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Positioning and Development of Enterprise Think Tanks in the System of New-type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Interpreting national policy orientations on think tank development and investigating pathways for enterprise think tank growth are of significant importance for advancing the construction of enterprise think tanks and the broader new-type think tank system in China. [Method/Process] In response to challenges such as limited influence and unclear development trajectories confronting Chinese enterprise think tanks, this study puts forward recommendations grounded in thorough analysis of national strategies for building a new-type think tank system with Chinese characteristics, together with lessons drawn from the practices and experiences of prominent enterprise think tanks. [Results/Conclusion] The proposed measures include: aligning self-positioning with national development requirements; adapting to the data and information era; establishing open and interactive organizational structures; developing scientific and effective research paradigms; prioritizing the transformation and dissemination of research outputs; innovating talent cultivation mechanisms; and initiating enterprise think tank alliances.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Orientation and Development of Enterprise Think Tanks in the System of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

Interpreting national policy thinking on think tank construction and studying the development path of enterprise think tanks are of great significance for advancing the construction of enterprise think tanks and the broader system of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. Addressing the challenges of insufficient influence and unclear development pathways facing China's enterprise think tanks, this paper proposes recommendations based on an in-depth analysis of national strategic thinking regarding the construction of a new think tank system with Chinese characteristics, drawing upon the practices and experiences of renowned enterprise think tanks. The findings suggest that enterprise think tanks should strengthen their development by: (1) identifying their positioning according to national development requirements; (2) adapting to the characteristics of the data and information era; (3) establishing an open and interactive organizational system; (4) building a scientific and effective research model; (5) emphasizing the transformation and dissemination of research outputs; (6) innovating talent team construction; and (7) organizing and establishing enterprise think tank alliances.

Keywords: think tank; enterprise think tank; Chinese characteristics; think tank system; orientation

Classification Number: C932

Think tanks are organizations that conduct policy-oriented research and analysis on domestic and international issues and provide consulting services to facilitate informed decision-making by policymakers and the public on public policy issues [1]. Enterprise think tanks currently lack a clear definition, but are generally understood as corporate intelligence decision-making and execution systems—comprehensive, multi-disciplinary organizations composed of experts and professional institutions that provide optimal theories, strategies, methods, ideas, or other related services to corporate decision-makers on issues including R&D, manufacturing, marketing, human resources, finance, law, and public relations. In January 2015, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” [2] (hereinafter referred to as the “Opinions”). How to understand the definition and connotation of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, and what role enterprise think tanks should play in this construction, are critical questions requiring focused research. This paper proposes the positioning of enterprise think tanks within the system of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics based on a summary and analysis of the development of China's think tanks and enterprise think tanks.

1.2 Development History

China's think tank development has evolved from simple to mature, and from singular to diverse, manifesting in two key aspects. First, the number of think

tanks has continuously increased. According to the “Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” compiled annually by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania, the number of Chinese think tanks grew from 74 in 2008 to 435 in 2016—an increase of nearly sixfold—ranking second worldwide, behind only the United States with 1,835 think tanks. Second, the development pattern of think tanks has continuously evolved [3]. China’s think tank development has roughly experienced three stages: (1) 1978–1985, when official think tanks developed unprecedentedly and expanded rapidly, with the establishment of central-level think tanks such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Development Research Center of the State Council; (2) 1986–1999, when official think tanks developed comprehensively and private think tanks emerged, particularly after the establishment of the socialist market economy system in 1992, which provided fertile ground for private think tanks, leading to the founding of influential institutions such as the Unirule Institute of Economics and Horizon Research Consultancy Group; and (3) 2000–present, characterized by rapid development and continuously improving standardization, with unqualified private think tanks gradually being forced to transform or disappear, resulting in a diversified landscape with multiple types of think tanks coexisting.

2 Current Development Status of China’s Enterprise Think Tanks

Enterprise think tanks serve as corporate intelligence agencies—the “brain” of enterprises. For a long time, they have provided decision-making support and operational management assistance, playing important roles in corporate strategic development, professional research, and operational management, and making outstanding contributions to sustainable corporate development. As enterprise think tanks have evolved and social demands have grown, they have actively undertaken more social projects while helping enterprises generate profits. In 2016, AliResearch proposed that in the Internet era, even a small think tank can exert significant influence; whereas traditional think tanks primarily serve decision-makers, think tanks in the “Internet+” era will fully realize their social service functions [4].

