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Cultural and Ecological Construction in the Development of Chinese Think Tanks (Post-print)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In recent years, with national attention and investment in think tank construction, China has witnessed a boom in think tank development. To ensure the sustainable development of think tank construction, it is essential to examine the cultural atmosphere and ecological environment required for think tank development. [Method/Process] This paper begins by interpreting the fundamental conceptual implications of think tank terminology with Chinese characteristics, explores the philosophy of constructing a think tank cultural ecology, and discusses the “common values” in building such an ecology from the perspective of the relationship between core think tank products (research reports) and peripheral articles. [Results/Conclusion] The development of think tank construction requires the long-term accumulation of think tank culture and the nurturing cultivation of a healthy ecology. Think tanks should possess strong problem awareness (a spirit of questioning) and independent analytical thinking capabilities, be able to engage with reality and discover nuanced issues, maintain an international perspective, continuously produce scientifically sound and feasible high-quality think tank research reports, and ultimately grow into high-level, first-class think tanks.

Full Text

Building the Culture and Ecology for the Development of Chinese Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In recent years, as the Chinese government has devoted increasing attention and resources to think tank development, China has witnessed a boom in think tank construction. To ensure the sustainable development of this sector, it is essential to examine the cultural atmosphere and ecological environment necessary for building robust think tanks.

[Method/Process] This paper begins by interpreting the basic conceptual connotations of think tank terminology with Chinese characteristics, exploring the philosophy of constructing a think tank cultural ecology. It then discusses the “common values” for building this ecological environment, starting from the relationship between core products (research reports) and peripheral publications.

[Result/Conclusion] The development of think tanks requires long-term cultural accumulation and nurturing by a healthy ecosystem. Think tanks should cultivate strong problem awareness (a spirit of inquiry) and independent analytical thinking capabilities, maintain concern for reality while exploring detailed issues, embrace an international perspective, and continuously produce scientifically sound and feasible high-quality research reports, ultimately maturing into world-class institutions.

Keywords: think tank; cultural ecology; evaluation ranking; independence; supply side; globalization

In recent years, as the Chinese government has focused on think tank construction, China has experienced a surge in building such institutions. This enthusiasm is reasonable in the early development stage, as it helps nurture emerging entities, attract social attention, and create space for growth. However, as the wave of think tank cultural construction rises, we must consider what kind of cultural atmosphere and ecological environment are needed to sustain long-term development.

1. Interpreting the Conceptual Connotations of Basic Think Tank Terminology

As Chinese think tank construction accelerates to align with globalization, numerous fashionable new terms with Chinese characteristics have been coined and widely disseminated, yet these terms are rarely employed in international professional circles. Their precise meanings remain ambiguous, with diverse interpretations circulating within the field, creating a state of conceptual confusion. Since think tank construction should prioritize cultural development—a process that inevitably involves the introduction, digestion, and absorption of transnational think tank cultures—examining these fundamental terms and their connotations is essential for healthy development.

1.1 On Narrow and Broad Definitions of Think Tanks

Think tank is a professional term, but the global community has yet to establish a clear, strict definition. The simplest narrow consensus defines a think tank as a registered non-profit organization whose core product is research reports that directly influence public policy [1]. Broadly speaking, any institution that proposes new policy recommendations for government could be called a think tank, but this creates ambiguity because proposing new policy suggestions is a necessary but not sufficient condition. In other words, to be a think tank, an institution must produce ideas advocating new policies, yet not every institution that proposes policy recommendations qualifies as a think tank.

The U.S. federal government has approximately one thousand advisory committees, including seven in the White House and various other committees bearing presidential names in other departments. The President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, for instance, is co-chaired by the President's science advisor (a full-time position), while other members serve without salary or consulting fees, receiving only travel expense reimbursements. Some consider these advisory committees as U.S. government think tanks, but they are not typical examples. Similarly, many Chinese cities have municipal government expert advisory groups or decision-making committees, which some view as analogous to government counselor offices and thus think tanks, while opponents argue they lack the organizational form of think tanks and do not produce publishable research reports. Additionally, various democratic parties that submit policy proposals directly to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, as well as engineering, economic, and legal consulting institutions that indirectly influence public policy by providing technical services to government, all possess think tank functions but are difficult to classify as think tanks.

1.2.1 Classification of Think Tanks

Classification represents a major research area on think tanks, yet remains an unresolved academic issue. Criteria can include geographic scope (international, regional, domestic), academic field (health, environment, security, economy, society, technology, management), institutional sector (party/government agencies, universities, enterprises, private non-enterprise units), or asset ownership (official fiscal, semi-official, civil society). However, classification is an external perspective for research purposes and should not affect think tank construction or development. The principle is practicality and research convenience; generally, the categories of official, semi-official, and private think tanks suffice. Excessive subdivisions are neither necessary nor scientifically rigorous [1].

