

Three Contradictions in the Construction of New-Type University Think Tanks in China (Postprint)

Authors: Shen Guolin

Date: 2018-08-14T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper focuses on three contradictions encountered in the construction of university think tanks: the contradiction between academic research and policy advisory research, the contradiction between physical institutions and virtual institutions, and the contradiction between discipline construction and think tank construction. [Methods/Process] Through analyzing the causes of these three contradictions and the relationship between think tanks and the entire university ecological environment. [Results/Conclusion] It proposes solutions to these contradictions: First, the most important path to resolving the contradiction between academic research and policy advisory research is to explore a categorical evaluation mechanism, that is, to separate the evaluation of policy advisory research from academic evaluation and establish a comprehensive evaluation system for policy advisory research; Second, the contradiction between physical institutions and virtual institutions can be resolved through a “virtual-physical integration” approach; Third, to find the equilibrium point between discipline construction and think tank construction.

Full Text

Abstract

This article identifies three key contradictions in the construction of university-affiliated think tanks: the tension between academic research and policy consultative research, the dilemma between entity and virtual institutional structures, and the conflict between discipline construction and think tank development. It analyzes the root causes of these contradictions and examines the relationship between think tanks and the broader university ecosystem. To resolve these tensions, three primary solutions are proposed: First, establishing a separate

evaluation system for policy consultative research distinct from traditional academic assessment mechanisms; second, adopting a hybrid “virtual-entity” organizational model; and third, striking a balance between disciplinary development and think tank construction.

Keywords: new-type think tanks, university-affiliated think tanks, contradictions, world-class universities

Introduction

In January 2015, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Types of Chinese-Characteristic Think Tanks* (hereinafter referred to as the *Opinions*), which called for the coordinated development of party and government departments, academies of social sciences, party schools and administrative institutes, universities, military institutions, research academies, enterprises, and social think tanks. Among these new-type think tanks, university-affiliated think tanks represent a crucial force. As early as 2013, Vice Premier Liu Yandong emphasized at a symposium that universities must leverage their advantages of comprehensive disciplines and concentrated talent to prosper philosophy and social sciences, thereby contributing to the construction of new types of Chinese-characteristic think tanks. In 2014, the Ministry of Education promulgated the *Plan for Promoting the Construction of New Types of Chinese-Characteristic University Think Tanks*. Over the past three years, numerous universities across China have vigorously advanced think tank construction, giving rise to a proliferation of university-affiliated think tanks in a vibrant and competitive landscape. However, in this dynamic practice of constructing new-type university think tanks, both institutional and think tank levels frequently encounter three fundamental contradictions. The ability to effectively coordinate these contradictions determines the success or failure of new-type university think tank construction.

1 Three Contradictions in University Think Tank Construction

University-affiliated think tanks are research organizations that emerge within the academic ecosystem of universities. The contradictions they face arise from tensions between this new type of research organization and the existing academic production mechanisms within universities. These contradictions encompass three dimensions: the tension between academic research and policy consultative research, the dilemma between entity and virtual institutional structures, and the conflict between discipline construction and think tank development.

1.1 The Contradiction Between Academic Research and Policy Consultative Research

Academic research and policy consultative research are not inherently contradictory. The former emphasizes foundational theoretical inquiry, while the latter focuses on applied policy solutions. They differ fundamentally in their orientation: academic research seeks to discover universal laws and achieve theoretical innovation to explain the world, whereas policy consultative research aims to solve practical problems and propose actionable strategies to transform it. University think tank research clearly belongs to the latter category. In principle, the two should be complementary—theory provides the foundation for policy solutions, while policy implementation tests theoretical validity. However, within the university environment, contradictions emerge between the institutional systems built around these two research paradigms. Prior to the construction of new-type university think tanks, decades of practice had established a comprehensive evaluation and incentive system for academic research, where promotion and rewards were based on metrics such as monographs, publications in Chinese and English journals, and national or provincial-level research grants. These metrics typically excluded decision-making consultation. Think tank outputs—including government adoption and approval of reports, participation in policy formulation, lecturing for leaders, and media commentary—are difficult to incorporate into traditional academic evaluation frameworks.

Some universities have attempted to integrate decision-making consultation achievements into their existing academic evaluation mechanisms, most commonly by equating policy briefs receiving certain levels of official approval with publications in specific-tier academic journals or providing monetary rewards for such briefs. Nevertheless, in the eyes of academic committees, publications in authoritative journals carry far more weight than policy briefs. The author has personally participated in academic talent evaluation meetings where academic authorities consistently favored extensive scholarly papers while questioning the true value of briefs merely two to three thousand words long. This contradiction also manifests in talent recruitment. During a research visit to one university think tank, the director reported that the institute had attempted to recruit a talent with World Bank experience who lacked a doctoral degree. However, university regulations required all recruited talent to hold doctoral degrees, particularly from prestigious overseas institutions. Despite this individual's exceptional suitability for think tank research, the recruitment ultimately failed after numerous efforts.

