

The Rise of Global Collaboration in China Policy Research: Evidence from Bibliometric Network Analyses, 2000–2025

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of China policy research and its growing role in global policy scholarship. Using bibliometric and social network analyses of 326 articles published in 20 high-impact political science journals from 2000 to 2025, we trace the field's expansion, identify key thematic concentrations, and document the emergence of robust international collaboration patterns. Cross-national co-authorship networks reveal a clear transition from a fragmented, Western-centered structure to a dual-hub system anchored by Mainland China and the United States, while institution-level networks show that leading Chinese universities have become central collaborators and Hong Kong institutions continue to serve as critical bridges. These patterns illustrate how China policy research has moved from peripheral observation to active co-production of policy-relevant knowledge, demonstrating the critical role of structured international collaboration in generating high-quality, theoretically consequential, and globally relevant scholarship. By highlighting the infrastructure, mechanisms, and partnerships that support this co-production, our study underscores how collaborative networks enable scholars to address complex transnational policy challenges and maintain scholarly engagement even amid geopolitical tensions. Finally, we discuss practical pathways for strengthening field-building through conferences, professional associations (e.g., CAAPA, CPSG), and international-facing publication platforms, offering lessons for fos-

tering sustainable global research collaboration in public policy more broadly.

Keywords: China Policy Studies, International Collaboration, Bibliometric Analysis, Scientific Collaboration, Institutional Collaboration

El auge de la colaboración global en la investigación de políticas sobre China: evidencia de análisis de redes bibliométricas, 2000-2025

RESUMEN

Este estudio examina la evolución de la investigación sobre políticas chinas y su creciente papel en la erudición política global. Mediante análisis bibliométricos y de redes sociales de 326 artículos publicados en 20 revistas de ciencia política de alto impacto entre 2000 y 2025, se rastrea la expansión del campo, se identifican concentraciones temáticas clave y se documenta el surgimiento de sólidos patrones de colaboración internacional. Las redes transnacionales de coautoría revelan una clara transición de una estructura fragmentada y centrada en Occidente a un sistema de doble centro anclado por China continental y Estados Unidos, mientras que las redes a nivel institucional muestran que las principales universidades chinas se han convertido en colaboradoras centrales y las instituciones de Hong Kong continúan sirviendo como puentes fundamentales. Estos patrones ilustran cómo la investigación sobre políticas chinas ha pasado de la observación periférica a la coproducción activa de conocimiento relevante para las políticas, demostrando el papel crucial de la colaboración internacional estructurada en la generación de erudición de alta calidad, con relevancia teórica y de alcance global. Al destacar la infraestructura, los mecanismos y las alianzas que sustentan esta coproducción, nuestro estudio subraya cómo las redes de colaboración permiten a los investigadores abordar complejos desafíos políticos transnacionales y mantener el compromiso académico incluso en medio de tensiones geopolíticas. Finalmente, analizamos vías prácticas para fortalecer el desarrollo del campo a través de conferencias, asociaciones profesionales (por ejemplo, CAAPA, CPSG) y plataformas de publicación con proyección internacional, ofreciendo lecciones para fomentar una colaboración de investigación global sostenible en materia de políticas públicas en general.

Palabras clave: Estudios de política china, Colaboración internacional, Análisis bibliométrico, Colaboración científica, Colaboración institucional

中国政策研究中的全球合作演进：基于文献计量与社会网络分析的证据（2000 - 2025）

摘要

本研究系统考察中国政策研究的发展历程及其在全球政策研究中的地位变迁。基于2000—2025年20种高影响力政治学期刊发表的326篇中国政策研究，本研究采用文献计量与社会网络分析方法，梳理该领域的知识演进脉络、研究主题结构与国际合作格局。国际合作网络显示，该领域已由早期以西方为中心的分散合作结构，逐步转向以中国大陆与美国为核心的“双中心”格局。机构层面的合作网络进一步表明，中国大陆顶尖高校已进入核心合作者序列，中国香港高校持续发挥关键的桥梁与中介作用。上述变化反映出中国政策研究正从“西方外部观察”走向“知识共同生产”，并凸显国际合作在产出高质量、具理论贡献与全球影响的研究中的关键作用。进一步地，本研究揭示支撑知识共同生产的基础设施、运行机制与合作网络，讨论协作关系如何帮助学者应对跨国政策议题，并在地缘政治紧张背景下维系学术交流。最后，本研究提出通过学术会议、专业协会（如CAAPA、CPSG）与国际化学术出版平台推动领域建设的路径，为公共政策领域促进可持续的国际科研合作提供参考。

关键词：中国政策研究；政策过程研究；国际学术合作；知识生产；合作网络；文献计量学；社会网络分析

1. The Importance of International Collaboration in Public Policy

Global partnerships have become indispensable in public policy in a time when the most pressing challenges of our time are inherently transnational and cannot be effectively addressed within tradition-

al national governmental boundaries (Rittel and Webber 1973; Cairney 2021). Some of these challenges include climate change, AI, pandemics, and poverty, whose causes and consequences routinely transcend national borders and make unilateral action insufficient (King et al. 2023). The mobilization of scientific knowledge through international collaboration enables policymak-

ers and researchers to design strategies and solutions for these complex global issues (Rittel and Webber 1973; Cairney 2021; King et al. 2023; UNESCO n.d.). As policy research becomes increasingly complex and methodologically diverse, it has become necessary to draw from a broader global pool of specialized knowledge and expertise to generate innovative and effective ways to solve today's complex and multifaceted policy challenges (Ribeiro et al. 2018).

A large body of research demonstrates that scientific collaboration broadens access to data and infrastructure, stimulates methodological innovation, enhances productivity and research quality, and amplifies scholarly impact (Abramo and D'Angelo 2015; Adams 2013; Adams and Szomszor 2024; Cheng et al. 2025; Freeman and Huang 2014, 2015; Li et al. 2022; Lyu et al. 2021, 2023; Rosenkopf and Nerkar 2001). Collaboration across institutional, disciplinary, and national boundaries, especially within diverse international teams, is consistently associated with wider diffusion and higher citation impact (Fan et al. 2022; Lyu et al. 2023).

