

The Evolution of Chinese Policy Studies: A Bibliometric Analysis from 2000 to 2024

Yu Xiao

*Askew School of Public Administration and Policy,
Florida State University, FL, USA*

yx24b@fsu.edu

Hongtao Yi

*Askew School of Public Administration and Policy,
Florida State University, FL, USA*

h.yi@fsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Despite extensive literature on Chinese public administration, there is a notable gap in providing comprehensive syntheses focusing specifically on Chinese public policy research. To address this gap, we analyzed 155 key articles published in leading policy journals from 2000 to June 2024. Utilizing bibliometric and content analysis, this study maps publication trends, collaboration networks, evolving research focus, influential theoretical foundations, and methodological applications. Our findings highlight a transition in Chinese policy research from theory borrowing to theorizing, and from descriptive analyses focusing on social policy to a multifaceted approach across different policy domains. Chinese policy studies increasingly leverage local experiences to enrich and contribute to policy theory. Finally, our findings underscore the need for rigorous research designs examining emerging policy issues to advance the field further.

Keywords: Chinese Policy Studies, Bibliometric Analysis, Policy Implementation, Theoretical Evolution, Methodological Application

La evolución de los estudios de política china: Un análisis bibliométrico de 2000 a 2024

RESUMEN

A pesar de la extensa literatura sobre la administración pública china, existe una notable carencia en la elaboración de síntesis exhaustivas centradas específicamente en la investigación sobre políticas públicas chinas. Para abordar esta carencia, analizamos 155 artículos clave publicados en importantes revistas de política entre 2000 y junio de 2024. Mediante análisis bibliométrico y de contenido, este estudio mapea las tendencias de publicación, las redes de colaboración, la evolución del enfoque de investigación, los fundamentos teóricos influyentes y las aplicaciones metodológicas. Nuestros hallazgos destacan una transición en la investigación sobre políticas chinas desde la adopción de teorías a la teorización, y desde análisis descriptivos centrados en la política social a un enfoque multifacético en diferentes ámbitos de la política. Los estudios de política china aprovechan cada vez más las experiencias locales para enriquecer y contribuir a la teoría de políticas. Finalmente, nuestros hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de diseños de investigación rigurosos que examinen cuestiones políticas emergentes para impulsar el campo.

Palabras clave: Estudios de política china, Análisis bibliométrico, Implementación de políticas, Evolución teórica, Aplicación metodológica

中国政策研究的演变：2000年至2024年的文献计量分析

摘要

尽管关于中国公共行政的文献有很多，但在“聚焦于中国公共政策研究的全面综述”方面存在明显的空白。为了填补该研究空白，我们分析了2000年至2024年6月期间发表在主要政策期刊上的155篇重要论文。本研究运用文献计量法和内容分析法，描绘了出版趋势、协作网络、不断发展的研究重点、有影响力的理论基础、以及方法论应用。我们的研究结果强调了中国政策研究从理论借鉴到理论化的转变，从侧重于社会政策的描述性分析转变到涵盖不同政策领域的多层面方法。中国政策研究越来越多地利用本土经验来丰富政策理

论并对其作贡献。最后，我们的研究结果强调，需要严谨的研究设计来分析新兴的政策问题，以进一步推动该领域的发展。

关键词：中国政策研究，文献计量分析，政策实施，理论演变，方法论应用

1. Introduction

Chinese policy research has gained increasing scholarly attention due to China's unique political system and intricate policy-making processes (Li and Zhang, 2021; Yang and Yi, 2023; Zhang et al., 2018). The growing presence of such studies in leading international journals reflects the theoretical and practical significance of understanding China's governance mechanisms (Li and Zhang, 2021; Kim et al., 2019). Scholars in this field examine the applicability and limitations of Western policy theories across different institutional contexts while developing new theoretical frameworks inspired by China's unique institutional setting (Li and Zhang, 2021; Liu et al., 2022).

Existing literature reviews on Chinese policy studies predominantly fall into two distinct yet interconnected categories. The first synthesizes research within specific policy domains or evaluates the application of established Western policy theories in China, such as studies on technology policy (Sun and Zhang, 2008), circular economy policy (Cui and Zhang, 2018), and policy innovation theory (Zhao and Gu, 2022). These reviews test theoretic-

cal boundaries and highlight the need for theoretical adaptation in China. The second stream, embedded within public administration scholarship, provides broader insights into Chinese policy research development through comprehensive analyses of publication patterns, research themes, and intellectual influences (Zhang et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2019; Li and Zhang 2021).

Despite existing contributions, a systematic review of Chinese policy studies is still lacking. Most reviews focus on Chinese public administration broadly, without specifically identifying policy studies as an independent field. Consequently, we lack a clear understanding of this field's evolution, particularly how research priorities and theoretical frameworks have shifted alongside China's changing governance challenges. This gap is especially relevant following the recent recognition of Public Policy as a formal subdiscipline within Public Administration in China. Moreover, key elements like influential scholars, research networks, and major themes across policy journals remain underexplored.

To address the gap, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of Chinese policy research by examining 155 articles published in leading policy jour-

nals from 2000 to June 2024. The study employs bibliometric analysis to map the field's intellectual structure, while applying content analysis to examine research characteristics, including analytical levels, data sources, and methodological approaches. This comprehensive examination aims to illuminate the development trajectory and future directions of Chinese policy studies.

The next section critically reviews existing literature on the development of Chinese public policy research as a field. Section 3 outlines data collection and analytical procedures. Sections 4 and 5 present findings on publication trends, collaboration networks, thematic developments, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches. Finally, we look ahead to the future of Chinese policy studies.

2. Literature Review on Chinese Public Policy and Public Administration Research

Most literature reviews on Chinese policy studies focus on specific policy domains or the application of Western policy theories to China's context, offering insights into how these frameworks are adapted to the country's unique institutional environments. For example, Cui and Zhang (2018) used a bibliometric review to trace the co-evolution of circular economy policy and academic research in China, revealing strong policy-research feedback loops over time. In the area of science and technology policy, Sun and Zhang (2008, 2016) identified the national innovation system and industrial

policy tools as dominant themes, based largely on qualitative analysis of core journal articles. Zhao and Gu (2022) reviewed the development of policy innovation theory in the Chinese context, highlighting how concepts such as incremental and collaborative innovation have been adapted and expanded through local governance practices.

A second body of literature approaches Chinese policy research from within the broader framework of public administration. Rather than focusing on specific policy sectors, these studies take a disciplinary lens to examine how policy-related scholarship has evolved in China, especially in terms of publication trends, research themes, and methodological choices. Liu and Li (2013) reviewed publications in Chinese Public Administration, analyzing scholars' backgrounds, thematic shifts, and methodological shortcomings. Zhang et al. (2017) investigated the growing contributions of mainland scholars in international public administration journals, identifying emerging collaboration patterns. Kim et al. (2019) further examined trends in publication volume, geographic distribution, and qualitative dominance in top English-language journals. Li and Zhang (2021) conducted a systematic review of Chinese research in nine leading public administration journals between 2002 and 2020, revealing that most studies applied or extended Western theories.

