demand for policy research as they gain support more by slogans than by grounded policy proposals. The government does not see any strong need for policy research as it upholds laissez faire policy for development.
10. Nonetheless, the importance of think tanks cannot be underestimated. The government has realized the importance of policy research given its legitimacy crisis. Furthermore, the growing political competition will increase the demand for policy research from political actors for winning in the war of ideas.