# Postprint: Analyzing the Transformation and Development Direction of Chinese Think Tanks from the Knowledge Capital Value-Added Path

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**Date:** 2017-11-05T00:00:00+00:00

## Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In light of the current need for transformation of China's state-affiliated think tanks, this paper examines the operational mechanisms of think tank knowledge capital through analysis of the framework and empirical evidence concerning knowledge capital appreciation pathways, offering feasible recommendations for think tank transformation in China.

[Method/Process] Pathways for think tank knowledge capital appreciation are identified through literature review and theoretical deduction; the specific modalities of knowledge capital composition, knowledge transformation, and knowledge dissemination processes are determined via literature review, web-based investigation, and case analysis.

[Results/Conclusion] The appreciation mechanisms of think tank knowledge capital are systematically delineated, upon which four recommendations are proposed for the transformation and development of China' s think tanks.

## Full Text

### Analyzing the Reform Path of China' s Think Tanks from the Perspective of Knowledge Capital Added-Value Path

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#### Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** In view of the urgent need for transformation among China' s state-affiliated think tanks, this paper examines the operational mecha-

nisms of knowledge capital in think tanks through an analysis of the knowledge capital added-value path framework and empirical validation, offering feasible recommendations for the reform of China' s think tanks. **[Method/Process]** Through literature review and theoretical deduction, the knowledge capital added-value path for think tanks is derived; through literature review, web-based investigation, and case analysis, the specific modalities of knowledge capital composition, knowledge transformation processes, and knowledge dissemination processes are identified. **[Result/Conclusion]** The knowledge capital added-value mechanism of think tanks is systematically mapped out, and based on this analysis, four key recommendations for the transformation and development of China' s think tanks are proposed.

**Keywords:** knowledge capital added-value; think tank reform; operational mechanism; Chatham House; Hoover Institution
**Classification Number:** G311

Since the promulgation of the *Opinion on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* in 2015 [1], the development of new-type think tanks in China has gained significant momentum. Transitioning to a demand-oriented model has become a critical imperative for China' s think tank construction, with the essence of transformation lying in mechanism reform. As knowledge-intensive organizations, think tanks rely on knowledge as the decisive factor in their operations. However, China' s predominantly state-affiliated think tanks [2] currently struggle to achieve efficient knowledge operations, suffering from four major problems: first, research topics rely excessively on government assignment [3], making it difficult to leverage distinctive knowledge accumulation; second, researchers are mostly on permanent public-sector payrolls [4], which hinders knowledge framework restructuring; third, knowledge products are monolithic, lacking practical guidance and applicability; and fourth, knowledge dissemination efforts are insufficient, resulting in limited institutional influence and public engagement.

This paper defines the composition of think tank knowledge capital, explores the mechanism through which think tank knowledge capital participates in operations to achieve added value, and validates this process through case studies of outstanding foreign think tanks, thereby summarizing feasible approaches and practical priorities for promoting the industrial transformation of domestic think tanks.

## 1. Think Tank Knowledge Capital

Knowledge capital, also known as intellectual capital, has been defined by foreign scholars such as Stewart [5] (1994), Williams R.L. and Bukowitz W.R. [6] (2001), and Bontis, Nick et al. [7] (2010) from the perspectives of efficiency, content, and process. Domestic scholar Nan Xingheng [9] (2014) proposed that the knowledge operation and transformation process is key to converting knowledge into knowledge capital. Synthesizing these perspectives, this paper conceptual-

izes knowledge capital as the sum of static knowledge resources that an organization can mobilize, which achieves value addition through dynamic operations that produce and apply knowledge products.

The essence of think tanks lies in influencing decision-making through knowledge innovation. The core objective of the knowledge capital added-value process in think tanks is consistently to seek policy influence. This paper defines think tank knowledge capital as the knowledge resources that an institution can mobilize to participate in specific business operations. Based on an understanding of the essence of think tanks and supported by literature review, the well-established tripartite division of knowledge capital theory is applicable to the classification of think tank knowledge capital (see Table 1 ).

**Table 1** The Structure of Knowledge Capital in Think Tanks [10] - **Component:** Staff and their knowledge and experience - **Component:** Established systems and hardware facilities (e.g., databases, knowledge repositories) - **Component:** Communication networks with external stakeholders

## 2. Framework for Think Tank Knowledge Capital Added-Value Path

The dynamic operation process of think tank knowledge capital constitutes a "black box." This paper attempts to open this black box by constructing a framework for the knowledge capital added-value path. Synthesizing the business process of think tanks from topic selection and determination through research to final completion, the corresponding knowledge capital added-value path for this business process is analyzed and presented in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

**Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]** The Added-Value Path of Knowledge Capital in Think Tanks

### 2.1 Topic Selection Stage

Before formal research begins, relevant knowledge capital must be organized according to topic characteristics and stakeholder demands—forming research teams (human capital), collecting research materials (structural capital), and planning project processes (relational capital).

