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New Think Tank Strategy and Core Competencies Postprint

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Abstract

Purpose/Significance To gain insights into the perspectives of frontline experts and scholars on think tank development, share theoretical research achievements in think tank studies, and provide guidance for the core capacity building of new-type think tanks. **Method/Process** The content of expert reports from the “2016 Advanced Workshop on Core Capacity Building for New-Type Think Tanks” organized by the editorial department of *Think Tank: Theory and Practice* was interpreted and analyzed, with important common and distinctive perspectives therein summarized, refined, and recommended. **Results/Conclusions** The spiritual core of new-type think tanks manifests as national sentiment and Chinese self-confidence; the core capacities of new-type think tanks mainly include strategic planning, learning, governance, communication, exchange, etc.

Full Text

Development Strategy and Core Competence of New Think Tanks—Analysis of Experts’ Views at “2016 Core Competence Construction of New Think Tanks” Senior Seminar

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Abstract

[Purpose/significance] This paper aims to investigate the insights of frontline think tank experts, share theoretical research achievements, and provide guidance for developing the core competence of new think tanks. **[Method/process]** We conducted an in-depth analysis of expert presentations from the “2016 Core Competence Construction of New Think Tanks Senior Seminar” hosted by the editorial department of *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*,

extracting and summarizing important shared and distinctive viewpoints. **[Result/conclusion]** The spiritual core of new think tanks manifests as patriotism and confidence in China, while their core competence primarily includes strategic planning, learning, management, communication, and community building.

Keywords: new think tank; senior seminar; core competence; spiritual core; patriotism; strategic planning; development community

From July 14-16, 2016, the “2016 Core Competence Construction of New Think Tanks Senior Seminar” was held at the Chinese Academy of Sciences Academic Hall, organized by the editorial department of *Think Tank: Theory & Practice* (National Science Library, Chinese Academy of Sciences) with support from multiple institutions including the Center for Think Tank Studies and Evaluation at Nanjing University. Over 20 frontline experts from government, academia, and industry conducted comprehensive analyses and in-depth discussions on three major themes: macro-level policy and think tank planning, capacity building and best practices, and challenges and countermeasures, while engaging in interactive exchanges with more than 200 participants. The experts offered diverse and insightful perspectives. To share these valuable insights, we have systematically reviewed these presentations and constructed a conceptual map of new think tank strategy and core competence organized by thematic content.

1. Spiritual Core of New Think Tanks

The *Book of Rites· Great Learning* states: “Those who wished to manifest their bright virtue throughout the world first governed their states; wishing to govern their states, they first regulated their families; wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons; wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts.” New think tank development adapts to the needs of state governance and remains intimately connected to national policy formulation and even the destiny of national development. Unlike general academic research, think tank research carries more profound “national” significance. Multiple experts emphasized that dedication to national affairs and inherent confidence in China constitute the invaluable spiritual core of new think tank development.

1.1 Patriotism

Chen Wenling, Chief Economist and Research Fellow at the China Center for International Economic Exchanges, argued that think tank personnel must first possess the sentiment and commitment to strategize for national affairs, remaining indifferent to fame and fortune, willing to work in obscurity, and conducting solid work for national strategy and policy to produce high-end intellectual products. Core competence building is a gradual process that cannot be rushed for quick success. Min Xueqin, Secretary-General of Zijin Media Think Tank and Professor at Nanjing University’s School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, stated: “To strategize for society, one must maintain a ‘caring’ heart.” As indi-

vidual sociology scholars, she considered it a rare privilege to embed themselves in society under the think tank banner. She advocated allowing this caring heart to transcend disciplines, enabling governance recommendations based on professional knowledge and imbued with warmth to gather momentum through think tanks, be elevated, and ultimately influence decision-making while pushing society from a dumbbell-shaped to an olive-shaped structure. Ji Zhengju, Deputy Director of the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau, emphasized that think tank research requires national responsibility and a sense of mission, focusing on genuine scholarship and real problems, and having the courage to shoulder responsibilities to achieve “iron shoulders bearing righteousness, skillful hands writing brilliant articles.”

