

Building on Foundations, Leveraging Strengths, Bridging Theory and Practice, and Unleashing Vitality—Reflections and Recommendations on Developing New-Type University Think Tanks (Postprint)

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Abstract

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Building on Foundations, Leveraging Strengths, Serving Both National and Local Needs, and Unleashing Vitality—Reflections and Recommendations on the Construction of New-Type University Think Tanks

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Leveraging Existing University Research Institutions

Chinese universities, particularly comprehensive ones, possess well-established hierarchies and layouts of research institutions that are numerous and wide-ranging. Notably, the Ministry of Education’s “2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers” and key research bases in humanities and social sciences feature solid research foundations, strong talent pools, robust capacity for problem identification, and considerable experience in policy consultation. Building new-type university think tanks upon these existing structures can yield twice the results with half the effort.

However, leveraging existing research institutions does not mean converting all university research organizations into think tanks. Based on differences

in research fields, methodologies, and organizational forms, we can categorize research institutions into two types: basic research-oriented and think tank-oriented. For those bases and institutions that have the willingness, conditions, and capacity to address major national economic and social development needs, we should actively guide them toward think tank development, encouraging faculty to conduct forward-looking and policy-oriented research, participate in decision-making consultation, and fully play the role of think tanks and brain trusts, thereby building them into specialized new-type university think tanks. For other bases and institutions that excel in basic disciplinary research, we should require them to maintain their fundamental academic research while appropriately performing think tank functions, without mandating their transformation into specialized think tanks.

The transformation of university research institutions into think tanks also does not imply a “hat-wearing” or “lifetime” system. For the designation and management of new-type university think tanks, we should de-emphasize status, implement dynamic management with entry and exit mechanisms, and pursue practical results. We need to change the previous model of centralized application, unified evaluation, one-time selection, and permanent status. Instead, based on actual operational performance, we should recognize institutions as they mature. Those that demonstrate capability can be contracted and funded; those that deliver actual achievements can receive additional support through government procurement and knowledge purchasing; those that underperform will not have their contracts renewed and may even have their designations revoked. According to evolving national needs and institutional development, we should allow mutual transformation between basic research and think tank-oriented institutions.

Nanjing University currently possesses one national-level 2011 Collaborative Innovation Center, two provincial-level collaborative innovation centers, four Ministry of Education key research bases, 25 other provincial and ministerial-level research institutions, and over 100 university-level research institutions in the field of philosophy and social sciences, forming a relatively complete multi-level, multi-type base structure. We have identified institutions such as the China South Sea Research Collaborative Innovation Center, the Yangtze River Delta Economic and Social Development Research Center, the Republic of China History Research Center, and the Risk and Crisis Management Research Center as priority targets for specialized think tank construction due to their national urgency, solid disciplinary foundations, and strong team capabilities, and have proposed a series of specialized requirements for their transformation into new-type university think tanks.

Utilizing Existing Disciplinary Strengths

First, the functional positioning must be accurate—a think tank is a think tank and should not bear excessive non-think-tank functions. Second, they should target specific professional fields and directions; the think tanks that Nanjing

University prioritizes are not comprehensive think tanks but rather have clearly defined domains and directions, with comprehensive think tank functions undertaken by the university as a whole. Third, they should gradually develop specialized policy research teams. Fourth, their governance structures, management methods, and operational models should conform to the requirements of modern think tank construction.

Discipline construction and think tank construction should not be positioned in opposition. Universities neither conflate the distinction between disciplines and think tanks nor sever their organic connection; instead, they must form a new pattern of spiral development and positive interaction between discipline construction and new-type think tank development. Disciplines constitute the basic institutional framework for university teaching, research, and knowledge classification, which remains the fundamental pattern of global higher education to date. Without disciplinary development, university think tank construction often becomes water without a source or a tree without roots. The highest-quality research achievements in universities basically originate from their own advantageous and characteristic disciplines, which represent the concentrated embodiment of a university's research strength and disciplinary background. Advantageous and characteristic disciplines can provide knowledge support, talent support, management support, and platform support for think tank construction, thereby providing solid theoretical support for scientific decision-making by the Party and government. In the specific process of university think tank construction, what we emphasize is not weakening discipline construction but strengthening disciplines, using problems as guidance to break down disciplinary barriers.

