

Implications of Foreign Think Tank Development Experience for Maintaining Independence in Chinese Think Tanks (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Independence is one of the core values of think tanks, characterized by inherent complexity and relativity, and is difficult to quantify. Currently, domestic research on think tank independence is relatively scarce and requires further discussion. [Method/Process] This paper conducts a comparative analysis of think tank independence and measures to maintain independence in the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan, expounds on existing problems in China's current think tank independence construction, and proposes corresponding recommendations. [Results/Conclusion] In the process of building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics, China needs to promote the coordinated development of various types of think tanks, improve relevant laws and regulations on think tank registration and management, guide enterprises and individuals to donate to think tanks, and strengthen supervision and management of various types of think tanks.

Full Text

Inspirations from Foreign Think Tank Development Experiences for Maintaining Independence in Chinese Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Independence is one of the core values of think tanks, yet this concept is inherently complex and relative, making it difficult to quantify. Currently, domestic research on think tank independence remains scarce and requires further discussion. [Method/Process] This paper conducts a

comparative analysis of independence and independence-preserving measures among think tanks in the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan, expounding on existing problems in China's current think tank independence construction and offering corresponding recommendations. **[Result/Conclusion]** In the process of building new types of think tanks with Chinese characteristics, China must promote coordinated development among various think tanks, improve relevant laws and regulations on think tank registration and management, guide enterprises and individuals to donate to think tanks, and strengthen supervision and management of all types of think tanks.

Keywords: Independence; American think tanks; British think tanks; Japanese think tanks; New think tank development

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Independence can be considered one of the core values of think tanks [1], yet this concept itself possesses complexity and relativity that defy easy quantification. The annual *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report* published by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, led by James McGann, does not include think tank independence as an evaluation metric, nor does it explore the issue of think tank independence. Domestic think tank research rarely addresses independence, with existing analyses focusing primarily on directional and principled discussions. Wang Ronghua proposed in *Chinese Think Tanks in Transition* that think tanks should “maintain independence while not forgetting national interests” [2], emphasizing the need to correctly handle the relationship between think tank independence and national strategic interests. He argued that research independence does not affect research orientation, and that on major international issues, think tanks should maintain clear national positions and political value orientations. Song Xiaowu noted in “Enhancing the Independence of Chinese Think Tanks” [3] that improving think tank independence represents an inevitable requirement for China's economic and social development, that independence and diversity coexist, and that think tank independence includes both financial and intellectual independence. He further argued that enhancing think tank independence requires efforts from the think tanks themselves. The book *Great Power Think Tanks* states that “the essential characteristic of think tanks is independence, with influencing public policy as the fundamental goal” [4], asserting that think tanks should avoid interference from interest group games and become advocates for public interest.

1. Definition of Think Tank Independence

No consensus exists on the concept of think tank independence. Zhu Xufeng defined both independence and the loss of independence, arguing that “independence” refers to researchers' faithfulness to objective research findings regardless of whether those findings harm certain interests. The criterion for judging independence should examine whether research institutions can uphold objective

research results and express independent policy propositions [5]. The “loss of independence” is defined as “when think tanks, influenced by other actors during operation, make policy recommendations or advocacy actions that violate the objectivity of policy research and harm the public interest” [6].

“On the one hand, the existence and development of think tanks are generally influenced by their national systems, institutional frameworks, historical and cultural contexts, and cannot be separated from the political needs of their countries’ domestic and foreign affairs. On the other hand, the existence and development of think tanks are always deeply connected to the maintenance and realization of interests. Consistent with the attributes of humanities and social sciences, while think tanks serve public policy, realize public interest, and bear social responsibility as general functions, their ideological expression inevitably contains special value judgments and interest appeals in essence. This manifests not only in think tanks’ practice of producing intellectual products but also in think tank evaluation practices. Any understanding of think tank independence must be established on this foundation” [7]. Factors influencing think tank independence are deeply rooted in the political, economic, and cultural soil where think tanks are located, resulting in significant differences in independence among think tanks from different countries.

Think tank independence comprises three constituent elements: institutional independence, research independence, and financial independence. Factors influencing think tank independence are relatively complex, with funding sources generally considered the most important factor. “Think tanks are capital-intensive institutions, with independence closely related to funding. Different funding sources significantly impact independence; those who accept money tend to speak for their paymasters” [8].

