

“Think Tank Factors Behind the ‘Southwest Phenomenon’: A Case Study of Guangxi Think Tank Construction (Postprint)”

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the think tank factors underlying the “Southwest Phenomenon,” using Guangxi’s think tank construction as a case study to propose patterns and pathways for local think tank development. [Method/Process] Through field research and interviews, first-hand data on Guangxi’s think tank development in recent years was obtained. By integrating Guangxi’s developmental locational advantages and cultural characteristics, the top-level design and distinctive connotations of Guangxi’s think tank development were examined. [Result/Conclusion] Behind Guangxi’s sweeping transformation and development, the wisdom of local think tanks shines brightly. The study posits that local think tanks constitute a vital force in promoting regional development. Local think tank construction should prioritize top-level design, closely integrate with regional locational advantages, merge seamlessly with local socio-economic transformation and development, while strengthening open cooperation and exchanges, and standardizing think tank management.

Full Text

Think Tanks behind the “Southwest Phenomenon”: A Case Study of Guangxi Think Tank Construction

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study examines the think tank factors behind the “Southwest Phenomenon,” using Guangxi’s think tank construction as a

case study to propose rules and pathways for local think tank development. [Method/Process] Through field investigations and interviews, this paper obtains first-hand materials on recent developments, and examines the top-level design and distinctive characteristics of think tank development in Guangxi by integrating its regional advantages and cultural features. [Result/Conclusion] Behind Guangxi' s magnificent transformation and development lies the wisdom of local think tanks. The study concludes that local think tanks are a vital force driving regional development. Their construction should integrate closely with regional advantages and local socioeconomic transformation, while strengthening open cooperation and standardized management.

Keywords: local think tank; regional advantage; cultural features; top-level design; management mechanism

2. The “Southwest Phenomenon” and Guangxi’ s Developmental Advantages

2.1 Interpreting the “Southwest Phenomenon” Since China’ s economy entered the “new normal,” regional divergence has become increasingly prominent. While Northeast China has experienced a “cliff-like” decline and eastern coastal regions have shown slow recovery, Southwest China has stood out as a lone bright spot. Particularly with the promotion of the “Belt and Road” initiative, Southwest China has embraced new development opportunities by leveraging its unique geographical advantages and cultural characteristics, forming the remarkable “Southwest Phenomenon.” According to statistics, during the 12th Five-Year Plan period, China’ s average annual GDP growth rate was 7.9%, while Chongqing and Guizhou reached 12.8% and 12.5% respectively, ranking first and second nationally. Their development models have been praised as the “Chongqing Experience” and “Guizhou Speed.” By the first half of 2017, when national growth had slowed to 6.9%, Tibet, Chongqing, Guizhou, and Yunnan still achieved growth rates of 10.8%, 10.5%, 10.4%, and 9.5% respectively, with Sichuan and Guangxi also exceeding the national average [1].

By the end of 2016, Guangxi’ s cumulative cross-border RMB settlement had exceeded 700 billion yuan, ranking first among central, western, and border provinces for seven consecutive years. The deepening of the Beibu Gulf financial reform has vigorously promoted the flourishing development of border trade. During the 12th Five-Year Plan period, foreign trade imports and exports in the entire region grew at an average annual rate of 23.7%, reaching 18.35 billion yuan in 2016. ASEAN has been Guangxi’ s largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years, with trade cooperation becoming increasingly active [1]. Emerging industries such as logistics, big data, and robotics have become new drivers of economic growth in Southwest China. The “Belt and Road” initiative has also brought new historical opportunities for Southwest China’ s opening-up. Simultaneously, local think tanks in Southwest China have contributed to regional

reform, development, and institutional innovation.

