

## Postprint: A Bibliometric Analysis of Domestic and International Think Tank Research Trends

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tank research has emerged as a subject of significant interest. Timely understanding and grasping the research trends of think tanks both domestically and internationally, and identifying the differences between them, holds important referential value for constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. [Method/Process] This study, based on the CSSCI and WoS Core Collection databases, employs CiteSpace visualization software to generate a time-zone view of keyword evolution in think tank research literature both domestically and internationally. By examining keywords that have emerged over the years in domestic and foreign think tank research, it analyzes the research trends and differences between them. [Results/Conclusions] The study reveals: First, think tank research both domestically and internationally demonstrates promising development prospects, warranting dedicated research efforts from scholars. Second, domestic think tank research literature primarily focuses on constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics and emphasizes theoretical exploration, whereas foreign think tank research literature tends to delve deeply into specific fields, processes, and pressing issues, with greater emphasis on case studies. Consequently, theoretical research and case analysis will constitute the main content of future think tank research in China.

### Full Text

### Preamble

**Dynamic Analysis of Domestic and International Think Tank Research Based on Bibliographic Data: A ChinaXiv Collaborative Journal**

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## Abstract

**[Objective/Significance]** Think tank research has become a topic of widespread concern. Timely understanding and mastery of domestic and international think tank research dynamics, along with identification of differences between them, holds important reference value for constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

**[Method/Process]** Based on the CSSCI and WoS Core Collection databases, this study employs CiteSpace III visualization software to generate temporal zone views of keyword evolution in domestic and international think tank research literature. By examining keywords that have emerged over the years, we analyze research trends and their differences.

**[Results/Conclusions]** The study reveals: First, both domestic and international think tank research demonstrate promising development prospects and warrant continued scholarly investigation. Second, domestic literature focuses primarily on constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing theoretical exploration, while international literature delves into specific fields, processes, and urgent problems, emphasizing case studies. Therefore, theoretical research and case analysis will become primary directions in China's think tank research.

**Keywords:** think tank; research dynamics; CSSCI; WoS; CiteSpace

**Classification Number:** G250

## 1 Introduction

Think tanks, also known as “brain trusts” or “idea banks,” are professional research institutions that take public policy as their research object, aim to influence government decision-making, orient toward public interest, and adhere to social responsibility as their research criterion. Think tanks embody a nation's soft power and discourse power, and to a certain extent, they influence national government decision-making, economic development, social stability, and people's well-being. Therefore, intellectual capital can be regarded as an important and valuable resource for a country and its people.

In recent years, think tanks and related research have become hot topics in academia, industry, and even government departments, attracting significant attention and emphasis from researchers. Currently, think tank research has entered a rapid development stage. In terms of institutional numbers, the “2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report” released by the University of Pennsylvania on February 9, 2016, indicated that the number of global think tank institutions reached 6,846, with the United States ranking first globally (1,835 institutions) and China ranking second (435 institutions) [1]. As the world's

leading power (politically, economically, militarily, culturally, and technologically), the United States' vast number of think tank institutions demonstrates to a certain extent that think tanks play a key scientific decision-making and supportive role in U.S. national policy, economic development, and social stability.

Regarding literature research, Li Y [2] considers Deliberative Policy Analysis (DPA) as one of the important development trends of post-positivist policy analysis and proposes the concept of Think Tank 2.0. Zhang Jun et al. [3] explore the characteristics and development trends of quantitative research methods used in authoritative international think tank research activities to provide references for Chinese think tanks. Chen Qin et al. [4] identify climate change, public health, education policy, and institutional reform as key frontier areas of focus for international think tanks. In think tank evaluation research, both domestic and international institutions conduct relevant assessments. For example, the University of Pennsylvania's "Global Think Tank Report" evaluates global think tank institutions, while China's Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Think Tank Research Center publishes the "China Think Tank Report—Influence Ranking and Policy Recommendations," which ranks Chinese think tank institutions.

