

From Germination to Transformation: Policy Studies in China Over the Past Half-Century (1970s-2020s)

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Abstract

Over the past half-century, policy studies in China have undergone a remarkable evolution. This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the field's development by tracing its origins and transformations over time. We introduce a time-based and multifaceted framework that delineates the evolution of policy studies in China into four distinct phases: germination (1978 to mid-1990s), burgeoning (late 1990s to 2012), normalization (2013 to 2022), and transformation (2023 to present). We first analyze the evolution of each phase in terms of historical contexts, disciplinary development, policy research (including policy domains, theoretical advancements, and methodological approaches), and intellectual engagement with the international policy research community. Drawing on a self-compiled database of 347 articles, we then present an overview of key trends across these four phases and further analyze the patterns of policy areas, theories of the policy process, and research methodologies for each phase. We conclude the article by identifying major challenges confronting policy studies in China and outlining potential opportunities for advancing the field.

Key Words: Policy Studies in China, Disciplinary Development, Theories of the Policy Process, Publication Trends, Research Methodology

I. Introduction

Why should we care about policy studies in China? In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, the grand challenges we face—ranging from climate change to global pandemics—are becoming more complex, uncertain, and global in nature (Head and Alford 2015; Head 2019). Addressing these challenges requires well-designed public policies, which, in turn, demand interdisciplinary and international collaboration. Even domestic issues are best understood and tackled through a comparative and global perspective (Hou et al. 2011). In this context, policy research plays a crucial role in providing evidence-based solutions.

Given long-standing concerns about American centrality in public administration and policy studies (Nabatchi and Carboni 2019), examining the evolution of policy studies in China offers valuable comparative insights. As a nation with an ancient civilization and a long history of strong governance, China offers alternative perspectives and approaches to policy challenges that differ from those in the Western context (Yang and Yi 2023). China's vast size, complexity, and rapid transformations since 1978 have resulted in a diverse array of public policies, creating rich opportunities for policy research. Studying these policies can potentially yield innovative solutions to, or cautionary lessons for, tackling pressing domestic and global challenges, such as environmental pollution and climate change, energy sustainability, public health and healthcare, low-carbon transportation, economic crises, trade disputes, poverty, and inequality. Policy studies in China have also contributed significantly to global policy scholarship by introducing new theoretical perspectives, expanding substantive policy domains, and informing policy practices. These studies have the potential to examine the applicability and limitations of Western theories and to develop new theoretical frameworks for international policy research (Xiao and Yi 2024). As Geoboo Song, Editor-in-Chief of *Policy Studies Journal*, emphasized in his keynote speech at the inaugural International Conference on China Policy Studies (ICCPS) in Beijing in June 2024, “the need for robust, collaborative policy research has never been greater. By working together, we can craft innovative solutions that benefit not just our own nations but the world at large.”¹ Ultimately, a deeper understanding of policy studies in China not only sheds light on the future development of the field in China but also potentially offers practical knowledge and lessons for international policy research and practices.

In this article, we provide a comprehensive overview of how policy studies in China have evolved over the past half-century. To achieve this goal, we propose a time-based, multi-faceted framework that categorizes policy studies in China into four phases: the germination phase (1978 to mid-1990s), the burgeoning phase (late 1990s to 2012), the normalization phase (2013 to 2022), and the transformation phase (2023 to present). We first describe the evolution of the four phases and the features of each phase, including their historical contexts, disciplinary development, policy research domains, theoretical advancements, methodological approaches, and intellectual engagement with the international policy research community. We then draw on an originally collected database of 347 published articles to analyze trends across these four phases, focusing on publication patterns, policy areas, theories of the policy process, and research methodologies. Our paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities for the future of policy studies in China.

¹ PSJ Editorial Team, June 21, 2024. URL: <https://psjblog.net/2024/06/21/bridging-policy-research-across-borders-challenges-and-opportunities-for-china/>

II. The Evolution of Policy Studies in China: Four Distinct Phases

Scientific progress is not a steady, linear accumulation of knowledge, but instead occurs through radical and disruptive paradigm shifts that episodically interrupt cumulative progress (Kuhn 2009). Policy studies in China, as a research field, have also undergone remarkable non-linear transformations over the past half-century, even though some of these changes might not be radical or disruptive enough to be called paradigm shifts. We propose a time-based, multifaceted framework where we delineate the evolution of public policy research in China into four distinct phases, and in each phase, we discuss four aspects, including historical background, disciplinary development, policy research, and international exchanges (see Figure 1). The developmental phases of a field can be categorized in multiple ways and by using different criteria. Our categorization is primarily defined by critical events that have significantly influenced the trajectory of policy research in China.

