

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Dig Deep and Reach Wide”: The Changing Politics of the Chinese Communist Party’s Consultative Information System

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Abstract

Since the early 2010s, a low-profile “dig deep and reach wide” campaign led by local Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committees has unprecedentedly institutionalized and embedded academic opinions into the regimes’ decision-making processes. This research aims to deepen the existing understanding of the intricate relationship between players in the CCP’s decision-making process by analysing the Party’s deliberation on scholarly opinions through an academic lens. It argues that the local Party committees’ incentives to incorporate academic opinions into their information channels are not only a reaction to the central CCP’s increasing need to “reach wide” for high-quality and critical policy proposals but are also a move to seek political endorsement from the central authorities. This process has transformed government–academic relations in China from a patron-client model to one of increasing interdependence in which Chinese academia has become increasingly attuned to the thinking and needs of the CCP.

摘要

自 2010 年左右以来，一个较为低调的“深挖广采”咨政信息运动在地方党委的主持下在中国开展起来。该工作将学者的咨政意见以制度化的方式嵌合进了中国共产党的决策过程中。以学界参与中国共产党决策作为切入点，本研究旨在深入分析中国共产党决策体系中各利益相关方之间的复杂联系。本研究认为地方党委将学术意见纳入其信息渠道不仅是为了应对党中央对高质量和问题为导向的咨政信息逐渐增加的“广采”需求，也是地方从中央获得合法性授权的途径。这一运动将中国的学界-政界关系由原有的从属关系变为逐渐增强的依存关系；也使得中国学界逐渐向中国共产党的思想靠拢并调整自身产出以适应后者的政治需求。

Keywords: authoritarian deliberation; scientific decision making; the Central CCP General Office; consultative information; government–academic relationship; China

关键词: 威权性协商; 科学决策; 中共中央办公厅; 咨政信息; 政学关系; 中国

All scientific decision-making starts with touching real information; therefore, emphasis on problem reporting is the key to the CCP’s information work.

Xi Jinping 习近平¹

1 Xi 1995, 17. Xi was then the CCP Standing Committee member of Fujian province and Fuzhou Municipal CCP committee secretary.

In recent decades, scholars have endeavoured to understand how decisions are made in China. The literature has made significant progress in revealing the complexity of this process, particularly in the nuances of the autocrat–elite relationship and public deliberation during decision-making processes.² However, knowledge of the mechanisms for consultative information (*zizheng xinxi* 咨政信息) supplied to decision makers, key players and their interactions in the system remains preliminary.

Since the early 2010s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has expanded its consultative information channels in an unprecedented way to systematically incorporate academic opinions from outside of the government and CCP institutions. This expansion has created a window allowing scholars to peek into the Party’s decision-making mechanisms. Soliciting criticism during the policymaking process with the aim of improving policy outcomes and increasing public support is an established Party practice.³ However, unlike the typical “consultative authoritarianism” model in which elite, intellectual and public opinions are collected periodically before decisions are made, since the early 2010s, professionals such as academics and research personnel in major private companies and social entities have regularly submitted classified reports to the party-state summarizing key political, economic and social issues.⁴ Consultative information is incorporated into a policy or political decision through *pishi* 批示 – the decision maker’s comments which are written on the report.⁵

One characteristic that sets consultative information apart from other CCP information-gathering channels, such as the Mayor’s Mailbox or “public opinion solicitation,” is its “internality.”⁶ The submission, editing and circulation process of consultative information is classified. Thus, compared with other publicly collected suggestions, the CCP expects more frank discussions in consultative information and is more tolerant of criticism in the reports.⁷

The CCP has taken two parallel approaches to incorporate professionals into its consultative information system. The first (and relatively well studied) approach is the top-down “new type” think-tank development initiated during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2013.⁸ The second and relatively less studied approach is the bottom-up “reach wide and dig deep” (*guangcai shenwa xinxi* 广采深挖信息) campaign initiated by local CCP committees through which private requests and one-on-one negotiations with universities, research institutes, corporations and social organizations have taken place.⁹ In practice, the two approaches work simultaneously and personnel sometimes overlap; a scholar in a university can be a member of a think tank but also submit reports as an individual.

By analysing the motives and processes of the bottom-up expansion of the CCP’s consultative information system through an academic lens, this research aims to deepen the existing understanding of the CCP’s decision-making mechanisms. It investigates how the CCP adjusts its sources of information to cope with changing social conditions and endeavours to unveil the intricate relationship between the main players in the process, namely, the central CCP, the local CCP and academics.

This research argues that the central CCP’s adoption of academic opinions into its consultative information system is a reaction to the increasingly complex governance challenges where its own

2 Harding 1987; Gandhi 2008; Boix and Svobik 2013; Truex 2018; He and Thøgersen 2010; He and Warren 2011.

3 Truex 2017, 329–30; Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019, 1539.

4 Xue, Zhu and Han 2018.

5 Tsai and Liao 2017.

6 For how the CCP processes external information, see Tsai and Liao 2017, 54–60; Chen, Pan and Xu 2016, 396–98.

7 Chen, Pan and Xu 2016.

8 Zhu 2011. “Xi Jinping weihe tebie qiangdiao ‘xinxing zhiku jianshe’?” (Why did Xi Jinping particularly emphasize “the construction of the new type think tank”?). *Renmin wang*, 29 October 2014, theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/10/29/c148980-25928251.html. Accessed 19 February 2020.