This study focuses on the development dynamics of domestic and international think tank research. Using relevant data from CSSCI and WoS Core Collection as research objects, we employ CiteSpace III visualization tools to generate temporal zone views of keyword evolution in domestic and international think tank research. By analyzing these dynamics and comparing differences, we identify deficiencies in domestic think tank research and construction, thereby providing empirical references and theoretical support for the construction, operation, and development of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. This will enable Chinese think tanks to provide scientific decision-making foundations in political, economic, cultural, technological, and environmental development.

## 2 Data Sources

Core journals generally possess high authority and representativeness, reflecting the latest research achievements and scientific developments in a particular discipline or research field. The Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), established by Nanjing University in 1998, selects Chinese humanities and social science academic journals and overseas-published journals through a rigorous combination of journal impact factor rankings by discipline and qualitative evaluation by renowned domestic experts. As an important tool for literature information retrieval and evaluation in China's humanities and social sciences, CSSCI provides source literature, cited literature, and optimized search capabilities, serving humanities and social science research, journal evaluation and management, and university administration.

The Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection, through strict selection, includes

over 10,000 authoritative, high-impact academic journals and more than 110,000 international conference proceedings, covering natural sciences, engineering technology, biomedicine, social sciences, arts, and humanities, with records dating back to 1900. Therefore, this study uses CSSCI and WoS Core Collection as data retrieval sources for relevant literature on think tank research.

**CSSCI Database Search Strategy:** Title ( “think tank” OR “brain trust” OR “idea bank” ), publication years (1998-2015), search date (June 15, 2016), yielding 361 records.

**WoS Core Collection Search Strategy:** Topic: ( “think tank\* “) OR Topic: (“ brain trust” ) NOT Address: (PEOPLES R CHINA); Timespan: 1900-2015; Indexes: SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, ESCI, CCR-EXPANDED, IC; Search date (June 15, 2016), yielding 1,159 records.

Using this data, we employ CiteSpace III visualization tools to generate temporal zone views of keyword evolution in domestic and international think tank research to identify research dynamics.

### 3 Research Prospects for Domestic and International Think Tank Research

Both domestic and international think tank research demonstrate promising development prospects. This argument is supported from three perspectives: literature growth trends, national policy orientation, and research application scope.

#### 3.1 Literature Growth Trends in Domestic and International Think Tank Research

Statistical analysis of relevant literature volume and its changes can evaluate and predict research levels, development characteristics, and trends in a discipline or technical field, as well as measure the attractiveness of a topic and the accuracy of certain research selections [5]. We statistically analyzed the cumulative literature volume and average annual growth rate of think tank research in CSSCI and WoS Core Collection to identify growth patterns, with results shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Figure 1 reveals: (1) In the sample data, domestic think tank research can be traced back to 1998 (e.g., Li Gang’ s [6] study on military staff systems and enterprise decision-making think tanks; Wang Shiwei’ s [7] argument that establishing idea banks is an important concept for contemporary library management and services), while international literature dates back to 1968 [8]. This indicates that international research started earlier with larger cumulative volume, suggesting more mature theories and systems. (2) Cumulative volume shows growth trends in both domestic and international research. To accurately reflect this growth, we calculated average annual growth rates. Although overall growth rates show declining trends, recent international literature maintains

approximately 17% annual growth, while domestic literature maintains about 26%. Overall, cumulative literature volume continues to grow with recent annual growth rates stabilizing within certain ranges. This fully demonstrates that both domestic and international think tank research are in rapid development periods, receiving high academic attention. Therefore, think tank research will remain an academic focus for the foreseeable future, warranting sustained investigation by interested researchers to further advance the field.

### 3.2 National Policy Orientation

According to the “2015 Global Go To Think Tank Report,” the United States leads in think tank numbers (1,835 institutions, approximately 26.80% of the global total), which reflects national policy guidance and orientation. In China, the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform,” adopted on November 12, 2013, explicitly proposed strengthening the construction of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system. On January 20, 2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” providing national strategic guidance on objectives and directions for think tank construction.

Under these policy documents, Chinese think tanks have gradually formed four major categories: party/government/military think tanks, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences think tanks, university think tanks, and private think tanks. These provide scientific decision-making foundations for national policy formulation, economic development, and social stability, promoting economic prosperity and social harmony.