This tension presents a profound dilemma for junior faculty members, who represent the essential talent pipeline for think tanks. Young scholars selected as reserve forces for university think tanks often face uncertainty and anxiety when choosing between academic and policy research. Devoting substantial energy to policy consultative research may yield results that are not recognized within academic evaluation systems and could even be perceived as opportunistic or a distraction from proper scholarly duties. Moreover, some junior faculty are

also tasked with think tank operations. Admittedly, first-rate scholars can navigate both domains with ease. Without deep academic foundations, think tank research cannot achieve high standards, while outstanding scholars inevitably maintain long-term interest in real-world problems—even those engaged in theoretical research—because sensitivity to practical issues continuously stimulates academic thinking and enables theoretical innovation. However, during the developmental journey toward becoming excellent think tank scholars, the choice between prioritizing academic research or policy consultative research remains a challenging dilemma for young faculty.

1.2 The Contradiction Between Entity and Virtual Institutions

First-rate think tanks should naturally be entity institutions. In the *Opinions* issued by the General Offices, the first criterion for new types of Chinese-characteristic think tanks is to be “entity research institutions that comply with national laws and regulations, are relatively stable, and operate in a standardized manner.” In universities, entity research institutions generally refer to secondary-level units with independent staffing, financial, and personnel authority. Based on practical experience, the question of whether new-type think tanks within universities should be entity or virtual remains a subject of debate.

Entity transformation is relatively straightforward when converting existing research institutions into think tanks, as these institutions already possess entity status. However, establishing an entirely new think tank within a university presents formidable challenges. Securing secondary-level institutional status is already difficult, and providing dedicated office space, research staff, and administrative personnel positions is even more problematic.

Entity institutions offer stability through relatively independent financial and personnel authority, enabling them to utilize funds and hire staff—conditions essential for professional think tank development. However, some university leaders express concerns that fully entity-based think tanks may become isolated and “ossified” over time, as only designated personnel engage in think tank research while external participants are excluded, causing the think tank to disconnect from the broader university and become an island (based on the author’s fieldwork conducted in Shanghai universities during September-October 2017). Conversely, virtual institutions offer greater flexibility by relying on relevant departments and allowing fluid participation.

The Shanghai University Think Tank Research and Management Center, where the author is based, conducted a survey in 2015 of all philosophy and social science research institutions in Shanghai’s universities, identifying a total of 1,981 organizations of various sizes. Upon closer examination, many proved to be “zombie institutions” or “name-card institutions” that exist only in name. Virtual institutions easily devolve into such zombie or name-card entities without sustained funding, while entity institutions struggle to obtain dedicated staffing and financial and personnel authority from the university. This reflects a funda-

mental contradiction and dilemma in the relationship between think tanks and universities. While funding and office space are relatively accessible, securing personnel positions remains exceptionally difficult.

1.3 The Contradiction Between Discipline Construction and Think Tank Development

Disciplines constitute the lifeblood of universities. Currently, talent cultivation and academic research in Chinese universities are both organized around disciplines. Departments centered on disciplines are the fundamental organizational units of universities, controlling various resources including funding allocation, teaching and research evaluation, faculty appointment and promotion, supervisor selection, and performance rewards. In the State Council' s *Overall Plan for Coordinating the Construction of World-Class Universities and First-Class Disciplines*, discipline construction has been elevated to a level equivalent to world-class university development. Without first-class disciplines, there can be no first-class universities [1].

Centered on the Double First-Class initiative, Chinese universities have launched a new round of resource investment focused on discipline construction. Qu Zhenyuan, President of the China Association of Higher Education, notes that strengthening universities through discipline-based units and cultivating a cohort of first-class disciplines as soon as possible is essential for creating genuinely substantive world-class universities rather than hollow ones. A university' s core competitiveness lies in its disciplines, and quality university-affiliated think tanks must be built upon key disciplines, which provide continuous funding and talent. Think tanks without disciplinary support are like trees without roots or water without a source.

However, policy consultative research conducted by think tanks is often interdisciplinary. Strategic and policy issues cannot be addressed through a single discipline alone and typically require collaborative research across multiple disciplines. In the university environment, such interdisciplinary collaboration encounters numerous challenges, including attribution of achievements, resource allocation, cross-department cooperation, and team integration. This creates a contradiction between discipline construction and think tank development.