Guangxi's development is situated at the intersection of three interfaces. First, from an international perspective, Guangxi lies at the junction of China's southwestern hinterland and the ten ASEAN countries. It backs onto vast southwestern China while facing Southeast Asia, with both coastal access and land borders. Its 1,595 km coastline provides the southwestern region with its fastest sea access, making it an important frontier window for trade with Southeast Asian, African, and European countries along the "Belt and Road." Domestically, Guangxi bridges China's eastern and central-western regions. It borders the Beibu Gulf to the south, backs onto the greater Southwest, and shares regional industrial structure adjustment and upgrading opportunities. The accelerating pace of industrial transfer has created new opportunities for Guangxi's leapfrog development. Historically and culturally, Guangxi sits at the crossroads of multiple civilizations. Ancient Guangxi belonged to the "Baiyue" region, inhabited by the Xi'ou and Cangwu branches of the Baiyue people. Since the establishment of Guilin Prefecture in the Qin Dynasty, Guangxi has been under central jurisdiction. The Lingqu Canal connected the Pearl River and Nanliujiang River systems, laying the foundation for Guangxi to become a maritime passage for central China. As one of China's most ethnically diverse provinces, Guangxi is home to 12 indigenous ethnic groups including the Zhuang, Han, Yao, and Dong. Millennia of cultural fusion have created unique cultural tourism resources and development patterns.

3. Top-Level Design and Guangxi's New Think Tank System

Development cannot be separated from top-level design based on the Party and government's policy needs. A sound decision-making consultation system and connection between think tank intellectual supply and demand can prevent blind and disorderly development. For Guangxi, regional development, cultural inheritance, ecological protection, and border security have become important directions for policy consultation demand from the Guangxi Party Committee and government. In January 2016, Guangxi issued the "Implementation Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Guangxi Characteristic New-Type Think Tanks" [2] (hereinafter referred to as the "Guangxi Opinions"), aiming to implement the "Four Comprehensives" strategic layout and the central government's "Three Positionings" for Guangxi's development, accelerate the realization of the "Two Centenary Goals," and establish a decision-making consultation system with Guangxi characteristics.

3.1 Innovating Decision-Making Consultation Mechanisms to Promote Close Government-Think Tank Coordination Following the autonomous region Party Committee's requirement that "think tank construction should be institutionally connected with Party Committee construction," Guangxi's think tank construction is led by the Party Committee Policy Research Office, involving five main departments: the Party Committee Policy

Research Office (Political Research Office), the Party Committee Deep Reform Leading Group Office, the Party Committee Rural Work Office, the People's Government Development Research Center, and the Decision-Making Consultation Committee. The Political Research Office serves as the core, responsible for seamless connection with decision-makers, understanding policy needs, soliciting and reviewing topics, maintaining "pipeline communication," and acting as the decision-maker's "internal brain." The Decision-Making Consultation Committee is tasked with extensively connecting with various think tank experts, specially inviting consultation committee members nationwide, releasing Guangxi social science topics to both provincial and external parties, interpreting Party Committee and government policies, and serving as the "external brain" for precise policy connection.

To coordinate various think tank institutions in Guangxi and integrate research forces, Guangxi established the Guangxi Characteristic New-Type Think Tank Alliance, with 115 member units including 16 council members and 22 key think tanks. Additionally, Guangxi explicitly proposed focusing on building six types of think tanks: Party and government department think tanks, academy of social sciences and Party school/administrative college think tanks, university think tanks, scientific research institute think tanks, enterprise think tanks, and social think tanks, along with four service platforms: demand, information, expert, and achievement databases. This forms the "1+1+6+4" Guangxi characteristic new-type think tank system, providing a favorable policy environment for think tank development [3]. The specific structure is shown in .

3.2 Tapping into Endowment Advantages to Promote New-Type Think Tank Construction The top-level design of new-type think tank construction does not aim to overthrow the existing decision-making consultation system but rather to build upon it by fully tapping into endowment advantages, optimizing the environment for collaborative construction, and promoting new-type think tank development. For instance, the Guangxi Party Committee and government attach great importance to local think tank development, increasing support for various think tanks. Within five years, Guangxi plans to launch a 6 billion yuan fund to implement the innovation-driven strategy and support key research bases. Simultaneously, Guangxi promotes the "revolving door" mechanism for talent, encouraging think tank personnel to take temporary positions in government departments or government officials to work at the grassroots level.

