

## Organic Intellectuals Based on New Think Tanks and Service for Local Development: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper primarily examines how new-type think tanks should undertake self-construction from the perspective of organic intellectuals to serve local development. In transitional China, grassroots problems are numerous. For think tanks, leveraging the professionalism and organic nature of organic intellectuals to serve local development represents one viable path. Consequently, the construction of new-type think tanks has become a challenging issue. On the one hand, the positioning of think tanks should be closely integrated with the needs of local development; on the other hand, the development of think tanks must be combined with the organic nature of intellectuals. [Method/Process] This paper selects the “China Rural Think Tank Development Platform” as a case study to analyze key issues in think tank construction, effective intellectual participation, and the needs of local development. [Results/Conclusions] The study finds that new-type think tanks must invest considerable effort in talent acquisition; they should provide targeted, organic countermeasures based on government requirements to better serve local development.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### Organic Intellectuals and Local Development in New-Type Think Tanks: A Case Study of the “China Rural Think Tank Development Platform”

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## Abstract

[Purpose/significance] This article examines new-type think tank construction from the perspective of organic intellectuals and their role in serving local development. During China's transitional period, grassroots problems are numerous and complex. For think tanks, leveraging the professionalism and organic nature of intellectuals to serve local development represents one viable path forward. However, building new-type think tanks presents a significant challenge: on one hand, think tank positioning must align closely with local development needs, while on the other hand, think tank development must integrate with the organic characteristics of intellectuals. [Method/process] This study selects the "China Rural Think Tank Development Platform" as a case to analyze key aspects of think tank construction, effective intellectual participation, and local development requirements. [Result/conclusion] The findings reveal that new-type think tanks must invest substantial effort in talent acquisition and provide targeted, organic policy recommendations based on government demands to better serve local development.

**Keywords:** intellectuals; organic intellectuals; new-type think tanks; rural areas; local development

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### 1.1 Defining Intellectuals and Organic Intellectuals

To understand organic intellectuals, we must first clarify what constitutes an intellectual. Professor Hao Zhidong [1] defines intellectuals broadly as "those who have received considerable education and engage in specialized professional work." Professor Xie Yong [2] offers a more specific perspective, noting that "China's intellectual circles only began adopting the Western concept of intellectuals in the 1980s, referring to that group which maintains social concern beyond their professional sphere and approaches social reality with critical thinking." Synthesizing these perspectives, intellectuals can be understood as groups that have received certain education, maintain concern for society beyond their professional domains, and apply critical thinking to social problems.

Within this category, however, exists a special subset: organic intellectuals. Their criticism tends to be more constructive than purely critical, and they primarily serve government decision-making through consultation and advisory roles, such as researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences or the Development Research Center of the State Council. As Professor Hao Zhidong states, "Organic intellectuals refer to those in leadership positions with certain education who formulate and implement policies at central or local government levels" [1]. Yet this represents only one perspective.

Examining alternative definitions reveals that the concept of "organic intellectuals" originated with Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci argued that "every social group, arising from the fundamental economic function in

the economic field, simultaneously and organically creates one or more strata of intellectuals that give it homogeneity and awareness of its function not only in the economic field but also in the social and political fields” [3]. He further noted that “according to Mannheim’ s definition of intellectual activity, we inevitably conclude that ‘all men are intellectuals, but not all men have the function of intellectuals in society’ ” [3], implying that not all intellectuals performing specific or professional functions are necessarily organic, with “specificity” often being equivalent or approximate to “organic nature.”

What functions, then, define organic intellectuals? Gramsci cautioned that “the most widespread methodological error consists in seeking this criterion in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the whole system of relations within which these activities (and the intellectual groups embodying them) have their place in the general complex of social relations” [3]. Thus, organic intellectuals must be intellectual actors situated within broader social relations.

Qian Yongfeng, former Director of the Cultural Affairs Bureau in Chiayi County, Taiwan [4], contends that “organicization means that as an intellectual, one serves not a particular community or class, but the overall progress of society. Therefore, intellectuals must organicize themselves, liberate themselves, and understand how to conduct dialogue and connect different interests.” This perspective reveals two evolutionary paths for organic intellectuals across different eras: first, as advisors to government—think tank members who serve as organic intellectuals; and second, as independent actors arising from social differentiation who engage in free and independent activities to promote overall social progress. Both paths share the common characteristic of facilitating social progress, differing only in that the former assists government in policy execution while the latter emerges from grassroots society to advocate for progress.

