

Research on International Communication of China's Think Tanks

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Abstract: Think tanks are an important component of the country's soft power. In recent years, China's think tanks have developed rapidly in both quantity and quality. However, they have not completely turned into the soft power of the country. It is because the international influence of China's think tanks is relatively weak that think tanks should not only play the role of decision-making order, but also play the role of international communication. However, the international communication function of think tanks has been neglected due to the misunderstanding of the role and function of think tanks. In fact, the international communication is originally one of the important functions of think tanks. In recent years, China's think tanks have drawn on the experience of well-known international think tanks, continuously involved themselves to the international arena and strengthened in-depth cooperation with well-known international think tanks. China's think tanks have made positive achievements in terms of both content and path in international communication. However, due to the lack of independence and autonomy in the research of China's think tanks, as well as the defects in the management system and mechanism, the international communication function of China's think tanks has not been brought into normal play. Thus, the construction of China's think tanks is still in its infancy, and it is still a long way to go to enhance the country's soft power through the development of think tanks.

Keywords: China's Think Tanks; International Communication; International Cooperation; National Soft Power

Think tanks with Chinese characteristics are an important component of China's soft power¹, especially when they play an international communication function, the content of think tanks as national soft power is even more obvious. In recent years, various think tanks have sprung up in China. On the one hand, this shows that the demand for think tanks is vast in China's modernization practice today, or that the demand for philosophy and social science ideas is especially rigid in China's modernization construction today. On the other hand, China's think tanks are established late and developed slowly, and their capability to communicate with

¹ "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics" [In Chinese], *People's Daily*, January 21, 2015.

foreign countries is obviously insufficient. Hence, although the number of think tanks did surge in a short period of time, they have not been fully transformed into China's soft power. In order to make think tanks become the soft power of the country, besides giving full play to their decision-making advisory functions and providing intellectual support for the scientific decision-making of the country, think tanks must also have a strong capability of international communication.

I. International Communication Is an Important Function of Think Tanks

The discussion on the social science research institutions playing the role of think tanks began in the mid-1980s. In the middle and late period of the first decade after entering the 21st century, "social science moving towards society" has suddenly evolved into the functional orientation of think tanks of social science institutions. In particular, on January 5, 2004, the CPC Central Committee issued the *Opinions on Further Prosperity and Development of Philosophy and Social Sciences*, explicitly proposing to "make philosophy and social sciences a 'think tank' for the Party and the government". In this case, some scholars began to explore the specific path to establish the "think Tank" and the specific methods to break the ideological bottleneck at that time.¹ The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences took the lead in proposing to "establish a new socialist think tank that is first-class in China and well-known in the world".² Subsequently, social science research institutions all over the country have readjusted their positions and developed towards think tanks. After nearly ten years of development, the function of think tanks in philosophy and social sciences research institutions around the world has become increasingly prominent. After the 18th National Congress of the CPC, with the rapid development of China's modernization, the growth of China especially needs the philosophy and social science thought with Chinese characteristics as support. Hence, in April 2013, General Secretary XI Jinping first proposed the goal of building "new think tanks with Chinese characteristics". The *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues of Deepening Reform in an All-round Way*, which was deliberated and adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee, clearly stated that "the construction of new type of think tanks with Chinese characteristics should be strengthened". In 2014, the 6th Meeting of the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Continuing Reform deliberated and adopted the *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics*. In January 2015, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the document. Subsequently, the first batch of 25 national high-end think tanks was established, and other kinds of think tanks also played different important roles in policy advisory services.

¹ Qu Wei, "Reflections on Building First-class Thinking Bank and Brain Trust" [In Chinese], *Social Science Management and Review*, 2004(4).

² Wang Ronghua, "Intensifying Research on Applied Strategies, Serving the Nation Based on Shanghai" [In Chinese], *Times Union*, November 18, 2004; Wang Ronghua, "Reflections on Building a New Socialist Think Tank" [In Chinese], *Social Sciences Weekly*, June 15, 2006.

