

Postprint: An Analysis of the Development Philosophy and Operational Mechanism of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Through in-depth research and analysis of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, this study examines its development philosophy, operational mechanisms, and influence networks to provide reference and lessons for constructing and developing new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics in China. [Methodology/Process] Through literature review, data and materials collected from the Wilson Center's website, and citation of internationally authoritative think tank ranking reports, this paper investigates the Wilson Center's development history, current status, and future development trends. [Results/Conclusion] Compared with other top think tanks in the United States, the Wilson Center is not among the oldest in American history, yet it has consistently ranked at the forefront of global think tank rankings—an achievement attributable to its foundational development philosophy, unique operational mechanisms, and diversified influence networks.

Full Text

Preamble

An Analysis of the Development Concept and Operational Mechanism of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper conducts an in-depth study and analysis of the development concept, operational mechanism, and impact network of the

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, aiming to provide references for the construction and development of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. **[Method/Process]** Through literature review and data collected from the Wilson Center's website, supplemented by authoritative international think tank ranking reports, this study examines the center's developmental history, current status, and future trends. **[Result/Conclusion]** Compared with other top-tier American think tanks, the Wilson Center is not among the oldest in the United States, yet it consistently ranks among the world's leading think tanks. This success is attributable to its founding development philosophy, unique operational mechanism, and diversified influence network.

Keywords: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Wilson Center; think tank; operational mechanism; development concept

Classification Number: G311

Introduction

On January 25, 2017, the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) at the University of Pennsylvania released the latest *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report 2016*. According to the report, there were 6,846 think tanks worldwide in 2016, with the United States leading at 1,835 and China ranking second with 435. Although China has become a “think tank giant” second only to the United States in quantity, the overall quality of its listed think tanks still lags behind major European and American counterparts. These established think tanks have developed relatively high research standards across various fields and possess a more mature think tank system. This paper focuses on the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which ranks among the top 10 globally, examining its development philosophy, operational mechanism, research characteristics, and influence network to identify valuable lessons and references.

1. Institutional Development Overview

The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars was established by the U.S. Congress in 1968 through the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Act as a presidential memorial to commemorate the 28th U.S. President, Thomas Woodrow Wilson, and to embody his lifelong ideals and practices.

Woodrow Wilson was a renowned scholar-president and the only U.S. president to hold a doctoral degree. His doctoral dissertation, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*, remains a classic study of the American governmental system. Wilson's “idealist” thinking is epitomized in his “Fourteen Points” proposed toward the end of World War I, which emphasized open diplomacy, collective security, national self-determination, international law, and free trade, ultimately contributing to the establishment of the League of Nations. Wilson's concepts and beliefs regarding international relations and foreign policy have profoundly influenced subsequent U.S. foreign policy, with presidents such as

Roosevelt, Carter, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton inheriting and reflecting Wilson' s "idealist" philosophy in their administrations [1].

In 1970, under the leadership of Benjamin Read, the Wilson Center welcomed its first cohort of scholars, focusing on international affairs, environmental issues, and the law of the sea. During James H. Billington' s tenure beginning in 1973, the center emphasized recruiting world-class visiting scholars. This period produced influential research, including Robert Putnam' s study on Italian regional government and Frank Snowden' s research on ancient Black lives, establishing the Wilson Center as a premier destination for international relations research fellowships. In 1974, with the establishment of the Kennan Institute specializing in Soviet studies, the center' s research program framework was essentially formed. Over the following 15 years, the center established seven program groups focused on regional studies. In 1999, Lee Hamilton assumed directorship. As a long-serving congressman and major Washington political figure, he placed greater emphasis on public policy-related research. During this period, the Wilson Center not only earned a reputation as an excellent institution for international fellowships but also became a prominent neutral and nonpartisan debate forum. The number of annual conferences increased from 200 to 800, with attendance by numerous heads of state, cabinet officials, and members of Congress advancing the center' s research programs and enhancing its public profile. The Wilson Center' s research fields continued to expand, focusing on more policy issues and further increasing its engagement in international affairs.