Most recently, Yang and Yi (2023) offered a valuable synthesis of the frontiers of policy process research in China, identifying five key areas: agenda-setting, decision-making, ex-

perimentation, implementation, and diffusion. However, while their study highlights the emerging research directions, it does not provide a comprehensive mapping of the field’s intellectual structure, theoretical foundations, and institutional dynamics.

Table 1. Review of Key Literature on Chinese Policy and Public Administration Research

Article	Coverage	Area	Conclusion
Yang and Yi, 2023	Frontiers of Policy Process Research in China	Public Policy	Five important studies: agenda setting, decision-making, policy experimentation, policy implementation, and policy diffusion
Li and Zhang, 2021	Chinese Public Administration Research in top PA Journal	Public Administration	Contributed in theory testing and extension.
Kim et al., 2019	Publications in Top English Journals from Mainland China (1996–2016)	Public Administration	Important topic: social development and administrative reform; Qualitative method dominates.
Zhang et al., 2017	Chinese Public Administration Research from the Social Science Citation Index database (2000–2014)	Public Administration	Mainland China scholars play an important role in Chinese public administration studies.
Wu et al., 2013	Research published in top PA journals of mainland China and Taiwan (1998–2007)	Public Administration	Chinese policy scholars lack attention to research methods

Note: This table is adapted from Kim et al., (2019), and Li and Zhang (2021).

Despite these valuable contributions, the field lacks a systematic synthesis that captures the intellectual landscape of Chinese public policy studies as a distinct field. Domain-specific reviews often illuminate how Western theories are adapted to China’s institutional reality, yet they remain fragmented and narrowly scoped. Conversely, public administration reviews address broader disciplinary trends but seldom engage with public policy as a theoretically instinct domain. Even recent efforts, such as Yang and Yi’s (2023) synthesis of policy process research, are centered on a specific thematic subfield and do not attempt to map the broader structure, scope, or evolution of Chinese public policy studies.

The limited attention to public policy as a cohesive field is understandable, given its traditional status as a

subfield within public administration in China. However, recent institutional changes underscore the need for a more focused assessment. In May 2023, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council officially elevated Public Policy as a secondary discipline under Public Administration. This institutional elevation reflects not only the growing relevance of policy expertise in China's governance system but also the academic community's recognition of public policy as an independent domain of inquiry. In this context, a systematic review of the field's development—encompassing its research themes, theoretical orientations, methodological trends, and patterns of scholarly collaboration—has become both timely and necessary for consolidating knowledge and guiding future scholarship.

3. Methodology

To comprehensively understand the intellectual structure of Chinese policy research, this study

employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative bibliometric analysis with qualitative content analysis.

3.1 Article Selection

Our systematic review focuses on articles published in nine high-impact, peer-reviewed journals in public policy. These journals were carefully selected based on their sustained academic influence and established contribution to advancing theoretical and methodological innovations in public policy research. The journals include: *Review of Policy Research*, *Policy and Society*, *Policy and Politics*, *Climate Policy*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Policy Studies Journal*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *Journal of Public Policy*, and *Policy Sciences*. Table 2 shows the latest impact factors of these journals, providing a comprehensive view of their recent academic influence.

Table 2. Policy Journals Impact Factor (2019–2023)

Journal Name	2023 JIF	2022 JIF	2021 JIF	2020 JIF	2019 JIF
<i>Policy and Society</i>	5.700	9.300	10.104	4.231	3.050
<i>Climate Policy</i>	5.300	7.100	6.056	5.085	4.011
<i>Journal of European Public Policy</i>	4.600	4.200	4.366	7.399	4.177
<i>Policy and Politics</i>	4.300	4.700	3.297	3.750	3.069
<i>Policy Studies Journal</i>	4.100	3.800	4.775	5.141	3.797
<i>Policy Sciences</i>	3.800	5.300	5.121	3.846	3.609
<i>Journal of Policy Analysis and Management</i>	2.600	3.800	4.585	4.714	5.018
<i>Review of Policy Research</i>	2.300	2.100	2.328	2.000	1.548
<i>Journal of Public Policy</i>	1.900	2.400	2.611	2.517	1.750

This dataset was established in June 2024. We employed a systematic two-stage screening process to identify relevant literature. In the first stage, we conducted a comprehensive search across Scopus and Web of Science databases, using the keywords “China” or “Chinese” to screen titles, abstracts, and keywords of publications from 2000 to 2024. The year 2000 was chosen as the starting point for this analysis because it marks a significant juncture in China’s modern policy-making landscape, coinciding with China’s rapid economic expansion and increased integration into global systems following its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This period heralded substantial shifts in the policy process, making it a critical era for studying the evolution of Chinese policy research. It was also the year when China’s first public policy school was established (Zhang & Chan, 2020). This preliminary search yielded 372 articles.

Subsequently, through careful reading of abstracts and methodological sections, we refined our sample to 155 articles that focused primarily on Chinese policies, rather than articles that merely mentioned Chinese policy as contextual background or examples. We extracted and compiled detailed bibliometric data, including publication titles, author affiliations, source titles, publication types, abstracts, publication years, author keywords, citation counts, and references, storing all information in BibTeX format. From our dataset of 155 articles, we identified 156 institutions, 317 keywords, and 9,578 references.

3.2 Bibliometric and Content Analysis

Our analysis consists of four main steps as shown in Figure 1, utilizing a mixed-methods framework that integrates both quantitative and qualitative analyses to offer a comprehensive understanding of the field. Bibliometric analysis, through quantitative analysis of publication counts, citation data, and other metrics, helps evaluate field development, key contributors, intellectual structure, and evolutionary trends. We utilized the bibliometrix package in R, which provides a comprehensive set of tools, following the science mapping workflow. First of all, we begin with descriptive statistics to identify publication trends and key contributors. Building on the document X attribute matrix, we further develop a network matrix that includes collaboration, keyword co-occurrence, and co-citation of references.

Institutional collaborations are one of the primary forms of scientific cooperation that enhances institutional influence and accelerates knowledge dissemination (Ye et al., 2012). Evidence shows collaborative research receives higher citations (Presser, 1980), partially supporting its quality-enhancing effects. Analysis of institutional collaboration networks reveals how knowledge production is organized and evolves within a field. Institutional collaboration refers to the co-authorship of publications by researchers affiliated with different institutions, indicating formal or informal research partnerships. To represent these collaborative