However, it should be noted that at present, China's think tanks are mainly focused on consulting services for Chinese parties and governments at all levels, and there is a little consulting services for society and enterprises, which is not regarded as important business contents. As for the function of international communication, China's think tanks are basically not involved. There is even a misconception that think tanks provide decision-making advisory services to the government, involving all kinds of secrets that are not suitable for international communication, which is obviously wrong. The *Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics* clearly points out: the development process of a big country is not only a process of improving hard power such as economy, but also a process of improving soft power such as ideology and culture. Think tanks are an important carrier of the country's soft power and increasingly become an important factor of international competitiveness, playing an irreplaceable role in foreign exchanges. To establish a good image of socialist China, to promote Chinese culture and contemporary Chinese values to the world, and to make the Chinese voice heard on the international stage, it is urgent to give full play to the important role of new think tanks with Chinese characteristics in public diplomacy and cultural mutual learning, and to continuously enhance China's international influence and international voice,¹ which clearly and unambiguously points out that think tanks have an indispensable function in international communication.

However, the current academic research on the international communication function of think tanks is very little. Some scholars have studied the international communication function embodied by think tanks in the construction of foreign discourse. They believe that think tanks influence what the audiences think and how they think through their own theories and thoughts, thus constructing international discourse beneficial to China.² Some scholars also suggest that the construction of think tanks should be incorporated into the system of the country's diplomatic strategy to operate, thus establishing and perfecting the system and mechanism suitable for the development of think tanks, finding a way for the development of think tanks suitable for China's national conditions, enhancing the international communication capacity of think tanks and striving for the international voice of think tanks.³ Some scholars have also made sample analysis on the influence of China's think tanks, which mainly refers to their influence in China without analyzing the international influence of China's think tanks.⁴ These studies have made very useful explorations on the issue of the international communication power of think tanks, but the research in this area is obviously very limited. The author believes that we need to clarify the differences between think tanks and media in international communication regarding the research

¹ "Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics" [In Chinese], *People's Daily*, January 21, 2015.

² Jia Min, "Promoting Innovation and Diffusion of International Discourse Power with Think Tank Construction" [In Chinese], *Modern Communication*, 2016(4).

³ Yin Zhaohui, "Path Analysis of International Communication Power Construction of Chinese Think Tanks" [In Chinese], *Leadership Science*, April 2016 (Middle).

⁴ Chen Sheng, Meng Man, "Research on the Influence of Think Tanks and Its Mechanism: Based on Sample Analysis of 39 Chinese Think Tanks" [In Chinese], *Studies in Science of Science*, Vol. 9, 2015.

on the international communication capability of think tanks.

First of all, the international dissemination of media takes content as the key and attracts people with content. The media content carriers, however, are diverse, including text, picture, video and visualized data. The media emphasizes the importance of catching people's eyes, thus sometimes deliberately "creating" effects. However, think tanks take thought as the key and influence the audience through thought. In other words, think tanks emphasize not only the carrier of thought dissemination, but also the novelty, innovation and foresight of thought itself instead of the specific way of spreading thought. This is the biggest difference between them.

Secondly, the media rely on communication channels, which is to create channels for content dissemination both domestically and internationally under the premise that content is the key. Therefore, the media pay special attention to the construction of communication channels in terms of international communication. There is a saying that good wine needs no bush, which is the most worrying thing for the media regarding international communication. Especially in today's massive information, if there is no good communication channel and communication technology, no matter how good the content is, it will be quickly submerged by the vast mass of information. This is what Joseph Nye called "rich information leads to poor attention."¹ However, think tanks are different. Think tanks are places where ideas are created and platforms for exchange of ideas. As long as there is interaction between personnel, the exchange of ideas can be realized, thus realizing international communication of think tanks.