9 “Zibo shiwei changwei, mishuzhang Bi Sidong pishi yaoqiu guangcai, shenwa dang’an ziyuan quanli dazao *Zizheng cankao* dang’an pinpai” (Bi Sidong, member of the Standing Committee and secretary general of Zibo Municipal Party Committee, instructed to reach wide and dig deep into archival resources and make every effort to build the archive platform of “policy consultation”). *Zhongguo dang’an zixun wang*, 10 May 2018, zgda.zxw.com.cn/news/2019-05/10/content_278721.htm. Accessed 23 July 2021; Froissart 2020.

information-analysing agencies are either slow to respond or are biased because of conflicts of interest. The local CCP committees' motives to "dig deep and reach wide" for consultative information are not only a reaction to political pressure from the central CCP to increase consultative information contributions but also a move to seek political resources from the centre through *pishi*. This process shifts the government–academic relationship in China from a simple patron–client model to one of increasing interdependence, as academics earn significant political capital for their local government counterparts through the production of consultative information. Meanwhile, the party-state has been gradually tying academics closer to its political needs through career and monetary incentives, which directs Chinese academics to be more attuned to the thinking and needs of the CCP.

This research is among the first to identify the bottom-up expansion of the CCP's consultative information system since the early 2010s in a process that has been developing largely away from the academic spotlight. It contributes to the literature by noting that an authoritative regime, China in this case, can be flexible in diversifying its sources of information to facilitate decision making and that players in the process maintain complicated interactions rather than having a simple top-down structure. Furthermore, this study enriches the work on consultative authoritarian mechanisms by noting that instead of periodically collecting elite and public opinions, the CCP has institutionalized academic opinions into its consultative information system.

Owing to the secretive nature of the CCP's consultative information system, publicly available statistics are minimal, and large-scale quantitative studies would be prohibitively difficult to operationalize. Therefore, this research applies a qualitative research method instead. I had the privilege of being able to conduct in-depth and follow-up interviews with six government officials working on consultative information compilation at two municipal-level and one provincial-level CCP general office, nine scholars and three university administrative staff from four provincial administrative regions. The interviewees were recruited through personal connections and by the recommendations of the interviewees in a snowball sampling technique. Interview questions were open-ended and included core questions such as "How long have you been working on consultative information?" "What is the role of academics in consultative information?" and "How is consultative information evaluated in your agency?" All interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Owing to travel restrictions in China, interviews conducted in early 2020 were carried out online. My observations from fieldwork and archival research on publicly available documents and statistics triangulate the interviews.

The paper proceeds as follows. Next, it outlines the expansion process of the consultative information system from the perspective of the central–local government relationship. It then analyses how local governments have been drawing considerable political capital from the central government through scholars' *pishi*. Finally, this research evaluates changes in Chinese academia since it became involved in the CCP's consultative information system.

The Expansion of the CCP's Consultative Information System

Prior to the establishment of the consultative information system in the early 1980s, the "request for authorization and report" (*qingshi baogao* 请示报告) mechanism had largely defined communications between the central government and local governments since 1949. Local governments sought approval before making key decisions, reporting on emergency issues and submitting annual working reviews to the central government.¹⁰ The CCP general offices at different administrative levels were responsible for the communication of such information.¹¹ Since the market reform of the early 1980s, the central government's need for a regular supply of updated information on local economic

¹⁰ Meng 2019.

¹¹ Yuan 2011.

and social changes has surged, but the *qingshi baogao* mechanism only communicated essential information and emergency and general local issues. A more regular and updated documental system was needed.¹²

In January 1985, Wang Zhaoguo 王兆国, the-then head of the Central CCP General Office (CCGO), established a “comprehensive information system among the central [CCP], ministries and local [CCP committees]” to run in parallel with the *qingshi baogao* institution.¹³ As illustrated in Figure 1, sitting at the centre of the system, the CCGO processes information submitted from provincial CCP general offices, the *Xinhua* News and direct report points (*zhibao dian* 直报点) on a daily basis.¹⁴ The CCGO then edits and compiles information into internal journals (*neibu kanwu* 内部刊物), which are then circulated among respective decision makers at the central level.¹⁵ Local CCP committees compile their own versions of internal journals to aid local decision makers. Similar to policy proposals in other countries, a report is normally around 6,000 words in length and comprises a brief introduction to an issue, its proposed solutions as well as the identification of specific actors to take actions.¹⁶

Before the Xi Jinping administration took over, the consultative information channel was largely inaccessible to personnel outside the government and CCP institutions: “Information work was kept within the government, and many cadres had little awareness of how to incorporate outside ideas; they would only reach out to their ‘own people’ for policy research.”¹⁷ “Information work” (*xinxi gongzuo* 信息工作) refers to the writing and reporting of consultative information, which may appear in the form of an internal report (*neican* 内参) or brief report (*yaobao* 要报). The party-state’s research institutes comprise the national and local academies of social sciences and the government policy research offices (*zhengce yanjiushi* 政策研究室).¹⁸ Although the Ministry of Education set up a few universities in the 1990s as CCGO direct report points, consultative information was reported by the universities’ CCP committees rather than the individual scholars.¹⁹ Only a handful of scholars from universities with close ties to the central government, such as Hu An’gang 胡鞍钢 from Tsinghua University, utilized their personal connections to have an impact on policymaking.²⁰ According to Subject H, a scholar whose information has received multiple *pishi* from Politburo members, “Prior to 2013, I had no idea what a *neican* was. In 2013, Ministry X asked me to convert one of my books into a 3,000-word report and I told them to do it themselves because I was busy. At that point I didn’t realize they were asking for a *neican* from me.”²¹ Such confusion was not an isolated case; a majority of the academic interviewees involved in *neican* writing agreed that their initial contact with the party-state on consultative information occurred only in the early 2010s.²²

The main reason behind the change, as has been argued in a number of studies, relates to the difficulty the government and the CCP’s own reporters experienced in providing updated, in-depth and unbiased policy proposals against the backdrop of increasingly complex governance challenges.²³ Local information reporters have long been obstructed by local governments and

12 Liu 2009.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Direct report points are selected local CCP general offices, state-owned enterprises and institutions that report information directly to the CCGO. Bai 2000.