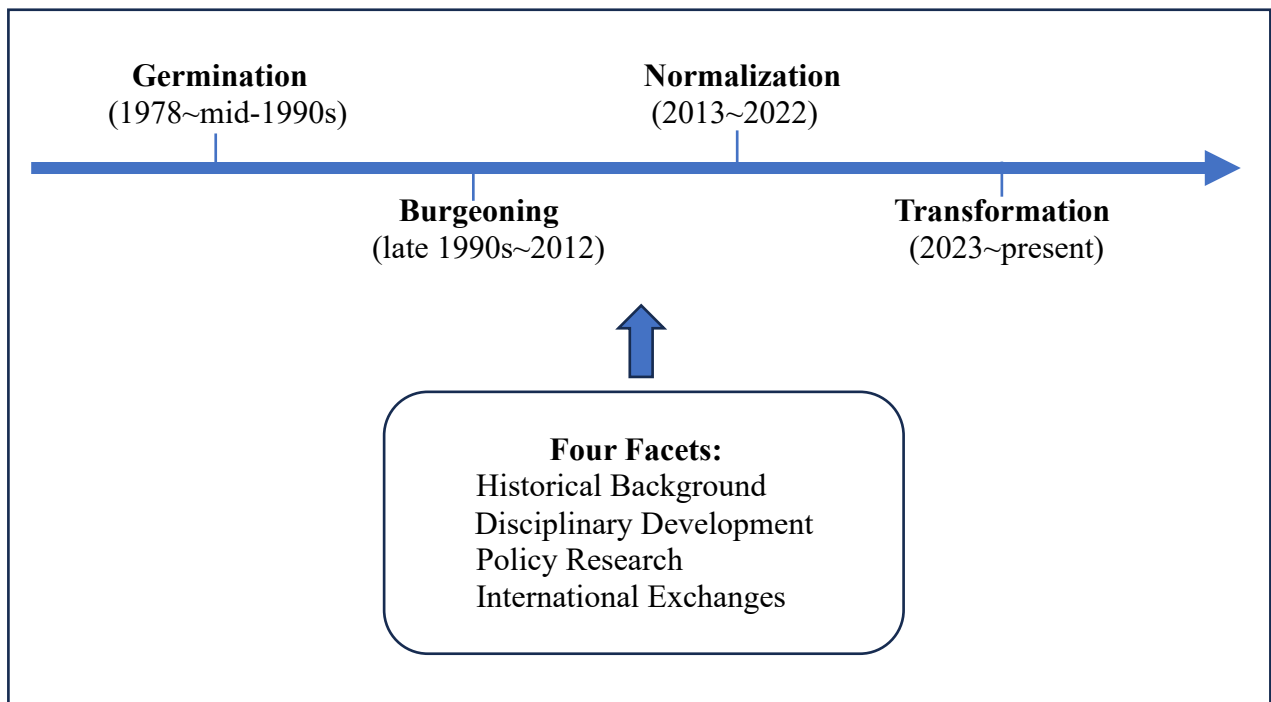


Figure 1 A Time-Based Multi-Faceted Qualitative Framework

The evolution of policy studies in China has been closely tied to the country's broader political and economic transformations, particularly the shift from a centrally planned economy toward a market economy. The expanding role of government in managing the economy and governing a variety of social issues has led to the growing demand for systematic policy analysis. Embedded in the unique historical background, these four stages reflect the evolution of the broader disciplinary development of public policy, public administration, and public management and feature different policy domains, research methods, and international exchange patterns. Policy studies in China were initially spawned by politics and then gradually grew into a relatively independent research field, which in turn contributed to the theory and practice of public

policymaking. Initially influenced by Western policy studies, China's policy studies have progressively gained their footing, strengthened their identity, and evolved into an integral part of the global policy studies community.

Our framework serves as a historically grounded and context-specific tool to understand the non-linear development of policy studies in China. While it does not claim to offer a novel theory, it sheds light on how disciplinary evolution has been shaped by shifting political landscapes, transformations in academic systems, and growing international engagement. By identifying critical junctures and contextual drivers of change, the framework contributes to broader discussions on how knowledge production unfolds in transitional and authoritarian contexts. We also suggest that the phase-based approach may be adapted to analyze the development of policy studies in other non-Western settings, potentially facilitating comparative analysis and broader theoretical dialogue.

The First Phase: The Germination Phase (1978 to mid-1990s)

The germination phase coincided with the onset of intense nationwide economic reform. During this phase, efficiency and pragmatism became dominant themes, fostering the resumption of policy studies in response to pressing societal and economic needs. Two major forces drove the germination of policy studies in China. The primary and direct force was the Reform and Opening Up initiated in 1978, which brought about a dramatic and profound transformation of Chinese society following the 10-year upheaval of the Cultural Revolution (1966~1976). As a fundamental national policy aimed at transitioning China from a socialist planned economy to a market economy, Reform and Opening Up called for comprehensive policy experimentation and innovation across a wide range of policy areas to boost economic development. In March 1979, Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader of China at the time, emphasized in a Party meeting that “political science, law, sociology, and studies on world politics have been greatly neglected for many years, and we need to catch up quickly... We have already acknowledged that our natural sciences are behind those of Western countries. We should now also acknowledge that our research in the social sciences is lagging behind as well.”² The germination of the fields of political science, public policy, and public administration was a direct result of the rising demand of the Reform and Opening Up and the directions of the state leadership.

