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Research on Issues and Countermeasures of Local Think Tanks Serving Scientific Decision-Making: Postprint

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Abstract

[目的/意义] As the development of new-type think tanks to serve scientific decision-making has become a new focus of society, local think tanks are currently constrained in effectively playing their roles in providing policy advice and participating in governance due to the lack of organizational guidance, reporting channels, processing and feedback mechanisms, and evaluation and incentive systems. [方法/过程] To address these issues, the research team conducted a specialized investigation into the construction of new-type think tanks, taking Shandong Province as a case study, and held discussions and seminars with heads of relevant provincial departments, as well as some universities, research institutes, enterprises, and social organizations. [结果/结论] In response to the aforementioned problems, the study proposes countermeasures and suggestions, including constructing a local new-type think tank system, building a think tank circle within party and government departments, improving evaluation and incentive systems for think tank talent, perfecting funding management mechanisms, and exploring the establishment of decision-making advisory committees.

Full Text

Problems and Countermeasures of Local Think Tanks Serving Scientific Decision-making —Taking Shandong Province as an Example

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] While the construction of new types of think tanks to serve scientific decision-making has become a new social focus, local think tanks currently face constraints including lack of organizational guidance, reporting channels, processing and feedback mechanisms, and evaluation and incentive systems, which limit their effectiveness in offering policy advice and participating in governance. **[Method/Process]** To address these issues, our research group conducted a special investigation on the construction of new think tanks in Shandong Province, holding in-depth discussions with responsible officials from relevant provincial departments, universities, research institutes, enterprises, and social organizations. **[Result/Conclusion]** In response to the identified problems, we propose countermeasures including constructing a local new-type think tank system, building think tank circles for party and government departments, improving talent evaluation and incentive mechanisms, refining funding management systems, and exploring the establishment of a decision-making advisory committee.

Keywords: local think tank; scientific decision-making; Shandong Province; management mechanism; evaluation and incentive

Classification Number: C932.6

New-type think tanks represent an important support for scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making by the Party and government, representing a new institutional arrangement prioritized by the central government since the 18th Party Congress. The most significant difference from Western think tanks and ancient Chinese advisors lies in the fact that Chinese characteristic new-type think tanks must uphold Party leadership and the correct political direction, focus on overall situations and central tasks, and serve the scientific decision-making of the Party and government [1][2].

To implement the decisions and deployments of the central government and Shandong Provincial Party Committee, the “Research on New-Type Think Tank Construction” project team conducted a special investigation on new-type think tank construction in Shandong Province. The survey covered institutions including the Shandong Provincial Party School, Shandong Academy of Governance, Shandong Academy of Social Sciences, Shandong Academy of Sciences, Shandong Association for Science and Technology, Shandong Academy of Macroeconomic Research, Shandong Provincial Social Science Planning Office, Shandong Provincial Soft Science Office, Shandong Provincial Institute of Fiscal Science, as well as Shandong University, Shandong Normal University, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan University, Lushan Economic Research Institute, and Shandong Lunan Economic Development Research Institute. Through discussions and in-depth exchanges with responsible officials from these provincial departments and various universities, research institutes, enterprises, and social organizations, we concluded that local new-type

think tank construction has achieved a good start with active participation from all sectors. However, significant difficulties and obstacles remain, particularly regarding how think tank outputs can inform decision-making, which should be prioritized and resolved in future work to enable think tanks to better serve decision-making processes.

In 2015, both national and Shandong provincial governments successively issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” and the “Implementation Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” making unified deployments and specific arrangements for new-type think tank construction. All sectors of society responded actively, with many enterprises, universities, research institutes, and civil organizations transforming into think tanks, making the construction of new-type think tanks to serve Party and government scientific decision-making a new social focus.

