

## The Current Status and Future Prospects of Chinese Think Tank Evaluation Systems: Postprint

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### Abstract

[目的/意义] Since the 18th National Congress, Chinese think tanks have proliferated rapidly and have gradually exhibited a trend of industrialization. Notably, the development and maturation of Chinese think tanks cannot be separated from the innovative development of management systems, especially a scientific and rational think tank evaluation system.

[方法/过程] By analyzing the current state of the Chinese think tank evaluation system, this study clarifies the path and role in establishing such a system.

[结果/结论] To develop an effective evaluation system for Chinese think tanks, it is essential to clearly define the concepts and functions of think tanks, rationally approach the methodology of think tank evaluation, and recognize that influence is the core of think tank evaluation. Meanwhile, through the evaluation system, we should strengthen think tank identity, stimulate think tank initiative, and enhance think tank recognition, thereby achieving a positive interaction between think tank construction and think tank evaluation, and promoting the development of Chinese think tanks to a higher level.

### Full Text

## The Current State and Future Prospects of China's Think Tank Evaluation System

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Chinese think tanks have proliferated rapidly, gradually ex-

hibiting an industrialized development trend. Notably, the maturation of Chinese think tanks cannot be separated from innovations in management systems, particularly the establishment of scientific and rational think tank evaluation systems. **[Method/Process]** By analyzing the current state of China's think tank evaluation systems, this paper clarifies the pathways and roles for establishing such systems. **[Result/Conclusion]** To develop an effective think tank evaluation system in China, we must clearly define the concept and functions of think tanks, adopt a rational perspective on evaluation methodology, and recognize that influence constitutes the core of evaluation. Simultaneously, by strengthening think tank identity, incentivizing think tank self-awareness, and enhancing think tank recognition through evaluation systems, we can achieve a virtuous interaction between think tank construction and evaluation, thereby promoting the development of Chinese think tanks to a higher level.

**Keywords:** think tanks; think tank evaluation; current state; prospects

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As a crucial support for scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making, think tanks represent an important component of national governance system and capacity modernization, as well as a key element of national soft power. Following the explicit call in the 18th Party Congress report to “play the role of think tanks,” the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee emphasized strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system. The Fifth Plenary Session further stressed implementing the philosophy and social sciences innovation project and building such think tanks. In January 2015, the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council elevated the role and importance of think tanks to an unprecedented level. On November 9, 2015, the 18th meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform approved the “Pilot Work Plan for the Construction of National High-End Think Tanks,” launching a new exploration in building Chinese think tanks. Subsequently, provinces and autonomous regions across the country introduced their own implementation opinions on think tank construction. In short, since the 18th Party Congress, Chinese think tanks have sprung up like mushrooms after rain, gradually demonstrating an industrialization trend.

It is worth noting that the development and maturation of Chinese think tanks cannot be separated from innovations in management systems, especially from scientific and rational think tank evaluation systems. However, the think tank community has yet to reach broad consensus on how to evaluate think tanks.

## 1. Current State of China's Think Tank Evaluation System

At present, China's think tank evaluation has “formed a new pattern of multi-institution competition” [1], showing a trend of diversified development. Five

major evaluation systems have attracted widespread attention, with various think tank evaluation reports ranking think tanks from different perspectives using different evaluation criteria and objective indicators.

In January 2014, the Center for Think Tank Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences took the lead in conducting think tank evaluation in China, proposing an influence-centered indicator system with Chinese characteristics, which marked the starting point for diversified think tank evaluation in the country. For three consecutive years thereafter, it released the “China Think Tank Report.” This report primarily employed a subjective ranking method based on questionnaires, supplemented by expert evaluation and reference to some objective indicators, assessing Chinese think tanks from four dimensions: comprehensive influence, sub-item influence, systemic influence, and professional influence.