Thirdly, there is an essential difference between the voice effect of the media and the voice effect of the think tank. Although both the Chinese media and the China's think tanks aim to transmit the "Chinese voice" to the international community, the content of the "Chinese voice" in the media is more the interpretation of China's established policies, and even the positive effects of policies that have been put into practice since the role of the media in China has always been positioned as the "mouthpiece of the Party". This Chinese voice can only be based on praise. The international community often receives this Chinese voice in suspicion. The Chinese voice delivered by the think tanks is based on academic theories and discipline theories. It is not yet a policy proposal, let alone a thought and theory that has been put into practice. Colleagues of international think tanks often listen to this Chinese voice in anticipation. This is because the Chinese voice can be used to gauge and predict the direction of China's policies, especially the "Chinese voice" from think tanks that have important influence on China's policies, which is generally the weathervane of China's policies.

II. The Positive Effects of China's Think Tanks on External Communication

Since 2014, although the indicators about "the Influences of China's Think Tank" have been adjusted in each year, the "international influence" indicator has been

¹ [The USA] Nye, Joseph, *Hard Power and Soft Power*, Trans. Men Honghua, Peking University Press, 2005, pp.152.

retained as a primary evaluation indicator, but its content has been changed.¹ Judging from the secondary indicators of “international influence” and the evaluated characteristics, the international communication capability of China’s think tanks has gradually valued, which means that China’s understanding of think tanks is gradually deepening and China’s minds in this area are also constantly emancipated. It is precisely because of this that the external communication of China’s think tanks has grown step by step in the process of learning from internationally renowned think tanks.

First, learn from the experience of international think tanks, and gradually push the experts to the international community. Viewed from those world-renowned think tanks, the most important thing for their success is to walk on an international open road, especially active “going global” of experts. Viewing China-related studies of America’s think tanks with any value orientation, experts working on China-related studies often travelled between China and the United States. For example, before the 2002 meeting between the heads of state of China and the U.S., Strobe Talbott, President of Brookings Institution, specially led a delegation to visit China in advance, in order to understand the new trend of China’s policies; Professor David Shambaugh, a non-resident senior fellow of the Institution and an important representative of the “China School” in the U.S., is a frequent visitor to China’s academic community.² This kind of situation is quite common among American think tanks. China’s think tanks are basically studying problems under closed conditions, mainly relying on books and experts’ brains. Of course, objective reasons exist; China has developed from the closed, to the limited opening and finally the all-round opening, while China’s think tanks have been generally consistent with the process of China’s opening up to the outside world; they have been closed especially because of the so-called decision-making “confidentiality”, been highly cautious in foreign exchanges, and dare not to communicate with others. After China’s full integration into the international system, Chinese experts from the government’s think tanks or research-based think tanks have begun to be delegated or communicate with the outside through various projects. Especially when research funding was sufficient, experts, including young researchers, have taken the initiative to go global for first-line research and exchange. If mentioning nothing about the else, the amount of Chinese scholars in American universities and think tanks is quite significant.

¹ The “International Influence” reported in 2014 includes “international popularity and reputation”, “the frequency of cooperation and exchange with similar foreign institutions” and “continuous attention and analysis capability for major international events”. The indicator reported in 2015 is based on two secondary indicators: “reputation” (including “linked by internationally renowned think tanks” and “the search volume of the English name of a think tank on the main engines”) and “internationalization” (including “branches set in major countries”, “the number of cooperative projects with international think tanks” and “the proportion of hired foreign experts”). In 2016, the reported indicator includes two different secondary indicators from the previous year: “international cooperation” (including “branches set in major countries”, “the number of cooperative projects with international think tanks” and “the proportion of hired foreign experts in the council/academic committee”) and “international communication” (including “the number of articles published in the international mainstream media”, “linked by internationally renowned think tanks” and “the search amount of the English name of a think tank on main engines”).

² China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, eds., *American Think Tanks and Their Attitudes toward China* [In Chinese], Current Affairs Press, 2013 Edition, pp. 113-115 & 208.