Beyond academic outcomes, scientific collaboration is one of the most effective vehicles for advancing global partnerships and has grown steadily in recent decades (Wagner et al. 2017). It is widely recognized as a key driver of both economic prosperity and sustainable development (U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy 2000), and it can help sustain dialogue even where political relations are fragile. During

the Cold War, for example, scientific ties between the United States and the Soviet Union provided a framework for engagement on nuclear arms and other sensitive issues when diplomatic channels were constrained (Royal Society 2011, 62; UNESCO n.d.).

Today, when tensions between the world's two largest powers, the U.S. and China, intensify through strategic rivalry, trade disputes, and deepening geopolitical mistrust, scientific collaboration between them nonetheless remains robust across many fields. This coexistence of escalating political confrontation and resilient scientific interdependence reveals a striking paradox. It invites us to ask how transnational knowledge networks adapt under geopolitical strain and explain their role in buffering, mediating, or even subtly reshaping conflict. Situated at the intersection of these dynamics, China policy research offers a particularly revealing vantage point and lens for understanding how global scholarly communities reorganize themselves when political relations are fragile.

Against this backdrop, China policy research has emerged as a distinct and increasingly prominent field that both reflects and shapes global scientific collaboration. China's institutional design and policy processes have far-reaching consequences for climate governance, global health, digital regulation, and other domains with worldwide ripple effects. At the same time, the growing volume of China-focused articles in leading journals signals rising theoretical sophistication, practical

salience, and intensifying cross-border collaboration in the study of China's policy system (Cao et al. 2026; Kim et al. 2019; Li and Zhang 2021; Yang and Yi 2023; Xiao and Yi 2024; Zhang et al. 2018).

Yet the evolution of China policy research as a global field has not yet been systematically examined. Existing studies have mostly examined the development of public administration and public policy in China and focused on publication patterns in specialized PA/PP journals (Cao et al. 2026; Li and Zhang 2021; Wu et al. 2013; Wu et al. 2016; Xiao and Yi 2024; Zhang et al. 2018). To date, no study has examined China policy research published in top political science outlets, nor has anyone systematically analyzed how cross-national and cross-institutional collaboration patterns in the field have evolved over time. This gap is especially notable given the interdisciplinary nature of public policy, the growing importance of international collaboration in policy research, and the fact that both public administration and public policy originated within political science and later developed as distinct (sub)fields, with many seminal policy studies published in leading political science journals (e.g., Berry and Berry 1990; Gray 1973; Lowi 1964; Schneider and Ingram 1993; Walker 1969; Wilson 1887). To this day, many public administration and public policy programs remain institutionally embedded within political science departments, and leading political science associations (such as American Political Science Association and Midwest Political Science Association) contain highly

active sections dedicated to public policy and public administration.

In China, policy research has developed in close interaction with political science. Previous studies show that China policy research, which was initially institutionalized within political science (Cao et al. 2026), has extensively drawn on political science theories to examine policy processes and develop policy theories (Li 2019). Moreover, political scientists have remained central contributors to Chinese public administration and policy research (Walker et al. 2014), and political science ranks as the most prominent interdisciplinary collaborator in mainland China's public administration research output (Zhang et al. 2018). Restricting analysis to public administration and public policy journals therefore systematically overlooks a substantial body of China policy research that is published in political science outlets.

This study addresses these gaps by tracing the development of China policy research and assessing why it merits attention as a distinct and maturing field. Using bibliometric and social-network analyses of all China policy articles published in the top 20 political science journals from 2000 to 2025, we document the field's temporal growth, journal distribution, and collaboration structures across countries and institutions. The results reveal a stage-based expansion rather than linear growth, with two major stepwise shifts around 2006 and 2020, and a pronounced increase in China-focused publications across leading outlets. We further map

the evolution of international collaboration networks over four phases, showing a transition from a fragmented and Western-centered structure to a more integrated, dual-hub configuration centered on Mainland China and the United States. At the institutional level, we show how collaboration expanded from a small set of Western institutions to a densely connected network in which Mainland Chinese universities emerged as central and influential actors.

By situating China policy research within the broader dynamics of global scientific collaboration, our analysis demonstrates both the field's scholarly significance and its practical importance for understanding and governing transnational policy challenges. The article concludes by outlining future pathways for deepening engagement through conferences, professional associations (e.g., CAAPA, CPSG), and China-based international journals to further support the co-production of policy knowledge in this increasingly central area of public policy scholarship.

2. Methodology

To systematically examine patterns of scientific collaboration in China policy research as reflected in top political science journals, we have selected 20 leading political science journals from the 2023 Journal Citation Reports. As part of our selection process, journals were required to meet

the following criteria: (1) they had to be included in the "Political Science" category, (2) they had to be SSCI-indexed and ranked in Q1, and (3) they had to have impact factor levels greater than 4.0 (both five-year and 2023). The final set comprises the following peer-reviewed journals: *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Communication*, *International Organization*, *Policy and Society*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Environmental Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Policy & Internet*, *World Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Policy Studies Journal*, *Global Environmental Politics*, *Public Administration*, *Political Behavior*, *Journal of Politics*, *Political Geography*, *Policy & Politics*, and *Politics & Society*.

Focusing on these journals, we searched the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) on January 22, 2026, with the keywords China or Chinese (2000–2025), and excluded book reviews, letters, news items, and editorials, yielding 754 records. The authors manually conducted additional content checks to ensure the substantive relevance of individual journal articles to China policy studies. Through three rounds of inter-coder reliability checks,¹ we established a set of criteria and kept only studies examining identifiable policy domains or government actions in the Chinese context. Using this consistent set of criteria, we then manually

1 We selected random samples of 40, 50, and 50 articles for three rounds of inter-coder reliability checks to determine whether each article qualified as "China policy research." After each round, we held discussions to standardize and clarify the criteria for classifying an article as "China policy research."

screened all 754 articles and determined that 326 articles fit our criteria of “China policy research.” Therefore, our dataset includes a total of 326 articles on China policy that were published in the top 20 political science journals from 2000 to 2025. We tracked all the authors, their institutions, and the country/region of their institutional affiliation. When affiliation fields contained missing, inconsistent, or duplicated entries, we followed Si (2022) to manually verify each author’s institution and country/region using WoS full records, supplementing with targeted Google checks. We note that the country/region reflects institutional affiliation rather than nationality of authors.