In January 2015, the Horizon International Development Institute and China.org.cn jointly released the “2014 China Think Tank Influence Report,” becoming China’s first think tank evaluation system based primarily on objective indicator data. This system still adopted influence as its standard, dividing it into four categories: professional influence, government influence, social influence, and international influence. The final think tank scores and rankings were derived from these four objective indicators combined with a subjective index. In terms of evaluation subjects, the cooperative research between the civilian think tank Horizon Institute and the new media platform China.org.cn not only directed greater attention to civilian think tanks due to the civilian nature of both institutions, but also opened up a new operational model for think tank-media collaboration.

In November 2015, the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences and the Chengdu Documentation and Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences jointly released the “Chinese Think Tank Influence Report 2015,” which for the first time in China introduced the big data concept into think tank evaluation. While using traditional subjective and objective questionnaire methods, this report utilized internet information capture technology to obtain data on 276 think tanks in the Greater China region, conducting sub-item, comprehensive, and categorical evaluations from five dimensions: decision-making influence, social influence, public opinion influence, professional influence, and international influence.

In November 2015, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Evaluation Center released the “Global Think Tank Evaluation Report,” the first time a Chinese research institution evaluated and ranked global think tank development. To ensure objectivity and fairness, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was not included in the evaluation. The report assessed 359 of the world’s most influential think tanks from three aspects: attraction, management, and influence, producing a global top 100 list based on final scores. This indicator system placed qualitative evaluation and quantitative analysis on equal footing, emphasizing the role of expert evaluation and third-party assessment.

In July 2016, the Think Tank Research and Release Center of Guangming Daily and the Think Tank Network Influence Evaluation Research Group of Nanjing University jointly released the “China Think Tank Network Influence Evaluation Report,” becoming China’s first report conducting a specialized evaluation of think tank network influence. This report pioneered the RSC “snowball” evaluation model for think tank network influence, using three indicators to represent the three dimensions of a snowball in space: Resource indicator (R), Spread indicator (S), and Communication indicator (C). The report argued that rolling the snowball in only one or two dimensions would result in elongated or flattened influence, limiting its impact; only by rolling the snowball simultaneously in all three dimensions could think tank network influence continue to grow. Based on this model, the report evaluated think tank network influence, enriching evaluation methods and pioneering the exploration of specialized and precise evaluation in China.

After nearly three years of development, China’s think tank evaluation systems have evolved from subjective influence evaluation systems to objective data-based systems, from single quantitative evaluation to combined quality and quantity evaluation, from big data capture to snowball evaluation models, and from comprehensive to specialized and precise evaluation, presenting a sound development trend featuring multiple methods and multiple evaluators. Evaluation objects are not limited to domestic think tanks but also include comparative evaluations of foreign think tanks. China’s think tank evaluation system is continuously exploring and advancing amid controversies, moving from nonexistence to existence and from scarcity to abundance.

## 2. Key Issues in Think Tank Evaluation

### 2.1 Clarifying the Definition of Think Tanks

In recent years, China’s think tank construction has achieved great development with remarkable accomplishments, providing valuable assistance to Party and government decision-making. However, the Chinese think tank community has experienced restless “false prosperity.” Some “think tank” variants operating under the think tank name have become prevalent, exhibiting “commercialization,” “generalization,” and “entertainmentization.” Specifically, many profit-driven commercial consulting agencies have misappropriated the think tank title by passing themselves off as think tanks. Not all institutions that provide decision-making consultation can be considered think tanks—for instance, higher education institutions can influence government decision-making, but their primary responsibility is teaching and education, so they cannot be regarded as think tanks. Some civilian scholars have turned their research into entertainment, aiming for media exposure and claiming to be think tank scholars, yet lacking multidisciplinary background knowledge, they cannot grasp practical issues, let alone propose valuable policy recommendations. Due to intentional or unintentional confusion of the think tank concept, China’s think tank community has become somewhat murky, with a mixture of good and bad. “The

criteria for defining think tanks are already quite inclusive, and the concept of think tanks cannot be infinitely expanded” [2]. Only by clarifying the functional positioning of think tanks can we nurture more excellent think tanks and better address the problem of Chinese think tanks being “large but not strong.”

