

On the Importance of Leading Figures in the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Since the concept of “new type of Chinese characteristic think tanks” was proposed, think tank construction has gained significant momentum in China. How to improve the overall quality of think tanks represents the focal point of future think tank development. This paper attempts to propose novel perspectives regarding the role of leading figures in think tank construction.

[Method/Process] Centering on the comprehensive competencies that leading figures should possess, and combined with analysis of typical domestic and international cases, this study finds that leading figures constitute one of the decisive factors influencing think tank development.

[Results/Conclusion] Leading figures in think tanks who embody a sense of mission and responsibility, possess strategic vision, and demonstrate operational capabilities can propel think tanks toward rapid development, breakthrough achievements, outstanding performance, and significant contributions. The selection and cultivation of leading figures for new type of Chinese characteristic think tanks, coupled with the establishment and improvement of institutional safeguards that enable them to fully unleash their creativity, productivity, and organizational capacity—thereby fully releasing the human capital of these leading figures—constitutes a critical component in the current phase of constructing new type of Chinese characteristic think tanks.

Full Text

On the Importance of Leading Figures in Constructing New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Since the concept of “new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” was proposed, think tank construction in China has gained tremendous momentum. At this stage, enhancing the overall quality of think tanks has become the central focus of subsequent development efforts. This paper attempts to offer new perspectives by examining the pivotal role that leading figures play in think tank construction.

[Method/Process] This article analyzes the comprehensive capabilities that leading figures should possess and investigates typical cases both domestically and internationally, demonstrating that leading figures constitute one of the decisive factors influencing think tank development.

[Result/Conclusion] Leading figures endowed with a strong sense of mission and responsibility, consciousness of the overall situation, and operational capabilities can guide think tanks toward rapid development, breakthrough achievements, and significant contributions to the nation. Therefore, the selection and cultivation of leading figures for new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, coupled with the establishment of institutional safeguards that enable them to fully unleash their creativity, productivity, and organizational capacity, represent critical components of current think tank construction efforts.

Keywords: new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics; leading figures; sense of mission; human capital

The “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” states: “Intellectual resources are the most precious assets of a nation and a people. In recent years, China’s think tanks have developed rapidly, making significant achievements in producing ideas, results, and talent, and contributing importantly to reform, opening-up, and socialist modernization.” Simultaneously, as the situation evolves, think tank construction has become increasingly inadequate and maladjusted, with the most prominent manifestation being the lack of leading figures and outstanding talent. Leading figures refer to exceptional individuals who possess solid theoretical knowledge, rich practical experience, superb leadership skills, and enjoy good reputations in their fields and society at large. Leading figures who adhere to correct political orientation, possess both political integrity and professional competence, and embody an innovative spirit are of great significance to think tank construction. Due to their position within the organization, their knowledge background, values, personal capabilities, influence, and particularly their sense of mission and responsibility toward the think tank enterprise play a crucial role in determining the direction and quality of think tank construction.

1. What Is a Leading Figure?

1.1 Connotation and Traits of Leading Figures

In terms of connotation, think tank leading figures can be summarized by the concept of “leader” in management studies. Scholars have noted that effective leadership enables people within an organization to work with ease and satisfaction, thereby achieving sound organizational management [1], while “the essence of leadership is influence” [2]. By exerting influence on others within the organization, leaders unite them to accomplish organizational objectives collectively. Leadership, in essence, is the act of guiding an organization to fulfill its mission and vision, founded upon influence over team members and realized through division of labor and cooperation toward shared goals.

Current personality research reveals that individuals scoring high on extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience in personality traits tend to achieve higher leadership scores. Beyond personality traits, creative intelligence and high emotional intelligence can enhance leadership effectiveness, while specific values and attitudes also determine leadership qualities and outcomes [3].

1.2 Who Can Become a Leading Figure?

Leading figures in organizations share certain common characteristics. Generally, they should be extraverted, demonstrating greater positivity in sociability, assertiveness, and responsiveness to external stimuli. These traits not only grant them stronger influence, making them more likely to be selected as leaders, but also equip them to handle management challenges such as communication with greater proficiency. Conscientiousness and a sense of mission emphasize that leading figures should demonstrate stronger responsibility, self-discipline, and willingness to devote themselves wholeheartedly to a cause, thereby helping cultivate a fair and effective organizational environment that enhances performance and unites efforts toward common goals. Openness to experience reflects leaders’ tolerance for new ideas, as their curiosity and broad-mindedness can inject continuous vitality into the organization and sustain its development.