On the supply side of the think tank intellectual market, academy of social sciences think tanks conduct localized research, relying on solid fieldwork and extensive alliance cooperation for "Belt and Road" exchanges. University think tanks rely on collaborative innovation centers to build "bridges" with policy departments and promote research achievement transformation. They also incorporate think tank achievements into scientific research assessment scope to motivate research enthusiasm. Party school think tanks fully utilize student

and organizational advantages to implement a Chinese-characteristic “revolving door” mechanism, aiming to deeply understand regional conditions and improve policy service quality. Additionally, some local governments uphold the principle of “open think tank operation,” attracting talent and intelligence. A number of platform-type and media-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics have emerged in Guangxi. For example, the Guangxi Beibu Gulf (Beihai) Development Research Institute is a platform-type think tank jointly established by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Guangxi Academy of Social Sciences, and Beihai Municipal People’s Government. Leveraging the talent resources and forward-looking development concepts of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, combined with Beihai’s economic development conditions, it has become not only an important local think tank for Beihai but also an innovative development model for local new-type think tanks.

4. New Characteristics of Guangxi’s Think Tank Construction

Closely integrated with local social development characteristics, Guangxi’s think tanks have formed three major features in their research: local characteristics, openness, and applicability, respectively reflected in Guixue research, poverty alleviation research, and ASEAN research.

4.1 Guixue Research and Local Characteristics Millennia of cultural fusion and historical sedimentation have endowed Guangxi with unique flavor and characteristics. As a multi-ethnic residential area with profound historical heritage and rich cultural resources, Guangxi exhibits significant regional differences. The northern region, influenced earlier by central plain culture, formed a Guibei culture characterized by central plain culture. The southwestern and northwestern areas inhabited by indigenous ethnic minorities formed ethnic minority cultures with their own cultural cores. The northern coastal region features distinct maritime culture. Meanwhile, since modern times, the influence of Western culture on southern and northern coastal areas has created a new sense of open culture. In contemporary times, the intersection and integration of reform culture, local culture, and world culture have formed Guangxi’s unique cultural phenomenon [4].

Guixue is a local discipline and academic field established to systematically summarize and study Guangxi culture, conducting comprehensive research on Guangxi’s social, political, cultural, historical, religious, ethnic, and folk phenomena [5]. Its main research directions focus on humanities and social sciences (including traditional medicine), encompassing multi-disciplinary research achievements on Guangxi culture and related humanistic studies. The main research subjects are university think tanks and other types of think tanks in Guangxi, which promote characteristic discipline construction by deeply exploring regional cultural features, sorting out local development contexts, and promoting excellent cultural qualities. Think tanks with Guixue construction are mainly distributed in the Guangxi Guixue Research Institute, Guangxi Normal

University, Guangxi Education College, and Wuzhou University.

4.2 Poverty Alleviation Research and Applicability Characteristics

By the end of 2015, Guangxi still had approximately 4.5 million people in poverty [6], facing a formidable task to achieve the goal of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020. Confronted with this heavy responsibility, Guangxi's new-type think tanks have formed distinctive features.

First, they have widely solicited opinions and actively contributed suggestions on poverty alleviation. Guangxi think tanks conduct in-depth research on impoverished cities and counties, investigating local socioeconomic development conditions and proposing opinions and suggestions on poverty alleviation mechanisms. For instance, regarding the integration mechanism of poverty alleviation funds, the Guangxi Development Strategy Research Institute recommends improving city- and county-level performance-based competition mechanisms, gradually increasing the proportion of competitive allocation funds, and simplifying fund allocation procedures to accelerate the implementation of special poverty alleviation funds and projects [7]. Regarding the supervision mechanism for poverty alleviation projects in poor villages, the Guangxi Autonomous Region People's Government Development Research Center recommends establishing an integration mechanism linking supply-side structural reform with targeted poverty alleviation, combining relocation with industrial development, prioritizing education, technology, and skills training, and comprehensively promoting social security systems. Regarding the guarantee mechanism for poverty alleviation, it recommends establishing benefit evaluation, investment inspection, and follow-up service mechanisms [7]. To enhance policy implementation, the Guangxi Party School emphasizes that "targeted poverty alleviation requires more precise supervision," requiring improvements in policy implementer cultivation, strategic positioning, implementation tactics, resource integration, and supervision to better achieve poverty alleviation goals [8][9].

