

## Operational Mechanism of TED Think Tank and Its Implications for Chinese Think Tank Development: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Objective/Significance] The “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council points out that new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics need to strengthen their external communication capacity, should utilize mass media and other means to disseminate mainstream ideological values, and gather positive social energy. Research on the communication methods and pathways of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics is of great significance.

[Method/Process] This paper analyzes the origin, development, and dissemination of TED from the perspective of think tanks, particularly the rapid development brought about by its organizational model innovation, and subsequently proposes aspects that Chinese think tanks can learn from.

[Result/Conclusion] In the new era, new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics should strengthen their considerations in organizational innovation, topic selection, quality, and communication channels to ensure their sustainable development and alignment with China’s major-country status with Chinese characteristics.

### Full Text

## The Operating Mechanism of TED and Its Implications for the Construction of Think Tanks in China

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/Significance]** The *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the CPC and the General Office of the State Council points out that new think tanks with Chinese characteristics need to strengthen their external communication capabilities. They must utilize mass media and other means to disseminate mainstream ideological values and gather positive social energy. Research on the communication methods and pathways of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics is therefore of great significance. **[Methods/Process]** From the perspective of think tanks, this paper analyzes the origin, development, and dissemination of TED, particularly examining the rapid growth driven by its organizational model innovation, and subsequently proposes aspects that Chinese think tanks can learn from. **[Result/Conclusion]** In the new era, new think tanks with Chinese characteristics should strengthen their thinking regarding organizational innovation, topic selection, quality control, and communication channels to ensure sustainable development that matches China's status as a major power.

**Keywords:** think tank; TED; organizational model

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President Xi Jinping has repeatedly issued important instructions on think tank development, emphasizing that think tanks are a crucial component of national soft power and that we must attach great importance to actively exploring organizational forms and management methods for new think tanks with Chinese characteristics. These instructions demonstrate that think tank construction is an important part of advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities, while also pointing out the fundamental direction and putting forward overall requirements for building new think tanks with Chinese characteristics.

The rapid advancement of information technology has triggered major changes in the global media landscape. Due to their professional specialization, extensive channels, smooth dissemination, and high coverage, media organizations possess “inherent advantages” in think tank development. The emergence of media-type think tanks is an inevitable product of technological transformation interacting with traditional media transformation. International top-tier think tanks such as the RAND Corporation, Brookings Institution, and European Policy Centre in Brussels have all experienced a development process from policy circles and academic circles to the general public. On the one hand, this is an inherent necessity for think tank development—while serving leadership decision-making, influencing the public is an inevitable way for think tanks to expand their influence. On the other hand, social progress and reform are complex, public knowledge levels are rising, and willingness to participate in politics is gradually strengthening, all of which require think tanks to build a “bridge” between government and the people.

In the University of Pennsylvania's ranking of the world's top science and technology think tanks, TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) has consistently ranked in the top 30 since 2010 as a global leader among media-type think tanks, long discussed with great interest in think tank circles, particularly in science and technology think tanks. Having become a world-class think tank in just over 30 years since its establishment, studying TED's development, operation, and organizational innovation holds important significance for the development of Chinese think tanks in the new era.

TED rankings in global science and technology think tanks

*Note: Data source 2010-2016 University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP)*

In 1984, American architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman founded TED. In its early years, TED positioned itself as an elite closed gathering in the style of a "Silicon Valley elite carnival." The concept of "ideas worth spreading" was confined to a small circle of technology and design, and the early TED could be defined as a "niche think tank for a specific elite class." The elite-leaning Richard Saul Wurman established TED's initial rules, such as using 18—the number representing "world life" in Jewish culture—as the time limit for each talk. The 18-minute talk duration both avoided tedious length and forced speakers to prepare their content more carefully. At that time, TED was purely a platform for sharing ideas, with the audience being those physically present, not billions of online viewers.