To conduct our analysis, we employed social network analysis (SNA), which can be used to explore scientific collaboration by representing actors as nodes and their joint publications as edges (Liu et al. 2005; Uddin et al. 2012). In our international collaboration network, each node is a country or region, and an undirected edge connects two nodes if scholars from those locations have co-authored one or more articles. In the institutional network, nodes are universities or research organizations, and edges denote institutional co-authorship ties. For example, if one article lists authors from Tsinghua University (Mainland China), Peking University (Mainland China), and The Ohio State University (United States), then this single paper adds one undirected edge between Mainland China and the United States as part of the country/region network (edge weight of 1). In the institutional network it adds three undirect-

ed edges to represent Tsinghua–Peking, Tsinghua–Ohio State, and Peking–Ohio State, with each weight = 1. If, later in the same period, a second paper is co-authored by authors from Tsinghua University and The Ohio State University, then the Mainland China–United States edge weight increases to 2, and the Tsinghua–Ohio State edge weight increases to 2, while the Tsinghua–Peking and Peking–Ohio State edges remain at 1. This illustrates how multi-institution papers create multiple pairwise links, and how repeated co-authorship thickens specific ties over time.

To capture collaboration dynamics and trends, we divided our dataset into four publication stages (2000–2005, 2006–2013, 2014–2019, 2020–2025) in terms of publication trends, and constructed separate network graphs for each stage using the *netify* (Dorff and Minhas, 2025) and *bibliometrix* packages (Aria and Cuccurullo 2017) in R. For each network, we report node-level degree (number of partners), betweenness centrality (how often a node lies on shortest paths between other nodes in the graph, indicating brokerage), and eigenvector centrality when relevant (connection to well-connected partners, indicating influence), as well as network density (the share of realized ties among all possible ties) and simple summaries of tie weights to distinguish thick recurring partnerships. These procedures ensure the reliability of our data and provide a robust foundation for analyzing temporal trends and the collaborative structures underlying China policy research published in top political science journals. We turn now to our results.

3. Evidence from Top Political Science Journals (2000–2025)

3.1 Temporal Growth Patterns

As shown in Figure 1, China policy research in top political science journals displays four distinct growth phases with two major stepwise shifts. During the initial phase (2000–2005), annual publications were modest, typically one to three articles, indicating that China policy research was still in its infancy and attracted

relatively limited scholarly attention in top political science journals. The growth phase (2006–2013) began with a pronounced jump to twelve publications in 2006 and sustained an average of approximately 7.8 articles annually, reflecting rapidly increasing research interest and institutional capacity. In the maturation phase (2014–2019), production settled into a steady band of roughly 9–17 articles per year (mean = 11.2), reflecting both the field’s maturation and the consolidation of its research community.

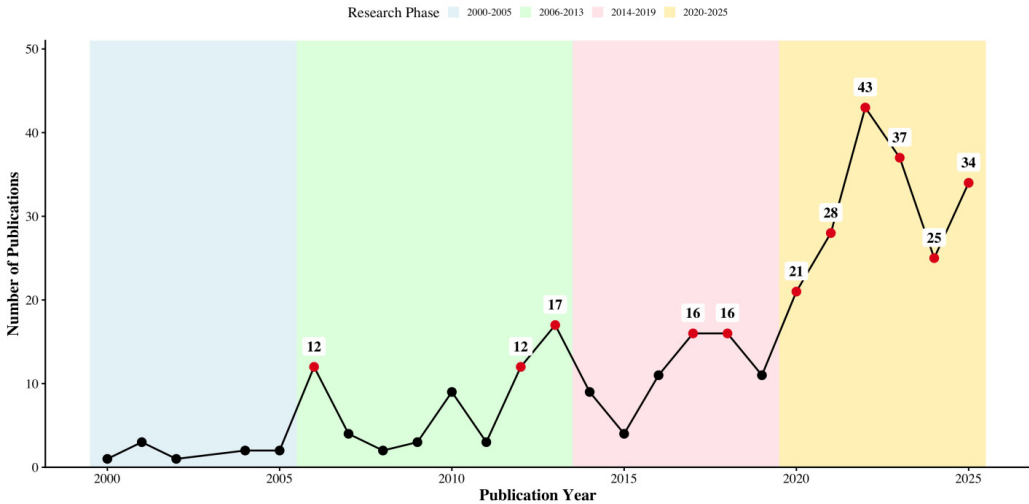


Figure 1. Annual Publication Trend in Top Political Science Journals (2000–2025)

(Red markers denote years with publication counts exceeding 11; colored bands represent distinct development stages.)

The most remarkable expansion began in 2020. Publications climbed from 21 articles in 2020 to a peak of 43 in 2022, an increase of more than 100 percent. This surge was driven by global interest in China’s development model, growing demand for policy analysis amid shifting U.S.-China relations, and heightened attention to China’s pan-

demic policy responses. While 2024 saw a slight decrease to 25 articles, the volume quickly rebounded to 34 in 2025. During the consolidation phase (2020–2025), the annual average reached 31.3 articles. This is nearly three times higher than the maturation phase (2014–2019). The consolidation phase (2020–2025) features consistently elevated publica-

tion levels, with China policy research appearing more frequently and more prominently in top political science journals than in any earlier stage. It also reflects sustained scholarly attention and engagement with China policy research during this period.

Overall, publications on China policy in top political science journals have expanded more than forty-fold, rising from one article in 2000 to a peak of 43 in 2022. The trajectory is not a smooth, linear rise but is marked by two stepwise shifts. The first shift occurred around 2006, when the annual average moved from about 1.5 articles during the Initial Phase to about 7.8 during the growth phase. The second occurred around 2020, when the average rose from about 11.2 during the maturation phase to about 31.3 during 2020 to 2025. These shifts indicate that the China policy studies in top political science journals expanded not through

linear scaling but through stage-driven resets to higher baselines.