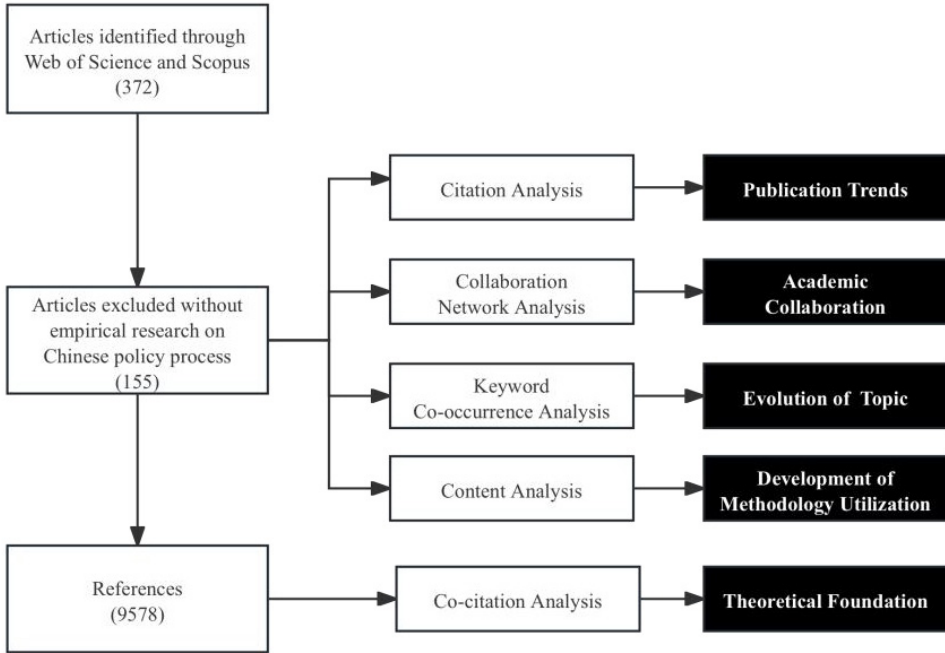


Figure 1. Research Procedure

ties, we construct a network where each node denotes a distinct institution, and connections are formed when researchers from different institutions co-author a paper. The intensity of each link—measured by its weight—reflects the number of joint publications between the institutions. This network is particularly crucial for Chinese policy studies, as it facilitates a dialog between indigenous policy practices and international theoretical frameworks. For analytical robustness and to focus on major patterns, we only include institutions ranking in the top 10% by publication volume. The Walktrap clustering algorithm is employed to discern major collaboration clusters, thereby enhancing our understanding of institutional collaboration patterns.

Next, we turned to analyzing research themes using keyword co-oc-

currence networks. Keywords can succinctly summarize critical content from articles and serve as valuable text-mining material (Li et al., 2016). Keyword co-occurrence refers to the phenomenon where two keywords appear together within the same article, suggesting a potential conceptual or thematic association between them. To transform co-occurrence relationships into a structured form, we built a network in which each node corresponds to a unique keyword. An edge is established between two nodes if the corresponding keywords appear together in at least one article. The strength of such a connection—represented by edge weight—reflects how many times the keyword pair co-occurs across all articles in the dataset (Law et al., 1998). Unlike word clouds that display isolated keyword frequencies, co-occurrence

networks reveal how research topics are interrelated, uncovering latent conceptual linkages and the overall thematic architecture of the field (Lozano et al., 2019). After refinement and standardization of the keyword list, we identified 317 keywords in the selected articles. To highlight dominant themes, we retained 53 keywords appearing at least three times. Using the Walktrap clustering algorithm, we revealed key themes. Additionally, we examined temporal trends of the top ten keywords by frequency, excluding geographic terms, to trace the thematic evolution of the field.

Third, we conducted a co-citation analysis of references to understand the key theoretical foundations underlying these themes. Co-citation occurs when two published articles jointly cite some earlier publications as references (Small, 1973). From our dataset of 155 articles, we obtained 9,578 references and calculated their citation frequencies. Since the citation frequency of an article indicates its influence on field development (Chabowski et al., 2011), we selected the top 51 most cited references (cited >4 times, top 0.5%). To visualize the intellectual linkages among these highly cited works, we constructed a co-citation network in which each node represents a cited article. A tie is formed between two nodes if they are co-cited by the same source article, and the strength of the tie corresponds to the number of times the pair is co-cited across the dataset. Using the bibliometric package, we generated this network and applied the Walktrap clustering algorithm to identify theoretical clusters. This network reveals how foundational

studies group together, providing insight into the major conceptual building blocks of Chinese policy research.

Finally, to complement these quantitative analyses with qualitative insights, we conducted content analysis following established frameworks in Chinese public administration research (Li and Zhang, 2021). Our coding scheme systematically categorized articles based on multiple dimensions: case type (single or comparative), government level (national, provincial, and local), study type (empirical or theoretical), methodology (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed), data sources, and policy areas.

By combining these analytical tools, we provide a comprehensive examination of the development, current state, and future directions of Chinese policy research. This multi-faceted approach allows us to identify trends in publication, research topics, theoretical contributions, and methodological approaches, while also providing insights into the intellectual structure of the field and its evolution over time.

4. Dynamics of the Field: Publication Trends and Collaboration

This section analyzes the publication trend and collaborative patterns in Chinese policy research. Tracking these patterns helps reveal how the field has developed over time and identifies the major institutional actors contributing to its development.

4.1 Publication Trends and Key Contributors

From 2000 to June 2024, Chinese policy research has exhibited remarkable growth, publishing 155 articles across nine leading public policy journals, with an average annual growth rate of 7.36% and 20.2 citations per article. While all analyses in this study rely on data collected through June 2024, Figure 2 has been separately updated to reflect publication counts through December 2024 to avoid the false impression of a sharp decline in the final year. Analysis of publication patterns reveals three distinct developmental phases, each characterized by unique dynamics and trends in research output.

The Initial Phase (2000–2011) laid the foundation for Chinese policy research, characterized by modest and fluctuating publication numbers that reflected the field's exploratory nature. During this period, annual publications ranged from as few as one article to occasional peaks of seven articles (2001) and five articles (2006). The inconsistent output, averaging 2.4 articles annually, suggests that research was still developing, with scholars gradually establishing their presence in the international academic community.

The Expansion Phase (2012–2017) was marked by substantial growth in publications. There were two notable peaks of 12 publications each in 2012 and 2015, with an impressive average of 7.8 articles annually. Even its least productive year outperformed most years in the initial phase (2000–2001). This demonstrates the field's growing

maturity and increasing international recognition. This phase aligns with the post-2008 global financial crisis era, during which the Chinese government launched large-scale stimulus programs and expanded policy experimentation. China's relatively effective response to the crisis, together with growing scholarly interest in state capacity, fiscal intervention, and crisis governance, contributed to increased attention to implementation, budgeting, and innovation in the Chinese context.

The Current Phase (2018–2024) represents a maturing stage for this area, characterized by both stability and groundbreaking achievements. During this period, there was an unprecedented growth in the number of published papers, reaching an extraordinary peak of 27 in 2023. This phase has maintained a strong baseline of at least five publications per year, with a high average of 11.3 publications per year. The strong performance from 2020 to 2024, with an average of 13.6 publications per year, is particularly impressive, highlighting the growing momentum and wide-ranging scope of the field. This continuing high level of production signals not only rising research capacity and institutional support but also a growing international interest in Chinese policy research.