In 2001, Chris Anderson, former editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine, joined TED, fundamentally changing its operation. First, its focus expanded from technology, entertainment, and design to nearly all topics today, featuring speakers in up to 100 languages with content unrestricted by politics, religion, gender, or other limitations.

In 2009, TED opened its brand licensing through the TEDx program, which uses cities as names and combines local stories with officially recognized conference formats, allowing TED enthusiasts worldwide to hold TEDx events locally. The official license charges no fees and is completely independently planned and coordinated by organizers, aiming to realize TED's philosophy and stimulate participants' passion for promoting idea dissemination within their communities. TEDx events combine TED talk videos with local guests, thereby spreading TED's spirit worldwide. Based on TED's philosophy of "ideas worth spreading," the TEDx project creates a local TED-like experience by promoting dialogue among communities, organizations, and individuals. The TEDx program has proven remarkably effective, with 35 cities joining in its first year. As of the end of June 2018, a cumulative total of 26,128 events had been held globally, with 2,796 events in preparation.

As an institution that both hosts online video playback and offline events, TED seamlessly integrates content with products, building content influence and establishing strong user connections that cause its dissemination power to increase

geometrically—something worth learning for new media, knowledge payment, and content companies. Particularly in the new era, TED’ s model offers extremely important insights for think tanks using mass media and other means to disseminate mainstream ideological values and gather positive social energy.

In 2006, Anderson made a major strategic decision that would affect TED’ s future development—turning years of recorded speech resources into TED Talks and uploading them to the Internet for global audiences to download and watch for free. This approach generated considerable controversy within TED at the time. Anderson insisted that locking so many potentially influential speeches in a room was useless; it would be better to use the Internet as a platform to reach a global audience and better realize its philosophy of “spreading ideas.” TED’ s achievements today have been enormous: from 2006 to 2018, more than 2,800 videos on TED’ s official website have been viewed over 6 billion times. With its unique development model and new sharing philosophy, TED has risen rapidly to become a highly watched focus in the global OER (Open Educational Resources) field in a very short time, successfully completing its transformation from a closed elite group to a knowledge-sharing think tank platform.

## 2.2 Cultivating the TED Conference as the Main Revenue Source

Simultaneously, Anderson began to cultivate the TED conference. The TED conference is held annually in March-April in Monterey, California, and later gradually expanded to the West Coast of North America, subsequently attracting a growing number of influential attendees. As TED think tank’s core product and exchange platform, more than 1,000 people attend the five-day TED conference each year, gathering scientists, Nobel laureates, leaders of well-known enterprises, designers, and intellectuals who, based on curiosity and open-mindedness, share their surprising discoveries with each other, making the TED conference quickly popular worldwide and becoming a global vane in science and technology and other fields. Among the ten most popular videos globally in 2016, seven came from that year’ s TED conference.

At each annual TED conference, the “TED Prize” is awarded to three outstanding individuals, rewarding their “world-changing” ideas. In addition to the TED conference, there are other events including TED Global, TED Women, and TED Youth.

Each year’ s TED conference produces many wonderful speeches. Due to language barriers, many speeches were previously limited to English speakers. Therefore, in 2009, TED launched the Open Translation Project. This program provides English subtitles and interactive transcripts by TED, which are then translated into various languages by global volunteers. As of June 2018, the translation project has covered 116 languages with over 30,000 translation volunteers, translating 130,968 videos.

Free online video dissemination has not made TED talks cheap; on the contrary, more and more people have come to recognize TED’ s value through online

videos. The threshold for attending face-to-face conferences remains high. In 2006, TED conference ticket prices increased by 50%. Despite this, all tickets were sold out within a week, and more than 1,000 people applied for additional tickets. In 2013, the price rose to \$7,500, and in 2016 and 2017, standard tickets were \$8,500, yet they remained hard to obtain. Alphabet's two founders—CEO Larry Page and President Sergey Brin, Microsoft Vice President Joe Belfiore, Twitter and Uber investor Chris Sacca, and Amazon founder's brother Mark Bezos were all attendees of the 2017 conference. Ticket revenue from the April 2017 TED conference alone exceeded \$20 million. According to the official website, the 2018 base ticket price rose to \$10,000. The conference has become TED's main revenue source, much higher than donations or publishing operations, accounting for nearly two-thirds of TED's total income. According to an estimate by *The New York Times Magazine*, due to TED's high ticket prices, continuously rising brand value, and new revenue sources such as recently added TED online live streaming and broadcast live streaming, each TED conference generates at least \$23 million in revenue.