Second, learn from world-renowned think tanks, and strengthen the in-depth cooperation between China's think tanks and international think tanks. The international cooperation of think tanks is normal in Europe and the United States. Especially, the think tanks in Europe and the United States have maintained highly close cooperation in joint studies with frequent contacts, and even shared research results on public policies. The cooperation between China's and international think tanks was mainly based on agreement to establish friendly exchanges, which occurred more during the preliminary establishment stages of the think tanks. With the accumulated experience in building think tanks, the cooperation between China's and international think tanks has turned to project cooperation to promote studies on issues of common interest; or to send some experts to participate in project studies of international think tanks thus to experience the operations, management and results transformation of the projects. In recent years, China's think tanks have increasingly cooperated with international think tanks in the form of convening specific seminars or professional forums, which have finally formed certain consensus and promoted in-depth studies. The cases include the World Conference on Sinology organized on a regular basis by Renmin University of China in cooperation with European and American countries, the American Symposium of the World Forum on China Studies (WFCS) in the U.S. organized by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences with the Asia Society (of the U.S.), the Asian Symposium of the World Forum on China Studies (WFCS) jointly organized by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and relevant Korean think tanks, and the European Symposium of the World Forum on China Studies (WFCS) jointly organized by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and relevant German think tanks. In addition, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University and others have carried out a lot of cooperation with many international think tanks, including university think tanks. Moreover, there have been countless specific professional forums organized under such cooperation. It is suggested that the breadth and depth of the international cooperation of China's think tanks have been improved unprecedentedly, marking the growing maturity of China's think tanks.

Third, with reference to the practice of international think tanks, China's think tanks can set up their branches or offices abroad. International think tanks, especially some top think tanks in the United States, have their own branches abroad. For example, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace established the Carnegie Moscow Center in Moscow after the end of the Cold War; all members of the Center, except the director, are Russian.¹ The Brookings established the Brookings Doha Center. Although China's think tanks have not set up branches, but have made a huge step in the cooperation with international think tanks. For example, Tsinghua University and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have established the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center; Tsinghua University and the Brookings Institution have established the Tsinghua-Brookings Center (for public policy studies); the think tank research

¹ China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, eds., *American Think Tanks and Their Attitudes toward China* [In Chinese], Current Affairs Press, 2013 Edition, pp. 113-115 & 208.

program of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and the University of Pennsylvania is also a in-depth cooperation, and relevant research results are published simultaneously in the United States and China. Besides, China's and global think tanks have set up some branches or overseas representative offices abroad.¹ These circumstances indicate that China's think tanks are characterized by a diversifying and globalizing openness trend.² Besides, the cooperation between China's and international think tanks also means the intended external communication of China's think tanks.

At present, the positive achievements in the external communication of China's think tanks are mainly reflected in the content and path. Viewed from the content, the positive achievements include the followings. First, spread "the voice of China". During quite a long time, "the voice of China" had been very weak in the international arena and even lost on many occasions. With the establishment of various China's think tanks, "the voice of China" has been increasingly spread through the think tanks. Especially after the development of high-end think tanks in the past three years and the increasing maturity of various social think tanks, foreign exchanges have become more frequent, and the think tanks have spread more "voice of China", increasingly enhance the influences of "the voice of China".

Second, spread "the thoughts of China", especially those with important value for world development, global governance, and reform of the international system. China's think tanks have played an increasingly important role in these areas. For example, the ideas and policies of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the strategic thinking of China on the BRICS countries have all been transmitted to the international community through China's think tanks in recent years. From this perspective, China's think tanks have also greatly enhanced the international communication power of "the thoughts of China". According to this indicator, the influence of China's think tanks is constantly improving. Statistics shows that there are 429 think tanks in China in 2014, ranking second only to the United States (1,830) in the world, but only seven think tanks ranked in the top 100 in terms of global influence.³ In 2015 and 2016, the number of China's think tanks rose to 435; during the two years, a total of 9 China's think tanks became "the world's top think tanks", including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China Institute of International Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the Development Research Center of the State Council, the Institute of International and Strategic Studies of Peking University, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, the Unirule Institute of Economics, the Center for China and Globalization, and the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies of Renmin University of China.⁴ In 2017,

¹ The Center for China and Globalization, see <http://www.ccg.org.cn/About/>.

² Huang Renwei & Fu Yong, "China's New Think Tank Construction and International Experience" [In Chinese], *Journal of International Relations*, 2015(6).