Second, they have brought intelligence to rural areas, with think tank scholars working on the front lines of poverty alleviation. Believing that "poverty alleviation must start with intelligence," Guangxi's local think tanks have sent personnel to impoverished areas to provide human resource investment and intellectual support. Through lectures, symposiums, forums, and think tank platforms, they pool collective wisdom. For example, in response to the autonomous region Party Committee's call for a "five-year battle to become moderately prosperous," young think tank experts from the Guangxi Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicinal Plants, Baise Academy of Agricultural Sciences, and relevant universities have joined the targeted poverty alleviation campaign, providing on-site solutions to villagers' industrial development technical problems [10]. The region has also continuously carried out "Spring Breeze Actions" for youth poverty alleviation.

Third, they have effectively expanded and extended think tank industrial chains to guide development in poor areas. Beyond actively participating in poverty

alleviation work, Guangxi think tanks have proactively connected with external resources, building “think tank bridges” to introduce suitable projects for local development. For instance, through Guangxi think tanks’ efforts, the China Circulation G30 has signed agreements with national-level poverty counties to establish targeted poverty alleviation bases, forming strategic partnerships in commercial circulation, e-commerce, project investment, project financing, construction, training, investment attraction, capital cooperation, and resource leadership [11].

4.3 ASEAN Research and Openness Characteristics Guangxi enjoys unique advantages in ASEAN research. With the “Belt and Road” vision, Guangxi has become an important gateway connecting the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Silk Road Economic Belt. Its unique geographical position as China’s only land-sea connection with ASEAN countries, combined with the development of the Beibu Gulf Economic Zone and the Pearl River-Xijiang Economic Belt, has created new strategic opportunities. Therefore, the “Guangxi Opinions” explicitly propose “focusing on consolidating and enhancing Guangxi’s characteristic core think tank construction for ASEAN strategic research.” Currently, the proposed characteristic think tanks include: the Guangxi Party School “Belt and Road” Research Institute, Guangxi Academy of Social Sciences China (Guangxi)-ASEAN Research Institute, Guangxi Federation of Social Sciences East Asian Economic and Political Research Center, China-ASEAN Regional Development Collaborative Innovation Center, Guangxi University China-ASEAN Research Institute, Guangxi University for Nationalities China-ASEAN Research Center, and Guangxi Autonomous Region Ethnic Affairs Commission Guangxi Ethnic Studies Center.

To strengthen connections with ASEAN countries, Guangxi think tanks employ a combination of “bringing in” and “going out” approaches. On one hand, they focus on China-ASEAN regional economic development issues, building information and databases to support national ministries such as the Ministry of Commerce and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, establishing research platforms with international vision and national conditions awareness. On the other hand, they cultivate high-level ASEAN contacts through frequent personnel exchanges between think tanks, developing a group of ASEAN contacts who are “knowledgeable and friendly.” They actively promote track II diplomacy through exchanges and cooperation, creating a “Belt and Road” three-dimensional pattern led by the government, driven by enterprises, and promoted by the people.

5. Reflections and Implications from Guangxi’s Think Tank Construction

Viewed from Southwest China to the whole country, Guangxi’s think tank development exemplifies how local new-type think tanks, based on unique geographical advantages and cultural characteristics, have not only contributed to the “Southwest Phenomenon” in the new normal but also emerged as a new

force in local think tank development. Its practices merit careful consideration and broader promotion.

5.1 Local Think Tanks as a Vital Force for Regional Development

During the transformation and upgrading process, Southwest China has not simply copied the systems and models of eastern coastal regions. Instead, by seizing new opportunities from global industrial transfer and the “Belt and Road” initiative, it has forged a new development path with local, ethnic, practical, and open characteristics. Southwest China’s impressive growth performance is inseparable from the efforts of local think tanks in reform and decision-making, as well as the high priority placed on think tank construction by local governments.

Historically, the role of local think tanks has been overlooked. Whether in terms of talent attraction, management capabilities, policy influence, or social impact, local think tanks seemed incomparable to national think tanks. However, the think tank factors reflected in the “Southwest Phenomenon” demonstrate that local think tanks are closest to local needs, most numerous, and serve as the “nerve endings” of the decision-making system and the “tail market” of the intellectual market. In the new era, the construction of a new-type think tank system with Chinese characteristics cannot neglect local think tank development. Localized public policy development aims to effectively enhance local governance capabilities, and by leveraging geographical position and regionally distinctive research content, local think tanks can secure greater development space.