2. The Important Role of Leading Figures in Think Tank Construction

2.1 Management and Leadership Functions

Leading figures in organizations must inspire member productivity, which requires not only unique personal charisma but also a strong sense of mission. A critical challenge for leaders is translating this mission into stage-by-stage objectives and guiding the team forward. As exceptional managers, leading figures should provide guidance in multiple aspects: setting organizational goals; discovering and developing member potential; planning organizational brand marketing; establishing performance evaluation systems and implementing effective assessments; selecting management approaches aligned with organizational

needs; building and maintaining supportive constituencies; and exercising strict self-discipline to serve as a benchmark for other members.

Moreover, leading figures should be visionary “entrepreneurs” whose grasp of industry prospects, understanding of the overall situation, unique insights, confidence, and capacity for self-reflection determine how far the organization can advance.

2.2 Specific Manifestations of the Important Role

As special non-profit organizations, think tanks bear the missions of “advising government,” “enlightening the public,” “strategic planning,” and “cultivating talent,” requiring profound research foundations. Unlike general academic research institutions, think tanks emphasize practice, producing targeted and practical results that serve decision-making and society. This demands that think tank leading figures possess not only the traits of general institutional leaders but also unique qualities tailored to think tank needs. Integrating the functions of general non-profit organization leaders with the characteristics of think tanks themselves, we argue that think tank leading figures should make outstanding contributions in five key areas:

2.2.1 Grounding in Academic Capability to Lead Think Tank Research Leading figures play an irreplaceable role in shaping core research competencies, planning unique research directions, and producing outstanding research outcomes. Think tank research topics generally focus on hot issues in relevant fields or even cutting-edge problems not yet recognized by the public, requiring strong academic research capabilities. On one hand, leading figures must employ their own academic research abilities to guide members in studying key issues, necessitating a comprehensive and profound understanding of these problems, including unique insights into research priorities, methodologies, relevant international experiences, and current achievements. These fundamental requirements establish a high threshold for leaders’ academic research capabilities. Relative to other soft management indicators, this hard indicator of academic capability largely sets a high bar for think tank leaders, meaning that leading figures must simultaneously possess top-tier academic talent.

Surveying top think tanks worldwide reveals that many leaders are also academic leaders in their fields with original research achievements. The most typical example is Dr. Henry Kissinger, the “most awesome foreigner” who interacted with five generations of Chinese leaders and a diplomatic evergreen. A Harvard graduate, Kissinger was a first-class scholar in political science, and his balance-of-power diplomacy theory laid a solid foundation for his subsequent foreign policy formulation. He later served as senior researcher or consultant for multiple top think tanks, continuously writing papers, delivering speeches, and publishing works that significantly influenced the foreign policies of successive U.S. administrations.

According to a “Financial Think Tank Influence Ranking” survey conducted by the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University, a think tank leader’s academic capability (publicly published academic achievements) influences more than 30% of the ranking. This can be understood from another perspective: the research nature of think tanks means that the vast majority of personnel, or core human capital, are researchers. As leaders of researchers, think tank leading figures can only command respect and lead research activities effectively when they possess sufficient academic research capabilities.

On the other hand, think tank research is not equivalent to academic research, and think tanks are not purely academic institutions. Think tank construction constitutes an important component of national governance modernization and must serve the scientific and democratic decision-making of the Party and government, solve development challenges, and contribute to national soft power construction, thereby enhancing international competitiveness and discourse power. This characteristic determines that think tank research must focus on new problems, employ new methods, explore new fields, establish practical topics, emphasize policy orientation, and stress operational implementation to ultimately influence decision-making while carving out survival spaces through specialized features. In this process, leading figures play a vital role in establishing research directions, transforming traditional academic research models, completing research outcomes, and forming distinctive research characteristics.

2.2.2 Exploring Management Models and Controlling Organizational Operations

The normalized operation of think tanks requires their leading figures to be excellent managers simultaneously. Maintaining normal operations demands that leaders focus on goal-setting, planning, organizing, coordinating, controlling, and commanding. The term “new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics” precisely reflects that this emerging entity possesses entirely new features different from previous research institutions, with no mature precedents to follow in organizational construction—all mechanisms, processes, and functions require exploration. Consequently, the comprehensive quality requirements for leading figures are unprecedentedly high.