Utilizing university disciplinary strengths should also pay full attention to interdisciplinary approaches. The Ministry of Education's "Plan for Promoting the Construction of New-Type University Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics" explicitly states: "University think tanks should leverage the advantage of having complete disciplinary categories, conduct multidisciplinary comprehensive research around major practical problems, and propose targeted and operable policy recommendations." The multidisciplinary nature is precisely the unique advantage that distinguishes universities from other research institutions or think tanks. The birth and development of emerging interdisciplinary fields represent the concrete manifestation of scientific research laws. Using emerging interdisciplinary fields as a guide enables think tank work to transcend disciplinary and industry limitations, address major national practical problems from a holistic perspective, analyze problems over longer time spans to guide medium- and long-term social development, focus on major real-world difficulties, provide collaborative attack points for relevant parties, and ensure the sustained and efficient operation of think tank work through win-win cooperation and collaborative innovation. The major issues involved in the "Four Comprehensives" strategic layout—building a moderately prosperous society, deepening reform, governing by law, and strict Party discipline—cannot be solved by a single discipline alone but require systematic multidisciplinary research to form

intellectual synergy.

Nanjing University's influential think tanks both domestically and internationally all rely on powerful parent disciplines. As one of the first 14 national "2011 Collaborative Innovation Centers," the China South Sea Research Collaborative Innovation Center is built upon Nanjing University's advantageous disciplines in border history and geography, marine science, law, information science, remote sensing, communication studies, and others, constructing a multidisciplinary collaborative innovation body for South China Sea research and an international exchange and cooperation platform. This has seized the commanding heights of South China Sea research, demonstrated international influence, and cultivated high-level interdisciplinary talent. On this basis, the center uses the multidisciplinary collaborative innovation body for South China Sea research as its main body, with institutional and mechanism reform as its guarantee, vigorously promoting the cross-integration of relevant disciplines. Relying on political science, law, Chinese history, world history, and marine science, the center has established an interdisciplinary program in "Maritime Frontier and Ocean Security." This program is based on both basic and applied research, solving real-world problems that cannot be addressed by a single discipline alone through the collaborative integration of liberal arts and sciences, and serving the nation's diplomatic and maritime strategies through multi-channel, interdisciplinary high-level talent cultivation models.

The Nanjing University Yangtze River Delta Economic and Social Development Research Center, approved by the Ministry of Education in February 2001 as a national-level key research base in humanities and social sciences, similarly relies on the strength of Nanjing University's economics disciplines. It fully leverages the comprehensive advantages of liberal arts and sciences, utilizes academic resources such as the national key discipline of political economics, doctoral programs in theoretical and applied economics, and postdoctoral research stations in theoretical and applied economics, focuses on major theoretical and practical issues in the economic and social development of the Yangtze River Delta, refines academic directions, coordinates basic and applied research, and has overall designed and organized the implementation of major research projects. This has produced a number of landmark achievements representing national standards and possessing global influence, growing into an important domestic research base for Yangtze River Delta studies.

Other institutions such as the Nanjing Massacre and Peace Studies Research Center, the Sino-American Cultural Studies Center, the Social Risk Management Research Center, and the Jiangsu Provincial Data Engineering and Knowledge Service Key Laboratory respectively rely on Nanjing University's advantageous disciplines in history, international relations, political science, public management, and information science. It is precisely based on long-term disciplinary accumulation and stable teams that when these institutions transform into think tanks, their voices often hit key points, address critical issues, and generate significant impact. For example, Professor Liu Zhibiao from the Yangtze

River Delta Center proposed seven stock market rescue recommendations during the stock market crisis that received high-level central attention; Professor Tong Xing from the Social Risk Management Center's recommendations on community home-based elderly care services received instructions from Comrade Li Keqiang; Professor Su Xinning from the School of Information Management's recommendations on dissertation security management were published in the *Guangming Daily* internal reference. These recommendations originate from experts' long-term research accumulation and emergency response capabilities.

Focusing on Major Issues

Problem orientation is an essential characteristic of think tanks. Highlighting problem consciousness, adhering to demand-driven research, astutely identifying social hot spots and difficulties, raising questions, confronting questions, researching questions, and answering questions, while gathering first-rate expert teams to conduct holistic, strategic, and forward-looking research to propose effective countermeasures and make voices heard internationally and domestically—these are the most fundamental requirements for high-level university think tank construction.

