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Postprint: A Bibliometric Analysis of Chinese Think Tank Research Literature

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To systematically review the research landscape of Chinese think tanks in recent years, trace the scholarly output of domestic researchers, summarize the major advances, analyze the principal characteristics of domestic think tank research, and provide theoretical foundations and references for constructing new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

[Method/Process] Utilizing bibliometric analysis methods, Excel, and CitespaceIII tools, this study analyzes the characteristics of Chinese think tank research, encompassing: literature growth trends, journal analysis, institutional analysis, author analysis, highly-cited literature analysis, and research content analysis.

[Results/Conclusion] Research on Chinese think tanks has begun to attract considerable attention, with the field entering a flourishing stage. Academic journals publishing think tank research are relatively dispersed. Institutions engaged in think tank research are primarily universities and academy of social sciences systems. Chinese scholars exhibit substantial interest in American think tanks, university think tanks, and think tank construction.

Full Text

Bibliometric Analysis of Think Tank Research in China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study systematically reviews think tank research in China over recent years, tracking scholarly outputs by domestic researchers,

summarizing major advances, and analyzing key characteristics to provide theoretical foundations and reference points for building new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics. **[Method/Process]** Employing bibliometric analysis methods along with Excel and CitespaceIII tools, we examine features of Chinese think tank research including literature growth trends, journal distributions, institutional contributions, author productivity, highly-cited publications, and research content. **[Results/Conclusions]** Findings indicate that think tank research has begun receiving substantial attention in China and is entering a productive phase. However, publication outlets remain dispersed across numerous journals. Research institutions are predominantly universities and academy of social sciences systems. Chinese scholars demonstrate particularly strong interest in American think tanks, university-affiliated think tanks, and issues of think tank construction.

Keywords: Think tank; Think tank; Bibliometric analysis; Classification number: G250

1 Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as General Secretary has attached great strategic importance to new think tank construction from the perspectives of promoting scientific and democratic decision-making, advancing modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities, and enhancing national soft power. General Secretary Xi Jinping has repeatedly issued important instructions on strengthening think tanks with Chinese characteristics. 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 Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” followed by implementation guidelines from multiple provinces. On November 9, the 18th meeting of the Central Leading Group for Deepening Reform reviewed and approved the “Pilot Work Plan for National High-End Think Tank Construction,” and on December 1, the launch meeting for pilot work was convened, with 25 institutions selected as the first batch of national high-end think tank construction pilots. As national attention toward think tanks continues to grow, think tank research in China will undoubtedly enter a new stage. This necessitates a systematic review of past research, tracking of domestic scholarly outputs, summarization of major progress, and analysis of key characteristics to provide theoretical foundations and reference points for constructing new think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

The term “think tank” is translated from English, with alternative translations including “思想库” (thought reservoir), “智囊团” (brain trust), “智囊机构” (brain institution), and “智囊库” (brain repository). The prototype of think tanks—“智囊团”—existed in ancient China, such as the retainer groups and Jixia Academy during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and the Qingtan School during the Eastern Jin dynasty. However, modern think tanks origi-

nated in the United States during World War II, referring to the secure rooms where the U.S. military discussed strategic and operational plans. Over subsequent decades, the scope of think tanks has expanded from strategic, military, and international relations research to contemporary political, economic, and social issues. This paper employs bibliometric analysis to examine the current state of think tank research in China, aiming to reveal research achievements, characteristics, and progress in domestic think tank theory over recent years.

2.1 Data Sources

This study focuses on Chinese think tank research, utilizing the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database as its data source. The search strategy employed was: (Title = “智库” OR “思想库” OR “智囊团” OR “智囊机构” OR “智囊库”) OR (Keywords = “智库” OR “思想库” OR “智囊团” OR “智囊机构” OR “智囊库”). The database selected was CNKI’s China Academic Journals Network Publishing Database (coverage from 1915 to present). The search was conducted on December 10, 2015, yielding 3,363 documents. After reviewing titles and abstracts to remove duplicates and irrelevant literature, 1,916 valid documents remained, spanning from 1961 to 2015.

2.2 Research Methods

This study primarily employs bibliometric analysis to examine Chinese think tank research from multiple dimensions: literature growth trends, journal distribution, institutional distribution, authorship, highly-cited literature, and research content. CNKI provides fields for publication year, journal, author, and institutional affiliation, enabling statistical analysis using Excel. For research content analysis, while CNKI provides keyword fields related to research topics, these cannot fully answer questions regarding which countries/regions’ think tanks scholars primarily study, what types of think tanks they focus on, or whether research themes concern theoretical studies, construction guidance, or case analyses. Therefore, this paper adopts manual coding to extract information on think tank countries, types, and research themes from titles, abstracts, keywords, and even full texts, using CitespaceIII for keyword analysis.