Therefore, the first problem that think tank evaluation systems must address is the definition of think tank organizations and the clarification of their functional positioning. The “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” clearly states: “New-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics are non-profit research and consulting institutions that focus on strategic issues and public policy as their main research objects and serve the Party and government in scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making.” This definition shows that think tanks are not academic institutions but rather research and consulting institutions that revolve around public policy and strategic issues, aim to serve the public interest, and perform special functions. The definition includes three basic elements: research independence, relatively stable research fields, and decision-making influence of research outcomes [3], which are key to ensuring high-quality research results from think tanks.

## 2.2 Scientific Evaluation Methodology

Think tank rankings often target influence as their evaluation objective. However, “influence” itself is an abstract and difficult-to-quantify concept. Even lecturing for the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee does not necessarily mean influencing national leaders’ final decisions. There is no universal standard for evaluating think tank influence, and its functional positioning determines that evaluation systems are not singular and static but multidimensional and dynamic. Therefore, evaluating think tank influence is an extremely challenging task.

The significance of think tank evaluation lies in encouraging think tanks to do more things that enhance their influence. Both quantitative analysis and subjective evaluation are important components of think tank evaluation. Think tank evaluation is a complex systematic project that must incorporate both quantitative analysis and subjective evaluation, combining virtual and real elements effectively.

In think tank evaluation, quantitative analysis is a commonly used method because a correlation exists between think tank research outcomes and influence, allowing some measurement methods to estimate relative influence. However, the values of various indicators in this method are artificially set, creating deviations between the final estimated influence and actual performance. For example, many think tanks claim to be originators of certain decisions or proposers of ideas, but as the number of think tank organizations increases, tracing policies to their sources becomes increasingly difficult, making deviations more likely in quantification. Nevertheless, “quantitative analysis can indeed reflect think tank performance in one or more aspects, showing some correlation with

policy formulation” [4].

Quantitative analysis can reflect changes in certain indicators of think tank evaluation but cannot capture the full picture of think tank influence. Qualitative judgment no longer relies on specific indicator data but instead uses questionnaires, expert evaluation, and other methods based primarily on subjective overall impressions. If questionnaire respondents and evaluators have comprehensive understanding of relevant think tanks, they can better grasp the basic impression of think tank influence. To ensure credibility of evaluation results, the validity and representativeness of questionnaires and expert evaluation must be guaranteed, preventing fraudulent responses and regional imbalance in respondent selection.

Furthermore, in qualitative analysis, comparisons between think tanks of different institutional types and research directions may not be particularly meaningful. If cross-national think tank comparisons are involved, differences in political systems, social cultures, and economic environments lead to significant variations in how think tanks influence decision-makers and their operational mechanisms, making global think tank evaluation potentially less valuable than imagined.

### **2.3 Clarifying Influence as the Core of Evaluation**

Influence is the lifeblood, work objective, and core task of new-type think tanks. All think tank work must center on influence, promoting decision-making influence while balancing social and international influence to indirectly achieve decision-making influence. In short, the vitality of think tanks lies in influence, with decision-making influence as the dominant factor and social and international influence as two foundational pillars.

Decision-making influence is the foundation of think tanks and their core function. Think tank scholars transform specialized knowledge into language easily understood by decision-makers through internal references, research reports, investigation reports, and decision-making consultations, aiming to solve decision-makers’ problems and become policy reality. In China, think tank decision-making influence is primarily reflected through approvals and instructions from Party and government leaders. Think tank research outcomes are delivered to leaders’ desks through certain channels, and relevant leaders provide affirmative instructions on policy recommendations that can solve practical problems. In Chinese think tank evaluation, the presence or absence of leadership instructions has become a basis for evaluating decision-making influence, which can be assessed from the identity of the instructing leader, specific content of instructions, degree of adoption by relevant departments, and subsequent actual policy effects. The number and level of think tank scholars invited to participate in government decision-making consultations, the number, funding amount, and level of government projects accepted, the number and proportion of think tank scholars taking positions in government departments, and the number and pro-

portion of former government officials in think tanks can all serve as important indicators for evaluating decision-making influence. Moreover, in overall think tank evaluation, decision-making influence should be assigned the largest weight proportion.