This article adopts the first path, defining organic intellectuals as those who serve the government. Building on Professor Hao Zhidong’ s classification of intellectuals into organic, critical, and professional categories in *Intellectuals and Rural Development* [5], we argue that organic intellectuals primarily exercise agency based on professional rather than moral positions, driving changes in social relations—including those between government, market, and society—through practical and decision-making levels. They also promote government functions in public policy through direct practice and constructive supervision. Consequently, organic intellectuals can be positioned as government advisors or political counselors.

## 1.2 The “Organic Nature” of Organic Intellectuals

If organic intellectuals serve government, how should we understand the “organic nature” underlying this relationship? For Gramsci, “organic nature” has two meanings: first, the organic connection between intellectuals and specific socio-historical groups, wherein every social group produces its own closely linked

stratum of intellectuals; and second, the organic connection between intellectuals and the masses, representing a dialectical relationship [6]. In essence, intellectuals can align with either specific socio-historical groups or the general populace, with the alignment depending on both the intellectuals themselves and their social environment.

Notably, in contemporary Chinese society, organic intellectuals have fewer channels to connect with the general public while growing increasingly close to government. As Li Junpeng from Columbia University's Sociology Department observed in a 2011 *Society* article: "Under the modernity model, intellectuals are standard-bearers or guides of social progress (legislators); under the postmodernity model, the alliance between intellectuals and power begins to fracture, and intellectuals become synonymous with experts, advisers, or counselors (interpreters)" [7]. This suggests that "the organic nature of intellectuals has departed from Gramsci's original framework and, with changing times, has increasingly moved toward power" [4]. However, such alignment facilitates effective power implementation by combining knowledge with government decision-making practice, as their substantive power remains limited. They primarily function as think tanks, providing intellectual support for government decisions—similar to ancient Chinese advisors.

In contemporary China, these advisors constitute new-type think tanks. Governments require highly specialized knowledge to propose targeted solutions to social problems, and these intellectuals leverage think tank platforms in the internet era to assist government decision-making and rural development.

This article therefore focuses on two issues from the perspective of organic intellectuals: first, new-type think tank construction and effective participation of organic intellectuals. As previously noted, organic intellectuals often participate through think tank forms, exemplified by Chi Fulin from the China (Hainan) Institute for Reform and Development, who represents one of the earliest intellectuals of this type since China's 1978 reforms [8][9]. Second, intellectuals in the "Two Lakes region" (Hunan and Hubei provinces) demonstrate particularly prominent organic nature in rural governance. This government-assistance model originates from the connection between government and research institutions, driven by two primary factors: first, these intellectuals possess strong knowledge literacy and professional interests from their frontline positions in education and research, receiving substantial support from universities and government departments that equip them with the basic conditions for think tank functions. In other words, this "government-assistance" function results from the interaction between intellectuals' own aspirations for knowledge value conversion and governments' growing demand for external knowledge amid frequent social problems and increasing social risks during the transition period. Second, these individuals willingly assume such roles to help address "three rural issues" (agriculture, rural areas, and farmers), completing cooperation with government under the shared premise of promoting rural development and forming tacit understanding in action.

In January 2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” which states: “Intellectual resources are the most valuable resources for a nation and a people. In recent years, China’s think tanks have developed rapidly, achieving great success in producing ideas, results, and talents, and making important contributions to promoting reform, opening-up, and socialist modernization” [10]. This document affirmatively recognizes the importance of intellectual resources for national modernization. *Xinhua Daily* similarly noted that “promoting think tank construction should focus on: first, top-level design, with central authorities issuing supporting policies to guide localities; second, pilot programs, launching local pilot initiatives; third, deepening reform, incorporating think tank construction into reform consciousness; and fourth, intensifying talent introduction and training while strengthening selection of high-end domestic and international talents” [11]. Tang Zhouyan argued that “new-type think tanks need to achieve three points: first, increased decision-making demand with smoother channels for think tank participation in major decisions; second, greater information disclosure for more timely and accurate data acquisition and analysis; third, more robust policy evaluation systems highlighting the role of third-party think tank assessments” [12]. These perspectives focus primarily on think tank functional construction, including transformation research on local academy of social sciences think tanks, but rarely address talent absorption and think tank construction itself.