The distribution of publications across journals reveals variations, reflecting different editorial focuses and research priorities within Chinese policy studies. *Review of Policy Research* published the most Chinese public policy research articles (46), making up

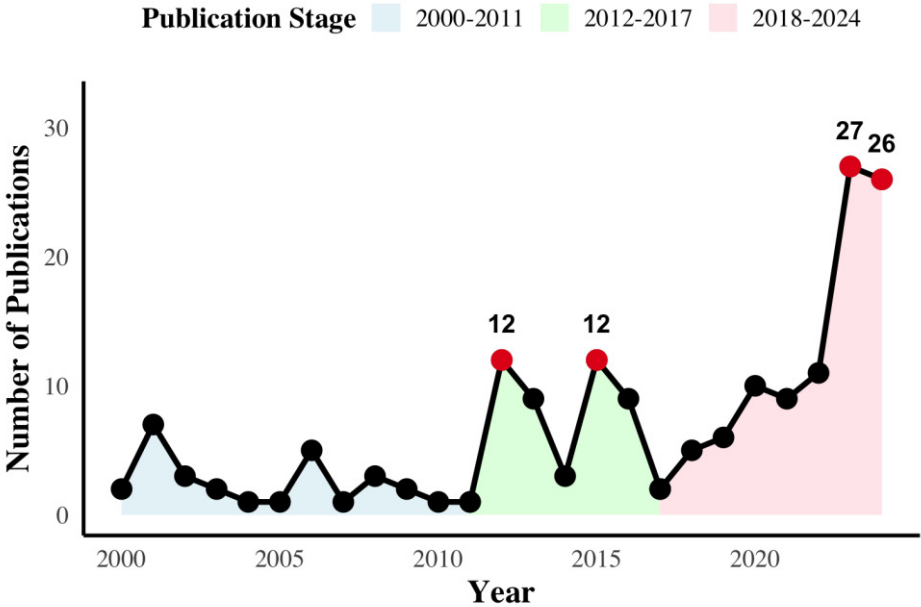


Figure 2. Publication Trend in Top Public Policy Journals (2000–2024)
(Red highlights the top three peak years; different colors indicate distinct development stages. Data for 2024 has been updated through December for this figure only, to ensure clarity in year-on-year comparisons. Other figures and analyses reflect data through June 2024.)

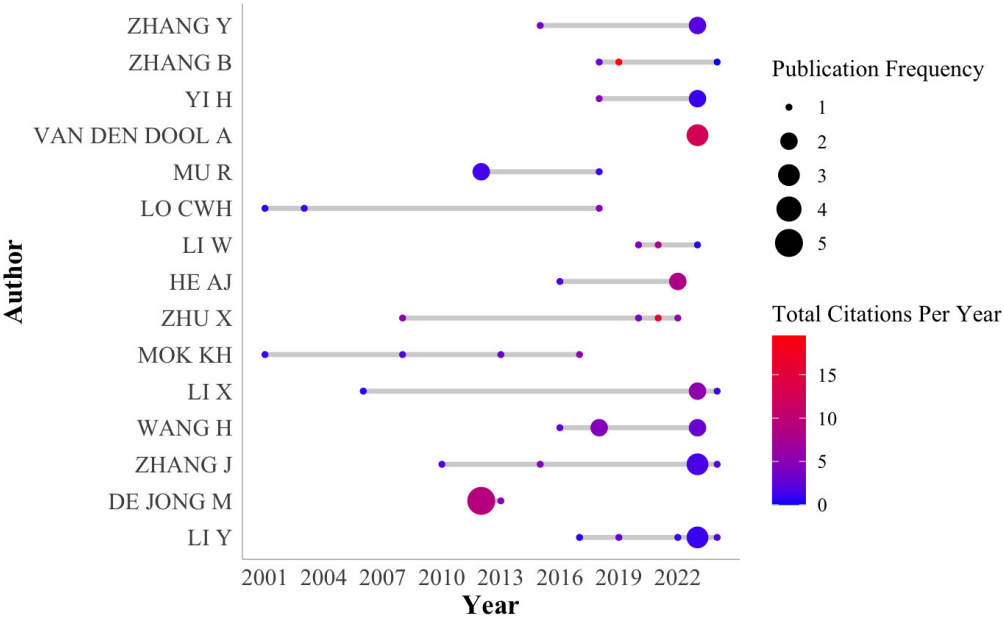


Figure 3. Publication Activity and Citation Rate Over Time
by Top 15 Most Prolific Authors

about 30% of total publications. This is followed by *Policy and Society* (28), *Policy and Politics* (15), and *Climate Policy* (15). Among the nine journals, *Journal of European Public Policy* published the fewest related articles (1), possibly due to its focus on European policy research. The only article in that journal compared public governance preferences for AI technology across Germany, UK, India, Chile, and China (Ehret, 2022).

As Figure 3 shows, we can observe a complex dynamic of scholarly contribution and impact in Chinese policy studies. Among the field's contributors, several scholars stand out for their significant influence. Zhu Xufeng has maintained a consistent scholarly impact from 2008–2022, with four publications totaling 189 citations that examine policy innovation through intergovernmental relations (Zhu and Zhao, 2021) and official mobility patterns (Zhu and Meng, 2020). Yanwei Li is the most prolific scholar, with seven publications addressing critical issues, including crisis response mechanisms (Ye et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2023) and public participation dynamics (Li et al., 2022). Other notable contributors include Martin de Jong, whose 2012 publications on infrastructure governance and regional development had 118 citations, and emerging scholars such as Sun et al. (2019), whose study on China's green credit policy is now the most cited in the field. This pattern of sustained scholarly engagement and high-impact individual contributions indicates an evolving and increasingly dynamic research landscape within Chinese policy studies.

4.2 Collaborative Network

In Chinese public policy research, scholars from mainland China and Hong Kong (China) have been remarkably active, publishing 60 and 17 articles respectively. Scholars from the United States and Singapore also made significant contributions, publishing 10 and 7 articles respectively. Among universities, Tsinghua University published the most articles at 17. This is followed by City University of Hong Kong, Peking University, and Renmin University of China, each publishing 9 articles. Internationally, the National University of Singapore and the Delft University of Technology stood out as the most productive contributors.

The institutional collaboration network in Chinese policy research demonstrates a vibrant academic exchange ecosystem. As shown in Figure 4, the structure of collaboration spans regional and international boundaries, enhancing the depth and breadth of the field. The number of linked components (156) and the existence of numerous small clusters indicate a highly specialized and diverse research community. While dominant institutions are evident, the presence of numerous smaller actors highlights the field's openness to niche expertise and innovative perspectives. It is surprising that mainland Chinese institutions account for only 24.3% of this network, which underscores the global nature of research collaboration in Chinese policy studies.

