

Research on the Types and Characteristics of Think Tank Reports: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose / Significance] With the evolving situation, think tank development has become an important component of national and local soft power, with its significance becoming increasingly prominent and think tank reports growing in number. To provide more accurate direction for the development of think tank products in China and worldwide, and to offer references for constructing high-quality think tanks.

[Method / Process] Through analysis and synthesis of reports, think tank reports can be categorized into nine types based on their intended purposes: “echo chamber” feedback reports, “ongoing” event reports, “interpretive” policy reports, “warning” research reports, “descriptive” analysis reports, “internal reference” critique reports, “recommendatory” evaluation reports, “patchwork” industry reports, and “encyclopedia” annual reports. Simultaneously, each of these nine types of think tank reports is dissected through comprehensive elaboration, characteristic analysis, and structural content evaluation to derive the model for each type of think tank product.

[Result / Conclusion] Finally, a systematic classification of these nine types of think tank reports is presented to provide more accurate direction for the development of think tank products in China and worldwide, and to offer references for constructing high-quality think tanks.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Types and Characteristics of Think Tank Reports

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] With the evolving landscape of policy development, think tank construction has become an integral component of national and local soft power, making the analysis of think tank reports increasingly important. **[Method/Process]** Through comprehensive analysis and synthesis of domestic and international think tank reports, this study classifies such reports into nine categories based on their intended purposes: “echo wall” feedback reports, “progressive tense” event reports, “interpretation” policy reports, “internal reference” critique reports, “warning” research reports, “descriptive” analysis reports, “advice” evaluation reports, “patchwork” industry reports, and “encyclopedia” annual reports. Each category is systematically examined through detailed elaboration, characteristic analysis, and structural evaluation to derive its operational model. **[Result/Conclusion]** This classification framework provides a more precise direction for the development of think tank products in China and globally, offering valuable references for constructing high-quality think tanks.

Keywords: think tank; think tank report; think tank report type; think tank report features

2. Types and Characteristics Analysis of Think Tank Reports

According to the *Global Think Tank Report*, China ranks second worldwide in the number of think tanks, yet its think tank products exert relatively limited influence—suggesting a need for greater emphasis on quality. While classification of think tanks themselves is well-established (e.g., official vs. private by funding source, central vs. local by affiliation), classification of think tank products remains underdeveloped. Since think tank products typically manifest as reports—whether presenting ideas, proposals, or recommendations—this paper categorizes them based on their intended objectives into nine distinct types, each examined in detail below.

2.1 “Echo Wall” Feedback Reports

2.1.1 Definition Policy or decision announcements invariably generate reactions and responses. Modern survey companies can provide effective answers to these echoes, and with the proliferation of internet access and advances in big data analytics, such feedback can be transformed into valuable reference points for timely policy adjustments and corrective decision-making.

2.1.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports exhibit three key features: (1) **Interactivity**—though intellectually independent and transparent in research, think tanks must establish robust trust and interaction mechanisms with the public to ensure smooth information and idea flow, thereby monitoring policy implementation; (2) **Objectivity**—grounded in empirical truth-seeking rather than dogmatism, these reports must remain practical and down-to-earth, adhering to objective analysis in both methodology and practice; and (3) **Dual classification** into dynamic and static categories. Dynamic categories involve iterative processes where policies produce unforeseen effects, generating feedback that prompts continuous refinement. Static categories achieve desired outcomes after initial deliberation without requiring further cycles.

2.1.3 Operational Model The “echo wall” operates through a dynamic cycle: when a policy is promulgated, it yields either positive or negative results. While successful policies require no intervention, those producing adverse effects or unintended consequences necessitate think tank involvement to reorganize and analyze feedback for more rational policy adjustments. This creates a continuous improvement loop, illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

2.2 “Progressive Tense” Event Reports

2.2.1 Definition Due to varying regional contexts and the inherent suddenness of events, individuals and institutions often cannot immediately interpret or accurately analyze developing situations. Yet decision-makers require robust information support precisely during such critical moments.

