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Postprint: A Study on the Organization and Mobility Patterns of Research Talent in Foreign Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Research talent constitutes the core competitiveness of think tanks, and the organizational and mobility patterns of research talent significantly influence the exertion of their research capabilities. [Method/Process] This study begins by examining the fundamental elements that affect the organization and mobility of think tank talent to derive three distinct talent organization and mobility patterns. Through case studies of representative think tanks exemplifying each of the three patterns, it summarizes best practices, experiences from foreign think tank development, and draws corresponding implications. [Results/Conclusion] Think tanks should, based on their developmental stage and other practical circumstances, select or integrate different talent organization and mobility patterns, thereby sustaining their research vitality and capacity.

Full Text

A Study on the Organizational and Flow Patterns of Research Talents in Foreign Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/significance] Research talents constitute the core competitiveness of think tanks, and their organizational and flow patterns significantly influence the effectiveness of their research capabilities. **[Method/process]** This paper identifies the basic elements affecting talent organization and mobility in think tanks, deriving three distinct patterns. Through case studies of representative think tanks for each pattern, we summarize advanced practices and experiences from foreign think tanks and derive corresponding implications. **[Result/conclusion]** Think tanks should select or integrate different talent organizational and flow patterns based on their development stage and actual circumstances to maintain research vitality and capacity.

Keywords: foreign think tanks; research talent; organizational pattern; flow pattern

Classification Number: C692

Think tanks differ from general research institutions in that they provide consultation and direct solutions for social realities and decision-making. Consequently, a think tank's core capability lies in its direct research and consulting capacity, and its development depends heavily on the abilities of its research talents. Through appropriate talent organization, think tanks ensure stable research capacity and efficiency, while talent mobility allows them to rapidly meet evolving demands. Simultaneously, research talents utilize think tanks as platforms to satisfy their personal development needs. Therefore, adopting suitable talent organizational and flow patterns better aligns the mutual needs of think tanks and research talents, thereby fully leveraging talent capabilities and values to enhance think tank strength.

1 Basic Elements Affecting the Organizational and Flow Forms of Research Talents in Think Tanks

For this study, talent flow is defined as working at an institution other than one's home institution (including visiting scholar positions, guest appointments, and other forms) for three months or one project cycle or longer. As environmental factors have minimal influence, we analyze the basic elements from the perspectives of both think tanks and talents. Literature review reveals that from a supply-demand perspective, think tank talent organization primarily relates to think tank strength (supply) and development needs, while talent inflow and outflow relate to the strength (supply) and needs of either the think tank or the talents themselves.

1.1 Think Tank Strength and Demand Determining Organizational and Flow Pattern Selection

Due to their sponsoring institutions or deliberate choices, think tanks adopt different positioning types during development. Based on primary service targets and research scope, domestic and foreign think tanks can be categorized into three main types: government-oriented research service think tanks, domain-specific think tanks focusing on particular industries or disciplines, and comprehensive large-scale think tanks serving all of society and all fields. Their research processes and emphases differ, leading to different talent division of labor, matching, and coordination methods—that is, different talent organization patterns. Consequently, varying demands for talent expertise drive different choices in talent flow patterns.

1.1.1 Think Tank Comprehensive Strength Academic strength forms the foundation of all think tank capabilities and constitutes a crucial resource that think tanks can provide to research talents. Additionally, soft power such as think tank reputation, networks, and cooperative relationships, as well as hardware strength including funding conditions and sponsoring institutions, also attract talent. Generally, think tanks in the establishment phase have relatively weaker strength but are on an upward trajectory, while mature think tanks possess stronger strength.

Stronger think tanks tend to adopt advanced, situation-appropriate talent organizational and flow patterns to reduce resource waste and improve efficiency, and they have greater capacity to make adjustments. Beyond designing talent team organization to achieve efficient and flexible talent allocation for various tasks, think tank strength also facilitates providing short-term exchange opportunities for internal talent and attracting external talent. Talent strength and think tank strength form a mutually reinforcing upward spiral.

1.1.2 Think Tank Development Needs Think tanks with different type positioning and strength levels have varying development needs, prompting them to select different talent and organizational forms to address these needs. Government-oriented research service think tanks maintain streamlined permanent research talent to control size, thus requiring the ability to rapidly hire excellent mobile talent. Domain-specific think tanks need to optimize the organization of their permanent research talent to enhance research efficiency and further improve institutional strength through short-term talent flow. Comprehensive large-scale think tanks, being relatively mature and well-developed, have high requirements for maintaining research vitality and quality through talent organization and flow.

1.2 Research Talent Strength and Demand

1.2.1 Research Talent Comprehensive Strength Talent academic ability represents the primary capability required by think tanks. Talent influence

and the strength of their home institutions also satisfy think tank needs for rapidly expanding cooperative networks and enhancing research impact. Talent strength constitutes an important component of think tank strength, making it a key basis for determining talent positions within the organization and a primary driver of talent flow.