### 2.2 Research Stage

The interactive coordination among the three forms of capital permeates the entire process from research initiation to knowledge product output. Since relational capital primarily functions indirectly through the other two capital forms during this stage, the focus is on the transformation between human capital and structural capital. Based on Ikujiro Nonaka' s SECI four-stage model [11] and considering only the organizational level, the knowledge transformation process within think tanks is summarized into two aspects: knowledge codification

(transformation into structural capital) and knowledge transcription (transformation into human capital).

### 2.3 Completion Stage

Influencing decision-making is the essential purpose of think tank activities. A topic is only considered complete when its knowledge products are accepted by target audiences. Think tank knowledge dissemination activities revolve around two pathways for influencing decisions: direct government lobbying and shaping public opinion [12]. During this process, the interaction between relational capital and structural capital becomes more prominent, with structural capital providing the specific knowledge content for dissemination and relational capital providing the channels.

## 3. Knowledge Capital Added-Value Path in Foreign Think Tanks

This study selects two top-ranked think tanks from the University of Pennsylvania' s *2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* as analytical cases: Chatham House in the UK and the Hoover Institution in the US. The former is characterized by frequent exchange activities and well-developed relational capital reserves, while the latter leverages university research strengths with relatively prominent structural capital. Through literature and web-based investigations, their knowledge capital accumulation and operational practices are systematically examined, providing empirical validation for the knowledge capital added-value path framework.

### 3.1.1 Human Capital

Human capital constitutes the foundational and core component of institutional knowledge capital, from which relational capital and structural capital are derived [13]. Based on literature review and think tank mechanisms, this analysis identifies three key elements of think tank human capital: personnel mobility, disciplinary background, and knowledge characteristics.

Think tanks emphasize maintaining human capital mobility to address multi-stakeholder, complex research topics. At both Chatham House and the Hoover Institution, researchers constitute the main body, with senior researchers representing a high proportion of the research staff. Among the researcher composition, short-term disciplinary experts hired according to specific topics form the majority (exceeding sixty percent in both cases).

**Table 2** Human Capital Structure of Chatham House and the Hoover Institution - **Chatham House:** Senior Researchers: 252 (73.0%); Contract Researchers: 89 (35.3%) - **Hoover Institution:** Senior Researchers: 157 (84.9%); Contract Researchers: 77 (49.0%) - Additional data indicates short-term disciplinary researchers exceed 60% in both institutions.

Pursuing disciplinary diversity is also an important approach for think tanks to address complex topics and establish an objective, neutral image. For example, Chatham House's International Economics Department has 15 researchers whose expertise spans macroeconomics, finance, risk management, regional political economy, aging issues, and more. The Hoover Institution' s Economic Policy Working Group comprises 21 researchers with interdisciplinary backgrounds in economics, finance, management, regional industries, and related fields.

While think tanks emphasize research, the research talent they require differs from academic talent in universities or research institutions. In many cases, think tank selection criteria for researchers even run counter to conventional academic standards [14]. Think tanks prefer talent that can skillfully apply theory and discern social needs. For instance, Chatham House' s research departments have dedicated personnel responsible for gathering external demands and promoting policy recommendations, while the Hoover Institution has established a Washington office and several international liaison offices to perform similar functions.

### 3.1.2 Structural Capital

Structural capital comprises the externalized and structured knowledge capital components that ascend from the individual to the organizational level. Two key elements of think tank structural capital include institutional regulations and knowledge storage facilities.

Standardized administrative operations serve as an important guarantee for efficient knowledge production in think tanks. Both case study institutions operate with parallel administrative and research departments. At Chatham House, the administrative department is considerably smaller than the research department, consisting of a 25-member board of trustees and an 18-member senior advisory committee. The Hoover Institution' s administrative division includes a 10-member board of trustees, complemented by a 63-member supervisory board responsible for evaluating and monitoring research work and input-output performance (see Table 3 ).

**Table 3** Administrative Structure Comparison between Chatham House and the Hoover Institution

**Chatham House:** - Board of Trustees: Formulates development strategies, coordinates operational mechanisms, and conducts organizational performance evaluations. - Senior Advisory Committee: Members typically hold or have held government positions, serving as a guarantee institution for close government ties by participating only in outcome review, not in specific research projects. - Research Departments: 6 departments organized by region and hot-button issues. - Working Groups: Numerous groups for commissioned projects that dissolve upon completion.

