

Think Tanks, Think Tank Studies, and Think Tank Culture Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To promote academic research and cultural development of think tanks, foundational research on think tanks must first be conducted. [Method/Process] This paper explores the definition of think tanks, their industry classification, the similarities and differences between think tanks and consulting firms, between think tank scholars and public intellectuals, the disciplinary institutionalization of think tank studies, and the construction and development of China's think tank cultural environment. [Results/Conclusion] The independence of think tanks is relative; the academic status of think tank studies remains in a pre-disciplinary state; it is difficult to establish unified standards for think tank influence; and existing think tank evaluation rankings lack authority and credibility. At present, strengthening foundational research on think tanks and increasing the differentiated output of high-quality think tank research reports will benefit the healthy and sustainable development of think tanks.

Full Text

Science and Culture of Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To promote academic research and cultural construction of think tanks, foundational research on think tanks must be conducted first. [Method/Process] This paper examines the definition and classification of think tanks, similarities and differences between think tanks and consulting

companies, distinctions between think tank scholars and public intellectuals, the institutionalization of think tank studies as a discipline, and the development of China's think tank cultural environment. **[Result/Conclusion]** The independence of think tanks is relative, the academic status of think tank studies remains in a latent state, unified standards for think tank influence are difficult to establish, and current think tank evaluation rankings lack authority and credibility. At present, strengthening foundational research on think tanks and increasing the differentiated output of high-quality think tank research reports would benefit the healthy and sustainable development of think tanks.

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Over the past two decades, think tank culture has begun to emerge in China, and academic discussions on Chinese think tank development have gained momentum in the last ten years, accompanied by growing attention to think tank comparisons and rankings. The terms “think tank” and “think tank studies” frequently appear in professional literature. As China implements its strategic goal of establishing a group of high-end think tanks with significant influence and international reputation, conducting systematic foundational research on think tanks is both necessary and meaningful.

1 Conceptual Connotations of Think Tanks

Currently, there is no unified, precise definition of think tanks in academic circles, but the basic consensus holds that think tanks are organizations conducting research on public policy strategies to bridge the gap between social knowledge and public policy, with research results aimed at helping governments improve decision-making processes and refine public policies.

1.1 Classification of Think Tanks

In Western societies, think tanks are essentially “external brain” organizations independent of government, almost all being non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with a relatively uniform type. Their classification typically follows geographical scope (international, regional, domestic) and academic fields (health, environment, security, economy, society, science and technology, management, etc.). China's think tanks, however, exhibit greater variety, making classification more complex. Current academic classifications of Chinese think tanks primarily use affiliation relationships and industry 归属 as criteria, with three common

approaches: a three-type classification (government think tanks, research institute and university think tanks, and civilian think tanks) [1]; a four-type classification (party-government-military think tanks, university think tanks, local research institute think tanks, and social think tanks) [2]; and a seven-type classification (party-government departments, academies of social sciences, party schools and administrative institutes, universities, military, research institutes and enterprises, and social organizations) [3]. Whether these classification standards are accurately positioned remains questionable. If academy of social sciences think tanks can be classified separately, then there would be justification for classifying academy of natural sciences think tanks correspondingly, and similarly for non-party-school administrative institutes, non-university, non-military, non-research institute, and non-enterprise think tanks. Currently, there is no definitive classification system, and some classifications constantly change due to think tanks' cross-boundary research issues, field shifts, or adjustments in industry 归属, resulting in ambiguous identity positioning. Classification need not be overly detailed or complex; simplicity and practicality should be primary considerations. Classifying by asset ownership offers a sound approach, with a three-type standard dividing think tanks into official, semi-official, and non-official categories, which should suffice.

1.2 Distinguishing Think Tanks from Consulting Companies

Think tanks and consulting companies share very similar socioeconomic industry characteristics, both belonging to the tertiary sector as service industries. According to the national standard *Classification of National Economic Industries* (GB/4754-2011) and its four-level classification principles, consulting companies are positioned within the leasing and commercial services sector (Category 7), specifically under business services (Major Category 2), then further classified under consulting and investigation (Medium Category 3), finally falling into socioeconomic consulting (Minor Category 3) with classification code 7233. The classification of socioeconomic consulting does not end there, as it further develops into management consulting, within which public management consulting represents the final subdivision that places consulting companies and think tanks in the same industry family. Broadly speaking, they are the same type of organization.