³ "Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program", *2014 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, January 22, 2014.

⁴ [The USA] McGann, James: *The 2015 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report*, Translated by the Center for Think Tank Studies of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2016 Edition, pp. 74-82; [The USA] McGann, James: *The 2015 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report*, Translated by the Center for Think Tank Studies of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Academy

the number of China's think tanks increased to 512, and the ranks of the China's think tanks enlisted in "the top 100 think tanks" were also improved.¹

Third, build "the disclosure of China". After entering the 21st century, the most frequently discussed issue in Chinese academic circles concerns the promotion of China's international discourse power. What puzzled China most was that China had solved the problems of "being attacked" and "starving", but failed to solve the problem of "being scolded". It was generally believed that China's discourse power was weak because there were too few Chinese people "voicing" in the international community. However, this was not the case, and the reason was that the current "discourse of China" was lacking the support of original theories. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's disciplines came firstly from the Soviet Union mainly for the planned economy and then from Europe and the U.S. due to the reform and opening up and the construction of market economy. The corresponding theories were basically rooted from the two sources. In other words, for decades, China's theories had been mainly transplanted from the outside, and there were few local theories.² At present, China's theoretical innovation would mainly come from college think tanks and social science research think tanks. Think tanks are libraries of policies, pools of ideas, and reservoirs of theories. Without the support of thoughts and theories, there is no scientific, forward-looking and regular policy. It is the abundant reserve provided by the think tanks that enable them to influence how people think and say³, and thus to construct "the disclosure of China" in the international community.

Fourth, spread "the image of China". What is the image of China and how to spread the image have long plagued the rising China. In the early years, China made an image video at New York Times Square, USA, and the content was provided by the Xinhua News Agency. Unexpectedly, it was questioned by international and domestic people. Although it was a misstep, there was no better way. So far, no suitable path has been found in spreading "the image of China". In fact, there is no need to deliberately shape the image of a nation, since any "artificially modified" image would be "extremely unnatural". The national image is the natural expression of the nation's foreign behaviors and the natural manifestation of every member of the nation outside the country, and needs no deliberate shaping. It is in the natural display of every member that a specific "image of China" would be spread; however, the representatives of the think tanks carry out external exchanges as the elite of the society, the China's think tanks have a special significance in spreading "the image of China", especially through communications, policy interpretation and cutting-edge ideas and theories. Such "image of China" is often easily recognized and accepted by the outside world, because such "image" is constructed on the basis of the academic

of Social Sciences Press, 2017 Edition, pp. 75-82.

¹ "Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program", *2017 Global Go to Think Tank Index Report*, January 31, 2018.

² Hu Jian, "Interpretation of the Discourse System of Chinese Road and Its Construction" [In Chinese], *Contemporary World and Socialism*, 2017(5).

³ Wang Mei, "International Communication of Think Tanks and the External Disclosure System Construction" [In Chinese], *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2015(6).

“natural behaviors” of think tank experts; although it is a bit “smart”, it is definitely not “artificial”.

Viewed from the paths, the positive achievements of China’s think tanks in external communication involve the followings. First, Academic Exchanges. Academic exchanges have always been one of the important ways of think tanks. Just because of somewhat biased understandings of think tanks in China during the preliminary period, think tanks were opposed to academics. However, without academic connotations, the scientific and strategic natures of policy advice are paradoxical. Academic theoretical thinking is the soul of a think tank. A criterion for the think tank evaluation, whether it is the global think tank report led by McGinn or a domestic criterion used by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and other think tanks, lays emphasis on “academic quality and reputation”, “the amount and quality of publications, and the influence”¹ and “academic influence” (including “paper works” and “research projects”).² In recent years, the understanding of the relationship between think tanks and academics has begun to enter the right path. China’s think tanks have increasingly valued academics and emphasized the irreplaceable role of academic exchanges in improving the influences of think tanks.