**Hoover Institution:** - Board of Trustees: Formulates institutional strategies.

- Supervisory Board: Members are selected from across the country to represent public will, supervising institutional development and input-output performance, evaluating development strategies, and assisting board decision-making. - Research Departments: 5 departments organized by hot-button issues.

Database and other knowledge storage facilities are common methods for think tanks to organize, store, and access knowledge products. Knowledge outputs generated by think tanks are typically documented and preserved in appropriate formats to ensure systematic research and demonstrate scientific authority. The international economic statistics (IMF) frequently cited in reports from Chatham House' s International Economics Department are sourced from its self-developed digital library. The Hoover Institution has been described as "a think tank developed from a library" [15], with national survey materials submitted from various regions in its library often serving as references for researchers' projects.

### 3.1.3 Relational Capital

Relational capital holds significant importance for think tanks, as talent from political, business, and academic circles not only brings practical knowledge for solving research problems but also provides special channels for promoting viewpoints and lobbying government. Two key elements of think tank relational capital include existing relationship resources and the capacity to develop new relationships (i.e., ability to organize events).

The primary function of Chatham House' s Senior Advisory Committee is to maintain government relations, with department heads typically spanning political, business, and media circles while also holding university positions. The Hoover Institution, conversely, prefers connections with academia, with most of its senior researchers holding university research positions.

Think tanks establish connections with broader stakeholders by organizing exchange activities. Chatham House hosts over 200 public-facing events annually (see Table 4 ). The Hoover Institution also builds relationships with various sectors through participation in congressional hearings; for instance, senior fellow John B. Taylor participated in 7 congressional hearings in 2015.

**Table 4** Details of Chatham House Conference System - **Internal Institutional Meetings:** Non-public, high-frequency, small-scale, with political dignitary participation - **External Cooperative Meetings:** Non-public, high-frequency, rich exchanges, with industry expert participation (including roundtables, breakfast hearings, interview series) - **Topic Research Meetings:** Few public, high-frequency, topic-specific, multi-stakeholder participation (including seminars, workshops, forums) - **Formal Exchange Meetings:** Paid public access, medium-frequency, addressing social hotspots, with "star guest" participation - **Media Public Events:** Low-frequency, commemorative significance, broad participation (including London Conference, Chatham House Prize Award Dinner)

### 3.2 Knowledge Transformation Within Think Tanks

Think tanks produce knowledge products through knowledge transformation. The spiral transformation between tacit knowledge in human capital and explicit knowledge in structural capital promotes knowledge innovation. Knowledge codification is the process of converting institutional knowledge into explicit knowledge, involving the externalization of tacit knowledge and the combination of fragmented explicit knowledge [16]. Knowledge codification in think tanks facilitates the consolidation of new knowledge and the documentation of knowledge products.

**3.2.1 Knowledge Codification** Think tank knowledge codification activities primarily include monograph and report production, self-published periodicals, activity knowledge documentation, and database resources. Think tanks (particularly academic ones) regard monographs and reports as important evidence of institutional knowledge authority and foundational materials for enriching the structural capital system. Many policy recommendations originate from academic monographs and research reports, which are subsequently disseminated through various self-published periodicals to guide practice. In 2016, a research report co-authored by Chatham House' s US and Latin America program and Asia program generated a series of briefings and expert commentaries.

Self-published periodicals directly update structural capital by deconstructing and reconstructing systematic explicit knowledge (monographs, essay collections, etc.). Through researchers'in-depth analysis and secondary understanding of knowledge, academic theory becomes more practical and accessible. Chatham House maintains three types of institutional publications, while the Hoover Institution publishes one print and two online periodicals plus various compilations (preprints, project outcome collections, etc.).

Activity knowledge documentation is an important pathway for think tanks to absorb external knowledge and promote structural capital added-value. Chatham House' s conference records, audio/video materials, and conference papers are edited and stored in archival databases within its digital library. The Hoover Institution has established similar digital archives for its conferences.

Updates to digital library and other database resources serve as an important indicator of institutional knowledge codification activity. Chatham House' s digital library resources are updated frequently, with "new book catalogs" delivered monthly and "authorized regional news bulletins" and "weekly event reports" providing weekly information pushes to subscribers.

**3.2.2 Knowledge Transcription** Think tank knowledge transcription activities mainly include: exchange seminars and discussions, institutional system regulations, and teaching and training.