Despite their significant advantages in professional research, China’s enterprise think tanks still lack influence compared to other types. According to the “2015 China Think Tank Report: Influence Ranking and Policy Recommendations” published by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, China’s think tanks were categorized into four types: party/government/military think tanks, research institute think tanks, university think tanks, and social think tanks. Enterprise think tanks were not classified separately but were grouped under research institutes and social think tanks, with no enterprise think tanks appearing in any influence rankings. The situation improved in 2016. The “2016 China Think Tank Report: Influence Ranking and Policy Recommendations” divided China’s think tanks into five categories: think tanks directly under

ministries and commissions, local party/government think tanks, local research institute think tanks, university think tanks, and social (enterprise) think tanks. Three enterprise think tanks made the influence ranking list: CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute, Electric Power Planning & Engineering Institute, and State Grid Energy Research Institute.

In 2015, the pilot construction of national high-end think tanks officially launched, with 25 institutions selected as the first batch of pilot units, among which only one was an enterprise think tank—CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute—accounting for 4% of the total. In 2016, the China Think Tank Index, developed collaboratively by the Center for Think Tank Studies and Evaluation at Nanjing University and the Think Tank Research and Publishing Center of Guangming Daily, became China’s largest think tank data management and evaluation system with complete intellectual property rights. Among the first batch of 489 think tanks included in the index, only two were enterprise think tanks—AliResearch and CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute—representing a mere 0.4%.

3.1 Connotation of the System of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

The “Opinions” state that the construction of a new think tank system with Chinese characteristics should serve the decision-making needs of the Party and government, focus on policy research and consulting, and be oriented toward modernization, the world, and the future to better serve the overall work of the Party and the state. “Chinese characteristics” means adhering to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, always taking the protection of national and people’s interests as the fundamental starting point, voicing independent “Chinese voices,” proposing “Chinese solutions,” and shaping a positive “Chinese image.” “New types” means innovating think tanks’ concepts, organizational forms, operational mechanisms, institutional norms, and research theories—not simply copying foreign think tank models, but applying modern management concepts and models suited to China’s national conditions [5].

3.2 Construction of the System of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

Rational classification and accurate positioning of think tanks are essential for their development. Unclear classification and positioning limit quality improvement. In a rational think tank system, different categories have their own focus areas, effectively avoiding redundant research and disorderly competition [6]. Based on think tanks’ degree of affiliation and characteristics, combined with the national strategic positioning for think tank development, China’s new think tank system can be divided into five types: party/government/military think tanks, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Party School/Administrative Institute think tanks, university think tanks, social think tanks, and enterprise

think tanks, with enterprise think tanks studied as a separate category.

Each type has distinct focuses: party/government/military think tanks directly serve party/government/military construction; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Party School/Administrative Institute think tanks focus on major practical issues in national governance capacity and economic/social development, conducting national condition research and decision-making consulting; university think tanks cultivate interdisciplinary talent from the student stage, dedicating themselves to basic theoretical research, multi-disciplinary comprehensive research, and guiding public opinion; social think tanks maintain close ties with the public, reflecting their most direct, realistic, and urgent public needs, and voice independent perspectives [8]; and enterprise think tanks effectively support enterprise and industry development. These five types complement each other and form synergies to serve the overall work of the Party and the state, as illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

3.3 Functions and Positioning of Enterprise Think Tanks

Given the current unbalanced development of China's think tanks, should enterprise think tanks be abandoned in favor of other types? The answer is no. Should enterprise think tanks completely copy the development models of other types? The answer is also no.

3.3.1 Necessity of Enterprise Think Tank Construction

Enterprise development requires intellectual support and cannot rely entirely on external consulting agencies. Enterprise think tanks better understand their own enterprises. As the “internal brain” of an enterprise, they serve as the primary decision-support force, while external expert teams and consulting agencies serve as the “external brain” providing auxiliary support. This organic combination of internal and external structures facilitates more scientific corporate decision-making. Building enterprise think tanks also benefits the protection of corporate intellectual property and enables long-term, continuous online support for enterprises—something external consulting agencies cannot provide.

Industry development also requires intellectual support, where enterprise think tanks have distinct advantages. Positioned within an industry, enterprise think tanks have more thorough understanding of industry status and future development. With abundant industry expert resources and professional research accumulation, they offer more practical value for promoting industry development.

