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## Problems and Reflections on the Transformation and Development of Local Think Tanks: Post-print

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In recent years, think tanks have developed rapidly across China, yet numerous common problems persist. Investigating how traditional research institutions can evolve into professional think tanks holds significant practical importance. [Methods/Process] This paper primarily employs literature review and case analysis methods to summarize and examine the issues in the development of local think tanks in China, and takes the Zhejiang Urban Governance Research Center as a case study to analyze its experiences and practices in transforming into a professional think tank. [Results/Conclusions] This paper argues that the “newness” of the new-type think tank at the Zhejiang Urban Governance Research Center is mainly manifested in conceptual innovation, specialized features, research autonomy, and diversified funding sources, which offers valuable lessons for the construction of other local think tanks.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

**Analysis on the Transformation and Development of Local Think Tanks in China—A Case Study of the Center for Urban Governance Studies of Zhejiang Province**

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In recent years, think tanks have proliferated rapidly across China, yet numerous common challenges persist. Investigating how traditional research institutions can evolve into professional think tanks holds sub-

stantial practical significance. **[Method/Process]** This paper employs literature review and case analysis methods to systematically examine the developmental issues confronting domestic local think tanks, using the Center for Urban Governance Studies of Zhejiang Province as an illustrative case to analyze its transformation experience. **[Result/Conclusion]** The paper argues that the “newness” of this center manifests primarily in conceptual innovation, specialized characteristics, research autonomy, and diversified funding sources, offering valuable lessons for other local think tank initiatives.

**Keywords:** local think tank; transformation; urban governance

**Classification Number:** C932

During China’s 13th Five-Year Plan period, as government governance models continued to transform, local governments needed to strengthen their planning coordination and policy guidance functions. The complex and volatile domestic and international economic landscape, coupled with arduous tasks of transformation, upgrading, and reform innovation, urgently demanded improved scientific decision-making capabilities to ensure decisions align with socioeconomic development laws while maintaining fairness, legitimacy, and feasibility. This necessitates actively encouraging and supporting traditional local think tanks to develop into professional entities—organizations that can conduct objective, fact-based analysis grounded in solid foundational research and comprehensive data to produce scientifically sound intellectual products, thereby positively influencing and engaging in government public decision-making without being constrained by managerial perspectives, vested interests, or parochial concerns.

## 1. Review of Traditional Local Think Tanks’ Participation in Public Decision-Making

Traditional local think tanks, relative to their new-type counterparts, refer to institutions serving government public decision-making or organizations engaged in public policy consulting. These primarily include internal research units within party and government departments, party schools (administrative institutes), academies of social sciences, and other research institutions with related functions. Expert surveys have identified prominent issues: the secretarial-bureaucratization of local party-government think tanks (such as policy research offices), the training-propagandization of local party school think tanks, the disconnect of university think tanks from practical realities, and the nominal existence of social think tanks (like organizations affiliated with social science federations) [1]. This paper contends that traditional local think tanks exhibit four key characteristics in their engagement with government decision-making:

### 1.1 Lack of Independence

First, topic selection lacks independence. Party committees and governments at provincial, municipal, and county levels all maintain internal policy research offices (development research centers), while provincial and municipal people’s

congresses and political consultative conferences have also established research departments. Various ministries and commissions house policy research institutes or investigation offices, all staffed with policy research personnel. These internal research units directly serve their parent decision-making bodies by responding to “assigned topics,” resulting in dependent research agendas. Second, research itself lacks independence. Functionally, the failure to effectively separate the “deliberation” role of think tanks from the “decision-making” role of policymakers often leads to a “superior’s will” tendency in research, where conclusions are predetermined and experts merely validate feasibility. Third, institutional operations lack independence. Although local governments have established decision-making consultation procedures, these typically involve individual participation by consulting committee members, counselor office counselors, or experts. The institutions themselves lack operational mechanisms for think tank functions.