### 3.3 Wide Research Application Scope

Think tanks play crucial decision-support roles in social policy, political strategy, economy, military, technology, and culture, leading scientific development through evidence-based decision-making. Literature sources reflect application value and scope to some extent. We statistically analyzed disciplinary sources of think tank research literature in CSSCI and WoS Core Collection to clarify origins and understand application value and scope.

The 361 domestic documents primarily originate from five disciplines: political science (23.15%), management (21.81%), education (16.44%), economics (11.74%), and library, information, and documentation science (11.41%), as shown in Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]. The 1,159 international documents are distributed across seven main fields: Government & Law (11.34%), General & Internal Medicine (5.46%), Public Administration (5.40%), Business & Economics (5.28%), International Relations (4.61%), Social Sciences—Other Topics (3.52%), and Education & Educational Research (3.34%), as shown in

Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper].

Both domestic and international think tank research share similar primary disciplines: politics, economics, education, and management. This indicates that think tank research mainly applies to national political construction, economic development, education development, and national/corporate governance.

## 4 Analysis of Domestic and International Think Tank Research Dynamics

CiteSpace III software can use titles, abstracts, and author keywords as term sources, employing both noun phrases and burst terms to conduct collaborative research (author, institutional, international), thematic studies, and co-citation analysis, revealing structural characteristics, development trends, and research frontiers. Keywords are highly condensed summaries of literature content, reflecting research topics to some extent. To identify think tank research dynamics, we used CiteSpace III to generate temporal zone views of keyword evolution in CSSCI and WoS Core Collection, shown in Figures 4 [Figure 4: see original paper] and 5 [Figure 5: see original paper] respectively. These temporal zone views consist of time-ordered zones arranged left to right, tracking burst terms in think tank research to identify domestic and international research dynamics.

### 4.1 Analysis of Domestic Think Tank Research Dynamics

Figure 4 shows that besides different expressions of “think tank,” keywords such as United States, U.S. think tanks, think tank construction, new think tanks, Chinese characteristics, new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, education, and new education think tanks have large nodes. These represent key foci of Chinese think tank research, reflecting research dynamics. Synthesizing these keywords reveals three main trends: (1) evolution and construction of “think tanks” ; (2) richness and deepening development of think tank types; and (3) decision support and service as enduring purposes.

**4.1.1 Evolution and Construction of “Think Tanks”** The temporal zone view shows that the term “think tank” in China evolved from “idea bank” or “brain trust” to “think tank” and then to “new think tank with Chinese characteristics.” This evolution reflects deepening development: from introducing think tank research to indigenous construction.

First, **introduction of think tank research.** Comparing foreign think tank construction, evolution, and development characteristics to reconsider China’s think tank research status and dilemmas represents an important approach. For example, Wu Ge et al. (2000) analyzed foreign think tank evolution and development characteristics to identify China’s challenges and explore reform trends [9]. Wu Yuliang (2015) introduced and analyzed foreign think tank information services to provide references for constructing Chinese characteristic information services [10].

Second, **indigenous think tank construction**. In the knowledge economy era, evidence-based scientific decision-making is paramount. Library and information institutions should build idea banks by developing strategic continuity, core competencies, organizational structures, research activities, continuing education, information technology and resources, and cooperation and marketing, thereby promoting the transformation of knowledge resources into knowledge capital (e.g., patents, trademarks) [11]. Yu Yulong (2015) argues that government-university collaborative think tanks, as an exploratory practice, possess unique organizational management advantages and good collaborative operational effects [12]. The construction of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics has become a national strategy, playing roles in policy advice, intellectual enlightenment, checks and balances, resource aggregation, and national strengthening, providing scientific decision-making foundations for strategic formulation, economic development, social stability, and national security.