3.2 Journal Distribution

China policy research in top political science journals is highly specialized and thematically concentrated. Environmental politics journals dominate the landscape, with *Environmental Politics* publishing 45 articles and *Global Environmental Politics* contributing 15, underscoring the global academic focus and interest in China's environmental policy. A second cluster centers on policy-specialty journals, with *Policy & Internet* at 33, *Policy & Society* at 21, *Policy Studies Journal* at 19, and *Policy & Politics* at 12, together publishing 85 articles. It demonstrates how China's policy experience fuels theory building in policy studies. High publication counts in *Political Geography* (41 articles) and *Public Administration* (41 articles) highlight the spatial and administrative dimensions of China policy research.

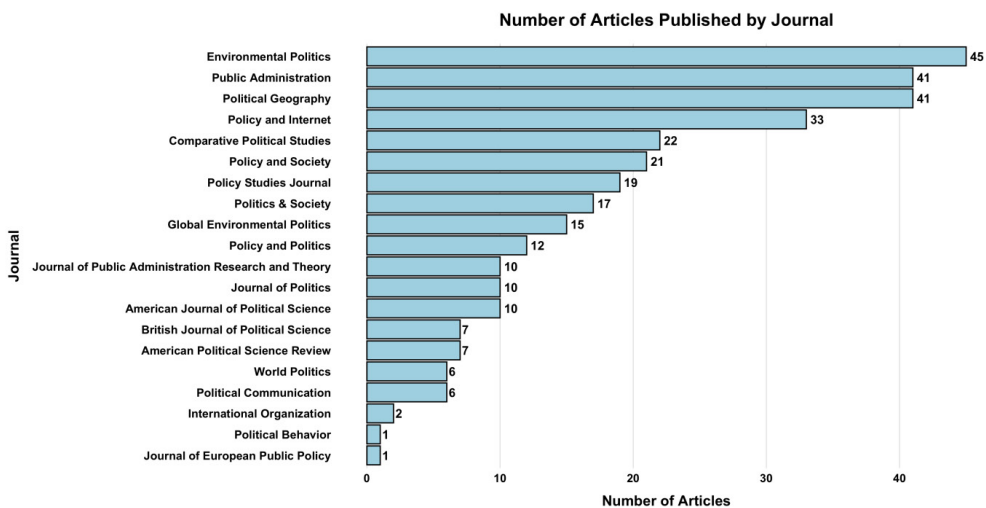


Figure 2. Distribution of China Policy Research Articles Across Leading Political Science Journals

In contrast, generalist flagship journals such as the *American Political Science Review* (7), the *American Journal of Political Science* (10), and the *British Journal of Political Science* (7) feature relatively fewer China policy studies, suggesting selective engagement with region-specific research. Overall, China policy research is anchored by environmental governance, spatial politics, and public administration journals, while generalist outlets maintain a narrower yet representative presence, resulting in a twin-peak distribution with a long tail of specialized publications.

The dominance of environmental political journals can be explained by the long-standing prominence of environmental policy research within China policy studies (Cao et al. 2026; Li and Zhang 2021; Xiao and Yi 2024). This underlying driver of scholarly interest is closely tied to developments in Chinese policy practice. Since the 1990s, environmental degradation linked to rapid economic growth has sustained scholarly attention to environmental policy within China policy research. This attention intensified after 2013, when environmental protection was elevated as a central policy priority (Cao et al. 2026). Environmental policy also offers an empirically visible and theoretically salient domain for examining and developing theories, such as policy adoption, policy diffusion and policy learning (Li and Zhang 2021; Xiao and Yi 2024). These features have positioned environmental political journals as the main publication venues for China policy research.

3.3 International Collaboration Network

The international collaboration network of China policy research published in political science journals expanded substantially in both scale and structural integration. As shown in Figure 3, participating countries/regions rose from 6 to 13 to 14 to 29 across the four periods, with collaborative ties increasing respectively from 2 to 15 to 16 to 46. Although the network became less dense as new participants joined, countries/regions became increasingly connected, with the average number of collaboration partners rising from 0.67 to 2.31, 2.29, and 3.17 per country/region. After 2006, a large and cohesive collaboration core emerged, embedding over three-quarters of countries and accounting for more than 95 percent of total publications.

In the initial phase (2000–2005), international collaboration in China policy research was extremely limited and weakly structured. The network comprised only six participating countries/regions connected by two isolated co-authorship ties, with all collaborations occurring only once. Although the United States accounted for the largest share of publications (six), its publication dominance did not translate into a central role in international collaboration. Overall, the international collaboration network in the initial phase reflects a stage in which China policy research was largely dominated by Western-based scholars, with limited engagement in cross-national collaboration.

