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Postprint: An Evaluation Framework for Think Tank Influence from the Perspective of Information Transmission

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Information serves as the carrier for influence transmission. Compared with the ambiguity and concealment of influence, information transmission is more explicit. Therefore, based on the framework of information transmission between think tanks and the government, we propose an evaluation framework for think tanks applicable to China. [Method/Process] This study analyzes the key links in information transmission between think tanks and the government, establishes a basic framework for information transmission between think tanks and the government, and enriches and refines the details of information transmission within the framework through structured interviews with officials from a central ministerial-level agency. [Results/Conclusions] The study finds that institutional constraints significantly affect communication link capacity and the ability to match information demands, think tanks' public communication capacity substantially influences the ability to regulate information filtering, and data collection capacity, scientifically objective data analysis capacity, and expert insight constitute the ability of think tanks to gather and produce information.

Full Text

An Evaluation Framework for Think Tank Influence from the Information Transmission Perspective

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Information serves as the carrier of influence transmission. Compared to the ambiguity and concealment of influence itself, the process of information transmission is far more explicit and observable. Accordingly, this paper proposes an evaluation framework suitable for Chinese think tanks based on the framework of information transmission between think tanks and government.

[Method/Process] This study analyzes the key links in information transmission between think tanks and government to establish a basic framework for this transmission process. The framework's details were enriched and refined through structured interviews with 25 division-level cadres from six representative business bureaus of a central ministry-level agency who frequently organize expert consultation activities.

[Results/Conclusion] The research reveals that institutional constraints significantly impact communication link capacity and information demand matching capacity, while think tanks' public communication capacity substantially influences their ability to adjust information filtering. Data collection capacity, scientific and objective data analysis capacity, and expert insight collectively constitute the core capabilities for think tanks to gather and produce information.

Keywords: think tank evaluation; government decision-making consultation; think tank influence; information transmission

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Think tank evaluation researchers posit that the purposes of evaluating think tank influence are twofold: first, to provide a guide for investors and purchasers of think tank services in the think tank market, and second, to guide think tank construction through various indicators in the evaluation system [1]. However, most existing think tank evaluation systems originate from the West, with theoretical foundations rooted in Western think tank operational mechanisms and 指标体系 deeply influenced by Western evaluation frameworks. China's new think tanks operate within an environment that differs markedly from their Western counterparts, making direct application of Western evaluation benchmarks inadequate for accurately reflecting think tanks' actual influence on government decision-making. While influence transmission is fuzzy, complex, and concealed, information transmission is clear and visible—and information serves as the very carrier of influence. Through professional access, this study conducted in-depth analysis of information exchange processes between experts and state organs in a specific industry. The interviews focused on three aspects: preferences and tendencies in selecting consulting experts, evaluations of current consultation effectiveness and experts, and cadres' own channels for obtaining professional

information.

1 Literature Review

1.1 Diversified Definitions of Think Tanks

Think tank evaluation must first address two fundamental questions: What constitutes a think tank, and what is think tank influence? In Western political systems, think tanks are considered the “fifth power” alongside the legislative, executive, judicial branches and the media, serving as channels for various interest groups to convey opinions to decision-makers and the public [3]. Japanese scholar Suzuki proposes that “think tanks are organizations engaged in public policy research” [4], representing one of the least restrictive definitions, requiring only relevance to public policy research. Other definitions impose additional constraints: some limit objectives (e.g., “aiming to influence public decision-making”), others restrict funding sources and institutional structures (e.g., requiring “independence and non-profit status”), while some constrain political stances (e.g., “neutrality”). Due to these varying criteria, some research institutions are recognized as think tanks while others are not. In reality, these restrictive definitions are not only unsuitable for China but also fail to keep pace with the polymorphic development of think tanks in Western societies [5]. Practically, imposing excessive restrictions on the nature of think tanks holds little significance, as Chinese government departments do not concern themselves with whether a consulting entity is a “think tank” per se. This study therefore broadly includes all institutions capable of providing decision-making consultation to government.

1.2 Ambiguous Notions of Think Tank Influence

Andrew Rich defines think tank influence as think tank experts successfully transmitting their ideas to policymakers or prompting them to consider policy-relevant information [6]. Zhu Xufeng views think tank influence as observable actions by which think tanks directly or indirectly alter policy processes or policymakers’ viewpoints to achieve desired policy outcomes [7]. Wang Lili argues that think tank influence is essentially public opinion influence [8]. However, because this influence is difficult to measure directly, most indicators actually measure capabilities correlated with influence rather than influence itself. As Zhu Xufeng notes, what we currently measure is often “behavior conducive to achieving influence” [9]. Research capacity, research infrastructure, public communication capacity, and social network capital are all measures of capabilities related to influence, not influence itself.

