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Design and learning effects of China’s expert advisory committees

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ABSTRACT

Facing challenges of dealing with complex social and technical issues, Chinese government has sought to enhance social credibility of policy decisions by soliciting expert advice. One institutional approach to do so is to establish expert advisory committees (EACs). Based on an analysis of EACs established by China’s national government agencies, this paper finds low but increasing degrees of transparency and formalization, high degree of government control and relevance, low but increasing degree of inclusiveness and contestability. With more diversification and contestation of the societal interests and values, rising public demand for participation in decision-making and growing technical complexity of policy issues in China, the EACs’ advice has drawn upon more diverse types of knowledge, interests, and values. The study provides one of many learning mechanisms that account for the rapid economic development and social-political stability of the country witnessed by the world.

1. Introduction

Public advisory bodies (PABs) provide policy-relevant knowledge, evidence, and critical advice to policymakers for quality and legitimacy of government decision-making (Bressers et al. 2018; Weimer 2010; OECD 2017). It is also an important form of public participation by expert and laypersons in Western democratic countries (Lavertu, Walters, and David 2011; Krick 2015; Rasmussen and Gross 2015). In countries or jurisdictions with more centralized political systems, rulers also establish advisory committees to consult experts, interest groups, and citizens for policy advice; but the membership and operation of these committees are subject to high government control, and the operation of the committees are less transparent and less inclusive of laypersons’ participation and critical policy advice (Miners 1998; Zunino 2006; Jayasuriya and Rodan 2007).
This paper aims to investigate the institutional design and operation of China’s central governmental PABs, their effect on the supply and use of policy advice in policymaking. Focusing on China enables us to contextualize the consideration of transparency, formalization, government control, and inclusiveness in a centralized political system when designing PABs, which has gained little attention so far.

This research will also contribute to the study of China’s policy processes by investigating the formal policy advisory institutions. Since the 1980s, to develop market economy and reform the public sector, Chinese government has sought to strengthen its technocratic competence, recruited university scholars to advise its policymaking, consulted experts from government-sponsored universities and research institutes, and experts from private think tanks (Zhu and Xue 2007; Shambaugh 2001). Policymaking in China, albeit largely controlled by the Party leaders in a top-down manner, has been more plural and open to the influence by knowledgeable and active civil society actors (Frossart 2019; Han and Ye 2017; Li and Weible 2019). Such plural and participatory processes have also been institutionalized in some policy domains (e.g. education policy, Zhao 2018).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the existing studies on the policy advisory committees’ roles and relations with governmental and societal actors in different countries. Second, we report the degree of transparency, formalization, government control, inclusiveness of national expert advisory committees (EACs) in China, and the effects on the supply and use of policy advice. Third, we relate these findings to the study of China’s policy processes, and to the comparative literature on designing PABs.

2. Designing Policy Advisory Bodies

PABs provide formal channels for expert knowledge, evidence-based research, and organized interests to influence policymaking. In the USA and EU, PABs range from scientific and expert committees that advise technically complex issues (Jasanoff 1990; European Commission 2015), to advisory bodies which serve as a platform for communication and consensus-building among citizen and special interests (Brown 1972; Lynn and Busenberg 1995).

Policymakers in different countries face challenges in designing independent, transparent, credible, contestable, objective, and representative PABs. The challenges include tensions between transparency and consensus-building, formalization and flexibility, inclusiveness and certainty, efficiency and credibility, relevance/responsiveness, and objectivity/quality (Weimer 2005; Dunlop 2010; Morton and Karen 2018). Regulations and rules have been developed with a hope to address these challenges.3

To supply both well-founded and publicly accountable policy advice, hybrid PABs that are inclusive in terms of policy mandates, membership, expertise, and interest representation have been established in the US and European countries (Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, Greece, and Estonia), to bridge science, public acceptance, and policy (Kr Hick 2015; Lavertu, Walters, and David 2011; Veit, Hustedt, and Bach 2017; Damme, Brans, and Fobé 2011). The design of the hybrid PABs has the following consideration:
The first consideration is the degree of transparency. High degree of transparency could enhance legitimacy, but result in uncertainties and reduced autonomy of concerned bodies (Meijer 2013). Transparency in policy decision-making and policy outcome could also reduce citizen trust in government and create confusion among the public (e.g. South Korea, Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013).

The second consideration is the degree of formalization (or institutionalization) of PABs, which refers to the extent the membership appointment, roles, functions, and relations to other organizations of the PABs follow regularized patterns, codified rules, and accepted norms. High degree of formalization can stabilize advice production and enhance process legitimacy if following norms of transparency, fairness, and deliberation (Damme, Brans, and Fobé 2011). Compared to less formal advisory forums, institutionalized advisory bodies are more integrated into the government policymaking processes thanks to the specification in laws, stable resources, and access to policymakers. However, formalized PABs could be costly and less adaptable (Brans and Aubin 2017).