#### **4.1.2 Richness and Deepening Development of Think Tank Types**

Chinese think tank types have gradually enriched and deepened, forming education think tanks, local think tanks, science and technology think tanks, university think tanks, and others. Education think tanks consist of experts and scholars in education and related fields who conduct objective, scientific research on educational issues and provide policy recommendations to government [13]. Local new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, guided by socialist theory with Chinese characteristics, are based locally, reflect local conditions, study local problems, and serve local economic and social development. They possess rich practical experience and multidisciplinary knowledge backgrounds, providing results primarily to support local decision-making [14]. Science and technology think tanks use professional knowledge and scientific tools to conduct public policy and decision-making research, addressing either scientific development decisions or science-based economic and social decisions [15]. University think tanks rely on distinctive university disciplines, gather renowned scholars, orient toward national development, integrate basic and applied research, conduct interdisciplinary, collaborative, and comprehensive studies on major practical problems, and provide think tank products for government and society while cultivating talent [16]. These constructions lay foundations for deepening research in specific fields.

#### **4.1.3 Decision Support and Service as Enduring Purposes**

Think tanks gather experts and scholars from various disciplines to apply their wisdom in providing satisfactory or optimized solutions for key areas, critical processes, and urgent problems in national economy, politics, culture, society, ecological civilization, and foreign affairs, thereby improving and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics and advancing national governance systems and capabilities. The temporal zone view clearly shows that since 1998, Chinese think tank research has emphasized decision-making services, consultation, scientific decision-making, and influence enhancement. With changing domestic

and international environments, Chinese think tanks now focus on collaborative innovation and soft power enhancement. For example, Lian Lijun elaborates on constructing collaborative innovation mechanisms for characteristic think tank decision-support information assurance from five aspects: building integrated operational mechanisms, optimizing collaborative innovation environments, establishing long-term mechanisms for expert selection and effective functioning, leveraging guiding roles of local university think tanks, and introducing scientific methods to improve effectiveness [17]. Overall, Chinese think tanks provide strong intellectual support for national policy formulation, governance, and diplomacy.

## 4.2 Analysis of International Think Tank Research Dynamics

Although international think tank research dates back to 1968, CiteSpace III extracted no keywords from 1968-1990. Therefore, we generated the temporal zone view from 1991 onward, shown in Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]. Besides “think tanks,” keywords such as policy, politics, management, science, governance, risk, security, and united-states have large nodes, representing key foci that reflect research content. The entire temporal zone view shows that from 1991-2016, international think tank research concentrated on political policy research, while also addressing security, crisis, and environmental issues.

**4.2.1 Political Policy Research** Political policy affects healthy national economic and livelihood development. Politics, as the superstructure based on economics and the concentrated expression of economic interests, centers on political power in various social activities and relationships, embodying policies formulated or adopted in national governance. The temporal zone view shows international think tank policy research includes: education policy, public policy, health policy, social policy, family policy, foreign policy, etc. For example, Lingard B [18] studied the education policy work (reports, school funding budgets) of Australia’s Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) through case analysis. Pearce W et al. [19] outlined new movements to increase Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) in UK public policy. Shaw S E et al. [20] proposed an interpretive approach to think tanks in health policy and planning. Pautz H [21] assessed the extent to which the UK Labour Party under Tony Blair utilized think tank expertise to shape its social policy agenda through interviews with civil servants and politicians combined with key document analysis. Quoss B [22] found that family policy teaching through advocacy and women’s empowerment could replace or supplement technical knowledge instruction. Tyler M C et al. [23] studied the Australian Institute of International Affairs internship program, revealing how foreign policy institutions bridge academia and rigorous international affairs requirements.

**4.2.2 Security and Crisis Issues** National security and terrorist crises severely impact stability, causing social turmoil. Therefore, security and crisis issues are key think tank research priorities. Security research focuses

on national security, such as O' Neil A [24], who outlined a conceptual framework to understand factors affecting Australia's security environment in the early 21st century, and Toktas S [25], who explored think tanks' roles in national and cultural security formulation through field research on 14 think tanks in Istanbul and Ankara. Crisis and risk research includes the Dutch government think tank WRR's risk management approach addressing dynamic relationships between uncertainty and risk [26], and Lakoff A et al. [27], who used controversial urban security initiatives as a case study for political risk assessment. The Obama administration's National Security Strategy Report (May 27, 2010) identified multiple threats including economic ones, incorporating economic security into national security strategy. China's National Security Law (July 1, 2015) provides legal foundations for national defense security. Think tank researchers should actively participate in security and crisis research, providing recommendations on risk prevention, assessment, early warning, regulatory review, and crisis management to ensure political, economic, cultural, information, and defense security.