2. International Experiences with Think Tank Independence

2.1 United States

The U.S. think tank system has long been considered the world’ s most dynamic, trustworthy, and well-developed think tank system. American think tanks possess a rich history in conducting public debates, providing civil society education, and influencing public policy and administration, earning them the designation as the “fifth power” alongside the legislative, executive, judicial, and media branches. According to the University of Pennsylvania’ s *Global Think Tank Report*, by the end of 2016, there were 6,846 think tanks worldwide, with the United States ranking first with 1,835 think tanks, and American think tanks occupying top positions in global elite think tank rankings.

2.1.1 Brookings Institution The Brookings Institution consistently ranks first in global think tank rankings in the *Global Think Tank Report* and serves as a benchmark for think tanks worldwide to learn from and emulate. The

Brookings Institution aims to strengthen and defend American democracy; ensure economic and social welfare, security, and opportunity for all Americans; and secure a more open, safe, prosperous, and cooperative international system.

Brookings' independence includes intellectual independence, financial independence, and political independence [9]. Brookings scholars enjoy a very relaxed working style, with considerable autonomy in both research topic selection and working hours. Brookings' funding structure is highly diversified, deriving from special funds established by founder Robert Brookings, as well as donations from foundations, corporations, and individuals, government grants, publication revenues, and other investment income. In 2016, approximately 67% of the institution's funding came from donations and contributions, 28% from endowment funds, and the remaining 5% from publication revenues and other sources (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]).

Independence represents a highly cherished value at Brookings, and the institution has made numerous efforts to maintain its independence. First, it broadens fundraising channels, as rich and diversified funding sources can avoid influence from donors seeking commercial returns. Second, it includes relevant clauses in cooperation contracts to reduce funder intervention in researchers' work; the vast majority of research funding is not directly tied to specific research projects. "Even when individual project funders have special requirements, the institution or researchers retain the right to publish these findings. The institution ensures that results are published on its website or that reports are publicly released, rather than privately submitted to funders" [10]. Third, Brookings consistently adheres to non-partisanship and civic-mindedness, requiring researchers not to use working hours for political activities and to clarify that such participation represents personal actions rather than institutional positions when engaging in such activities.

2.1.2 RAND Corporation Established in May 1948, RAND Corporation aims to "maintain American public welfare and security by promoting the development of science, education, and philanthropy." It has long insisted on being "an independent, objective analysis research institution situated between government and the public" [4]. RAND's funding primarily comes from project contracts with clients, with two-thirds originating from U.S. government projects. Additionally, it receives funding from charitable organizations, foundations, private sector entities, and individual donations. In 2016, RAND had approximately \$300 million in revenue, with 20.9% from national security agencies such as the Department of Defense, 16.2% from the U.S. Air Force, 14.9% from the U.S. Army, and 21.6% from the Department of Health and Human Services (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]).

Despite undertaking numerous government projects, RAND adheres to three principles: no government intervention, no government officials on the board of directors, and no direct financial support from the government [4]. RAND does not accept funds directly provided by the government, only signing project con-

tracts with government agencies and conducting corresponding research based on those contracts [11].

Although top-tier American think tanks have long proclaimed themselves as “independent” and regarded this as their core value, American media and the public have never eliminated suspicions about special interest connections between think tanks and their financial backers. In recent years, the “myth” of independence has been repeatedly shattered. On September 7, 2014, Eric Lipton and others published an article titled “Foreign Powers Buy Influence at Think Tank” in *The New York Times* [12]. The article stated that since 2011, at least 64 foreign governments, state-owned institutions, or government officials had donated to 28 major American research institutions. Public documents and lobbying records showed that total overseas donations (including promised donations) amounted to at least \$92 million. Prominent think tanks including Brookings, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Atlantic Council have accepted large donations from foreign governments, increasingly evolving into lobbying agencies for foreign governments and suspected of illegal activities [13]. *The New York Times* published two consecutive articles on August 7 and 8, 2016: “How Think Tanks Amplify Corporate America’s Influence” and “Think Tank Scholar or Corporate Consultant? It Depends on the Day,” exposing scandals of Brookings and other think tanks accepting corporate donations to advance corporate interests. The “revolving door” mechanism between American think tanks and government agencies, while enhancing think tanks’ influence on national policy, simultaneously threatens their independence. Brookings researchers maintain close relationships with government departments. During Obama’s presidential campaign, he recruited numerous advisors from Brookings, and after taking office, invited institutional members to join the new administration. Brookings’ deep official background has triggered public questioning of its independence. Furthermore, most top-tier American think tanks exhibit “board interlocking,” where board members hold concurrent positions in other institutions [14]. These “interlocking directors” possess even more complex interest chains, creating suspicions of interest orientation on major issues concerning think tank development.