In August 1984, the General Office of the State Council of China and the former Ministry of Labor and Personnel held the National Administrative Science Seminar in Jilin City, Jilin Province. At the seminar, attendees proposed establishing a national, academic-oriented, and nonprofit Chinese Public Administration Society, which was officially founded in Beijing in 1988³. In 1985, the State Council of China merged three institutions – the Economic Research Center, Technological Economy Research Center, and Price Research Center – to establish the Development Research Center of the State Council, aiming to conduct comprehensive policy research and provide policy proposals for national development⁴. In the same year, the UN Seminar on Reforming Civil Service Systems for Development was held in Beijing,

² This is a quote from the concluding remarks made by Xiaoping Deng, the paramount leader of China at the time, at a Chinese Communist Party meeting on March 30, 1979. <http://www.reformdata.org/1979/0330/5172.shtml>

³ The official website of Chinese Public Administration Society: <http://www.cpasonline.org.cn/#/index/2/9>

⁴ https://www.gov.cn/xxgk/pub/govpublic/mrlm/201207/t20120726_65413.html

demonstrating China's determination to promote political reform and support for public administration and policy research. Another milestone occurred in 1986 when Vice Premier Wan Li published an article titled *Democratic and Scientific Decision-Making: An Important Topic in Political System Reform* in the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)⁵.

In July 1989, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China established the CCP Central Policy Research Office, which has become the highest official think tank of the CCP. In 1994, the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP (now known as the National Academy of Governance) was established to train senior officials and provide policy consultation to the central government. These significant political episodes spurred the resumption of policy research and teaching in academia⁶, especially in the disciplines of political science and public administration (Z. Chen 2018).

The second force driving the germination of policy studies in China was the introduction of Western policy studies to China by academia as new components within the traditional disciplines of political science and public administration. By that time, Western public administration and policy studies had undergone a profound evolution – from the call to separate politics from administration (Wilson 1887), to the vision of policy sciences aiming to integrate interdisciplinary knowledge for public decision-making (Lasswell 1951), to the rise of the behavioral revolution that shifted attention from formal-legal structures to administrative behavior (Simon 1955), and to the emergence of New Public Administration, calling for “strong democracy” in public policies (Frederickson 1996; Barber 2003) and New Public Management, promoting market-oriented economic rationality to solve government failures (Osborne 1993). Policy analysis also began to become a profession in the 1980s (D. Weimer and Vining 2017). Early policy process theories, now fundamentals of policy process research, were also formulated during this period, including the Multiple Streams Framework (Perry and Kingdon 1985), the Institutional Rational Choice Framework (Ostrom 1990), the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), and the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner and Jones 1991).

All of these served as a rich repertoire for early Chinese scholars of policy studies when they began introducing Western policy research and education to China. For example, Zhou Shiqiu (1982), a pioneering public administration scholar who received a doctoral degree in public administration from Harvard University in the 1930s, proposed a systematic analysis of public administration to clarify government functions and advocated the establishment of a discipline of public administration suited to China's specific conditions⁷. He published *Public Administration* (Zhou 1984), China's first textbook in the field, and emphasized that administrative reform should accompany economic reform (Yang and Lu 1985). In 1982, Xia Shuzhang, another Harvard graduate who returned to China to teach public administration, played a pivotal role in

⁵ In 1986, Vice Premier Wan Li made a speech on “democratic and scientific decision-making” at the first National Symposium on Soft Science Research. Then, a revised version of his speech was published in *People's Daily*. <http://www.reformdata.org/1986/0731/8266.shtml>

⁶ Modern public administration education first emerged at major Chinese universities in the 1940s, but it was halted in 1952 due to ideological considerations.

⁷ Zhou Shiqiu was also invited to attend the UN Seminar on Reforming Civil Service Systems for Development held in Beijing in 1985.

advancing the field. In a widely influential article in the *People's Daily*, he made a compelling case that “it is time to put the study of public administration on the agenda”. This call to action had a profound and long-lasting impact on the development of public administration, public policy education, and research in China⁸. He is widely recognized as a pioneering and esteemed scholar in the development of public administration in China and is hailed as the “Father of MPA” in China. Around the same time, Meng Fansen (1983) proposed that China needs to establish “a science of policy” to study the Party and the State.

It is worth noting that during the germination period, public administration and public policy were not independent academic fields; they were considered sub-fields of political science⁹. It was these pioneering public administration and public policy scholars, who were also political scientists, that highlighted the importance of public administration and policy studies. In 1980, the Chinese Association of Political Science (CAPS) was established. CAPS incorporated public administration as an essential research orientation and organized workshops in public administration and public policy in subsequent years. All of these efforts led to the establishment of *Chinese Public Administration* in 1985, the first flagship academic journal in China dedicated to promoting government and policy studies. Three years later, the Chinese Public Administration Society (CPAS) was founded.

Policy studies during this period were oriented toward practical problems and macro-policies, particularly those related to economic development. The overarching value of public policies during this period was economic efficiency, aligning with the fundamental principle of the Reform and Opening Up that emphasizes “prioritizing efficiency with due consideration to fairness” (Wang 1995). In practice, economic efficiency was often prioritized at the expense of equity (Wang 2007). Accordingly, policy research mainly focused on modifying civil service systems and increasing administrative efficiency to support the sweeping market reform across the nation. During this period, China's policy studies did not pay much attention to specific policy process theories. Rather, their primary concern was how to utilize policy tools to solve practical problems. The policy research methods during this period were rudimentary, primarily consisting of descriptions, reviews, or comments based on personal experience or observations. Normative and simple descriptive research was dominant, while empirical research, especially quantitative research, was rare (Chen 2000).

