

## On the Similarities and Differences between Think Tanks and Academia: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The recent development of think tanks has disrupted the traditional structure of the scholarly profession, leading to significant functional differentiation among scholars and exerting influence on the established academic evaluation system and the status quo of academia. This has rendered the relationship between think tanks and academia an issue requiring urgent clarification. [Method/Process] This paper proceeds from the historical origins of the two types of “scholarly professions”—academia and think tanks—and argues that “the distinction between think tanks and academia dates back to ancient times.” It then discusses the differences between think tanks and academia in terms of their principal actors, behavioral orientations, and scope of work, as well as the current varied classifications of think tank research arising from differences in their service objects. [Result/Conclusion] In anticipation of a future characterized by mutual respect, solidarity, and mutual learning between think tanks and academia.

### Full Text

### Preamble

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**Title:** On the Differences and Similarities Between Think Tanks and Academia

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The recent development of think tanks has disrupted the traditional structure of the scholarly profession, leading to significant functional differentiation among scholars and impacting the established academic evaluation system and the current state of academic research. This makes

it imperative to clarify the relationship between think tanks and academia. [Method/Process] This paper begins with the historical origins of these two “scholarly industries” —academia and think tanks—and argues that “the divergence between think tanks and academia has existed since ancient times.” It then discusses the differences between the two in terms of industry subjects, behavioral orientations, and work content, as well as the current classification of think tank research based on different service objects. [Result/Conclusion] It is hoped that think tanks and academia can develop a future characterized by mutual respect, solidarity, and mutual learning.

**Keywords:** think tank; academia; scholar function

**Classification Number:** G312

Since General Secretary Xi Jinping made important instructions on “new types of Chinese characteristic think tanks” on April 15, 2013, the social status of China’s think tank community as a special group within the scholarly profession has become increasingly prominent. This was especially true after the decision of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee first wrote “building new types of Chinese characteristic think tanks” into the Party’s highest-level document, and after the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Development of New Types of Chinese Characteristic Think Tanks” in January 2015. Since then, think tank development has risen to the level of national strategy and top-level design, becoming an inseparable component of modern state governance. The think tank industry in China has experienced rare, explosive growth.

Although practitioners in both think tanks and academia belong to the scholarly profession and share a high degree of unity, the rapid development of think tanks in recent years has broken the original structure of the scholarly profession, produced major functional differentiation among scholars, and influenced the inherent academic evaluation system and the current state of academic development [1-2]. This has made a methodological discussion of the relationship between think tanks and academia an urgent issue that needs clarification. Some scholars believe that academia and think tanks are incompatible and that universities cannot develop think tanks, while others argue that they share considerable convergence [3-5]. These two distinct perspectives each appear to have some validity, yet they cannot be reconciled with each other, nor can they become a universal consensus in the field. Without a deep clarification of the relationship between think tanks and academia, policies aimed at encouraging think tank development cannot complement academia, nor can they promote the long-term development of universities and local academy of social sciences systems that focus primarily on academic work. Instead, this may lead to numerous negative phenomena in the think tank industry, such as “more tanks than wisdom” and “a mix of good and bad” [6-7]. To address this, the author begins with the historical origins of these two “scholarly industries” —academia and think tanks —discusses the latest developments in the think tank industry in recent years, and draws the preliminary conclusion that “the divergence between think tanks

and academia has existed since ancient times.” The author then discusses the three aspects in which think tanks and academia have gradually diverged in recent years—industry subjects, behavioral orientations, and work content—as well as the current classification of think tank research based on differences in service objects. Finally, the paper describes a future in which think tanks and academia mutually respect, unite with, and learn from each other.

## 1. The Millennial Divergence Between Think Tanks and Academia

According to the definition by the famous German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) in *The Vocation of the Scholar*, both those engaged in think tanks and those engaged in academia can be regarded as “scholars,” that is, individuals “essentially entrusted with the mission associated with the production and dissemination of knowledge” [8]. This definition also captures the origins of Chinese intellectuals throughout history. Since ancient times, Chinese scholars have had a progressive ideal of personal cultivation and lofty aspirations: “cultivate oneself, regulate one’s family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world,” as well as different missions of “withdrawal from the world” (*chushi*) and “engagement with the world” (*rushi*).