1.2.2 New-Type Think Tanks

New-type think tanks are defined in contrast to old-type (traditional) ones. Since modern Chinese think tank construction is still in its infancy, modern think tanks should inherently be new-type think tanks. Although cultural ex-

change does not entirely follow the principle of water flowing downhill, new and superior cultures generally diffuse toward old and backward ones. In the international think tank cultural exchange arena, the direction of cultural and civilizational transmission follows this pattern, encompassing both internal operational mechanisms and external social environments. The extensive study of modern think tanks in Western developed countries and the borrowing of their successful experiences demonstrate that so-called “new-type think tanks” are essentially modern think tanks with an international perspective.

1.2.3 Characteristic Think Tanks

The term “think tank with Chinese characteristics” carries strong political attributes but has not been given a clear definition. It can probably be interpreted by reference to the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In reality, every country’s think tanks have their own characteristics based on their national systems and the governance issues they address. For most non-partisan think tanks, the term carries limited political color. The substantive issue regarding characteristic think tanks should be how to integrate the common values of modern international think tanks while creating distinctive features without departing from fundamental think tank attributes. This is a question worthy of deeper consideration within the field. If intellectual independence is lost, think tanks may ultimately become intellectually barren.

1.2.4 High-End Think Tanks

The term “high-end think tank” has strong media attributes. Based on current media coverage, it appears to describe think tanks that focus on issues of concern to national leaders. However, from a professional perspective, the standard for a truly high-end think tank should first be closely related to the quality characteristics of its research reports, including: timely and relevant topics, detailed data, rigorous logic, independent thinking, objective and scientific conclusions, and actionable recommendations. Second, research content should not be limited to macro-level, international, or high-level issues. Competition among think tanks must be grounded in attention to real-world problems. Only by advocating new policies and institutional reforms to address urgent national governance challenges can think tanks pave their way toward becoming new-type, high-end institutions. If a think tank cannot produce high-quality products in so-called low-end governance research, how can it possibly reach the high end?

2. Building the “Common Values” of Think Tank Ecological Civilization

Chinese think tank development requires a sound ecosystem. While relevant authorities have invested considerable funds in think tank construction, the main product—think tank research reports—remains severely scarce, whereas articles about think tank construction and evaluation show signs of overpro-

duction. Modern think tank development is necessary for national governance modernization, making the construction of “common values” for the think tank ecosystem essential for maximizing think tank functions and effectiveness.

2.1 Think Tank Research Overweighs Research on Think Tanks

Think tank research includes theoretical studies, methodologies, and research reports, whereas research on think tanks encompasses horizontal comparisons (domestic and international), vertical studies (development history, progress, and trends), and construction planning. The former addresses national and social governance issues, while the latter focuses on think tank construction itself. Think tank research produces research reports; research on think tanks yields construction plans, work programs, case analyses, and white papers. The purpose of think tank research is to advocate for and influence public policy, while research on think tanks aims to guide development direction and cultivate the ecological environment. The main subjects of think tank research are think tanks themselves, whereas research on think tanks involves a broader range of actors, including media, the public, and social and political scholars. As China undergoes socio-economic transformation and rapid development, numerous public policies lag behind social progress and urgently need improvement. Therefore, encouraging the production of think tank research reports currently holds more practical significance than publishing papers on think tank research.

2.2 De-emphasizing Think Tank Evaluation and Ranking

How to approach think tank evaluation and ranking significantly influences the direction of think tank development. First, we must clarify the purpose of vigorously promoting such rankings. Just as the motivation for scientific research is not to win awards, the motivation for think tank construction should not be to achieve fame. While evaluation and ranking can attract social attention and encourage competition among think tanks, they require a substantial foundation of research reports. What truly impacts national governance modernization is think tank research reports, not the quantity or ranking of think tanks. A clear parallel is that the state places far greater emphasis on evaluating and rewarding scientific and technological achievements than on ranking research institutions, and does not conduct institutional rankings. Although the United States engages in think tank rankings, we should note three facts: first, only one academic group at the University of Pennsylvania conducts such rankings; second, modern American think tanks have a history of over seventy years, while the University of Pennsylvania only began its rankings about eleven or twelve years ago; and third, despite being a major think tank country, the U.S. does not treat ranking results as sensational, instead focusing far more on the independence and objectivity of think tank products and the transparency of their operations. In contrast, China has slightly too many institutions conducting think tank rankings and lacks the accumulation of modern think tank development. Excessive enthusiasm for evaluation and ranking at present may produce

a side effect, repeating the mistakes of the Great Leap Forward' s mass steel production campaign and undermining sustainable think tank development.

Second, we must view think tank evaluation and ranking calmly. According to some analyses, over 90% of Chinese think tanks are official [2], meaning they do not compete under fair initial conditions. Currently, think tank influence in China largely depends on scale, which in turn depends on state investment intensity. Therefore, ranking official think tanks essentially produces results consistent with the state' s investment ranking, and this pattern is difficult to change long-term. This may guide think tank competition to neglect connotative development while emphasizing exogenous support, making fiscal appropriations the sole path for think tank development.

