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Recommendations for Sustainable Development of Talent and Funding in Chinese Social Think Tanks: Post-Print

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Abstract

[Objective/Significance] The Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks issued in May 2017 clearly defined the definition and connotation of social think tanks with Chinese characteristics. However, more targeted countermeasures need to be identified for how social think tanks can overcome the problems of poor talent stability and funding shortages. [Method/Process] This paper first reviews the comparative advantages of social think tanks relative to government-affiliated think tanks, and explicitly proposes that talent and funding are the core elements for the sustainable development of social think tanks. It then elaborates in detail on five challenges faced by social think tanks in talent attraction, cultivation, and utilization, as well as four reasons for funding shortages and lack of stability. [Results/Conclusion] Based on the manifestations and causes of problems in the sustainable development of talent and funding for social think tanks, this paper proposes countermeasures and recommendations for the sustainable development of Chinese social think tanks from three aspects: improving institutional support for social think tanks, innovating the “recruitment, utilization, cultivation, and retention” mechanism for think tank talent, and clarifying positioning, building brand reputation, and strengthening cooperation.

Full Text

Recommendation for the Sustainable Development of Talent and Funding for China’s Social Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The May 2017 policy document *Several Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks* clearly defined the meaning and connotation of social think tanks with Chinese characteristics. However, more targeted solutions are needed to address the problems of talent instability and funding shortages. **[Method/Process]** This paper first outlines the comparative advantages of social think tanks relative to government-affiliated think tanks, and explicitly identifies talent and funding as the core elements for sustainable development. It then elaborates on five challenges social think tanks face in talent attraction, cultivation, and utilization, as well as four reasons for funding shortages and instability. **[Result/Conclusion]** Based on the identified problems and root causes regarding sustainable talent and funding development, this paper proposes three recommendations: improving institutional support for social think tanks, innovating talent recruitment, utilization, cultivation, and retention mechanisms, and clarifying positioning while building brand recognition and strengthening cooperation.

Keywords: social think tank; talent; funding; sustainable development; recommendations

Classification Number: C932.4

1. Social Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics in the Context of “Think Tank Fever”

The January 2015 policy *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* established that “social think tanks are a component of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics.” At the end of 2015, two social think tanks—the China Center for International Economic Exchanges and the China Development Institute (Shenzhen)—were included in the first batch of 25 national high-end think tanks. The May 2017 *Several Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks* (hereinafter referred to as the *Opinions*) further clarified regulations regarding the nature and functions, establishment standards, management systems, and internal construction of social think tanks. The “think tank fever” has evolved from incubation to vigorous development, with social think tanks, as an important component, receiving particular attention from all sectors of society.

Compared with government-affiliated think tanks, social think tanks offer greater neutrality in perspective, objectivity in research, and independence in operation. However, social think tanks are not “opposition parties” that contradict government views, nor are they mouthpieces hijacked by interest groups. Rather, they constitute an important component of China’s political ecology and democratic atmosphere, forming the decision-making foundation in China’s policy-making process alongside other types of think tanks and maintaining a relationship of “harmony in diversity” with the government.

The complementarity between social and government-affiliated think tanks manifests in three ways. First, social think tanks can aggregate diverse interests and value orientations from broader social groups, thereby expanding and supplementing the popular foundation for decision-making. Second, their relatively independent status provides unique advantages in information dissemination, public opinion guidance, and feedback collection. Third, their civilian and non-governmental attributes facilitate public diplomacy and international cooperation and exchange. As stated in *Guoyu · Zhengyu*, “Harmony generates things, while uniformity cannot continue.” Practice has proven that only by fully leveraging social think tanks’ capacity to connect public opinion and gather elites, enabling more social actors to participate in policy formulation and making policies more representative and grounded in public opinion, can decision-makers be provided with more choices and comprehensive analysis, thereby accelerating the transformation of government functions and the scientization and democratization of decision-making.

2. Talent and Funding: The Main Constraints on Sustainable Development of Social Think Tanks

The development of China’s social think tanks faces numerous challenges, including ambiguous legal status, unstable funding sources, obstructed channels for information access and results reporting, lack of credibility and operability in research findings, and high staff turnover with poor professionalism. However, from a practical perspective, the most critical constraints on social think tank development are the difficulty in attracting and retaining outstanding talent and the problems of funding scarcity and instability.