1.2 Confidence in China

Professor Li Gang, Deputy Director of the Center for Think Tank Studies and Evaluation at Nanjing University, expressed this sentiment when moderating Dean Wang Wen’ s presentation: “Although deeply influenced by American culture, one can feel strong confidence in China from him. It is precisely this confidence that allows him to stand tall in any international setting, and this is also the most critical factor for the success of the Chongyang Institute.” Li Guoqiang, Deputy Director of the Public Management and Human Resources Institute at the Development Research Center of the State Council, argued that think tank development should unequivocally uphold and submit to the leadership of the Communist Party of China, which represents the most fundamental characteristic of new think tanks with Chinese features. Shen Jinjian, Research Fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Evaluation Center, proposed that high-end think tank construction should embody “Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese 气派.”

2. Core Competence of New Think Tanks

Regarding the core competence of new think tanks, Professor Chu Jingli, Executive Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, summarized from the logic of think tank idea production and dissemination as: the capacity to grasp and judge major strategies and issues (topic selection); scientific research and analytical synthesis capacity (information, data, tools, platforms); communication capacity with government, public, and media (multiple channels); quality, level, and value of think tank outputs (the foundation of think tanks); and influence of think tank outputs on public policy (results orientation). Drawing from practical experience, Research Fellow Chen Wenling believed that core competence should include strategic planning capacity, policy reserve capacity, research teams, public opinion guidance capacity, and institutional mechanisms capable of competing with first-class think tanks. Multiple other experts provided further in-depth and vivid elaborations. We have organized these viewpoints and condensed them into five aspects: strategic planning, learning, management, communication, and community building.

2.1 Strategic Planning

As the saying goes, “The brave who are fond of asking will surely win; the wise who are fond of planning will surely succeed.” Strategic planning refers to winning through strategy, possessing accurate judgment, and achieving victory through foresight and planning. It embodies the “wisdom” of think tanks and represents their most important core competence.

2.1.1 Strategic Planning as Paramount “The best strategy is to attack the enemy’ s plans, next is to disrupt his alliances, next is to attack his army, and the worst is to attack his cities” [1]. Wang Wen, Executive Dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, drew upon this concept from *The Art of War*, arguing that Chinese think tanks need to rise, and the starting point and blank space for this rise lies in strategic planning. For Chinese think tanks to gain international influence, the breakthrough point and future growth area also lies in strategic planning. Chinese think tanks’ strategic planning capacity is insufficient, primarily manifested in inadequate global organizational capacity, international appeal, discourse shaping power, and international talent cultivation. Therefore, we must enhance strategic planning capacity through four aspects: setting global agendas, influencing international public opinion, making friends worldwide, and influencing other countries’ policies. Chen Wenling believed that strategic planning capacity is the core competence of new think tanks. It involves planning strategic, forward-looking, and reserve policies and designs around national core capabilities and major interests; providing multiple sets of options and policy designs for current urgent needs and future development; and thinking what leaders think and what they have not yet thought, offering great and good ideas. It requires a sense of the times and acuity, skillfully capturing and researching issues from the forefront of the era to propose ideas and recommendations aligned with development trends.

2.1.2 Judgment as Essential “Information has never been a scarce resource, but accurate selection is; opportunities have never been scarce, but rational analysis is; even wealth is not a scarce resource, but unique insight is.” Wang Jianing, Chairman of Chongqing Think Tank, shared his practical insights on operating a think tank, highlighting the unique value of selection, analysis, and vision for think tank work—essentially, a capacity for judgment. Wu Liang, President of Xinhua Outlook Think Tank, believed that judgment (expert network) and intelligence (information network) are the two core elements of think tanks. He is convinced that socialized and collaborative judgment combined with efficient intelligence systems based on big data will be the future trend for think tanks. Dean Wang Wen argued that think tank leaders must possess comprehensive judgment capacity, including accurate judgment on topic selection and human resource investment.

2.2 Learning

As the ancient saying goes, “Without learning, one cannot understand ancient ways, and there has never been one who could govern peacefully.” Learning strengthens research capacity, draws on international experience, and utilizes information technology and foreign language tools to integrate past and present, internal and external perspectives. It forms the foundation of think tank “wisdom.”