1.3 Western-Oriented Theoretical Foundations for Think Tank Evaluation

Think tank influence evaluation is based on theories interpreting and analyzing policy processes. Grounded in Western political science, evaluations typically

assess three primary pathways of influence: public opinion, knowledge elites, and political elites [10]. Such Western-based evaluation frameworks are unsuitable for China, yet China's prominent think tank evaluation systems still follow this government-academia-public influence framework. For instance, one Chinese think tank influence evaluation standard divides influence into growth and marketing capacity, decision-making influence, academic influence, and public influence [11]. Given that China's political system, political culture, operations, and management differ substantially from Western think tanks [12], evaluation systems based on Western political theory are theoretically incompatible with China's national conditions. Beyond theoretical biases, many evaluation systems exhibit clear correlations among influence indicators, leading to artificially inflated weighting of academic influence. Although academic influence is an important correlate, think tank research differs significantly from academic research in purpose and orientation. Over-reliance on academic influence in evaluation systems prevents proper assessment of local and industry-specific think tanks. Since information is the carrier of influence, analyzing think tank influence from an information transmission perspective offers a viable alternative approach.

Information transmission refers to delivering specific information to particular recipients through certain means, representing a fundamental framework in both communication studies and information management research [13]. Therefore, this study attempts to construct a new think tank evaluation framework based on objective information transmission analysis, drawing from China's think tank participation in decision-making processes. Zhu Xufeng suggests that understanding the connecting points between Chinese think tank organizational structures and other organizations in the decision-making consultation system holds important value for think tank construction and development [15]. This paper explores the components of think tank influence based on key nodes in the information transmission process between think tanks and government.

2 Information Transmission Model Between Think Tanks and Government

2.1 Think Tanks as Providers of Decision-Support Information

China operates under the premise that government, as the guardian of public interest, must prioritize societal welfare in decision-making. Xia Yishan argues that while government's fundamental goal is maximizing public interest, information asymmetry creates decision-making obstacles that prevent optimal outcomes [14]. This paper assumes government decision-making operates within imperfect information environments and conflicting local interests, striving to identify socially optimal decisions within time constraints. When government actively seeks consultation from think tanks, it represents a call for external information assistance, acknowledging internal information deficiencies that cannot be remedied due to positional, capacity, or restriction-related limitations.

A think tank's influence lies in its ability to provide decision-makers with needed information—knowledge, data, complex situation analysis, future trend predictions—that can either support or refute decision-makers' preconceptions, provided the information is truthful, reliable, scientific, objective, and helpful. As participants in the policy process, think tanks share government's ultimate goals [12] but possess different perspectives and information channels, giving them access to valuable information missing from government decision-making. Their primary role is conveying information that facilitates optimal decisions, with influence manifested in the volume of information transmitted and its coupling with government information needs. Thus, think tanks are essentially information providers, making it reasonable to base influence evaluation on analysis of influence's carrier—information transmission.

2.2 Information Transmission Model Between Think Tanks and Government

Miao Lu summarizes Chinese think tanks' decision-making participation channels as: participating in discussions and drafting of important party and government documents; conveying viewpoints to decision-makers through internal reference reports; influencing decisions through academic conferences and forums; affecting decisions through training; influencing elites and the public through publications and self-media platforms; and influencing decisions through international academic and societal engagement [16]. While these channels can indeed influence decisions directly or indirectly, their mechanisms differ. Information enters government through roughly two channels: institutional channels (government-led, including consultation meetings, seminars, training, commissioned projects, and internal reference reports) and extra-institutional channels (reaching decision-makers indirectly through public media, public opinion, and academic publications) [17].

Similar to how information transmission depends on source transmission power, channel capacity, and recipient reception, think tanks' capacity to transmit information to government decision-makers is constrained by several factors: (1) channel establishment—whether think tanks can establish institutional communication channels with government; (2) information production—whether think tanks can collect and produce needed information; (3) demand coupling—whether think tanks can track government information needs; and (4) high-power transmission—whether think tanks possess strong public media and academic dissemination capacity.