Based on different characteristics of think tanks, domestic and international classification standards vary. According to the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” this paper categorizes think tanks into seven types: party and government department think tanks, academy of social sciences think tanks, party school and administrative institute think tanks, university think tanks, military think tanks, research institute and enterprise think tanks, and social think tanks.

Based on thematic content and following the column divisions of the journal *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, this paper classifies think tank research themes into four categories: theoretical research, think tank construction, case analysis, and think tank evaluation, with specific contents for each theme detailed

in Table 1 . Theoretical research explores think tank positioning, functions, policy environments, governance structures, and mechanisms, forming the theoretical foundation for think tank development and construction. Think tank construction examines path selection, operational models, talent cultivation and incentive mechanisms, and organizational management to support and guide think tank practice. Case analysis introduces experiences, development trends, and research outputs of renowned domestic and international think tanks to disseminate achievements. Think tank evaluation investigates evaluation indicator systems, methodologies, and think tank influence.

3 Analysis of Literature Growth Trends in Think Tank Research

The annual distribution of think tank research literature reveals current development trends. According to CNKI data, Chinese think tank research began in 1961 with an article titled “Kennedy’ s ‘Brain Trust’ ” published in *World Knowledge*. Using five-year intervals, Figure 1 [FIGURE:1] illustrates growth across eleven periods. Overall, think tank literature has consistently increased, with development roughly divisible into three stages: Stage 1 (1961–1980, four intervals, 20 years) featured minimal output with only four papers and a ten-year gap without publications (these two intervals are omitted from subsequent discussion). Stage 2 (1981–2005, five intervals, 25 years) showed low volume with slow, fluctuating growth. Stage 3 (2006–2015, two intervals, 10 years) witnessed rapid growth with fluctuating increases, particularly accelerating in 2014 and 2015, with 2015 recording the highest volume. This recent flourishing trend closely relates to national think tank policies, propelling think tank research into an increasingly hot topic and drawing widespread societal attention to theoretical and practical issues of think tank construction and dissemination of think tank achievements.

4 Journal Distribution

To date, 777 domestic journals have published think tank research literature. Figure 2

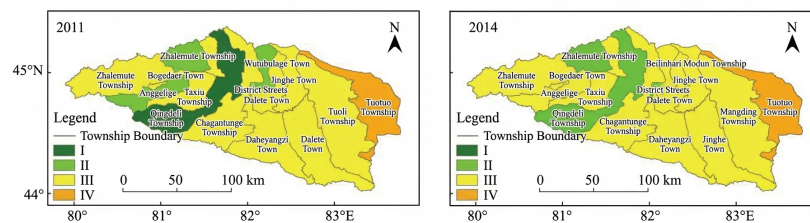


Figure 1: Figure 2

shows journal distribution across time periods. Overall, the number of journals has gradually increased. Before 2005 (excluding the 1966–1975 intervals), journal numbers were small with slow growth, and average papers per journal fluctuated considerably. In the two intervals after 2005, journal numbers grew faster, though not as rapidly as literature volume. In the most recent five-year interval, the average papers per journal reached 2.3, still relatively low, indicating that while many journals publish think tank research, average output per journal remains modest.

Figure 3 [FIGURE:3] presents statistics on papers per journal. Notably, 62% (478 journals) published only one think tank paper, 16% (124 journals) published two, 7% (58 journals) published three, 4% (27 journals) published four, 2% (17 journals) published five, and 9% (73 journals) published more than five. This demonstrates limited journal concentration in think tank research, though some journals have established dedicated think tank columns.

Table 2 lists the top 20 journals by publication volume. Among these, five are included in Peking University’s “Core Journals of China” catalog: *Social Sciences Abroad*, *People’s Tribune*, *Chinese Public Administration*, *Outlook*, and *Chinese Cadres Tribune*, with *Social Sciences Abroad* and *Chinese Public Administration* also indexed in Nanjing University’s CSSCI. Overall publication volumes remain low, with the top 20 journals publishing between 14 and 34 papers each, showing small gaps. The three most prolific journals are *International Communications*, *Social Observation*, and *Chongqing Social Sciences*.