## 2.1 Talent Acquisition in New-Type Think Tanks

Think tank construction fundamentally depends on talent support. While the previous section outlined key points for new-type think tank construction, the *Xinhua Daily* article “Where is the Path for China’s New-Type Think Tanks?” mentioned talent absorption but lacked specific discussion. It stated that “think tank construction can be characterized as ‘heated, urgent, and difficult.’ We should follow the trend and build our think tank highland from three aspects—peak, high-caliber individuals, and high efficiency—to construct new-type characteristic think tanks with high quality, high-end talent, and efficient operation systems” [11], without explaining how to absorb “high-caliber individuals” or attract high-end talent. Yet these are precisely the keys to building high-quality think tanks.

This article argues that: first, intellectual contributions from talent can help government make more scientific and comprehensive decisions; second, newly introduced talent can often improve think tank construction rather than relying on non-modern governance thinking for judgment and decision-making; third, talent must be categorized, as some are unsuited for organic roles and instead conduct research based on professional roles. In other words, the non-organic nature of professional intellectuals does not suit local think tank development and construction, necessitating the professionalism of organic intellectuals [13].

This study contends that identifying organic intellectuals represents an overlooked issue in new-type think tank construction. Professional activities that do not function in the public sphere cannot be considered purely organic intellectuals but rather organic intellectuals within professional fields, which does not benefit public society. For instance, the “China Rural Development Think Tank Platform” –a high-level policy consultation support platform developed by Central China Normal University’s China Rural Research Institute targeting “national urgency and world-class standards” –lists on its website systems such as the “China Rural Intelligent Decision System,” “China Rural Survey System,” “China Rural Village Observation System,” “China Rural Database System,” and “China Rural Social Dynamics Tracking System.” However, three aspects remain unclear: first, the process of data collection and analysis (such as data obtained from rural surveys); second, comprehensive information about think tank members; and third, how these intellectuals or organic intellectuals are recruited.

As Professor Xu Yong stated in his article “Building a High-End Think Tank for Agriculture, Rural Areas, and Farmers” [14], “Central China Normal University’s China Rural Research Institute has gradually formed the following work approaches and methods in practice.” Following this lead, we examined the institute’s recruitment information (i.e., talent introduction) and found relevant details. The recruitment requirements prioritize political science, statistics, economics, and related fields, with political science needing 2 positions and others needing 1 each, totaling 4 positions, as detailed below:

### **Table 1: Recruitment Positions and Numbers at China Academy for Rural Development**

The positions and number of the recruitment of China Academy for Rural Development

- Political Theory
- Government Economics
- Statistics/Econometrics

(Source: *University Talent Network “2015 Faculty Recruitment Notice of Central China Normal University China Rural Research Institute”* [15])

These four positions require: 1) full-time PhD graduates meeting university talent introduction requirements; 2) age approximately 35 for young faculty, 原则上 under 30 for recent PhD graduates; and 3) familiarity with empirical research methods. These criteria reveal that recruitment emphasizes professional qualifications with minimal additional requirements, the only distinction being that overseas study background is preferred for statistics and econometrics positions.

Thus, we observe that professional qualifications serve as the primary condition for talent introduction, rather than the organic nature of intellectuals. For new-type think tanks, however, “organic” considerations should precede “professional” ones. In other words, how well the “organic nature” of talent introduction is

managed directly impacts think tank functionality.