Generally speaking, the so-called “withdrawal from the world” approach emphasizes the principle that “if the Way prevailed in the world, I would not need to change it” (*The Analects*, Weizi), aiming to explore the great principles, laws, and Way of the world, inquire into the origins of all things in the universe, and investigate the principles within the details—much like today’s academic scholars who focus on topics and theoretical reflections relatively distant from immediate reality [9]. The so-called “engagement with the world” approach, by contrast, emphasizes that “ministers have times to await consultation, and remonstrance officials have times to request audiences” (*Reading the Comprehensive Mirror*), devoting oneself to social and state affairs, offering counsel to decision-makers, and assisting rulers in governing the country—roles that are directly continuous with contemporary think tank scholars and aim to explore policy-relevant problems and seek solutions [10].

Throughout history, as social operating rules have continuously evolved and state administration has become increasingly complex, the functions of scholars have undergone many meaningful changes across eras. From the philosophers of the pre-Qin period, the classical studies of the Han dynasty, and the metaphysics of the Wei-Jin period, to the Buddhism of the Sui-Tang period, the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and the Neo-Confucianism of the Song-Ming period, there emerged a group of literati situated between officialdom and the common people, or holding official titles but with no intention of serving as officials. These individuals had lofty aspirations, worried about the world, pursued spiritual freedom, expressed political views, and expounded life philosophies, leaving behind celebrated masterpieces and valuable cultural heritage. This is what is often praised as “academic inheritance.” Another group

of scholars “learned civil and military arts and sold them to the imperial family,” recruited by feudal rulers to become trusted advisors to decision-makers, such as the retainers of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the strategists of the Three Kingdoms period, and the private secretaries of the Ming-Qing periods. These individuals were erudite and practical, applied their knowledge to statecraft, discerned subtle signs and hidden trends, planned far ahead, corrected errors, either assisted decision-makers in competing for dominance, offered strategies to consolidate rule, or advised emperors to adjust policies, becoming exemplars of “accomplishing the ruler’s worldly affairs and winning fame in life and after death” [11].

In the early 19th century, disciplinary specialization began in Europe and the United States, with economics, political science, sociology, history, anthropology, and oriental studies gradually differentiating strictly within the humanities and social sciences. This perfected the modern academic disciplinary system, which was slowly transplanted into Chinese universities, shaping the modern academic professional division system of first-level and second-level disciplines in Chinese philosophy and social sciences since the 20th century. With the popularization of higher education, the number of people engaged in teaching and academic research in universities has risen sharply, becoming the main body of the scholarly community. By contrast, the development of modern think tanks in China came much later. After the embryonic period of the founding of New China and the recovery and development period of the early reform and opening-up, it was not until the 1990s that think tank development gradually flourished along with the “prosperity of decision-making science and development of consulting industry” and “promotion of scientific and democratic decision-making” proposed at the 15th and 16th Party Congresses. After April 2013, the era of new types of Chinese characteristic think tanks officially began, and think tank construction was formally incorporated into the national development strategy for soft power development and construction [12], especially after the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Chinese Characteristic Think Tanks,” which specifically designated think tanks from academically prestigious universities as an important force in building new types of Chinese characteristic think tanks. Consequently, many university academic research institutions have undergone think tank-oriented transformation.

The direct practical reason for the think tank-oriented transformation of academic research institutions, rather than the reverse, lies in the imbalance between the number of think tank scholars and academic scholars. According to data from the “China Think Tank Report (2014)” released by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Think Tank Research Center, China has approximately 30,000 think tank researchers. According to Ministry of Education statistics, by 2015, there were 15.39 million full-time teachers at all levels and types of schools nationwide, including 1.57 million teachers in higher education (including vocational colleges) [13]. In other words, a rough comparison shows a ratio of approximately 1:50 between practitioners in the think tank and aca-

demographic industries, with think tank personnel clearly in a disadvantaged position. This places think tank scholars in an absolute minority and vulnerable position within the entire scholarly profession, especially in universities, where think tank supply far lags behind decision-making demand. More importantly, in universities where the academic evaluation system serves as the main indicator, the large number of academic scholars has objectively made it difficult for think tank scholars' research achievements to be recognized or fully accepted by the university evaluation system.