Enterprise think tanks will play important roles in deepening reform of state-owned enterprises. Since 2015, marked by the issuance of the “Guiding Opinions on Deepening Reform of State-Owned Enterprises” by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, China's SOE reform has entered a new phase facing a series of prominent contradictions and problems. President Xi Jinping has pointed out that “the more arduous and heavy the reform and development

tasks, the greater the need for strong intellectual support.” For state-owned enterprises, enterprise think tanks are the backbone of corporate reform and development.

3.3.2 Functions of Enterprise Think Tanks

The “Opinions” propose to “support state-owned and state-controlled enterprises to establish new types of think tanks that closely integrate industry, academia, research, and application, focusing on serving industries by conducting decision-making consulting research on SOE reform, industrial restructuring, industrial development planning, industrial technology direction, industrial policy formulation, and major engineering projects,” providing direction and fundamental guidance for China’s enterprise think tank development.

First, enterprise think tanks should promote a development model that closely integrates industry, academia, research, and application, systematically combining production, learning, research, practice, and application to form organic connections across all links. This involves: (1) uniting industrial entities and academic institutions to leverage respective advantages, 打通成果流通渠道, and forming a complete industry-academia-research-application chain; and (2) tapping internal potential to leverage enterprise think tanks’ own capabilities, using research and consulting as the core to radiate toward training, practice, and other directions, forming an organic whole of industry-academia-research-application.

Second, enterprise think tanks should respect their own characteristics and focus on serving enterprise and industry development. As they belong to enterprises and are rooted in industries, they should pursue professional development, concentrating on supporting enterprise and industry development. This includes: (1) strategic support—interpreting national policies, analyzing social phenomena, and examining historical trajectories to propose strategic routes for future enterprise and industry development; and (2) technical support—fully leveraging professional advantages to propose solutions and strategies for technical issues in enterprise and industry development and guide project implementation.

3.3.3 Positioning of Enterprise Think Tanks

Enterprise think tanks are important forces for implementing national strategies and boosting industry development. Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the central government has proposed a series of major strategic deployments including the “Five-Sphere Integrated Plan,” “Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy,” the five development concepts, and the “Belt and Road” initiative. Enterprises, especially central SOEs, constitute an important foundation for the Party’s governance and national prosperity, mostly operating in key industries and sectors vital to national security and people’s livelihoods. They play a pivotal role in promoting national economic and social development and are the main force for implementing national strategies. Enterprise think tanks should actively

conduct targeted and innovative theoretical research and practical applications around national strategic needs, promote scientific industry development, and advance the implementation of national work deployments.

Enterprise think tanks are important forces for driving corporate innovation and development. China's economy is currently experiencing a triple overlap of growth speed shifting, structural transformation, and power conversion, with industries facing tremendous pressure and challenges. This places higher demands on enterprises to deepen reform and strengthen innovation. Enterprise think tanks should deeply 洞察外部形势变化 and provide strong intellectual support for enterprises to overcome development challenges and achieve sustained healthy growth.

Enterprise think tanks serve as important bridges linking enterprises with government, society, and other stakeholders. As the central hub for corporate external communication, they should maintain close contact with government departments, monitor policy developments, actively propose policy recommendations, build a policy system that promotes scientific development, and secure favorable policy support for enterprise development. They should listen to voices from all social sectors, output research results and viewpoints, form positive interactions with the outside world, and build a favorable development environment.

Enterprise think tanks should seek win-win cooperation with other think tanks based on different division of responsibilities. By learning from other think tanks' good operational models and research results, providing targeted research consulting, conducting joint research, and establishing mutual research bases, enterprise think tanks can cooperate and integrate with other think tanks to form a system of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics serving the Party and state's development priorities. The specific positioning of enterprise think tanks is illustrated in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

4.1.1 Overview

AliResearch [9], established in April 2007, has built a complete organizational structure and operational model relying on Alibaba Group. It has accumulated vast amounts of data directly related to commodity circulation entities including consumers, suppliers, distributors, and wholesalers, producing highly valuable research results and decision-making recommendations through analysis. In 2016, Alibaba Group's revenue reached 101.1 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 32.7%, making it China's highest per-capita productivity internet company.