Some university think tanks possess no autonomy in financial, material, or personnel management, temporarily assembling personnel from different disciplines to write reports, only to have disputes arise over authorial credit that sour relationships and create conflicts between departments and disciplines. Other think tanks, for operational convenience, simply merge with academic departments, blurring the lines between teaching, research, and think tank functions, resulting in unclear positioning and an inability to organize genuinely interdisciplinary research. Still others rely purely on the personal prestige of academic leaders to assemble interdisciplinary teams, without any institutional or systemic guarantees.

2 Primary Paths to Resolving Contradictions in University Think Tank Construction

All contradictions embody both opposition and unity. The law of contradiction in things—the law of the unity of opposites—represents the most fundamental principle of dialectical materialism. The three contradictions in university think tank construction contain both opposing and unified dimensions. How to achieve a higher-level synthesis of these oppositions in practice constitutes a critical challenge for all university think tank builders.

First, the most important path to resolving the tension between academic and policy research is to explore a classification-based evaluation mechanism that separates the assessment of policy consultative research from traditional academic evaluation, thereby establishing a comprehensive evaluation system specifically for policy consultative research. Academic and policy research are not inherently opposed; both require strong problem consciousness and scientific research methods. Their difference lies primarily in their ultimate objectives: academic research aims for theoretical innovation, while policy consultative research seeks to propose strategic and policy solutions, resulting in different manifestations of their outputs. According to the author's observations, most universities have established reward mechanisms for policy consultative research, most commonly providing monetary incentives for reports receiving certain levels of official approval. Some institutions have already incorporated policy consultative research into their academic evaluation systems, for instance, by equating approved policy briefs with publications in specific-tier journals. However, the establishment of a dedicated evaluation system for policy consultative research remains in its infancy. Top-tier talent evaluation frameworks such as the Changjiang Scholars Program, the Thousand Talents Plan, and the Young Changjiang Scholars Program have not yet incorporated policy consultative research achievements. It will take time for academic authorities across various disciplines to genuinely recognize the value of policy consultative research.

The ideal model for university think tank research should function as follows: Real-world societal problems drive think tanks to establish targeted research projects, assembling research teams where senior scholars mentor junior scholars or faculty guide students. These teams immerse themselves in reality, collect data, analyze situations, and subsequently produce both academic papers and decision-making consultation reports. While the core ideas of papers and reports should be unified, their writing approaches, formats, and target audiences differ. Academic papers can be published in specialized journals, while consultation reports are submitted to relevant departments to serve decision-making processes. Throughout this research process, junior faculty and students receive training and enhancement of their academic capabilities, maintain their academic publication records, and simultaneously generate societal impact. This approach truly integrates knowledge innovation, talent cultivation, and social service.

Second, the contradiction between entity and virtual institutions can be resolved through a “virtual-entity combination” approach. This involves maintaining a core group of permanent research staff while employing a larger number of part-time researchers, or keeping think tank operations staff as permanent hires while implementing temporary appointments for research personnel. University think tanks can adopt a “small platform, large network” operational model, maintaining a certain number of dedicated think tank personnel while hiring numerous internal and external part-time research fellows. This establishes a collaborative mechanism that mobilizes relevant research forces both within and outside the university to jointly conduct policy consultative research and think tank activities. Each think tank essentially functions as a network and platform – “the permanent camp with flowing soldiers.” Operating a think tank behind closed doors is untenable. The fundamental issue is not whether a think tank should be virtual or entity, but whether its operations are open and collaborative, and the degree of autonomy it possesses in hiring and financial management to sustainably support high-quality decision-making consultation research.

Third, finding the balance point between discipline construction and think tank development is essential. These two aspects should not be treated as opposing forces. Universities must neither conflate the distinctions between disciplines and think tanks nor sever their organic connections; instead, they must foster a new pattern of mutual supplementation and positive interaction between discipline construction and new-type think tank development [2]. First-rate university think tanks should be built upon first-rate disciplines. Without support from top-tier disciplines, university think tanks become like water without a source or trees without roots. As Xu Qingsen, Deputy Director-General of the Department of Higher Education at the Ministry of Education, stated: “The ideal relationship between think tanks and departments is one of relative independence” [3]. This independence means that think tanks should be relatively independent entities within the university, with autonomous personnel and financial authority, as well as evaluation and incentive systems specifically designed for think tank researchers, clearly distinguishing them from teaching and research activities in academic departments. Some think tanks merge completely with their original departments, operating under “one team, two signs.” All faculty members of the department are counted as think tank members, temporarily assembled when reports are needed, engaging in more activities and report writing when funding is available, and reverting to teaching and research when it is not. Such university think tanks lack professionalism and at best represent departments with think tank functions. Conversely, think tanks should not become special zones within universities. If think tank experts become completely detached from departmental activities, teaching arrangements, and graduate supervision, they will eventually disconnect from the university’s overall development and discipline construction, making it difficult to sustain growth, let alone achieve excellence.