In January 2017, the *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report 2016* was released. The author compiled the Wilson Center' s rankings from 2012 to 2016 [2] (see). The Wilson Center not only maintains strong research advantages in international development, foreign policy, and international affairs but also ranks among the top think tanks in multiple special achievement categories, including interdisciplinary research, best use of media, and best management.

2. Development Philosophy of the Wilson Center

Inheriting and continuing President Wilson' s values and ideals, the Wilson Center defines its mission as "being the nation' s key non-partisan policy forum, providing actionable ideas to the policy community on global issues through independent research and open dialogue" [3].

(1) Maintaining a Neutral, Nonpartisan Forum

The Wilson Center strives to be a leading nonpartisan forum. Fundamentally different from other prominent American think tanks, the Wilson Center receives more than one-third of its annual funding from federal appropriations, which it considers essential to maintaining its nonpartisan mission [4]. Because a substantial portion of its operating funds comes from the U.S. government, the Wilson Center can conduct in-depth, independent research on relevant issues and leverage its unique governmental background to provide a platform for

dialogue and debate across party lines. Consequently, the Wilson Center claims no partisan affiliation and does not engage in policy lobbying, ensuring a lasting commitment to its founding principles of independence and nonpartisanship and truly achieving its goal of becoming a trusted platform for ideas, research, and debate.

(2) Adhering to Independent, Original Research

The Wilson Center conducts its own original research on many of the world's most pressing global issues, focusing primarily on governance, America's role in the world, and long-term challenges facing the United States and the world. Each year, over 150 scholars, journalists, diplomats, former government officials, and other professionals come to the Wilson Center to conduct academic research in relevant fields. The center ensures its research quality and capacity by recruiting top researchers worldwide [5]. The Wilson Center emphasizes in-depth policy research, examining not only U.S. government public policies themselves but also focusing on enhancing understanding of policy contexts. It attempts to enable scholars from different countries to understand the broader contexts behind each other's government policies and to help government officials and scholars comprehend the ideas underlying each other's positions.

(3) Serving as a Bridge Between Academia and Policy Circles

The Wilson Center works to connect academic research with actual policy formulation. Leveraging its unique governmental background, the center provides researchers with opportunities to exchange ideas and interact with current government policymakers, promoting research and discussion on domestic and world affairs. By bringing together outstanding scholars and decision-makers from diverse backgrounds, the center facilitates exchanges between different disciplines, between academia and decision-making circles, between executive and legislative branches, and between political and business spheres, thereby achieving its goal of "building bridges between the world and Washington, between critical thought and political practice" [3]. This also distinguishes the Wilson Center from institutions focused solely on research.

(4) Influencing Key Policy Audiences and the General Public Through Innovative Outreach

As a think tank, the ultimate goal is to disseminate its research findings to the world of ideas. The Wilson Center strives to create opportunities for communication and exchange with the government, expanding the influence of its research findings on U.S. policy formulation, and influencing the public through various forms such as radio programs, publications, and websites. In the internet era, the Wilson Center pays special attention to the application of high-tech and digital media tools, undertaking various innovative practices in media production and digital marketing to promote and publicize the center's work and research findings.

3. Operational Mechanism of the Wilson Center

As a world-class think tank, the Wilson Center possesses distinctive characteristics in organizational structure, research organization, and fundraising.

3.1.1 Unique Top-Level Design

The Wilson Center is affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution but operates as a separate entity. Like most American think tanks, the center's highest decision-making body is its Board of Directors. Unlike other think tanks, however, the Wilson Center's board chair is directly appointed by the President. The current chair is Thomas R. Nides, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources and current Vice Chairman of Morgan Stanley. By statute, eight U.S. government officials serve as ex-officio members of the Wilson Center's Board, including the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary of State, Secretary of Education, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Librarian of Congress, and Archivist of the United States, plus one presidentially designated federal representative. Additionally, the board includes nine members from non-governmental backgrounds [6]. As the highest decision-making level, the board determines the think tank's direction and policies, formulates and reviews research plans, and is responsible for selecting and appointing administrative personnel in charge of daily operations. Due to the unique composition of the Wilson Center's board, the center enjoys unparalleled advantages in connecting with policy circles, while its research direction is also closely related to current affairs and policy formulation.