2.2.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports are characterized by: (1) **Professionalism**—decision-making demands specialized knowledge for timely, effective responses, particularly during emergencies where expert guidance forms a mini-think tank; (2) **Timeliness**—amid diverse interest groups and demands, think tanks leverage their objective, impartial positions to provide quality information promptly for various stakeholders. They are classified into: (a) **Flat type**, which follows chronological event progression, and (b) **Reversal type**, where events defy public expectations and produce unexpected outcomes at certain points. For reversal-type events, think tanks must resist sensationalism, thoroughly understand full contexts, integrate diverse social voices, and promptly distinguish truth from falsehood.

2.2.3 Operational Model The progressive tense model involves think tank participation throughout the entire event lifecycle—before, during, and after. Information demands expand over time, requiring reports to keep pace with mainstream media coverage while tracking public events comprehensively. Given the sudden, uncertain nature of public incidents that can lead to partial or one-sided perspectives, think tanks must prioritize understanding complete narratives and verifying information authenticity. The operational model is shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

2.3 “Interpretation” Policy Reports

2.3.1 Definition When new textual or promotional policies are issued, domain experts must follow up with interpretations covering the policy’s background and intent, content and implementation, and follow-through objectives. This helps the public initially understand and subsequently appreciate the value and feasibility of policy measures, representing another vital think tank function.

2.3.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports feature: (1) **Constructiveness**—not merely identifying problems but actively building solutions by advising decision-makers on follow-up work to ensure continuous progress tracking; and (2) **Auxiliary function**—serving as intellectual reservoirs and advisory assistants that provide policy ideas and recommendations to influence subsequent decisions, while conducting necessary evaluations of implementation effects and guiding public expectations. They are classified into: (a) **Routine communication type**, which strengthens policy dissemination and public education when new policies emerge, and (b) **Outcome follow-up type**, which addresses how policy execution—a lengthy process—can be exploited by self-interested parties, requiring scholars to actively guide public understanding through continuous interpretation and rational analysis.

2.3.3 Operational Model The operational model for interpretation policy reports is relatively straightforward, focusing on tracking and interpreting policies to prevent public misunderstanding and exploitation by malicious actors that could cause national difficulties.

2.4 “Warning” Research Reports

2.4.1 Definition “Warning” research reports study specific events, analyze their future development trends, and make predictions—typically negative or pessimistic forecasts—culminating in cautionary reports. These reports first analyze event causes and consequences, then project future trends and trajectories.

2.4.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports feature negative prophetic qualities with cautionary implications. They are classified into: (1) **Qualitative forecasting**, which relies on human experience, judgment, and intuition about a system’s past and present to provide directional predictions about development trends, states, and situations—particularly suitable for systems lacking historical statistics; and (2) **Time series forecasting**, which uses historical data of system objects over time to quantitatively predict future performance by identifying temporal variation patterns, suitable for analyzing trends using simple statistical data.

2.4.3 Operational Model Two primary modeling approaches are employed: (1) **Differential equation models**, which describe how object characteristics

evolve over time or space, analyze change patterns, predict future behavior, and study control mechanisms. While many differential equations address physical or geometric problems with given assumptions, non-physical domain problems require context-specific analysis or analogy to establish assumptions. Typical applications include epidemic prediction, economic growth forecasting, warfare modeling, drug distribution and elimination, population prediction, and smoke diffusion—all exhibiting exponential growth trends based on variable counts; and (2) **Time series methods**, which arrange prediction objects chronologically to form time series, then infer future possibilities and trends from past variation patterns. Time series forecasting generally reflects three change patterns: trend variation, cyclical variation, and random variation.

2.5 “Descriptive” Analysis Reports

2.5.1 Definition “Descriptive” analysis reports examine events after occurrence, analyzing background, facts, processes, causes, and trends. Also called “Monday morning quarterbacking” reports for their post-event appearance, they primarily summarize event development, causes, and outcomes.