2.1 The Urgent Need to Address Talent Attraction and Retention

Compared with party-government-military think tanks, university think tanks, and corporate think tanks, social think tanks face inherent disadvantages in attracting and retaining talent. Although social think tanks offer flexibility in talent utilization and compensation, the objective reality is that the absence of establishment positions, difficulty in applying for professional titles, and poor credibility and recognition directly cause some outstanding talents who are interested in joining social think tanks to ultimately abandon the opportunity or leave after short-term employment due to considerations of career development and family life. Yet talent is the foundation and core of social think tank development. As research and consulting institutions, social think tanks rely on talent to produce outcomes, generate influence, and thereby secure government commissioned projects and social donations. Without a stable talent team, social think tanks would be “tanks without wisdom.” Specifically, social think tanks face the following challenges in talent attraction and retention:

2.1.1 Excessive Reliance on Leading Figures Social think tanks are typically organized around a leading figure as the core, with dozens of full-time researchers as the backbone. Daily research projects and academic activities largely depend on the leading figure's personal reputation, influence, and connections. The think tank's core viewpoints and communication channels still revolve around this figure, resulting in an elite-dominated "paternalistic" system that replaces collective decision-making with a "monitor system" [?]. This "inverted T-shaped structure" creates an unsound talent echelon and may lead to organizational operations being determined by the leading figure rather than by rules and regulations.

2.1.2 Lack of Stable Research Teams Cultivating "combat-ready" researchers suited to think tank research characteristics requires a long cycle. Before research teams mature, social think tanks must rely on "network-type experts" by establishing expert committees, boards, or advisory committees to recruit experts to participate loosely in think tank activities—such as attending one or two annual academic meetings to provide suggestions on research directions and plans, or serving as speakers at academic conferences hosted by the think tank. While these expert teams can bring visibility and academic influence, a truly sustainable social think tank ultimately needs to cultivate a "Praetorian Guard" rather than relying on "mercenaries."

2.1.3 Absence of Talent Mobility Mechanisms Although social think tanks are defined as "taking strategic issues and public policy as the main research objects, and serving the scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making of the Party and government" with a "public welfare orientation," barriers between them and government or official institutions remain rigid. Currently, apart from current government employees working part-time or participating after retirement, and some leading figures engaging in politics through the platforms of People's Congresses and Political Consultative Conferences, there is a lack of two-way mobility mechanisms between in-service government personnel and ordinary staff of social think tanks.

2.1.4 Low Degree of Professionalization Due to funding and institutional issues, coupled with the long cultivation cycle for professional research talent, most social think tank staff (apart from leading figures and backbone researchers) suffer from high turnover and inexperience. Especially recent master's and bachelor's degree graduates who join social think tanks often work in research assistance and administrative positions with low sense of achievement and motivation. High turnover means more new staff, which translates to lower professionalization and 默契感 (mutual understanding), forcing management and research backbones to divert attention to non-business work and reducing efficiency. The Brookings Institution maintains a ratio of 1:3 between principal and support staff, with support personnel responsible for data collection and processing, fund management, product marketing, and promotion,

while researchers focus entirely on policy research and analysis [?].

2.1.5 Passive Talent Collaboration Models Because social think tanks rely heavily on part-time researchers, academic committee members, or advisors, talent collaboration is relatively passive. External experts' personnel relationships and intellectual property rights belong to their home institutions, creating constraints and concerns about part-time work at social think tanks. Current officials or researchers holding positions at social think tanks also prioritize their primary jobs, making it difficult to attend social think tank activities when they conflict with their main work. Moreover, as the state has strict regulations on leading cadres of party and government organs holding concurrent positions in social organizations, these “mercenaries” find it difficult to truly participate in social think tank work.

2.2 Widespread Funding Shortages and Sustainability Problems Stable funding supply is another important foundation for ensuring the sustainable development of social think tanks. Due to their flexible mechanisms, social think tanks have convenience in diversified fundraising, with potential sources including government service purchases, corporate donations, service fees, and funding from other social organizations, particularly foundations [?]. Diversified fundraising helps maintain balance among funding sources and thereby preserves research objectivity and neutrality. However, compared with government-affiliated think tanks, social think tanks generally face funding shortages and instability for the following reasons:

2.2.1 High Registration Thresholds and Diverse Legal Status Chinese law imposes strict management on NGOs and civil organizations, resulting in high registration thresholds for social think tanks. Some social think tanks cannot register as civilian non-enterprise legal persons and must be established as companies, preventing them from enjoying tax benefits [?]. This also means donors cannot deduct taxes through donations, affecting the effectiveness of public fundraising and causing difficulties in external financing. Even when established as civilian non-enterprise entities that enjoy certain corporate income tax reductions, their overall tax burden remains heavier than that of public institutions and social organizations [?]. The newly issued *Opinions* explicitly stipulate “dual management” –requiring registration with civil affairs departments and affiliation with a supervisory unit. To avoid unnecessary risks, government departments are often reluctant to serve as sponsors for social think tanks seeking affiliation [?]. High registration thresholds lead to diverse forms of existence for social think tanks, which is not conducive to unified government management and affects the protection of think tank employees' legitimate rights and interests [?]. These irregularly registered social think tanks face the risk of rectification and cleanup at any time, let alone sustainable funding development.