In addition to bringing Western science and technology to China, the central government of China also encouraged and funded elite Chinese students to study abroad. A wave of Chinese students joined the “studying-abroad fever” in the 1980s and 1990s (Qian 1996). While most students pursued science and engineering, a small number chose to study economics, political science, and public policy and management. These students became the first group of pioneering scholars of policy studies since the Reform and Opening Up, playing a crucial role in bridging international and domestic policy research in the years to come.

In summary, during the germination phase, policy studies in China were revived in response to sweeping domestic economic and administrative reforms. Chinese policy scholars looked to

⁸ <http://cpasonline.org.cn:8000/gb/readarticle/readarticle.asp?articleid=351>

⁹ More nuanced is the fact that public policy was considered a sub-area of public administration, and it was considered a research orientation for other disciplines such as economics and law.

Western countries, particularly the United States, aiming to introduce Western policy theories and lay the groundwork for establishing policy studies as an academic field.

The Second Phase: The Burgeoning Phase (late 1990s to 2012)

After approximately 20 years of preliminary exploration, policy studies in China entered its second phase of rapid development, driven primarily by swift societal changes and the formal establishment of public policy as an academic field. In this phase, policy studies began to establish a formal academic foundation and experienced significant growth. Universities and research institutions increasingly recognized policy studies as an independent academic discipline from political science. The scope of policy studies expanded beyond economic reform and administrative efficiency to encompass a broader range of policy areas. The first cohort of policy schools was established at prestigious Chinese universities, where Western public policy theories were introduced and examined in the Chinese context, with a growing emphasis on more rigorous methods. International academic exchanges also increased during this period.

The efficiency-first principle of the Reform and Opening Up greatly boosted the economic growth in China. From 1978 to 1995, China's GDP grew at an average rate of 10.09%¹⁰. However, this rapid growth also gave rise to a series of serious social challenges, including environmental degradation, widening wealth disparities, unequal development, social unrest linked to state-owned enterprise reforms, and rising healthcare and education costs. These challenges prompted China's policy focus to shift from prioritizing economic growth to addressing a range of social issues (Wang 2007).

Against this backdrop, the field of policy studies in China entered its second phase. A milestone marking the beginning of this phase occurred in 1997 when Public Administration was separated from Political Science and officially established as a parallel discipline to Political Science, with a new name called Public Management. To avoid potential confusion and misunderstanding caused by translation, we need to clarify the term "Public Management" in this context. We translated the newly established discipline as Public Management because it was reclassified from a sub-discipline of Political Science under the category of Law to an independent discipline parallel to Political Science, under the category of Management, by the Ministry of Education of China, which is responsible for the classification of academic disciplines in all Chinese universities. Under the new discipline of Public Management, six sub-disciplines were established in 1997, namely Public Administration (or Administrative Management), Education Economics and Management, Land Resources Management, Social Security, Social Medicine, and Public Health Management (Xue, Peng, and Zhang 2002). Though not an official sub-discipline, public policy was treated as a specialized research area under these sub-disciplines.

Besides domestic factors, globalization also played a significant role in promoting public affairs education in China. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 created the need for a new generation of public managers with expertise in both domestic and international public affairs to navigate a marketized and globalized economy (Yang 2005). To build a team of professional public managers to serve the domestic economic and administrative reform and improve the civil service system, the Ministry of Education approved the

¹⁰ Calculated by authors using open data on China's GDP growth rate.

establishment of the MPA degree in 1999, with the first cohort of MPA students enrolling a year later. The official establishment of Public Management as an independent discipline also spawned the birth of the first cohort of policy schools in China, such as School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University (2000), School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University (2000), School of Government, Peking University (2001), School of Public Administration and Policy, Renmin University of China (2001), and School of Government, Sun Yat-Sen University (2001), and College of Public Administration, Huazhong University of Science and Technology (2001)¹¹. Think tanks also witnessed significant growth during this period (X. Zhu 2012).

Facing the serious social challenges mentioned above arising from rapid economic growth, policy studies in China shifted their attention from economic and administrative efficiency towards social equity, public welfare, and social stability. Multiple new policy areas emerged, including healthcare, pensions, social security, wealth gaps, environmental protection, and others. During this period, Chinese policy scholars paid a lot of attention to public participation in the policy-making process. They started to employ well-established Western policy process theories to analyze Chinese policies. Realizing the limitations of normative research during the first phase, Chinese policy scholars during this period advocated for a shift towards empirical research. This shift led to a noticeable increase in the use of case studies, qualitative interviews, surveys, and descriptive statistics. Further details will be provided in the empirical evidence section.