2.5.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports are characterized by their summarization of superficial facts without addressing substantive issues. They are classified into: (1) **Association analysis**, which identifies interesting relationships and correlations among large datasets; and (2) **Cluster analysis**, which divides abstract data collections into similar object groups where intra-group similarity is high and inter-group similarity is low, enabling better analysis.

2.5.3 Operational Model This model identifies frequent patterns, associations, correlations, or causal structures among item sets or object sets in transaction data, relational data, or other information carriers. By extracting similar data for analysis, it derives future development trends and solutions—a “birds of a feather” analytical approach. The operational model is shown in Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

2.6 “Internal Reference” Critique Reports

2.6.1 Definition “Internal reference” critique reports are negative exposés. As a unique form of internal research and policy recommendation in modern Chinese government management—similar to ancient secret memorials—these reports present facts with minimal embellishment, offer viewpoints without excessive packaging, and provide sharp, incisive policy recommendations. Internal reference journalism serves as an important channel for leaders to understand public sentiment.

2.6.2 Characteristics and Classification These reports feature critical, sharp, and direct analysis. They are classified into three types: (1) reports

on social malpractices seeking official rectification; (2) reports on pending issues requiring prompt resolution; and (3) reports on valuable experiences or clues for potential promotion.

2.6.3 Operational Model Internal reference critique reports provide direct, negative exposés of issues, bluntly identifying problems and offering sharp countermeasures.

2.7 “Advice” Evaluation Reports

2.7.1 Definition As consultative research institutions engaged in developmental studies, Chinese academy and university think tanks have historically provided recommendations for government public management, though few have substantially influenced final decisions. This reflects China’s underdeveloped “revolving door” mechanism between think tanks and government. In contrast, the U.S. revolving door system operates smoothly and commonly—exemplified by figures like former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (who worked at Harvard’s Center for International Affairs before entering government and later founded Kissinger Associates) and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (who chaired the RAND Corporation). Given China’s developing think tank system, we can leverage “evaluation” to influence government management and decision-making processes—hence “advice.”

2.7.2 Characteristics and Classification Beyond evaluating policy implementation and providing reference opinions, think tank evaluation reports should serve a “sideline drum-beating” function, urging government adoption of strategic recommendations. These “advice” evaluation reports feature: (1) **Guidance**—focusing on existing problems and deficiencies to provide constructive suggestions that benignly guide government operations (though adoption remains at government’s discretion); and (2) **Professionalism**—successful evaluation reports synthesize expert perspectives and authentic investigations to conduct professional analyses of government work, as laypersons cannot identify breakthrough problems or propose constructive solutions.

Based on intended purposes, advice evaluation reports are classified into: (a) **Public-interest advice evaluation reports**, where citizens contribute evaluations and constructive suggestions purely for national prosperity; and (b) **Profit-oriented advice evaluation reports**, where private think tanks—often with limited government funding and reliant on foundations or corporate sponsorship—provide paid consulting services to maintain institutional viability.

2.7.3 Operational Model The operational model follows third-party assessments by think tank units of specific government work, offering targeted, authentic investigations and research that harness collective intelligence to identify problems and propose macro-level recommendations for improvement.

2.8 “Patchwork” Industry Reports

Currently, industry reports lack standardized formats, with many informally assembling unrelated elements to complete reports.

2.8.1 Definition China’s think tanks are geographically concentrated: Beijing hosts 151 (42%), Shanghai 50 (14%), and other regions 160 (44%). Influential think tanks cluster in Beijing (with 10% in Shanghai), while 80% of low-impact think tanks operate outside these hubs. This distribution creates “think tanks without wisdom.” As Renmin University’s Wang Wen noted, Chinese think tanks lag due to insufficient professionalism and lack of occupational specialization. Some industry reports integrate all directly and indirectly related content within an industry, using small things to achieve big results—hence “patchwork” industry reports.