Think tanks attach importance to organizing various types of conferences and events that shoulder complex missions including knowledge exchange, relation-

ship building, knowledge dissemination, and public image shaping. Among these, internal institutional meetings feature active knowledge transformation processes and relatively high efficiency in human capital added-value. Chatham House consistently convenes a series of non-public meetings (such as hearings, seminars, roundtables, etc.). Hoover Institution's internal meetings, by contrast, involve fewer political figures but more domain experts.

Institutional guarantees of exchange rights are an important means to ensure unobstructed channels for tacit knowledge flow. Chatham House has established the famous "Chatham House Rule." This rule primarily applies to various meetings held within the institute, requiring maximum guarantee of freedom of speech without bias, allowing participants to discuss viewpoints while prohibiting the disclosure of speakers' identities outside the meetings.

Teaching and training represent another important and effective method for tacit knowledge transfer and sharing [17]. On the one hand, tacit knowledge exchange between mentors and apprentices promotes self-added-value of human capital; on the other hand, it facilitates the transfer of human capital to relational capital in the form of course materials. Both think tanks in this case operate their own graduate programs to cultivate research and professional skills among young institutional researchers, arranging for students to participate in institutional projects.

### 3.3 External Knowledge Dissemination

The purpose of think tank knowledge dissemination is that public attention can enhance institutional influence. The knowledge disseminated by think tanks depends on dissemination channels, with structural capital providing content and relational capital providing channels. With the deepening development of the Internet and social media, new forms of added-value have emerged for both structural capital and relational capital in think tanks.

**3.3.1 Traditional Media Dissemination** In the digital age, knowledge dissemination activities conducted through think tank premises or traditional channels such as television, newspapers, and institutional publications remain favored by think tanks. The relevant practices of both institutions are detailed in Table 5 below.

**Table 5** Comparison of Traditional Knowledge Dissemination Paths between Chatham House and the Hoover Institution

**Chatham House:** - Promotional Conferences and Exhibitions: Chatham House Prize Award Ceremony, etc. - Media Roundtables, Library Exhibition Lectures, etc. - Radio and Television: TV and radio programs, third-party TV and radio stations - Newspapers and Magazines: Commentary articles and editorials

**Hoover Institution:** - Radio and Television: Own studio, participated in over

100 TV interviews and 250 radio programs in 2015 - Newspapers and Magazines: Published over 1,000 op-ed articles in 2015 - Publishing: Fewer monographs, focusing on briefings, research reports, and self-published periodicals

**3.3.2 New Media Dissemination** With the deepening popularization of the Internet and social networks, the public can form public opinion through various new online media to participate in and influence government decision-making. Think tanks have also begun to disseminate institutional knowledge and cultivate public recognition and approval through multiple forms such as official websites and social media. The channels they adopt and specific cases are detailed in Table 6 .

**Table 6** Comparison of New Media Knowledge Dissemination Paths between Chatham House and the Hoover Institution

**Chatham House:** - Official Website Visits: 2.3 million person-times - Digital Library: All self-publications available online - Mobile Devices: Mobile app allows users to interactively upload knowledge resources - Social Networks: 3 social media accounts with nearly 150,000 total users

**Hoover Institution:** - Official Website: Publishes institutional publications including various native digital journals

### 3.4 Summary

In the composition of think tank knowledge capital, human capital emphasizes academic application capabilities, focusing on talent mobility and diverse disciplinary backgrounds; structural capital is project-oriented, emphasizing the preservation and reuse of knowledge outcomes; relational capital represents existing relationships with focused diversity and generates new relationships through frequent exchanges. During the topic selection stage, human capital mobilization (forming research teams) plays a role in establishing core research and promotion capabilities and pre-constructing subsequent relationship influence patterns. During the research stage, the knowledge transformation process is active, with interactive added-value between human capital and structural capital promoting knowledge product output. During the completion stage, the knowledge dissemination process dominates, with structural capital and relational capital operating to produce content and carriers that influence specific audiences.

## 4. Analysis of Problems in China' s Think Tank Knowledge Capital Operation

Based on research findings and comparison with domestic situations, we can identify important problems in the operation of knowledge capital in China' s think tanks:

### 4.1 Passive Topic Acceptance and Lack of Institutional Characteristics

China' s think tanks possess their own knowledge capital, but it is insufficient for addressing demands and topics. While state-affiliated think tanks in China are assigned research topics by the government, the two foreign think tanks in our cases also handle commissioned topics. This indicates that the government assignment mechanism is not the fundamental problem. The issue lies in the lack of market competition, which results in China' s think tanks lacking rapidly deployable knowledge capital, leading to low research efficiency, severe homogenization in the knowledge transformation process, and excessive reliance on existing administrative channels in the knowledge dissemination process.