### **1.2 Unidirectionality**

Traditional local think tank research predominantly follows a “unidirectional” model: party committees and governments articulate consulting needs, while agencies with project-awarding authority—such as provincial and municipal social science federations and science and technology commissions—establish research guidelines according to annual government plans. Local research institutions then deliver decision-making consultation outputs in response. Most projects are commissioned directly to designated institutions, with only a small portion awarded through open bidding. Due to limited channels for submitting research outputs, only organizations and individuals with special access gain opportunities for information exchange. In essence, traditional local think tank research is largely “passive” or “adaptive” rather than “proactive” or “forward-looking.”

### **1.3 Emergency-Oriented Nature**

Local government public decision-making typically operates within national development planning and policy frameworks. Consequently, unlike national think tanks, local think tanks focus on the question “What should the local government do?” This consulting demand is usually urgent, requiring effective solutions within short timeframes. Against the backdrop of globalization and urbanization, local governments face intricate and complex development and governance challenges. Without long-term research accumulation, local think tanks struggle to produce forward-looking and strategic research, often remaining confined to emergency-oriented policy studies that address immediate problems—a reactive approach that easily falls into the trap of “treating symptoms rather than root causes.”

## 1.4 Isolation

Traditional think tanks such as local party schools, academies of social sciences, university institutes, and research institutions are often “insulated” from actual decision-making departments. On one hand, value-oriented and compensation-oriented factors like performance evaluation dampen enthusiasm for public policy research. On the other hand, these institutions remain primarily oriented toward academic research. Unfamiliarity with government operations and lack of understanding of local realities result in weakly targeted outputs that exert minimal influence on public decision-making, even when they engage in applied policy research.

In summary, against the backdrop of economic globalization and integration, factors influencing local development and government decision-making have become increasingly complex, diverse, and interconnected, creating an urgent need for think tank participation in public decision-making to harness “external brain” wisdom and support party committees and governments. The research methods and operational mechanisms of traditional local think tanks can no longer meet the demands of decision-making consultation under the “new normal,” nor do they facilitate institutional development. Therefore, transforming traditional research institutions into new-type professional think tanks represents both an inevitable requirement for promoting scientific and democratic decision-making in local party and government departments and a crucial pathway for advancing their own development.

## 2. Challenges in Building New-Type Local Think Tanks

In recent years, as the national strategy of “advancing new-type think tank construction” has progressed, research institutions bearing the think tank label have gradually increased. However, due to the absence of major reforms in the external environment related to public policy decision-making, inadequate supporting policies and regulations, and unclear self-positioning of think tank institutions, local think tank construction has proven less effective than national high-end think tanks and remains largely in an exploratory phase. The challenges can be categorized into external and internal dimensions.

### 2.1 External Challenges

**2.1.1 Absence of a Think Tank Intellectual Product Market** The think tank intellectual product market refers to exchanges of intellectual commodities between public policy knowledge producers and demanders through various media. Suppliers are think tanks, while demanders include public policymakers, groups influencing policy formulation, and the public [2]. Currently, the market mechanism for think tank products remains unclear, leaving the “production” and “sales” of local think tank outputs and government “procurement” in a disordered state. Governments need to provide macro-level guidance on the overall development direction and layout of local think tanks, creating a relatively relaxed

environment for intellectual product production, operation, and dissemination through legal, policy, financial, and personnel measures, and establishing public decision-making consultation platforms to form a stable intellectual product trading market.

**2.1.2 Inadequate Policies and Regulations** The institutional mechanisms for think tank participation in decision-making consultation are underdeveloped. First, decision-making consultation lacks statutory basis. No local regulations or rules mandate think tank participation in government decision-making, leaving whether and how to consult largely discretionary. Second, decision-making consultation lacks standardization. Without statutory procedures, there are no standardized requirements for consultation targets, procedures, stages, or performance evaluation. Third, there is a lack of mid- and post-implementation assessment. While third-party evaluation is officially encouraged, it is not mandatory, and specific implementation guidelines remain underdeveloped.

**2.1.3 Information Asymmetry in Decision-Making Consultation** Information asymmetry and poor communication channels between government demanders and think tank suppliers pose a major obstacle. Low transparency and openness of government information resources prevent many local think tanks from timely understanding government decision-making needs. This creates a situation where governments cannot necessarily identify the most suitable think tanks and experts, while think tanks' research content and progress may not align with decision-making requirements.