The third consideration is the degree of government control. PABs whose budget, agenda, membership, and advice solicitation are highly controlled by the government are more likely to be trusted by the latter; their advice is also more likely to reach high-level decision-makers (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). However, such PABs have less autonomy (Damme, Brans, and Fobé 2011), may not be able to identify emerging issues and innovative solutions (Sarkki et al. 2014). Low autonomy of PABs could hinder epistemic learning, namely experts acting as teachers of decision-makers to reduce the uncertainty of technical problems (Dunlop 2017).

Another consideration is the degree of inclusiveness. The PABs that have a balanced membership representation of interests and values can enhance the neutrality of their policy advice (Weimer 2010). When the composition of PABs is more inclusive to new societal actors and interests in particular issue contexts, their policy advice could integrate new values and interests, attend to tacit and localized knowledge, increase the legitimacy and local feasibility, and identify conflict-mediation options (Greenhalgh and Russell 2009; Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007; Parkhurst 2016). Nevertheless, inclusiveness of PABs could complicate public communication, and reduce certainty and potential influence of policy options (Jenkins-Smith 1989; Korfmancher and Koontz 2003; Levidow and Carr 2007). In a politically polarized context, advisory committee’s advice could be partisan biased, serving competing political interests and for short-term firefighting (Aberbach and Rockman 1989; Craft and Howlett 2012).

3. Context and expectations about PABs in China

In China, the government controls considerable political resources and decision-making venues but learns and adjusts beliefs under the pressure to provide public services and sustain the regime (Li and Weible 2019). In China, government advisory networks could be hegemonic and close to alternative policy advice due to its centralized structure (Craft and Wilder 2017; Li and Wong 2019; Lam and Chan 2015). Yet, there are also findings that China’s advisory networks could be open to new ideas and actors
under the fragmented government structure and local governance challenges (Froissart 2019; Teets and William 2015).

In the 1960s and 1970s, political loyalty of Chinese intellectuals and scientists to the dominant Party leaders was stressed over their scientific achievement (Goldman 1981). Under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership after the 1980s, the Party encouraged autonomy in scientific research and solicited policy advice from experts (Deng 1977; Wang 2011a). Experts’ criticism of government policy was tolerated so long as their advice was perceived to benefit the nation’s development, and did not challenge the Party’s rule (Bonnin and Chevrier 1991; Goldman 1999).

After the entry of WTO in the 2000s, the Chinese government sought to formalize the expert consultation in policy processes for major professional and technical issues, and established extensive expert networks and diverse forms of PABs (e.g. think tanks, see Xue, Zhu, and Han 2018), with an aim to “base the decision-making on science (kexue) and democracy (minzhu)” (CCPCC5 (China Communist Party Central Committee) 2004). Chinese governments at all levels established internal research offices and research centers, which absorbed experts to serve as internal advisors (Naughton 2002). Chinese government has also routinely consulted and taken advice from academics, professionals, practitioners, research institutes, advisory committees, expert NGOs, and international organizations when formulating major policies (e.g. health care reform, environmental policies) and evaluating programs (Zheng et al. 2010; Francesch-Huidobro and Mai 2012; Froissart 2019).

In a centralized but fragmented political system, differentiated bureaucratic mandates create a demand for diverse, competing expert advice and policy framing (Hammond 2013; Mertha 2009). External experts from think tanks also proactively advocate to influence government policies (Zhu 2011). In some cases, alternative policy analysis and advocacy by experts contribute to major policy changes (Wang 2011b; Zhu 2013; Li and Wong 2019). At the same time, advocacy strategies are still muted in many cases (Li and Weible 2019). Societal initiatives and dissenting voices are often constrained by the state (Cai 2008). Operations of government policy networks are relatively opaque and centralized (Biukovic 2008; Zheng, De Jong, and Koppenjan 2010). Access to decision venue and policy influence often relies on personal ties to policymakers (Besha 2010; Li and Wong 2019).

Given the dominant role of Chinese government in setting policy agenda and making policy decisions, low degree but increasing openness of policy processes and recent development of PABs, we propose the following expectations about PABs’ institutional designs and effects on the production of policy advice

Expectation 1a: China’s PABs have low degree of transparency and formalization, high degree of government control, and low degree of inclusiveness.

Expectation 1b: In view of increased openness and more contestation found in China’s policy processes, the institutional characteristics of China’s PABs have been evolving.

Expectation 2: Given Expectation 1a, we expect policy advice produced by PABs in China is (1) of low degree of social credibility and process legitimacy; (2) of low degree of innovativeness and adaptation to the changing societal needs; (3) of high relevance
to decision-makers but is based on low degree of epistemic learning; and (4) receive low degree of contestation.