3.1.2 Flat Organizational Structure

The Wilson Center operates under a president responsibility system, with former Congresswoman Jane Harman serving as current President and CEO. Like most American think tanks, the Wilson Center's organizational structure has evolved toward flatness. Under the president, there are primarily two types of institutions: academic research and support services (see [Figure 1: see original paper]).

Program departments and institutes constitute the Wilson Center's academic research organizational form. According to the center's research planning, it currently maintains 22 research program departments or institutes. Each department or institute's resident staff includes a director and research assistants, ranging from 1 to 8 people. Support departments include the Administrative Office, Development Office, and External Relations Office, which provide services and support for academic research institutions. The Administrative Office is primarily responsible for operational management matters, including finance, personnel, technical support, and library resources. The Office of Scholars and Academic Relations is a crucial department organizing the annual fellowship application and review process. The Development Office is mainly responsible

for fundraising. Although the Wilson Center receives government appropriations, it must still raise two-thirds of its funds independently. The External Relations Office comprises seven departments including digital communications, traditional and digital media production, event and conference planning, audiovisual support, as well as the Wilson Center Press and *The Wilson Quarterly* editorial office, playing a key role in promoting and publicizing the center's programs and research findings through multiple media platforms.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

In recent years, American think tanks have generally moved toward flatter organizational structures [7], and the Wilson Center is no exception. The center has relatively few permanent staff. Among approximately 150 full-time staff members, over 80 work in various program departments, with the remainder handling administrative management, support services, results promotion, and external affairs [8]. The Wilson Center primarily relies on visiting scholars to conduct professional, high-level academic research. These visiting scholars possess not only specialized knowledge but also rich professional experience and practical backgrounds, preventing the think tank from falling into "ivory tower" research. This model of reducing full-time researchers, recruiting part-time researchers, and extensively accepting visiting scholars not only enhances researcher mobility and research effectiveness but also promotes exchange and collaboration while reducing costs and enabling more flexible political engagement.

3.2.1 Research System Architecture

To inherit and promote President Wilson's governance philosophy and academic spirit, the Wilson Center has positioned itself in research fields such as international relations and foreign policy since its founding. After establishing a regional research framework in 1974, the center formed program groups and institutes around ten key countries and regions, recently adding a Polar Initiative focusing on the Arctic region. In recent years, common issues such as technology and environment have become closely related to public policy formulation. Consequently, the Wilson Center has established five additional thematic program departments [9]. The research focuses of each program are shown in .

As seen in the table, the Wilson Center's research system has several characteristics: First, the program framework based on regions enables clearer definition of research questions in international relations and foreign policy. Second, its research agenda is essentially "tailor-made" for the U.S. government, focusing on U.S.-related international relations and key events that may impact the United States, thereby providing recommendations for foreign policy. Additionally, in response to sudden global events, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Wilson Center establishes special funds for rapid response, including hiring expert consultants, organizing research trips, and conducting emergency analysis and discussions to provide timely, useful assistance to policymakers. Third, thematic research programs both "look back at history," providing in-depth analysis of

policy formulation backgrounds from historical perspectives, and “look forward to the future,” focusing on how trends in technology, environment, and other areas impact public policy formulation. As stated in its 2012 strategic plan [5], the core is to focus all work on issues that can generate maximum impact on policy ideas and public dialogue.