There are two major clusters of collaboration in Chinese policy studies. The largest collaborative cluster is an-

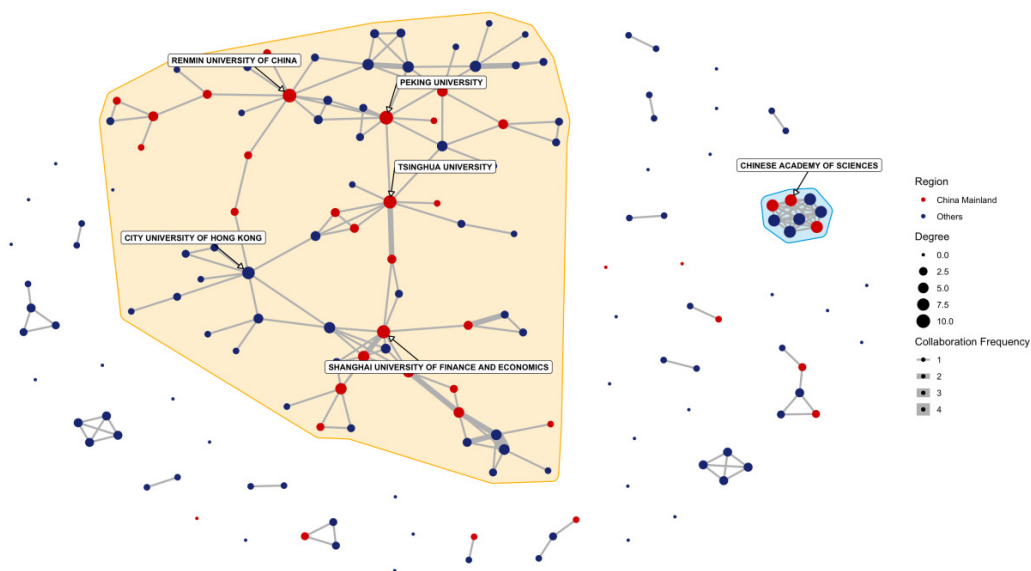


Figure 4. Institutional Collaboration Networks in Chinese Policy Studies
(Red = Mainland China; Blue = Others. Node size shows degree, edge width shows collaboration frequency. Labels are shown only for the top five institutions by collaboration frequency.)

chored by several core Chinese institutions that function as critical bridges of collaboration. At its center are leading academic institutions, including Peking University, Renmin University of China, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, and Tsinghua University. Peking University and Tsinghua University focus primarily on environmental policy and policy innovation. The City University of Hong Kong also holds a critical position within the cluster, facilitating cooperation across geographical boundaries. The international dimension of this cluster is further strengthened by the active participation of institutions such as the National University of Singapore, Delft University of Technology, and the University of Southern California. These international nodes play significant roles in fostering collaborative research efforts,

contributing to the globalization of Chinese policy research, and enabling comparative policy perspectives.

The second-largest cluster, centered around the Chinese Academy of Sciences, demonstrates a more focused research agenda concentrated on social policies in developing countries. This cluster's distinctive contribution is exemplified by influential studies such as Wang et al.'s (2016) examination of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and their impact on reducing student dropout rates in rural Chinese middle schools. This work highlights how institutional collaboration can produce research with direct policy implications for addressing social challenges.

This collaborative network has made significant contributions to Chinese policy research by not only pro-

ducing numerous publications but also fostering multidimensional dialogue between scholars from different governance and policy contexts. This cross-institutional exchange integrates diverse theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and comparative insights into the study of Chinese policies. Collaboration between institutions within and beyond China has enriched the field by allowing researchers to examine Chinese policy practices through multiple analytical lenses, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of China's unique policy processes and implementation mechanisms while connecting these insights to broader theoretical discussions in policy studies.

5. Evolution of the Field: Research Focuses, Theories, and Methods

As the field continues to grow, there is a shift in research focus, alongside advancements in theoretical depth and methodological rigor.

5.1 Core Themes in Policy Research

Through clustering analysis of the keyword co-occurrence network, our study identifies three prominent thematic clusters that have shaped the discourse in Chinese policy research. Each cluster represents a distinct but interconnected realm of inquiry that reflects broader shifts in the intellectual contours of the field.

Governance and Policymaking

This red cluster includes keywords such

as “Governance Approach,” “Policy Implementation,” “Policy Making,” “Innovation,” “Authoritarianism,” and “State Role.” This dominant cluster captures China's unique institutional contexts, where policymaking occurs within the “nomenklatura system”—a hierarchical bureaucratic structure under Party leadership (Hammond, 2013). Within this arrangement, policy entrepreneurs operate through a “technically infeasible strategy” (Zhu, 2008), navigating between political constraints and implementation innovations. As Wang et al. (2013) articulated, the principle of “crossing the river by feeling the stones” (*mozhe shitou guohe*) has become institutionalized as a defining characteristic of Chinese policymaking, reflecting an incremental and experimental approach to policy innovation within the authoritarian governance framework. This policymaking approach simultaneously maintains the stability of China's political system while providing room for policy innovation.

Comparative Social Policy

The yellow cluster explores commonalities and differences in social policy evolution between China and other regions, including “Asia,” “Far East,” and “Eurasia.” These keywords suggest a macro-geographic and regional research perspective that involves policy comparisons between different contexts. The comparative perspective manifests at multiple levels and through various methodological approaches. For instance, Lee (2006) compared welfare restructuring models in China and Singapore. This comparative approach

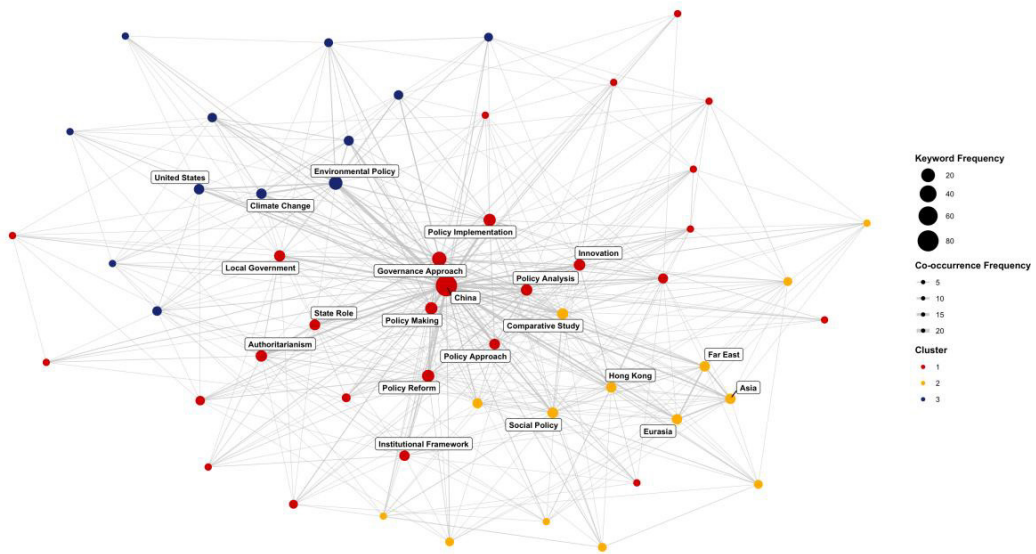


Figure 5. Co-occurrence Network of Keywords in Chinese Policy Research (2000-2024)

(Top 53 of 317 keywords. Node size = frequency; edge width = co-occurrence; color = cluster (Walktrap). Labels shown for frequency > 6.)

illuminates common mechanisms of policy evolution across different institutional settings. At the same time, it also highlights China's distinctive policy innovation patterns. Shi (2012) analyzes the “pilot-expansion” model in the social policy domain, demonstrating China's unique mechanisms of policy learning and diffusion. Notably, different colored clusters show interconnections. Hammond (2013) analyzed China's unique policy entrepreneurship behavior in social policy and examined it within the context of the East Asian development model.