In fact, older-generation academic masters such as Ji Xianlin and Li Xueqin have long called for "rewriting academic history" in their writings, because Chinese academia has an independent tradition and should focus more on the developmental 脉络 and transformational inheritance of the relationship between ancient academic schools and contemporary disciplinary systems, emphasizing the inheritance relationship between the historical evolution of ancient think tanks and the responsibilities of modern scholars [14]. Unfortunately, in many literature studies on the origins of think tanks, much ink is devoted to how China has borrowed Western think tank mechanisms and institutional forms since the reform and opening-up, and how the important consulting functions of government decision-making have been transplanted into the Chinese system. Although this conforms to the partial reality of "Western learning spreading to the East" in modern Chinese thought, it overlooks the endogenous evolution of think tanks in China, making it easy to neglect the scholar's inherited, innate feelings for family and country and the mission of the times. In other words, "serving the country" and "policy research" themselves should be inherent genes in the inheritance process of Chinese scholars' profound scholarly cultivation over thousands of years, at least for a considerable portion of scholars, rather than new or additional tasks for the scholarly community, nor "alternative" or "improper" work content, much less replicas of Western think tank forms in China.

Thus, although both academia and think tanks engage in what Fichte called "the work of knowledge learning, production, and dissemination," and both primarily work through writing, investigation, and publishing articles, in modern society's cultural concepts, the concept of "scholar" is regarded as "a residual cultural identity concept after strict knowledge differentiation" [15]. This concept is elitist, ambiguous, and academic, requiring greater identification in terms of mission and specific work content. The principle is similar to how within the same broad industry, more refined identification is needed: for example, securities, insurance, and banking all belong to the financial industry but differ greatly from one another; newspapers, television, radio, and websites all belong to the media industry but are similarly vastly different. Returning to historical origins reveals clearly that since ancient times, think tanks and academia have both belonged to the scholarly profession, but their divergence has long existed, with many distinct differences between them. Of course, they also share considerable commonality, integration, and identity [4].

## 2. Three Major Differences Between Think Tanks and Academia

In general understanding, scholars are a branch of the research profession. Personnel in the research profession can be roughly divided into four categories: government policy researchers, various social consulting service personnel, academic scholars, and think tank scholars. These four categories have different degrees of association with economic markets and government policies. As shown in the figure below, from a theoretical perspective, government policy researchers need to keep up with current affairs, conduct research on social difficulties, pain points, and hot spots, formulate policies, write speeches for decision-makers, and seek solutions for social and national governance. However, these research processes depend on the agenda-setting of government work and cannot be promoted or obtained through consulting services or purchases, making them relatively detached from economic markets. Various social consulting service industries are exactly the opposite, specializing in providing paid, valuable knowledge production and research services for social institutions and enterprise departments.

[Figure 1: see original paper] The four-quadrant diagram of study types

Measured by the degree of association with policy and markets, the locational differences between think tanks and academia become apparent. Academic scholars are generally far from both economic markets and government policies, whereas think tanks must be close to both economic markets and policy politics. Taking the United States as an example, think tanks require substantial social donations. Although think tanks may not directly serve donors, their research directions and philosophies are usually closely related to donors. The quality of think tanks has a strong positive correlation with the amount of donations. Generally speaking, globally ranked think tanks such as the RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution have annual budgets of around \$100 million or more. Think tanks are heavily concentrated in Washington, D.C., the political capital of the United States, along what is known as “Think Tank Row” on Massachusetts Avenue, only 1-2 kilometers from the White House, State Department, and Treasury Department—truly “the right time and place” for policy research [16-17]. Beyond these macro-level differences in policy and market association, there are three micro-level differences:

**First, from international experience, there are major differences in practitioner subjects between think tanks and academia.** Those engaged in think tank research and those engaged in academic research are often two different groups of scholars. Career transitions occur between these two groups. Some individuals work in universities for many years before moving to think tanks, such as Li Cheng, Director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution, and Scott Kennedy, Deputy Director of the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, both of whom were previously outstanding academic scholars in universities. Others move from think tanks back to universities, such as Pei Minxin,

a professor at Claremont McKenna College, who previously served as Director of the Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a well-known think tank scholar. There are also university-based think tank scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama, originator of the “end of history” thesis, who is now the Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, and Joseph Nye, proponent of “soft power,” who is a professor at Harvard University. They are located in universities but have minimal teaching responsibilities, focusing mainly on think tank research closely related to policy. Some scholars have solid academic research but occasionally participate in policy research teams to make their research more practical, such as Harvard political science professor Iain Johnston, who once told me personally that he is not a think tank scholar but engages in academic research. Another group includes scholars who previously held high positions and later moved to universities to assume important roles while also producing good academic research, such as former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Thomas Christensen, now a professor at Princeton University. Based on my research, the phenomenon of think tanks and academia as two distinct yet mutually convertible industries is also widespread in the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. Although there are exceptional individuals like former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former World Bank Vice President Lin Yifeng who excel in academia, think tanks, and government agencies or international organizations, the majority of scholars are not willing or able to simultaneously excel in both think tank and academic roles.

Due to differences in practitioner subjects, practitioners’ titles and designations also differ. Academic scholars are generally called “pure scholars” or “theoretical research scholars,” mostly concentrated in universities and, in China, various levels of academy of social sciences systems. Generally speaking, this group requires doctoral degrees, has relatively strict disciplinary divisions and inheritance, and rarely sees cases of interdisciplinary PhDs serving as professors in another discipline. Academic scholars also have a strict hierarchical title sequence, divided into “professor,” “associate professor,” and “lecturer (assistant professor),” or the similar three-level sequence of “research fellow,” “associate research fellow,” and “assistant research fellow.” Although the term “professor” first appeared in *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Confucius’ s Disciples* in the phrase “Zixia lived in Xihe and taught, serving as teacher to Marquis Wen of Wei,” its modern connotation in China has been heavily influenced by the West, originating in 1912 when the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China promulgated the “University Ordinance,” Article 13 of which officially mentioned “universities shall establish professors and assistant professors.” In 1927, the Education Administrative Committee of the Nationalist government published the “Regulations on University Faculty Qualifications,” which more detailedly proposed that “university faculty shall be divided into four levels: professor, associate professor, lecturer, and assistant.” In the academic field, entering the “professor” sequence equals obtaining a “tenured” position.

In contrast, the scope of think tank practitioners is broader. Official think tanks, social think tanks, university think tanks, and in recent years, new types such as enterprise think tanks and science and technology think tanks encompass a wider range of intellectual groups. Think tank management and operation require complementary diversified talents, including not only research talents but also external exchange and cooperation talents, as well as achievement dissemination talents, forming a complete think tank industry chain. Therefore, the functional division of think tank practitioners is also relatively broad, involving not only research but also dissemination, conferences, administration, fundraising, etc. [18]. Positions within think tanks are usually designated as “director,” “deputy director,” “senior research fellow,” etc. Except in a few countries like China, think tank scholars rarely have tenure, especially in the United States, where competition in the think tank job market is fierce, with one-to-three-year appointments being common. Professionalization, industrialization, and specialization have become the basic conditions for think tanks in Europe and America [16]. In terms of education, think tanks do not necessarily require doctoral degrees. Among U.S. think tank practitioners, those with doctoral degrees accounted for 23% between 1960 and 1980, and only 13% after 1980 [19]. Think tanks have relatively weak disciplinary inheritance, and their subordinate institutions are generally not divided by discipline but by research object. For example, many major U.S. think tanks have specialized China research programs that hire professionals from international relations, political science, area studies, economics, and even sociology. Top-tier U.S. international studies think tanks do not have schools or departments of international relations like universities do, but instead have Asia-Pacific studies, African studies, Latin American studies, and counter-terrorism research project groups, each generally equipped with interdisciplinary talent teams.