The tremendous improvement in economic benefits has further improved the organizer's efficiency and gradually enhanced the conference's network environment. Driven by Anderson's media philosophy of "openness and interaction," TED has expanded beyond technology, entertainment, and design into education, culture, business, arts, and other fields. From the themes of TED conferences between 2000 and 2018, each year's theme has almost been a cross-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary comprehensive theme exploring future changes. All ideas related to innovative human life can be shared on this forum, breaking through industry and field distinctions. It is hard to imagine a magician sharing the stage with a Nobel laureate, yet people from vastly different backgrounds might address the same issue.

2008-2018 conference of the TED

### **2008**

Location: Monterey, California

Theme: Who are we? What is our place in the universe? What is life? Is beauty truth? Will evil prevail? How do we change the world? How do we create? What is out there? What will tomorrow look like? What stirs us? How dare we be optimistic? What is the key to the question?

### **2009**

Theme: The Great Unveiling. This was TED's 25th anniversary. Everyone first presented an exciting discovery, revolutionary idea, powerful invention, spectacular artwork, and first performance. We shared undiscovered talents and unveiled new chapters for names you know.

### **2010**

Theme: The World Right Now. TEDActive was launched. People from such different backgrounds appeared in the same conference, speaking on topics different from their usual identities.

**2011**

Theme: Rediscovery of Wonder. We gathered a group of explorers, storytellers, photographers, science pioneers, visionaries, and provocateurs from around the world to inspire unprecedented imagination. We added a large number of thoughtful insights so that our dreams of possibilities would be anchored in reality. We are dramatically transforming the ancient art of language, pushing it forward with rich use of multiple technologies, formats, and methods to have the most powerful impact on the audience.

**2012**

Theme: Young, Wise, and Undiscovered. We assembled the world's most outstanding talents and, through a series of TED salons in 14 cities worldwide, helped us discover a large number of thinkers and doers, inviting them to California to share their work with the world.

**2013**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: The most important developments of the past 30 years...and applying this knowledge to...

**2014**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: Truth and Courage. Faced with this rapidly changing world, we will seek deeper truths, richer understanding, better questions, challenge perceptions of truth, and dare to imagine the future.

**2015**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: Dreaming is more important today than ever before. Humanity has more capabilities, connections, and possibilities than ever before.

**2016**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: The rapid development of artificial intelligence has made this world a near-future possibility. But what will this future look like? How will it change our lives?

**2017**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: The Age of Amazement. With technological progress and social change, we will seek an exciting and insightful way forward.

**2018**

Location: Vancouver, Canada

Theme: The Age of Amazement. With technological progress and social change, we will seek an exciting and insightful way forward.

*Note: Data source <https://conferences.TED.com>*

### 2.3 “Training” in Speech Format Creates Beauty Under the Spotlight

In addition to inviting outstanding individuals from various fields to speak, TED invests substantial funds in “training” them. Most people are not natural speakers, and even if their ideas are world-class, they may not be able to express them in words. TED must package those ideas worth spreading. The TED team spends six months communicating with speakers, explaining the dos and don’ts of 18-minute talks, including tone and body language. For an 18-minute talk alone, both parties revise it back and forth several times. Having content alone is not enough—all details affecting participants’ senses, including stage, lighting, music, and scenery, are designed and revised by a team of one hundred people. Months of careful preparation are ultimately condensed into an 18-minute talk. Each outstanding speech becomes a new benchmark, prompting the next speaker to deliver even more brilliant content. Meanwhile, this huge spotlight effect makes more intellectual collisions possible, stimulating people’s desire for innovative thinking.