Environmental Policy

The blue cluster studies China's environmental and climate policy development, particularly focusing on sustainability transitions and market-based environmental policy implementation.

A key research focus is policy experimentation, which combines top-down and bottom-up mechanisms to test and evaluate policy innovations. Notable examples include pilot programs for carbon emissions trading schemes and low-carbon city initiatives (Zhang, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). Research in this cluster examines the dynamic interactions between central and local governments in policy design and implementation, highlighting how this relationship shapes environmental outcomes (Liu et al., 2018; Zhu and Zhao, 2021). The research reveals the complexities of China's multi-level governance system and its implications for environmental policy effectiveness.

5.2 The Evolution of Research Focus

To further capture the dynamic trajectory of Chinese policy research, we an-

alyzed changes in keyword frequency across different periods (as shown in Figure 6). The focus of Chinese policy research has evolved from dispersed to concentrated, from singular to pluralistic.

In the initial stage (2000–2011), scholars used comparative approaches to capture commonalities and characteristics of China's institutional environment in social policies (Midgley and Tang, 2002; Saunders, 2006). During this period, keywords were sparse and infrequent, indicating the field was in the initial stages, with academic discussion not yet mature. However, it is worth noting that these three keywords remain ongoing themes in Chinese policy research (3-8 times/year), reflecting an enduring tradition of positioning Chinese policy research within a comparative framework.

The expansion phase (2012–2017) witnessed a diversification of research themes. The research on environmental policy has grown significantly (increasing from 3 to 10 occurrences annually), emerging as a major research focus. This reflects the increasing importance of environmental governance in China's policy agenda (Zhang, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). Moreover, research on policymaking and policy reform still gradually increased (2-6 times annually). Innovation emerged as a new keyword (2-4 times), reflecting a growing interest in China's policy innovation practices (Lee and Restrepo, 2015; Li, 2017). Alongside this, several new policy theories and mechanism-oriented keywords also gained prominence, such

as “authoritarianism,” “policy making,” “local government,” and “policy implementation.” It signals an academic shift from macro-institutional description toward the analysis of policy dynamics and implementation processes (Howlett, 2014; Mei & Liu, 2014).

The advancement phase (2018–2024) manifested deeper and more systematic research characteristics. Environmental policy research continued to heat up (12-13 times), becoming one of the main research topics. Research on policy implementation and policymaking increased significantly (5-10 times), indicating deeper research into policy processes. Research related to authoritarianism, local government, and state role notably increased in this phase (2-5 times), reflecting a deeper examination of the Chinese political system (Zhu and Zhao, 2021; Li and Ma, 2019; Zhu and Meng, 2020). Governance approach research also peaked (7-11 times/year), showing continuous and systematic interest in understanding China's governance mechanisms (Tang et al., 2018). During this period, research emphasizes the integration of theory and practice, and in-depth policy evaluation. This is reflected in the steady rise of “environmental policy” (12 to 19), as well as notable increases in keywords such as “policy implementation,” “policy making,” “governance approach,” and “state role.” These keywords reflect the growing use of policy theoretical frameworks to analyze China's environmental policy. For instance, Bailey et al. (2023) applied the Policy Conflict Framework to analyze policy conflicts in shale development in China.

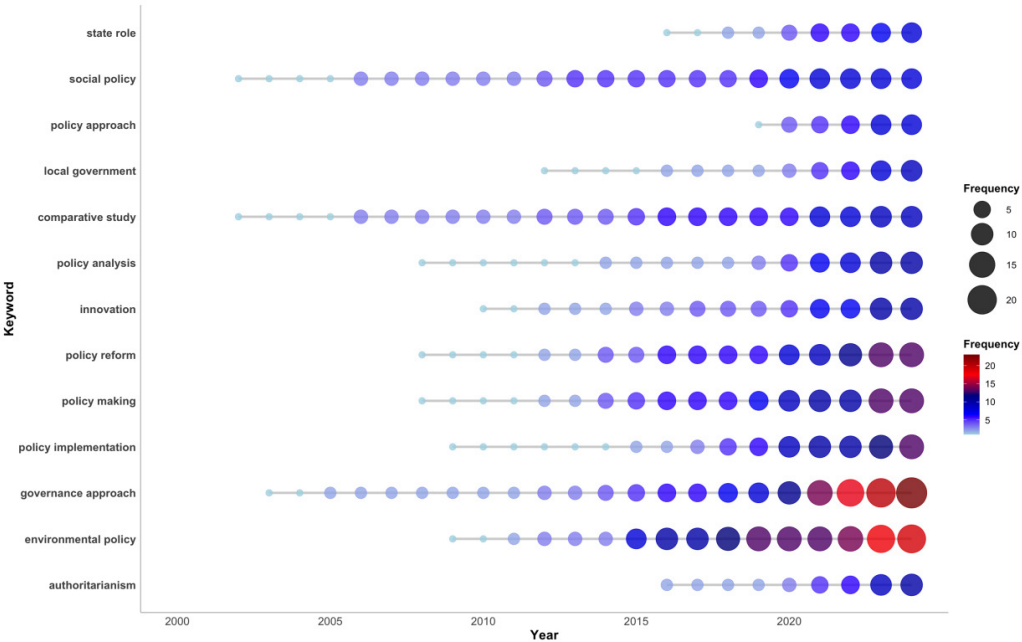


Figure 6. Keyword Trends in Chinese Policy Research (2000–2024)

(Trends of selected keywords ($n > 8$) from 317 keywords, excluding geographic terms, are shown. Color and size of points indicate keyword frequency.)

These trend changes reflect how Chinese policy research focus has gradually expanded from early institutional comparison and social policy to broader fields, particularly specific issues like environmental governance and policy implementation, with significant improvement in both depth and breadth of research. Meanwhile, this evolution also reflects the development trajectory of Chinese policy practice itself, especially the continuous advancement in areas like environmental governance and policy innovation.

5.3 Most-Studied Policy Theories

The co-citation network in Chinese policy research provides insight into the theoretical foundations shaping Chinese policy research. Through cluster analy-

sis of the 51 most frequently cited references (cited more than four times), we identified four main theoretical clusters. In this network, edges represent co-citation relationships between references, with thicker links indicating stronger connections, and node size representing total citation frequency. The clusters are color-coded according to Walktrap community detection results.

Policy Change

The light blue cluster in the upper right represents the theoretical foundations of policy change under China’s unique political system, consisting of Western policy process theories and institutional analysis of transition countries. Western policy process theory is mainly based on two frameworks: the Multiple

Streams Framework proposed by Kingdon (1984), which argues that policy change stems from the intersection of the problem stream, policy stream, and politics streams; second, the Punctu-

ated Equilibrium Theory proposed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), which explains the coexistence of stability and drastic changes in the policy process.