**Second, from the perspective of value philosophy, there are clear differences in professional interests between think tank scholars and academic scholars.** Think tank scholars place greater emphasis on immediate impact, while academic scholars are often seen as persistent pursuers and guardians of “profound learning,” emphasizing academic freedom—freedom from unreasonable constraints, limitations, and interference by external factors in academic activities—and pursuing academic ideals, not necessarily caring about contemporary reputation, sometimes even desiring to “hide their works in famous mountains to be passed down to future generations” [20]. Chinese academia first emerged in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, evolving from the statecraft techniques of Confucius and Mencius, and gradually establishing the basic content framework of ancient academia in the process of exploring the Way of the world [21]. Modern academic scholars have made the pursuit of academic ideals, truth, and the defense of truth their academic mission and task [20]. Academic research may derive from empirical sources or from logical deduction of existing theoretical achievements and exploration of general values. The quality of academic research is based on the views and opinions of academic peers, particularly the standards and criteria for publication in academic

journals. Academic progress is often built upon disciplinary frameworks and academic predecessors, seeking breakthroughs at the ideological level.

Think tank scholars, by contrast, have a clear positioning: they must study issues of interest to government decision-makers who seek solutions, aiming to influence contemporary government decision-makers. The quality of think tank research is judged by feedback from decision-makers and the practical operability of solutions; the key to the development of think tank research achievements lies in the degree to which real-world problems are solved. The earliest record of “think tank” appears in *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Shu Lizi and Gan Mao*: “Shu Lizi was witty and resourceful, and the people of Qin called him ‘think tank,’ ” showing that the innate function is to strategize for decision-makers. Think tank groups have had characteristics of their respective eras but always serve contemporary governments [22]. Think tank scholars need a scholar-official complex, which in contemporary terms is “feelings for family and country” —a sense of responsibility and mission to promote national and social progress, as expressed in Fan Zhongyan’s famous line, “Worry before the world worries, rejoice only after the world rejoices” [23].

**Third, from the perspective of operational methods, there are significant differences in work content between think tank scholars and academic scholars.** Think tank scholars often have more complex tasks than academic scholars.

Academic work content mainly involves rigorous theoretical assumptions, methodological demonstrations, logical deduction, cautious conclusions, and meticulous citation. Additionally, academic scholars in universities generally have teaching and talent cultivation responsibilities. Most academic scholars work as “individuals,” long-term concentrating on a fixed direction within a single discipline, occasionally publishing academic papers in journals with relatively weak timeliness requirements and less need for media coverage, with some even refusing media interviews. Academic scholars are often called “theoretical researchers,” relatively insensitive to policy changes, and some even look down upon policy researchers.

Think tank research is more complex, requiring not only research but also strong topic selection awareness and high timeliness demands, sometimes needing to produce a research brief for decision-makers within days or even hours [24]. This requires “teamwork” and more research assistants and operational staff. In U.S. think tanks, research personnel generally account for only 50% of the entire institution. Think tanks concentrate substantial resources and budgets on lobbying and promotion, with some think tanks like the Heritage Foundation allocating 50% of their budget to marketing [25]. Think tank scholars require more complex work capabilities: they must be able to write long policy reports of tens of thousands of words as well as short internal reference documents of about two thousand words; they must learn to accept interviews, deal with the media, and regularly participate in consultation meetings with government departments; they must conduct academic demonstrations and data collection

while also concisely cutting to the point. In other words, think tank scholars must not only produce ideas but also care about their dissemination, behind which lies a series of compound operational behaviors. As some scholars have commented, there are major functional differences between academic research and think tanks, including different purposes, concepts, timeframes, result orientations, and mechanisms [26]. These differences are reflected in the behavioral orientations of think tank scholars and academic scholars.

However, many domestic think tanks still focus on academic research as their main development direction, with some believing that “academic thought is the soul of think tanks” [27]. Former Vice Minister of Education Li Weihong has pointed out that the scarcity of high-quality think tank achievements and the fact that some research lacks pertinence and practicality and is overly academic are factors hindering think tank development [2]. From this perspective, releasing policy reports, writing media commentaries, appearing on television, giving public lectures, and accepting interviews are useful and efficient think tank behaviors. Think tank consultation reports or internal references differ from academic articles not only in length but also by often skipping lengthy reasoning and argumentation processes to cut directly to the theme, proposing feasible solutions in the conclusion section.