15 Tsai and Liao 2018.

16 Interview with Subject E, Guangdong, October 2019; interview with Subject C, Guangdong, November 2019.

17 Interview with Subject Z, online, February 2020.

18 Zhao and Tok 2021.

19 Interview with Subject D, online, February 2020.

20 Hamrin 1987; interview with Subject W, online, February 2020.

21 Interview with Subject H, online, February 2020.

22 Interview with Subject W; interview with Subject G, Guangdong, June 2020.

23 Hayward 2018.

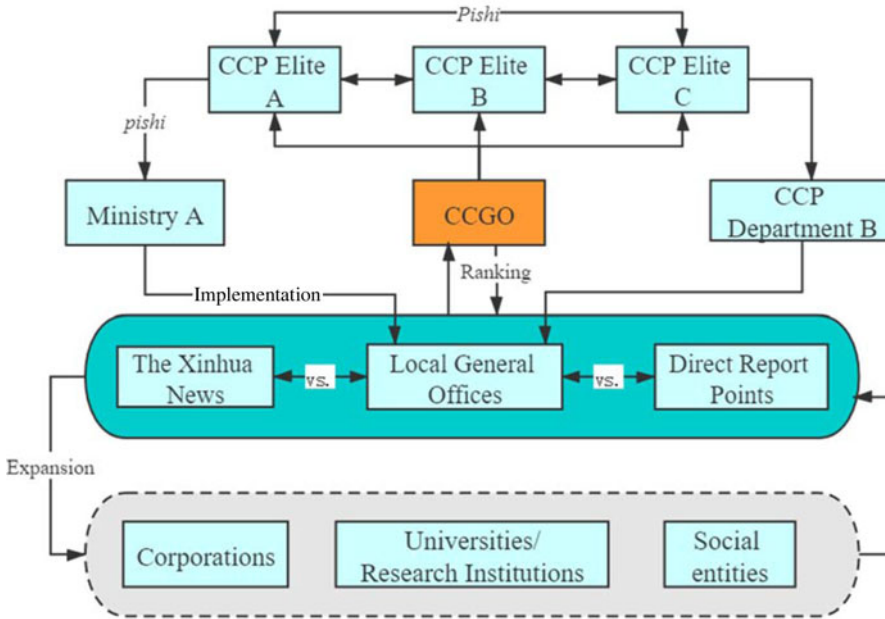


Figure 1: The CCP's Consultative Information System

prevented from reporting problems to the CCGO.²⁴ This issue has been frequently identified by the CCGO-managed journal *Mishu gongzuo* 秘书工作 as one of the main obstacles in the CCP's information system.²⁵ Information from the ministries' research institutes is also frequently criticized for being biased towards ministerial interests.²⁶ These factors, combined with the strict bureaucratic documental system, created a culture of consultative information systems that were "rigid and slow" in reacting to major national crises and which had let down the centre by misreading the situation regarding several key national issues.²⁷ In comparison, academics are relatively distant from the conflicts of interest in central–local government relations. They are, however, exposed to a larger body of literature and possess a greater inventory of research methods that help to produce more "scientific" policy proposals. Therefore, in the early 2010s, decision makers began to turn to reports by academics with the view that such reports were more analytical and objective in their criticism.²⁸

There is, however, a limitation to the degree of criticism tolerated, particularly when it is directed at specific agencies or personnel. As Subject K commented, "Local officials can be irritated if you point out their problems to the central government; they might even suggest that you do not write about certain issues."²⁹ Nevertheless, even if a CCP leader dislikes a report, an academic author is unlikely to be exposed to any significant political risk other than never receiving *pishi* from the leader or the department. Authors are "protected" by the fact that consultative information is classified and they are partially exempt from the CCP's political censorship rules.

Before reaching out to individual academics, the policy consultation channel was first made available to the "new type" think tanks by their government patrons. They are usually referred to as "leading institutions" (*lingdao danwei* 领导单位) or "supervisory entities" (*zhuguan jigou*

24 Mi 2019.

25 Jiangxi CCP Committee General Office 2019; Lai 2019.

26 Xue, Zhu and Han 2018, 50.

27 Interview, Subject Z.

28 Ibid.

29 Interview with Subject K, Guangdong, September 2021.

主管机构). To ensure that the information produced by think tanks has the best chance of receiving *pishi*, patrons provided built-in information channels when the think tanks were established. The 25 national high-level think tanks (*guojia gaoduan zhiku* 国家高端智库), for example, are managed by the CCP Publicity Department and report directly to the CCGO.³⁰ Similarly, the Shanghai CCP General Office receives reports directly from think tanks established under the 2011 “Implementation plan of enhancing the social service capacity of knowledge in the higher education institutes of Shanghai.”³¹

Individual scholars’ involvement in policy consultation came later and largely reflected the increased competition in consultative information performance among the local CCP general offices, the information from which was subsequently disseminated to local governments and CCP institutions. The CCGO’s ranking and rewarding of local information contributors began in the early 1990s but was largely a symbolic gesture before the 2010s.³² With the central CCP’s stress on high-quality consultative information, the political significance of the ranking has increased and reached its apex after the 2019 CCGO National Forum on Information Work.³³ Although its content is not publicly available, the message sent out from the forum is clear: that the CCGO assigns unprecedented weight to the local CCP committee’s consultative information performance.³⁴ As Subject C suggested, “many provinces started their moves soon after [the forum]” because “local governments don’t want to lose face in the ranking.”³⁵ “Losing face” in this context means ranking low on the CCGO’s list, which points to the incompetence of the local leaders and thus may even jeopardize their promotional prospects.

