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## Visual Comparative Analysis of Domestic and International Think Tank Research: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tanks, as symbols of national soft power, have been elevated to a strategic position at the national level. Conducting comparative analysis of domestic and foreign think tank research holds important referential and practical significance for China in building new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. [Method/Process] This article focuses on keywords, employs Citespace visualization software to conduct visual comparative analysis of international think tank research literature, and proposes new trends and models for the development of Chinese think tanks. [Results/Conclusions] The results indicate that foreign research hotspots concentrate in government governance, risk management and control, technological innovation, and people's livelihood and healthcare, with policy research and healthcare being the research frontiers in recent years. Domestic research keywords fall into three categories: think tank concept research, foreign think tank research, and new think tank construction, among which the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics represents the frontier of domestic concern. Based on the visual analysis of domestic and foreign think tanks, this article proposes three transformations for Chinese think tank construction—shifting the focus from macro-political issues to micro-level livelihood concerns, expanding the composition structure from government dominance to state-society collaboration, and evolving the operational model from single consultation to multi-party cooperation—and conceptualizes a “1+1” think tank development model centered on university think tanks.

## Full Text

# Visualized Comparative Analysis on Researches of Think Tank at Home and Abroad —Comment on The New Tendency of Internal Think Tank

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** As a symbol of national soft power, think tanks have been elevated to a strategic position at the national level. Conducting a comparative analysis of domestic and foreign think tank research holds important referential and practical significance for China to build new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. **[Method/Process]** Focusing on keywords, this paper employs Citespace visualization software to conduct a visualized comparative analysis of international think tank research literature, and proposes new trends and models for think tank development in China. **[Result/Conclusion]** The results indicate that foreign research hotspots concentrate on government governance, risk management, technological innovation, and public health, with policy research and healthcare representing recent research frontiers. Domestic research keywords fall into three categories: conceptual studies of think tanks, studies of foreign think tanks, and construction of new think tanks, with the development of think tanks with Chinese characteristics being the frontier of domestic concern. Based on the visualized analysis of think tanks at home and abroad, this paper proposes three transformations for China's think tank construction: shifting focus from macro-politics to micro-livelihood, expanding composition from official dominance to official-civilian win-win cooperation, and developing operational models from single consultation to multi-party collaboration. It also conceptualizes a "1+1" think tank development model centered on university think tanks.

**Keywords:** think tank; knowledge mapping; scientific decision-making; comparative analysis; transformation

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## 2 Data Acquisition

For the foreign database, we selected the Web of Science Core Collection (hereinafter referred to as WoS) as the data source. In the WoS search interface, the search formula was set as Topic=( "think tank" ), with citation indexes including SCI, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, and CPCI-SSH. As of April 1, 2016, a total of 733 relevant documents were retrieved [2]. The search results were then refined by document type, selecting "Article or Proceeding paper" while keeping other conditions at default settings, yielding 431 valid relevant documents after processing.

For the domestic database, we selected the CNKI full-text database as the data source. In the search interface, the search formula was set as Title=“think tank” OR “思想库” OR “智囊团”, with source journals limited to Chinese core journals and CSSCI. Non-academic papers such as conference notices, forum speeches, and introductions were excluded. As of April 1, 2016, a total of 781 relevant documents were obtained after data cleaning [3]. These 431 foreign documents and 781 Chinese documents were then used as sample data for this visualized study, with subsequent statistical analysis and visualized analysis of cooperating institutions, keyword hotspots, and research trends conducted separately using Citespace software.

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### 3 Analysis of Visualization Results

The knowledge maps exported by Citespace can reveal disciplinary structural characteristics and development trends that cannot be directly obtained through individual knowledge accumulation, visually displaying the research dynamics and trends of scientific literature to enable corresponding refined analysis [4]. Meanwhile, it provides a burst terms detection function to reveal frontier development trends in a discipline, and summarizes key areas reflected in literature through keyword clustering [2][5]. Based on the focus of this study, we selected keywords from the sample documents as the object of visualized analysis to make a general analysis and grasp of hotspot issues and evolution trends in modern think tank research both domestically and internationally.