2.2 United Kingdom

As a two-party system, most major British think tanks have been established by either the Conservative or Labour parties, aiming to participate in ideological debates. Consequently, British think tanks are naturally closely related to political parties. British think tanks often face funding difficulties, and their social donation systems are less developed compared to the United States, forcing them to rely on government funding. The government values and strongly supports think tanks, serving as their largest client. The British government has long provided financial support to think tanks through direct fiscal appropriations and has offered a series of preferential policies to promote think tank development, placing great emphasis on information support for domestic think tanks through

powerful business information networks that provide foreign-related consulting information.

2.2.1 Chatham House (Royal Institute of International Affairs)

Founded in July 1920, Chatham House is the largest and longest-standing international affairs research institution in the United Kingdom. Chatham House has ranked second globally in the *Global Think Tank Report* for nine consecutive years, placed first among “non-U.S.” think tanks in 2016, and was voted Think Tank of the Year in the survey. Chatham House’s mission is “to promote rigorous research and policy engagement on the complex and changing world by individuals and organizations.” The institute states on its website: “Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any political institution,” and further declares on its homepage: “This institute has never received any subsidies from the British government or any other source” [15]. In the 2016-2017 fiscal year, Chatham House received £15.099 million in funding from 179 different sources worldwide, including government contracts, private foundations, and corporate donations.

2.2.2 Adam Smith Institute

Established in the 1970s, the Adam Smith Institute is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan think tank that promotes free-market and neoliberal ideas through research, publication, media advocacy, and education [16]. “To guarantee institutional independence, the Adam Smith Institute does not accept government funding. The institute hopes that most of its funding comes from free private individuals, foundations, business activities, and book sales revenues” [17]. To defend research independence and impartiality, in the United Kingdom, research project sponsors typically cannot directly pay think tanks to produce reports according to their intentions. Additionally, British think tanks impose strict restrictions on fund usage: first, sponsors cannot designate the purpose of funds, which are fully arranged and used by the think tank; second, sponsors have no right to modify research results or conclusions, and think tanks can publish research findings without sponsor approval; third, some think tanks set maximum donation limits to prevent donors from influencing independence. For instance, the Adam Smith Institute explicitly stipulates that each enterprise’s annual donation cannot exceed £50,000 [18].

2.3 Japan

Based on their relationship with the government, Japanese think tanks can be simply classified into three categories: official think tanks, quasi-official think tanks, and private think tanks. Official Japanese think tanks refer to those directly affiliated with government agencies and departments, represented by the National Institute for Defense Studies of the Ministry of Defense, the Institute for Fiscal Studies of the Ministry of Finance, and the Institute for Monetary and Economic Studies of the Bank of Japan. Quasi-official think tanks refer to those established as independent administrative institutions, mostly created when government departments spun off entities based on the *General Act on*

Independent Administrative Institutions [19], such as the Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry, the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, and the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology. Private think tanks exist as corporate entities, including for-profit think tanks operating as businesses and foundation-based think tanks (such as Nomura Research Institute, bank-affiliated think tanks) and non-profit think tanks (such as the Institute for International Policy Studies and the Japan Center for International Exchange).

Official think tanks receive all their funding from government budgets, while quasi-official think tanks receive funding from government-allocated budgets. Compared to official think tanks, quasi-official think tanks have more flexible fund usage, but their expenditure requires recognition and auditing by supervisory authorities. Private think tanks have diverse funding sources, including corporate endowments, membership fees and donations, foundation and real estate revenues, and research activity income. Most Japanese think tanks face funding shortages. Since the 1990s, Japan's long-term economic stagnation, combined with strong dependence on respective "financial backers," has caused many think tanks, including party-affiliated ones, to face financial difficulties.

Japan's entrenched bureaucratic system, with administrative agencies controlling the entire process from policy formation to implementation, makes it difficult for private think tanks to 介入 (participate in) policy formulation and decision-making processes. The vast majority of Japanese think tank research topics are commissioned projects, with research survey income highly dependent on government and quasi-government departments. The predominance of official commissioned projects limits think tank independence. The revolving door mechanism lacks bidirectionality, with many Japanese think tank leadership positions occupied by retired bureaucrats. These "空降 (parachuted) bureaucrat-scholars" dominate and promote research activities, creating potential for interest transfer. The issue of think tank independence has long been criticized by external observers.