### 2.4 No Sponsored Promotion—Quality Control is the “Lifeline”

Quality is the first step toward sharing. Although speakers are leaders in their respective fields, TED still regards quality control as its “lifeline,” with peer review becoming an important standard for judging speech guests. Before speakers present, TED needs to confirm that their work has been peer-reviewed and well-received by other scientists. Although TED accepts sponsorship from various businesses, sponsors must not engage in any form of product or service promotion during speeches. It is this high standard, cautious and meticulous arrangement that ensures speech quality and guarantees TED’s cutting-edge and leading position. Furthermore, by sharing its videos through public platforms such as iTunes, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter, TED continuously attracts global public attention. This approach not only enables ordinary people to freely share the latest innovative ideas but also makes more and more speakers willing to participate in TED conferences to publicize and spread their new ideas, creating a virtuous cycle.

## 3. Challenges and Opportunities for the Development of Think Tanks in China

In Chinese history, think tanks have been an important component of the governance system and governance models, occupying a very important position. Throughout history, all wise monarchs and capable ministers attached great importance to think tanks; terms such as retainers, private advisors, and military strategists were all used to refer to think tank talents. During the Warring States period, Zhao Sheng, Prince of Pingyuan and a minister of the Zhao state, treated talented people with courtesy and was said to have three thousand retainers. The protagonist of the idiom “Mao Sui’s self-recommendation,” Mao Sui, came from among them. Although among the three thousand retainers there

were those who were ostentatious but useless, from the perspective of historical development, this could be considered a top-tier think tank.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping explicitly instructed that Chinese characteristic think tanks should be built according to the principle of “moderately ahead of schedule, serving decision-making,” pointing out the direction for the future development of Chinese think tanks. In 2015, the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the CPC and the General Office of the State Council pointed out that think tanks are an important component of national soft power. We must increase think tank construction, support scientific decision-making with scientific consultation, guide scientific development with scientific decision-making, and give full play to the important role of think tanks in governing the country and managing state affairs. For a time, consulting companies, party schools, universities, and government research departments all claimed to be think tanks. However, think tanks are very different from academic institutions and consulting companies, and academic institutions and consulting companies cannot be equated with think tanks.

According to the *2017 Global Think Tank Report* global think tank rankings, Chinese think tanks have developed rapidly in recent years. In 2017, China had 512 think tanks, ranking as the world’s second-largest think tank country. Despite the large number, many think tanks still have a long way to go in supporting scientific decision-making, releasing important reports, disseminating Chinese stories, and cultivating talent.

### **3.1 Improving International Communication Capacity and Seizing International Discourse Power on Issues**

Today’s world structure is undergoing profound changes. Promoting the dissemination of positive Chinese energy in the international community, responsibly telling Chinese stories well, spreading the Chinese voice, demonstrating a real, multi-dimensional, and comprehensive China, and improving national cultural soft power are the responsibilities and obligations of think tank communication. However, “the dream is beautiful, but the reality is harsh.” A report in the U.S. *Foreign Policy* pointed out a list of 13 regional policy discourse centers in 7 major global regions, and neither Beijing nor Shanghai was included. This shows that the internationalization level of Chinese think tanks is relatively lagging, they have not yet established influence in the international community, and have not formed their own unique discourse power in international affairs. This point does not match China’s status as a major country. Therefore, establishing Chinese think tanks from the perspective of global communication channels is of great significance.

On April 16, 2018, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that the U.S. government would ban ZTE from purchasing sensitive products from U.S. companies for the next 7 years. For a time, domestic think tanks emerged to

analyze the future development trends of ZTE and technology. The increasingly complex China-U.S. trade friction triggered by the “ZTE incident” reflects the serious absence of forward-looking prediction by Chinese think tanks and also exposes that Chinese think tanks should speak more “Chinese voices” in international mainstream media so that the international community can recognize the essence of matters. At the same time, Chinese think tanks should strengthen systematic understanding of the Trump administration and the U.S. political and decision-making system and propose effective suggestions.