Academic exchanges with the international policy studies community were also enhanced. An increasing number of policy schools at Chinese universities gradually established ties with their American counterparts, including the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, the School of Public Affairs and Administration (SPAA) at Rutgers University, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University, the Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy at Florida State University, and so on (Yang 2005). Initiated by Rutgers SPAA and supported by the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), the inaugural Sino-U.S. International Conference on Public Administration was held in the School of Public Administration, Renmin University of China, in 2002. Six years later, the China-America Association for Public Affairs (CAAPA) was established and organized its first Chinese Public Management Scholars Seminar at the School of Government, Sun Yat-sen University, in 2010. These international academic exchanges played a significant role in bridging Chinese and US scholars in the field of public affairs. What is worth noting is that these conferences are mainly devoted to public administration topics in general. While public policy does not constitute the central theme of these conferences, it remains an important research focus within the field of public administration.

To sum up, during the burgeoning phase, policy studies in China experienced rapid growth in disciplinary development, academic research, and international exchanges. Despite ongoing challenges in defining its self-identity, refining theoretical frameworks, and enhancing

¹¹ According to Shanghai Ranking (<https://www.shanghairanking.cn/rankings/bcsr/2023/1204>), as of 2023, 220 Chinese universities have established a policy school or department.

methodological rigor, this period laid a solid foundation for the subsequent phase of normalization.

The Third Phase: The Normalization Phase (2013 to 2022)

Similar to the first two phases, Chinese policy studies during the normalization phase were also shaped by China's practical political and socio-economic realities. By normalization, we refer to the process through which policy studies in China evolved from fragmented and exploratory efforts into a more structured, standardized, and institutionalized academic discipline. During this period, the Chinese policy research community expanded and reached a broader consensus on research paradigms, theories, methods, and curriculum design. This development also helped the field establish clearer theoretical frameworks, more rigorous methodological approaches, and stronger institutional support from universities, nonprofits, and government agencies. Moreover, international academic exchanges became more institutionalized, further integrating Chinese policy studies into the global academic community.

Starting in 2013, when the new administration led by the current President Xi Jinping assumed office, China's macro-level policies have undergone a series of major shifts, marked by increasing political and economic centralization (Tsai and Zhou 2019), cracking down on corruption (J. V. Zhan and Zhu 2023), implementing more stringent environmental and energy policies (Kostka and Zhang 2018), and alleviating poverty (G. Xu and Yano 2017). These notable policy changes signified a major transition from economic and administrative efficiency to enhanced central government authority over local governments, sustainable development, and social equity. Accordingly, policy studies evolved to capture and analyze these changes. Certain policy domains attracted more scholarly attention during this stage, such as social policies (i.e., anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, education, and public health) and environmental and energy policies.

During this phase, policy studies in China, as a research field, gradually strengthened its academic identity. Different from the burgeoning phase when publications increased sharply, the Chinese policy studies community in this phase emphasized the normalization and standardization of policy teaching and research, calling for a higher-quality curriculum, a more scientific research paradigm, more rigorous research methods, and higher-quality publications.

As of 2017, according to the China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center¹², 43 Chinese universities had been authorized by the Ministry of Education to award doctoral degrees in Public Management (with Public Policy as a major research orientation). In 2010, the School of Public Administration and Policy at Renmin University of China started an online case center that compiles cases in public administration and policy and offers course materials for MPA training. In 2014, the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University launched an online case database, the China Case Bank for Public Policy and Management, to provide case-based teaching services to Chinese universities and serve as a think tank for the public sector¹³. Policy schools in China also gradually reformed their programs,

¹² China Discipline Evaluation. URL: https://www.cdgc.edu.cn/cde/Latest_Results_of_CDE.htm

¹³ China Case Bank for Public Policy and Management. URL: <http://case.sppm.tsinghua.edu.cn/>

curricula, and evaluation criteria to establish a more refined teaching system and a more scientific research evaluation framework.

Both policy process theories and policy analysis experienced stable and robust growth during this period. All major policy process theories, especially Policy Diffusion and Innovation (PDI), policy experimentation, Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), and policy networks, were employed or tested in Chinese contexts. A general research pattern is that the core hypotheses of these Western policy process theories are confirmed in the Chinese context, which meanwhile exhibits some discrepancies in application compared with Western contexts. Policy analysis of Chinese public policies also increased sharply. The Chinese policy research community strongly emphasized the significance and application of more rigorous research designs and methodologies. Research methods became more diversified. Correlational studies with statistical modeling were on the rise. Meanwhile, causal inference methods also caught the attention of Chinese policy scholars. The methodological advancements fostered a community of policy analysis during this period. More details will be discussed in the data evidence section.

International academic exchanges also flourished during this period as policy studies in China gained greater international recognition. An increasing number of Chinese universities have established exchange programs with foreign counterparts for Chinese students to study public policy abroad. More Chinese scholars presented their works at international conferences organized by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM), the Public Management Research Association (PMRA), the American Political Science Association (APSA), the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), the Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA), etc. In 2017, a group of Chinese scholars attending APPAM initiated the Chinese Policy Scholars Group (CPSG), which aims to serve as a bridge between policy researchers and practitioners in the US and China. In later years, CPSG organized a series of academic lectures, research seminars, career development workshops for junior policy scholars, and job training workshops for advanced doctoral students. These events provided a platform for scholarly and professional dialogues and formed a lively and supportive community for Chinese and international policy scholars with a policy interest in China.