The interview subjects were cadres from government research and policy guidance departments. While some studies view such internal government institutions as internal think tanks, this research found they rarely conduct direct research. Instead, they serve as organizers of decision-making consultation and collectors/transmitters of consultation information. These cadres act as information filters in the think tank-government communication framework, directly receiving and selectively conveying information or helping think tanks establish

channels to top decision-makers. Their information selection preferences are influenced by educational background, knowledge background, and information from academic and public communication. Additionally, think tanks' capacity to obtain feedback information from within government limits their information provision capabilities. The basic framework of think tanks influencing government decision-making through information transmission is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

2.3 “Decision-Making Influence” from an Information Theory Perspective

Previous sections introduced several concepts of “decision-making influence.” Whether prompting decision-makers to think or directly providing suggestions, these concepts emphasize think tanks' capacity to change government decisions. From an information theory perspective, changing government decisions essentially means providing new information that enables government to reassess policy risks and benefits and make more rational decisions. Information theory studies generalized information transmission using mathematical methods, where information is the physical quantity that reduces uncertainty. The amount of information received by a recipient is the reduction in uncertainty about unknown situations after receiving information from the source, called mutual information. Mutual information depends on both received information and the recipient's own information needs; only when transmitted information well-couples with the recipient's needs is information volume maximized.

Therefore, think tank influence is essentially the capacity to produce and transmit information to decision-making levels—information that meets government decision-making needs and reduces uncertainty in government decisions. This information theory-based definition of influence is closer to influence's essence than traditional definitions. Conventional definitions emphasize think tanks changing policymakers' minds through various means, yet think tanks are not powerful institutions capable of coercing government compliance. Government adoption of their suggestions occurs simply because they provide information not already possessed, enabling government to reassess situations and change decisions. Traditional definitions emphasizing “changing” decisions actually misinterpret “influence,” as reinforcing original decisions also constitutes influence. Just as a receiver maintaining or changing original judgments with greater certainty both represent reduced uncertainty and effective information reception, “changing” government decisions is only one facet of think tank influence. Providing information that reinforces original judgments also exerts influence. Thus, the information theory-based influence definition is more neutral and free of value judgments.

3 Think Tank Evaluation Indicator System Based on Information Transmission

3.1 Capacity to Establish Communication Links

The capacity to establish long-term cooperative relationships with government determines whether think tanks can gain government trust and exchange information in the future. Information transmission includes both outputting information to government and obtaining information from government—a crucial prerequisite for realizing influence. Miao Lu argues that Chinese think tanks occupy a passively selected position in decision-making participation [16], a view partially confirmed by this study. Participants in decision-making consultation activities are selected by government agencies with clear institutional biases. Interview data indicate that preferred consultation targets are primarily: internal government experts (score 3.77), experts from research institutions directly or indirectly under government jurisdiction (2.77), general academy and university experts (2.23), media think tank experts (1.31), and private think tank experts (0.38)—ranked clearly by institutional proximity. The scoring method used option average composite score = $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weight}) / \text{number of respondents}$, with highest-ranked options receiving weights equal to the number of alternatives. As this was a ranking question without mandatory selection, private think tank experts scored below 1.

Beyond internal government experts, agencies most trust institutions with certain affiliations—ministries prefer their own research units and universities, while local governments prefer local academies and universities. These institutions possess inherent trust advantages, especially in confidential decisions or those involving major interests. Other well-known research institutions and universities are also options for central ministries and local governments but are typically placed in a second-tier 备选 due to insufficient focus on specialized problems or lack of understanding of local/industry-specific issues. Private think tanks rarely become active choices for government decision-making consultation. However, interviews with some private think tanks (e.g., Chongqing Think Tank) revealed that some have proactively established government contacts by submitting research reports and policy recommendations, gaining government recognition and attention. Some governments have also attempted to cooperate with private think tanks in economic and cultural domains [18], but such information exchange is troubled by “trust” and “confidentiality” issues, limiting it mostly to one-way transmission from think tanks to government and restricting private think tanks’ scope and capacity for participation.

3.2 Information Agents’ Filtering Mechanisms

Zhu Xufeng previously conducted empirical research on Tianjin division-level cadres, analyzing their decision-making consultation conditions, needs, and behaviors in relation to officials’ qualifications [19]. The division-level cadres interviewed in this study lack policy decision-making authority but serve as informa-

tion filters in the government decision-making process, organizing consultation activities and acting as key intermediaries between decision-makers and experts. The scarcity of top decision-makers' time means they cannot spend substantial time browsing and searching for information; what they read must be the most refined and urgently needed information, which must be screened and transmitted upward by middle-level cadres. Therefore, information agents play a critical role in the think tank-government information transmission framework.