## 2.2 Participation of Organic Intellectuals in New-Type Think Tanks

After talent introduction, a more critical challenge emerges: how to effectively participate in government decision-making processes. Traditional intellectuals typically leverage professional expertise to gain government adoption of their recommendations, or, like experts from local academies of social sciences, more easily obtain local government projects to conduct “organic” activities serving government interests, with their role positioning reflecting this approach. Organic intellectuals, however, employ additional methods beyond policy advice, such as using their organic status to voice concerns online for social justice and fairness, exemplified by Professor Yu Jianrong from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The realization of intellectuals’ organic nature through “helping government” manifests in their participation in rural construction. Intellectuals serve think tank functions through multiple approaches. Using the China Rural Research Institute as an example: first, researchers must conduct extensive fieldwork and document findings in notes or research reports; second, researchers hold positions in government departments to achieve organic integration of theory and practice; third, they cultivate graduate students’ research interests by guiding them to select topics from practical life scenes and investigate surrounding rural governance experiences, such as the “Hundred Villages Observation” project [16]; fourth, project support serves as the primary output mechanism, with the institute undertaking national and provincial-level projects while completing think tank publications and reports, and also outsourcing some projects to researchers from other institutions through competitive bidding. While the project system enables targeted, short-term policy analysis, it also sacrifices comprehensive, panoramic perspectives and long-term observation of event dynamics and evolution—a limitation mitigated through combining long-term and short-term projects.

It is important to note that some organic intellectuals participate not because of their organic status but due to conscience, while others engage through more indirect means such as survey reports and monographs. The former demonstrates weaker organic nature than the latter, though both occupy positions within organic institutions. The latter approach, exemplified by Du Runsheng, fulfills organic roles through investigation, writing, and lectures.

## 3. The “Organic Nature” of New-Type Think Tanks and Service to Local Development

“Establishing an effective demand-docking mechanism. Grasping ‘national urgency’ and ‘departmental requirements’ constitutes the primary element of policy consultation services” [17]. Facing “national needs” and “departmental needs”

determines the “targeted nature” of organic intellectuals: first, targeted services for expressed needs; second, research and policy services for specific problems.

Take research on social stability as an example. While mass petitions and incidents in rural China have decreased, they remain relatively severe. “In 2005, environmental pollution disputes nationwide reached 50,000 cases, with confrontation levels significantly higher than other mass incidents. In 2009, Feng Xiaoxing, Deputy Secretary-General of the All-China Environment Federation, further noted: ‘Mass incidents caused by environmental issues are increasing at an annual rate of 30 percent’ ” [18]. How should organic intellectuals in new-type think tanks address this thorny issue? The author believes targeted research on rural mass incidents should focus on understanding village conditions and interest demands. “We have built a stable social survey platform with three data and case systems capable of providing personalized, order-based, highly targeted services: first, the ‘Three Hundred’ observation network—hundred villages observation, hundred communities observation, and overseas hundred villages observation—for long-term tracking surveys to obtain diachronic first-hand materials; second, five major observation projects including the State Council Poverty Alleviation Office’s ‘Impoverished Village Observation Points,’ the State Forestry Administration’s ‘Forest Reform Village Observation Points,’ the Ministry of Civil Affairs’ ‘Difficult Village Observation Points,’ Hubei Provincial Party Committee and Government’s ‘Hubei Province Village Observation Points,’ and Hubei Provincial Poverty Alleviation Office’s ‘Hubei Impoverished Village Observation Points’; third, the ‘three rural issues’ digital platform, with the China Rural Database at its core” [18]. This demonstrates that using data and surveys to grasp rural development trends, particularly farmers’ demand trends, constitutes an essential element of think tank construction.

Organic nature manifests precisely here. On one hand, for rural development and social stability, organic intellectuals propose social governance strategies to government based on professional knowledge, providing explanations on issues such as “grassroots democratic construction” [19] and offering possibilities for central authorities to understand contemporary rural governance. The platform also played a role in Enshi City’s “Lawyers Entering Villages” project initiated in the second half of 2015, achieving certain results. On the other hand, think tank platform outputs, including survey reports and academic papers by Professor Deng Dacai and others [20], provide better understanding of Chinese rural society. The organic nature of these intellectuals is expressed through the think tank platform, as seen in works such as *Land Shareholding Cooperation and Effective Forms of Collective Economy*, *Research on Effective Forms of Rural Villager Autonomy*, and *Anti-Poverty in Action: Investigation and Practice of Rural Poverty Alleviation in China*.