4. Method and data

The analysis is based on the documents of 178 EACs established by central government ministries, commissions, and bureaus directly reporting to the State Council as of 2019. The titles of the EACs were identified by searching the government websites, using the Chinese key words “expert committee (zhuanjia weiyuanhui),” “expert advisory committee (zhuanjia zixun weiyuanhui),” and “advisory committee (zixun weiyuanhui).” We searched the documents about the EACs from these websites and the searching engines (e.g. www.google.com, www.baidu.com), including press releases, news reports, administrative decrees, charters, by-laws, and biographies.

We coded the information according to a framework (Table 1).

- To assess the formalization and transparency of the EACs, we examined whether the committees’ establishment, the charters or by-laws, the appointment and change of members, the arrangement of meetings such as who chair and speak in the meetings, are announced and publicly accessible.
- To assess the degree of government control over the EACs, we coded committee chairs’ background and who chair and speak in meetings.
- To assess the relevance, mode of learning, inclusiveness, and contestation of the EACs, we coded the announcements, charters/by-laws about EACs advice.

Two research assistants were trained by the first author to code the content of the press release and other announcements according to the coding frame. The code frame for the content of policy advice (the last point) was developed inductively from the coding materials (Table 2). The inter-coder reliability was checked and improved in

Table 1. Institutional design of PABs and effects on policy advice.

|       | Transparency | Formalization | Government control | Inclusiveness |
|-------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Pros  | Democratic legitimacy and social credibility | Stable advice production and process legitimacy | Advice relevant to policymakers; advice reaching high-level decision-makers | Enhance legitimacy and local feasibility; integrate new values and interests |
| Cons  | Citizen distrust and confusion; uncertainty and losing autonomy | Costly and not adapting to changing societal needs | Low autonomy of advice production and less innovation; Epistemic mode of learning is less dominant | Producing uncertain advice that complicates public communication, be partisan biased, serving competing political interests and for short-term firefighting |
the coding process. Discrepancies between coders were reconciled through discussion with the first author.

5. China’s Central Government EACs (1980s–2018)

In 1980, Deng Xiaoping stressed that to modernize socialist China the leading cadres should be more professional and knowledgeable (1980). The then-vice-premier Wan Li also admonished that to carry out economic reforms, policymaking should be more scientific and based on “soft science” (ruan kexue), referring to systematic, objective, and scientific analysis assisted by modern quantitative computing estimation and advanced technology. He suggested that, instead of heavily relying on Party leaders’ personal experiences and collective wisdom, policy decisions should have more input from experts, think tanks, and advisory agencies; the diversity and independence of policy research should also be encouraged (Wan 1986).

One of the earliest EACs was established by the ministerial government agencies in the 1980s. Wan Li highlighted the importance of scientific policymaking through quantitative and systematic analysis by referring to formulating population and family planning policy (1986). The National Family Planning Commission (NFPC) established the first expert advisory group in 1984, and appointed 13 experts, from universities, research institutes affiliated with government agencies, government-sponsored academies, mass organizations, and the NFPC itself, to be members of the advisory group. The members have diverse expertise, ranging from demographic theory to biomedical science. These experts were tasked to carry out policy analysis and research and provide training and policy advice for government officials (NFPC 1986). Advocacy by some members of the advisory group contributed to policy relaxation in 2015 (Li and Wong 2019).

The EACs established before 1993 are not shown in Figure 1, either because the information was not available on the internet, or because the ministry that established those EACs was restructured and its archives could not be found on the internet at the time of searching. In the former case, the NPFC was mandated to consult its expert committee in 2008 (NPFPC), showing that the earlier expert advisory group has been

| Table 2. Coding frame. |
|-------------------------|
| **Basic information**   |
| Committee’s title       |
| Years of establishment  |
| Formalization and transparency | Issue charters/by-laws |
|                         | Chairs’ appointment announcement |
|                         | Number of meetings since establishment |
|                         | Advising policies in meetings |
| Government control      | Chairs’ backgrounds<sup>a</sup> |
|                         | Government officials chairing the meetings |
|                         | Government officials speaking in the meetings |
| Membership composition  | Members’ career background |
| Advice and advisory activities |
| Develop and implement strategies and policy plans |
| Facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making |
| Evaluation research and investigations |
| Technical standards |
| Innovation and new development of the sectors |
| Facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making |
| Consult the sectoral stakeholders or the public |

<sup>a</sup>Coding categories for chairs and members’ background (see Appendix 1).
institutionalized. In the latter case, the Ministry of Health established the Endemiology Expert Advisory Committee in 1987 (Yu 1987); the Committee was still in operation in 2005 (China Endemiology Journal 2005), but the Ministry of Health was merged with another agency in 2013 and its website could not be found nor searched. Due to these limitations, Figure 1 under-estimated the number of EACs being established by the national government.