To effectively target major issues and demands, we must first “reach the top.” So-called “reaching the top” means serving national strategic needs. Only by closely focusing on national development policies and major needs and keeping pace with the times can think tanks maximize their value and maintain vitality. The Nanjing University China South Sea Research Collaborative Innovation Center has firmly seized the major opportunities of national South China Sea development and the “Belt and Road” initiative, facing major national strategic needs such as safeguarding China's sovereignty in the South China Sea, developing resources and energy, and regional peaceful development. It has undertaken major tasks commissioned by government departments and conducted strategic assessments and policy recommendations regarding changes in the South China Sea situation. In recent years, the center has provided over 100 decision-making consultation reports and information bulletins to the General Office of the Central Committee, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and military departments, more than 50 atlases to the General Office of the Central Committee and the State Council, and 200-plus maps to the city of Sansha, greatly supporting relevant policy formulation and implementation. In January 2015, the center became a maritime consultation institution officially appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in March 2015, it joined the first batch of “Belt and Road” think tank networks organized by the International Department of the Central Committee. The center's achievement, “Comprehensive Remote Sensing Monitoring and Decision Support Analysis for the South China Sea and Surrounding Areas,” won the second prize of the 2014 National Science and Technology Progress Award. The center attaches great importance to the role of public opinion guidance in South China Sea rights protection struggles, having held multiple timely international seminars on maritime issues and completed

“voice” tasks for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Diplomatic History Society. Regarding hot issues such as the Philippines arbitration case, the center established an expert team composed of scholars from both sides of the Taiwan Strait, held countermeasure discussions, organized special issues, and published over 100 journal articles and newspaper interviews both domestically and internationally, effectively responding to challenges in international public opinion. The center has also actively explored a Chinese-characteristic new-type think tank construction model of “going global,” establishing a branch institution—the “China-U.S. Research Center” —in Washington, D.C., to open a public opinion battlefield for competing over international discourse power on South China Sea issues abroad.

Second, we must “stand on the ground.” So-called “standing on the ground” means serving local development needs. In addition to serving national needs, universities should actively contribute to the economic and social development needs of their localities. This is both a basic requirement for fully implementing the “Four Comprehensives” strategy and beneficial for university-locality cooperation and mutual benefit. The Nanjing University Yangtze River Delta Economic and Social Development Research Center is based in China’s most economically and socially developed Yangtze River Delta region. It has identified and refined directions around numerous major theoretical and practical issues in the region’s development practice, focusing on issues such as “regional economic transformation and development research,” “Yangtze River Delta industrial development research,” “Yangtze River Delta open economic development research,” and “Yangtze River Delta economic growth and sustainable development research.” The center has achieved remarkable results in scientific research, discipline construction, talent cultivation, academic exchange, information development, and consultation services.

According to incomplete statistics, over the past decade, center researchers have published 867 academic papers, 85 academic monographs, and submitted more than 100 research reports, with 56 achievements by center members winning first or second prizes in the Ministry of Education and Jiangsu Province Social Science Outstanding Achievement Awards. Notably, the achievement “The Development Model and Mechanism of the Yangtze River Delta Region” filled a domestic research gap, received high academic attention, and won the fourth China University Humanities and Social Sciences Research Outstanding Achievement Award. The achievement “Yangtze River Delta Supporting China’s Manufacturing” won the first prize of Jiangsu Province’s “10th Philosophy and Social Sciences Outstanding Achievement Award.”

In particular, the “Jiangsu Development High-Level Forum,” co-hosted by the center and the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and Provincial Government, has been successfully held 34 times since its establishment in 1997, developing into Jiangsu’s most influential “think tank.” The forum directly addresses major practical issues in Jiangsu and Yangtze River Delta development, establishing different topics for each session and innovating its operational mechanisms. Top-

ics are determined through consultation between provincial Party leaders and scholars, with thorough preparation for established topics. Provincial Party leaders attach great importance to the forum, personally attending each session and speaking as discussants. Forum participants come from different fields and backgrounds, offering diverse perspectives based on various knowledge structures and analytical angles. The forum adopts a format combining invited speeches with voluntary participation, with time-limited presentations that eliminate lengthy and empty talk. Participants include scholars, government administrators, and business people from Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and other places who engage in equal dialogue and broaden perspectives, thereby providing forward-looking consulting services for scientific government decision-making.