2.2.2 Poor Research Professionalism and Influence Compared with the decision-making influence of government-affiliated think tanks, social think tanks' weaker authority and credibility make it difficult to raise social funds. According to the Development Research Center of the State Council' s official website, in 2014 the center submitted 483 research reports, with central leaders making 301 instructions on 121 of them. In contrast, a report from a well-known domestic social think tank shows that over two years it only received five instructions from central and Beijing municipal leaders [?]. Due to low professionalization and poor decision-making influence, interest groups have low enthusiasm for commissioning social think tanks to speak on their behalf. Commissioning institutions also have concerns about the professionalism of social think tanks' research output, making them unwilling to entrust consulting projects to social think tanks.

2.2.3 “Tanks Without Wisdom” and Uneven Development Amid the “think tank fever,” social think tanks have mushroomed, resulting in low professionalization and disorderly development. Some social think tanks overemphasize social communication and relationship building while neglecting policy research and intellectual production [?]. Although think tanks can be categorized as comprehensive, specialized, platform, or media types based on their form [?], and different think tanks need different development models due to their founding backgrounds, development concepts, and resources, this does not mean that platform and media types can ignore content. Some social think tanks focus only on seizing discourse power, leading to insufficient in-depth investigation, imprecise alignment with decision-making needs, and inadequate grasp of consulting issues. Such low-professionalization think tanks that only emphasize media marketing and communication power also deter external funding.

2.2.4 Underdeveloped Culture of Social Donations China has not yet formed a donation culture toward social think tanks, whereas over 70% of American households regularly donate to public welfare institutions, making social donations an important funding source for foreign social think tanks [?]. For example, the Brookings Institution' s total revenue in 2015 was \$106 million, with 86% from various donations. Specifically, there were ten “major donors” contributing over \$2 million, including four foundations, three individuals, one corporation, one government agency, and one university. Among all donors that year, 87 were foundations, showing that charitable donations account for a very high proportion. The Council on Foreign Relations raised a total of \$55.9623 million in 2013, with annual contributions accounting for 14.4%, corporate membership and related income 15.2%, donations and grants 17.5%, publication income 14.3%, current investment returns 24.8%, and rental income 3.6% [?]. Social donations are not only society' s recognition of think tanks but also an important funding source for their healthy and sustainable development.

3. Recommendations for Sustainable Talent and Funding Development in Social Think Tanks

Talent and funding are the two pillars of sustainable development for social think tanks. To some extent, a social think tank with strong stability, significant influence, and high professionalization has essentially solved the problems of sustainable talent and funding. In other words, grasping talent and funding means grasping the “bull’s nose” of social think tank development. Therefore, this paper proposes three targeted recommendations based on the previously analyzed problems.

3.1 Improving Institutional and Systemic Guarantees for Social Think Tanks If talent and funding are the “bull’s nose” of social think tank development, then institutional and systemic guarantees are the “rope” that guides their healthy and sustainable development. Although “social think tanks are a component of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics” has been written into national guidance, what is more important is how to implement and improve external support conducive to social think tank development through practical and effective measures.

First, strengthen top-level government design for social think tank development. The government information disclosure system should be further implemented. Information disclosure is not only an inevitable requirement for government transparency and democratization of decision-making but also objectively eliminates information barriers between official and unofficial think tanks. It is necessary to accelerate the establishment of demand databases, information databases, expert databases, and achievement databases, as well as big data platforms for public decision-making consultation, and to establish a response mechanism for party and government departments to consult social think tanks. Meanwhile, actively explore the establishment of a negative list system to empower social think tanks with more development space. Additionally, a strategic vision should be adopted to explore the “think tank industry” model. The think tank industry uses think tanks as carriers to integrate intellectual resources of high-end talent, with innovative talent as the core representing the concentration of the entire intelligent industry chain [?]. It is recommended to establish “think tank parks” in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and other talent-concentrated areas to create an “intellectual Silicon Valley” that attracts research institutions and civilian think tanks to cluster in the park, forming a think tank highland. Local governments can provide housing and venue rental preferences and offer conditions for scientific research, conferences, and international exchanges [?].