Think tanks in socioeconomic industries often operate under the banners of research institutions, foundations, and associations, closely resembling public management consulting companies. Currently, academic circles generally believe their primary difference lies in profit orientation: consulting companies are for-profit organizations, while think tanks are non-profit organizations (NPOs). Although think tanks may sometimes generate profits, they are not profit-driven and do not pursue profit as their main objective—this represents the narrow definition of think tanks. If think tanks are compared to scientific theory, public management consulting can be likened to engineering technology; scientific discovery differs from technological invention. Similarly, if consulting companies

are compared to obstetricians, think tanks can be compared to reproductive scientists—delivering babies and assisted reproduction operate at different technological levels, and their capacity for intellectual innovation differs substantially.

China’s foundation system and social donation mechanisms remain underdeveloped, making it difficult to apply Western think tank definition standards completely. The general consensus holds that any organization engaged in policy research, whether funded through fiscal “per capita institutional appropriations” or operating as public consulting institutions, can be considered a think tank in the broad sense as long as it directly or indirectly serves government policy.

1.3 Distinguishing Think Tank Research Reports from Consulting Reports

In the narrow sense, think tanks and consulting companies produce different types of outputs with distinct purposes. Think tank research reports feature stronger academic characteristics, emphasizing intellectual openness, innovation, and forward-looking perspectives, aiming to improve current public policies or propose advanced policy concepts, with a higher sense of responsibility toward the unspecified public than toward contractual clients. Public management consulting reports, conversely, emphasize practicality and operability, aiming to support, interpret, and publicize public policies, with primary responsibility to contractual clients. Generally, consulting reports focus on specific matters for commissioned clients, using client satisfaction as the criterion, without obligation to research, summarize, or innovate broader theoretical frameworks beyond the contract scope, and rarely evaluating public policies, making them difficult to publish in academic journals. Therefore, the primary distinguishing criterion between these two types of reports is whether they can be published in academic journals.

Nearly all think tanks claim to be “independent, impartial, and objective,” yet this is difficult to verify in practice. In the United States, think tank research funding primarily comes from foundations, unconditional social donations, membership fees, and publication revenues, but many research projects originate from government and corporate contracts. Despite strict project execution and result review systems, the similar business model to consulting companies makes it difficult to ensure that think tank intellectual products remain completely unaffected by commissioning parties—this also explains why think tanks and consulting companies sometimes intersect and become difficult to distinguish.

1.4 Think Tank Scholars and Public Intellectuals

Think tank scholars are members of think tanks, but in reality there exists a “closely related” group—public intellectuals (hereinafter “gongzhi”), precisely defined as individuals with academic backgrounds and professional qualifications who express opinions on public affairs to the general public. Gongzhi are promoted or selected by relevant media and exhibit two characteristics: first,

they focus on public issues such as society, politics, culture, education, and environment; second, they emphasize interpretation, evaluation, and criticism of current social public issues. Gongzhi frequently appear as social commentators, possessing critical spirit and moral commitment, playing the role of “concerned patriots” and “loyal dissenters.” In Western societies, gongzhi are products of social and historical development, while in China, the concept has emerged alongside evolving social value systems and economic development.

Although gongzhi also address public affairs and influence public policy, they do so by publishing personal commentary on current affairs and social issues rather than research reports. However, some gongzhi are themselves think tank scholars, and some think tanks frequently invite gongzhi to participate in research on think tank reports.

2 Think Tank Studies and Evaluation

Think tank studies refers to the systematic study of think tanks, which should encompass two major aspects: research on think tank organizations and research on think tank reports. What disciplinary status should these occupy?

2.1 Disciplinary Status of Think Tank Organization Studies

As social organizations, the study of think tanks should include their construction, structure, objectives, operations, management, communication, and development. The national document for discipline recognition is the national standard *Classification and Codes of Disciplines* (GB/T 13745-2009). According to this standard, research on think tank organizations belongs to the humanities and social sciences category, with sociology as the first-level discipline and organizational sociology (code 840.61) as the second-level discipline. In addition to this national standard, the Ministry of Education has promulgated a “quasi-ministerial standard” *Catalogue of Discipline Classifications* for its own education and science management needs, though this catalogue lacks disciplines for studying social organizations.

2.2 Disciplinary Status of Think Tank Research Reports

Think tanks produce research reports that influence public policy, so their outputs should fall within the scope of public policy science. According to the national standard *Classification and Codes of Disciplines*, the discipline closest to public policy science is administrative studies (code 810.30) as a second-level discipline under political science, a first-level discipline in the humanities and social sciences category. Two other disciplines also involve public policy: knowledge sociology (third-level discipline, code 840.3720) under cultural sociology (second-level) within sociology (first-level) in the same category, and public management studies (code 630.44) as a second-level discipline under management science, a first-level discipline in the engineering and technology science

category. According to the Ministry of Education's *Catalogue of Discipline Classifications*, public policy should have two possible classifications: political theory (code 030201) as a second-level discipline under political science, a first-level discipline in the law category, and administrative management (code 120401) as a second-level discipline under public management, a first-level discipline in the management category.