Top-tier foreign university think tanks offer valuable practical experience. The Hoover Institution at Stanford University, a world-renowned university-

affiliated think tank, employs senior scholars based on research needs and funding capacity. These scholars can be either formal faculty jointly appointed by the institute and other Stanford departments, or external personnel directly hired by the institute. This flexible and diverse employment model and organizational approach ensures research quality and influence. Through a well-functioning “internal revolving door” between the institute and other university departments, the Hoover Institution’s strong research areas mutually reinforce Stanford’s advantageous disciplines, achieving a win-win outcome for both the institute and the university [4]. Similar employment models have been adopted by domestic universities. Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Institute of Urban Governance, for instance, employs a dual-appointment system. The university positions the institute as a university-affiliated think tank, hiring a cohort of professors and research fellows in urban studies who are simultaneously appointed by their home departments, with their achievements benefiting both the institute and their departments (based on the author’s research at Shanghai Jiao Tong University on September 28, 2017). A “campus revolving door” mechanism is also being adopted by some universities, allowing faculty interested in think tank research to work part-time or full-time at think tanks for a period before returning to their departments, with their performance evaluated and rewarded according to think tank requirements during their tenure.

In the relationship between discipline construction and think tank development, leading figures play a critical role. These are exceptional talents who possess solid theoretical knowledge, rich practical experience, superb leadership capabilities, and enjoy strong reputations in their fields and society. Such leading figures can become the soul and core of a think tank’s brand [5]. Among the first batch of pilot units for national high-end think tanks, several selected university-affiliated think tanks are led by renowned figures: Peking University’s National School of Development led by Professor Lin Yifu, Tsinghua University’s Institute for Contemporary China Studies led by Professor Hu Angang, and Fudan University’s China Institute led by Professor Zhang Weiwei. These leading figures serve as bridges between discipline construction and think tank development. Within their disciplines, they are academic leaders; within their think tanks, they are organizational leaders. Their role becomes particularly crucial during a think tank’s initial stages, as they leverage their academic and societal influence to expand business, recruit talent, promote research outcomes, and comprehensively enhance the think tank’s influence.

Universities constitute complex and vast ecosystems, and university leaders must deeply consider the appropriate position of think tanks within this system. Think tanks should not become special zones or isolated islands within the university system, where a small group works while the majority merely observes. Nor should think tank development disrupt the university’s existing ecosystem. If think tanks are incompatible with the university’s established ecological structure, how can they leverage the concentrated advantages of university talent and disciplines? Think tank construction should not be reduced to

simply producing more policy briefs or securing more official approvals. It represents an important component of universities' social service mission and a new type of research organization emerging within the university ecosystem. The construction of new-type Chinese university think tanks constitutes a reallocation and investment of higher education resources. If investment merely creates new think tanks without reforming the university' s institutional mechanisms—such as personnel appointment, funding management, and academic evaluation—the construction of new-type think tanks will amount to nothing more than a temporary fad. As President Xi Jinping stated at Peking University, we must “root universities in Chinese soil.” China' s world-class universities must have Chinese coordinates, and Chinese university think tanks should concern themselves with genuine Chinese issues. It is precisely these continuously emerging Chinese issues from practice that truly drive the research and development of new types of Chinese-characteristic think tanks. Chinese university think tanks grow within China' s university ecosystem, and their development will inevitably propel reforms in university research systems and mechanisms, contributing to the creation of Chinese discourse, a Chinese-characteristic knowledge system, and Chinese-characteristic world-class universities. Successful Chinese university think tanks will ultimately feed back into the construction of the university' s first-class disciplines, enhance the university' s contributions to national society, expand the university' s influence, and thereby contribute to building world-class universities and first-class disciplines.

References

1. Liaoning Daily. “Double First-Class” construction emphasizes both construction and reform [EB/OL]. [2017-11-03]. http://www.qsttheory.cn/zhuanqu/bkxj/2015-11/06/c_1117064594.htm.
2. Hong Yinxing. Based on foundations, leveraging advantages, reaching new heights, and unleashing vitality: Reflections and recommendations on constructing new-type university think tanks [J]. *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, 2016(1): 5-8.
3. Xu Qingsen. University think tank construction should properly manage three relationships [J]. *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, 2017, 2(1): 8-9.
4. Chen Yingxia, Liu Hao. Personnel allocation and management models of top-tier foreign university think tanks [J]. *Comparative Education Review*, 2014(2): 66-71.
5. Hu Haibin. On the importance of leading figures for constructing new types of Chinese-characteristic think tanks [J]. *Think Tank: Theory & Practice*, 2017, 2(3): 51-56.

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

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.