From this comparison, think tanks focus on advising governments on “how to do,” consisting of people who understand government operational mechanisms, are skilled at producing and disseminating ideas, and have clear aspirations to influence decision-makers and improve national policies, engaging in pragmatic behaviors of idea production and dissemination through relatively compound operational methods. Academia, by contrast, focuses on exploring knowledge of “what should be” or “what is essential,” consisting of people who dare to challenge and transcend themselves intellectually and are relatively detached from government and social operations, seeking to promote the upgrading of thought itself through rigorous theoretical assumptions and demonstrations—an idealistic endeavor.

### 3. Different Paths, Same Destination: The Convergence of Think Tanks and Academia

The Qing dynasty scholar Liu Xianting wrote in *Guangyang Miscellany*: “Zhuge Liang is a person of the ages, and his scholarship entirely derives from this book.” *Guangyang Miscellany* covers various aspects, including law, ritual and music, mathematics, medicine, and fire attack, demonstrating that ancient scholarship meant the art of statecraft. Aristotle once said, “Humans need three kinds of knowledge: theoretical, practical, and critical,” suggesting that the best manifestation of scholarship is its application in practice. Plato also said, “I believe that a proper education, if maintained, can transform human nature in a country, and people with sound character who receive this education become better people.” Therefore, teaching and educating people are important components of academic work, and promoting a country, society, and nation through education

and research is also the ultimate destination of academia. From the perspective of ultimate goals, think tanks and academia are different paths leading to the same destination, possessing both differences and unity.

In the modern sense, contemporary think tanks originate from the specialization of knowledge production and the specification of service objects in modern society. Advisors serving decision-makers have long existed, but the term “think tank” (English “Think Tank”) was born in the early 20th-century United States [28-29], a product of European and American countries seeking to expand international influence and better implement foreign policy in the context of globalization [30]. Think tanks typically engage in setting global agendas, influencing international public opinion, making friends widely across countries, and influencing other countries’ policies [31]. James McGann, a well-known U.S. think tank research expert, classifies think tanks into policy-formulating think tanks, government spokesperson think tanks, academic think tanks, shadow think tanks, and activist think tanks based on different operational methods [32]. If classified by service object, the functional differences between different think tanks are also clear. However, in this regard, comparisons between think tanks and academia have many intersections.

The first is research serving the general public. Since the end of the Cold War, a major trend in global think tanks has been the expansion of their work to influence the broader public [33]. Think tank scholars need not only “advise the government” but also “enlighten the people,” writing articles that ordinary citizens can understand and that spread widely in mass media. However, not everyone who serves the public is a think tank scholar. Some scholars, both domestic and foreign, are keen on publishing articles in the media, even publishing only in media, becoming columnist-style scholars. They are skilled at writing bestsellers, promoting their views and reputations through the most effective communication methods or eye-catching viewpoints. Their goal is clear: to make a living and gain influence by serving the public (or “entertaining the public”). They are often disdained by the think tank community and criticized by academia. More than 20 years ago, Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington published *The Clash of Civilizations*, shocking the world. The book’s logic was torn apart by both think tank and academic circles. However, his student Pei Minxin offered a better explanation: “Huntington is a typical scholar, a generalist in academia...*The Clash of Civilizations* is Huntington’s most famous work in the world. However, from an academic perspective, this is not his best work. This is because *The Clash of Civilizations* was written for a different audience. He didn’t write it for scholars but for the general public” [34].