**3.1.1 Foreign Hotspot Research Areas** In the Citespace project interface for foreign data, the time span was set from 1968 to 2016, node type as “Keyword”, with threshold values of (2, 2, 20), (2, 3, 15), and (2, 3, 15), while other parameters remained at default settings. After running the project file, a keyword co-occurrence network view with 112 network nodes and 91 connections was obtained. After adjusting relevant parameters for network view optimization, the result is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. Since some early literature did not include keywords, we summarized and extracted representative keywords from relevant document abstracts to compensate for omissions in the sample visualization process. Additionally, Citespace provides the concept of betweenness centrality as a reference for network node importance, which measures the significance of a node in connecting paths between other nodes in the network [6]. The list of high-frequency and high-betweenness centrality keywords is presented below.

**Table 1** Statistics of Foreign High-Frequency and High-Centrality Keywords

Through research and analysis of foreign think tank literature, combined with the high-frequency and high-betweenness centrality keyword statistics table and keyword co-occurrence network view, we observe that beyond the directly related subject terms “think tanks” and “think tank,” foreign modern think tank

research hotspots mainly concentrate on “risk,” “policy,” “management,” “science,” and “therapy.” For example, in therapy, foreign think tank research explores and selects new medical treatment approaches to determine whether new therapies can be applied clinically, a concern for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners alike [7]. Bartels et al. detailed how the Toronto think tank contributed to breakthrough progress in glioma research, constructing the think tank to gather diverse forces from policy, research, and field stakeholders to address urgent medical challenges [8]. Additionally, monitoring children’s health status represents another important function of think tanks [9]. For instance, the continuous rise in childhood obesity rates in recent years has attracted attention from various sectors, with Mendelson noting the need for sustained input from experts and leaders across industries and fields to fully leverage think tanks’ important role in promoting healthy lifestyles [10]. Overall, foreign think tank research hotspots are relatively dispersed. After conducting cluster analysis on keywords, these prominent research hotspots can be summarized into several major areas of current global public concern: government governance, risk management, technological innovation, and public health.

**3.1.2 Evolution of Frontier Themes** The burst terms detection function embedded in Citespace software can visualize the evolution of frontier themes within a research field. Based on the parameter settings of the keyword co-occurrence network, testing revealed that setting the threshold at (2, 2, 20) yielded optimal results, with other settings remaining unchanged [2][3]. The initial view showed that literature before 2005 had relatively dispersed focus without burst terms. Therefore, the time span was adjusted to 2005-2016 to concentrate frontier theme exploration on the past decade. After running the project, the keyword timezone view of foreign think tank research frontiers was obtained, as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

As seen in Figure 2, since the beginning of the new century, foreign exploration of the think tank field has taken 2011 as a dividing line. Before 2011, the main focus was on qualitative research of think tanks themselves and macro-level issues at the national level concerning politics, economy, and democracy. Since 2011, foreign think tank exploration has presented a comprehensive, multi-perspective research pattern, covering all aspects involved in national daily operation, from science and technology to educational innovation, from medical diagnosis to international issues [11][12]. Among these, the most numerous burst terms appear in two areas critical to national and individual survival: international policy and cooperation, and clinical medicine, such as “policy,” “United States,” “disease,” and “diagnosis.” In institutional research rankings, top positions are also occupied by international universities and high-level hospitals. Combined with changes in publication volume and institutional rankings, research in these two fields represents the frontier themes of foreign think tank research.

In terms of international policy and cooperation, the U.S. government frequently uses think tanks to test the impact of new policies to improve feasibility while

reducing risks. Think tanks also serve as external communication platforms for foreign leaders and senior officials, with the Council on Foreign Relations becoming a must-visit destination for many foreign leaders. Notably, foreign think tank research has continuously “expanded” in recent years, gradually integrating into various disciplinary categories and penetrating into citizens’ social life [13][14]. This “internalization” research trend represents both the self-improvement of think tanks’ social functions and the concentrated manifestation of think tanks as “soft power” for national development and construction.

**3.2.1 Domestic Hotspot Research Areas** Compared with foreign think tank research initiated in the 20th century and concentrated in the early 21st century, China’s think tank research has generally kept pace, with quantity later surpassing that of foreign countries. To ensure scientific rationality of the visualized analysis, we maintained consistent parameter settings with the foreign research described above when analyzing domestic academic literature on think tanks. Running the project file yielded a keyword co-occurrence network with 94 network nodes and 95 connections, along with domestic high-frequency and high-betweenness centrality keywords, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper] respectively.