3.2.2 Multi-Level Talent Network

For think tanks, producing insightful and socially influential research is paramount, and talent is key to generating high-quality research. The Wilson Center funds 150 visiting scholars annually from around the world to conduct research at the center, with two-thirds working on commissioned projects and the remainder pursuing self-defined topics within the center’s research framework. The talent network construction mechanism has several characteristics:

(1) Competitive Talent Recruitment Mechanism

Recruiting top global scholars through competitive mechanisms is an important approach for the Wilson Center and a crucial guarantee for conducting independent, original research. Each year, over 300 scholars, officials, journalists, and business professionals from around the world compete for the Center Fellows scholarships. The center maintains high requirements for applicants: besides holding a doctoral degree, candidates must have published academic monographs beyond their doctoral dissertations and possess high English proficiency [10]. Through rigorous selection by internal and external review panels, the center ultimately selects approximately 20 fellows annually based on their research fields and the potential of their proposals to influence public opinion and policy. The center provides fellows with generous research funding and superior research and living conditions, while granting them academic freedom. Fellows may define their own research topics, which typically must align with the center’s research system to ensure excellent research outcomes. Due to limited numbers and strict review, becoming a Wilson Center fellow represents a significant honor [11].

The Public Policy Fellows program is a short-term research grant offered to outstanding scholars and government staff. Originally designed for congressional staff, the program now recruits globally. Through a competitive selection process, the center funds approximately 20 fellows annually to conduct 3-5 month research projects on important public policy issues closely related to the Wilson Center’s work. Featuring seminars and interactions, the program allows fellows to discuss specific foreign policy issues with current foreign policy thinkers and practitioners, greatly benefiting their future careers in foreign policy-related fields.

The Wilson Center also selects and funds 1-2 Distinguished Fellows annually, who are typically well-known leaders in relevant research fields and outstanding scholars or practitioners who have made significant contributions to academic

and public policy domains. Additionally, the center has established a new non-resident scholars program, the Global Fellows. Global Fellows do not conduct research at the center but can provide timely analysis and new ideas for ongoing research projects, making them an important component of the Wilson Center's talent system—a global network of thought leaders, including former British Ambassador to Sudan and Tunisia Alan Goulty, former Chilean Cabinet Minister and Ambassador Jorge Heine, among others. Through multiple talent recruitment methods, the Wilson Center attracts top global scholars, enhancing its research strength and laying the foundation for high-level, original research.

(2) Alumni Network as Research Support

To date, nearly 5,000 scholars have conducted research at the Wilson Center. After their time at the center, these scholars have returned to active roles in teaching, government service, journalism, and other fields. The Wilson Center incorporates these scholars into its alumni network, which serves as an expert network and talent reserve. The center frequently invites these alumni to participate in center activities, including research, publications, and high-level roundtables. These scholars, spread across the globe, are not only field experts but also intermediaries for international exchange and dialogue. For example, Kennan Institute alumni from Russia and Ukraine have gained deeper understanding of the United States and maintained long-term professional connections with the center, facilitating international dialogue and academic exchange between their regions and the United States across broad social science fields.

(3) Internship Programs Cultivating Reserve Talent

The Wilson Center also provides research assistant internship opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students. Research assistants come from over 80 institutions of higher education nationwide. They work with visiting scholars on research, publications, and multimedia production, deepening their understanding of research fields and providing beneficial practice in research methodology and professional studies. These students represent outstanding members of their generation and constitute reserve talent for future research teams.

3.3 Funding Raising and Utilization

Adequate funding is crucial for think tank survival and development. As an official institution, the Wilson Center receives over \$10 million in direct appropriations annually from the U.S. federal government. Additionally, through various donations, commissioned project income, royalties, and interest, the center generates approximately \$16 million in non-appropriated revenue. Most of these funds come from foundations, with the remainder from corporate and individual contributions. In 2014, donors contributing over \$1 million to the Wilson Center included the Carnegie Corporation, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Ford Foundation, Boeing, Google, Microsoft, among others [12].

3.3.1 Diverse Fundraising Channels The Wilson Center secures private sector support through cooperative, mutually beneficial approaches. Corpora-

tions or individuals can become partners by joining the Wilson Council or Wilson Alliance and making donations. Members of these groups receive invitations to influential conferences, including the “Wilson Center Day” policy conference, “National Conversation” series, and Hamilton Lecture. At these closed-door meetings, members can exchange ideas with key public officials, foreign dignitaries, and center researchers on important issues such as U.S. national security and the global financial crisis [13]. In 2014, the center also established a Global Advisory Board comprising many internationally renowned figures who provide international relations consultation while leveraging their prominence to raise funds globally.