### **3.3 Strengthening the Cultivation of Professional Think Tank Talent and Establishing a Training Mechanism Different from University Training Models**

Taking the American RAND Corporation as an example, its subsidiary institution, the Pardee Graduate School, is a cradle for cultivating senior decision-makers and is highly authoritative in policy analysis. The Pardee Graduate School’s talent training model is completely different from that of ordinary universities, focusing on policy analysis and advocating the philosophy that “a qualified policy analyst must have profound background knowledge in social and natural sciences, master a variety of different analytical techniques, and have the ability and confidence to engage in interdisciplinary research.” For more than 40 years since its establishment, the Pardee Graduate School has not only cultivated a large number of reserve talents for RAND Corporation but also cultivated and delivered a large number of excellent decision-making consulting talents for American society. In contrast, domestic think tank talent cultivation currently lacks professional training for most think tank personnel, who mostly go directly from university graduation to think tank institutions, lacking systematic research methods. It is difficult for research results to reach a certain height and depth in a short time.

## **4. Implications of TED for the Discourse System and Communication Channels of Chinese Think Tanks**

As the global pattern undergoes obvious changes and the complexity of China’s public governance and the arduousness of comprehensive deepening reform increase decision-makers’ demand for think tanks, Chinese think tanks have entered a new stage of vigorous development. Chinese characteristic new media think tanks should adhere to both international comparison and local conditions, actively learn from TED’s development experience and innovative methods, and achieve further development in terms of philosophy, topic selection, speech methods, and promotion channels.

#### **4.1 Openness, Innovation, and Cooperation Should Become the Main Theme of Domestic Think Tanks**

TED' s transformation from near bankruptcy to a global top-tier science and technology think tank should attribute its success to openness, innovation, and cooperation. Anderson' s advocacy of the open concept is essentially an innovative concept, a breaking of original rules and the creation of a new symbiotic ecosystem. Driven by the media philosophy of “openness and interaction,” this originally technology-heavy gathering was transformed into a more open and diverse conference, bringing TED unexpected growth speed and development space.

Chinese think tank development has formed an overall pattern where different types of think tanks coexist and complement each other. In addition to several main think tank types such as public institutions, universities, and pure non-governmental organizations, enterprise think tanks, media-type think tanks, and mixed-ownership think tanks have emerged. Diversification enables different think tanks to leverage their respective advantages. Whether traditional think tanks or newly developed media-type think tanks, they should pay more attention to national strategies, government needs, and public aspirations. In this regard, they can learn from TED' s development philosophy, build platforms for dialogue and exchange, broaden research fields, and promote interactive exchanges and cooperation among government, social elites, and ordinary people in a more open, innovative, and cooperative manner.

#### **4.2 Topic Selection Should Focus on Science and Technology and Industrial Transformation and a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind**

Since the first TED conference, many conference topics have been closely linked with the most cutting-edge technology products. TED talks have witnessed progress and leaps in human technology time and again. From the annual conference themes, it can be seen that topics such as dreams, the future, truth, and artificial intelligence all revolve around the general direction and trends of future technological revolutions and industrial transformations. At the same time, topics closely related to human life have been highly promoted in recent years –disease, environment, disaster, life, etc. This kind of topics involving cutting-edge technology and human destiny gives TED videos unparalleled depth and human charm.

For a long time, domestic think tanks have paid relatively insufficient attention to global and international issues, resulting in low international visibility and lack of discourse power. In recent years, with China' s rise, this situation has changed. Topics proposed by China, such as “a community with a shared future for mankind” and “the Belt and Road Initiative,” have become hot topics of discussion in the international community. However, in terms of overall internationalization level, the degree is still very limited. Compared with TED,

domestic media-type think tanks lag behind in research fields, with relatively little research on global climate change, environmental protection, and exploration of cosmic mysteries. In future development, domestic media-type think tanks should keep up with international frontiers, actively research cutting-edge topics, pay more attention to leading the general direction and trends of future technological revolutions and industrial transformations in topic selection, and focus on topics closely related to human destiny.