**Table 2** Statistics of Domestic High-Frequency and High-Centrality Keywords

From the keywords and co-occurrence network obtained through visualized analysis of domestic literature, we find that beyond the research theme terms “think tank” and “思想库,” domestic think tank research keywords mainly concentrate on “Chinese characteristics,” “decision-making consultation,” “comprehensive deepening of reform,” and “think tank construction.” Chinese society is currently undergoing rapid transformation, with governments at all levels striving to become public service-oriented governments, and government decision-making mechanisms undergoing fundamental changes. Within this context, the goal of scientific decision-making poses new propositions for China’s think tank research while also bringing new opportunities for Chinese think tank development. However, research on “the characteristics of Chinese think tanks, the connotation of new think tanks, and how to build new think tanks with Chinese characteristics” has only just emerged, with many issues still urgently requiring exploration [15].

In the keyword co-occurrence network, keywords can be mainly categorized into three types: (1) Think tank self-research—including terms such as “research institution,” “decision-making consultation,” and “research center,” mainly discussing the development history, prospects, conceptual functions, and characteristic models of think tanks [16][17]; (2) Foreign think tank research—including “Brookings Institution,” “RAND Corporation,” and “United States,” deeply analyzing the development models and characteristics of renowned foreign think tanks to provide empirical support for current domestic think tank construction; (3) New think tank construction—including “Chinese characteristics,” “comprehensive deepening of reform,” “think tank construction,” and “new think tank,”

exploring Chinese-characteristic think tanks based on China's national conditions to contribute to deepening reform and national construction.

Based on the distribution of core keywords in the figure and combined with in-depth research on domestic think tank literature, we find that compared with foreign countries, domestic think tank research hotspots concentrate on the mechanism of domestic and foreign think tanks and new think tank construction [3][15]. Since entering the new century, China has particularly emphasized the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities during its reform process, with increasingly higher requirements for the scientific nature of policy formulation. Therefore, how to build think tanks with Chinese characteristics based on China's national conditions and how to maximize think tank effectiveness for various aspects of China's construction are undoubtedly two major hot topics in domestic think tank research.

**3.2.2 Evolution of Frontier Themes** To explore the frontiers of domestic think tank research, we applied burst term detection with the same parameter settings as foreign literature, setting the time span to 1990-2016 to obtain the relevant view shown in Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper].

As can be seen, with 2007 as the boundary, China's think tank research theme changes mainly divide into two major stages: The first stage focuses on conceptual research of think tanks, including both investigations of renowned foreign think tanks such as "RAND Corporation" and "Hoover Institution," and qualitative research on the connotation and extension of think tanks. Before 2007, although think tanks supported government decision-making behind the scenes, due to low transparency of government information disclosure at that time, Chinese think tanks never lifted their mysterious veil, with related research mainly revolving around think tank concepts and foreign think tanks. With the advancement of reform and the gradual maturation of the domestic "revolving door" mechanism, China's first think tank forum in 2007 publicly disclosed large think tanks that had long provided consulting services for party, government, and military sectors, formally opening the door to domestic think tank research and construction [18].

The second stage mainly focuses on the construction of Chinese-characteristic think tanks dedicated to policy research. In terms of frequency, high-frequency keywords such as "Chinese characteristics," "comprehensive deepening of reform," "think tank construction," "new think tank," and "policy research" have emerged as frontier themes. Since think tank functions were exposed to public view, China's investment in think tank research and construction has only increased. Especially after the 18th National Congress, the government has emphasized scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making, giving play to the role of think tanks. The "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics" has clearly proposed the future development direction for think tanks. On this basis, for think tanks to fulfill their missions and provide scientific and reasonable decision-making consulta-

tion, they need to explore new development models rooted in Chinese reality, which is precisely the current frontier and focus of think tank research.

**3.3 Comparative Analysis of Visualization Results** The visualized analysis of international think tank research clarifies the current development status and trends of think tanks at home and abroad. Comparing the two, it is not difficult to find that research directions and trends for think tanks were basically consistent in the early stages, but during subsequent development, China's think tank development path has not been entirely consistent with that of foreign countries and there remains a certain gap. Based on the comparative visualization results, we believe the following points deserve attention regarding China's think tank development.