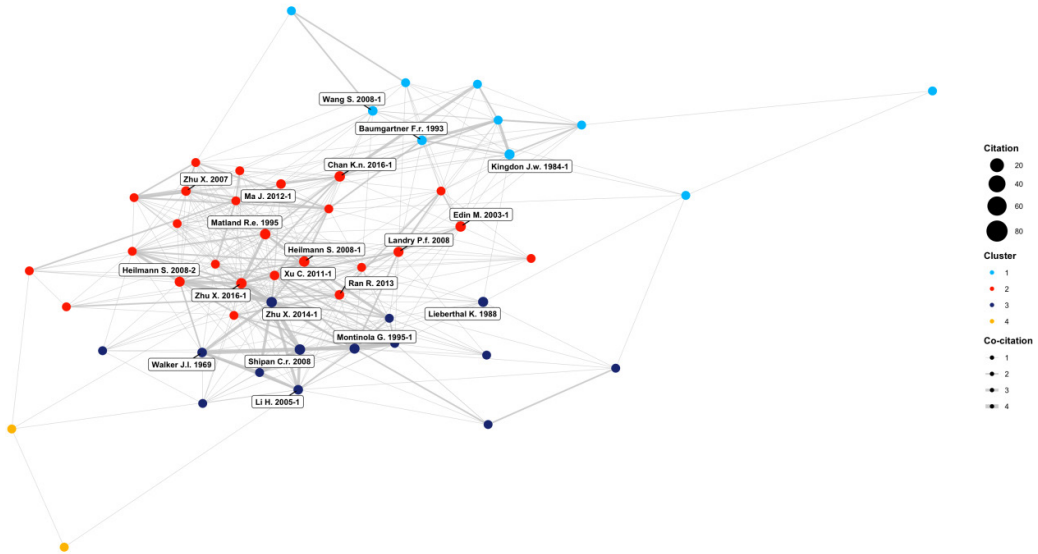


Figure 7. The Co-citation Network of Top 51 References

(The top 0.5% most cited references were selected. Node size reflects citation frequency; edge width indicates co-citation; node color denotes clusters identified via the Walktrap algorithm. Labels are shown for co-citation > 4 for clarity.)

Alongside these Western policy process frameworks, this cluster also integrates institutional analysis of transitional economies. For example, Wang (2008) used the Double Movement theory to emphasize the state's role in offsetting market excesses. Shirk (1993) followed a rational choice institutional approach to explain how China maintained authoritarian control amid market reforms. Additionally, Pei (2006) proposed the developmental autocracy theory, highlighting the potential “trapped transition” in gradualist reform, emphasizing how the regime retains economic levers to ensure po-

litical survival. Together, these theories contribute significantly to Chinese policy studies by bridging the gap between Western theoretical frameworks and China's institutional context. The cluster provides frameworks for understanding Chinese policy change, explaining both general patterns through Western policy process theories and the unique logic through transitional state institutional analysis.

Policy Implementation

The central red cluster offers a comprehensive theoretical framework to illuminate the dynamics of China's policy

experimentation and implementation under its decentralized authoritarian system. The first strand of literature focuses on central-local relations, including decentralized authoritarianism (Xu, 2011; Landry, 2008) and state capacity (Edin, 2003). These studies investigate how the central government uses personnel management and performance targets to incentivize local compliance while maintaining hierarchical control. However, this approach yields varying results across policy domains (Heilmann, 2008b).

The second component concentrates on policy implementation mechanisms, such as the ambiguity-conflict model (Matland, 1995), which explains how ambiguity and conflict affect policy outcomes. Other works emphasize incentive structures (Ran, 2013), social accountability (Ma, 2012), and information acquisition (Chan and Zhao, 2016), offering a nuanced view of why policy implementation often diverges from central intent. The third dimension of this cluster explores policy experimentation as a key governance strategy. Studies emphasize how local pilots are scaled up to national policies (Heilmann, 2008a), how cadre mobility incentivizes innovation (Zhu & Zhang, 2016), and how think tanks inform adaptive learning (Zhu & Xue, 2007). While these themes are also relevant to policy diffusion, its primary focus lies in the unique institutional and incentive structures that shape Chinese implementation practices.

The red cluster illuminates the intricate mechanisms through which China's decentralized authoritarian

system shapes its unique policy experimentation, implementation challenges, and adaptive governance.

Policy Diffusion

The middle dark blue cluster represents theories of policy diffusion and policy innovation, allowing researchers to better understand the internal logic and external influences on policy change. First, Walker (1969) laid the early theoretical foundation for policy innovation. Berry and Berry (1990) outlined policy diffusion theory, including internal determinants and regional diffusion models (Berry and Berry, 1990). Shipan and Volden (2008) further refined four diffusion mechanisms: learning, competition, coercion, and imitation.

Chinese scholars have extended these ideas to the domestic context. Montinola et al. (1995) characterized China's federalism as "Chinese-style," emphasizing local experimentation under central oversight. Zhou (2010) examined bureaucratic collusion and informal rules in diffusion processes. Zhu (2014) proposed two unique diffusion modes: mandatory diffusion, driven by top-down directives, and tournament diffusion, where localities innovate to outperform peers under performance-based competition. These studies reveal how formal and informal institutions jointly shape policy diffusion in a hierarchical political setting. As Mei's (2020) research shows, this characteristic is particularly evident in major crisis responses (such as COVID-19), where policy mix must align with rooted policy style to maintain consistency and effectiveness.

By combining these theories, researchers can delve deeper into the factors behind policy diffusion and explore how to effectively promote policy innovation in China.

Incentive Structure

The bottom yellow cluster focuses on how incentive structures influence policy processes. North (1990) argues that institutional frameworks create incentive structures that shape organizational behavior and economic performance through path-dependent patterns. Tang et al. (2018) combine policy feedback theory with official ranking tournament logic, analyzing how China's Mandatory Target System (MTS) fosters provincial competition in environmental performance. Their findings suggest that performance benchmarking serves as an institutional mechanism for vertical accountability and innovation diffusion.

This theoretical cluster significantly contributes to understanding how institutional mechanisms and performance metrics can drive governance outcomes. It bridges classic institutional theory with contemporary Chinese governance practices, showing how formal institutional structures shape bureaucratic behavior and performance.

5.4 Most-Used Research Methods

Chinese policy research primarily focuses on specific policies or single cases (82.47%), exploring implementation details and policy evaluation of specific policies in the Chinese context. Comparative research, which examines policy subsystems across different contexts,

typically employs qualitative methods. Early comparative studies primarily focused on social welfare policy across different countries or regions (Lee, 2006; Saunders, 2006; Midgley and Tang, 2002).

Regarding government levels in Chinese policy research, national-level studies account for 80.31%, provincial-level studies for 11.04%, and local-level studies for only 8.65%. The study by Ma et al. (2012) is one of the few local-level studies, using the Hangzhou subway construction disaster as a case to explore the strategic behaviors involved in balancing public values. Overall, there is a pronounced focus on national-level analysis in Chinese policy research, with relatively few studies delving into local policies.

The field is largely empirical in orientation, with 90.9% of studies drawing on primary or secondary data to assess policy effects. Only 9.1% of articles are theoretical essays. Documents are the most used data source, appearing in approximately 61.6% of studies. Survey, interview, and other sources are also widely used, and 37% of studies incorporate two or more data types, enhancing both validity and robustness.