2.2.1 Learning as the Foundation of Wisdom Professor Li Gang argued that the connotative development path of think tanks should be “learning” - oriented, with professional knowledge as the foundation for think tanks’ survival and development. Think tanks should conduct specialized and focused research, concentrating on niche markets and targeting specific audiences. They should be vocalists rather than pop musicians, specialists rather than general practitioners. In her practical experience operating a think tank, Professor Min Xueqin endeavored to nourish the think tank with sociological knowledge and scholarship, slowing it down and pausing so that its soul could catch up. She believed that truly leading and sustainable strategies and tactics must involve the soul keeping pace with the body’s progress and organizational development. Wang Shiwei, Research Fellow at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Information Research Institute, quoted from *Philosophical Letters*: “Man is a limited being; the possibilities of his understanding and his power to conquer things are limited. If man is convinced of this, he will set fairly correct limits to his thoughts and actions, thereby harmoniously fulfilling his destiny.” He proposed that given limited time, energy, and capacity, think tank research should achieve distinctiveness through focus. As President Xi Jinping emphasized, “Think tank construction should focus on improving research quality and promoting content innovation” [2]. Zhang Zhiqiang, Director of the Chengdu Library and Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, believed that the essence of think tanks lies not just in having a “tank” (repository) but in having “wisdom.” Think tanks should conduct high-level, interdisciplinary policy research with practical utility, ensuring the rigor of research methods, data, analysis, and conclusions.

2.2.2 Learning from International Experience “Learning from international experience requires understanding not just the ‘skin’ but the ‘soul.’” Yuan Peng, Deputy Director of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, emphasized the need to start from China’s national and social conditions, adapt foreign experience for domestic use, and learn the right lessons. He suggested beginning with details: (1) talent management, experimenting with small-scale “revolving door” mechanisms and regulating work hours by total hours worked rather than fixed schedules; (2) drawing on “Track II” diplomacy, cleverly using think tanks as gray spaces to support government functions; and (3) conducting national think tank layout to fully leverage regional expertise and resource advantages.

2.2.3 Leveraging Tools As the proverb states, “To do a good job, one must first sharpen one’s tools.” In the new era of interconnected and intelligent everything, information technology, big data, and the internet provide tremendous support for research while challenging researchers to master new technologies and keep pace with the times. Professor Min Xueqin emphasized the need to skillfully use big data and large sample data to speak out while maintaining data impartiality and cleanliness to stand firm in the world and be accountable to government and the public. Professor Li Gang believed that for evidence-based policy analysis and consultation, databases and platform construction are crucial leverage points. University-affiliated think tanks should establish specialized databases and platforms, master original data, and cultivate “exclusive know-how.” Zhang Moyi, Senior Government Affairs Manager for RELX Group China, shared the “evidence-based analysis” approach for new science and technology think tanks, highlighting the group’s support in three areas: quality content (ScienceDirect, Scopus), databases and analytical tools (HPCC big data technology, SciVal analysis and decision-making tools), and influence dissemination tools (Mendeley, Newsflo). Xing Guofeng, Deputy General Manager of the Education and Culture Division of CNKI Digital Publishing Industry Group, shared CNKI’s core technologies in think tank knowledge resource big data centers and statistical data mining application models, as well as the information support it can provide for strategic research and scientific evaluation. Additionally, multiple experts emphasized the importance of improving English proficiency to speak out on international occasions and publish in international media, avoiding limitations caused by language barriers.

2.3 Management

As the ancient wisdom states, “Govern well, serve capably, act timely.” Management refers to effective personnel and funding management, emphasizing outcome evaluation and quality control, and optimizing institutional mechanisms. It provides the guarantee for think tank “wisdom.”

2.3.1 Talent Retention and Mobility As the saying goes, “The way to govern a state lies in promoting the virtuous.” Talent is the most critical element for think tank development, requiring both effective management and motivation of internal talent and leveraging external excellent talent to maximize talent mechanisms’ benefits. Li Guoqiang believed in establishing both “retention mechanisms” and “mobility mechanisms” for talent and effectively combining them. In the era of globalization, informatization, and “Internet+,” we should utilize this flattened organizational management form to flexibly, openly, and efficiently absorb talent according to development needs. Professor Li Gang argued that think tank development requires a foundation; even with a “small institution, large network” model, stable in-house researchers are essential to become an internationally influential think tank. Dean Wang Wen shared insights on personnel allocation ratios: common characteristics of world-class think tanks include researcher proportions not exceeding 60%, with remaining staff handling

media relations, fundraising, conferences, and other non-research affairs. In contrast, Chinese think tanks have researchers comprising 90% of staff, requiring them to personally handle various affairs and wasting substantial energy. He recommended optimizing think tank personnel ratios by recruiting media professionals to leverage their expertise in publicity and public relations.