4.1.2 Key Practices

In terms of strategic objectives, AliResearch focuses on its core resources and era characteristics, clearly positioning itself as a "think tank platform in the data

technology era.” Relying on Alibaba’s business ecosystem, it obtains massive first-hand data resources to extract beneficial intelligence information.

In operational approaches, it openly collaborates closely with top scholars and institutions in the industry, launching the “Ali Open Research Program” and building an online docking platform for “online merchants + researchers.”

In research system construction, it has built a research framework comprising two research centers, an advisory team, an academic committee, and multiple research communities, called the “big platform + small front end,” which greatly enhances research efficiency.

In innovation development, it intensively cultivates its original data at scale, launching five core data products including the Alibaba Online Shopping Price Index and Consumer Confidence Index. Through data analysis, it understands enterprise and market development changes, providing scientific support for corporate decision-making.

In results dissemination, it promotes research findings and enhances influence through multiple channels including the Ali Case Workshop, *Ali Business Review*, and high-level forums.

4.2.1 Overview

CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute [10][11][12] is a directly affiliated research institution of CNPC, primarily engaged in trend analysis and strategic research on petroleum industry development, petroleum technology, petroleum economics, petroleum markets, overseas investment environments, and policies and regulations, providing extensive energy information consulting services. Its predecessor was established in 1964 as the Petroleum Industry Ministry’s Intelligence Research Office.

4.2.2 Key Practices

In strategic objectives, it proposes to initially build a world-class comprehensive international energy company think tank by 2020, further playing a core leading role in national energy policy formulation and CNPC’s decision-making support system, and enjoying higher reputation and influence in domestic and international energy industries.

In operational approaches, it upholds the development concept of “open institute,” signing strategic cooperation agreements with multiple domestic and international research institutions and forming mutual visit mechanisms with internationally renowned organizations. In 2016, it sent 44 groups with over 100 person-times abroad for conferences, research, and training, and received more than 50 visiting groups with over 200 person-times from high-end international think tanks, energy organizations, and oil companies, conducting joint research with institutions from the US, India, Japan, South Korea, and other countries.

In research system construction, it has improved governance mechanisms and institutional systems compatible with national high-end think tank construction. According to development needs, it has established six research centers and continuously improved 32 key disciplines, enhancing research quality through the development of professional laboratories, tool method models, database clusters, and characteristic value chains. It has established a national high-end think tank academic committee to advance high-end think tank construction using external expert resources.

In innovation development, it emphasizes information and data research and management in the petroleum and petrochemical industries, building China's largest petroleum and petrochemical information resource development center with stable information channels established with over 120 domestic and international institutions. It has launched the construction of a "global energy information system based on big data," independently developing more than 20 databases to 洞察石油行业发展走向 through information data analysis.

In talent cultivation, it has improved effective incentive mechanisms, launched pilot programs for dual management and professional sequences, emphasized cultivating international talent, and enabled employees to work in international organizations and rotate through overseas projects.

In results dissemination, it actively voices opinions and promotes results through 成果发布会, hosting major conferences, and participating in international forums.

5.1 Identify Positioning According to National Development Requirements

Case studies of renowned enterprise think tanks demonstrate that clear positioning is essential for development. The "Opinions" propose that "by 2020, we should coordinate the development of party/government departments, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Party schools/administrative institutes, universities, military, research institutes, and enterprise/social think tanks to form a new think tank system with Chinese characteristics featuring clear positioning, distinctive features, moderate scale, and rational layout." In this system, enterprise think tanks should coordinate development with other types through rational division of labor, emphasizing the 发挥特色专业领域研究实力. Enterprise think tank development should avoid two extremes: neither detaching from enterprises nor becoming closed off within them. They should establish a funding mechanism primarily based on enterprise sponsorship, combined with multi-party investment from government departments, strategic partners, and other social entities, thereby better supporting enterprise and industry development through serving diversified project clients.

5.2 Fully Adapt to Data and Information Era Characteristics

McKinsey states: “Data has penetrated every industry and business function today, becoming an important production factor. The mining and application of massive data 预示着新一波生产率增长和消费者盈余浪潮的到来。” Enterprise think tanks should actively adapt to the “Internet + big data” era by 畅通数据信息获取渠道 through joining authoritative alliances and establishing strategic partnerships. They should build large software platforms and databases, effectively applying mathematical models and data mining technologies to process and analyze data, conducting forward-looking research and 预判企业发展趋势与外部形势变化. They should also strengthen professional laboratory construction to support research with information technology.