As think tank construction deepens, many think tanks have begun exploring entirely new management models. Some focus on organizational structure design and business planning; others start by formulating and improving internal management systems, introducing modern enterprise management mechanisms; some design processes for research, production, and communication to improve operational mechanisms; and others establish new incentive mechanisms to attract more talent to think tank platforms. In summary, model innovation, process construction, and system improvement all play crucial roles in the healthy and orderly development of think tanks, while leaders’ holistic awareness, management capabilities, and practical courage serve as key factors in promoting system implementation.

Michael Rich, President and CEO of the RAND Corporation and a member

of the Council on Foreign Relations, has held multiple senior positions within RAND and assisted in establishing the RAND National Defense Research Institute, which provides research and analysis for the Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy, Marine Corps, and other military departments. Since becoming President and CEO in 2011, Rich has implemented a series of innovations in organizational operations, including: leading RAND' s diversified development and business expansion in international markets by establishing RAND Europe, RAND Qatar Policy Institute, and RAND Australia to continuously expand influence; innovating and improving communication mechanisms and expanding communication channels to widely disseminate research results and enhance policy consultation quality; and supporting the construction of the Pardee RAND Graduate School by establishing the world' s largest Ph.D. program in policy analysis and personally teaching students. These measures have further elevated RAND' s global reputation.

Fundraising and financial management constitute another important aspect of think tank construction. The success of world-class think tanks often depends on adequate funding and scientific financial operations. For instance, RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution have diverse funding sources, including government support, foundation grants, corporate sponsorships, and individual donations. Currently, Chinese think tanks have limited funding sources, and seeking more sponsorships has become an essential duty of leading figures as mechanisms become more flexible. Leaders' personal management capabilities and social reputation serve as important considerations in attracting social donations. Once funds are secured, how to formulate reasonable budgets and utilize funds to maximize benefits also tests leaders' capabilities.

2.2.3 Planning Major Events and Highlighting Agenda Setting Operating behind closed doors represents a major taboo for think tanks. A key focus of modern think tank operations involves participating in and hosting various events to facilitate information exchange and expand influence. Planning important exchange activities also demonstrates think tanks' capacity for agenda setting and public opinion guidance. Through different types of events, think tanks promote full exchanges and consensus-building on major policy or social issues, thereby influencing decision-making and society. From concept generation and planning to organization and implementation, these activities largely challenge leaders' macro vision, unique insights, and operational capabilities, requiring them to dare to innovate and excel at what others cannot.

An important think tank function is "strategic planning" (伐谋), and agenda setting constitutes a primary means of actively shaping international discourse power. As China increasingly participates in global governance, Chinese think tanks will engage more with the world, establishing more exchanges and cooperation with foreign think tanks and actively conducting public diplomacy.

In recent years, Chinese think tanks have begun shining on the international stage. The Think Tank 20 (T20) Summit represents one of the largest and most

representative think tank events held by Chinese think tanks. Before the 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit, Chinese think tanks, as lead organizers, actively facilitated gatherings of experts from G20 members, non-G20 members, and international organizations through T20 meetings and other platforms, collecting numerous policy recommendations for the G20 Summit and effectively expanding the G20 mechanism's global representation while firmly seizing agenda-setting dominance. They conducted extensive communication, coordination, and topic cooperation with G20 member states and international organizations, reaching broad consensus.

Additionally, many institutions have repeatedly held think tank exchange activities overseas, such as establishing multilateral or bilateral regular dialogue mechanisms with important think tanks along the "Belt and Road" to actively disseminate China's voice internationally, exchange opinions on national policies, and even shape or change other countries' policy trends through discussion. Among these, the most famous is the South China Sea Think Tank Dialogue held in Washington, D.C., in July 2016, which fully demonstrated the important role of public diplomacy and showed tremendous influence on decision-making, society, and international affairs. The successful hosting of these events depends on leading figures' excellent event planning capabilities, rich international cooperation experience, and loyalty and sense of mission toward national endeavors.

2.2.4 Expanding Think Tank Communication and Innovating Brand Marketing Think tank influence derives partly from output quality, policy adoption, and effectiveness, which are based on strong research capabilities. The other dimension of influence comes from expanding communication channels and innovating brand shaping and marketing.