1. Current Status of Think Tank Development in Shandong Province

1.1 Research Institutions Accelerating Transformation into Think Tanks The core function of think tanks is policy consultation. Consequently, social science research institutions have shifted their focus toward serving decision-making. The Shandong Academy of Social Sciences aims to become Shandong’s premier think tank, implementing a dual-wheel drive development strategy of basic theoretical research and applied policy research, complemented by a “Social Science Innovation Project,” striving to build an important “think tank” and “brain trust” for the Provincial Party Committee and government [3]. The Shandong Academy of Macroeconomic Research (hereafter referred to as Shandong Macro Academy) targets the goal of building a think tank with “status in Shandong and influence nationwide,” formulating and implementing 22 articles on “precise services” to produce “useful and effective” policy recommendations. Science and technology research institutions have also begun strengthening their decision-making consultation functions. The Shandong Academy of Sciences implemented a “Science and Technology Innovation Project,” highlighting the “Technology+” feature with science and technology development strategy as the core focus, striving to build a high-end science and technology think tank. An increasing number of universities have joined the ranks of decision-making research and consultation. The Development Research Institute of Shandong University focuses primarily on the practical aspects of Shandong’s economic and social development, serving as a “think tank” and providing intellectual support. In early 2016, the Shandong Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department organized the selection of the first batch of provincial key think tank pilots, with 96 eligible units applying province-wide and 15 ultimately selected, while many other universities, enterprises, and social organizations are actively striving to meet application standards.

1.2 Accelerated Construction of Think Tank Talent Teams Think tank construction requires talent as the foundation. Shandong Province issued the “Implementation Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of High-End Think Tank Talent Teams,” planning to build, within 3-5 years and around six major areas including economic development, political construction, cultural development, social development, ecological civilization, and Party building, a high-end think tank talent team familiar with provincial and local conditions, skilled in policy research, and possessing professional qualities, adopting a “Chief Expert + Team” development model. In 2016, Shandong Province selected its first batch of 183 high-end think tank talents, including 17 chief experts and 58 position experts. Meanwhile, some universities and academy institutes have also strengthened the introduction and cultivation of think tank talents. Relying on the “Social Science Innovation Project,” the Shandong Academy of Social Sciences introduced 19 high-level think tank talents with advanced degrees within approximately one year, representing the highest level and quantity of talent introduction since the academy’s establishment. The Shandong Academy of Sciences selected 20 top domestic science and technology policy experts and 8 internationally renowned think tank experts to build a first-class domestic science and technology think tank expert team. The Health Management and Policy Research Center of Shandong University selected several policy research backbones for key cultivation through the Shandong University-Karolinska Institute Global Health Research Center.

1.3 Accelerated Exploration and Innovation of Think Tank Systems and Mechanisms New-type think tanks require new systems and mechanisms for support. The Shandong Academy of Social Sciences established a research organization method centered on “innovation units—innovation teams—innovation positions,” innovating personnel management systems by implementing classified management for innovation team and non-innovation team members, strict “access” and “exit” systems, and an innovative compensation system combining process-based and goal-based rewards. The Shandong Macro Academy successively established internal evaluation and comparison systems, professional technical personnel performance assessment systems, and performance target management and notification systems, making decision-making application the primary indicator for performance evaluation. The Lushang Economic Research Institute achieved “five diversifications” in funding sources, talent incentives, achievement transformation, financial support, and “revolving door” personnel utilization through the establishment of a corporate, market-oriented, and professional operation system. The Lunan Economic Development Research Institute established a council system, fully leveraging the flexible and free advantages of social organization think tanks in business operations, personnel management, and financial management, fully stimulating think tank development vitality. In July 2015, the Shandong Academy of Social Sciences initiated the establishment of the “Shandong Think Tank Alliance,” which has grown to over 50 member units, gradually forming a think tank community for

talent exchange, cooperative development, and decision-making services.