5 Institutional Analysis

Table 3 lists the top 18 institutions and their main colleges, institutes, and departments by publication volume. Three institutional categories emerge: universities, academies of social sciences, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, with universities comprising the majority (13 institutions) and academies of social sciences accounting for four. Renmin University of China leads with 49 publications, primarily from the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies (32.65%), School of Journalism (20.41%), and National Academy of Development and Strategy (12.24%). The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences ranks second with 43 publications, 16.28% from the Institute of American Studies and 13.95% from the Academy of Information and Intelligence. The Chinese Academy of Sciences ranks third with 36 publications, 50% from the National Science Library and 13.89% from the Institute of Policy and Management.

In terms of individual sub-units, the National Science Library of the Chinese Academy of Sciences published the most (18 papers), followed by the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University (16 papers), the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University (13 papers), and the Zhou Enlai School of Government at Nankai University (11 papers). According to the *Chinese Think Tank Influence Report (2015)* jointly released by the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences and the Chengdu Library of the Chinese

Academy of Sciences, the top 10 most influential Chinese think tanks are: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, Peking University, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Renmin University of China, Fudan University, Central Party School, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Development Research Center of the State Council, and China Institute for Reform and Development. Notably, the top five institutions by publication volume are all among the top eight most influential think tanks in China.

6.1 Author Productivity Distribution

Figure 4 [FIGURE:4] presents a pie chart of author productivity distribution. A striking 84% of authors published only one paper, 11% published two, 3% published three, and merely 2% published more than three. This indicates few authors engage in long-term, systematic research in think tank studies, reflecting the field's immature development.

6.2 High-Productivity Authors

Price's Law defines high-productivity authors as those whose combined output equals half of all papers in the field, with the number of such authors equaling the square root of the total author count. Applying Price's Law yields a threshold of one paper, which contradicts reality, likely because the field remains in its early development stage with over 80% of authors publishing only single papers. Consequently, Price's Law is currently unsuitable for identifying high-productivity authors in think tank research. Based on empirical observation, this paper defines high-productivity authors as those with more than five publications.

Table 4 lists the top 15 authors, all high-productivity scholars with six to 16 publications. The three most prolific authors are Zhu Xufeng from Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management (16 papers), Wang Wen from Renmin University's Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies (16 papers), and Wang Lili from Renmin University's National Academy of Development and Strategy. High-productivity authors predominantly come from universities, with over half beginning their think tank research within the past six years. Most remain active in the field based on their latest publication dates.

6.3 Co-authorship Patterns

Among the 1,916 valid documents retrieved, 1,722 contained author information. Analysis reveals that single-authored papers account for 75% of think tank research, while co-authored papers represent only 25%, indicating that individual research dominates and robust research teams have yet to form extensively.

7 Analysis of Highly-Cited Literature

Table 5 lists 19 highly-cited papers in think tank research, with citation frequencies ranging from 31 to 100. The most-cited work is Ren Xiao's "The Fifth Power: The Growth, Function, and Operation Mechanism of American Think Tanks" from Fudan University's Institute of International Studies, with 100 citations. Only four highly-cited papers were published before 2000, with the remaining 15 appearing between 2000 and 2010. Professor Zhu Xufeng from Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management authored five highly-cited papers with a total of 255 citations. Highly-cited literature appears across diverse journals covering social sciences, management, economics, and political science.

8.1 Geographic Focus of Think Tank Studies

According to the University of Pennsylvania's *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report 2014*, 6,681 think tanks existed worldwide by the end of 2014, with the United States leading at 1,830 (27.4%) and China ranking second with 429. In think tank research, some domestic literature examines foreign think tanks to provide experience and reference for Chinese think tank construction.

Table 6 presents statistics on foreign think tank studies across time periods, revealing evolving research interests. Overall, while the absolute number of foreign think tank studies has increased over time, their proportion has declined. Chinese think tank research originated from studying foreign models—all four pre-1980 papers focused on foreign think tanks. Between 1981 and 2005, foreign think tank studies numbered fewer than 50 per interval, accounting for 30–40% of total output. In the two intervals after 2006, foreign think tank studies increased exponentially to triple digits, yet their share continued declining to just 18.87% in the most recent five-year period. This suggests Chinese think tank research developed based on foreign studies, and as domestic scholars' sustained attention and domestic think tank construction mature, we anticipate rapid growth in overall think tank literature, with foreign think tank studies increasing in absolute terms but likely continuing to decline proportionally.

Chinese think tank research has examined 20 countries/regions. Figure 5 [FIGURE:5] lists the top nine countries studied. Among 467 papers on foreign think tanks, U.S. think tanks dominate with 293 papers (62.7%), 12.7 times more than the second-ranked Japan.