The top municipalities in the CCGO’s information contribution ranking, such as Shenzhen and Hangzhou, all rely heavily on academics for their consultative information contributions.³⁶ Many other top performing provinces and municipalities also actively approach academics outside the “new type” think tanks. This approach has quickly spread through “experience-exchange forums” (*jingyan jiaoliuhui* 经验交流会), following the CCGO’s 2019 forum.³⁷ According to Subject D, “If they [local CCP general office staff] heard that Xiamen municipality has contacted Xiamen University for consultative information, they would do so [with their local universities] as well.”³⁸

Pressure from the CCGO quickly fed down through provincial governments to grassroots-level governments. Local CCP committees made consultative information an evaluation criterion for almost all departments, ranging from the technology bureau to the retired cadre bureau. The three most heavily weighted criteria are the number of total reports submitted, the amount of consultative information accepted by higher-level CCP information offices and the amount of *pishi* received.³⁹ Yinchuan 银川, the capital city of the Ningxia Ethnic Hui Autonomous Region, adopted a points-based quota system in which every department must submit at least 20 pieces of consultative information per month and is awarded 20 points if this target is reached. A piece of information accepted by the Yinchuan CCP Information Office is awarded 5 points, or 25 points if it is accepted by the CCGO. Similarly, one piece of consultative information receiving *pishi* from the Central CCP elites receives 30 points, or 20 points if the *pishi* comes from Ningxia regional leaders.⁴⁰

30 Interview, Subject G.

31 Lin and Deng 2018.

32 *Mishu gongzuo* Editorial Board 1995; Zhou and Ma 1991.

33 Interview, Subject C.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Interview, Subject D.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Tai’an Government 2017.

40 Yinchuan Government 2012.

Consultative information performance at the local level in Guangdong is thought to take up one-fourth of the local government's overall evaluation result.⁴¹ Subject A, a cadre from a municipal-level market regulation office, reflected that, "In recent years, consultative information has become a crucial criterion for our performance. If done well, we can easily outperform other [municipal] departments."⁴²

The local CCP general offices' bottom-up reaction to the CCGO's ranking pressure has created a diverse range of methods to collect consultative information that "lack a national standard."⁴³ The majority of the local CCP general offices utilize private connections to request information from academics. Cadres usually search for the top researchers or research institutes in their fields and arrange official meetings, which are often referred to as "research activities" (*diaoyan huodong* 调研活动). When connections are established, personnel in the government agency seek to maintain long-term collaborations with individual researchers. "We have collaborations with top researchers from many different fields, in chemistry, biology, international relations and more," reported Subject F from a municipal agency, "many of them we have collaborated with for several years and they provide timely reports on important and timely issues with professional opinions."⁴⁴

It is not uncommon for academics to receive requests through multiple channels. "The provincial government, the municipal government and *Xinhua* News have all contacted me," said Subject H, adding that she prefers to collaborate with *Xinhua* News, which was the first institution to approach her.⁴⁵ Private requests have become less effective as the competition among those charged with gathering consultative information has increased, and scholars are able to prioritize their preferred channels. "The provincial government [cadre] has asked multiple times for us to contribute *neican*, but we rarely do so, because we primarily serve the CCGO," said Subject G, a scholar from one of the 25 high-level think tanks.⁴⁶

Latecomers to the competition, particularly local CCP general offices with few established connections with academics, have initiated "active hunts" (*zhudong chuji* 主动出击) for consultative information.⁴⁷ Jiangxi province, for example, established an "information consulting expert database" and uses WeChat groups and seminars to "mobilize expert enthusiasm" for contributing information.⁴⁸ Some local CCP general offices entrust social science offices (*shekechu* 社科处) in universities to collect consultative information from scholars, while others host discussion panels with university management boards to reach a broader range of academics.⁴⁹

The Shenzhen Municipal CCP General Office stands out in the competition by openly allowing submissions on internal reports from all individuals. "Not many places have done this," Subject H commented.⁵⁰ The submission process is similar to that of a journal, with manuscripts being scored by editors in the general office according to a set of classified standards.⁵¹

The expansion of information channels inevitably creates conflict between the agencies. The first type of conflict occurred between the old and new information agencies working with Chinese academia. Subject D described one such conflict: "One obstacle for us when developing researchers as reporters is that they are used to submitting academic output to institutions such as the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences (NOPSS), and we are persuading them to turn to

41 Interview with Subject S, Guangdong, September 2020.

42 Interview with Subject A, Guangdong, July 2020.

43 Interview, Subject D.

44 Interview with Subject F, Guangdong, June 2021.

45 Interview, Subject H.

46 Interview, Subject G.

47 Interview, Subject D.

48 Jiangxi CCP Committee General Office 2019, 51.

49 Interview with Subject L, online, February 2020.

50 Interview, Subject H.

51 Interview, Subject D.

us.”⁵² The conflict described here is indirect, as the NOPSS requests long research reports of approximately 150,000 words, while policy consultative information is normally less than 6,000 words. The second, and more direct, conflict arises when cadres from different CCP committees “dig” for information in others’ “backyards.” Cadre C admitted that “cadres from Hangzhou dig for information from Beijing, and vice versa.”⁵³ The pressure to perform well in the CCGO’s consultative information ranking system seems to have pushed local CCP cadres to fish for information in other administrative regions.

Competition is also to be found between agencies in the same government. As mentioned above, agencies are required to fulfil a quota, and consultative information performance heavily impacts their performance appraisals. Sometimes, more than two agencies may seek consultative information from the same research institute or individual. Each agency then needs to promote the “advantages” of its channel to attract submissions. Subject B, from a municipal office, introduced that office’s channel as “a special channel, through which reports that catch our leader’s attention are accepted quickly.”⁵⁴ Subject Y, from a Guangdong provincial government agency, advertised their channel as “responsive to the information contributors, and diligent in submitting reports to multiple channels.”⁵⁵

Responding to the growing complexity in governance, the CCP has, since the early 2010s, incorporated professionals from outside the government and CCP institutions as contributors to its consultative information system at an unprecedented level. As discussed above, the local CCP committees’ motives to initiate the “dig deep and reach wide” campaign for consultative information are in response to increasing political pressure from the CCGO. However, rather than just passively respond to the CCGO requirement, local CCP general offices also utilize consultative information as leverage to trade political capital with the central government, with academics as the key media for such power transactions.