First, the “internalization” of foreign think tanks is an object that requires focused attention in China's future think tank construction. The “internalization” trend of think tanks in foreign research fully demonstrates that their essential attribute of solving social problems must ultimately return to and land on specific details. As a large country with 1.4 billion people, China faces prominent social contradictions and livelihood issues. Therefore, think tanks, as the “brain trust” behind national public policy formulation, cannot be limited to government decision-making consultation; they must undoubtedly become the golden key to solving social livelihood problems in the future. Especially in the current effort to build new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, greater attention must be paid to and grasp of this research trend from broad to detailed, from macro to micro.

Second, the socialization of think tank organizations is also a crux for the scientific development of China's think tanks. The vigorous development of foreign think tanks is not only due to government support but more importantly determined by the social attributes of think tank organizations themselves. The foreign think tank research organizations mentioned in the visualized analysis are mostly established by private foundations or corresponding societies, with greater research freedom and independence compared to China's almost exclusively official think tanks. Faced with the weak development situation of civilian think tanks, the socialization process of China's think tank organizations will be a major challenge for the government in the future.

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#### 4 New Trends and Models for China's Think Tank Development

According to the “Global Think Tank Report 2015” released in early 2016 by the TTCSP project team of the University of Pennsylvania, as of 2015, China had 435 think tanks, ranking second in the world in quantity, though construction quality remains to be improved [19]. Combined with the comparative analysis results of international think tanks, we believe China's think tank construction needs to strengthen transformations in three aspects and open up a new devel-

opment model from official to civilian think tanks centered on university think tanks.

**4.1 Shifting Focus from Macro-Politics to Micro-Livelihood** The original intention of establishing think tanks lies in researching public policy and providing objective, democratic, and scientific consultation for national policy formulation [20]. In the early stages of modern think tank development, American think tanks led by RAND Corporation mainly originated from national and state government needs, concentrating their main efforts on international politics and military intelligence gathering, focusing more on macro-level themes such as national politics and global military trends.

With the gradual advancement of socialization, the social functions of think tanks have undoubtedly been diffused and released to a greater extent. Therefore, in the foreign think tank research keyword co-occurrence network, beyond “policy” and “politics,” terms such as “management,” “therapy,” “children,” and “disease” involving micro-livelihood fields have emerged. Currently, China’s think tank research involves relatively few such micro-practical field issues. Under a social pattern of diversified interests and values, the driving force for future think tank development will no longer be limited to government department needs but will directly orient toward social public demand [21]. Therefore, conducting think tank research oriented by social needs, focusing on topics of public concern, and solving livelihood problems emerging in society will become an inevitable transformation for future think tank development.

**4.2 Expanding Composition from Official Dominance to Official-Civilian Win-Win Cooperation** Maintaining independence is an important guarantee for establishing think tank brand credibility and maintaining consulting authority. According to the “Global Think Tank Report 2015,” China’s currently key-constructed and top-ranked think tanks are mostly official or semi-official, with close interest relationships with national government agencies. This correlation is reflected not only in think tank funding sources but also in organizational system architecture. Taking China’s currently top-ranked large think tanks as examples, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (ranked 31st globally), China Institute of International Studies (ranked 35th), and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (ranked 72nd) are directly affiliated with the CPC Central Committee, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or provincial/municipal governments [21]. In contrast, among American think tanks, the vast majority are civilian think tanks, with both the Brookings Institution and RAND Corporation serving as indispensable decision-making brain trusts for the U.S. government as independent civilian think tanks.

The significant difference between Chinese and Western think tanks lies in the fact that advanced think tanks coexist with the government while civilian think tanks develop weakly. China’s current policy stipulates that non-profit organizations must be affiliated with government supervisory units during registration,

which greatly affects the independence of civilian think tanks. Organizations such as Anbang Group, Great Wall Enterprise Strategy Research Institute, and Unirule Institute of Economics can only survive in the cracks due to various development obstacles [22]. Although think tanks should essentially be considered academic research institutions, the inherent organizational attributes of official think tanks represent government or class interests to a certain extent, inevitably creating some bias when conducting policy research and consultation. China's think tanks need to learn from foreign think tank operation models, ensuring research and decision-making scientificity based on independence as a prerequisite, expanding think tank types from purely official institutions to official-civilian co-construction and win-win cooperation, increasing support for civilian think tanks, and ensuring research independence while promoting greater reflection and participation of public will in public policy formulation.