Second, improve the corporate governance structure and operational mechanisms of social think tanks. The *General Principles of Civil Law* (formerly *General Provisions of Civil Law*) promulgated after the 2017 Two Sessions provided new interpretations in the “legal person” section: based on the nature of the legal person’s purpose and cause, it added public welfare legal persons

(public institutions, social organizations, foundations, social service agencies) and for-profit legal persons. Registering social think tanks as “public welfare legal persons” resolves the awkwardness of their registration status and provides legal guarantees for management, operation, and fundraising. As independent legal entities, social think tanks should also establish and improve internal management systems for party building, labor and personnel, finance, seals, and archives, truly becoming legal entities with autonomous operation, clear rights and responsibilities, coordinated operation, and effective checks and balances. Considering the particularity of “leading figures” in social think tanks, management systems for think tank leaders should also be improved, standardizing appointment conditions, selection procedures, and term limits, and implementing a legal representative departure audit system. For other staff, professional ethics construction should be strengthened, consciously practicing socialist core values and firmly establishing awareness of national security, information security, and confidentiality discipline [?].

Third, further promote government procurement of think tank services. Overall, it is essential to establish and improve the “policy idea market” as soon as possible [?][?], leveraging market mechanisms in policy analysis supply and demand, funding sources, influence methods, screening means, and supervision mechanisms. Decision-making consultation should be incorporated into the statutory procedures of decision-making, and guiding opinions or expert consultation and demonstration methods for government purchase of decision-making consulting services should be issued. The form of information transmission and adoption should shift from “chimney-style” vertical transmission within the system to horizontal adoption of external social think tank recommendations [?]. To achieve this, the government needs to expand its purchase of social think tank services. First, the government can establish a think tank cooperation project funding system, allocating a portion of the annual national or local research budget to create a “Think Tank Cooperation Development Fund” [?]. In addition to special project sequences for party schools and universities, a separate project sequence for social think tanks can be added. For example, the Hainan International Tourism Island Think Tank Alliance funded by the Hainan Provincial Federation of Social Sciences offered RMB 50,000 research funding for winning bids in its 2017 project tender. Second, provide certain funding for academic activities organized by social think tanks. The 2016 *Several Opinions on Supporting the Development of Conference and Exhibition Business in Haikou* stipulated that conferences with over 200 participants could apply for special funds, with a maximum subsidy of RMB 800,000 for a single conference and up to RMB 1 million for international conferences with over 200 participants.

3.2 Innovating Talent “Recruitment, Utilization, Cultivation, and Retention” Mechanisms Talent is a valuable resource for both social and government-affiliated think tanks. Correspondingly, talent problems existing in social think tanks also exist to varying degrees in official think tanks. However, social think tanks have their particularities and require innovative talent

mechanisms for recruitment, utilization, cultivation, and retention.

First, social think tanks must break away from “system thinking” in running think tanks. They should provide more flexible mechanisms and means than official think tanks to stimulate outstanding talents to display their talents and accelerate the growth of excellent talents, using market mechanisms to attract and utilize talent and respecting talent as a special commodity. For example, for outstanding young talents, social think tanks can implement an “appointment and evaluation separation” mechanism, appointing excellent young talents to higher positions. Meanwhile, research output rather than years of service should be the main evaluation criterion, allowing young researchers with demonstrated research ability but only master’ s degrees to be appointed as assistant researchers or assistant directors, facilitating their publication in journals. A practical achievement attribution system should be implemented, where individual research results are not collectively attributed or attributed to leaders, motivating young researchers to produce more outcomes. Think tank talent emphasizes the combination of theory and practice, requiring familiarity with government operations and policy formulation with high policy research literacy, as well as the ability to comprehensively apply theories from social and natural sciences with high academic literacy. Social think tanks should use this as a direction to cultivate talent suited to think tank needs in recruitment, team building, and personnel training.

Second, innovate talent utilization models and platforms. First, local governments with conditions can trial expert consultation and demonstration systems for major administrative decisions, actively exploring the establishment of decision-making advisory committee systems and third-party evaluation systems that incorporate social think tank experts, providing them with more platforms and opportunities for political participation. Second, social think tanks with strong research capabilities can apply to establish postdoctoral workstations with independent recruitment qualifications or set up joint postdoctoral training models with enterprises and universities. According to national regulations, postdoctoral recruitment targets mainly young scholars under 35 years old. By establishing postdoctoral workstations, social think tanks can ensure annual influx of new research strength and retain some postdoctoral fellows after completion. Third, visiting scholar systems similar to those in universities can be established, cooperating with universities to create external research or practice bases. As the saying goes, “How can the water be so clear? Because fresh water keeps flowing in.” Social think tanks should innovate talent attraction models to encourage more young people to participate in think tank work.