Based on comprehensive talent strength, think tank talent can be categorized into three types: core research talent, general organizational talent, and regular auxiliary talent. Core research talent are typically academic leaders and project principal investigators. General organizational talent provides primary support to core research talent in projects, while regular auxiliary talent completes tasks assigned by the former two types. The importance and irreplaceability of these three talent types in the research team form a pyramid that decreases downward, though the latter categories can enhance their strength to achieve upward transformation.

1.2.2 Research Talent Development Needs To achieve transformation to higher levels and occupy more important positions in the talent organization, research talents need to enhance their comprehensive strength. Beyond research ability, various experiences such as visiting scholarships and research visits are increasingly incorporated into talent evaluation criteria. Consequently, research talents hold increasingly open attitudes toward short-term mobility to enhance their strength in order to meet think tank assessment and promotion requirements. Additionally, establishing professional networks and receiving generous compensation and benefits also serve as drivers for talent flow.

2 Organizational and Flow Patterns of Research Talents in Think Tanks

As analyzed above, the key to long-term permanent talent organization lies in adapting to top-down framework design, while short-term mobile talent provides flexible adjustment to established organizational structures from the bottom up. Through supply-demand relationships, think tanks balance the three types of internal talent—core, general, and regular auxiliary—by dispatching and exchanging their permanent talent to become mobile talent for other institutions while simultaneously absorbing talent from other research institutions as mobile talent, thereby complementing each other to build a complete think tank talent team.

Based on the talent organizational forms commonly adopted by think tanks and the ratio between permanent and mobile talent in the talent team, we categorize think tank talent organizational and flow patterns into three types: (1) a project-oriented flexible talent organization and flow pattern where permanent and mobile talent are equally matched; (2) an industry-leading accumulation talent organization and flow pattern with stronger permanent talent strength;

and (3) a comprehensive talent organization and flow pattern covering all fields with flexible changes between permanent and mobile talent.

2.1 Project-Oriented Flexible Talent Organization and Flow Pattern

To control institutional scale, reduce unnecessary expenses, and maintain organizational flexibility, some think tanks choose to build streamlined, efficient talent teams and hire external talent as needed based on the requirements of undertaken projects.

In terms of team composition, the total number of research talent is relatively small, with permanent talent equal to or even fewer than mobile talent. The core and general organizational talent teams are streamlined with strong comprehensive strength, sometimes participating in basic research work as permanent talent. Mobile talent possesses relatively strong comprehensive strength and often participates in core research as core and general organizational talent. In project teams formed by externally hired mobile talent based on projects, the number of external experts may exceed that of permanent talent. Think tanks control the number and types of talent flowing outward.

2.2 Industry-Leading Accumulation Talent Organization and Flow Pattern

Due to institutional scale and development stage limitations, domain-specific think tanks first choose to achieve industry-leading levels in certain fields. This requires elite core research talent in these fields to serve the think tank directly on a long-term, stable basis, while high-quality talent in non-priority areas can be supplemented through short-term mobility.

In terms of team composition, the total number of research personnel is medium, with permanent talent exceeding mobile talent. Talent teams in priority fields possess strong comprehensive strength, with the vast majority being long-term permanent hires. Short-term mobile talent, whose expertise relates to the think tank's priority fields, can participate in research as general organizational talent. Talent teams in non-priority areas primarily consist of permanent general organizational talent, with externally hired mobile talent based on projects whose numbers may exceed permanent talent. Think tanks encourage outflow of permanent talent to enhance their strength.

2.3 Comprehensive Talent Organization and Flow Pattern Covering All Fields

After long-term development, comprehensive large-scale think tanks have become relatively mature with substantial scale and influence, possessing the capacity to rapidly respond to multi-domain research projects. Such think tanks have strong comprehensive talent teams in multiple fields, with a continuous stream of new talent seeking to join, forming a vibrant and high-quality stable "talent flow."

In terms of team composition, the total number of research personnel is relatively large, with permanent talent far exceeding mobile talent. Talent teams are complete with strong comprehensive strength, and permanent talent cultivation and promotion channels are smooth. Think tanks regularly recruit and hire mobile talent and dispatch permanent talent for purposes such as resource exchange and network building. They support research talent holding concurrent positions inside and outside the institution. Foreign think tanks of this type have established mature “revolving door” systems.

3 Case Studies of Organizational and Flow Patterns in Foreign Think Tanks

This chapter selects three well-known foreign think tanks as typical representatives of the three different talent organizational and flow patterns.