2.3 Institutionalization of Think Tank Studies as a Discipline

Some Chinese scholars have proposed constructing think tank studies [4], arguing that “although think tank studies is an emerging discipline, it will certainly become a permanently valuable new discipline,” and optimistically predicting that “master’ s and doctoral programs in think tank studies will appear in the near future.” Whether think tank studies can mature into a formal discipline depends on whether its content possesses an independent framework, whether its research employs systematic methods, and whether it demonstrates representative scholars, regular academic activities, fixed-period academic journals, and stable, active academic societies. The ultimate indicator is whether it has been incorporated into university curricula and recognized by national science and education authorities.

Research on a specific topic can be called “studies,” but before obtaining scientific “legitimacy” and entering academic halls, it remains a latent discipline. In Western countries with relatively developed think tanks, no specialized term for think tank studies has yet emerged. For think tank studies to mature from a latent to a formal discipline requires substantial foundational and systematic research support, including: definitions and characteristics of think tanks, functions and mechanisms, classifications, research methodologies, evaluation systems, think tank history (longitudinal), current status of domestic and international think tanks (horizontal), and development strategies (future), along with relatively consistent academic recognition of these research findings. Therefore, the current state of institutionalizing think tank studies as a discipline can be summarized as: necessity exists, urgency is lacking, and feasibility is insufficient.

2.4 Mainstream Products of Think Tank Studies

Currently, most academic articles on think tank studies concentrate on superficial aspects such as think tank industry survey reports, think tank construction and development reports, and think tank ranking results, exhibiting homogenization. In contrast, relatively few articles address basic theoretical research on think tanks themselves or analyze think tank research reports. Data [5] shows that articles on think tank construction and evaluation account for approximately 58% of the literature, theoretical research articles comprise 17%, and case studies merely 25%. Although articles on think tank organizations are meaningful for think tank development, think tank products—research reports

and case analyses—hold more direct significance for influencing public policy and should occupy the primary position in think tank studies content.

2.4.1 Classification of Think Tank Influence Although no unified standards exist for think tank evaluation indicators, they generally point toward contributions to government decision-making and policy revision. Think tank product influence is typically considered to manifest in three aspects: first, academic weight, including publication in think tank and internal reference journals and attention from academic circles; second, practical application, including adoption by government, circulation and forwarding by ministerial-level or higher leaders, and use in issuing new policies or revising existing ones; and third, social response, including resonance generated through public dissemination. Current think tank evaluation systems are diverse and complex in design, such as [2] sub-item influence, systematic influence, and professional influence, further refined into six dimensions: decision-making influence, academic influence, social influence, international influence, think tank capacity, and think tank growth and marketing capability. Whether these evaluation indicators have clear boundaries, overlapping content, or practical application remains questionable. Some classify think tank influence [2] by professional fields into economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction, ecological construction, and international relations. The comprehensiveness and scientific validity of these field divisions merit discussion—for instance, do think tanks have influence in science and technology fields, and if so, where would this be placed?

2.4.2 Credibility of Think Tank Rankings Evaluating think tanks solely by the number of research reports is biased, yet influence itself is a subjective indicator. For example, how should one quantify and weight for comparison three different articles: a data-rich, innovative 10,000-character academic report, a 2,000-character internal reference suggestion with leadership endorsement, and a thought piece that resonates with hundreds of thousands of public readers? Current think tank evaluation institutions acknowledge that evaluation processes primarily employ subjective assessment methods using relatively fuzzy ordinal rankings, referencing only a few quantitative indicators. If relatively fuzzy ordinal methods are used [2], are the final results also fuzzy? Would alphabetically sorted “well-known influential think tanks” be more appropriate than numerically ranked “well-known think tank lists”? Moreover, who should conduct think tank evaluations and rankings? Would third parties outside think tanks and government—such as media or specialized think tank research institutions—be more suitable? Think tank participation in their own evaluations and rankings may lead to significant public disagreement on evaluation standards, processes, and results, or even lack of credibility.

3 Think Tank Culture Construction

The connotation of think tank culture encompasses the core values of the think tank industry and its humanistic ecological environment. The former is determined by think tank functions: independence (objectivity), scientific quality (high quality), and constructiveness (pragmatic and effective influence). The latter is determined by the nation's socioeconomic development stage, influencing think tank development types, speed, and government acceptance. Examining the current state of Chinese think tank organizations, China's official think tank system is essentially quasi-governmental, with organizational forms and operational management poorly adapted to effective think tank operation. Meanwhile, China's civilian think tanks struggle to function effectively due to limitations in economic development stage, humanistic and social environment, and their own talent consolidation challenges.