2.3 Upholding Think Tank Independence

Modern think tanks are products of scientific and democratic decision-making processes, with their greatest characteristic being intellectual and academic independence. Since their inception, discussions about think tank independence have never ceased and will remain a topic requiring in-depth exploration. While independence is not a sufficient condition for producing high-quality research reports, it is a necessary one. Without independence, think tanks cannot produce high-level research reports regardless of their status. Intellectual and academic independence does not mean disagreeing with government policies on every issue, but rather cultivating a spirit of inquiry, being adept at identifying problems, and daring to propose independent policy recommendations and innovative ideas. All think tanks claim intellectual independence, but domestic assessments involve excessive subjective factors, requiring gradual consensus-building to establish commonly recognized objective standards. Additionally, think tank independence manifests as economic independence, emphasizing that think tanks must be independent research institutions or legal entities with diversified funding sources. Western modern think tanks commonly practice transparency by voluntarily disclosing the background of research reports, operational processes, and financial conditions to evaluate independence. Therefore, openness and transparency are fundamental to maintaining independence.

2.4 Think Tank Reform Starts from the Supply Side

China currently has no shortage of think tanks. Some experts criticize the situation as “having repositories without wisdom” or “many repositories but little wisdom.” Whether this underestimates Chinese think tanks is debatable, but two basic facts exist: first, the field emphasizes developing the external environment—such as funding mechanisms, information and data openness, government communication channels, and revolving door mechanisms—while discussing little about cultivating researcher competence; second, among think tank market products, core products are too scarce while peripheral and marginal products show overcapacity.

As China undergoes socio-economic transformation and rapid development, public policies consistently lag behind social progress. The current academic ecology of Chinese think tanks exhibits several characteristics: more macro-level than micro-level research, more business/economic than livelihood economics studies, more forward-looking than reality-based research, more development planning than institutional reform analysis, more international diplomacy than social governance focus, and more feasibility than infeasibility studies. In reality, numerous public policies affecting millions of households urgently need improvement, yet enormous institutional inertia makes progress on tangible, comprehensible, and immediately beneficial policy reforms—such as in health-care, education, housing, household registration, and pensions—extremely difficult. Building Chinese think tanks involves both supply-side and demand-side development, with supply-side reform being the think tanks’ own responsibility and the top priority. This includes expanding product scope, intensifying research on real-world problems, and improving the capacity and quality of core products.

2.5 Grasping the Starting Point of Think Tank Globalization

The development direction of modern think tanks is toward internationalization and globalization. Some scholars explain that think tank globalization means employing a global vision and perspective in research, which is quite reasonable. However, acquiring such a “global vision and perspective” is no easy task.

On international issues, think tanks must first embrace the common values of the “global village” to promote peaceful human development. Consequently, even military think tanks have gradually shifted from traditional “vertical and horizontal alliances” (strategic maneuvering) to strategies of peaceful development and cooperation, as international issues are contests of strategic wisdom that require broad vision and far-sightedness. On domestic issues, think tanks should learn from the experiences of modern think tanks with rich social governance achievements and adopt internationally recognized research methods and approaches.

Every country faces thorny domestic governance challenges. For national think tanks to enter the world stage, participate in global governance research, and increase international discourse influence, they must grasp the right starting point. Chinese think tanks’ participation in global competition should focus not only on international issues like the TPP, the South China Sea, and global economic integration, but more importantly on domestic problems. Only by advocating new policies and institutional reforms to solve national governance challenges can Chinese think tanks pave their way toward internationalization and globalization. The logic is straightforward: a think tank without outstanding performance in domestic governance research hardly qualifies to participate in global governance.

3. Conclusion

Whether a country needs think tanks, what kind it needs, and how many it needs depends largely on its stage of economic and social development, progress in modern political civilization, economic scale, and population size. Generally speaking, think tanks are products of major powers. A country with many think tanks may be called a think tank power, but this differs from the concept of a major-power think tank. The primary characteristic of a major-power think tank is its international perspective—making it synonymous with modern think tanks. Research indicates that China ranks second globally in think tank quantity, qualifying it as a think tank power [3]. However, this offers little substantive pride, as the quantity and quality of Chinese think tank products still lag far behind world-class levels.

Building high-level, first-class think tanks requires long-term cultural accumulation and nurturing by a healthy ecosystem. Many gaps exist between Chinese and international modern think tanks, with the largest being in the quantity and quality of core products—a gap that ultimately reflects the intellectual quality of think tank researchers. Constructing the culture and ecology for Chinese think tank development must begin with ideological and cultural construction, starting with integrating the “common values” of modern think tanks. This forms the foundation for all concrete think tank construction.

In most cases, public policy production is a gradual process of continuous improvement. Therefore, think tanks need not be sole inventors and manufacturers of new policies, but should serve as renovators and maintenance shops for existing policies. This requires think tank experts to possess strong problem awareness (a spirit of inquiry), concern for reality, ability to identify detailed issues, international perspective, and independent analytical thinking skills to continuously produce scientifically sound, feasible, and high-quality (intellectually valuable) research reports, ultimately developing into modern, high-level, first-class think tanks. Throughout this process, the direction to maintain is clear: the purpose of think tank development is to innovatively influence public policy, and the goal is to produce think tank research reports.

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Author Contributions

Cheng Hong: Conceived the ideas and wrote the paper; Liu Zhiguang and Deng Xinghua: Discussed ideas, refined arguments, and contributed to writing and editing.

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

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