Given the forum's unique and important role in scientific government decision-making, it has received repeated high praise from five successive Jiangsu Provincial Party Secretaries and other leaders, being called an important "think tank" and "brain trust" for government decision-making that has made important contributions to promoting scientific and democratic government decision-making. Then-Jiangsu Party Secretary Chen Huanyou stated at the sixth high-level forum: "The forum is an 'intellectual pool' for our provincial Party committee and government, our consultant and advisor." Then-Party Secretary Hui Liangyu also noted at the March 2000 "Jiangsu Development High-Level Forum" that the forum serves several functions: "First, it serves as an 'external brain' for the provincial Party committee and government. Your insights can broaden our vision, enabling us to learn much knowledge, understand many situations, and obtain much information. Second, it serves a 'connecting' function. Forum participants include experts and scholars, Party and government officials, and entrepreneurs who come together to collide, exchange, and discuss ideas. Third, for local governments, the forum can serve as a 'think tank' and 'staff department.'" Then-Party Secretary Li Yuanchao also pointed out: "The forum represents an institutionalization of scientific decision-making and a fine tradition passed down by several provincial Party committees. We must maintain this tradition well." "Over the past decade, through this approach, we have pooled ideas and concentrated wisdom from all social sectors, providing valuable decision-making references for the provincial Party committee and government and powerfully promoting Jiangsu's economic and social development."

Third, we must pay attention to playing the role of public opinion guidance. In recent years, the concepts of big data and "Internet Plus" have developed rapidly. The dissemination of knowledge and ideas, the inheritance of excellent traditional culture, and even competition in the realm of values and ideology are gradually shifting to new media. In addition to focusing on traditional media voices, new-type university think tanks should emphasize occupying discourse power in the propaganda field, actively responding to new media challenges while expanding their own communication channels.

The establishment of the Nanjing University Purple Gold Media Think Tank represents a new attempt to meet this challenge. Under the guidance of the Jiangsu

Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department and with the support of major media outlets in the province, the think tank focuses on public opinion and social mentality. It collaborates with relevant social science departments at Nanjing University, concentrating on government, social, and public reactions and countermeasures following major domestic and international policy announcements and key events, analyzing their potential impacts on economic, social, and cultural aspects. The think tank pools the strength of government, academia, and media, using “Internet Plus” innovative thinking and big data analysis technology to advise government decision-making and serve national strategy.

The think tank is funded and established by the “Purple Gold Media Fund.” It is both affiliated with Nanjing University and an independently operating non-enterprise institution registered with the Provincial Civil Affairs Department. The funding party appoints council members to participate in daily council operations, with funds used for initial research work and daily operations. After two to three years of mature operation, the think tank can provide part of its annual expenses by undertaking relevant surveys and consultations for government, media, academic, and business circles. When it achieves certain influence, it can legally accept donations from consortiums or individuals and operate according to the model of globally renowned think tanks.

The think tank implements a director responsibility system under the leadership of the board of directors, with academic committees and administrative committees, as well as multidisciplinary social science postdoctoral workstations. The research team during the initial operation phase mainly consists of professors and researchers from various social science departments at Nanjing University. After achieving certain influence, it will hire full-time and part-time researchers annually or by project, ensuring 10-20 permanent researchers (including full-time postdoctoral fellows) each year. In September 2015, the Purple Gold Media Think Tank launched a “revolving door” mechanism, absorbing four full-time researchers from major media outlets in the province to join the think tank.

Since its establishment, the Purple Gold Media Think Tank has released the “2015 China Stock Market Storm Survey—Mid-term Report,” which received widespread media attention and praise from higher-level leaders. Subsequently, reports such as the “Universal Two-Child” Policy Review and Associate Professor Chen Yunsong’s “Big Data: Social Science and Think Tank Construction” also attracted attention from the General Office of the Central Committee, the General Office of the State Council, and media such as “Theory Light,” demonstrating good development momentum and vitality.

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

Source: ChinaXiv—Machine translation. Verify with original.