Pishi as Political Capital: The Changing Academic–Government Relationship

There are tens of thousands of reports submitted [to the CCGO] each year, but the core leader (*hexin lingdao* 核心领导) only instructs (*pishi*) a few hundred.

Interview with Subject C⁵⁶

Under China’s authoritarian regime, *pishi* from CCP elites is more than a form of decision making; it is also a powerful and rare political endorsement sought by local governments. Since political and administrative authority is concentrated heavily in the Party elites at the national level, when one issues a *pishi*, all relevant parties are expected to carry out the instructions in a timely manner.⁵⁷ The subsequent implementation of the *pishi* often brings political resources, such as legitimacy, connections, funding and “face” (*mianzi* 面子), to the local government and leaders. This arrangement is repeated at different levels in local government. For instance, the provincial CCP leader’s *pishi* on reports submitted by the municipal CCP general office will give the latter more political resources.

There are several paths to gaining CCP elites’ *pishi*; consultative information has become a popular option among the local CCP committees because it carries a low political risk. Other methods, such as via the local governments’ liaison offices in Beijing (*zhujingban* 驻京办), require local cadres to carefully manoeuvre and maintain connections with personnel in the central

52 Ibid.

53 Interview, Subject C.

54 Interview with Subject B, Guangdong, June 2021.

55 Interview with Subject Y, Guangdong, July 2021.

56 Xi Jinping is commonly referred to as the “core leader” by Chinese bureaucrats.

57 Tsai and Liao 2018, 250.

government.⁵⁸ Ministers' and CCP elites' secretaries are continually targeted by the liaison offices as they can deliver policy proposals backed by the local governments onto the desks of the CCP elites.⁵⁹ However, liaison offices are often associated with "chasing after connections" (*pao guanxi* 跑关系), which may be seen as corruption.⁶⁰ In comparison, the CCGO's consultative information compilation process is relatively transparent as acceptance certificates and contribution statistics are regularly issued and circulated among the information-providing entities. To gain *pishi* for policy proposals, local CCP general offices need to create a steady source of high-quality consultative information that addresses the major concerns of CCP elites in a timely manner.

Academics attract the attention of the local CCPs largely owing to their ability to attract *pishi*. Subject C admitted that the number of reports receiving *pishi* originating from academics is "significant."⁶¹ Some scholars estimate that in the top information ranking cities, such as Hangzhou, Shenzhen and Xiamen, academics may have contributed up to half of the reports receiving *pishi*.⁶² This estimate is supported by an "appreciation letter" from the Shenzhen CCP General Office stating that the information submitted by Shenzhen's universities and research institutes exceeded the office's required quota by 2,600 per cent in 2019, illustrating the significant role that academia plays in the local CCP's work on consultative information.⁶³

Figures from the National Statistics Bureau (NSB) from 2011 to 2019 reveal that the growth in consultative information submitted by university and college academics has been significant, and that the acceptance rate by the party-state remains high. All Chinese universities and colleges are required to submit annual statistics on their academic output, including "research and consultative reports" (*yanjiu yu zixun baogao* 研究与咨询报告) and the number of reports accepted by the government via the China University Humanities and Social Sciences Information Network (CSSN).⁶⁴

Figure 2 shows the CSSN statistics from 2011 to 2019. According to the National University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Management System (school network version V2019) user manual, the phrase "research and consultative report" refers to "the number of investigation reports, research reports and consultative reports that were submitted to relevant government agencies." The phrase "number accepted" refers to reports that have evidence from agencies that accepted the report.⁶⁵ Each unit in Figure 2 is equal to one item or consultative report.

Between 2011 and 2019, the share of consultative information submitted by universities that was accepted by municipal and higher-level agencies was 48.52 per cent on average, peaking at 55.87 per cent in 2011 and falling to a low of 42.90 per cent in 2018.⁶⁶ The annual accepted consultative information rate grew from 4,562 pieces in 2011 to 11,539 pieces in 2019, with an average annual increase rate of 12.89 per cent.

The importance of academics in acquiring *pishi* helps to explain the explosion of information submitted by China's universities. According to Figure 2, the annual total number of consultative reports submitted by China's universities increased by 216 per cent, from 8,166 pieces in 2011 to 25,805 pieces in 2019, with an average annual growth rate of 15.65 per cent. This significant increase is in line with the hypothesis that the CCP has been increasingly incorporating professional

58 Zhi 2015, 25.

59 Li, Wei, and Pye 1992.

60 Zhi 2015, 25.

61 Interview, Subject C.

62 Interview, Subject Z; interview, Subject W.

63 Shenzhen University 2020.

64 NBS 2018a.

65 "Quanguo putong gaodeng xuexiao renwen shehui kexue yanjiu guanli xitong (xiaoji wangluo ban V2019) gongbu" (The national general university humanities and social sciences research management system (school level network version V2019) is released). *Zhongguo shehui kexue wang*, 2 December 2019, ex.cssn.cn/skjj/skjj_jjjd/skjj_jjghg/201912/t20191202_5052107.shtml. Accessed 19 July 2021.

66 "Tongji shuju" (Statistics). CSSN, 17 July 2019, sinoss.net/tongji. Accessed 17 July 2019.