The second is research serving industries. Many enterprises, non-governmental organizations, or investors need to understand the development trends, scale structure, competitive landscape, and comprehensive economic information of certain industries or sectors [35]. Most enterprise think tanks that have developed rapidly in China in recent years serve specific industries, aiming to provide business decision-makers with optimal strategies, ideas, or related services in

marketing, human resources, finance, R&D, manufacturing, law, finance, public relations, and other aspects. In the financial world, the most typical examples are the “research reports” periodically issued by major securities firms and investment banks’ research teams on various industries. Some academic research teams also track certain industries or sectors long-term, hoping to understand micro-level changes in their industries and promote the upgrading and renewal of academic theories from an industry research perspective. The most typical examples are the large annual “Blue Book” series published by Social Sciences Academic Press and China Renmin University Press, which analyze and predict the status and development trends of various economic and social fields in China and the world each year, covering all aspects of economic and social life including economy, society, culture, finance, law, healthcare, real estate, tourism, talent, and education. Contributors come from both think tank and academic circles.

The third is research serving policy. The most important institutions for policy-serving research are generally the “research bureaus,” “research offices,” and “research centers” within government ministries and commissions, such as the Research Institute of Finance of the People’s Bank of China, the Chinese Academy of Fiscal Sciences under the Ministry of Finance, and the Academy of Commerce. Provincial party committees and governments also have research offices and development research centers. Some institutions specialize in writing speeches for leaders, compiling new formulations and ideas, while others focus on the demonstration, research, and formulation processes of specific policies. In recent years, many think tanks have broken the monopoly of ideological services within the administrative system in some fields, forming a multi-channel supply of knowledge and ideas for public policy formulation by ministries and commissions [36]. Many academic research institutions also receive major social science projects from ministries and commissions, hoping to conduct policy demonstrations at deeper theoretical levels. Theoretically, policy research itself is a rigorous science. Regarding the specific concept of policy research, U.S. scholar Stuart S. Nagel stated: “Policy research can be generally defined as research on the nature, causes, and effects of different public policies to solve various specific social problems” [37]. This shows that policy research is not just short-term countermeasure research; both think tanks and academia can serve specific policies, with differences sometimes only in timeliness, perspective, and length. Western academia has specifically studied the gap between think tanks and academia, concluding that academic research conclusions on specific policies may not be immediately transformed into policies but involve information and knowledge needed for policy formulation that decision-making departments may have no time to address yet must possess [38].

The fourth is research serving strategy. This mainly refers to serving the highest national decision-making level, considering long-term goals from a national perspective, rather than business strategy or corporate strategy, nor merely military operational strategy. Strategic research often stands at the height of the highest decision-making departments, adopts a national-based position, transcends ministry and regional interests, and explores solutions that the highest

decision-making level can implement and that will prove effective over relatively long periods [39]. Generally, strategic research capabilities require substantial demonstration, short-medium-long-term combined research methods and variable analysis, and comprehensive consideration from the decision-maker's height—all directions in which both think tank and academic scholars can work together. From a strategic perspective, scholars should also play roles in public diplomacy such as international communication and lobbying to realize national strategic intentions. In my view, a top-tier Chinese think tank should influence not only Zhongnanhai but also the White House, just as excellent U.S. think tanks can exert certain influence on Chinese decision-makers, not just American ones. Many scholars claim to engage in “strategic research,” but whether in think tank or academic circles, those who can truly serve a country's highest decision-making level are extremely few.

Although the differences between think tanks and academia have existed since ancient times, with deep-level differences in industry subjects, behavioral orientations, and work content, they are not two completely unrelated or rarely intersecting fields, nor is there a natural “gap” between them. Think tank scholars are not limited to simple “short-term research” or “countermeasure research”; excellent think tank scholars often have profound academic foundations, but social division of labor leads them to write fewer or no lengthy academic papers. Academic scholars are not limited to “theoretical research” or “research unrelated to reality”; excellent academic scholars (especially in political science, economics, and sociology) often maintain long-term interest in and attention to reality and policy, frequently becoming honored guests of decision-makers. From this, we can derive the proper attitudes that think tanks and academia should have toward each other.