3.1 Project-Oriented Flexible Talent Organization and Flow Pattern: The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA)

The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) was established in 1959 after World War II as a peripheral organization of Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to better understand diplomatic policies of various countries. JIIA has fewer permanent than mobile talent[1], possessing attributes of both a small-scale domain-specific think tank and a government-oriented research service think tank.

[Figure 4: see original paper]

3.1.1 Streamlined Permanent Talent Team As a public interest corporation, JIIA maintains a lean organization, establishing four research centers divided by focused regions and fields. The permanent research staff includes 16 directors, fellows, research advisors, and special researchers, all belonging to core or general research talent. Each researcher has a distinct research area and is assigned to different project teams when undertaking various projects and research tasks.

3.1.2 Project-Oriented Talent Pooling and Influence-Enhancing Talent Exchange JIIA currently has 20 mobile talents including guest and senior guest researchers and visiting scholars, and ensures a stable number of long-term part-time researchers. Based on undertaken projects, JIIA hires external researchers to form project teams, with external experts often constituting the majority[2], and disbands the teams upon project completion. For example, in the research team for the “Security Policy” sub-project under “A Reality Check on Security Policies—Circumstances on the Korean Peninsula and in the Middle East (FY2015-2016)” [3][4], group leader KAMIYA Matake is an expert from the National Defense Academy and a part-time researcher at JIIA; the five team

members are researchers, professors, or associate professors from different universities or research institutions; and two secretaries from JIIA serve as both team members and liaison/administrative staff.

JIIA hosts or participates in approximately 10 international forums and seminars annually, actively promoting exchanges, cooperation, and mutual visits with foreign research institutions and experts.

3.2 Industry-Leading Accumulation Talent Organization and Flow Pattern: Center for International Studies and Research (CERI), Sciences Po

The Center for International Studies and Research (CERI) at Sciences Po, established in 1952, ranks 7th among global university-affiliated think tanks[5]. Leveraging Sciences Po' s long-standing strengths in political science, sociology, and other disciplines, CERI holds a bellwether position in international relations and regional politics. After decades of development, CERI has formed a complete and stable talent organization and flow pattern. Through investigation[6], CERI' s research talent team composition is summarized in Table 2.

3.2.1 Stable and Complete Talent Organization CERI fully utilizes PhD student resources, who become permanent talent during their studies to assist in think tank work. Excluding honorary researchers, CERI' s permanent talent forms a relatively complete and stable pyramid-shaped core-general-regular auxiliary talent team, with senior or full-time researchers as core research talent, assistant researchers and other mid-level and junior researchers as general organizational talent, and PhD students as regular auxiliary talent.

CERI' s permanent researchers simultaneously undertake professional research and teaching responsibilities at Sciences Po, enjoying greater autonomy in selecting research content and directions. They can independently form research groups based on projects without being responsible to specific departments.

3.2.2 School-Affiliated Talent Flow Pattern CERI recruits contract researchers and part-time researchers for rapid project response. Currently, CERI has 23 guest researchers from various countries, mostly university faculty, which increases research perspectives and opportunities for dispatched research talent to learn.

CERI fully utilizes Sciences Po' s resources. The university has educated 7 French presidents, 12 foreign ministers, and multiple directors-general of the UN and other international organizations. Leveraging the extensive network and cooperative relationships established by prominent alumni and integrating CERI projects with university exchange programs increases exchange and visiting opportunities for various talent types.

3.3 Comprehensive Talent Organization and Flow Pattern Covering All Fields: RAND Corporation

While U.S. think tanks generally have no more than 100 researchers, RAND Corporation currently employs 1,875 researchers. Their diversity in professional fields, political backgrounds, social experiences, and work experience provides a solid foundation for RAND to assemble diverse talent teams.

3.3.1 Dual-Matrix Internal Talent Organization RAND has comprehensive and complete research teams with superior comprehensive strength in most research fields. For example, in the “Anthropology” field with 18 personnel[7]: 5 senior scientists serve as research cores, 4 scientists and 1 assistant scientist serve as general organizational talent, and 2 senior researchers, 4 analysts, and 2 research assistants primarily undertake auxiliary tasks.

RAND implements matrix-style organizational management between researchers and research projects. Researchers administratively belong to six “Researcher Management Departments,” while projects are affiliated with eleven research units, creating a “dual-matrix talent organization pattern” [8]. Project leaders can recruit and allocate research talent from management departments based on project needs to form project teams for concentrated work. Upon project completion, researchers return to their original departments and are reorganized based on new projects, forming an internal talent mobility mechanism.

[Figure 5: see original paper]

3.3.2 Diverse “Bring In” and “Go Out” Approaches To prevent academic rigidity and ensure research team rejuvenation, RAND employs multiple methods to attract mobile talent. Beyond specially appointed experts from universities, enterprises, and other research institutions, “bring in” talent mainly includes: rehiring departing senior officials and experts from government departments; hosting strong foreign scholars as guests and visiting scholars; and utilizing graduate students from RAND’s Pardee RAND Graduate School for auxiliary work.