**2.1.4 Lack of “Coopetition” Mechanisms Among Think Tanks** Think tanks have vastly different resource backgrounds and capacities for participating in public decision-making consultation, resulting in a lack of necessary and reasonable competition. Provincial and municipal government research offices, party schools, and academies of social sciences possess favorable environments and information resources essential for public policy research and decision-making consultation, while universities, general research institutions, and civilian think tanks face poor channels for understanding decision-making needs and limited access to internal information, significantly diminishing their influence. However, different think tanks have their own strengths and weaknesses, and macro-strategic research cannot proceed without foundational research support. Currently, collaboration and cooperation among think tanks are weak, with inadequate mechanisms, neglect of peer research findings, poor sharing consciousness, and even silo mentalities, leading to duplicated efforts and “information islands.”

## 2.2 Internal Challenges

### 2.2.1 Weak Independence and Difficulty Breaking Inertial Thinking

Think tank institutions have yet to establish independent legal person systems.

Constrained by institutional nature, staffing, and fiscal resources, they struggle to break existing inertial thinking in operational models, research paradigms, and evaluation orientations. Continuing to provide compensation based on administrative positions and professional titles after implementing think tank operations makes it difficult to motivate young researchers. Independent thinking, objective judgment, and innovation formation are three essential aspects that new-type think tanks must uphold.

**2.2.2 Weak Problem Consciousness and Outdated Research Methods** Weak problem consciousness and outdated research methods represent a prominent challenge. Although bearing the “think tank” title, many local research institutions lack problem consciousness and conduct research according to traditional academic mindsets, resulting in weak capacity to serve public decision-making. For instance, university and civilian think tanks lack political sensitivity and problem awareness, habitually engaging in disciplinary, theoretical, and foundational research without converting discourse systems, yielding limited reference value for decision-making. Meanwhile, official think tanks, though possessing stronger problem consciousness, may address issues in isolation without foundational research accumulation and big data support, failing to meet comprehensive, complex, and specialized decision-making demands.

**2.2.3 Unclear Positioning and Low Specialization** Many local think tanks suffer from unclear positioning and low specialization. Party and government decision-making consultation demands encompass long-term strategic, macro, and forward-looking issues; immediate response measures; and evaluation and improvement of implemented policies and systems. These issues are comprehensive and systematic, requiring long-term specialized research accumulation as a foundation. However, due to the absence of relatively stable professional research fields coupled with information asymmetry between supply and demand, numerous research institutions exist, yet decision-making departments struggle to identify the most suitable research teams for their topics.

**2.2.4 Difficult Mobility and Scarcity of High-Level Intellectual Resources** Current think tank personnel structures lack sufficient full-time researchers with composite knowledge structures and comprehensive research capabilities, as well as energetic young and middle-aged researchers. Due to staffing and compensation constraints, think tank talent faces the dilemma of being “unable to enter” official think tanks and “unable to retain” talent in civilian think tanks. The internationally common “revolving door” mechanism remains difficult to implement in Chinese practice. Many retired officials with rich management experience struggle to play their proper decision-making consultation roles on think tank platforms.

### 3. Experience of the Zhejiang Center for Urban Governance Studies

What constitutes a new-type think tank? Experts define it as a novel type of think tank and brain trust that differs from traditional social science research institutions, party and government policy research departments, and Western partisan political and civilian research organizations. Grounded in theoretical innovation, it aims to serve scientific decision-making, prioritizes forward-looking research, and measures success by application and transformation of outcomes. Its primary function is providing scientific foundations for party and government decision-making and intellectual support for socialist modernization [3]. Accordingly, local new-type think tanks are research institutions serving local scientific decision-making, characterized by independence and forward-looking perspectives, with effectiveness measured by outcome application and transformation. The Zhejiang Center for Urban Governance Studies, a key provincial research base for philosophy and social sciences, has gradually transformed from a traditional social science research institution into a distinctive local new-type think tank over six years of construction and development, generating considerable influence in urban governance-related public decision-making domains.