Third, innovate talent mobility channels and mechanisms. The core issue of talent mobility in social think tanks is the lack of a “two-way” circulation mechanism, with only one-way flow from government to think tanks. Therefore, solving the talent mobility problem requires addressing how social think tank talent can smoothly flow into government. Currently, this can be approached from three “partial” aspects: selecting “some” well-known, highly skilled ex-

perts to hold “some” positions in “some” government departments related to think tank work through secondment or temporary transfer. In 2015, Shandong Province issued *Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of High-End Think Tank Talent Teams*, proposing to “recommend chief experts and position experts to party and government organs at all levels in batches.” This involves first selecting social think tank experts to identify chief and position experts, then targeted recommendations to government departments for secondment. Considering the general trend of de-administration, increasing establishment positions to attract social think tank talent is unsustainable. For the larger group of ordinary social think tank staff (i.e., non-leading figures), consideration can be given to increasing support in livelihood security such as household registration, housing, children’s education, and medical insurance, as well as support in professional title evaluation, project commissioning, and media publicity, using “soft” and “flexible” mechanisms to alleviate frequent talent turnover.

3.3 Clarifying Positioning and Collaboratively Building Brand

Against the backdrop of “think tank fever,” social think tanks have developed rapidly, but many have failed to accurately position their characteristics and advantages, simply copying successful experiences and gradually “disappearing” after holding a few initial activities. With numerous think tanks and fierce competition, some social think tanks lack collaboration and communication, conducting brand activities or research in isolation with common low-level repetitive research. For sustainable development, social think tanks need to strengthen brand building, expand influence and visibility, and actively engage in inter-think-tank cooperation to serve national development.

First, social think tanks should establish a “comparative advantage” perspective and move away from the misconception of being “big and comprehensive” or “all-around players.” On one hand, think tanks at different levels, aspects, and with different pursuits should have their own specialized fields, being both “professional” and “focused” [?]. Comprehensive, specialized, platform, and media-type think tanks should develop in a rational and orderly manner. Based on their core advantages, they should explore the “think tank plus” model. On the other hand, social think tanks should fully utilize their advantages of research independence, objectivity, and neutrality to produce knowledge products that official think tanks cannot produce [?]. They should conduct “policy-oriented” research around policy blind spots, “public opinion-oriented” research around hot social issues, and “advisory-oriented” research around key issues of concern to leaders, timely reflecting public voices and popular will to party committees and governments [?].

Second, social think tanks should actively participate in inter-think-tank cooperation. At the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, President Xi Jinping explicitly proposed to “build think tank alliances and cooperation networks well.” In fact, as early as 2015, the

Belt and Road Think Tank Cooperation Alliance was officially launched. This organization, encompassing over 60 well-known domestic think tanks, has played a significant role in promoting Belt and Road development. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Economic Think Tank Alliance, initiated by Chinese experts, has also played an active role in demonstrating the feasibility of an SCO free trade area. Social think tanks should abandon “identity consciousness” and “sectarian bias,” maintaining both corporate competitive awareness for orderly competition in visibility and influence, and a holistic view of serving the nation, actively undertaking the era’s responsibilities and historical missions, conforming to national development trends, responding to major national strategic decisions, and actively participating in inter-think-tank cooperation to serve national development.

Third, social think tanks should actively serve as “vanguards” of public diplomacy, establishing a good Chinese image, telling good Chinese stories, and spreading good Chinese voices through international academic research and conferences. The *National High-End Think Tank Management Measures (Trial)* proposes building 50-100 high-level think tanks with “national urgency, distinctive features, institutional innovation, and leading development” and significant influence and international reputation by 2020. Social think tanks should actively participate in national high-end think tank selection, standing on higher platforms to play their unique role in civilian diplomacy. Government departments should also consciously absorb and cultivate distinctive and capable social think tanks as “national teams,” leveraging their catfish effect. Meanwhile, equal emphasis should be placed on “bringing in” and “going out.” On one hand, encourage social think tanks to recruit outstanding overseas think tank experts and sinologists; on the other hand, encourage renowned think tank experts to hold positions in relevant international organizations, thereby enhancing the internationalization level and influence of social think tanks and their talent.

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