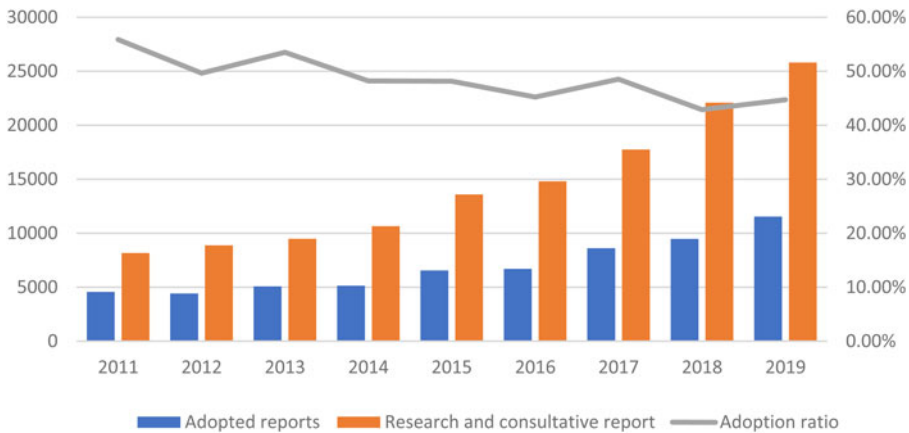


Figure 2: Chinese Universities' Consultative Information Reports, Adopted Reports and Adoption Ratio, 2011–2019

opinions from outside of the Party and government institutions into its decision-making mechanism since the early 2010s.

Prior to the reform, the Chinese academic–government relationship was a client–patron one in which the government dominated major research funding, journal publications and talent schemes in China. As a rising player in the CCP's consultative information system, Chinese academics have been furnishing their government counterparts with unprecedented political resources, transforming the relationship to one of increasing interdependence.⁶⁷

Political capital achieved through endorsement via *pishi* can include the approval to initiate a new project or authorization to use local discretion on certain issues. Obtaining such legitimacy is crucial for local governments to reduce their risk of acting *ultra vires*. In 2018, one report submitted by a private think tank in Shenzhen through the Shenzhen CCP General Office received *pishi* from Xi Jinping, which helped to set the basics of the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area.⁶⁸ The incorporation of private think tanks' reports into key national projects is not common but in this case it helped to concretize Shenzhen's position of authority within the Greater Bay Area. When interviewed by the *Southern Daily*, Wang Weizhong 王伟中, the-then Shenzhen CCP committee secretary, stressed that Xi's *pishi* on the plan set “the direction for Shenzhen to follow in its course to propel the development of the Bay Area.”⁶⁹ The legitimacy endowed through *pishi* may explain why Shenzhen CCP leaders have become “extremely keen on the work of information” since 2018.⁷⁰ It is alleged that reports which have received *pishi* from Xi are “carefully studied” by the local government CCP committee members.⁷¹

“Face” (*mianzi*) is another political resource that academics give to their government connections through *pishi*. In Chinese officialdom, *mianzi* is roughly equivalent to the impression that an individual's performance leaves on peers and superiors. If one's performance leaves a good impression on one's superior, one then earns *mianzi*, which can be converted into political capital for the career advancement of local government leaders. In the consultative information system, an

67 Zhu 2019, 18–20.

68 Interview with Subject C.

69 “Shenzhen: yi fushe daidong tuijin yuegang'ao dawanqu jianshe” (Shenzhen: promote the construction of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau Greater Bay Area with radiation). *Nanfang ribao*, 18 March 2019, gd.cri.cn/20190318/ae47fc46-add0-5139-6821-8ef768bc40ea.html. Accessed 4 March 2020.

70 Interview, Subject H.

71 Interview with Subject S, Guangdong, February 2021.

entity can gain “face” by ranking highly on the CCGO list, having its reports accepted and given *pishi* by CCP elites, actions which acknowledge the entity’s performance, confirm the value of the report and praise its timely response to the Party’s major concerns.

Academics have recently become the major “face earner” for their government associates, largely owing to the amount of information they are producing: “[local governments] have clearly become aware of the benefits of working with scholars. *Laoda* 老大 [CCP elites] will remember you if you submit a lot of information, and this adds to the *mianzi* of the local leaders.”⁷²

For the party-state patrons of think tanks, “investment returns” on well-performing think tanks are mainly in the form of the CCP elite’s recognition of their think tanks, which adds *mianzi* to the agency and its leaders. In turn, party-state patrons tend to increase their political support for think tanks: “Why did those high-ranking officials appear at these events [discussion forums, ceremonies, etc. at the think tank]? Because we [think tanks] have been doing well [in providing consultative information] and they felt they gained *mianzi* by attending.”⁷³

In this sense, the Xi Jinping administration’s emphasis on consultative information has increased the interdependence between academia and the government. Academics seek political influence within the government, and agencies seek to improve their own performance using reports submitted by academics.

Funding from and connections to the central government ministries are also important political resources that local governments hope to capture from *pishi*. The implementation of *pishi* often involves investigating issues discussed in the report by the relevant ministry representatives.⁷⁴ Such activities provide good opportunities for local officials to obtain funding from the ministries and develop connections with personnel in the central government. For instance, following Xi’s *pishi* in 2011 to tackle poverty in southern Jiangxi province, Prime Minister Li Keqiang 李克强 visited the region and 31 ministries sent investigation teams.⁷⁵ The *pishi* put Jiangxi under the party-state spotlight, and the region subsequently attracted central government funding and support. Likewise, Li Keqiang’s 2017 *pishi* on the construction of the National Botanic Museum in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan province, mobilized the National Development and Reform Committee to set up major projects to support the initiative.⁷⁶

Academics play an important role in attracting central resources to local governments. As Subject D confirmed, “ministries visit at least two to three times a year because of *pishi* on consultative information submitted by scholars.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, the ministries have a greater incentive to invest funds in regions which are already well established in the minds of the CCP elites through repeated *pishi*, giving the ministries a higher chance to benefit from central investment in local programmes.⁷⁸ As such, information from academics becomes the link that ties the interests of local governments and ministries together.

The top leaders of public universities and research institutions also benefit from the *pishi* given to reports written by their academics as they hold administrative positions in the cadre system.⁷⁹ The number of *pishi* given to consultative reports submitted by scholars is taken into account in

72 Interview, Subject Z.

73 Interview, Subject W.

74 Zhao and Tok 2021, 14.

75 “Zongshuji pishi! Guowuyuan zhichi! Ganzhou jiang jingyan quanguo” (General secretary’s instructions! State Council support! Ganzhou will amaze China). *Sina*, 28 June 2017, jx.sina.com.cn/zimeiti/2017-06-28/detail-ifyhmtcf3009044.shtml. Accessed 30 June 2021.