5.2 Prioritizing Top-Level Design in Local Think Tank Construction

The core of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics is “Chinese characteristics.” Only by adhering to the principle of “Party leadership over think tanks” can we shape the correct value orientation of Chinese think tanks and ensure their sustainable development. However, in current local think tank construction, there has emerged a tendency of “better left than right,” with think tank construction being “loud thunder but little rain,” and institutional reforms failing to land. In policy advice, this manifests as using “correct but hollow” rhetoric to gloss over issues.

To further promote scientific, democratic, and legalized decision-making, think tank construction needs to uphold the correct value orientation of “seeking truth from facts” and build a policy-making system that encourages broad participation. The “Guangxi Opinions” have promoted policy openness and transparency to a certain extent. Beyond clarifying construction directions and publicizing them nationwide, they propose establishing and improving major decision-making consultation systems, consultation service systems, information disclosure and sharing systems, independent bidding systems, tracking and achievement transformation management systems, and think tank construction responsibility and assessment incentive systems. Through top-level design, the system guarantees channels for policy advice.

5.3 Integrating Think Tank Construction with Regional Advantages

China's vast territory features diverse provincial and regional conditions. As the "most grounded" think tanks, local think tanks possess local knowledge and regional sensibility in handling local affairs, with the potential to develop into specialized think tanks deeply rooted in local government decision-making needs. Guangxi serves as a major passage to ASEAN, a new strategic pivot for the opening-up and development of southwestern and south-central China, and an important gateway connecting the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Its geographical advantages bring new opportunities and missions for think tank development. Therefore, the forward-looking and strategic nature of local think tanks may lie at the intersection of national strategy and local practice—finding new positioning for local development within national strategy while providing new samples for national strategy through local practice, thereby promoting local socioeconomic transformation while inheriting traditional and local cultural elements.

5.4 Integrating Think Tank Construction with Local Development

Only by fully responding to the real needs of local transformation and development can local think tanks demonstrate their unique value. Guangxi think tanks stand from a neutral perspective, conducting in-depth grassroots research to understand people's livelihood pain points and solve development bottlenecks, especially in impoverished areas that need both "tangible assistance" and "intellectual support." By connecting with external resources and extending think tank industrial chains, they introduce suitable projects for local development. Only by merging the vision of local socioeconomic transformation with think tank development can a new path for local think tanks with Chinese characteristics be forged.

5.5 Strengthening Open Cooperation and Exchange

Local think tanks should uphold the concept of "openness," establishing exchange mechanisms not only with other think tanks within the province but also learning from top-tier domestic think tanks to expand their influence. Guangxi has made early efforts to coordinate think tank resources within the autonomous region, integrate research forces, and establish think tank alliances, with promising results. Meanwhile, Guangxi think tanks have established connections with top domestic think tanks. For example, Guangxi University China-ASEAN Research Institute has collaborated with Yunnan University, Xiamen University, Nankai University, University of International Business and Economics, Southwest Jiaotong University, PLA Strategic Research Institute, and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Asia-Pacific Global Strategy Research Institute. The Guangxi "Belt and Road" Research Institute has cooperated with Fudan University, and the Guangxi Beibu Gulf (Beihai) Development Research Institute has partnered with the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

5.6 Standardizing Think Tank Management Mechanisms It must be recognized that Chinese think tanks are still in their infancy, and standardized management mechanisms are essential for ensuring stable operation. Guangxi think tanks are exploring new management mechanisms, mainly reflected in: (1) think tank council construction to connect with local policy needs and guide research directions; (2) academic committee establishment to actively absorb external experts and enhance public governance standards; (3) Chinese-characteristic “revolving door” mechanism construction to guide talent flow between government and think tanks under Party Committee guidance; (4) scientific achievement assessment and promotion mechanisms to appropriately increase the proportion of think tank achievements in evaluations and reward important think tank outputs; (5) think tank team building with reasonable staffing structures and personnel project funds accounting for no less than 50%; and (6) achievement cultivation mechanisms to provide necessary technical support for expanding think tank influence.

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

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