1.4 Accelerated Production of Think Tank Research Outputs Think tank achievements have begun to demonstrate effectiveness. The Shandong Academy of Social Sciences focused on expanding the influence of think tank outputs, publishing 15 achievements in central mainstream media in 2015, representing a 200% increase from 2014 and achieving monthly “Shandong voices” in central mainstream media. Simultaneously, the academy conducted provincial condition research, submitting numerous research reports to Provincial Party Committee and government leaders for reference, obtaining 27 provincial-level or higher instructions in 2015, a 56% increase from 2014. The Shandong Macro Academy founded and published the “Shandong Macroeconomic Research Report,” “Shandong Service Industry Development Report,” and “Shandong Regional Economic Development Report,” regularly releasing “Macroeconomic Dynamics” and “Research Achievements Special Report,” with multiple special reports directly submitted to the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, and nearly 30 research reports receiving important instructions from provincial leaders. The Shandong Association for Science and Technology submitted 43 “Suggestions from Scientific and Technological Workers” and 5 “Academician Suggestion Express” documents, receiving 21 instructions from provincial-level or higher leaders, with multiple research findings entering Provincial Party Committee and government decision-making and deployment processes.

2. Constraints and Problems in Effective Think Tank Functioning

The fundamental value of think tanks lies in serving scientific decision-making. Our investigation revealed that think tank participation in Party and government decision-making consultation faces several constraints that prevent local think tanks from fully realizing their potential.

2.1 Lack of Effective Organizational Guidance for Think Tank Research First, the new-type think tank system remains incomplete. Currently, new-type think tank construction has just begun, and the further planning, layout, and coordinated development of comprehensive and specialized think tanks, official and civil think tanks, and strategic and tactical think tanks have not been fully clarified [4]. There is even a lack of high-level think tank layout in important areas such as innovation development and marine science and technology. Second, think tank research lacks effective organizational coordination. At present, various think tanks have their own advantages and specialties with different research focuses. Many think tank experts select topics based on personal interests, and most think tanks operate independently and tackle problems alone, lacking coordination and joint operations. This results in research findings that are either insufficiently in-depth or incomplete, while also creating redundant research and resource waste [5]. Third, think tank research directions lack effective guidance. Currently, there is no comprehensive communication

and supply-demand docking mechanism between decision-making departments and think tanks. Decision-making departments do not understand what think tank institutions can do, while think tank institutions struggle to grasp what decision-making departments care about, causing insufficient focus and strong randomness in think tank research directions that deviate and disconnect from government decision-making needs [6].

2.2 Lack of Effective Channels for Submitting Think Tank Outputs

Except for a few directly-affiliated think tank institutions such as the Provincial Party School, Academy of Governance, and Provincial Macro Academy, the vast majority of think tank institutions including university-affiliated research centers (institutes), research institutions, and enterprise and civil group-affiliated research centers lack smooth channels for directly submitting research results [7]. Think tank research outputs must either be submitted through indirect channels or relevant departments, involving considerable effort and even leading to the embarrassing situation where expert suggestions are submitted as petition letters, or they simply give up on submission and instead publish academic papers and monographs. This results in many excellent think tank outputs not entering the scope of Party and government decision-making reference, severely restricting the decision-making consultation service role that local think tank institutions should play.

2.3 Absence of Processing and Feedback Mechanisms for Think Tank Outputs

First, there is a lack of specialized institutions for receiving and processing think tank outputs. Currently, Party and government organs, people's congresses, and political consultative conferences have not established specialized institutions to receive and process think tank outputs, thus failing to effectively screen, classify, and submit these outputs. Second, there is a lack of processing mechanisms for think tank outputs. Leaders at all levels receive numerous reference documents and expert suggestions daily, with volumes increasing continuously. However, due to limited energy and time, leaders cannot review and respond to each document in detail. Coupled with the lack of corresponding screening and processing mechanisms, many excellent think tank outputs are not properly handled or are even omitted and discarded. Third, feedback mechanisms for think tank outputs have not been established. Think tank experts are eager to know whether their research findings have entered decision-making deployment, whether they have played a role, and what their actual effects are. However, after submitting think tank outputs, there is often no follow-up. Except for some think tank outputs that receive leadership instructions, most have no subsequent feedback, dampening the enthusiasm of think tank experts [8].