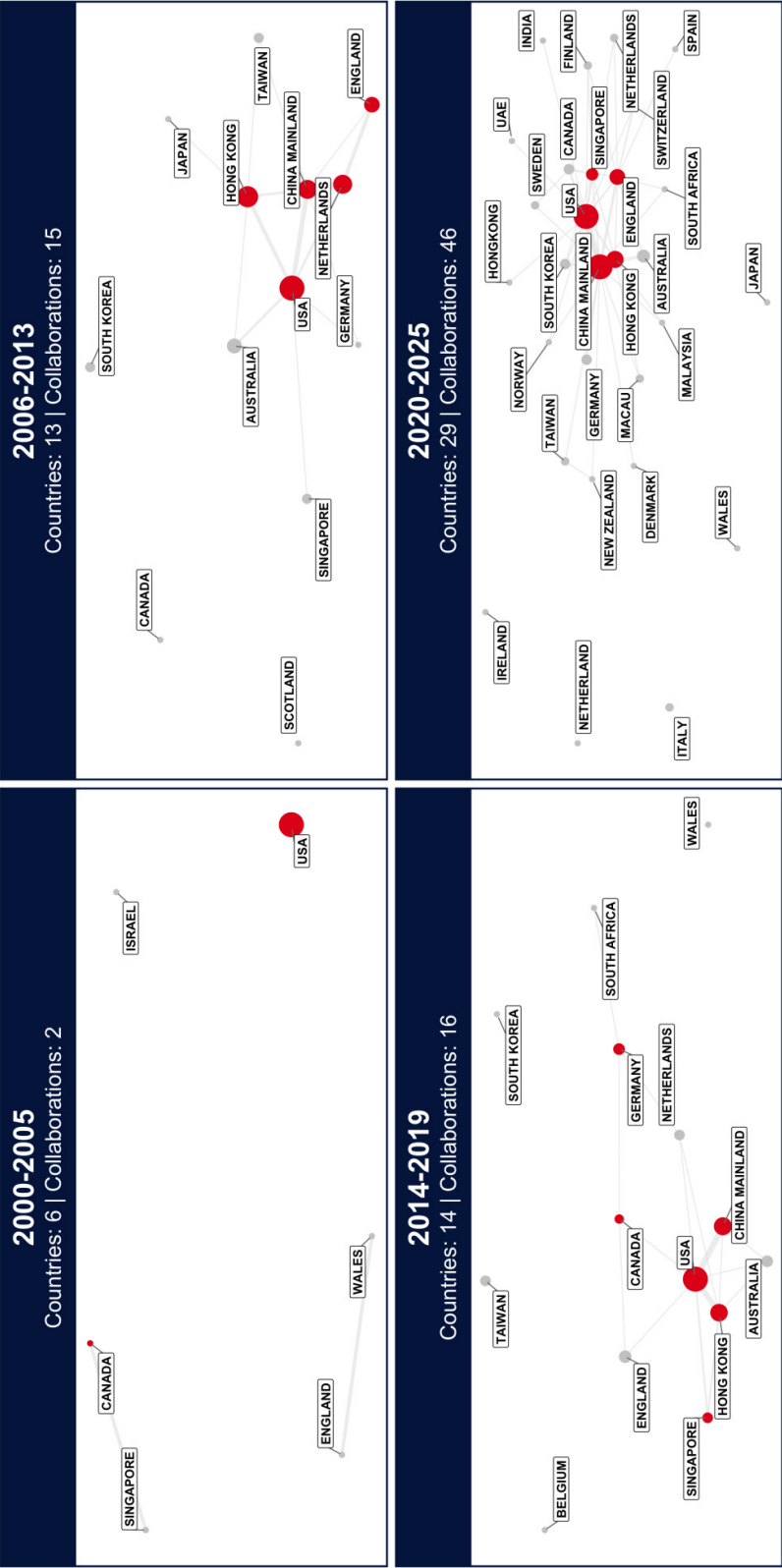


Figure 3. Evolution of International Collaboration Networks in China Policy Research (2000–2025)

(Nodes represent countries/regions; node size reflects total publication counts. Undirected edges denote co-authorship links; edge thickness indicates the number of collaborative papers. Red nodes mark important countries/regions identified by publication volume and network centrality.)

During the growth phase (2006–2013), international collaboration in China policy research became more structurally organized and increasingly centered on a small number of key countries. The United States remained the largest contributor, while Mainland China and Hong Kong emerged as central hubs with comparable levels of connectivity and intermediary roles (degrees of 6, 6, and 5, respectively). The strongest and most recurrent collaboration corridors were concentrated around these actors, most notably Mainland China–Netherlands (five co-authored publications), United States–Mainland China (four), United States–Hong Kong (three), and Netherlands–England (three). European participation also became more visible in this period, particularly through the Netherlands’ involvement in multiple strong collaborative ties. These patterns indicate a shift from fragmented early interactions toward a more multi-centered collaboration structure, anchored by the United States, Mainland China, and Hong Kong.

Between 2014 and 2019, international collaboration became more consolidated around a clearly defined core. The United States emerged as the dominant hub, ranking first in degree (7) and total co-authorship volume (21), and exhibiting the strongest bridging role across collaboration ties (betweenness centrality = 0.24). Mainland China (three partners; ten co-authored publications) and Hong Kong (five partners; 12 co-authored publications) remained key partners within the core. At the same time, several European countries,

particularly Germany and the Netherlands, played notable bridging roles by connecting multiple otherwise weakly linked partners. Taken together, the network in this period is characterized by a U.S.-centered structure with a small number of strong ties and a wider set of weakly connected partners.

The consolidation phase (2020–2025) is characterized by a clear structural rebalancing toward an asymmetric dual-hub collaboration network, with Mainland China emerging as the dominant hub. Mainland China surpassed the United States in the number of collaboration partners (16 vs. 14), total co-authored publications (60 vs. 47), and bridging role across collaboration ties (betweenness centrality 0.53 vs. 0.29), indicating a shift in network leadership. The strongest and most structurally consequential collaboration corridors were concentrated around Mainland China, most notably Mainland China–United States (23 co-authored publications), Mainland China–Hong Kong (11), and Mainland China–England (eight). While the United States and Hong Kong remained integral components of the network core, their brokerage roles were less pronounced than Mainland China’s, as reflected in much lower betweenness centrality and fewer collaboration partners.

Across the four phases, the most salient structural change in the international collaboration network is the rebalancing between Mainland China and the United States. While the United States dominated the first three

phases in publication output, Mainland China reached a comparable level in 2020–2025 (77 publications versus 78 for the United States) and surpassed the United States in network connectivity (degree = 16 vs. 14) and brokerage capacity (betweenness centrality = 0.53 vs. 0.29). In parallel, collaboration intensity increased substantially, rising from two to over one hundred by 2020–2025. The Mainland China–United States partnership evolved into the network’s principal bilateral axis, complemented by strengthening ties between Mainland China and Hong Kong and between Mainland China and England. These patterns indicate a transition from a fragmented and Western-centered collaboration structure to a more consolidated network organized around Mainland China.

3.4 Institutional Collaboration Network

Institutional collaboration expanded in parallel with country-level collaboration, but exhibited a different pattern of structural integration. As shown in Figure 4, the number of participating institutions increased sharply from 14 to 62, 77, and 183, while co-authorship links rose from 7 to 37, 64, and 239. As new institutions entered faster than new ties formed, network density declined steadily from 0.077 to around 0.020–0.022 and then to 0.014. Yet this expansion did not imply weak connec-

tivity. On average, institutions collaborated with more partners over time, with the mean number of collaborators rising from 1.00 to 1.19, 1.66, and 2.57 per institution. Structural integration at the institutional level advanced more slowly. The largest group of institutions connected through co-authorship expanded from 21.4% to 57.9% of all institutions, while accounting for a growing but still uneven share of publications, increasing from 21.4% to 73.9%.