Second, spread ideas through the external transmission of policies, and enhance the international influence. As we all know, an important function of China’s think tanks is the interpretation of policies. Besides, China’s think tanks are given the function of publicizing policies through interpreting policies by the Party and the government, so as to better acknowledge the external community China’s policies. Externally, the think tanks bear these responsibilities are believed to play a vital role in China’s decision-making. Therefore, domestic think tanks often compete with domestic peers for this role. A winner will be regarded as “a policy spokesperson” by the outside world, consequently it can spread its own thinking and ideas while transmitting policies.

Third, influence the media. The media is the main platform for discourse construction. Mastering and influencing the media is equivalent to mastering the initiative to construct discourse. Therefore, drawing on some practices of European and American think tanks, China’s think tanks have also made full use of or influence the media for external communication. There are the cases. (1) Write articles in overseas media to publish thinking and explain opinions. In recent years, experts of China’s think tanks have written quite a few articles in the mainstream media in Europe and the United States to express their own and their think tanks’ value orientations. (2) Publications, policy reports and other niche media are displayed or presented in foreign exchanges as “by-products”, aiming to promote the thinking of the think tanks. It has basically become a common path. (3) Invite foreign media to participate in important activities

¹ See [the USA] McGinn, James: *The Global Go to Think Tank Index Report* of Corresponding Years.

² See *The Report on China’s Think Tanks* of Corresponding Years Made by the Center for Think Tank Studies of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

of think tanks, use ideas to influence the foreign media, and utilize the foreign media to influence overseas audiences. Although this method is not common, it is highly effective in external communications.

Fourth, participate in international conferences or organize activities on the periphery of international conferences to strive for the setting of issues affecting international conferences. For a long time, being active at international conferences or on the peripheral of international conferences are basically European and American think tanks or other non-governmental organizations. However, in recent years, with the rapid development of China's think tanks, experts of China's think tanks have also been seen at international conferences, and there have been forums on relevant problems convened by China's think tanks on the periphery of the international conference. For example, in Germany, the G20 Summit was held in Germany. At the same time, many China's think tanks held corresponding forums in Bonn and Berlin; even if they could not influence the issues under discussion, they also raised positive issues in line with the Summit. Similarly, there will be more and more China's think tanks with increasingly significant role on issues under discussion.

III. The Main Problems Concerning External Communication of China's Think Tanks

In communication sciences, a saying goes as "content is king". The external communication of think tanks requires more content, especially original and forward-looking thoughts with academic details. The vigorous development of China's think tanks is reflected in the increase in the numbers of the institutions and the practitioners and in the constantly enhanced innovation of their thoughts. However, affected by relevant institutional mechanisms of China's think tanks (such as role positioning, funding sources, service targets, and management models), China's think tanks fail to adapt themselves to ideological production, and their think tank products cannot be recognized and accepted by international peers. Therefore, the external communication capability of China's think tanks is still very weak.

First, from the perspective of institutional nature, China's think tanks can be divided into think tanks within or outside the system (the latter is also known as social think tanks). Both categories strive to closely follow the Party and the government and become a consultant and interpreter of Party and government policies. The main reason is that China's think tanks were initially positioned as "the thinking bank and brain trust of the Party and the government", leading to a misconception that they only served the Party and the government. Therefore, all the research reports and countermeasures of China's think tanks have been moving toward a goal-the Party and the government, taken the ultimate goal of "presenting their reports to Zhongnanhai". To realize the goal, the research reports of the think tanks must inevitably focus on the main research task of "trying to understand the preferences of the leaders or interpreting the Party and the government documents". Therefore, the studies lacked autonomy. In fact, think tanks must serve not only the Party and the government, but also the society and enterprises. Serving the society and enterprises

requires a large number of field investigations to obtain targeted research reports, which would be more persuasive and influential in external communication. Otherwise, simple explanations of policies would make the external communication be completely consistent with official missions, and the external would feel that the think tanks represent the Party and the government, rather than third-party institutions with new ideas and conceptions. Consequently, such think tanks would not be well accepted by the outside world.