**4.3 Developing Operational Models from Single Consultation to Multi-Party Collaboration** As national and social issues become increasingly diversified and policy formulation correspondingly complex, relying solely on unilateral think tank research and consultation can hardly guarantee scientificity and rationality. Especially since most current issues involve multiple fields, such as the medical field issues “therapy” and “disease” appearing in the foreign literature keyword co-occurrence network inevitably being associated with “science” and other scientific technologies, making them inseparable from each other. However, most Chinese think tanks are established based on specific types of problems, making the recommendations provided by single think tanks relatively limited in applicability.

From current think tank development trends, solving complex problems and providing scientific recommendations in the future will require think tanks to achieve multi-institutional collaboration. This means completing a project requires cooperation among multiple independent think tanks or between think tanks and other organizations, sharing multiple and composite data and information among think tanks and institutions to achieve scientific and rational consultation. For example, compared with official think tanks, university think tanks have stronger academic capabilities, more concentrated professional talent, and broader field coverage [23], yet their role in public policy consultation and decision-making is very limited. If official think tanks can combine relevant topics with university think tanks during policy research processes to achieve resource sharing and collaborative cooperation, it would undoubtedly be a win-win situation for both government workers and think tanks themselves [24]. As John Raisian, Director of the Hoover Institution, defined the relationship between the Hoover Institution and Stanford University: “Hoover’s public policy orientation and Stanford University’s academic support constitute a powerful integration with tremendous synergy and complementarity between the two” [25].

Diversified and complex demands will likely make collaborative cooperation

a feature of future think tank operational models. Whether official, civilian, or university think tanks, they should face society more during construction, strengthen connections with other types of think tanks, academic institutions, and public groups, and fully leverage their resource advantages to realize their value. Only by establishing and consolidating strong collaborative relationships can they truly play the role of a brain trust before increasingly diversified problems.

**4.4 Conceptualization of an Intermediate Stack Model for China's Think Tank Development** Based on the sample documents retrieved from WoS and CNKI, most articles on think tank research come from renowned domestic and international universities and research institutes. As one of the human resource input/output ports of the “revolving door” mechanism, these institutions themselves have built think tanks for policy and academic research. From this perspective, university think tanks both conduct research on public policy formulation for the Chinese government and lack strong official backgrounds, possessing relatively strong independence to approach and research social needs based on academics. Thus, combining the “three transformations” facing China's future think tank construction, universities and their think tanks logically become key central points for think tank development. Meanwhile, from a practical perspective, the construction of China's new think tanks cannot be accomplished overnight but must complete transformational development under existing models. We propose using university think tanks as an intermediate stack to connect official think tanks, civilian think tanks, and social needs, thereby forming an intermediate stack model of think tank development alliance, as shown in Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper].

The most important point in constructing this model is that universities need to establish a network platform on the basis of think tanks to serve as an intermediate stack for project research and information sharing. In the operation of this model, university think tanks serve as the carrier institution for consultation and research intermediate stacks, with information flow between any two nodes at both ends of their connections being bidirectionally feedback-capable. On the one hand, for official think tanks, their policy formulation research can directly originate from the public or obtain scientific, reliable, and already integrated consulting opinions through topics or academic research on the university think tank network platform, enriching their information sources and making their results more scientific and rational. On the other hand, civilian think tanks can also use universities and their think tanks to place their projects on a more public and attention-grabbing platform to obtain more resources and funding support, while project information and data sharing can also promote cooperation among official, university, and civilian think tanks, thereby driving the diversified development of China's think tanks [26].

At present, think tank research both domestically and internationally is at its peak, with certain achievements made simultaneously. The hotspot areas of

think tank research emerge endlessly, which precisely demonstrates the plasticity of future think tank development. It is undeniable that China's think tank construction is currently in this transitional period. Based on the visualized analysis results of Citespace, exploration of new think tanks will be a key project in China's 13th Five-Year Plan. Therefore, how to learn from foreign think tank construction experience under new circumstances and build advanced think tanks with Chinese characteristics will undoubtedly become the focus of think tank research in the coming period.

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