#### 3.1 Institutional Reform

The Center was established under the auspices of the Hangzhou International Urbanology Research Center, transforming from an internal local history and culture research unit within a university to a research institution under the local party committee system, then through resource integration, into a party-government-affiliated yet open and independently operated think tank. Through these two reforms, the Center secured fiscal support, staffing guarantees, and information resources typical of a quasi-official local think tank (public institution nature without departmental affiliation), while also establishing social organizations like research societies and foundations to supplement needed talent resources (part-time experts, society members) and funding sources. This created an organizational structure of “public institution entity + council + research society + foundation,” effectively resolving the “people, money, space, and seal” challenges plaguing local think tank development.

#### 3.2 Goal Positioning

The Center early on articulated its positioning as an urbanology professional think tank “based in Hangzhou, serving Zhejiang, facing the nation,” combining “school construction” with “think tank services” and targeting the development of four major centers: urban governance theory research, decision-making consultation, academic exchange, and talent cultivation.

### 3.3 Research Methods

The Center integrates theoretical research with practical application and combines qualitative with quantitative research. On one hand, it develops major viewpoints and supporting theories on macro-level urbanology issues through major research projects on new urbanization and urban disease governance. On the other hand, it establishes policy advisory channels, participates in decision-making consultation on major issues like urban development strategy and comprehensive urban governance, and directly engages in local government decision-making processes by undertaking commissioned projects that apply theoretical research to practice.

Through its professional urbanology library and big data platform for urban governance, the Center employs an “integrated innovation” research methodology, applying theoretical findings to local policy advisory services while enriching theoretical research with information resources and governance cases from municipal governments.

### 3.4 Resource Integration

By absorbing resources from local governments, universities, and research institutions, the Center innovates collaboration models to build an open think tank. It serves as the Hangzhou Research Center for World Heritage Conservation, a research base on urbanization for the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, a postdoctoral research base for urbanology at Zhejiang University, and a teaching practice base for the China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong. It has also established strategic partnerships with UNESCO World Heritage Centre, UK Urban Studies Society, China Executive Leadership Academy Pudong, Zhejiang University, Tencent Technology (Beijing) Co., Ltd., People’s Daily Online Co., Ltd., Zhejiang Youth Media Group, Zhejiang Publishing United Group, UNESCO World Heritage Training and Research Centre for the Asia and Pacific Region, ICOMOS China, Luzhou Municipal People’s Government of Sichuan Province, and Cixi Municipal Government of Zhejiang Province.

### 3.5 Team Building

The Center has constructed a three-tier research talent system of “core layer—close layer—support layer.” With flexible mechanisms and adequate funding, it has assembled senior urban governance experts and urban managers through chief experts, part-time experts, and visiting research fellows, while attracting young talent through joint master’s, doctoral, and postdoctoral training programs in urbanology. Additionally, it can hire academic assistants and part-time researchers as project needs arise.

### 3.6 Operation Model

The Center has established a “matrix + modular” management model, forming research modules of “full-time researchers + strategic partner experts + part-time researchers” that can mobilize collective efforts for major projects, addressing insufficient research capacity. It implements a “research chain” operation mechanism integrating ten elements: “awards, forums, platforms, projects, talent, publicity, foundations, consultation, training, and exhibitions.”

Through a national urban governance outstanding achievements collection campaign, the Center gathers cutting-edge research and public (“netizen”) “golden ideas” on urbanology, upon which it annually hosts a series of high-level academic forums on urban governance research. By co-constructing eight research platforms with eight Zhejiang University institutes—on urban migration, urban transportation, urban land, urban housing, urban education, urban healthcare, urban ecological environment, and urban cultural heritage protection and utilization—it conducts long-term tracking of relevant urban issues and foundational theoretical research. Simultaneously, it provides consulting services and strategic proposals by undertaking commissioned projects from local party committees and governments on pressing urban governance issues. It offers training services for urban managers and expands social influence through comprehensive media outreach via social science popularization websites, WeChat, and Weibo. It attracts donations from prominent enterprises like Alibaba to the Urbanology Research Foundation, providing financial support for talent development, publication of research outcomes, and academic activities.