### 4.2 Research Personnel Rigidity and Inability to Address Multi-Stakeholder Topic Demands

Personnel in China' s think tanks are mostly on permanent public-sector payrolls. Low mobility leads to rigid institutional human capital, making it difficult to address variable topics in complex environments. Human capital occupies a fundamental position in the operation of think tank knowledge capital. Low efficiency in human capital added-value leads to low efficiency in structural capital transformation during the research stage and hinders the maintenance and development of relational capital. Inactive knowledge transformation processes result in macroscopic, rough knowledge products with poor applicability, negatively impacting subsequent knowledge dissemination.

### 4.3 Impoverished Knowledge Product Forms and Single Exchange Activity Channels

The knowledge transformation process in domestic think tanks is overly simplistic and direct. Knowledge products are primarily regular submitted reports or briefings, while knowledge exchange activities mainly consist of high-level private consultations and industry conferences. The knowledge product system formation depends on researchers' deconstruction, reconstruction, and secondary processing of knowledge. The lack of a systematic knowledge product portfolio is constrained by the accumulation of research business in human capital, while single exchange activity channels demonstrate weak accumulation and added-value capabilities in relational capital.

### 4.4 Insufficient Knowledge Dissemination Activities and Lack of Social Attention

China' s think tanks' relational capital lacks pathways for public connection and capacity for generating new relationships, relying solely on "administrative relationships" to directly influence policy decisions. Insufficient knowledge dissemination and lack of social attention result in public ignorance about the institution, its research topics, and the policies it supports, making it difficult to secure broad resources and build complete, dynamic relationship networks.

In today' s deeply networked society, this has become a major constraint on think tank transformation.

## 5. Recommendations for China' s Think Tank Transformation and Development

Based on the above analysis, China' s think tanks should adopt the following measures to advance institutional transformation:

### 5.1 Establish a Cohesive Knowledge Capital Added-Value Mechanism

Examining knowledge capital accumulation and identifying operation paths with institutional characteristics is fundamental to achieving efficient knowledge capital operation. Chatham House and the Hoover Institution differ in knowledge capital structure (the former emphasizes relational capital, while the latter stresses structural capital). Consequently, the former frequently organizes conferences and events, while the latter excels in institutional publishing and management. China' s think tanks should draw lessons from this "differentiated" development path during transformation, achieving a cohesive knowledge capital operation chain based on their own knowledge capital characteristics to avoid capital waste.

### 5.2 Organize Institutional Knowledge Capital Centered on Research Topics

Capital allocation should always be guided by research topic needs, avoiding resource over-allocation and redundancy. Based on the cases: when considering human capital, emphasis should be placed on both in-house research leaders and theoretical guidance researchers, as well as on hiring researchers with strong practical application capabilities. When considering relational capital, knowledge promotion should leverage relative relationship advantages based on institutional characteristics. The Hoover Institution' s relational capital has a stronger academic background compared to Chatham House, aligning with its research-valuing ethos. When considering structural capital, administrative structures should be simplified and business capabilities for implementing research projects should be developed. In the cases, both think tanks' research departments far exceed administrative departments in size, with administrative divisions serving only planning and supervisory functions. Many European and American think tanks have a tendency to weaken administrative functions, with some typical think tanks allocating over 80% of their funds to research projects [18].

### 5.3 Combine Knowledge Product Output and Knowledge Exchange Activities in Multiple Dimensions

Knowledge product output and knowledge exchange activities constitute the main business of think tanks. The efficient internal knowledge transformation

in the two case think tanks provides the foundation and guarantee for product output and activity operation. The motivations for launching business activities are complex: beyond the publicly known "advancing research topics" and "transmitting knowledge to policymakers and society," additional functions include increasing exposure (common in knowledge dissemination activities) and generating revenue (report and periodical subscriptions, paid conferences, new projects, etc.). These activities have relatively low knowledge added-value efficiency but serve the institution's core functions. Think tank construction should coordinate both focused and comprehensive business development, developing business systems according to institutional goals and audience differences.

### 5.4 Leverage Social Media and Mobile Networks to Mobilize Institutional Proactivity

With the development of mobile social networks, public opinion has increasingly gained policymakers' attention. Many think tanks have already increased investment in social media operations. Referring to the cases, think tanks can utilize the interactive dissemination advantages of these platforms to play a deep, leading role in social discussions. Exposure brings public attention, which in turn establishes social discourse authority. By participating in and guiding digital-era public opinion, think tanks can provide the public with opportunities to understand the value of their research topics and outcomes, deepening societal brand identification with the think tank itself.

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