2.4 Absence of Funding Management Systems Aligned with Think Tank Characteristics

Currently, think tanks primarily conduct policy consultation through project commissioning or bidding, yet current research funding

management systems have become a focal constraint on think tank construction. First, funding management is overly administrative, completely incorporating research funding management into administrative funding management tracks, which does not conform to think tank research patterns and characteristics, resulting in prominent problems of funding being “difficult to spend” or “unable to be spent.” Second, funding management systems are dogmatic, reducing research funding to simple “travel expenses” and “printing costs,” causing many researchers to continuously travel and conduct duplicate research simply to reimburse expenses, while reimbursement requires both accommodation and transportation expenses to be present simultaneously, lacking flexibility. Third, funding management systems are conservative, failing to fully recognize the value of intellectual labor by think tank experts. Government decision-making consultation project funding has not been included in the scope of scientific and technological achievement transformation, cannot be used as intellectual compensation for experts, and lacks effective funding performance incentives. The absence of appropriate funding management systems seriously affects the enthusiasm of think tank researchers [9][10].

2.5 Absence of Evaluation and Incentive Mechanisms for Think Tanks

First, there is a lack of scientific and reasonable think tank evaluation and assessment systems. Current evaluation still uses traditional indicators such as papers, project funding, patent quantities, and awards as standards for think tank talent evaluation, without including think tank outputs in evaluation criteria, which seriously mismatches the functional positioning requirements of think tanks [11]. Second, there is a lack of selection and reward methods for think tank outputs. Without officially unified selection and reward methods for think tank outputs, the effectiveness and standards of think tank participation in decision-making are difficult to determine. For those that have established such methods, leadership instructions are primarily used as the sole criterion for measuring the application level of think tank outputs. Third, there is no establishment of outstanding think tank achievement awards. Although think tank talents have made tremendous contributions to decision-making consultation services, the absence of specialized awards like outstanding think tank achievement awards means their outputs often fail to gain academic recognition, making it difficult to obtain professional technical titles matching their decision-making consultation value and limiting them in awards, selections, and project approval reviews [12].

3. Countermeasures and Suggestions for Better Think Tank Functioning

To fully implement the Provincial Party Committee and government’ s “Implementation Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” adhere to problem-oriented approaches, and focus on breaking through obstacles to local think tank development to better realize their proper role, we propose the following countermeasures and

suggestions.

3.1 Coordinating the Construction of a New-Type Think Tank System with Shandong Characteristics Formulate the “Overall Plan for New-Type Think Tank Construction in Shandong Province,” closely focusing on the development concepts of “innovation, coordination, green, openness, and sharing” and major regional development strategies. Through coordinated planning and layout and optimized resource allocation, avoid redundant construction and disorderly development to form a Shandong new-type think tank system that is reasonably laid out, distinctly characterized, coordinatively developed, and powerfully supportive. First, coordinate the construction of comprehensive and specialized think tanks. Actively promote the construction of comprehensive pilot think tanks such as the Provincial Party School, Academy of Social Sciences, and Academy of Sciences; strengthen science and technology innovation think tanks and blue economy think tanks; accelerate the construction of cultural think tanks and people’s livelihood think tanks; and vigorously cultivate green development think tanks and open development think tanks to provide comprehensive support for creating Shandong’s characteristic advantages. Second, coordinate the construction of official and civil think tanks. Promote the construction of official and semi-official think tanks including Party and government departments, academies of social sciences, party schools, academies of governance, and universities and research institutes to enhance their policy consultation and decision-making service capabilities. Regulate and guide the healthy and orderly development of enterprise think tanks and social think tanks, research and formulate the “Measures for the Development of Civil Think Tanks in Shandong Province,” encourage civil think tanks to utilize their unique advantages and identities to participate in decision-making consultation research and evaluation demonstrations, and support civil think tanks in providing multi-dimensional perspectives for Party and government decision-making. Third, coordinate the construction of strategic and tactical think tanks. Strategic think tanks refer to institutions that conduct continuous research and provide decision-making consultation on forward-looking, long-term, and reserve issues, with the key task of producing ideological and innovative achievements that function in medium- and long-term development strategies. Tactical think tanks refer to institutions that conduct targeted research and provide decision-making consultation on current specific, short-term, and urgent issues, with the key task of strengthening planning and consideration for professional fields and regional development levels.