Thematic areas span a wide range of sectors, including education, environmental protection, public health, and digital governance. Environmental policy is particularly prominent, accounting for 20.8% of the studies. For instance, Guo (2023) applied a mixed-methods approach to evaluate low-carbon city pilot projects, showing how financial incentives and monitor-

ing mechanisms shape urban climate action.

Regarding research methodologies, there is a balanced use of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Recent years have seen a notable increase in experimental and quasi-experimental designs. For instance, Zeng and Huang (2024) utilized randomized controlled trials to examine bureaucrats' trust biases toward think tank reports, while Shen et al. (2024) conducted field experiments to investigate the behavior of migrant children participating in social health insurance. They provide greater internal validity, offering valuable insights into policy effects.

Qualitative methods remain critical for understanding contextual and institutional dimensions. Scholars rely on case studies, document analysis, interviews, and process tracing to uncover how policies are formulated, contested, and implemented. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is frequently applied; for example, Li and Ma (2019) used QCA to investigate the factors influencing regulations in the ride-hailing sector.

An emerging strength in the field is the increasing use of mixed-method designs, which integrate qualitative depth with quantitative precision. For example, Xiao et al. (2019) combined fiscal data and political analysis to assess budgetary resource allocation in Hong Kong (China), while Gu et al. (2020) blended discourse analysis with interviews to explore the role of language politics in shaping regional identity. Such integrative designs offer

a more holistic understanding of complex policy dynamics in China's evolving governance environment.

6. Discussion

Our research systematically mapped the landscape of Chinese policy studies through a mixed-methods design combining bibliometric and content analysis. Our findings reveal a gradual shift from adopting Western theories to developing contextually grounded theoretical approaches, accompanied by a growing emphasis on implementation mechanisms and performance-based governance. For example, the concept of "experimental implementation" reflects how policy is adapted through local trials under hierarchical authority—an arrangement formalized as "experimentation under hierarchy" (Heilmann, 2008a; Zhu & Zhang, 2016; Zhu & Xue, 2007).

Unlike previous reviews that focused broadly on public administration or individual policy areas, this study provides a more fine-grained understanding of how theories have been selectively adapted, reinterpreted, and operationalized in the Chinese context. While earlier literature reviews such as those by Li and Zhang (2021) have provided a foundational understanding of public administration, our analysis extends this by integrating more recent studies that reflect the latest developments in policy research, particularly in areas such as environmental governance, policy experimentation, and bureaucratic incentive systems.

Our findings also underscore the importance of collaborative dynamics in shaping the research landscape of Chinese policy studies. The analysis reveals an intricate network of domestic and international collaborations that have fostered a rich scholarly exchange, thereby enhancing the methodological sophistication and theoretical diversity of the field. Moreover, the increasing integration of Western policy theoretical frameworks with Chinese institutional realities suggests a growing convergence between local relevance and global theoretical contribution—positioning Chinese policy studies as a potential source of conceptual innovation within the broader international policy discourse.

At the same time, the analysis has several limitations. One limitation is the potential underrepresentation of non-English publications. Non-English articles may offer different perspectives on local policy issues. As a significant proportion of Chinese policy research is published in Chinese-language journals, especially in fields closely tied to domestic discourse, our findings may underrepresent the full scope of scholarly activity. Future research should incorporate Chinese-language sources and interdisciplinary outlets to construct a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the field. Additionally, as the field continues to evolve, ongoing reviews will be necessary to capture the latest theoretical and methodological advancements.

The findings also raise broader implications for future research. The

evolution of Chinese public policy studies—particularly the growing focus on adaptive policy implementation and performance-based accountability mechanisms—offers new insights into how policy processes operate in centralized, non-Western contexts. For example, the widespread use of local experimentation as a means of policy refinement under hierarchical control (Heilmann, 2008) and the influence of cadre evaluation systems on local officials' innovation incentives (Zhu & Zhang, 2016) reveal implementation dynamics that differ substantially from those theorized in Western, electoral democracies. These developments highlight the need to pluralize the theoretical foundations of public policy (Howlett, 2013), by incorporating institutionally embedded approaches that reflect the diversity of political systems. Chinese policy studies offer a foundation for constructing alternative theoretical approaches to policy design and implementation in non-Western political systems. Future research could build on these insights to develop generalizable theories of policy processes across diverse contexts.

For policymakers, the insights derived from this review suggest that adopting a more localized approach to policy formulation and implementation may lead to more effective governance. The study highlights the benefits of aligning policy design with the nuanced realities of China's political and administrative contexts, suggesting that such alignment could enhance the efficacy and responsiveness of public policies.

7. Conclusion

This study employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach to examining the evolution and current state of Chinese policy research in top public policy journals from 2000 to 2024. Through citation analysis, collaboration network analysis, co-citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and content analysis, the research provides a systematic understanding of publication patterns, theoretical foundations, research themes, and methodological developments in Chinese policy studies.

We identified three developmental phases: an initial exploratory phase (2000–2011), an expansion phase (2012–2017), and an advancement phase (2018–2024). The field has shown steady growth in publications, demonstrating increasing international scholarly interest in Chinese policy studies. The institutional collaboration network analysis highlights the emergence of two major research clusters. The academic institutions in Mainland China and Hong Kong (China) serving as central nodes in fostering international academic exchanges. This collaborative pattern reflects the field's increasing internationalization while maintaining strong regional characteristics.

Chinese policy research has crystallized around three pivotal themes: the intricate policy-making processes within China's unique political system, the comparison of social policies across regions, and environmental and climate policy in China. These thematic areas have shifted from broad, dispersed be-

ginnings to a focused and multifaceted exploration of governance, policy implementation, and central-local dynamics, illustrating a clear trajectory towards a more consolidated and systematic inquiry.

The theoretical foundations encompass foundational theories of policy change under China's unique political regime, policy implementation distinct to China, and theories related to policy diffusion and innovation, with a particular emphasis on incentive structures within governance. Each of these theoretical clusters contributes to a nuanced understanding of the policy process in China. The methodological evolution in Chinese policy studies reflects a significant shift towards integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Initially reliant on qualitative analyses, the field now robustly employs mixed methods that enhance empirical rigor. This methodological sophistication allows researchers to dissect complex policy issues with greater precision, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms of policy implementation and the broader implications of China's practices.

Additionally, future research should address the current imbalance between national and local-level studies, as local policy implementation and innovation remain understudied despite their crucial role in China's policy process. The increasing application of experimental methods and mixed-method approaches opens new opportunities for more rigorous policy evaluation and impact assessment. Fur-

thermore, as China's role in global governance continues to evolve, research examining the interaction between domestic and international policy processes becomes increasingly important.

These findings and future directions suggest that Chinese policy research is maturing as a field, characterized by theoretical sophistication, methodological innovation, and growing collaboration. The field's evolution

reflects both the increasing complexity of China's policy challenges and the development of more nuanced analytical approaches to understanding these challenges. As global policy issues become more interconnected, the continued development of Chinese policy research will contribute valuable insights to both theoretical advancement and practical policymaking in China and beyond.

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