3.1 Characteristics and Common Values in Think Tank Construction

As China modernizes its think tank culture, it has proposed the strategic goal of establishing a group of distinctive new-type high-end think tanks with significant influence and international reputation, setting sail for Chinese think tank development. Building large-scale official think tanks through short-term investment may not be difficult, but enhancing policy research capacity is no simple matter. According to the 2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index, there were 6,846 think tanks worldwide in 2015, with China possessing 435—ranking second globally and qualifying as a think tank “large country,” yet only four ranked among the top 50 globally, hardly making it a think tank “powerhouse.”

Think tank humanistic environments require long-term construction, and think tank talent needs long-term cultivation. Promoting the construction of new-type distinctive high-end think tanks with international reputation is necessary, but the question remains how to integrate certain common value criteria of internationally renowned think tanks with Chinese characteristics while creating distinctive features without departing from fundamental think tank attributes. Using governance and social management concepts from institutions outside think tanks as guiding principles for think tank construction may result in “tanks without wisdom” or “wise tanks becoming wisdom-depleted,” making it difficult to enter international think tank academic circles.

3.2 Characteristics of China's Think Tank Cultural Ecology

Academic discussions on China's think tank culture construction address both external and internal cultural aspects. Current external cultural construction issues consistently point to the need for government to create favorable humanistic environments for think tank construction, while internal cultural construction hotspots concentrate on internal management systems, inter-think tank exchanges, and think tank output transformation, with less discussion on research direction content itself.

Various indications reveal that amid the rush to pursue think tank development, a lopsided cognitive tendency has emerged within the industry, venerating “high-end” think tank research. Anything involving international diplomacy, macroeconomics, or national strategy is considered “highbrow,” while anything involving microeconomics, livelihood issues, or social system reform is deemed “low-end, small-minded, lower-class” and “populist.” Consequently, China’s current think tank research content exhibits an unbalanced academic ecological characteristic: more macro research than micro research, more forward-looking research than current research, more development planning research than system reform research, more business economy research than livelihood economy research, more international diplomacy research than social governance research, and more feasibility studies than infeasibility studies. This situation seemingly indicates some biased demand from the state for think tank construction, with deeper roots possibly lying in policy makers’ temporary hesitation regarding public policy for deepening reform.

3.3 Path for Chinese Think Tank Research

China is undergoing socioeconomic transformation and rapid development with deepening reforms, where various deep-seated social conflicts clash intensely. In actual national governance, numerous public policies affecting millions of households urgently need improvement and perfection, yet enormous institutional inertia makes reforms to these universally understandable, visible, tangible, and immediately beneficial public policies extremely difficult, such as in healthcare, education, housing, household registration, and pension systems. Reserve and forward-looking think tank research is essential, but realistic and retrospective think tank research is equally indispensable—grassroots social issues are microcosms of strategic and macro-level problems.

The developmental path of many high-end think tanks often begins with socially relevant “down-to-earth” public policy issues, accumulating experience, talent, and cultural 积淀. In fact, micro-policy research reports are more easily accepted by government, have stronger operability for influencing public policy, and spread more widely among the public. More micro-policy research can lay the foundation for macro-policy research; more research on current public policies can support forward-looking public policy research.

Therefore, high-end think tanks should be understood as those with high-level research capabilities, where “high-end” refers to whether research reports feature detailed data, complete structure, rigorous logic, innovative ideas, and actionable recommendations—not whether research content is “high-level or macro,” nor the size of the think tank. The motivation for scientific research is not winning awards; similarly, the motivation for think tank construction should not be fame. If standards are the research content of a few enterprises, then five- or ten-year “high-level, macro” strategies can be the research content of a few think tanks. For most think tanks, producing high-level academic reports that contribute to public policy through down-to-earth efforts, accumulating small

achievements into larger ones, may represent a practical path toward achieving the goal of “establishing a group of high-end think tanks with significant influence and international reputation.”

4 Conclusion

Think tanks differ from public consulting companies, and the independence of think tank intellectual products is relative. Think tank studies cannot be institutionalized as a discipline in the foreseeable short term. Unified objective standards for think tank influence are difficult to establish, evaluation systems are hard to perfect, and current think tank rankings lack authority and credibility. At present, strengthening foundational research on think tanks and increasing the output of high-quality, differentiated think tank research reports is more conducive to the healthy and sustainable development of think tanks than promoting think tank studies as a discipline or hyping think tank rankings. Chinese think tanks are developing think tanks; to become developed think tanks, they should first increase research on domestic grassroots and practical issues. Only by keeping feet on the ground can they look far ahead, and only when research levels on domestic issues improve will international reputation naturally follow.

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

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