Since the 1990s, the national EACs have increased and their roles in policymaking have also been formalized. Both Hu Jintao government and Xi Jinping government promote scientific policy analysis and expert involvement in policymaking. Both governments reorganized the State Council at the beginning of their terms to implement new policy agenda, and new EACs were established correspondingly.

The Hu Jintao government (2003–2013) instructed that “significant issues of high professional and technological complexity shall undergo expert analysis, technical advising and policy evaluation,” and the government officials shall “extensively contact experts and scholars, and establish multiple policy advisory and information support systems” for decision-making (CCPCC (China Communist Party Central Committee) 2004). His government issued State Council Work Rules (State Council 2003), stipulating that any major policy recommendations submitted by the ministerial agencies shall follow strategic research or development plans, and shall undergo expert analysis and evaluation.

Xi Jinping government (2013–present) urged the Party cadres to learn from experts and the general public, improve scientific and democratic policymaking by conducting investigation and research (diaocha yanjiu 调查研究) and by listening to people’s criticism and recommendations (CCP Publicity Department 2016, 288–291; Xi 2014). The government should encourage academic debates and consult a greater diversity of policy views in its work (CCPCC (China Communist Party Central Committee) and State Council 2015). A recent version of the State Council Work Rules (State Council 2018) reiterates that it is a necessary legal procedure (fading chenxu) to consult experts in
reaching major policy decisions, alongside with other procedures such as public participation, risk evaluation, law compliance, and collective decision-making. Following this rule, the State Council issued an administrative decree, stipulating that the government shall explain to the public about the adoption of expert advice and public opinion on technical and professional issues of public concern. When government consult expert advice, principles of experts’ independence, contestability, professional competency, neutrality and representativeness, and being free of conflict of interests, shall be upheld (State Council 2019).

5.1. Formalization and transparency

We gauge formalization and transparency of the EACs by looking at whether there is public announcement of member appointment or change of membership, public announcement of charters or by-laws that regulate committees’ operation, whether committees regularly hold meetings, and whether meeting discussions are reported.

We find a low level of transparency and formalization of China’s national EACs compared to other areas. Fewer than one-third of EACs have established charters or by-laws that regulate advisory committees’ responsibilities, composition, and terms of membership and chairs, frequency of meetings, administrative support, and ethical rules (e.g. confidentiality and avoiding conflicts of interests). Only about 17% of them can be accessed on the internet. About 78% EACs publicly announce the official establishment of the committee, 81% announced the appointment of their members (but only about 69% announced the full membership lists). Just 18% committees announced the change of membership, indicating that the composition of the committees appears to be stable (see Table 3).

The operation of EACs has been increasingly transparent and formalized over the years. Table 4 shows that more recently established EACs reported their meetings to...

Table 3. Appointment, rules, meetings of EACs (1993–2018).

| Public announcement  | Yes | No |
|----------------------|-----|----|
| Official notice of establishment | 139 | 39 |
| Charters or by-laws | 52 (31 online accessible) | 126 |
| Members’ appointment | 145 (full list 122) | 33 |
| Change of membership | 33 | 144 |
| Government officials’ chair meetings | 39 | 139 |
| Government officials speaking in meetings | 71 | 107 |
| Members providing policy advice in meetings | 27 | 151 |
| Total | 178 |

*aWe only code the most recent meetings by the EACs. The government officials refer to those from the sponsoring government agencies. The number for “No” includes unknown cases.

Table 4. Meetings of EACs (1993–2018).

| Years since establishment | 0–5 years | 6–15 years | 16–25 years | 26 years or more | NA |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------------|----|
| Meetings since establishment | 80 | 77 | 12 | 1 | 170 |
| 1–5 times | 6–10 times | Over 10 times | NA |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Total | 82 | 80 | 12 | 1 | 178 |

Note: Six EACs did not report their meetings or years of establishment and are not included in the table. NA: years or number of meetings are unknown.
the public. However, information about the content of EACs’ meetings is scarce. It is also not clear to what extent the charters or by-law is implemented. For instance, some EACs’ charters stipulate regular meetings be held, but there is no public information about these meetings. Some committees require the members to keep meeting discussions and documents confidential.

5.2. Government control

In general, the government still exerts high degree of control over EACs’ composition and operation. All sampled EACs’ chairs and members are appointed by the sponsoring ministerial agencies. Some EACs’ charters or by-laws stipulate that the committee shall be chaired by the sponsoring agencies’ officials (e.g. NEPAC (National Environmental Protection Advisory Committee) 2006). Others stipulate that the committees’ chairs and members shall be nominated by the sponsoring government agencies (e.g. State Council Customs Tariff Commission Office 1999; Ministry of Education 2014; NHFPC 2014).