To sum up, policy studies in China during the normalization period witnessed solid development and growth in disciplinary construction, theories, and methods. The increasing academic exchanges between Chinese and international policy research communities narrowed the academic gap, fostering greater mutual understanding and collaboration in policy studies.

The Fourth Phase: The Transformation Phase (2023 to present)

The transformation phase started in 2023. By transformation, we primarily refer to the elevation of policy studies in China to a higher academic status and a larger societal role, combining ambitious theoretical pursuits with the development of knowledge systems tailored to China's local contexts. This phase emphasizes both theoretical innovation and practical contributions, with policy studies expected to provide more useful guidance for addressing complex societal challenges. Since this phase has just unfolded, we focus on the emerging trends rather than provide concluding comments as was done for previous phases.

In 2023, China's Ministry of Education designated Public Policy as a fundamental sub-discipline under Public Management, establishing it as the theoretical and analytical foundation for the other sub-disciplines. This formal recognition marks a milestone in the evolution of the field, signifying the establishment of Public Policy as a distinct academic discipline within China's public university education system. By granting Public Policy an independent status, the Chinese government has acknowledged its growing importance in addressing complex governance challenges and shaping evidence-based policymaking. This not only enhances the academic legitimacy of Public Policy but also paves the way for expanded research, specialized training, and professional development in the field.

Meanwhile, facing the rapidly changing domestic and international landscape, China's macro-political agendas have also seen some distinct changes. Domestically, in recent years, China has experienced a sluggish economy, higher unemployment rates, low birth rates, and an aging population. Internationally, the world has struggled with public health crises, climate change, trade disputes, and regional wars. Against this backdrop, China has prioritized national security over economic growth. What is worth noting is that with the explosive growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI), China has determined to invest greatly in AI models, aiming to position AI as a driver for economic transformation and technological innovation. Public policy is expected, by both scholars and practitioners, to play a bigger role in providing theoretical foundations and practical solutions for national governance. This requires a major transformation of policy studies in China.

Emerging policy areas during this phase include national security, economic security, digital governance, and the application of AI in the public sector. In response to the political call to "establish China's independent knowledge system,"¹⁴ the policy research community in China is advocating for new and integrated theories to better explain the Chinese policy process and provide more practical guidance for addressing pressing social problems.

Chinese policy scholars have also taken the initiative to organize international conferences in China. For example, the Inaugural International Conference on China Policy Studies (ICCPS) was held in Beijing in 2024, jointly organized by the School of Government at Beijing Normal University and the Chinese Policy Scholar Group (CPSG)¹⁵. The theme of "Exploring China Policy Studies from a Global Perspective: Theory and Practice" reflects the determination and aspiration to integrate China's policy studies into the global policy community. While many conferences cover policy research as subtopics before 2023, ICCPS marks the first conference devoted fully to policy research in China.

In the same year, the International Conference on Comparative Public Policy was hosted by the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University, in Beijing¹⁶ and the 12th

¹⁴ People's Daily. 2024. URL: http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2024-03/12/nw.D110000renmrb_20240312_3-09.htm

¹⁵ International Conference on China Policy Studies. URL: <http://www.sg.bnu.edu.cn/tzgg1/10fa315a7556453caeb647b466de35e6.htm>

¹⁶ International Conference on Comparative Public Policy. URL: <https://www.comparativepolicy.org/2024-jcpa-conference/>

Chinese Public Management Scholars Seminar was co-hosted by CAAPA and policy schools at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, Sun Yat-sen University, and Xi'an Jiaotong University, in Shanghai¹⁷. In 2025, Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) launched the first Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree in China, and an International Symposium on Frontiers of Policy Research was hosted by SYSU, with support from CPSG. All these conferences emphasized the importance of a global perspective for policy studies. As of November 2024, nine Chinese universities joined the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). In the meantime, other significant academic events in the field have also paid more attention to policy research, including the China Public Administration Postdoctoral Forum, hosted by Zhengzhou University, and the International Seminar on Postgraduates in Public Administration, initiated by Northeastern University. All these events have further facilitated the communication and fertilization between domestic and international policy research.

Overall, we saw a new era of policy studies in China since 2023, with the field of public policy being officially and formally named as a distinct and independent discipline and significantly more international exchanges with policy scholars and organizations overseas. A more comprehensive analysis of this phase is needed once sufficient data and insights have been gathered in the next 10 years or so, allowing for a better evaluation of its developments and outcomes.

A summary of the four phases is presented in Table 2, followed by an analysis of each phase in detail.