RAND also emphasizes “going out” by dispatching key researchers to work at other research institutions for periods. Main measures include: providing part-time positions at enterprises and institutes or facilitating work in government for periods; providing regular access to government policy leaders and planning groups; offering exchange opportunities with enterprises and institutes; and supporting researchers to serve as visiting scholars at institutes, attend academic conferences related to research, and conduct field investigations related to business and projects.

3.4 Advanced Think Tank Construction Experiences and Pattern Comparison

JIIA demonstrates strong talent organization and aggregation capabilities by timely responding to various projects from government, enterprises, and individuals despite its streamlined organization and small permanent talent pool, offering valuable lessons for Chinese government and civil society think tanks.

France and China share similarities in political environment, such as relatively weak local autonomy compared to other Western countries and strong government intervention in the economy. Sciences Po functions similarly to France's "Central Party School" with close ties to French political circles, making it highly relevant for Chinese university and industry think tanks.

As an established top-tier think tank, RAND Corporation possesses rich and mature talent organization and flow patterns. Despite its large size, it operates in an orderly manner and has reached a stage where talent actively seeks to join, serving as a learning model for various think tanks in their later development stages.

4 Construction Experience and Implications for Think Tank Talent Organization and Flow

Excellent think tank cases at home and abroad demonstrate that rational organization of permanent talent provides stable research capacity that meets most research needs. However, when permanent talent cannot satisfy think tank demands or when certain short-term needs do not require changing talent organizational forms, the advantages of mobile talent—rapid recruitment and diverse strengths—become prominent.

Most Chinese characteristic new-type think tanks are composed of previously established research units with fixed staffing, resulting in relatively fixed talent teams. Therefore, improving the rationality of talent organization and fully leveraging mobile talent can stimulate think tank research vitality.

4.1 Accurately Grasp Think Tank Type and Reality, Establish Internal and External Talent Pools to Track Talent Dynamics

Think tanks of different types and development stages require different talent organizational and flow patterns. Blindly copying other think tanks' practices not only wastes human and material resources but also risks missing development opportunities.

Utilize type positioning and think tank strength as two dimensions to determine institutional reality and infer development needs. Evaluate domain-relevant talent inside and outside the think tank based on comprehensive strength indicators, record them in a talent pool, and update it regularly. Fully utilize the

tracking and forecasting functions of the talent pool to identify talent development needs. By matching think tank and talent strengths and needs, prepare multiple suitable talent team plans for the institution.

4.2 Open Internal Promotion Channels and Expand External Talent Cooperation Networks

When establishing long-term research teams, think tanks should plan at the institutional level, focusing on matching core and general organizational talent, and provide opportunities for talent to fully utilize their strengths. Improve evaluation dimensions and tracking assessment mechanisms for talent strength, and open channels for internal promotion from regular auxiliary talent to general talent.

Based on the institution's talent team plan, maintain long-term cooperative relationships with external research talent. Whether through part-time appointments or long-term special hires, this enables rapid team assembly for projects while simplifying procedures and reducing costs. Through dispatching permanent talent for external exchanges, think tanks can both enhance permanent talent strength and gain understanding of advanced practices at other institutions while deepening cooperation.

4.3 Develop Practical Implementation Measures Based on Selected Talent Organization and Flow Patterns

For think tanks selecting the project-oriented flexible talent organization and flow pattern, permanent talent organization should focus on being streamlined with broad domain coverage and ensured talent strength. Complete talent echelons in relevant fields are unnecessary, but permanent talent must possess industry vision and the ability to manage project progress. Correspondingly, this pattern requires high-quality construction of external talent pools, maintaining cooperative relationships with a certain number of excellent talents and talent echelons. This pattern also requires controlling talent outflow but can stimulate research ideas through short-term exchange activities such as seminars.

For think tanks selecting the industry-leading accumulation talent organization and flow pattern, permanent talent organization should focus on complete echelons, relative stability, and smooth promotion channels. Internally, achieve dynamic balance in talent echelons and ensure research quality through talent cultivation and elimination mechanisms. Externally, increase dispatch opportunities and accept mobile researchers from other institutions to enhance industry influence and attract excellent talent.

For think tanks selecting the comprehensive talent organization and flow pattern covering all fields, permanent talent organization should focus on internal mobility. By separating personnel management from project management, this pattern achieves flexible project team allocation with stable permanent talent, combining the strengths of both accumulation and flexible patterns. For mobile

talent, the focus is on increasing influence rather than enhancing talent strength, thus the threshold is higher but more open.

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Author Contributions

Yang Wenhui: Topic selection, article writing and revision;

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Kong Yuan: Provision of some cases and revision suggestions.

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