In the initial phase (2000–2005), institutional collaboration in China policy research was limited and weakly structured. The network consisted of fourteen institutions connected by seven co-authorship ties, with a relatively high density (0.077) driven by the small network size rather than cohesive structure. Collaboration was episodic and non-cumulative. All co-authorship ties were one-off partnerships, and no institution maintained repeated or expanding collaborative relationships. Collaboration occurred mainly within the United States, within UK constituent-country linkages (e.g., England-Wales). Participation was dominated by U.S. institutions (8 of 14), while Chinese institutions were virtually absent. These patterns indicate that early institutional collaboration was shaped primarily by Western-based institutions, reflecting a Western-centered research orientation at this stage.

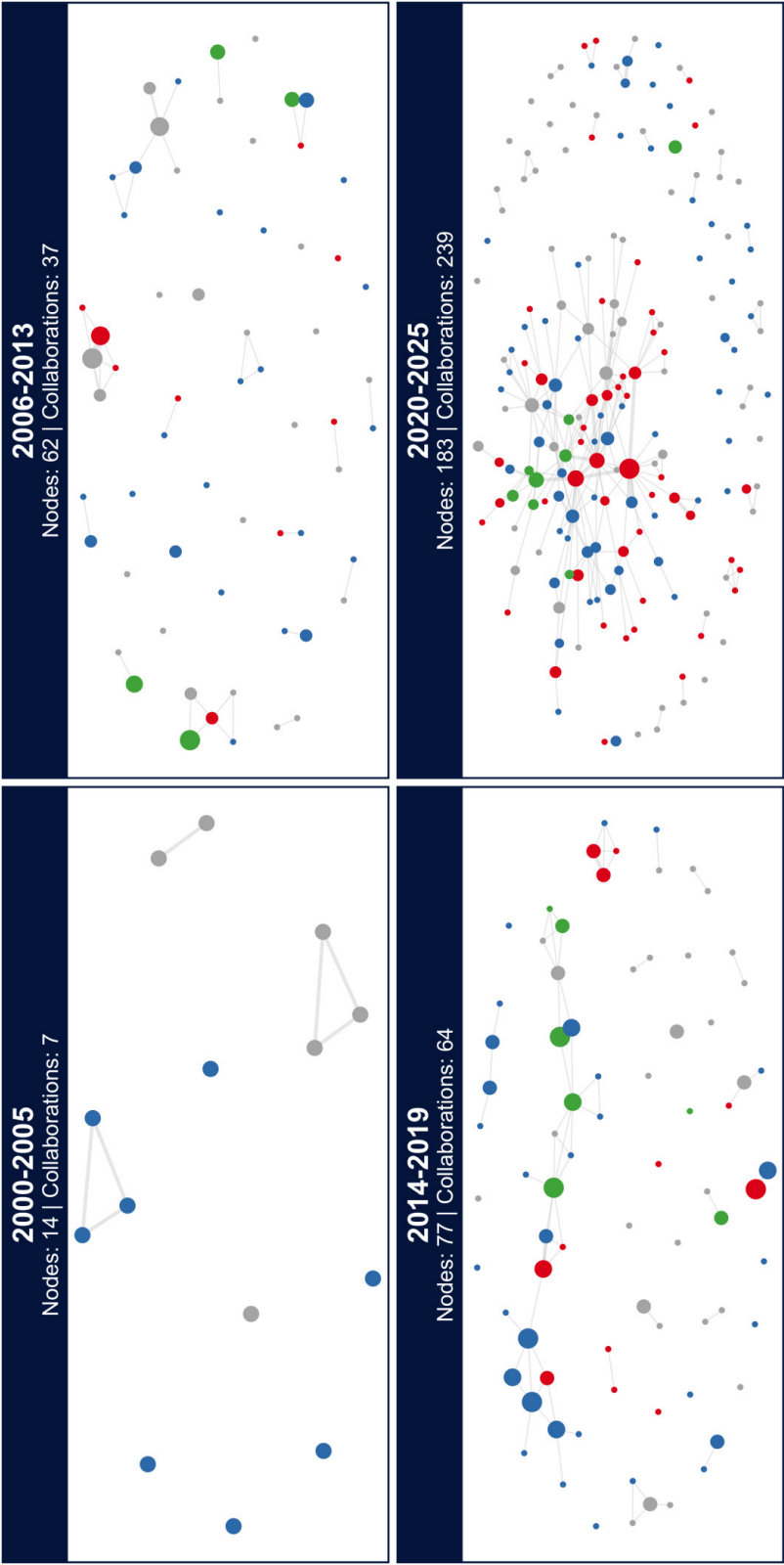


Figure 4. Institutional Collaboration Network in China Policy Research (2000–2025)

(Nodes represent institutions; node size reflects publication count. Undirected edges denote co-authorship links; edge thickness indicates number of joint papers. Node colors denote country/region affiliation: Mainland China (red), USA (blue), Hong Kong (green), Other (gray)).

During the growth phase (2006–2013), institutional collaboration expanded and became more structured, though still fragmented. The network increased to 62 institutions and 37 co-authorship ties, with density declining to 0.0196 as new institutions entered. Although the network remained fragmented, collaboration became more locally concentrated, with several institutions embedded in closely connected partnership groups (transitivity = 0.652; average local clustering = 0.85). Collaboration patterns also shifted from one-off ties toward repeated and cross-regional partnerships. Several collaboration corridors became structurally salient, most notably Delft University of Technology–Harbin Institute of Technology (five co-authored papers) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University–University of Southern California (three co-authored papers). At the actor level, most institutions appeared only once and occupied peripheral positions with limited or no collaborative ties. A small set of institutions, including Delft University of Technology, Harbin Institute of Technology, Wageningen University, and Tsinghua University stood out as repeat collaborators, each maintaining ties with four or more partners. This phase marks a transition from episodic, Western-centered collaboration to a more structured and internationally-connected institutional network, with Chinese institutions entering and participating in cross-regional collaboration for the first time in a meaningful way.