3.2 Establishing a New Operational Mechanism Centered on Party and Government Departments with Coordinated Interaction Among Various Think Tanks To address the current fragmented and isolated situation of think tank research, focus on building “three main lines” to organize and integrate various think tanks, connecting points into lines and lines into surfaces, opening up channels for think tank advice and suggestions, and effec-

tively forming a new-type think tank organizational operation mechanism that serves Party and government decision-making as its purpose and policy research consultation as its main direction. First, regarding global, strategic, and critical issues, fully leverage the central role of the Provincial Party Committee Policy Research Office and the Provincial Government Research Office (collectively referred to as the “Two Offices”) in serving important decisions of the Provincial Party Committee and government. Establish a joint research mechanism and important task delegation mechanism between the Two Offices and think tanks province-wide, gradually forming a major decision-making service think tank group centered on the Two Offices and strongly supported by numerous strategic and tactical think tanks. Second, regarding functional department decision-making areas, take various government decision-making departments such as development and reform, economic and information technology, education, science and technology, civil affairs, and human resources and social security as the core, adhere to serving central work, meet functional department decision-making needs, and form individual think tank circles with official think tanks as the main body and multiple think tanks providing strong support. Each government decision-making department, facing its respective decision-making areas, should fully utilize its own platform carriers, project plans, channel opportunities, and other resources to strengthen the gathering and integration of relevant think tanks, enhance organizational guidance for think tank research, accelerate think tank base construction and talent cultivation, and continuously improve the level of specialized high-end think tank decision-making consultation services. Third, regarding fundamental, theoretical, and long-term issues, fully leverage the role of various Shandong think tank group organizations and platforms such as the Provincial Federation of Social Sciences, Provincial Association for Science and Technology, Provincial Think Tank Alliance, research associations, societies, and industry associations to effectively organize and guide universities, research institutions, enterprises, and social think tanks in conducting free exploration, continuous tracking, exchange and integration, and joint research, continuously enhancing decision-making influence and public influence to build a local new-type think tank community.

3.3 Improving Think Tank Talent Evaluation and Incentive Systems

First, issue guidance opinions on think tank talent evaluation. Establish and improve evaluation methods recognized by decision-making departments, society, and industries that align with think tank talent characteristics. Perfect think tank talent evaluation standards and methods, overcoming tendencies to focus solely on academic degrees, professional titles, and papers. Recognition of think tank personnel should be reflected more in decision-making influence, such as the number of times think tank outputs receive leadership instructions and the frequency and level of think tank talents’ participation in government decision-making consultation. Second, establish think tank talent assessment and promotion mechanisms. Explore the establishment of management systems for think tank talent employment, professional title evaluation, and compensa-

tion, researching and formulating specific measures to incorporate Party and government adoption as an important basis for assessing researchers' work and promoting professional technical positions. Increase the evaluation weight of think tank talents' service to Party and government decision-making, including work tasks, influence, and achievements in workload statistics, professional title evaluation and employment, position promotion, talent programs, and commendations and rewards. Third, establish an outstanding think tank achievement reward system. Increase the reward intensity for major decision-making application achievements in provincial social science excellent achievement awards and provincial science and technology awards, research the establishment of special think tank achievement rewards, and provide reward commendations and post-subsidy funding support for outstanding decision-making consultation achievements. Fourth, establish a think tank talent "revolving door" system. Break constraints such as household registration, region, identity, academic degree, personnel relations, and age, explore the establishment of talent mobility channels among Party and government organs, enterprises and institutions, and society, promote orderly talent flow between Party and government organs and think tanks, systematically recommend think tank experts to hold temporary positions in Party and government departments, and support capable Party and government leading cadres and state-owned enterprise executives to engage in research at think tanks after leaving their posts with approval.