2.3.2 Funding Management Regarding funding management for official think tanks, Zhang Li, Secretary of the General Office at the Development Research Center of the State Council, recommended implementing a “three-combination” compensation system based on skills, performance, and labor. This approach aligns with research work patterns, provides positive incentives, and prevents researchers from operating in gray zones. Reform inevitably involves interest adjustments; think tank personnel should view funding reform and personal gains and losses from the perspective of modernizing the national governance system and capabilities, actively participating in and promoting reform to create better conditions for think tanks to fulfill their functions.

2.3.3 Outcome Evaluation Zhang Zhiqiang recommended high-quality analysis and quality control of think tank research outputs. Key elements include scientific analysis standards, strict quality review control, using research methods and data as the foundation for review, and using research conclusions as the key content for review. Through the cluster effect of think tank outcome quality control, we can achieve what the ancient sage described: “The governance of sages is not valued for ruling alone but for the ability to govern with the many.” Gao Guoli, Director of the Scientific Research Management Department at the Academy of Macroeconomic Research of the National Development and Reform Commission, advocated for constructing a differentiated evaluation system for Chinese think tanks. Different types of think tanks should establish different functional orientations, enhance comparability of main functions, select differentiated evaluation indicators, and clarify differentiated evaluation priorities. Chen Wenling shared the system of project initiation, mid-term review, and final evaluation established in her practical work, believing that assessing the proportion of major projects transformed into national strategies, policies, and decisions holds significant importance.

2.3.4 Institutional Mechanism Reform Chen Wenling advocated establishing institutions and mechanisms capable of competing with world-class think tanks. She identified institutional mechanisms as an important “weak” area for Chinese think tanks, including talent management and funding management. We should shape entirely new institutional mechanisms according to the requirements of new think tank core competence construction, creating fertile soil for think tank idea production with sound institutional guarantees and social environments. Li Guoqiang believed that think tank institutional management requires good macro-level layout, including geographical distribution and research direction planning. National-level think tanks should actively coordinate

various organizations and think tanks in the public decision-making process to achieve comprehensive, integrated, and forward-looking policy advice. Dean Wang Wen proposed reform recommendations for building new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, including reforms in planning-implementation interaction mechanisms, idea market mechanisms, personnel expansion mechanisms, financing operation mechanisms, and global communication mechanisms.

2.4 Communication

As the saying goes, “Good wine also fears a deep alley; China does not lack profound thinkers but lacks good communication masters.” Communication involves marketing and disseminating think tank ideas—on one hand, enhancing the production capacity of intellectual products and improving discourse shaping power; on the other hand, skillfully leveraging platforms and media to disseminate think tank intellectual products and enhance domestic and international influence. The production and dissemination capacity of think tank intellectual products is key to think tanks’ influence.

2.4.1 Report Writing Capacity Think tank reports are important carriers of think tank intellectual products. Yuan Peng believed that think tank products should have depth and thickness, while also being concise—unlike academic papers, think tank reports should be succinct, preferably under 2,000 words. Dean Wang Wen shared his experience in report writing: titles should be brief (under 13 characters) and eye-catching (to attract attention), and the first paragraph should cover the full content in 150-200 words to enhance discourse shaping power. He further hoped to create new concepts with international communication power like “smart power.” Ke Yinbin, Research Fellow at the Charhar Institute and Tsinghua University Center for Technological Innovation, emphasized the importance of presenting think tank reports in language and forms familiar to decision-makers and preferred by media. Professor Min Xueqin shared her grasp and requirements for think tank articles: “Let titles and content reflect care, and let readers feel that care.” Ji Zhengju believed that think tank report writing represents the “combined force” of “essence, energy, and spirit,” reflecting individual and team character and wisdom. To write good reports, one must first strengthen mental cultivation to achieve sincerity, dedication, and commitment. Second, one must enhance research capacity, including problem identification, analysis, and solution capabilities, while emphasizing logical and scientific thinking. Finally, one must develop good habits to achieve internal and external cultivation and comprehensive mastery. He emphasized that report writing requires not only an innovative spirit but also a craftsman spirit with sustained focus. Wang Shiwei elaborated on five key elements for writing special reports: (1) “Topic selection is paramount,” which can be problem-oriented, reality-oriented, demand-oriented, or characteristic-oriented, with small entry points; (2) “Introduction leads,” requiring direct and concise expression of main viewpoints; (3) “Information matters,” emphasizing solid, novel, and accurate research information; (4) “Countermeasures are