Table 2 A Summary of Four Phases of Policy Studies in China

Phase	Background	Disciplinary Development	Policy Research	International Exchanges
Germination (1978~mid-1990s)	-Reform and Opening Up (1978) -fiscal reform: tax-sharing reform (1994) -dominant public value: economic efficiency -policy studies promoted directly by national political leaders	-Chinese Association of Political Science (1980) -Flagship journal: Chinese Public Administration (1985) -Chinese Public Administration Society (1988) -English journal: <i>Journal of Chinese Political Science</i> (1995)	-policy domains: macro-economic policies; streamline civil services and increase administrative efficiency -debate between market economy and planned economy -methods: normative, description, and reviews/comments	-benchmarked Western (especially American) policy studies -introduced Western policy studies to China by pioneering scholars -studying abroad fever in the 1980s and 1990s
Burgeoning (late 1990s~2012)	-China joined WTO -dominant public values: economic and administrative efficiency -multiple social problems and conflicts arose under rapid economic growth	-Public Administration separated from Political Science (1997) -MPA established (1999) -the first batch of policy schools established in a number of prestigious Chinese universities	-policy domains: a widening range of policy areas such as healthcare, pensions, state-owned enterprises reform, NGO, and environment and energy; public participation in the policy-making process; social stability	-Policy Schools in Chinese universities established academic ties with their counterparts in American universities -The Inaugural Sino-U.S. International Conference on Public

¹⁷ The 12th Chinese Public Management Scholars Seminar. URL: <https://spea.sufe.edu.cn/44/56/c13251a214102/page.htm>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -burgeoning of think tanks offering policy recommendations -English journal: <i>Chinese Public Administration Review</i> (2002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -internationalization v.s. localizations debate -theories: apply Western policy process theories to Chinese contexts -methods: empirical research increased, especially case/survey/interview and descriptive statistics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administration (2002) - China-America Association for Public Affairs (CAAPA) established (2008) - The Inaugural Chinese Public Administration Scholars Forum (2010)
Normalization (2013~2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -political and economic centralization -efficiency overshadowed by other policy priorities such as anticorruption, poverty alleviation, and environmental protection -COVID broke out (2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -academic identity strengthened; research paradigm took shape; more interdisciplinary -43 Chinese universities authorized to offer doctoral programs in Public Administration, with Public Policy as a research orientation -China Case Bank for Public Policy and Management launched online by Tsinghua University (2014) -multiple research methods seminars emerged -English journals: <i>Chinese Political Science Review</i> (2016), <i>Journal of Chinese Governance</i> (2016), <i>China Policy Journal</i> (2018), <i>Global Public Policy and Governance</i> (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -policy domains: environment and energy, anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, e-government, public health, centralized economic policy, and national and global governance -theories: test Western theories in Chinese contexts; start to construct theories to explain the Chinese policy process -methods: emphasized more rigorous methods; correlational studies and causal inference increased 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Chinese Policy Scholars Group (CPSG) established (2017) -More Chinese scholars attended international conferences organized by APPAM, PMRA, APSA, ASPA, MPSA, etc. -Chinese universities established more exchange programs with foreign universities for students studying public policy
Transformation (2023~present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -national and economic security over economic efficiency -domestic economic predicament and international trade disputes, intensifying climate change, regional wars, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Public Policy officially designated as a fundamental sub-discipline of Public Management (2023) -Public policy expected to play a bigger role in national governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -policy domains: emerging areas such as digital governance, AI and public policy, and national security -theories: call for new and integrated theories to better explain the Chinese policy process, address pressing social problems, and contribute more to the international policy research -methods: more diverse methods with correlational studies and causal inference on the rise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The Inaugural International Conference on China Policy Studies, Beijing (2024) -The 2nd International Conference on China Policy Studies, Beijing (2025) -International Conference on Comparative Public Policy, Beijing (2024) -12th Chinese Public Administration Scholars Forum, Shanghai (2024) -13th Chinese Public Administration Scholars Forum, Nanning (2025)

				-9 Chinese universities joined the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) as of 11/2024
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III. Evidence from Top Policy Research Publications

To further analyze and evaluate the features of the four developmental stages of policy studies in China, we adopt a “Science of Science” approach and present empirical evidence based on publications in leading policy journals. A “Science of Science” approach harnesses bibliometric databases or corpora of scientific publications to document the dynamics of a scientific field (Archambault et al. 2009; Fortunato et al. 2018; Priem, Piwovar, and Orr 2022; Fagan et al. 2024).

Guided by this approach, we compile a dataset of publications on China policy studies in leading policy journals from 1978 to 2024. Using this dataset, we first analyze the overall patterns of policy studies in China across the four phases and evaluate whether these patterns reflect the major historical developments of the field. Then, for each phase, we analyze the dynamics of policy areas, theories of the policy process, and methodological approaches of policy studies in China, and illustrate how these studies have contributed to the international policy research community both theoretically and empirically. We also highlight the gaps between theories of the policy process and policy analysis and analyze the possible reasons for these discrepancies.

Our dataset does not include articles published in Chinese-language journals. This is primarily because previous studies—such as Huang and Lin (2019)—have already analyzed patterns in policy research published in these journals. We refer to their findings and compare them with our dataset where appropriate. The exclusion of Chinese journals from our dataset does not diminish the importance of Chinese-language scholarship. Instead, relevant Chinese articles are cited in both the qualitative analysis above and the quantitative analysis below.