From a management perspective, an organization's mission, vision, and values form its foundation and soul, and shaping this soul requires leaders' foresight. Therefore, organizational leaders must establish distinctive features and missions that support organizational development.

Externally, an organization's brand reflects external understanding of the organization and externalizes brand connotation through image shaping. Think tank influence depends to some extent on successful brand building and marketing, with communication serving as an important brand marketing tool. For modern think tanks, communication system construction is indispensable. As the saying goes, "Good wine also fears a deep alley" —whether research results can reach target audiences promptly, gain timely recognition, and achieve social effects depends on communication speed, breadth, and efficiency. Whether leading figures emphasize and skillfully utilize communication directly determines the marginal scope of think tank influence.

Furthermore, think tank brand marketing represents an inevitable choice for its soft power. Besides supporting decision-making, top international think tanks also serve as channels for countries to voice interests aligned with their own.

Think tank construction constitutes an important component of national soft power, with top think tanks internationally often proposing influential concepts that subsequently shape global political developments. “Strategic planning” (伐谋) represents a think tank mission, and fulfilling it requires think tanks to possess certain influence. As leading figures, they must be capable of helping shape a positive brand image for their think tanks and lead the establishment of capable marketing teams to efficiently disseminate think tank results and build industry reputation.

Sometimes, think tank leading figures themselves can become the soul and core of the brand. For example, Professor David M. Lampton, one of America’s most authoritative “China hands,” Dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and Director of its China Studies Program, represents such a core brand image. From the 1980s to the 1990s, Lampton long served as Chairman of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations and as Senior Advisor on China to President Obama, and he continues to promote new mechanisms for U.S.-China dialogue. His main research areas include Chinese domestic politics, U.S.-China relations, and China’s foreign policy. Since the 1970s, Lampton has been among the earliest American scholars to visit China, conducting research in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Over decades of China studies, he has published numerous works, including *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations, 1989-2000*, *The Three Faces of Chinese Power: Might, Money, and Minds*, and *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, and has published dozens of related papers in international journals.

2.2.5 Integrating Multi-party Resources and Establishing Industrial Mechanisms

Think tank operation is a complex task requiring external forces in daily operations and activities, demanding that leading figures coordinate these external forces to accomplish objectives. With continuous development in recent years, think tank construction has gradually become an industry, making internal cooperation and industrial chain improvement important tasks for think tanks and creating new requirements for leaders’ resource integration capabilities. Leaders’ integration ability first stems from their “moral character”—being widely recognized within the industry for high moral standards, strong patriotism, and realistic concern enables others to identify with their values and cooperate for common causes. Second, integration ability derives from their previous high achievements that have gained broad industry recognition.

Currently, the think tank community frequently hosts various large-scale activities around national development strategies, ranging from G20 think tank forums to Belt and Road forums. Generally, large forums involve multiple topics and participants including experts, scholars, social elites, and media personnel, with extensive institutional and personnel involvement that obviously exceeds the capacity of any single think tank. Therefore, such events often require co-organization by multiple think tanks. Forums also release multiple research

reports representing collective achievements of the think tank industry, reflecting the current development level of the think tank community to some extent.

The prosperous development of the think tank industry presupposes the construction and improvement of industrial mechanisms. If we compare think tanks to “thought factories,” then production, research and development, products, marketing, and service all constitute organic links in this industrial chain. Each link engages in both competitive and cooperative relationships with other related think tanks, promoting continuous product and structural upgrades through competition and cooperation, ultimately achieving common development and creating more fruitful results. How to achieve seamless inter-institutional cooperation, effectively integrate all resources, and maximize industrial benefits represents a question that think tank leading figures must consider. They simultaneously hold multiple identities—as researchers, salespeople, and service personnel—making them think tank “entrepreneurs” with eighteen martial arts skills who drive the think tank industry forward.