The Woodrow Wilson Awards dinner is another fundraising channel. Established in 1999, the award honors outstanding leaders from business and public service [14]. The awards dinner is held not only in Washington but also promoted worldwide to secure financial support from private donors in the United States and overseas. In 2015, the Wilson Center raised over \$2 million from four Woodrow Wilson Awards dinners [5].

3.3.2 Differentiated Funding Utilization Federal appropriations are used primarily to pay salaries and benefits for federal employees, fund the competitively selected annual fellowships, and support academic-related conferences and research. Additionally, research publication, document resource support, conference video production, essential outreach and website support for results dissemination, and operation and maintenance of most core infrastructure all rely on federal appropriations [5]. Seventy-five percent of non-appropriated funds are used for commissioned research, with two-thirds of annual visiting scholars funded through non-appropriated sources. These funds also support various conferences, seminars, and related activities. shows the Wilson Center’s funding sources and utilization in 2015.

4. Impact Network of the Wilson Center

Influence is one of the core values of think tanks. The Wilson Center influences its key audiences and promotes research findings through robust policy promotion mechanisms and diversified channels.

4.1 Combining Thought and Action to Expand Influence

American think tanks are particularly adept at expanding their influence through events, thereby enhancing their ability to impact government, Congress, and policy circles [7]. The Wilson Center’s most frequent activity is holding various conferences—over 700 were held in 2015 alone, most taking place at the Wilson Center and open to the public [11]. Through extensive exchanges with officials, experts, and scholars of different ideologies, levels, and perspectives, the center expands its influence in various fields and enhances its visibility.

The Wilson Center provides targeted services to government departments, regularly delivering policy research briefs and papers to agencies. Each year, the center produces high-quality reports on important global issues for key decision-makers and supporters, and prepares research briefs for relevant departments before diplomatic activities, such as for the State Department before the 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit and for the White House before the President's 2015 visits to Kenya and Ethiopia. The Wilson Center also builds communication platforms for government agencies; for example, the Africa Program facilitated several high-level dialogues between the U.S. Congress and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission and African trade and industry commissioners, playing an important role in track II diplomacy [15].

The Wilson Center offers several specific services for Congress. The center provides foreign policy training programs exclusively for Senate and House staff, exploring bipartisan solutions to major global issues. To date, approximately 300 congressional staff members from both parties have participated in this program. Additionally, the Wilson Center established an independent Capitol Hill Cybersecurity Laboratory for congressional staff to focus on global cyber threats and the role of information technology. In 2015, the Wilson Center held over 250 meetings in Congress, providing events and individual briefings for members of Congress and their staff. Through seminars, training, information dissemination, and other methods, the Wilson Center influences decision-making by transmitting its research findings through interactions with government departments, despite not directly intervening in policy formulation.

4.2 Building Brand Online and Offline

American think tanks utilize various media platforms to promote their research and findings to the public domain, enhancing their influence and visibility [15]. Wilson Center scholars frequently write policy analysis articles for top media outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, and are interviewed by leading broadcast programs including National Public Radio and CBS [5]. The center also collaborates with renowned media institutions to produce programs, such as "The National Conversation" co-produced with National Public Radio, which airs on over 200 radio stations nationwide with more than 200,000 listeners [10]. In 2015, the Wilson Center's broadcast media business grew by over 20%, and the number of commentary articles published in news media nearly doubled, ranking it as the fourth most-cited think tank in the media [2].

Furthermore, the Wilson Center has innovated various conference formats. Ground Truth Briefings are telephone conferences that leverage the center's extensive global network of experts for rapid exchange of opinions and views on important global hotspot issues. The center quickly gathers high-level policymakers, journalists, opinion leaders, and scholars for real-time commentary and discussion on major current events. In 2015, the Wilson Center held over 50 such briefings discussing hot issues including the Euro financial crisis, Iran nuclear negotiations, U.S.-Cuba diplomatic relations, and the Ebola outbreak

[5]. The Director' s Forum is a high-level forum launched by the Wilson Center analyzing current and historical major events, featuring guests such as the presidents of Tanzania, Estonia, and Honduras, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz [7].