### **4.3 Innovate Speech Methods and Let More Think Tank People Step into the Spotlight**

The only purpose of a speech is to share valuable ideas and to share them sincerely in a unique way. In terms of speech time, no TED talk video exceeds 18 minutes, which is the maximum duration that ordinary people can concentrate continuously. Strict time control means speakers need to present the core content brilliantly within the specified time, which inevitably means some scientific concepts must be simplified. But importantly, they cannot be misleading. The audience can also access a large amount of information in a very short time, creating a sense of “value for money.” Domestic speeches are often too long, lacking efficiency and practicality. In terms of time, we can refer to TED’ s model, set appropriate speech time intervals, so that the audience will not feel bored due to excessive length and can benefit from its clear classification and structured design model.

In terms of speakers, TED invites speech guests from various industries and fields, including former U.S. President William Clinton, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, legal expert Bryan Stevenson, primatologist Jane van Lawick-Goodall, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, obscure designers, and even 13-year-old children. However, they share a common characteristic: without exception, they are all people who like to think, live actively, persistently pursue innovation, and love their careers. Anyone with ideas, wisdom, and the power to move people’ s hearts can become a TED speaker. This is also a further integration and absorption of elite culture and grassroots culture, driving network interactive exchanges between social elites and ordinary people, enhancing TED’ s cohesion, and building a network community based on ideals, disciplines, and interests that demonstrates the temperament of freedom, equality, and sharing.

In terms of speech content, domestic think tanks can refer to TED’ s stance of having no formal ban on any topic and being neutral, treating any topic equally. However, they should add some scientific and social evaluation criteria. For example, in science, TEDx’ s science guidelines clearly state that science and health information must be supported by peer-reviewed research. At TED, we are interested in understanding the potential impact of new scientific discoveries, which is crucial for inspiring further exploration and discovery. TED speakers do not greet or introduce themselves at the beginning but cut directly to the subject. Content covers global frontier fields such as technology, entertainment, design, business, science, and global issues, with a wide coverage and

cross-border spirit, allowing everyone to find their areas of interest. Domestic think tanks often highlight speakers' achievements and industry influence, unconsciously weakening the audience's attention to content to a certain extent, which essentially contradicts the purpose and vision of speeches. In the new media era, content is king, and only novel and valuable ideas have self-dissemination capabilities. This point deserves attention from domestic think tank institutions. In recent years, although some domestic think tanks have imitated the TED speech model, domestic think tanks still lack thoughtfulness, interactivity, interestingness, and forward-looking vision in speech topics. It can be said that they have learned the "form" of TED speeches, but further research and study are needed on the "spirit" of its speeches.

#### 4.4 Rely on New Media and Deepen Communication and Promotion Channels

In the "Internet+" era, everyone is a "self-media," and the speed, methods, and approaches of information dissemination have undergone fundamental changes. If many successful OER cases rely on the global reputation and influence of famous schools, then TED's effective use of online promotion strategies can be described as indispensable. TED relies on social platforms such as iTunes, Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter to form network communities, attracting public follow-up, sharing, and exchange, and promoting dissemination effectiveness and brand influence in a "snowball" manner.

The public speech format has become popular online. In 2015 alone, TED talk videos were clicked more than 1 billion times, showing its far-reaching influence. Domestic think tanks still mainly rely on traditional methods such as publishing special articles, books, journals, internal reports, and electronic publications to release various policy information and policy suggestions. Open resource promotion channels are excessively narrow, resulting in insufficient dissemination and influence. In future development, domestic media-type think tanks can rely on social platforms and online and offline promotion mechanisms to deepen communication and promotion channels, make full use of network communities such as Sina Weibo, WeChat public accounts, and various WeChat groups, organize and guide audiences to think actively, and conduct debates and exchanges on various issues, so that more and more like-minded people can join and share the feast of brainstorming.

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

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