According to observations and interviews, middle-level cadres' control over information channels and filtering is manifested in several aspects: (1) selecting and recommending specific units and experts for thematic discussions; (2) reviewing research reports and opinions from various channels when editing internal references; (3) maintaining expert databases; (4) participating in research project establishment and review with voting rights; and (5) compiling various reports to summarize and feedback expert opinions to higher levels. Interview results show cadres have greater 主导权 during expert seminars and internal reference editing, ranking first and second respectively. Meanwhile, respondents considered "internal reference reports" (3.46) and "expert consultation" (2.46) as having the greatest influence on high-level decision-making.

Based on Zhu Xufeng's research on division-level cadres' consultation behaviors [19], we can assume that information agents' filtering preferences are influenced by their educational and work experiences and by public and academic media. With relatively stable demographic profiles, the primary factor adjusting information filtering is public and academic media. Among interviewed cadres, 66.7% were young and middle-aged (35-45 years), over 85% held doctoral or master's degrees, and over 50% had more than 10 years of professional experience—indicating high education levels and rich professional experience that equip them to screen and judge information quality. The study also examined their channels for obtaining and updating professional knowledge: 88% selected "reading online professional articles," 58.3% "reading professional monographs," 50% "attending training," 33% "reading professional journals," and only 25% "reading academic journals." This suggests that traditional think tank evaluation based on professional journal publication data lacks foundation; even young middle-level cadres with doctoral and master's training rarely read professional journal literature. According to interviews, academic journals are neglected primarily due to access inconvenience and theoretical focus with limited practical relevance. Online articles are easily accessible, with many professional WeChat public accounts offering excellent content combining professionalism and accessibility. Reading these requires no special time allocation, making them ideal for time-pressed cadres to update professional information. Professional monographs are more systematic, suitable for comprehensive learning of new knowledge and theories, and training programs regularly arranged by units also serve as important systematic knowledge update channels.

In summary, think tanks' public communication capacity is not direct decision-making influence but regulates information agents' filtering preferences in the

think tank-government information transmission framework, indirectly affecting information flow. Key indicators of think tanks' public communication capacity differ substantially from traditional academic achievement measures; internet dissemination capacity, ability to conduct training within government agencies, and capacity to produce high-impact monographs are critical indicators.

3.3 Capacity to Match Information Needs

Many evaluation systems treat “receiving leadership instructions” as think tank influence realization, but this essentially represents successful matching between information providers and information demanders—only when demand is matched is influence manifested. However, in practice, government needs and expert-provided information are difficult to match. Lack of understanding of actual work and absence of real data information are primary reasons why university and research institution experts cannot match government decision-making information needs. Research starting points from academic units also create this supply-demand contradiction, as scholars typically start from academic perspectives rather than government decision-making angles.

For the interview question “What help do you hope experts can provide?”, the highest-scoring answer was “scientific analysis methods for decision support” (5 points), followed by “detailed and objective survey data” (3.22 points) and “rational, profound analytical viewpoints” (2.01 points). This indicates that what government most hopes to obtain from think tanks are stable and reliable data collection capacity, scientific and objective data analysis capacity, and profound insight—these three capabilities constitute think tanks' core information collection and production capacities.

For the question “Which institution's experts provide more information and greater influence on leadership decisions?”, the highest-ranked was “internal government experts” (4 points), followed by industry university and industry research institution experts (2.82 points), general university and research institution experts (2.18 points), and private think tank experts (1 point). This ranking pattern aligns with access to internal information. Respondents considered the main problems with non-government experts to be “insufficient understanding of actual conditions” (3.77 points), followed by “information not being what government cares about” (2.31 points) and “viewpoints not being decision-oriented” (1.69 points). This demonstrates that capacity to obtain internal government information limits think tank influence.

To realize influence, think tanks must actively obtain and match government information needs, requiring capacity to access information and data from within government and to observe and think from government decision-making perspectives. Western think tanks emphasize the “revolving door” mechanism, which from an information transmission perspective is essentially a method for obtaining internal government information through personnel rotation. China has a similar mechanism—the 挂职 (temporary position) system—with increas-

ing exchanges between research institutions and government units under recent policy support. However, most 挂职 placements are limited within industries or local governments (e.g., local universities to local governments, industry universities to industry departments), again restricting information flow between government and think tanks outside their regions or sectors.