essential,” requiring practical, targeted, and forward-looking solutions; and (5) “Timeliness is crucial,” demanding immediate action on identified issues. In an era where “not innovating is unacceptable, and innovating too slowly is also unacceptable,” one must have a sprint spirit and skillfully achieve “shooting while aiming.”

2.4.2 Dissemination and Influence Think tank outcome dissemination should focus not only on internal communication—conveying scientific ideas to government and the public and providing intellectual support—but also on strengthening external communication, voicing China’s positions on the international stage, clarifying China’s stance, and promoting Chinese values [2]. Regarding communication capacity, Wang Simin, Deputy Director of the Guangming Daily Think Tank Research and Release Center and Editor-in-Chief of the *Think Tank* section, believed that international renowned think tanks invariably prioritize communication capacity. In the self-media era, think tank communication capacity has greatly expanded from focusing “upward and inward” to also considering “downward and outward.” We should avoid the pitfall of “communicating for communication’s sake” and enhance communication capacity through core competitiveness. Professor Li Gang emphasized the precision of think tank outcome dissemination to ensure measurable communication effects. Yuan Peng believed that in the era of online media, serving both the central government and social media and the public is the “standard configuration” for a high-end think tank. Regarding influence, Professor Chu Jingli believed that transforming think tank reports’ thinking, design, and wisdom into government decisions and actions represents the deep-level effect pursued by think tank work. Dr. Miao Lü, Co-founder and Secretary-General of the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), believed that influencing policy by influencing the international community is a key pathway for think tanks to realize their value. Chinese think tanks can influence the international community and subsequently policy by establishing cooperative relationships with international institutions, participating in activities, and actively setting agendas.

2.5 Community Building

“When ten thousand people hold their bows and shoot at one target, the target cannot help but be hit.” Community building involves making extensive friends, establishing networks, and developing communities to form synergies, achieving information exchange, resource sharing, and complementary advantages to realize energy aggregation effects and leapfrog development. Community building represents an excellent path for Chinese think tanks to overtake on curves and achieve later-mover advantages.

Professor Li Gang believed that think tanks themselves are networks. On one hand, think tanks are organic components of policy communities; to run think tanks well, they must fully integrate with other links, levels, and structures of the policy community. On the other hand, think tanks need to build their

own networks, expanding new networks through their own nodes and centers for integrated development. They should integrate with the strong (authoritative experts), with government, and with media to become communities of shared destiny, interests, and beliefs. When building networks, they should uphold the concept of “value co-creation,” enabling every member to achieve tremendous self-value from the network. Li Guoqiang believed that beyond professional and comprehensive think tanks, we should further consider developing think tank alliances and consortiums. He emphasized that think tanks cannot operate behind closed doors but must develop openly; think tank colleagues can take the initiative to build alliances and communities, which can address issues of comprehensiveness and specialization and enable comprehensive, scientific, and systematic policy advice. Dean Wang Wen suggested establishing a think tank federation to further achieve industrial development and cluster effects. He personally experienced Washington’s think tank industrial park, where decision-makers procure intellectual products like purchasers, obtaining what they need with great convenience.

3. Specific Types of Think Tanks

3.1 National High-End Think Tanks

National high-end think tanks are the leaders and role models in think tank construction, representing the development direction of Chinese think tanks [3]. Shen Jinjian believed that strengthening high-end think tank construction requires forming high-level research teams and innovating flexible and efficient operational mechanisms; highlighting professional characteristics and prioritizing high-level outcomes while emphasizing quality and originality; and focusing on major national strategic issues and public policies to propose practical and useful policy recommendations that live up to the trust and expectations of the Party and people.