**4.2.3 Environmental Issues** Irregular production and living activities cause environmental quality degradation, triggering numerous environmental issues including climate change. Climate change poses severe threats: glacial melting, extreme weather, food production reduction, sea-level rise, and species extinction, seriously endangering human production, living, and even survival. Consequently, climate change has attracted think tank experts' attention. The European Commission-funded CATALYST project (2011-2013) established coverage across Central America and the Caribbean, East and West Africa, the Mediterranean, and East and Southeast Asia to strengthen stakeholder capacity building for disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation [28]. Climate change is not a single-country or regional issue; it requires establishing a global environmental protection system through energy structure optimization, production efficiency improvement, and environmental concept transformation to reduce climate change impacts.

### **4.3 Comparative Analysis of Domestic and International Think Tank Research Dynamics**

Analysis of research prospects and keyword evolution in CSSCI and WoS Core Collection reveals significant differences:

- (1) **Domestic research is in its initial stage**, focusing on constructing new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, while **international research is relatively mature**, emphasizing political policy research in education, health, and other fields.

Chinese think tank research is in its initial stage, primarily introducing foreign experiences and operational models (e.g., U.S. and EU think tanks) and combining them with local characteristics to construct various new think tanks with Chinese characteristics (education, local, science and technology, univer-

sity), providing solutions for key areas and urgent problems. International research has established relatively complete systems (institutions, types, systems, funding), with mature and in-depth studies focusing on political policy research across education, public, health, social, family, and foreign policy domains. Chinese research should learn from international approaches, avoid detours, and conduct domain-specific research to provide optimal solutions.

(2) **Domestic literature emphasizes theoretical exploration; international literature emphasizes case analysis.**

Although both show growth, international literature dates back to 1968 while domestic literature begins in 1998, indicating greater international maturity. This maturity difference determines content variations. Domestic research, in its initial stage, focuses on investigating and introducing foreign experiences, combining them with local features to theoretically discuss and demonstrate construction of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics, thereby enriching theoretical systems. International research, being more mature with complete theoretical systems, emphasizes case studies and investigations in specific fields to identify problems and seek optimal solutions, providing more scientific decision-making foundations. Thus, Chinese think tank research should learn from international models by emphasizing both theoretical research and case analysis.

## 5 Summary

With scientific and technological progress, economic and political globalization, and intensifying security and environmental issues, think tank research has gained high attention from academia, industry, and government, forming brain trust organizations and think tank groups under national policy guidance. Think tanks use their knowledge to provide consulting services for enterprises, society, and nations, assisting decision-makers in making scientific decisions. Based on CSSCI and WoS Core Collection databases, this study employs CiteSpace III and other tools for bibliometric and visual analysis of think tank literature to identify domestic and international research dynamics. Through comparative analysis, we identify domestic research deficiencies and actively learn from international experiences to guide the construction and development of new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. The comparison reveals two attributes:

### 5.1 Similarities in Domestic and International Think Tank Research

Analysis of literature volume, national policy, and application scope reveals growing literature, supportive national policies, and wide application ranges in both contexts. Both demonstrate promising development prospects. Moreover, disciplinary sources are similar, mainly distributed across politics, economics, education, and management, indicating that think tanks in both contexts play major roles in national political, economic, and educational construction and

governance.

## 5.2 Differences in Domestic and International Think Tank Research

CiteSpace III-generated keyword evolution views reveal: (1) Domestic research is in its initial stage, focusing on constructing new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, while international research is relatively mature, emphasizing political policy research in education, health, and other fields. (2) Domestic literature emphasizes theoretical exploration, while international literature emphasizes case analysis.

In conclusion, both domestic and international think tank research have promising prospects and deserve researchers' attention. Differences in research frontiers provide reference significance for China's think tank construction and research. The richness and deepening development of Chinese think tank types provide possibilities for in-depth domain-specific research. Theoretical research and case analysis will become primary content in new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

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

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