Second, from the perspective of the source of funding, the think tanks within the system are generally funded by state financial allocations, while the social think tanks are mostly self-financing or funded by corporate donations (the latter is the main mode). For example, six of nine institutions that have entered the world's top think tank rankings are the intra-institutional think tanks, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China Institute of International Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the Development Research Center of the State Council, the Institute of International and Strategic Studies of Peking University, and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, which are solely funded by government financial allocations. The rest three institutions are the Unirule Institute of Economics, the Center for China and Globalization, and the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies of Renmin University of China, which are based on self-financing or funded by corporate donations. However, except for the Unirule Institute of Economics, which can adhere to its own independence, the think tanks, either within or outside the system, have centered their studies on the Party's and national policies, and are not think tanks with independent studies. An independent study, especially one as reference for decision-making, should not be the only policy solution. Instead, it should propose multiple policy options by repeatedly changing the amount and conditions of the influencing variables under a unified environment. Such study will improve the Party and the government's scientific decisions, and attract the attention of international peers. In this way, it will realize the function of external communication "without deliberate spreading".

Third, from the perspective of the strengths of the experts, although the think tanks within the system are stable, the social think tanks basically do not have their own stable research experts and are mainly supported by one or two research experts with a group of assistants and a group of external experts within the system. In other words, either in an intra-institutional think tank or a social think tank, the backbone research fellows are basically scholars within the system. Viewed from the experts who are currently active in China's social think tanks, the vast majority of the key experts are "secondary occupation" experts within the system. In other words, although there are many types of think tanks, the research power is indeed single. Different social think tanks employ the same batch of scholars who have become famous in the system and have great similarities in thinking. Whether a report is presented upwards or communicated externally, it is considered that the Chinese are "cooking one material in different ways". On the contrary, a large number of innovative young scholars cannot take the lead in the system, and have been squeezed into a very small space in

the social think tanks. In this way, China's think tanks are facing with such a contradiction in the external communication: on the one hand, there has been a shortage of original ideas and innovative ideas; on the other hand, it has been difficult to expose the seedlings of ideological innovation to the sun.

Fourth, from the perspective of organizational mechanism, the think tanks within the system are characterized by certain administrative levels. Although such administrative levels do not exist in the social think tanks, due to the employment of many experts within the system, especially those with higher administrative levels within the system, the problem of administrative level still exists. A high administrative level would affect the expert in external communication. This is because one with a higher level would be more worried about the disclosure of any sensitive content, and what he/she says are more inclined to be viewed as an official point of view.

Fifth, from the perspective of academic evaluation and financial support, the social think tanks are relatively loose, since the titles and salaries are not linked. However, the think tanks within the system are different; for a long time, research institutions and universities have conferred academic titles in accordance with papers and books; after the transformation to think tanks, most of them have been engaged in basic theoretical research in think tanks, while others have been willing to engage in decision-making consulting research, consequently resulting in academic evaluation-related conflicts between these two expert types. So far, no special system has been set up for the academic evaluation of think tank experts in China. Under such circumstances, the think tank experts without papers or books can barely enter the promotion channel of the academic title, thus restricting their thinking innovation. Similarly, because think tanks within the system are completely funded by financial allocations, the use of the government's financial allocation is strictly controlled. The problem is that the managements of the think tanks and the general research institutions are exactly the same, and the government audits the think tanks' use of funds in accordance with those for average research institutions. As we all know, the most important studies of think tanks are to deal with (both international and domestic) emergencies, and the urgency makes it difficult to carry out "budget" design, but financial investment is required in the studies. This contradiction restricts the emergency studies, goes against foreign exchanges, and makes it even more impossible to conduct external communication.

As mentioned above, the most important thing about communication is content. The content of think tanks' external communication is thought. From the above aspects, the key factors affecting the external communication of China's think tanks are (1) the mechanism of ideological production and (2) the mechanism of performance evaluation, which even directly affects the mechanism of ideological production. The problems of the two major mechanisms have made it difficult for China's think tanks to generate new ideas, new concepts and new policies, so the capability to external communication is very weak. Although the number of China's think tanks is second

only to the United States, it is far inferior to those in European countries and even some in other developing countries in terms of international influence and external communication. It can be seen that the construction of China's think tanks is still at a preliminary stage, and it is a long way to go to improve the country's soft power through the development of think tanks.