5.3 Establish an Open and Interactive Organizational System

Enterprise think tanks should build a “strong core, large platform, broad collaboration” concentric-circle operational model with the enterprise think tank as the core research force and extensive participation from domestic and international institutions across multiple fields. They should construct a matrix management structure integrating research fields, disciplines, and administrative management. They should build external exchange and cooperation models featuring global vision, diversified forms, and varied content, cooperating and communicating with government, enterprises, industry institutions, think tank organizations, media, and the public around important national strategies, expanding academic exchanges, expert visits, forum participation, field research, project collaboration, talent exchange, expert training, and information sharing.

5.4 Build a Scientific and Effective Research Model

Enterprise think tanks should establish multi-channel, multi-form research topic selection mechanisms combining government and headquarters group company 定向命题, strategic partner topic selection, social research project bidding, and independent project establishment, closely focusing on national, industry, and corporate strategic needs. They should build research models combining basic and consulting research, internal collaboration and external cooperation, enterprise service and social service, core research and social hotspot research, and localized and globalized issue research. They should implement a “fixed department + flexible team” research management model with two-way selection between project leaders and participants to achieve optimal resource allocation.

5.5 Emphasize Research Output Transformation and Dissemination

Enterprise think tanks should deeply 挖掘专业优势 and fully 发挥组织平台, research platform, communication platform, and 成果转化平台的作用, providing major research consulting 成果 for national policies, industry strategic planning, and corporate management decisions while promoting exchange and 推广. They should build a regular mechanism for research 成果 “theorization, systematization, modeling, and publicization,” promoting the formation of systematic and scientific theoretical research models, special reports, consulting reports, decision-making suggestions, papers and monographs, software patents, databases, training materials, and other research outputs, and promoting them through internal reporting, release conferences, international forums, meetings, websites, public accounts, and other channels. They should expand 成果转化渠道 connecting scientific and technological achievements with markets through establishing practice bases and incorporate research 成果转化贡献 into evaluation systems.

5.6 Innovate Talent Team Construction

Enterprise think tanks should establish well-ordered working mechanisms in all aspects of talent management including selection, utilization, retention, and cultivation. In talent recruitment, they should implement “double high-end” – selecting talent from high starting points and introducing experts at high levels. In talent cultivation, they should implement “double T-shaped” –developing both research and management capabilities, and mastering both professional technical research and economic/social management research. In talent promotion, they should implement “dual channels” –establishing two career growth and advancement paths for management and technical positions. In talent incentives, they should implement “two-way selection” –providing diverse, flexible incentive options including annual salary systems, position-based profit-sharing, project-based profit-sharing, and job rotation systems.

5.7 Organize Enterprise Think Tank Alliances

In May 2016, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission organized central enterprises and their think tanks to establish the Central Enterprise Think Tank Alliance, aiming to improve state capital efficiency and enhance SOE vitality, serving the reform and development of state-owned assets. State Grid Corporation served as the first council chair unit. Currently, the alliance has held two council meetings and one thematic seminar on “Issues in the Practice of Developing Mixed-Ownership Economy in State-Owned Enterprises,” conducting eight research projects on key issues such as mixed-ownership reform, incentive mechanisms for scientific and technological achievement transformation, and modern enterprise systems in central enterprises. It has published multiple issues of internal publications including *Central Enterprise Think Tank Information* and *Central Enterprise Think Tank Special Reports*, providing valu-

able suggestions for SOE reform and development. Drawing on this experience, we recommend organizing specific enterprise think tank groups to form different types of think tank alliances oriented toward common goals, building consensus, integrating resources, and innovating working mechanisms to form synergistic development support. Alliances should build comprehensive, high-level exchange platforms to strengthen extensive exchanges and deep sharing among member units and in-depth exchanges with government departments, renowned think tanks, international institutions, and authoritative experts. They should build cooperation platforms to deepen collaboration among member units in strategy, resources, channels, talent, and technology, promoting cooperation between enterprises and research institutes, private enterprises, and multinational corporations. They should build research platforms to conduct collaborative research on major common issues facing enterprise development and strategic problems in industry innovation, better serving national decision-making and industry development.

Author Contributions:

Zheng Haifeng: Designed the research framework and guided paper writing and revision.

Chai Ying: Collected materials, conducted research, and wrote the initial draft.

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