3.4 Improving Think Tank Funding Management Mechanisms First, strengthen funding support for think tank construction. In conjunction with the province-wide public institution classification reform, the provincial finance department should provide certain funding support to provincial key think tanks based on their nature and characteristics. Establish a new-type think tank development fund, exploring a new research funding model featuring long-term tracking research, continuous rolling support, and back-end rewards. Second, establish think tank research plan projects. Set up special think tank research projects under the provincial philosophy and social science planning projects and provincial soft science research plans, providing key funding for major issues urgently needed to be resolved by the Provincial Party Committee and government. Departments such as the Provincial Party Committee Policy Research Office and Provincial Government Research Office can provide appropriate funding support to think tanks undertaking research tasks through annual project commissioning and bidding. Third, improve think tank funding management mechanisms. Scientifically and reasonably prepare and evaluate funding budgets, standardize direct funding expenditure management, and leverage the incentive role of performance expenditures. Promote reform of provincial scientific research project funding management, improve indirect cost management, remove proportional restrictions on labor costs, adjust labor cost expenditure scopes, and incorporate social insurance subsidies for temporary hires into labor cost categories. Fully respect and reasonably evaluate the intellectual labor value of think tank workers, allowing performance expenditures to be calculated at no less than 40%

of project funding in the first batch of new-type think tank construction pilots. Government-commissioned projects that can be included in the “four technologies” contract category can serve as transformation methods for pilot think tank achievements, enjoying relevant reward policies for scientific and technological achievement transformation in Shandong Province. Fourth, formulate guidance opinions on government procurement of decision-making consultation services from think tanks. Consultation reports, policy proposals, planning designs, survey data, and other deliverables provided by think tanks can all be included in government procurement scopes and government service purchase guidance catalogs. Establish a procurement mechanism based on demand-driven purchasing, task-based pricing, open and optimal selection, and contract management, legally adopting various methods including open bidding, invited bidding, competitive negotiation, competitive consultation, and single-source procurement.

3.5 Establishing a Provincial Decision-Making Advisory Committee

At the provincial level, clearly define the functional positioning of the Provincial Decision-Making Advisory Committee, which differs from natural or social science research. Instead, it serves as the official “think tank” for overall planning of provincial new-type think tank construction, the main vehicle for organizing and promoting think tank construction, the organizational coordination institution for serving Party and government decision-making consultation, and the key channel connecting decision-making departments with various think tanks. The committee comprises commissioners from Party and government departments including the Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department, Provincial Party Committee Policy Research Office, Provincial Government Research Office, and Provincial Development and Reform Commission. The Decision-Making Committee establishes an office responsible for organizing, coordinating, and servicing the committee’s daily work. Specific responsibilities include: First, strengthening research, planning, and guidance for new-type think tanks. The Decision-Making Advisory Committee researches and drafts development plans, implementation opinions, management measures, and relevant policy documents for new-type think tank development. It regularly convenes think tank development joint meetings to discuss major issues in think tank development through consultation, strengthening work deployment and guidance for promoting new-type think tank construction. Second, establishing a major decision-making demand release mechanism. Establish a province-wide decision-making consultation research project release platform, compiling key research topics and decision-making consultation research plans around major decision-making needs of the Provincial Party Committee and government. Strengthen the committee’s pivotal role between government departments and various think tanks, with the committee organizing major research topics and leveraging the distinctive advantages of various think tanks for cooperative division of labor and joint research. Third, establishing a direct think tank output channel system. Build a Shandong Province think tank network platform, establishing province-wide systems for think tank output collection

and organization, review and submission, and effectiveness feedback, compiling “Think Tank Express” for regular submission to the Provincial Party Committee, Provincial Government, and relevant national ministries and commissions, increasing precise submission of think tank outputs and improving achievement application and transformation efficiency. Fourth, establishing think tank evaluation and assessment mechanisms. Strengthen evaluation and supervision of think tank institutions, establish think tank research output evaluation mechanisms, form a think tank output review committee, establish a think tank output review expert database, and provide key support and rewards to think tanks making important contributions to serving scientific decision-making and promoting reform and development.

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