Surprisingly, despite the formal authority to control EACs’ composition, most EACs are in fact not chaired by government officials, but by those who have careers in non-governmental sectors, such as non-governmental think tanks (44%), social organizations (9%), and business (3%). For instance, the chair of Urban Design Expert Committee works in a government-sponsored urban planning institute and is also a vice-chair of an urban planning society (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development 2016). Even the chairs who have government background are from diverse agencies: about 22% are from the sponsoring government agencies, about 21% are from non-sponsoring government agencies, and 1% are from governmental think tanks (see Table 5). Some chairs also have high political status as members of political consultative conferences and people’s congresses.

This shows that the sponsoring government agency’s control over EACs through chairpersonship is restricted. The control is exerted through chairpersons’ personal ties because many of these social organizations, non-government think tanks, and enterprises/companies where the chairpersons come from are established and sponsored by the government. Some committee members from these non-governmental sectors are also former government officials. For instance, the chair of National Intellectual Property Rights Expert Advisory Committee was the chair of China Pattern Protection

| Categories of career background                  | Incumbent | Retired |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Governmental think tanks                        | 1         | 1       |
| Non-governmental think tanks                    | 73        | 3       |
| Sponsoring government agenciesa                 | 23        | 15      |
| Non-sponsoring government agencies              | 27        | 9       |
| Enterprises or companies                        | 5         | 0       |
| Social organizations                            | 16        | 0       |
| Totalb                                          | 145       | 28      |

Note: a Sponsoring government agencies refer to ministerial agencies that establish and provide secretariat support for the EACs; b The number of chairs do not equal to the number of advisory committees. Some committees do not release their chairs’ and members’ information, and some committee chairs’ background belong to more than one category.
Table 6. Career background of members of EACs.

| Categories of career background (containing more than 50% of members) | EACs with the list of full members |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Non-governmental think tanks                                         | 100                              |
| Government agencies providing secretariat support                     | 2                                |
| Other government agencies                                             | 8                                |
| Retired government officials                                          | 1                                |
| Social Organizations                                                  | 1                                |
| Companies or enterprises                                              | 8                                |
| No categories are above 50%                                           | 3                                |
| Total                                                                 | 122                              |

Note: The addition of all categories equals 123 because one EAC has two categories of 50% members.

Table 7. Non-governmental think tank (NGTT) members of EACs.

| Categories containing more than 50% of NGTT members                  | NGTT members 50% or more of total | NGTT members less than 50% of total |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| University researchers                                              | 38                                | 4                                   |
| Party schools or administrative institutes                           | 0                                 | 1                                   |
| Academies of sciences, social sciences, or engineering               | 5                                 | 1                                   |
| Research institutes, monitoring centers, planning institutes sponsored by government agencies | 22                                | 10                                  |
| Hospitals                                                            | 11                                | 0                                   |
| Private think tanks                                                  | 0                                 | 0                                   |
| No categories among NGTT members are above 50% or no NGTT members    | 24                                | 7                                   |
| Total                                                               | 99                                | 23                                  |

Note: One EAC’s NGTT members have equal number from universities and government-sponsored institutes/monitoring centers.

Association (CPPA) and a former head of the National Intellectual Property Rights Bureau (NIPRB). The NIPRB is the supervisory and sponsoring agency of the CPPA. Some committee chairs from the enterprises were also managed by the government. For instance, the Chair of China Standardization Expert Committee is Deputy Chief Executive of a telecommunication business group is managed by the State Council and is concurrently the Deputy Head of China Engineering Academy.\(^\text{12}\)

The government control over EACs’ membership is also limited. Over 82% of EACs’ members are populated\(^\text{13}\) by non-governmental think tank experts from universities, research institutes, and academies (see Tables 6 and 7).

The government exerts control over the EACs through influencing committee meeting discussions. We find meetings of 39 committees (out of 177) are chaired by officials in the government agencies that establish and manage the committees (Table 3). We find more cases of government officials delivering speeches on committees’ meetings (71). Government control over meeting agenda and discussions have been institutionalized in some charters or by-laws. For instance, the by-law of the National Forestry Bureau Expert Advisory Committee stipulates that the committee chair, who shall be the head of the bureau, shall propose the advisory tasks and approve the work plan of the committee (National Forestry Bureau 2004).

When committee meetings are reported, government officials’ speeches (71) are more often covered than members’ policy advice discussions (27, see Table 3).
5.3. Relevance to policymakers and epistemic learning

The advice and advisory activities by each EAC often cut across multiple policy issues, are related to varied aspects of policy processes, and are of high relevance to the government’s priorities. Compared to developing strategies and policy plans (about 34% committees), more committees advise on how to implement strategies and policies (77%). EACs have also provided venues for epistemic learning: (1) 40% committees conducted research and investigations to evaluate policies; (2) 20% committees advise how to design technical standards; (3) 33% committees discuss the innovation and development in the sector. Although about 45% EACs mentioned the roles to “facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making,” very few of them (5%) were found to consult sectoral stakeholders or the public in advising the government policies (Table 8).