**First, think tank and academic scholars should respect each other.** In this restless information age, writing excellent academic papers is not easy, and becoming a professor is increasingly difficult, requiring patience, years of honing a single skill, and the ability to endure solitude. Similarly, writing a think tank report that will be remembered through the ages is also difficult. There are few timeless academic masterpieces; truly memorable policy reports, such as Zhuge Liang's *Chu Shi Biao*, Jia Yi's *On the Faults of Qin*, or George Kennan's “X” article *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* that propelled U.S. containment of the Soviet Union, are equally rare. Typically, some think tank scholars disdain academia, considering it too esoteric and “self-entertaining,” while some academic scholars look down on think tanks, considering their achievements fragile and superficial. These are actually references to each other's inferior works. In reality, low-level academic articles often lack understanding of reality and policy, while low-level think tank reports often lack academic foundation. Both think tanks and academia should jointly despise and condemn those scholars who produce low-level, repetitive work that wastes project funds and taxpayers' money.

**Second, think tank and academic scholars should unite with each**

**other.** The era of globalization has led to a surge in think tanks worldwide. Against the backdrop of declining national authority, emerging transnational issues, increasing international actors, and exploding information flows, knowledge production and dissemination have become transnational and networked, undertaking numerous international organization and technical tasks and influencing global governance and international public policy formulation [40]. Compared to domestic issues, the large number of global issues that have emerged in recent years, such as the G20, the Belt and Road Initiative, climate change, and green finance, require think tank and academic circles to work together, promote diversified talent mobility, draw on each other's strengths, share information, and rely on establishing broader domestic and international knowledge and idea networks to enhance the soft power and discourse power of China's development experience in the international community, seek Chinese solutions to global problems, and thereby promote sustainable development at both national and global levels.

**Third, think tank and academic scholars should promote each other.**

In recent years, some foreign scholars, sensing the reality of intellectual competition, have hoped to bridge the increasingly blurred boundaries between think tanks and academia [41]. An excellent academic product requires more continuous “field investigations” and “object interviews” like those in think tanks. Even an excellent purely theoretical academic article requires the most comprehensive literature review and a more universal explanation of the latest reality. An excellent think tank report supported by academic logic and theoretical laws will undoubtedly be more convincing to decision-makers. The topic sensitivity required for think tank reports can provide more research topics for academic research. Most scholars remember that when writing doctoral dissertations, there is always an essential chapter on “significance of the dissertation.” Those doctoral dissertations with practical and policy significance—not just academic significance—and sufficient demonstration often receive higher evaluations. Therefore, only by reviving the scholar-official spirit of “applying learning to practical use” and “feelings for family and country” can think tanks and academia mutually learn from each other methodologically.

Good academic research often employs innovative research methods based on the combination of theory and practice, quantitative and qualitative approaches [42]. Liang Qichao said, “Great scholars in enlightenment eras need not have profound attainments, but they often define research scope, innovate research methods, and infuse them with fresh spirit” [43]. High-level academic research depends not only on a scholar's theoretical literacy but also often on the scholar's sensitivity, meticulousness, and innovation regarding dynamic, current policy issues. Similarly, think tank scholars can maintain their academic freedom, independence, and dignity while calmly and objectively analyzing policies and seeking solutions to policy dilemmas. Academic research facing reality and policy often allows academic exploration to identify new theoretical trends and obtain motivation for theoretical upgrading [44]. Think tank research with academic foundation makes think tank products appear more credible.

As mentioned above, the most top-tier scholars can often ascend to the “academic hall” and also descend to the “think tank kitchen.” Think tanks and academia are not in a “zero-sum relationship” where one cannot coexist with the other, but rather a mutually inclusive relationship of mutual promotion. As Xi Jinping stated in his “Speech at the Symposium on Philosophy and Social Sciences” on May 17, 2016, regarding the requirements for think tank and academic development, “Think tank construction should focus on improving research quality and promoting content innovation” and “Treat the social effects of academic research seriously” [45]. Against the current background of public criticism that “academia has reached a dead end” and “think tank reports are too shallow,” it is quite necessary for think tanks and academia to seek mutual respect and learning and common progress. From this perspective, universities can also build think tanks, and think tanks also need more substantial theoretical thinking. For academic managers and think tank leaders, institutional reforms should also be carried out to facilitate integration and mutual learning between the two. Making research directions more aligned with society, reality, and policy, and making research achievements more accessible to the public, will eliminate the undesirable trends of academic elitism and think tank hollowness in future development, enabling better methodological integration between the two and thereby making greater contributions to society and the nation [46].

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