8.2 Think Tank Type Analysis

A total of 426 papers examined seven think tank types: university think tanks, social think tanks, party and government department think tanks, academy of social sciences think tanks, research institute and enterprise think tanks, party school and administrative institute think tanks, and military think tanks. Figure 6 [FIGURE:6] displays a radar chart of literature distribution across these seven

types. University think tanks receive the most attention (131 papers), followed by social think tanks (85 papers), while military think tanks receive the least (9 papers), possibly due to confidentiality concerns.

8.3 Research Theme Analysis

Figure 7

No.	Title	Cited Frequency	Author	Author Institution	Publication Year	Journal
1	The Fifth Power—The Growth, Function and Operation Mechanism of American Think Tanks	100	Ren Xiao	Institute of International Studies, Fudan University	2000	Contemporary International Relations
2	"Chinese Think Tanks": Connotation, Classification and Research Prospects	72	Xue Lan, Zhu Xufeng	School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University	2006	Studies in Science of Science
3	American Think Tanks and Their Role in Government Decision-making	65	Ding Huang	School of Political Science and Public Administration, Wuhan University	1997	Journal of International Technical Economics
4	Research on SCM Modeling Theory and Method	60	Chen Zhiyang, Ma Shihua, Chen Rongqiu	School of Management, Huazhong University of Science and Technology	1999	Journal of Management Sciences in China
5	The Influence of Western Think Tanks on Public Policy—An Analytical Framework Based on the Influence of Social Structure	59	Zhu Xufeng, Su Yu	School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University	2004	World Economics and Politics
6	China's Foreign Affairs Think Tanks: Participation and Role Analysis in Decision-making	58	Sun Zhe	Center for American Studies, Fudan University	2004	Fudan Journal (Social Sciences Edition)
7	The Social Function of Chinese Think Tanks—A Path of Reform Centered on the Policy Process	45	Xue Lan, Zhu Xufeng	School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University	2009	Management World
8	The Influence of American Think Tanks on Social Thought	45	Zhu Xufeng	School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University	2002	Contemporary International Relations
9	Foreign Think Tanks and Their Successful Experiences	42	Zou Yian	-	1999	China Soft Science
10	On Think Tanks	37	Wang Tingjiong	Institute of Scientific and Technical Information of China	1997	China Soft Science
11	American Think Tanks: Concepts and Origins	36	Yuan Peng	-	2002	International Data Information
12	Policy Decision-making Transformation and Elite Advantages	34	Zhu Xufeng	School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University	2008	Sociological Studies
13	The "Revolving Door" Mechanism of American Think Tanks	34	Wang Lili	National Academy of Development and Strategy, Renmin University of China; School of Journalism and Communication, Renmin University of China	2010	International Studies
14	Comparison of European and American Think Tanks and Its Enlightenment to the Development of Chinese Think Tanks	32	Xu Gongcheng	Department of Philosophy, College of Humanities, Xiamen University	2010	Comparative Economic & Social Systems
15	Foreign High-level Decision-making Consultation Mechanism and Its Enlightenment	32	Shao Feng	Institute of World Economics and Politics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	2005	Science of Science and Management of S. & T.
16	The Emergence and Development of Foreign Think Tanks and Their Support for Government Decision-making	32	Hou Jingchuan, Zhao Rongying	Research Center for Chinese Science Evaluation, Wuhan University	2003	Library and Information Service
17	Research on the Operation Mechanism of American Think Tanks	31	Wang Chunfa	Policy Research Office, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	2004	Science of Science and Management of S. & T.
18	Enlightenment of Western Think Tank Consultation Models on the Development of China's Decision-making Consultation Institutions	31	Chu Songyan, Zhao Chenggen	Teaching and Research Department of Politics and Law, National School of Administration; School of Government, Peking University	2005	Henan Social Sciences
19	Scientization of Decision-making and the Construction and Improvement of China's Public Decision-making Consultation System	31	Bao Xingrong	Yunnan Administration College	2004	Journal of Sichuan Administration College

Figure 2: Figure 7

shows the distribution of papers across four research themes. Think tank construction research overwhelmingly dominates with 1,073 papers (56%), exceeding the combined total of the other three categories. Think tank evaluation research is the least common (40 papers, 2%).

Figure 8

Time Period	Number of Documents	Number of Foreign Think Tanks	Proportion of Foreign Think Tanks
1961–1965	2	2	100.00%
1976–1980	2	2	100.00%
1981–1985	40	16	40.00%
1986–1990	67	20	29.85%
1991–1995	71	26	36.62%
1996–2000	64	21	32.81%
2001–2005	123	47	38.21%
2006–2010	346	106	30.64%
2011–2015	1203	227	18.87%

Figure 3: Figure 8

illustrates temporal distribution across the four themes. Case analysis emerged earliest, followed by theoretical research and think tank construction in 1981–1985, while think tank evaluation appeared latest after 2000. All four themes show overall growth over time, though at different rates. Before 2006, the three themes (excluding evaluation) had similar volumes per interval, but think tank construction literature grew rapidly after 2006, particularly in 2011–2015.