2.8.2 Characteristics and Classification Though industry-specific, these reports integrate indirect or direct content across an industry, exhibiting: (1) **Complexity**—due to lack of focus and inconsistent viewpoints when consolidating all industry-related content; and (2) **Productivity**—when think tanks cannot produce tangible products, industry reports become an output pathway by summarizing industry status and technologies to develop complete systems or mechanisms. They are classified into: (a) **Summary industry reports**, which are merely purposeful compilations without extracting actionable insights; and (b) **Outcome industry reports**, which—while summarizing existing technologies—identify development directions, new problems, or innovative pathways.

2.8.3 Operational Model Outcome industry reports analyze current situations to propose solutions, while summary industry reports conduct industry-wide investigations on specific issues, merely accumulating data without deriving meaningful conclusions.

2.9 “Encyclopedia” Annual Reports

China’s first modern encyclopedia, compiled from 1980 to 1993, encompassed 66 disciplines including philosophy, social sciences, arts, education, natural sciences, and engineering technology—creating an impression of comprehensive content.

2.9.1 Definition Annual reports represent a year’s crystallization of think tank work. Successful think tank products require not only immediate analysis but also complete research paradigms and distinctive analytical logic, ideally forming proprietary tools. Annual reports serve as comprehensive integrations, adopting “theory + method + topic” frameworks or varying styles annually to develop overarching characteristics. However, such summary reports often lack specificity, resembling academic rather than practical products with encyclopedia-like abundance but diffuse focus.

2.9.2 Characteristics Annual reports are organizational necessities, but formats vary widely. Think tanks often adopt “encyclopedia” annual reports that consolidate all yearly products, exhibiting: (1) **Diversity**—covering extensive ground as both annual work summaries and next-year reference tools, with varied compilation methods; and (2) **Academic orientation**—most think tank annual reports emphasize theoretical, methodological, and topical summaries, resembling carefully researched textbooks.

2.9.3 Operational Model “Encyclopedia” annual reports generally employ summarization approaches within established frameworks, compiling annual events or issues into comprehensive reports that are detailed and occasionally highlight key points while maintaining macro-level government perspectives and holistic event control.

3. Classification Analysis of Nine Think Tank Report Types

Think tank reports manifest in diverse, all-encompassing forms. To provide intuitive understanding, this paper consolidates the nine categories in Table 1 for comparison of commonalities and differences.

Table 1 Summary of Nine Categories of Think Tank Reports

Characteristics	Research Object	“Echo Wall” Feedback	“Progressive Tense” Event	“Interpretation” Policy	“Warning” Research
Definition	A policy or decision generates reactions; modern survey companies provide effective answers through feedback	Due to regional variations and suddenness, individuals/institutions cannot timely interpret events, yet decision-makers require such information	New textual or promotional policies require expert interpretation of background, content, and implementation for public understanding	Studies specific events, analyzes future trends, and makes predictions (typically negative), providing cautionary reports	

Characteristics	Research Object	“Echo Wall” Feedback	“Progressive Tense” Event	“Interpretation” Policy	“Warning” Research
Examples	1) Highway toll exemption during holid-ays2) Plastic bag restric-tions	Beijing subway staff insulting passengers incident	1) Interpreting home-buying after divorce policies2) Routine com-munication and outcome follow-up categories	1) Typhoons in Tai-wan/coastal areas2) Samsung Galaxy Note7 explosions	

Characteristics	“Descrip-tive” Analysis	“Internal Reference” Critique	“Advice” Evalua-tion	“Patch-work” Industry	“Encyclo-pedia” Annual
Definition	Post-event analysis of back-ground, facts, processes, causes, and trends	Negative exposés with minimal em-bellishment, sharp viewpoints, and incisive recommenda-tions	Provides policy evalua-tion and references to govern-ment, with advisory functions to influence decisions	Integrates all di-rectly/indirectly related industry content, achieving more with less	Comprehensive annual in-tegration of all think tank products; often lacks specificity