3.4 Capacity to Collect Data and Produce Information

Think tanks primarily exert influence by transmitting decision-supporting information to decision-making levels. Interviews show government lacks two types of information: first, information inconvenient or not within government 职责 to collect; second, information requiring scientific analysis, objective perspectives, and profound insight. Compared to academia, government possesses unparalleled information collection advantages but primarily collects operational data lacking richness, diversity, and dimensionality, with data models designed for management needs rather than research needs. More importantly, government lacks capacity to effectively process information, identify problems, and extract insights.

In this study, respondents' desire for scientific analytical methods exceeded their desire for data and experts. Central government staff have high average education levels and good academic training, plus rich work experience, making them less likely to "blindly believe" experts can propose superior analyses out of thin air. Their scientific training and work demands make them more trusting of instrumental rationality. Many post-WWII think tanks emphasize scientific analytical methods in policy analysis, such as RAND Corporation's pioneering work in Delphi methods, mathematical modeling, simulation, network theory, operations research, and game theory. In contrast, Chinese think tanks and the broader social sciences lag far behind American think tanks in applying scientific analytical methods [2].

"Data" ranked second in respondents' expectations of think tanks. Traditionally, think tank data came primarily from social surveys, with organizations like RAND and Pew possessing exceptional survey capabilities. Some well-known Chinese research institutions also have distinctive survey projects and centers, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Blue Book series, Peking University's Social Survey Center, and Renmin University's China Survey and Data Center. These independent organizations compensate for government decision-making information gaps through long-term, stable, scientific data production and data-based scientific analysis. In the big data era, more information can be obtained by collecting and analyzing data traces from human activities, enabling emerging internet companies to become important new think tanks based on their big data advantages. Examples include Alibaba's Ali Research Institute based on massive e-commerce data, Tencent's Internet and Society Research Institute based on social data, and Baidu's Data Research Institute based on search data [20]. Unique massive data resources combined with powerful computational analysis capabilities will give such think tanks strong market

competitiveness and policy influence in the future.

3.5 Think Tank Influence Evaluation Framework Based on Information Transmission

Based on analysis of influencing factors in information transmission between think tanks and government decision-making departments, an evaluation framework can be established that decomposes think tank influence assessment into: (1) capacity to establish communication links; (2) capacity to adjust information filtering; (3) capacity to match information demands; and (4) capacity to collect and produce information. Table 1 roughly shows the indicator structure based on this framework. Notably, these sub-indicators are not simply additive; realizing think tank influence requires coordinated cooperation across all components, with absence in any single 环节 potentially preventing ultimate influence realization. Table 1 shows the framework's first-level and corresponding second-level indicator systems. While specific calculation methods are not provided here, all second-level indicators can be measured using available data and mature quantitative methods or existing evaluation approaches.

Table 1 Think Tank Evaluation Framework from the Information Transmission Perspective

	Adjust Information Filtering Capacity Indicators	Match Information Demand Capacity Indicators	Collect and Produce Information Capacity Indicators
Establish Communication Link Capacity Indicators	Adjust Information Filtering Capacity Indicators	Match Information Demand Capacity Indicators	Collect and Produce Information Capacity Indicators
Number of proprietary channels established in government	Entering information screening scope at various government levels	Number of government research projects undertaken	Social survey capacity
Social network dissemination indicators	Website dissemination indicators	Number of government research projects participated in	Big data acquisition capacity
Professional monograph dissemination indicators	Training provided to government departments indicators	Talent exchange with government indicators	Data analysis capacity

Establish	Adjust	Match	Collect and
Communication	Information	Information	Produce
Link Capacity	Filtering	Demand	Information
Indicators	Capacity	Capacity	Capacity
	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators
Participation in field research and investigation indicators			High-level talent indicators

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this paper proposes an evaluation framework of think tanks influence suitable for China. [Method/process] After analyzing the key steps of influence transmission between think tanks and governments, this paper developed a framework of influence transmission. Then, through structured interviews with some cadres from related departments of Chinese ministry, it enriched the framework's information transmission details. [Result/conclusion] System constraints have great effects on the capacities of communication link and information demand matching. The public communication capacity of think tank has greater influence on the adjustment capacity of information filtering. Data collection capacity, scientific and objective data analysis capacity and expert insight constitute the capacities of think tanks to collect and produce information.

Keywords: evaluation of think tank; government decision consulting; think tank influence; information communication

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

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