Social influence of think tanks is primarily manifested in their public opinion influence. Since media possess powerful public opinion influence, think tanks can indirectly influence decision-making through media channels, and this trend is continuously strengthening. Think tanks should focus on social hot issues and major national policies, transmitting think tank voices to society, guiding public opinion, leading rational public thinking, and gathering positive energy for development. Evaluating such think tank research outcomes can be based on statistics such as the number of commentaries published, media interviews accepted, research reports released, and books published, supplemented by expert evaluation to reflect social influence. Think tank website traffic and visits, number of friendly links, WeChat public account followers and visits, Weibo followers and visits, operation of scholars' self-media, and Baidu (Google) search results can also reflect social influence to some extent. However, the problem of think tank mediatization should be noted—some think tanks overuse media tools to expand social influence, wasting limited energy on media, which puts the cart before the horse.

Currently, China' s national influence has spread globally, and Chinese enterprises have expanded worldwide, yet the internationalization process of Chinese think tanks lags far behind [5]. Meanwhile, as China rises rapidly, international public opinion is rife with “China collapse theory” and “China threat theory,” making the creation of a friendly external environment an important issue for stabilizing China' s development. Notably, think tanks have advantages in conducting public diplomacy: first, they reserve a large number of intellectual elites, especially many retired senior officials, capable of conducting think tank diplomacy; second, think tanks are “idea factories” that can strategize for national interests; third, their civilian identity can distance them from political disputes and enhance mutual exchange and understanding between nations through seminars and forums, serving as a “lubricant.” The number, attendance, and level of international conferences held, participation in international conferences, and exchanges with internationally renowned think tanks can all serve as important indicators for evaluating international influence. Chinese think tanks must emancipate their minds, actively go global, strengthen international cooperation and exchange, avoid the old path of “working behind closed doors,” leverage the unique role of think tank diplomacy, build internationally influential Chinese think tank brands, and “form discourse-shaping power that influences the world” [6].

It is important to understand the difference between academic evaluation systems and think tank evaluation systems. Existing academic evaluation systems are disconnected from social reality, using internal academic circle evaluations as standards and focusing on the theoretical and academic nature of research

outcomes. Academic research emphasizes theoretical model deduction, abstracting and theorizing universal and regular behaviors and phenomena. However, since most traditional scholars do not understand the rules of government policy formulation, their policy recommendations are often politically unfeasible. Think tanks must stay close to real-world problems, avoid armchair theorizing, and refrain from making unsubstantiated claims or playing word games. They should focus on major systematic and strategic issues, playing a constructive role. Although think tank policy consultation is built upon academic research and theoretical foundations, academic papers, monographs, and conferences cannot reflect think tanks' "external brain" capacity. The core task of think tanks is to provide policy advice and enlighten the public, fundamentally different from universities and research institutions. Basic theoretical research is the task of traditional research institutions, while practical applied research is the work of think tanks—academic institution evaluation standards cannot be simply copied for think tank evaluation.

### **3. Leveraging Evaluation Systems to Promote the Development of China' s Think Tank Industry**

The construction of think tank evaluation systems concerns the overall development of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics. A scientific and rational evaluation system can incentivize think tanks to perform their duties well and provide high-quality, high-level consulting services for Party and government decision-making. Through evaluation systems, we can strengthen think tank identity, incentivize think tank self-awareness, and enhance think tank recognition, thereby playing a proper role in regulating, guiding, and motivating the healthy development of China' s think tank industry, achieving a virtuous interaction between think tank construction and evaluation, and promoting Chinese think tanks to a higher level of development.