Ministries responsible for technically complex problems established many EACs that provide technical and scientific advice for policymakers’ epistemic learning. For instance, Ministry of Health set up 14 EACs from 2005 to 2011, advising technical issues concerning disease prevention and treatment, drug use, clinical technical evaluation, and biological risk evaluation. Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Construction established 17 EACs from 2008 to 2018, advising issues like urban transport infrastructure quality, disaster prevention planning evaluation, information technology development, and green architecture evaluation.

Nevertheless, the membership of these EACs is also influenced by hierarchical rules stipulating that their members shall hold senior professional ranks or positions in the government hierarchy (e.g. the National Food Safety Risk Assessment Expert Committee14 [NFSRAEC] 2011). The Food Safety Risk Assessment Management Regulation (the Regulation) stipulates that the assessment agenda, time schedule, and assessment information, and data needed by the NFSRAEC shall be provided by the Ministry of Health; the committee’s risk assessment is required by the Regulation to follow designated procedures; the committee shall be responsible to the government for the assessment results. Despite the hierarchical rule, the risk assessment work of the NFSRAEC is guaranteed to be free from other agencies’ intervention and shall be scientific, objective, and just; the committee members also enjoy discretion to formulate assessment plans and decide upon the assessment report (Ministry of Health; NFSRAEC 2011).

Table 8. Advice and advisory activities of EACs.

| Advice                                              | Yes (no. of committees) | No (no. of committees) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) Develop strategies and policy plans             | 61                      | 116                    |
| (2) Implement strategies and policy plans           | 136                     | 41                     |
| (3) Evaluation research and investigations          | 71                      | 106                    |
| (4) Technical standards                             | 36                      | 141                    |
| (5) Innovation and new development in the sector    | 59                      | 118                    |
| (6) Facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making | 77                      | 100                    |
| (7) Consult the sectoral stakeholders or the public | 9                       | 168                    |

Note: Coding is based on the recent government press release about committee meetings.
5.4. Contestability and inclusiveness

Although members of the EACs are all appointed by the government, they can have contested views toward policy development. One example is the Expert Committee of the National Family Planning Agency, established during 1987–2018 and retitled a number of times in accordance to its sponsoring agency. Some experts (e.g. Tian Xueyuan and Zhai Zhenwu) who were involved in enacting the One-child Policy in the 1980s and opposed policy relaxation in the early 2010s were members of the Expert Committee. Experts (e.g. Liang Zhongtang, Gu Baochang, Guo Zhigang) who supported policy relaxation in the 1980s and 2000s were also appointed to the Expert Committee. These experts not only held debates in the closed meetings of the committee but also publicly expressed their contesting views. Despite the existence of contestability, on major policy issues like birth control, policy advice by the expert committee members who had access to more political resources is more likely to influence policy decision. Limited inclusiveness of the departmental expert committee had blocked Party leaders’ policy learning (Feng, Gu and Cai 2016; Li and Wong 2019).

The epistemic community of one EAC can be contested by other epistemic communities and the media. For instance, the biosafety certification to permit marketizing genetically modified rice and maize was issued by the National Biosafety Committee (NBC) whose membership is dominated by genetic modification experts (Cao 2018). The certifications were opposed by rice plantation experts, environmental expert NGO, social scientists who are not in the committee, as well as other central government ministerial and research center officials (Jia 2010). The government was criticized to have denied appointment of a biodiversity expert with connection with Ministry of Environmental Protection and Green Peace to the NBC. Some experts of the NBC were criticized to have connection with commercial interests and one of them was removed from the committee due to public concerns of conflict of interests (Cao 2018).

Some EACs that deal with socially and politically more complex issues have more inclusive membership. Hierarchical positions and status are relatively less emphasized in the consideration for appointment. For instance, Ministry of Civil Affairs, announced the establishment of six EACs, advising issues on social work professional development, vocational training, community building, elderly services, and social welfare policies. The National Urban-Rural Community Building Expert Committee was one of these EACs. It was established in 2013 and tasked to provide policy advice on social governance innovation issues, a major initiative by the Xi Jinping government (CCPCC 2009). Most of the committee’s 60 members are required to be non-government experts from multiple disciplines and with different professional ranks. Young experts and practitioners from lower-level governments are encouraged to join the committee. Different from many EACs, members can not only be nominated by government agencies and non-governmental institutions like universities but can also be self-nominated by individual experts (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2016).