3. Constructing New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics Requires Exceptional Leading Figures

3.1 New Requirements for Constructing New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

The preceding sections have elaborated on the crucial leading role of leading figures in think tank construction. Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee proposed the new goal and direction of “strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system,” actively exploring organizational forms and management methods for new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, breaking original constraints, stimulating think tank vitality, and actively providing high-quality intellectual support for central scientific decision-making have become important tasks in think tank construction. This demonstrates that the “characteristics” and “newness” of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics apply both relative to foreign think tanks and to traditional research institutions and think tanks, facing transformation from traditional to modern, from singular to pluralistic, and from domestic to international. Ultimately, constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics depends on people—high-level research and operation teams comprising cross-disciplinary talent combinations from scholars to media personnel. Leading figures with international vision, superb operational management capabilities, and the ability to integrate various types of talent thus become crucial for constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. They can lead efficient teams, employ more modern and internationalized development approaches, create high-level think tank results, steadily enhance comprehensive influence, and contribute to strengthening national soft power.

3.2 Practical Driving Force for New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics

Currently, China faces a severe shortage of think tank talent that fails to meet demand and lags far behind think tank development needs. Leading figures who guide think tanks in exploring new ideas, taking initiative, and creating new situations represent an important driving force for think tank construction. Taking the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University as an example, the institute has implemented multiple innovations in its personnel mechanism over four years since its establishment. Centered around core leadership, various think tank experts cooperate effectively to form a rationally structured research team, while also building an efficient operational support team.

This team continuously innovates, achieving major breakthroughs in G20, Belt and Road, public diplomacy, green finance, and other areas, making the Chongyang Institute a representative new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics. In recent years, the institute has engaged in exchanges with numerous national leaders, including French President François Hollande, South African President Jacob Zuma, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, telling China's story and establishing the influence and discourse power of Chinese think tanks internationally, thereby contributing significantly to national soft power construction. In G20-related activities, the Chongyang Institute's expert team, led by Wang Wen, published hundreds of research reports and commentaries and conducted dozens of presentations, including multiple commentaries on national mainstream media such as CCTV. At the Symposium on Philosophy and Social Sciences chaired by General Secretary Xi Jinping, Wang Wen delivered a keynote speech as one of ten scholars representing young academics. Furthermore, in terms of communication breadth and depth, Wang Wen maintains high-quality research output year-round as a truly prolific scholar, and his monograph *Strategic Planning: How Chinese Think Tanks Influence the World* systematically discusses various aspects of think tank construction theoretically, making important contributions to Chinese think tank development [5].

3.3 Creating Favorable Conditions for Cultivating and Utilizing Leading Figures

The preceding sections have discussed the core leading role of leading figures in think tank construction. Conversely, leading figures themselves urgently need sound mechanisms and platforms to fully utilize their talents. As the proverb says, "Even a hero needs three helpers."

In terms of the broader environment, the nation must skillfully use, manage, and treat think tank talent well, especially leading figures. First, it must provide full trust, implement government information disclosure systems, solicit opin-

ions on major decisions, and encourage talented leading figures to contribute to national development. Second, it must break institutional and position constraints, highlight the composite talents and comprehensive functions of “think tank scholars,” reform qualification review and evaluation standards, establish new incentive mechanisms, stimulate creativity, and demonstrate exemplary leading and driving effects. Third, it should learn from mature overseas “revolving door” systems to promptly establish flexible and efficient personnel selection and employment mechanisms that facilitate talent mobility and normalize and institutionalize two-way talent exchange and transfer between think tanks and government departments and between think tanks and universities.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Since the 18th CPC National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping has delivered a series of speeches on talent work, repeatedly emphasizing that innovative undertakings call for innovative talent; that the more talent and the greater their abilities, the better for achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; and that knowledge is power and talent represents the future. He has also instructed that we must improve talent development mechanisms, utilize talent effectively, establish more flexible talent management systems, and remove institutional and systemic obstacles to talent mobility, use, and role-playing. We must recognize talent without rigid criteria and employ outstanding young talent boldly, providing them with stages to innovate and excel.

Constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics represents an important task in China’s national governance modernization and soft power enhancement. As a crucial driving force for think tank development, leading figures are of great significance to think tank construction. First, they must possess a sense of mission and responsibility toward the think tank enterprise. Second, they must demonstrate high sensitivity to major issues in China’s social development and maintain consciousness of the overall situation. Third, they must serve as good team leaders who guide their teams toward greater achievements. The selection and cultivation of leading figures for new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, along with establishing institutional safeguards that enable them to fully unleash their creativity, productivity, and organizational capacity, urgently require high attention from relevant sectors. How to fully utilize the composite capabilities and influence of think tank leading figures and release their human capital represents a key element in the next stage of constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

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