3. Problems and Inspirations for Chinese Think Tanks

On January 20, 2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Development of New Types of Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* (hereinafter referred to as the *Opinions*), proposing the goal of "focusing on building a batch of high-end think tanks with significant influence and international reputation" by 2020. Chinese think tank development has entered a new era of rapid growth, yet many problems persist and require urgent resolution.

3.1 Problems in Chinese Think Tank Independence

Compared with Western developed countries, Chinese think tanks remain in the early stages of development, with numerous problems in maintaining indepen-

dence.

First, the phenomenon of “strong state, weak society” in think tank development is severe, with unbalanced development. The *Opinions*, as the programmatic document initiating a new era of Chinese characteristic new-type think tank construction, devoted minimal discussion to social think tanks and provided no clear definition of their scope. The *Opinions* used terms like “promote” and “advance” to describe support for system-affiliated think tanks such as academies of social sciences, party schools, administrative colleges, universities, military research institutions, and state-owned enterprise research institutes, while using “regulate” and “guide” for social think tanks.

Official and semi-official Chinese think tanks hold absolute advantages in terms of quantity, scale, financial support, and personnel quality. The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Think Tank Research Center released the *2016 Chinese Think Tank Report—Influence Rankings and Policy Recommendations* in February 2017, ranking domestic think tanks across five dimensions: “comprehensive influence,” “sub-item influence,” “system influence,” “professional influence,” and “research topics.” The ranking results show that nearly all top-ranked think tanks are system-affiliated. Taking the “Top 30 Chinese Think Tanks by Comprehensive Influence” as an example, except for the China International Strategy Society and the China Economists 50 Forum, which ranked 24th and 25th respectively as social think tanks, the other 28 listed think tanks were all system-affiliated [20].

The insufficient development of social think tanks relates both to internal problems such as funding shortages, talent scarcity, and management deficiencies, and to weak government attention and support. “In the list of think tank units supported for key construction by various provinces and cities, most have no seats for social think tanks. Government support in core areas related to social think tank development, such as fund allocation, policy consultation, and research project assignment, is also clearly insufficient” [21]. Government data disclosure remains inadequate, leaving social think tanks without necessary research data. Meanwhile, social think tanks lack pathways to influence policy compared to system-affiliated think tanks. Additionally, the underdeveloped think tank market and insufficient awareness of purchasing intellectual services have strongly constrained think tank development, leaving social think tanks with weak influence and limited ability to fulfill their functions of advising government and enlightening the public.

Second, inadequate think tank legislation creates legal obstacles for social think tank fundraising. As privately operated research institutions, social think tanks fall under the category of social organizations in China, primarily governed by the *Interim Regulations on the Registration Management of Private Non-Enterprise Units* and the *Regulations on the Registration Management of Social Organizations* promulgated by the State Council in 1998. The government implements a “dual management” system for social think tanks (jointly responsible for registration management and business supervisory units). The requirement

for a business supervisory unit undoubtedly represents the greatest difficulty in legalizing social think tanks. Many think tanks, unable to find a “parent organization,” register as industrial and commercial enterprises instead. Becoming an enterprise means social think tanks cannot accept social donations like private non-enterprise units and must also bear tax obligations. Social think tanks face significant difficulties and huge risks in international financing, with “many private think tanks expressing concerns or simply refusing to accept overseas funds when receiving international donations or commissioned projects from international organizations” [22].

In February 2017, the 32nd meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform reviewed and adopted the *Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks*, providing an official definition of “social think tanks” and proposing “support and guidance” as well as “standardized management.” The *Opinions* reiterated the dual-responsibility management system for social think tanks by civil affairs departments and business supervisory units. Among them, private social science research institutions are supervised by provincial (autonomous region, municipality) federations of social science associations as business supervisory units and registered by civil affairs departments of provincial-level people’s governments; other social think tanks are supervised by competent authorities in their fields of activity as business supervisory units and registered by civil affairs departments of people’s governments at the same level.

Third, an imperfect social donation system hinders social think tank development. Currently, China’s donation-related laws lag behind those of developed countries like the United States. Regarding donees, donated objects, donation intentions, and donation behaviors, “both legislators and practitioners have insufficient understanding of the constituent elements of corporate donations eligible for charitable deductions” [23]. Taking donees as an example, current Chinese laws and regulations provide unclear and narrow definitions of eligible donees. Various documents issued by ministries and commissions present inconsistent and diverse expressions regarding qualified donees. Meanwhile, as social organizations, donees’ eligibility for charitable deductions requires administrative approval. These various requirements pose significant obstacles to supporting and developing social think tanks.