Between 2014 and 2019, institutional collaboration showed clear consolidation around a growing core. The

network expanded to 77 institutions and 64 co-authorship links, while density remained low (0.0219), reflecting continued entry of new participants. Structural integration nonetheless improved: the largest connected group increased to 32.5% of institutions and accounted for 43.2% of total publications, indicating rising concentration of collaborative activity. This core was coordinated primarily through Hong Kong institutions. The Chinese University of Hong Kong and City University of Hong Kong exhibited the highest connectivity (degree = 7) and the strongest brokerage positions (betweenness centrality = 0.054 and 0.049), linking U.S. and Mainland Chinese partners. Leading U.S. universities (e.g., UC San Diego, Stanford, MIT) and Mainland Chinese institutions (e.g., Tsinghua University, Nanjing University, Beijing Normal University) were well represented in the core, but their connections were often mediated through Hong Kong-based collaborators, producing a tri-polar structure with Hong Kong as bridge, North America as anchor, and Mainland China as an active participant.

In the consolidation phase (2020–2025), institutional collaboration expanded rapidly and became more structurally integrated. The network grew to 183 institutions and 239 co-authorship links, while density declined to 0.014, reflecting large-scale entry. Unlike earlier phases, expansion was accompanied by strong consolidation: the largest connected group encompassed 57.9% of institutions and accounted for 73.9% of total publications. The core of this period was led by

Mainland China universities—Peking University and Renmin University (degree = 18) and Tsinghua University (degree = 15). Hong Kong institutions were still visible but no longer dominating the brokerage positions (e.g., City University of Hong Kong degree = 9; Chinese University of Hong Kong degree = 8). At the relational level, the strongest repeated partnerships included Tsinghua–Ohio State (co-authored paper = 3). High-bridge connections were also concentrated around Mainland China's leading universities, especially Tsinghua–Peking and Peking–Renmin. The late-stage integration of the network was organized primarily through a Mainland-centered hub structure, with cross-regional links often routed through these hubs.

Overall, the four stages trace a gradual but systematic shift in the institutional collaboration structure of China policy research. The early phase was characterized by sparse, episodic collaborations largely confined to Western institutions, reflecting an external, observation-oriented research paradigm. As the field expanded, collaboration became more geographically diverse but remained weakly integrated, with many new entrants connected through isolated and short-lived ties. From the mid-2010s onward, the network entered a phase of consolidation, marked by the emergence of Hong Kong institutions as key intermediaries linking Mainland China, North America, and other regions. In the most recent stage, institutional collaboration has evolved into a more integrated and multi-centered system, with Mainland Chinese

universities becoming regular and influential participants in cross-regional collaboration rather than peripheral contributors. These stages document a transition from Western-centered observation to global co-production, in which brokerage roles persist but leadership and agenda-setting are increasingly shared across regions.

4. Discussion of Collaboration Patterns in China Policy Research

The international collaboration structure of China policy research published in top political science journals has shifted from a predominantly Western-centric pattern to a dual-hub system centered on the United States and Mainland China. The shift is rooted in research feasibility and sustained organizational efforts by Chinese scholars and institutions, and Hong Kong's bridge role. As Lieberthal (2010) noted, Western scholars often face greater barriers in accessing secondary data and fieldwork opportunities in China, whereas Chinese scholars possess structural advantages in data access and contextual knowledge. As China policy research increasingly emphasizes empirically grounded and policy-relevant analysis, this asymmetry has made collaboration with China-based scholars not only desirable but often necessary.

Beyond research feasibility, the maturation and institutionalization of policy studies in China have driven the shift toward a dual-hub system. Chi-

nese scholars have moved beyond ad-hoc collaborations to establish durable, institutionalized platforms for international dialogue, such as China-America Association for Public Affairs (established in 2008), and Chinese Policy Scholars Group (established in 2017). Chinese institutions have further asserted their agency by transitioning from “participants” to “hosts” of global discourse, organizing landmark events like the International Conference on China Policy Studies (ICCPS 2024) and launching dedicated English-language outlets—including the *Journal of Chinese Governance* and *China Policy Journal*—to formalize the dissemination of Chinese policy research (Cao et al. 2026). Moreover, a substantial share of core contributors to internationally published China policy research were trained abroad and subsequently embedded in leading Chinese universities, where they maintained durable ties with institutions in the United States, Europe, and Asia. The maturation of Chinese policy scholarship—evidenced by its shift beyond testing imported theories toward theory building grounded in Chinese policy experience—has further facilitated this transition (Li and Zhang 2021; Xiao and Yi 2024; Cao et al. 2026).

Hong Kong played a critical catalytic role as an institutional and intellectual bridge in the evolution of international collaboration in China policy studies. This bridging function was grounded in Hong Kong’s early alignment with Western academic standards, its concentration of internationally-trained scholars, and its ability to

combine methodological rigor and English-language publishing capacity with privileged access to Chinese policy contexts (Gao 2014; Lieberthal 2010; Zhang et al. 2018). Earlier studies show that mainland scholars frequently relied on Hong Kong collaborators in navigating international publication and collaboration networks (Zhang et al. 2018; Xiao and Yi 2024). Our network results show that Hong Kong remains embedded in the collaboration core across periods, maintaining strong and recurrent ties with Mainland China and major Western partners. This persistence suggests a stable brokerage function that has become a structurally-embedded bridge within the evolving dual-hub system.

Within this collaboration structure, the knowledge being co-produced is not merely additional empirical evidence on China, but analytically generative contributions to policy theory (Cao et al. 2026; Xiang & Yi 2024; Li & Zhang 2021). China-based scholarship increasingly produces new knowledge in three interconnected forms: novel mechanisms, cross-level linkages, and theory extensions grounded in Chinese policy experience (Li and Zhang 2021). Recent studies use Chinese cases to refine and expand existing theories of policy diffusion, innovation, and governance. For example, Zhu and Zhang (2016) introduce officials’ political mobility as a mechanism linking micro-level career dynamics to macro-level diffusion outcomes, while Yi, Berry, and Chen (2018) advance diffusion theory by conceptualizing leadership transfer networks as change agents. More recently, Mei (2020) emerged as

the most frequently cited work during the consolidation phase (2020–2025), using China’s COVID-19 response to generate theoretically consequential insights into policy design and crisis governance. These contributions illustrate how China policy research participates in the co-production of generalizable policy knowledge, transforming China from a research setting into a driver of theoretical innovation.