Figure 9

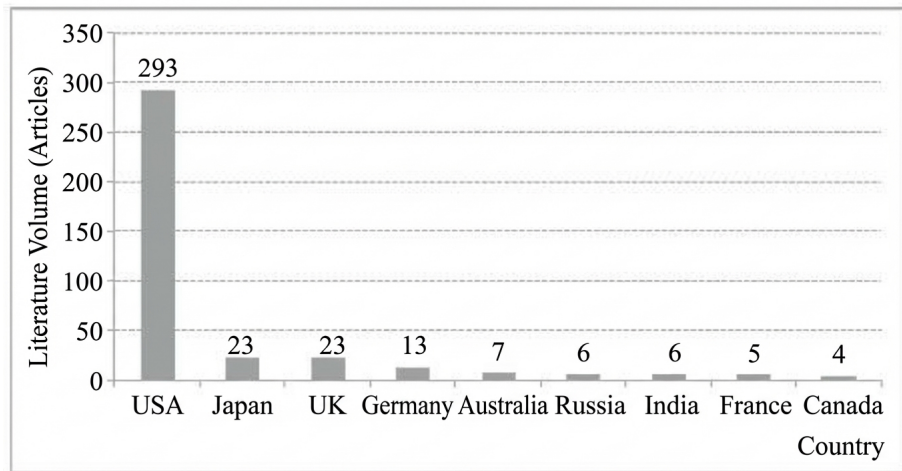


Figure 4: Figure 9

displays the distribution over the past decade. Think tank evaluation literature remains scarce with slow growth. Theoretical and case studies show comparable volumes with gradual, fluctuating increases. Think tank construction literature experienced three phases: minimal volume and slow change (2006–2008), fluctuating growth (2009–2013), and dramatic increase (2014–2015).

8.4 Keyword Analysis

Figure 10 [FIGURE:10] presents a keyword co-occurrence map with five-year time slices. Frequently appearing keywords include: “decision-making consultation,” “policy research,” and “decision-making scientization,” reflecting think tanks’ policy-serving functions; “Chinese characteristics” and “comprehensive deepening of reform,” indicating that think tank development opportunities emerged after the 18th Party Congress as part of comprehensive reforms; “research institutions,” “Brookings Institution,” and “RAND Corporation,” showing that think tanks are research organizations with notable attention to renowned foreign institutions; and “research results” and “decision-making proposals,” demonstrating that think tank outputs provide decision-making options to government.

Figure 11 [FIGURE:11] shows the keyword co-occurrence map and burst terms for the past decade, revealing burst terms including “Chinese characteristics,” “decision-making consultation,” “research institutions,” “comprehensive deepening of reform,” “decision-making scientization,” and “governance capability.”

9 Conclusion

Bibliometric analysis of Chinese think tank research reveals development trends and yields several conclusions: (1) Chinese think tank literature shows upward growth, accelerating in recent years; (2) Few journals concentrate on think tank research, with *International Communications*, *Social Observation*, and *Chongqing Social Sciences* publishing the most; (3) Research institutions are primarily universities, academies of social sciences, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, with universities dominating and Renmin University of China leading in output; (4) Few authors conduct long-term systematic research, with relatively high-productivity scholars including Zhu Xufeng from Tsinghua University and Wang Wen and Wang Lili from Renmin University; (5) Chinese think tank research developed largely through studying foreign think tanks, with greatest attention to U.S. think tanks, university think tanks as the most studied type, and think tank construction as the most common research theme.

In summary, while Chinese think tank research remains in its early stages with immature development, it has shown vigorous growth momentum in recent years. We anticipate continued increases in theoretical research, construction practices, and related studies in coming years. However, think tanks involve broad fields and complex issues, and relevant publications may not necessarily use “think tank” or related terms as keywords. Using only “think tank” and related terms as search terms may result in incomplete retrieval. Additionally, the four research themes in this paper are based on column divisions from *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, reflecting only different thematic approaches by Chinese scholars. Therefore, this study reveals only one dimension of domestic think tank research and cannot represent the full picture. Nevertheless, it offers valuable insights into certain characteristics and progress in Chinese think tank development, illuminating patterns in the field.

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