Characteristics	“Descriptive” Analysis	“Internal Reference” Critique	“Advice” Evaluation	“Patchwork” Industry	“Encyclopedia” Annual
Examples	“Toxic play-ground” incident	Baidu’ s nighttime gambling promotion	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Law Institute’ s third-party evaluation of government information disclosure	Traditional Chinese medicine industry analysis report	<i>Anhui Ecological Civilization Development Report and Wanbei Economic and Social Development Research Report</i>

Analyzing these nine categories reveals that “echo wall” feedback reports, “interpretation” policy reports, “advice” evaluation reports, and “internal reference” critique reports target public decisions or policies. “Internal reference” critique reports, “descriptive” analysis reports, “progressive tense” event reports, and “warning” research reports address events, typically emergent ones. “Patchwork” industry reports and “encyclopedia” annual reports focus on reports, usually annual summaries. Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper] visualizes this classification.

The objects of think tank analysis typically fall into three categories: public decision/policy, events (emergent), and reports (annual/summary). Different think tank products correspond to each category, providing clear direction for targeted think tank construction and material classification.

4. Carriers of Think Tank Reports

All communication and storage require carriers. In biology, carriers are self-replicating DNA molecules that transfer gene segments; in chemistry, they are constant substances that transport trace materials through processes. Broadly, carriers transmit energy or transport substances. Think tank reports similarly require carriers, with different report types necessitating different delivery mechanisms. For instance, “interpretation” policy reports targeting national policies are typically published on government websites, while confidential “internal reference” reports are digitally stored on hard drives for security. Based on

dissemination and storage needs, think tank report carriers are classified as: printed, digital, networked, and visual.

(1) Printed Type

Printed journals serve as familiar carriers for think tank reports, facilitating scholarly exchange and discussion. Available on major journal databases, they provide convenient access. Foreign language journals are primary vehicles for international academic influence, offering regular platforms for think tank-foreign reader exchange. China's tiered journal system means high-impact journals enhance report dissemination through combined influence, with journals screening quality reports while amplifying their reach.

(2) Digital Type

While some reports are stored as paper documents, this requires substantial space and maintenance effort, with unreliable manual backup processes. Digitization enables convenient storage, retrieval, and encryption for enhanced security and accessibility. Particularly for state-secret reports, digital storage ensures greater information security.

(3) Networked Type

With rapid internet development, networks have become primary information carriers. WeChat, Weibo, and other platforms with growing user bases serve as main channels for information acquisition, while mature government portals provide primary access to national policy information. Network platforms thus constitute major think tank report dissemination vehicles, enabling rapid public access. Most "interpretation" policy reports on government websites appear immediately after policy release for convenient public reading.

(4) Visual Type

Visualization employs computer graphics and image processing to transform data into graphical representations. Some think tank reports involve substantial statistical data spanning years or decades across fields. Rather than simple data accumulation, reports must use data to illustrate issues—such as industry development trends or economic fluctuations. Consequently, data-intensive reports often employ computer processing for visual presentation.

In today's world of complex ideological currents, intricate contradictions, and profound international changes, human peace and development face undeniable challenges [6]. Since the 18th Party Congress, the Central Committee has prioritized think tank construction, with General Secretary Xi emphasizing its importance four times and identifying think tanks as crucial components of national soft power, providing fundamental direction and development opportunities [7].

Through detailed analysis of these think tank products, this paper derives operational models for each category and systematically summarizes their types and characteristics, providing more accurate direction for think tank product development in China and worldwide, and offering references for building competitive think tanks. We must "absorb the essence and discard the dross" of existing think tank content to develop truly competitive, high-quality think tanks.

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Author Contributions

Chen An: Proposed the research question and established the overall framework;
Jia Chuanling: Drafted and revised the manuscript and finalized the version;
Li Pengjie, Zhao Qingfeng, Fang Yanan: Participated in manuscript drafting.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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