The Wilson Center also leverages online platforms to expand its influence. The center' s webcasting records over 500 hours of conferences and live events annually, providing video-on-demand for meetings and activities. ON DEMAND is a broadcast-quality video program launched by the Wilson Center on internet platforms, sharing content through YouTube, iTunes, and other popular social media and web platforms. The program invites globally renowned experts to provide in-depth analysis of current important events, extending to their historical and cultural backgrounds, reporting and commenting on breaking news, and providing evidence-based, civil, and nonpartisan exploration and discussion of various issues. The program demonstrates the Wilson Center' s research strength and convening power [5].

Founded in 1986, the Wilson Center Press has supported the publication of over 1,700 books in its history. These books reflect the research findings of center researchers and experts from its global scholar network, particularly in the center' s strength areas such as energy, security, environment and social resilience, urban studies, U.S. foreign policy, Cold War history, and key domestic and international public policy issues. Many works have generated profound influence. For example, Alfonso Quiroz' s *Corrupt Circles*, after being published in Spanish in Peru, became a core resource in the country' s public debate on corruption, ranking among Peru' s top five bestsellers within two weeks of release.

4.3 Digital Technology Facilitating Promotion

The Wilson Center emphasizes leveraging digital and network technologies, utilizing new media promotion methods and marketing techniques to broaden promotion channels and enhance publicity effectiveness.

In 2015, the Wilson Center redesigned its website, optimizing information dissemination methods, improving research results display and visual presentation, while becoming compatible with mobile devices and integrated with social media channels, maximizing content coverage and significantly increasing website traffic.

The Wilson Center' s social media efforts, particularly its rapid development on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, have made the center' s online audience increasingly younger, more diverse, and more global. Over the past two years, more than 2.8 million people have viewed the center' s posts on Facebook, with over 85,000 likes. Twitter followers have more than doubled, with engagement and traffic also increasing substantially. The Wilson Center continues to monitor and embed new digital networks such as Tumblr, LinkedIn, and Flipboard to attract more reader participation and interaction, expanding the center' s influence [5].

In the internet era, marketing models are also changing. In 2013, the Wilson Center introduced the cloud-based marketing platform Marketo, resulting in 66% overall growth in contact information. Email engagement tripled in 2015. Wilson Weekly e-newsletter subscriptions increased by 50%, and registration numbers for center program activities also increased significantly. Additionally, *The Wilson Quarterly* transitioned to an all-digital format in 2014, presenting content in more vivid forms and reaching broader audiences, becoming a venue for intellectuals to express their views.

Based on these outstanding media promotion efforts, the Wilson Center has consecutively received the ranking of “Best Think Tank for the Use of Media (Print or Electronic)” for multiple years [2].

5. Overall Assessment

Although not among the oldest think tanks in the United States, the Wilson Center has consistently maintained its position among the world’s top think tanks throughout its decades of development. It has adhered to its founding development philosophy, upholding President Wilson’s values and ideals, striving to establish communication channels between academia and policy circles, and promoting research and discussion on domestic and world affairs. Given its unique funding sources, the Wilson Center claims no partisan affiliation and does not engage in policy lobbying. The center endeavors to provide a dialogue platform, maintains a large international visiting scholars program, conducts independent and original research, and enjoys a distinguished reputation in international affairs and public policy. The Wilson Center leverages its unique official background for deep engagement in U.S. policy affairs while utilizing these political elites’ social connections and experience to expand its own influence and disseminate its research findings. As research by scholars including Guan Lin [16] has found, the Wilson Center, like other top American think tanks, exists within a network of large corporations, think tanks, and elites, where think tanks with more high-level board members achieve higher influence and comprehensive strength rankings.

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

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