76 “Zongli pishi duo buwei zhichi Kunming jian ‘Zhongguo jiankang zhicheng’ youle daxiangmu zhicheng” (The premier’s *pishi* and many ministries’ support of Kunming’s construction of “China’s health city” is backed with large projects). *Sohu*, 28 March 2017, sohu.com/a/130692081_115092. Accessed 30 June 2021.

77 Interview, Subject D.

78 Li, Junqing 2009, 127.

79 The administrative title of a university chancellor under the Ministry of Education’s direct supervision (*zhishu*) is equivalent to that of a deputy minister in the government (*fu tingji*).

performance appraisals of the leaders of universities and research institutes. According to Subject L, an administrative staff member of a university under the Ministry of Education's direct supervision, "After 2014, the chancellor started to include the number of *neican* contributions in his annual report to the Ministry of Education."⁸⁰ To increase the consultative contributions from academics, growing numbers of universities are setting up evaluation standards favouring information reports and *pishi*, as discussed in the next section.

Investigations into the relationship between government and academics under the Party's expanding consultative information system reveal a complex power structure. For ministers, local government leaders and university chancellors, consultative information is not just a matter of hitting a target; it is also a way to earn political capital to advance their agencies and improve their career trajectories. By providing consultative reports, academics act as bridges, connecting the ministries and local CCP committees directly to the CCP elites. While the party-state has benefited collectively from the consultative information submitted by academics, the impact of this development on Chinese academia and academics is controversial.

Chinese Academia: Attuned to the Thinking and Needs of the CCP

Academics' involvement in the consultative information system has brought about a series of changes to Chinese academia. The CCP has incorporated consultative information into academics' performance evaluations, promotions, research funding and talent scheme applications. This trend has pushed Chinese academia to better align itself with the thinking and needs of the CCP.

Since 2013, the CCP, the State Council and a growing number of research institutes have incorporated consultative information into academics' performance evaluation criteria. The change was initially made to stimulate think tank research output, but with the expansion of the bottom-up consultative information system, it now applies to a much broader range of academics.⁸¹ In 2014, the National Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences stipulated that academics may use *pishi* from leaders at the ministerial level or above to gain exemption from the National Social Science Fund's (NSSF) evaluations, which normally involve a lengthy peer review process.⁸² In 2018, the Ministry of Education made *pishi* an evaluation criterion in the national talent scheme "Changjiang scholar" (*Changjiang xuezhe* 长江学者).⁸³ *Pishi* is also alleged to carry weight in the CCP Organizational Department's "Ten-thousand talents programme" (*wanren jihua* 万人计划), which seems to be counterproductive to the original aims of the programme to "eliminate bureaucratic involvement in scientific research."⁸⁴

The first university regulations concerning monetary awards for consultative information were issued in 2014.⁸⁵ A number of research institutions have stipulated that a piece of consultative information receiving *pishi* from Politburo Standing Committee members would receive an award of up to 100,000 yuan, while those accepted by the CCGO or the State Council General Office would receive an award valued at between 13,000 and 30,000 yuan.⁸⁶ The award amount was significant

80 Interview, Subject L.

81 "Ruhe shixian dui zhiku rencai de jili" (How to realize the motivation of think tank talents). *Xuexi shibao*, 26 February 2018, theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0226/c40531-29834368.html. Accessed 8 March 2020.

82 South China University of Technology 2014. The office is the administrative body of the CCP's Leading Small Group of Work on National Philosophy and Social Sciences.

83 Changchun University 2018.

84 Interview, Subject W; "Wanren jihua" (Ten-thousand talents programme). *China Daily*, 12 December 2013, usa.china-daily.com.cn/china/2013-12/12/content_17168670.htm. Accessed 12 March 2020.

85 Wuyi University 2015.

86 "Fahui zhiku gongneng tuidong guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua" (Utilize think tank functions to promote the modernization of China's governance system and governance capacity). *Renmin wang*, 8 January 2018, world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0108/c190970-29751330.html. Accessed 12 March 2020.

compared with the average annual salary of China's academics in 2018, which was between 90,000 and 120,000 yuan.⁸⁷

Simultaneously, universities have added *pishi* to academic appraisal criteria. A *pishi* from a Politburo Standing Committee member is roughly equal to a paper published in a Q1 SSCI journal, while those accepted by the CCGO are roughly equal to a paper published in a Q2 SSCI journal or CSSCI-listed journal.⁸⁸

Some argue that the above changes offer different paths for scholars to advance their careers in Chinese research institutions.⁸⁹ This statement would be more valid if there were alternatives left open for academics, particularly those in heavily censored research areas. However, as China studies has been the subject of increasing censorship both inside and outside of China, consultative information has become, if not the only way, then certainly the main way for scholars to qualify for their evaluations when publication is not enough.⁹⁰

How Chinese academia will evolve as scholars become increasingly tied up with the party-state's political needs remains an important question. Some argue that Chinese academia is being empowered, as consultative information opens academic research to a much broader and more influential audience.⁹¹ The flaw in this argument lies in the fundamental differences between consultative information and academic research, which mean that the two are not comparable.

The first difference concerns the range of topics accepted and methods applied by the two types of research. Only topics favoured by the CCP elites and which are considered to be pragmatic and urgent are accepted by the CCGO, while academic research investigates a far broader range of topics. Furthermore, consultative information investigates the core questions of "what has happened?" and "what should be done?"; there is no need to review relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, provide supporting evidence or develop an in-depth analysis, as is the case with academic research.

The second difference is the confidential nature of the editing and reviewing process surrounding consultative information. Communication between the government and academics is mostly unilateral, and the content of a leader's *pishi* is classified.⁹² In this sense, it is difficult to conclude that academics are empowered through the CCP's consultative mechanism, as the policy influence of the reports is hard to trace.