3.2 Science and Technology Innovation Think Tanks

Liu Qing, Deputy Director of the Institutes of Science and Development at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, shared insights on building national high-end science and technology think tanks: first, topic selection models should focus on national macro-level decision-making needs and establish communication mechanisms with central decision-making departments; second, research models should form deep integration mechanisms among experts in science and technology, management, policy, and intelligence; third, management models should advance standardized procedures for supervision and quality control, developing and implementing clear methods in topic selection, project initiation, and organization to ensure scientific and orderly process management. He Defang, Director-General of the Department of Policies, Regulations and Supervision at the Ministry of Science and Technology, stated that China is in a period of intensive introduction of science and technology innovation policies, urgently needing to improve policy research level and quality. He offered four

recommendations for science and technology policy research: first, strengthen the theoretical system construction of science and technology innovation policy to reinforce theoretical support for decision-making; second, strengthen policy data infrastructure to consolidate the evidence base for decision-making; third, strengthen the development and research of professional analysis methods and tools to enhance decision-making scientification; and fourth, strengthen the construction of science and technology innovation policy research communities to enhance information diversification for decision-making.

3.3 University-Affiliated Think Tanks

Huang Hao, Deputy Director of the Academic Service Center and Director of the Policy Advisory Affairs Office at the Fudan Development Institute, believed that university-affiliated think tanks should have clear themes, play the role of a bridge (connecting government and experts), and cultivate talent. They should be adept at gathering resources and developing openly and healthily within think tank networks. The construction direction for university-affiliated think tanks can focus on four aspects: strategic planning, assessment and evaluation, external exchange, and talent cultivation. He felt that student resources are a treasure worth cherishing and leveraging.

3.4 Social Think Tanks

Dr. Miao Lü proposed three recommendations for promoting social think tanks' policy influence: first, develop China's market for intellectual products to provide ideological sources for sustainable economic development; second, provide social think tanks with opportunities to participate in policy, including establishing government procurement systems, policy support (encouraging corporate donations to think tanks and breaking barriers to talent flow between inside and outside the system), and information disclosure (breaking barriers to information flow between inside and outside the system); and third, explore establishing a Chinese-characteristic "revolving door" to tap the potential for two-way personnel circulation between government and think tanks.

3.5 Media Think Tanks

Wu Liang shared the development logic of media-type think tanks: "Only through thorough research can deeper guidance be possible; only by grasping discourse production capacity can we establish high-end and in-depth communication capacity for discourse power." On one hand, build research systems based on media resources, conduct in-depth vertical segmentation of fields, and construct sub-research platforms; on the other hand, these sub-research platforms share the same underlying logic—serving central decision-making and providing the most valuable content on issues of greatest concern to the central government. Regarding organizational forms, he predicted that "more imaginative logic will connect them." Wang Simin believed that in the "Internet+" era, the new ecological relationship between media and think tanks is an interdependent

“community of shared destiny,” with their integration and intersection determined by both parties’ functions. In integrated development, media and think tanks should leverage their respective advantages, maintain “boundaries,” and seek deep integration based on core competitiveness. Regarding think tank-type media, Professor Chu Jingli believed it is important for bridging the distance between think tanks and government and the public, enhancing outcome dissemination and influence, and affecting think tank policy and construction processes. Among these, think tank academic journals primarily function to purify and precipitate ideas, support academic research, and cultivate talent.

4. Conclusion

“This is an era that needs thought and can certainly produce thought” [2]. Although the first think tank senior seminar has concluded, the experts’ presentations continue to resonate and inspire. Upholding the sentiment of strategizing for national affairs, promoting wisdom through “learning,” benefiting the nation through “planning,” and continuously strengthening core competence building; further constructing development communities to achieve mutual exchange and joint leapfrog development. In his final seminar summary, Professor Chu Jingli proposed three “three mores and one less”: more learning, more exchange, more thinking, less foolish action; more doing, more practical work, more important work, less interference; more research, more outcomes, more submissions, less deception.

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