However, many EACs that deal with socially and politically complex issues still favor senior professionals, which have excluded experts from grassroots social organizations and non-government think tanks, as well as laypersons. Some EACs require that members shall have certain institutional affiliations. For example, the charter of the NEPAC
stipulates that its non-official members shall be “renowned experts,” such as members of the China Science Academy, or members of the China Engineering Academy (NEPAC 2006). Even EACs dealing with less technical issues, lay citizens are excluded. For instance, the charter of the Public Cultural Service System Building Expert Committee (PCSSBEC) specifies that one-third of the committee members shall be senior scholars, one-third shall be officials with national-level policymaking experiences, and another one-third shall be practitioners with senior professional experiences and qualifications (PCSSBEC 2011). Similarly, most of the Urban Design Expert Committee members (66 in total) are from government or government-sponsored institutions, only four are from companies, and only one is from a government-sponsored social organization (Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development 2016).

Departmental-controlled EACs could have low social credibility and low relevance to complex policymaking because of their narrow expertise, connection to sectoral interests, and closed advisory processes. To address this problem, the central Party and government leaders, such as CCP Secretary General Xi Jinping and State Council Premier Li Keqiang, have formed and chaired Party center commissions and State Council lead groups respectively to tackle high priorities and cross-departmental issues about international relations, financial risk mitigation, poverty alleviation, and pollution elimination. Some of these policymaking bodies establish EACs and conduct expert forums to solicit expert advice. For instance, the State Council Deepening Reform of Medical and Health System Lead Group has formed its own EAC which has recently appointed experts with both research and operational professional experiences in the medical sector and experts outside the medical sector; these experts are expected to provide advice based on innovative spirits and broad perspectives.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Based on an analysis of 178 EACs established by the national ministerial agencies from 1999 to 2018 in China, I find that there has been low degree of formalization and transparency of EACs, measured by whether there is official announcement of member appointment or change of membership, charters or by-laws that regulate committees’ operation, and committee meetings. It is also found that the operation of EACs has been increasingly transparent and formalized over the years.

As expected, there is high degree of government control over EACs’ composition and operation. Surprisingly, most of the EACs’ chairs and members are not government officials, but experts who have close networks with the government. The government also exerts control over the EACs through controlling meeting agenda and influencing meeting discussions.

Different from PABs of some other countries (e.g. Krick 2015; Lavertu, Walters, and David 2011), The EACs appointed by the national government are dominated by experts with close connection to governments. Hence, EACs’ advice is of high relevance to government policy agenda. Expert advice of the EACs has emphasized more on its role to “facilitate scientific decision-making” than “democratic decision-making.” The epistemic learning by Party leaders (higher-level decision-makers) is hindered by the individual government agency’s control of expert appointment and advice production.
processes which excludes the input of experts from multiple disciplines and grassroots citizens’ participation.

Although committee members provide different advice in committee meetings, their contestation is often ignored by the sponsoring government agencies who prefer the status quo. With the increasing diversification and potential contestation of the societal interests and values, the rising public demand for participation in decision-making, and the growing technical complexity of policy issues, the expert advice solicitation has been under the pressure to be more formalized, transparent, and inclusive. For instance, establishment of National Food Safety Risk Evaluation Expert Committee is a response to many food safety crises that had harmed people’s trust toward the government (Wu, Yang, and Chen 2017). Public announcement of the membership list of the National Biosafety Committee is a response to public criticism of its previously opaque operation and a request by an attorney to be more transparent (Cao 2018). The influence of departmental EACs’ advice is also checked and coordinated by the central Party and government cross-departmental policymaking bodies.

The study has enriched the comparative literature on policy advisory bodies and expert advice by analyzing the institutional design and operation of EACs in a centralized political system. The evolving characteristics of the EACs and the policy advisory processes in China show that the system is capable to adapt to internal and external challenges. The study challenges the presumed beliefs that China’s Communist Party leaders dictate policymaking. It provides one of many learning mechanisms that account for the rapid economic development and social-political stability of the country witnessed by the observers across the world.

Notes
1. “China” in this paper refers to People’s Republic of China.
2. ‘China’ in this paper refers to mainland China.
3. For example, the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees (2011) in the UK, the Federal Advisory Committee Act (1972) in the U.S., See (Ginsberg and Casey 2016).
4. See the discussions of institutionalized organizations by Polsby (1968).
5. China Communist Party Central Committee
6. For instance, the appointment processes and appointees’ details of UK’s public bodies, including expert and advisory committees, are required to be made publicly accessible (U.K. Cabinet Office 2016). In Hong Kong, the government requires that all agenda and papers of advisory and public bodies, if not classified, shall be made available upon request (Home Affairs Bureau (Hong Kong) 2003).
7. For instance, ‘State Council Customs Tariff Commission Expert Advisory Committee’ (SCCTCEAC) was established by the Ministry of Finance in 1999, and has changed membership for seven times corresponding to change of Commission membership change (State Council Customs Tariff Commission Office 1999).
8. For instance, Charter of the National Ethnic Education Expert Committee stipulated the committee should hold full meeting at least once a year (Item 10). However, there is no report of committee meetings since its establishment in 2014.
9. For instance, members of the Public Health Crisis Management Expert Advisory Committee are required to keep confidentiality of major issues and important materials obtained in the advisory processes, unless prior permission is granted by the government (Ministry of Health 2011).
10. The non-governmental think tank include government-sponsored universities, research academies (e.g. China Academy of Engineering), and various public service units that have research functions (e.g. food safety risk assessment centers and hospitals). These non-governmental think tanks have affiliation relations with government departments (e.g. Ministry of Education), and enjoy the latter’s subsidies in various forms (e.g. free space) and at different amounts. To some extent, they are comparable to quasi-NGOs in other countries (Dommett and Flinders 2015).