## 4. Innovations and Shortcomings of the Center’s Think Tank Construction

Experts note that the “new” in new-type think tanks “requires changing the relatively backward conditions of rigid systems, inflexible mechanisms, insufficient external exchange, and lack of discourse power” [4]. The Zhejiang Center for Urban Governance Studies has actively experimented with innovative systems and mechanisms, distinguishing itself significantly from traditional local think tanks and providing a model for the evolution of traditional local think tanks toward modern professional ones. Its “newness” manifests primarily in:

### 4.1 Conceptual Innovation

The Center positions new-type think tanks as “research institutions that advise decision-makers on handling various issues, providing optimal theories, strategies, methods, and ideas—an important force influencing decisions and promoting social development. Think tanks are also service organizations that ‘produce’ and ‘sell’ intellectual or ideational products” [5]. Guided by the concepts of “research chain” and “product chain,” it balances school construction with think tank development, serving local government public decision-making without being limited to a single function.

## 4.2 Professional Characteristics

Affiliated with a Hangzhou municipal party committee-affiliated public institution, the Center focuses exclusively on urbanology and urban governance as a professional think tank. Its director, a scholar-official who governed Hangzhou for over a decade, possesses profound theoretical knowledge and rich urban management experience. Grounded in the vivid experiences of Hangzhou's new urbanization construction since the new century, the Center concentrates on urban development 规律 research, urban development strategy research, and specific urban problem governance, aligning with the national new urbanization strategy and forming distinctive institutional characteristics.

## 4.3 Research Autonomy

The Center operates as a “bidirectional” research institution, both responding to local government decision-making needs and proactively planning major topics based on its research strengths and resource background to conduct forward-looking, systematic, and comprehensive studies, thereby building policy reserves in advance. It has developed major thematic research databases on “new urbanization strategy,” “household registration and benefits,” “urban development models,” “high-speed rail economy,” and “smart cities.” It has also participated in major development strategy research for dozens of municipal governments including Hangzhou, Wenzhou, Ningbo, Jinhua, Luzhou, Huanggang, Hefei, and Huangshan, directly influencing local urban government public decision-making.

## 4.4 Diversified Funding

Funding bottlenecks constitute a major obstacle to think tank development and a significant reason for weak independence. The Center has effectively resolved funding shortages through multiple channels: fiscal appropriations from local government procurement of services, funds obtained through social organizations undertaking commissioned projects from various governments, and donations to professional foundations from enterprises. Additional revenue streams include project cooperation, outcome transfer, publication income, and business training.

## 4.5 Innovative Management Model

The aforementioned “matrix + modular” management model and “research chain” operation mechanism significantly enhance institutional efficiency and enable rapid transformation into a local new-type professional think tank. Regarding high-end talent, the Center upholds an open spirit of “not seeking ownership but seeking utilization,” attracting urbanology experts to participate in think tank co-construction through projects and platforms.

#### 4.6 Dissemination and Influence

The Center emphasizes the diversity of think tank outcomes, focusing not only on leadership directives and departmental adoption but also on dissemination among media and domestic policy elites, citation in academic publications and conference presentations, and transformation across monographs, policy briefs, websites, and WeChat platforms. It co-built “China Urban Network” and “Zhejiang Urban Governance Website” with People’s Daily Online, along with official WeChat and Weibo accounts, achieving considerable influence in relevant fields. It annually hosts high-level academic forums such as the “China Urbanology Annual Conference.” As John Raisian, director of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, stated: “Self-imposed isolation within the comfortable ivory tower is an occupational risk for think tanks” [5]. Guiding public opinion also constitutes an important think tank value.

However, as an emerging think tank organization, the Center faces several limitations under the current policy system. First, external institutional constraints remain difficult to break through, as fiscal expenditure norms and research funding reimbursement regulations ill-adapt to think tank development needs, creating difficulties in fund utilization. Second, issues concerning outcome recognition, professional title evaluation, salary and benefits, and social security for full-time personnel of independent legal entity think tanks create friction with existing systems, while compensation for non-staff employees struggles to reflect incentive mechanisms. Third, think tank experts participate relatively infrequently in public discourse, with insufficient publicity and promotion. Finally, internationalization needs strengthening—urbanization being a global issue requires enhanced external exchange to disseminate Chinese perspectives and voices on urban research.

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

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