Reports accepted by the CCGO and even those receiving *pishi* are not guaranteed to have a policy impact. A report accepted by the CCGO may not trigger any policy initiation if no CCP elites address it. Furthermore, in cases where *pishi* is given, the articulation of the instruction can generate varied results. In general, the more specific the instructions, the more leverage the report has to effect changes. For instance, Subject J submitted two reports that received *pishi*. The first *pishi* contained the request, "Please circulate the report to Comrade X and instruct the X department to address." This received immediate attention from the ministries and an investigation was carried

87 NBS 2018b. The statistic is a reliable range rather than the actual average salary of academics.

88 SCI/SSCI first quartile (Q1) journals are those with an impact factor ranked in the top 25% among all journals listed in a given research category. "Guanyu yinfa 'Shenzhen daxue zhuan ye jishi zhiwu shenbao tiaojian' de tongzhi" (Notice on the "Application standards for professional and technical posts of Shenzhen University"), 5 May 2017, szu.edu.cn/board/view.asp?id=398267. Accessed 25 March 2020.

89 Interview, Subject Z; interview, Subject W.

90 The list of censored research topics includes – but is not limited to – the constitution, ethnicity, Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, Mao Zedong, the Cultural Revolution and human rights issues. Internationally, top academic publishers have been requested by the Chinese State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television to remove publications related to the above topics. Wong and Kwong 2019.

91 Interview, Subject Z.

92 Reportedly, this information was available in the early 2010s and became classified only after several scholars posted *pishi* content online.

out quickly.⁹³ In comparison, the second *pishi* made the more general request, “Please circulate this report to the relevant departments to study.” It had little effect.⁹⁴

Evaluating the changes brought to China’s academia by the incorporation of consultative information reveals a mixed impact. Individuals who actively engage in producing consultative information reports may find it easier to advance their careers via *pishi* than through academic output. However, the expanding consultative information system and the heavy censorship of China studies have left little room for independent academic research in “politically sensitive” areas in China. In this sense, it is difficult to conclude that Chinese academia is benefiting from its association with the CCP’s consultative channel. Rather, growing numbers of academics have been adjusting their thoughts and focus to be more in line with the thinking of the CCP elites and the political needs of the party-state.

Conclusion

The central CCP’s search for professional consultative information to facilitate its “scientific decision making” has expanded rapidly under the Xi administration. According to the 2018 national plan for “Modernizing China’s governance system and capacity for governance” (*tuidong guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandai hua* 推动国家治理体系和治理能力现代化), universities and think tanks are expected to make greater contributions to consultative services.⁹⁵

This research aims to deepen the current understanding of the mechanisms for supplying information to decision makers in authoritarian regimes and the relationships between the players involved in the process. Applying the consultative authoritarian structure, this research analyses the CCP’s “dig deep and reach wide” campaign, which incorporates academic opinions into the local CCP’s consultative information mechanism. This development has been propelled by the complex politics between the central CCP and its local counterparts. At the central level, Party elites diversified their sources of consultative information to include academic voices outside the government and CCP institutions in the early 2010s. The CCGO then tied consultative information contributions to local CCP committee performance evaluations, pushing the Party committees to expand their existing channels to reach outside. Academics are regarded as a favoured source of consultative information as they are relatively distant from agency interests and are able to wield a wide range of research methods to facilitate more “scientific” decision making.

Meanwhile, local CCP committees use the reports submitted by academics to amplify their own political gains from the central CCP. Reports with CCP elites’ *pishi* can generate valuable political resources, including legitimacy, “face,” funding and connections with the central government. The number of academic reports gaining *pishi* has been significant, attracting local CCP committees to increase collaboration with academia. The traditional client–patron relationship between academics and the party-state has therefore turned towards one of interdependence, as academics are now capable of generating political assets for the Party officials.

Moreover, the process has simultaneously altered the ecology of Chinese academia, bringing it more in line with the thinking and needs of the party-state. Consultative information reporting has been comprehensively incorporated into academics’ evaluation, promotion, research funding and award applications. In “politically sensitive” research areas, consultative information papers have been accepted as a replacement for published, peer-reviewed papers during term evaluations. In less-affected disciplines, the importance of internal reports has increased, and this has been

93 Interview with Subject J, Guangdong, November 2021.

94 Ibid.

95 “Xinhuashe pinglun yuan: buduan tuijin guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua” (Xinhua News commentator: continuously promoting the modernization of China’s governance system and capacity for governance). *Xinhua*, 7 July 2019, [xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/07/c_1124721069.htm](https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/07/c_1124721069.htm). Accessed 23 March 2020.

welcomed as a way to diversify one's academic portfolio. Notwithstanding concerns regarding academic autonomy in China, the CCP's search for academic consultation has tied a wide range of academics to its political needs.

In 2020, the party-state made it clear that scholars should “convert academic output into other types of achievements,” including consultative information.⁹⁶ The Ministry of Education then demoted the weight of SCI-listed publications in academic evaluation and subsequently banned monetary awards based on such a measure in all Chinese universities and colleges.⁹⁷ These changes suggest that the CCP has been further widening its consultative information channel to reach out to academic disciplines that were considered less “political,” such as the natural sciences, to better facilitate its decision making. With the fast-growing number of academic consultative information papers supplied to the CCGO, whether Chinese academia will remain a “goldmine” for local governments in the long run is uncertain.

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96 “Jiaoyubu dapo ‘SCI lunwen zhishang,’ Gao Fu de 500 duopian SCI lunwen yingbei renzhen kandai” (The Ministry of Education breaks the rule of “SCI paper first” and Gao Fu's more than 500 SCI papers should be taken seriously). *Sohu*, 5 March 2020, sohu.com/a/377839839_100252142. Accessed 24 March 2020.

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