IV. Reflections on Improving the Capability of China's Think Tanks to Communicate Abroad

The purpose of China's foreign communication is to shape China's good international image, tell the world the story of China¹, and spread Chinese culture. Academic culture and ideological culture are the cultural essence of a country. Think tanks are not only platforms for the production of ideas, but also tools for the dissemination of ideas. Therefore, we should give full play to the role of think tanks in international communication and vigorously enhance the external communication capability of China's think tanks.

First, we should change from bureaucratic jargon to the exchange of academic ideas. Explaining official policies is only one function of the think tank, not all. Especially in the process of foreign exchange, if think tank experts blindly explain China's policies to others, then experts will certainly be regarded as officials. The other party is talking about academic and ideological issues with us, while we are introducing the policies of the Party and the government. This kind of communication will be very embarrassing and it is impossible to have positive interaction. To avoid this, China's think tanks must strengthen independent research in order to enhance their academic background, that is, to enhance their capability to spread abroad.

Second, we should change from policy-dependent research to innovative research in academic thought. The so-called policy dependence research refers to the research that follows the policy and is carried out within the framework of the policy. The vast majority of this research is to defend the legitimacy of policies, rather than to conduct research from the perspective of truth and science. This kind of research result is very difficult to go to the world. On the contrary, no matter what carrier or language is used as the writing tool, the innovative research of academic thoughts has strong communication power and influence. It is also because of this that both the official and academic circles are increasingly emphasizing the construction of a discipline system and theoretical system of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics. Only under the support of China's own disciplines and theories can China's think tanks have the capability to construct discourse and to spread "Chinese stories" in international peer exchanges.

Third, we should change from focusing on producing thought to paying equal attention to producing and disseminating thought. Previously, both academic

¹ It should be noted that "telling China's stories well" does not mean only "telling China's good stories", because not all the China's stories are "good stories". China's stories should be told in an appropriate way to better showcase their objectiveness, authenticity and reliability.

institutions and think tanks were mainly focused on the production of ideas, trying to influence decision makers with “ideas” and completely ignoring the function of spreading ideas. To enhance the capability of China’s think tanks to communicate with the outside world, it is necessary not only to produce ideas and innovate ideas, but also to transfer ideas to international academic circles and international think tanks. It is also necessary to use the original ideas of China’s think tanks to influence international counterparts, and then to influence their audiences through international think tanks. This is also an important path for China to enhance its cultural soft power.

Fourth, when communication ideas are taken seriously by China’s think tanks, we must change from focusing on print media to relying on new media, convergence media and other emerging media. Some experts from China’s think tanks still know the importance of spreading ideas. They, however, only use their advantage of foreign language to publish several comments or papers in international media as individual behaviors rather than institutional behaviors. On the whole, scholars in Chinese academic circles are not very good at writing in foreign languages, and very few can write in foreign languages and express their ideas accurately. Therefore, only a few papers can be published in international media and journals. As a result, China’s think tanks, academics and even China as a whole have a particularly weak voice in the international arena. In fact, to improve China’s discourse power, it is not necessary to express it in foreign languages and publish it in international media, but to have original ideas and theories first, and then to have its own communication platform. Today, the Internet, convergence media and other emerging media provide very good means and platforms for the dissemination of ideas. China’s think tanks should not only be good at using foreign counterparts’ media to disseminate ideas, but also try to create their own new media to disseminate ideas.

Last but not least, we should build a cooperation platform with our international counterparts. Think tanks should also carry out open research. We should not only borrow external brains and employ experts from international think tanks to conduct cooperative research, but also jointly build platforms for ideological exchange, academic dialogue and dissemination with their international counterparts. We should influence each other through ideological and academic exchanges and strive for the discourse power through the dissemination of ideas on the platform. We must not treat foreign things as scourges and turn them away. Only when we are good at absorbing the essence of foreign thoughts can we have a steady source of wisdom and a driving force for sustainable development.