Through the above analysis, we find that rural development cannot be separated from organic intellectuals in new-type think tanks. Several aspects deserve attention:

### **3.1 Professionalism of Organic Intellectuals as a New-Type Think Tank Requirement**

In think tanks, intellectuals leverage their professionalism to provide policy advice to government, ensuring think tank development and research standards. For instance, the China Rural Think Tank Development Platform has become the nation's first rural development think tank platform with significant influence primarily because intellectuals' professionalism and organic nature have been well integrated, with continuous efforts from scholars like Xu Yong and Deng Dacai.

From the intellectuals' perspective, we can conclude that talent remains the key to think tank construction.

### **3.2 New-Type Think Tanks as a Local Development Requirement**

Local development relies on assistance from local academies of social sciences and university research institutions. On one hand, some university intellectuals inherently bear research responsibilities for local government development, particularly in policy-oriented research. The functions of academies of social sciences similarly require researchers to conduct studies serving local development and propose operational countermeasures. On the other hand, local development needs vary—some regions require more economic development, others greater social stability. New-type think tanks' organic intellectuals must conduct targeted research on these specific needs, whether through big data or field surveys, to propose professional countermeasures based on “real” conditions and fulfill their “organic” roles.

### **3.3 Organic Intellectuals as a Local Development Requirement**

The most distinctive feature of organic intellectuals lies in their “organic nature,” which manifests primarily through assistance to local development. For local development, determining what kind of organic intellectuals are needed is something localities can seek through new-type think tank construction. Local development can obtain desired “organic services” through government guidance.

In summary, the relationship among organic intellectuals, new-type think tanks, and rural local development encompasses the three aspects above, each being indispensable. If local development aims for positive outcomes, it requires new-type think tank services, which in turn depend on organic intellectuals, who must contribute their intellect to think tank work. This gradually forms a virtuous cycle.

The preceding analysis first examined the connotations and definitions of organic intellectuals and their organic nature, then explored effective intellectual participation and its relationship with local development. Using political stability as an example, we discussed contentious farmer behaviors in rural areas that threaten stability, emphasizing that strengthening research on interest demands

of grassroots populations and adopting more professional, targeted, and precise solution strategies deserve attention from organic intellectuals and new-type think tanks. When discussing non-local or national think tank construction at a broader level, the issue of organic intellectuals becomes even more complex.

Scholar Chu Zhuwu, in “New-Type Think Tank Construction Must Correctly Handle Five Major Issues,” points out: “Currently, China’s think tank construction is developing rapidly, entering a concentrated outbreak period, but some emerging problems also deserve our attention. First is the nature of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics. Second is the relationship between Chinese and foreign think tanks. Third is the relationship between think tank research and basic theoretical research. Fourth is the evaluation criteria for Chinese think tank construction. Fifth is think tank talent team construction” [13]. From the perspective of organic intellectuals, the most important issue, in this article’s view, remains “organic nature” construction, which, combined with the above discussion, translates to think tank talent team construction.

Specifically, two aspects require attention: (1) New-type think tanks need improvement in talent introduction. It is not difficult to find that some think tanks’ recruitment processes are often overly simplistic with low requirements for organic nature. As previously argued, they prioritize professionalism over organic nature, which does not align with think tank development needs. Enhancing the organic nature of new-type think tanks requires starting with talent composition, incorporating professional, experienced, and locally knowledgeable talents to form a three-dimensional, systematic organic think tank entity. (2) Organic intellectuals should participate more extensively in social and government activities, with channels for participation being one way to realize organic nature. Whether through the internet, articles, monographs, or lectures, they are “transmitting” (directly or indirectly) research findings. This does not hinder their role as organic intellectuals, as Gramsci long ago stated that establishing functional relationships with government and the public constitutes one form of organic intellectual. If they only provide unidirectional decision-making and intellectual support to government without using broad influence to promote social progress, they waste discursive resources. Therefore, organic intellectuals are crucial for new-type think tanks and local development, particularly regional development. The key step is establishing effective organic intellectuals in new-type think tanks and realizing their “organic nature.”

## Author Contributions

**Liu Chen:** Research topic selection, framework design, paper writing and revision

**Zhou Jing:** Data collection and paper revision

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

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