Fourth, think tank research concepts and practical character require further standardization. For a long time, system-affiliated think tanks, including party schools at all levels, government policy research offices, military research institutions, academies of social sciences, universities, and internal research institutions of state-owned enterprises, have relied on single-source funding from government budgets, fiscal appropriations, and state-owned enterprise allocations. Official and semi-official think tanks’ long-term dependence on “imperial rations” has led them to 倾向于 (tend to) conduct research with predetermined conclusions that cater to official preferences, accustomed to “assigned topics.” Meanwhile, social think tanks, constrained by limited funding and lacking policy influence path-

ways, must strive to provide satisfactory research for their financial backers to secure funds. Both think tanks and researchers have unclear research concepts and objectives, lacking the scholarly “backbone” that researchers should possess. Their research lacks objectivity and independence, resulting in low public credibility and influence.

3.2 Inspirations from Foreign Experiences

First, create an innovative and inclusive social, public opinion, and political environment to promote coordinated development among various think tanks. Famous think tanks in the United States and United Kingdom are primarily registered social think tanks, which constitute a large proportion of think tanks in Western developed countries. Non-official social think tanks possess strong influence and have played enormous roles in advising government and enlightening the public. By contrast, China’s think tank structure remains imperfect, with official think tanks dominating and social think tanks developing slowly. The flourishing of various think tanks through “letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend” helps maintain think tank independence. Government departments and public opinion must accept the academic research concept of “no forbidden zones in research.” The government should establish equal dialogue mechanisms, increase support for purchasing services, conduct decision-making consultation and policy evaluation services, and guide and support social think tank development. It should 破除 (break) “circle” culture and “official rank standard” thinking, change the current situation of excessive dependence on system-affiliated think tanks, improve information support policies, increase government transparency, and enable policy researchers from all types of think tanks to obtain accurate information and data needed for research.

Second, improve relevant laws and regulations on think tanks to promote healthy social think tank development. In the United States, according to provisions for non-profit organizations in the *U.S. Internal Revenue Code*, social think tanks as non-profit organizations are exempt from national and local property taxes, business taxes, gift taxes, fundraising taxes, and other levies, which has promoted the establishment and development of social think tanks. For China, it is necessary to improve the *Interim Regulations on the Registration Management of Private Non-Enterprise Units* and the *Regulations on the Registration Management of Social Organizations*, further simplifying think tank registration procedures, relaxing entry thresholds, reducing or exempting think tank taxes and fees, and alleviating think tank burdens. It should also promptly issue supporting policies to guide and support social think tanks and ensure relevant policies are implemented.

Third, clarify and improve donation laws and regulations, and streamline think tank donation processes and procedures. Funding sources constitute the most important factor influencing think tank independence. Single-source funding leads to the phenomenon of “those who eat others’ food are short-mouthed, those who take others’ hands are short-handed.” Most world-renowned think

tanks maintain and demonstrate their independence through diversified funding sources, with social donations representing the most important pathway for broadening think tank funding. Compared with the United States, China lacks charitable donation awareness and has lagging legislation, seriously affecting think tank fundraising. China urgently needs to further clarify the constituent elements of donation behavior, simplify relevant procedures, and clarify charitable deduction conditions through legislation. By improving laws and regulations, China should continuously encourage corporate charitable donations, cultivate awareness of charitable giving throughout society, and guide enterprises and individuals to donate to think tanks and other research institutions.

Fourth, strengthen supervision and management of all types of think tanks, and researchers should enhance self-management and self-discipline. Attention must be paid to the patronage model and interest cycles in think tank-government relations, and vigilance must be maintained against think tank alienation and interest representation driven by large capital. The government should issue relevant laws and regulations to standardize think tanks' rights and obligations. Think tank management departments should strengthen financial auditing and behavioral supervision of think tanks. Additionally, researchers should improve their self-cultivation and enhance self-management and self-discipline.

While learning from and drawing upon advanced foreign think tank experiences, we must clearly recognize that all think tanks are rooted in their cultural and political soil, and no perfect think tank exists in the world. We must 破除 (break) the myth of Western think tank “independence,” “absorb the essence and discard the dross,” critically learn and draw lessons, and explore a think tank development path that suits China' s national conditions.

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