#### **3.1 Strengthening Think Tank Identity Through Evaluation Systems**

Think tanks have become a universal phenomenon. Since the founding of the People' s Republic of China, many policy research institutions have served Party and government decision-making but lacked "think tank" positioning awareness. Chinese think tank identity derives from multiple channels: recognition by various think tank reports, recognition by government designation as "national high-end think tanks," and self-recognition by think tanks themselves. Since the 18th Party Congress, as "think tank fever" has continuously heated up in China, think tanks have become labels for many research institutions, think tank scholars have become titles for many researchers, and the concept of policy consultation has gradually taken root in people' s minds. Society has widely recognized the important role of think tanks in scientific decision-making, national governance, and public diplomacy. Through think tank evaluation, many policy research institutions have confirmed their "think tank" identity, actively absorbed and learned from the development experience of internationally renowned think

tanks, and achieved transformation from traditional research institutions to new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

### **3.2 Incentivizing Think Tank Self-Awareness Through Evaluation Systems**

Think tank evaluation serves as a command baton and weathervane for guiding the healthy development of the think tank industry, playing an irreplaceable role in incentivizing and regulating think tank construction. By setting scientific and reasonable think tank evaluation indicators and selecting high-end think tanks with influence, we can establish models for the industry's development and "give birth to industry self-awareness of China's new-type think tanks" [7]. Moreover, the division of influence into decision-making, social, and international influence, along with specific sub-indicators for each category, guides and incentivizes think tanks in various fields, motivating lagging think tanks to strive to surpass those ranked higher. Meanwhile, think tanks not included in rankings will gradually fade from government and public view, making it difficult to attract fiscal and social funding support, creating a vicious cycle for their development. Think tank evaluation designs a yardstick for think tank self-disciplined development and provides a reference system for government and the public to identify good think tanks. Fair think tank evaluation helps form value standards for healthy think tank development, such as enhancing activity influence, maintaining policy research independence, ensuring high-quality outcomes, and promoting the formation of industry standards and norms. In short, think tank evaluation guides the healthy development of the think tank industry, incentivizes think tank self-awareness, plays a guiding role, and helps Chinese think tanks develop better and more steadily.

### **3.3 Enhancing Think Tank Recognition Through Evaluation Systems**

"One must be strong oneself to forge iron," and the foundation of think tank development lies within itself, but we cannot deny the impact of the external environment on think tank development. Think tank evaluation can enhance think tank recognition, and broad government and social recognition can help think tanks obtain more funding and talent. With large amounts of funding and talent pouring in, think tanks can have sufficient strength to conduct policy research, improving the quality of research outcomes, which in turn gains government and social recognition, creating a virtuous development cycle. In short, intuitive ranking lists easily attract attention, are widely reported by media, and often generate great public enthusiasm, helping create a favorable social public opinion environment that assists the public and government decision-makers in understanding think tanks and enhancing awareness of their functions. Many excellent but little-known think tanks stand out in rankings, which helps improve their social visibility and recognition, promoting their further development.

### 3.4 Promoting Great Development of Think Tanks Through Evaluation Systems

The formation of a think tank evaluation market promotes competition among think tanks: the public evaluates think tank quality through rankings, donors assess whether their contributions are effectively used through rankings, and decision-makers evaluate whether think tank outcomes are high-quality through rankings. Think tank evaluation provides decision-makers with reference standards for grasping the overall development of think tanks, screening out truly high-quality, high-level, and high-influence think tanks from a mixed industry, and preventing low-quality, low-level, and low-influence think tanks from participating in government decision-making. Such bad think tanks waste limited social intellectual resources, fail to provide policy advice for government decision-making, and even reduce decision-making efficiency and mislead policy decisions [8]. For think tank development itself, think tanks can identify their characteristic fields according to evaluation systems, segment markets, accurately position themselves, and further develop and improve. For the industry as a whole, evaluation systems promote more standardized and institutionalized development of the think tank industry. For think tank survival and development, evaluation systems enable think tanks to better understand themselves and the overall industry situation, promoting not only self-improvement but also healthy industry competition, thereby driving the development of the entire industry.

In conclusion, although China's think tank evaluation faces many problems and challenges, and think tank rankings need improvement, we cannot simply deny the role of think tank evaluation. We should maintain a cautious attitude toward think tank evaluation, clearly define think tanks, understand the strengths and limitations of various evaluation systems, determine measurement standards for think tank influence, and actively use evaluation systems to promote the healthy development of Chinese think tanks.

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