We acknowledge at the outset that our analysis focuses on China policy research published in top political science journals and does not include Area Studies or public administration outlets, which may exhibit distinct collaboration dynamics. To our knowledge, this study is among the first to systematically trace the longitudinal evolution of collaboration structures in China policy research. Related studies based on public policy journals have adopted cross-sectional designs. For example, Xiao and Yi (2024) present a cross-sectional portrait of institutional collaboration based on China policy studies published in leading public policy journals. Such snapshots may obscure the important roles played by non-Chinese institutions and international partners in the early stages, particularly before the rapid expansion of international publications in the past decade. Nevertheless, despite differences in journal selection and analytical design, our findings are broadly consistent with prior evidence from both China policy studies published in leading public policy journals and research on Chinese public administration in top public administration outlets. Across

these studies, a common trend emerges: Chinese scholars and institutions have become increasingly prominent—and in some cases central—in international research collaboration (Kim et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2018; Li and Zhang 2021; Xiao and Yi 2024; Cao et al. 2026).

5. Future Directions of International Collaboration for China Policy Studies

Building on our analysis of evolving co-authorship networks, China policy research has moved from the periphery to the center of the international scholarly conversation. This shift is reflected in growing publication output, the rising prominence of Mainland Chinese institutions in collaboration networks, and increasing placement in leading political science journals that reach a broader disciplinary audience than the policy-focused outlets examined in prior research.

Like an epistemic research community organized around shared research agendas and analytical standards (Haas 1992; Davis Cross 2013), the collaborative relationships identified here document China’s transition from a “researched subject” to a “research co-producer,” with Chinese scholars and universities actively shaping academic inquiry and global dialogue in high-impact political science journals. Publications in these journals transcend disciplinary subfields (e.g., *American Political Science Review*), signaling that China policy research is generat-

ing theoretical contributions of interest beyond policy-specific communities. Together, these findings suggest that sustained and structured international collaboration is critical not only for advancing China policy studies but also for refining general policy theories and enriching the broader global policy research ecosystem.

Beyond co-authorship, China policy scholars and institutions have leveraged multiple platforms to deepen international engagement. Participation in major international conferences enables real-time exchange of ideas and methods, while membership in international associations provides institutional channels for sustained dialogue, including organizations such as the China-America Association of Public Affairs (CAAPA) and the Chinese Policy Studies Group (CPSG). In addition, collaborative special issues in leading journals further extend China's scholarly influence by shaping the research questions, concepts, and standards that define the field.

These patterns of collaboration directly connect to the broader significance of international collaboration that we mentioned in our introduction. As global policy challenges, ranging from climate change to pandemics and AI governance, transcend national borders, co-production of knowledge across countries becomes essential. Our findings show that China policy research exemplifies how international collaboration enhances both research quality and theoretical innovation, producing insights that extend well beyond

a single national context. By forming dense networks that bridge Chinese and Western institutions, scholars collectively expand access to data, methods, and comparative perspectives, generating work that is globally relevant and actionable for policy.

Moreover, the evolution of China policy research demonstrates that structured international collaboration can persist even under geopolitical tension. Despite rising U.S.-China strategic rivalry, co-authorship networks remain robust, showing that scholarly partnerships can serve as stabilizing channels for dialogue and knowledge exchange. This supports our emphasis on collaboration as a mechanism not only for producing research but also for fostering transnational cooperation and understanding. These scholarly networks themselves can serve as a form of global infrastructure that supports both theory and practice.

Finally, the trajectory documented here, from fragmented, Western-centered networks to a dual-hub, highly integrated international system, underscores that China policy research has matured into a model for transnational research collaboration. As public policy challenges continue to grow in scale and complexity, the experiences of China policy scholars offer lessons for other areas of global policy research: sustained, institutionally supported collaboration produces higher-quality knowledge, nurtures innovation, and enables scholars to collectively address problems that no single nation can resolve alone.

Looking ahead, strengthening these diverse channels will be vital. Chinese universities are actively establishing and hosting international policy journals that serve as bridges between domestic and global scholarship. A few examples include Tsinghua University's *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*; Renmin University's *Performance and Management Review*; Fudan University's *Global Public Policy and Governance*; Zhejiang University's *Journal of Chinese Governance*; Shanghai Jiao Tong University's *Urban Governance*; Sun Yat-sen University's *Chinese Public Administration Review*; and Beijing Normal University in partnership with CPSG's *China Policy Journal*. By supporting these outlets alongside conference series and association activities, China policy researchers can establish and deepen global networks, set research agendas, and foster inclusive, interdisciplinary collaborations that address both national and global policy challenges.

At the same time, future collaboration will unfold under mounting constraints, including U.S.-China “decoupling” strategies, tightening visa regimes, and heightened scrutiny of cross-border funding and data-sharing. These developments may reshape, or even fragment, the network structures we identify, by limiting mobility, constraining fieldwork, and making sustained joint projects harder to maintain. A key intellectual and practical challenge for the field will be to understand how such policy shifts alter patterns of co-authorship, agenda-setting, and to explore adaptive strategies (i.e., diversified partnerships, virtual collab-

oration infrastructures, and multilateral rather than purely bilateral ties) that can preserve the benefits of international co-production under more restrictive conditions.

These developments point to a future in which China policy research operates not as an isolated domain but as an integral component of global policy scholarship and dialogue. The trajectory from sparse, Western-centered networks to dense, dual-hub collaboration systems illustrates the field's maturation into a truly international enterprise. As scholarly partnerships continue to expand across countries and institutions, the infrastructure for sustained dialogue, joint problem-solving, and knowledge co-production becomes increasingly robust. This evolution mirrors broader trends in global governance, where transnational challenges demand integrated responses that transcend traditional academic and political boundaries. The success of China policy research in achieving this transformation, from peripheral curiosity to co-producer of knowledge, offers valuable lessons for other regional specializations seeking to contribute meaningfully to global policy discourse. By maintaining this momentum through diversified collaboration channels, journal initiatives, and institutional partnerships, China policy scholars are not merely documenting policy processes but actively participating in the co-creation of knowledge frameworks and high-impact scholarship that can address both Chinese domestic challenges and broader global policy problems that require international mobilization.

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