11. Chairs/key members of four EACs are members of National Political Consultative Conference, and chairs of eight EACs are members of National People’s Congress.

12. This is a government-sponsored think tank.

13. Over 50% members of these EACs are from non-governmental think tanks.

14. As of 2018, NFSRAEC’s members include 42 experts, 21 are from universities and colleges, 21 are from research institutes and labs affiliated with government agencies. During 2012–2018, 13 meetings have been convened. See China National Center for Food Safety Risk Assessment. http://www.cfsa.net.cn.

15. See also experts Zhai Zhenwu and Gu Baochang’s different policy views in media interviews. http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/20110309/11179498185.shtml http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0114/c40531-20187367.html. Accessed August 28, 2019.

16. See also Chen Xiwen, CCP Central Committee Rural Work Leading Group Office Director, stated that Chinese government would be very cautious of marketization of genetically modified agricultural products. https://news.qq.com/a/20120306/001820.htm. Accessed August 28, 2019.

17. Its first meeting was chaired by the Ministry of Civil Affairs Bureau officials who instructed the committee experts to ‘follow the 18th Party Congress’ spirit when conducting research and advising government to innovate community governance. http://www.mzyww.com/sqzl/html/w03/1567.html. December 31, 2014. Accessed August 27, 2019.

18. As of 2018, public information of 29 lead groups chaired by state council members and 11 commissions chaired by Political Bureau Standing Committee members can be found.

19. Expert Advisors for the State Council Health Care Reform have Changed (国务院医改智囊团大调整：4人已连任三届，委员组成有三大变化). https://www.sohu.com/a/317686055_161795. May 31, 2019. Accessed December 17, 2020.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Codebook for EACs’ roles, functions, and production of policy advice.

| General rules                                                                 |                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Coded sentence shall be complete, including the subject                    | 2. Coded sentence shall include relevant words and phrases that show its relevance to the corresponding categories |
| 3. “Policies” include reform (gaige) initiatives and programs (xiangmu)       | 4. Present/yes = 1, Not present/no = 0                            |

A. Responsibilities

A1 Help government to implement policies/plans
A2 Facilitate scientific and democratic decision-making
A3 Provide government policy advice

A.3.1 Development strategies or plans
A.3.2 Technical standards
A.3.3 Innovation and new development in the sector
A.3.4 Consulting the sectoral stakeholders or the public

B. Activities

B.1 Research and investigations
B.2 Meeting (the most recent) discussions
B.2.1 Whether members provide policy advice in the meeting
B.2.2 Whether sponsoring government agency’s officials attend
B.3 Government officials attendance (the most recent meeting)
B.3.1 Whether incumbent government officials chair the meeting
B.3.2 Whether incumbent government officials give speech

Table A2. Coding categories for chairs and members’ career background.

| Categories                                                                 |                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Incumbent (1.a) and retired officials (1.b) of the sponsoring government agencies (which establish the advisory committee) |                                                                 |
| 2. Incumbent (2.a) and retired officials (2.b) of other government agencies |                                                                 |
| 3. Incumbent (3.a) and retired members (3.b) of government think tanks     |                                                                 |
| 4. Incumbent (4.a) and retired members (4.b) of non-government think tanks |                                                                 |
| 4.1 Universities                                                           |                                                                 |
| 4.2 Party schools or administrative institutes                             |                                                                 |
| 4.3 Science/Engineering/Social Science academies                           |                                                                 |
| 4.4 Research/planning institutes, centers, labs affiliated with government |                                                                 |
| 4.5 Hospitals                                                              |                                                                 |
| 4.6 Private think tanks                                                    |                                                                 |
| 5. Incumbent (5.a) and retired members (5.b) of enterprises or companies  |                                                                 |
| 6. Incumbent (6.a) and retired members (6.b) of social organizations       |                                                                 |
| 7. Incumbent (7.a) and retired members (7.b) of other organizations (e.g. media) |                                                                 |