The dataset we compiled includes 347 research articles on China’s policy studies. Since *Policy Studies Journal (PSJ)* is a leading journal in the field of public policy with an emphasis on theories of the policy process and their applications, we first collected all 33 *PSJ* articles on policy studies in China, from 1978 to 2024, regardless of authors’ nationalities. Then, for each of these 33 *PSJ* articles, we gathered all their referenced articles on policy studies in China, regardless of the authors’ country of origin. Given *PSJ*’s strong emphasis on policy process theories, we also examine a leading journal with an emphasis on policy analysis –*Journal of Policy Analysis and Management (JPAM)*, using the same approach. Between 1978 and 2024, *JPAM* published 10 articles on China’s policy studies, authored or co-authored by Chinese scholars. We included these 10 articles, along with all the 101 articles on policy studies in China that they cited, to further expand and balance our dataset¹⁸.

¹⁸ Comparative studies that involve China and other countries are also included in our dataset.

The articles cited by *PSJ* and *JPAM* appear in 129 distinct journals and 22 book chapters, spanning public policy, public administration, and public management, as well as related disciplines such as economics, political science, and sociology. This diversity enhances the representativeness of our sample. Therefore, although not exhaustive, our dataset of 347 articles provides a reasonable cross-section of journals and disciplines engaged in policy research. We manually coded each article’s title, author(s), year of publication, journal, abstract, keywords, policy areas, theories, and methodological approaches.

Overview of Dataset: Nationality, Publication Trend, Policy Process Theories, Policy Areas, and Research Methods

First, we provide an overview of the dataset (Table 1). We also examine the distribution of authors by nationality (Figure 2).

Table 1 International Publications on China’s Policy Studies from 1978 to 2024 (N=347)

Orientation	Number of Articles	Journal
Policy Process	33	<i>Policy Studies Journal (PSJ)</i>
	203	Journals referenced by <i>PSJ</i> *
Policy Analysis	10	<i>Journal of Policy Analysis and Management (JPAM)</i>
	101	Journals referenced by <i>JPAM</i> *

*Note: The articles referenced by *PSJ* and *JPAM* appear in 129 distinct journals and 22 book chapters. These 129 journals span other Public Administration/Policy/Management journals (e.g. *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration*, *Public Management Review*, *Governance*, *Policy Sciences*, *Energy Policy*), Political Science journals (e.g. *American Political Science Review*, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Organization*, *The China Quarterly*, *Environmental Politics*), and Economics journals (e.g. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Journal of Development Economics*, *Journal of Public Economics*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*), and others.

Number of Articles by Author Nationality (N=347)

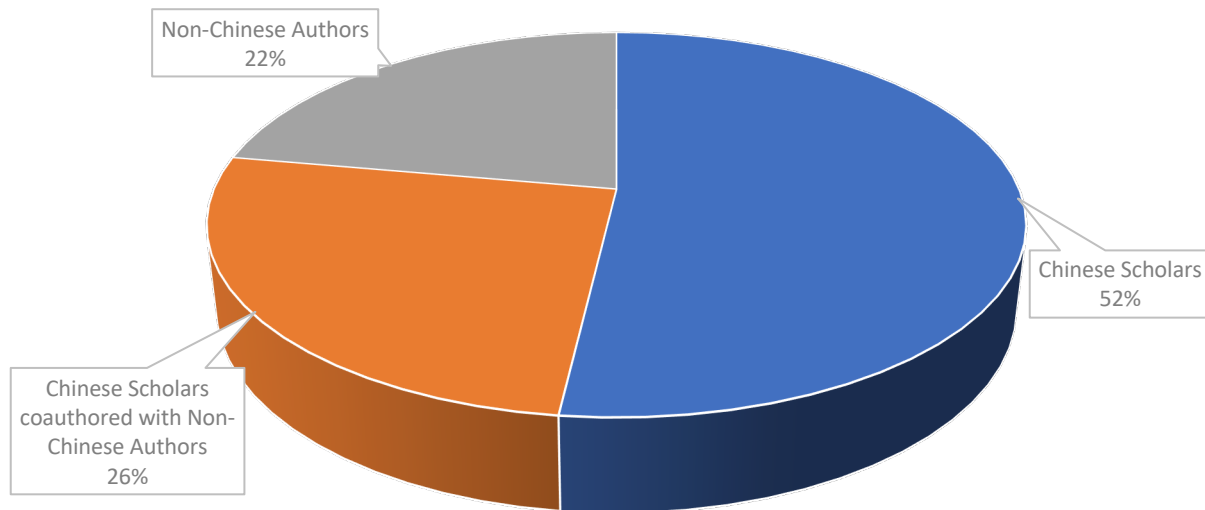


Figure 2 Number of Articles by Author Nationality (N=347)

More importantly, we provide an overview of the over-time trend of publications, policy areas, theories of the policy process, and research methods. These aspects are also further analyzed for each phase in the next section.

Trend of Publications

Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the trend of international and domestic publications on policy studies in China, with the former based on our dataset and the latter based on the research conducted by two Chinese scholars published in a Chinese journal (Huang and Lin 2019). The two figures show that international and domestic publications generally follow a similar trend: Overall, the number of publications has been on the rise; a small number of articles were published from 1978 to the mid-1990s, followed by a sharp increase until around 2012, and then a slight decrease thereafter. The trend of publications also aligns well with our categorization of the four phases of policy studies in China, which supports our categorization based on milestone events that have significantly influenced the trajectory of policy studies in China.

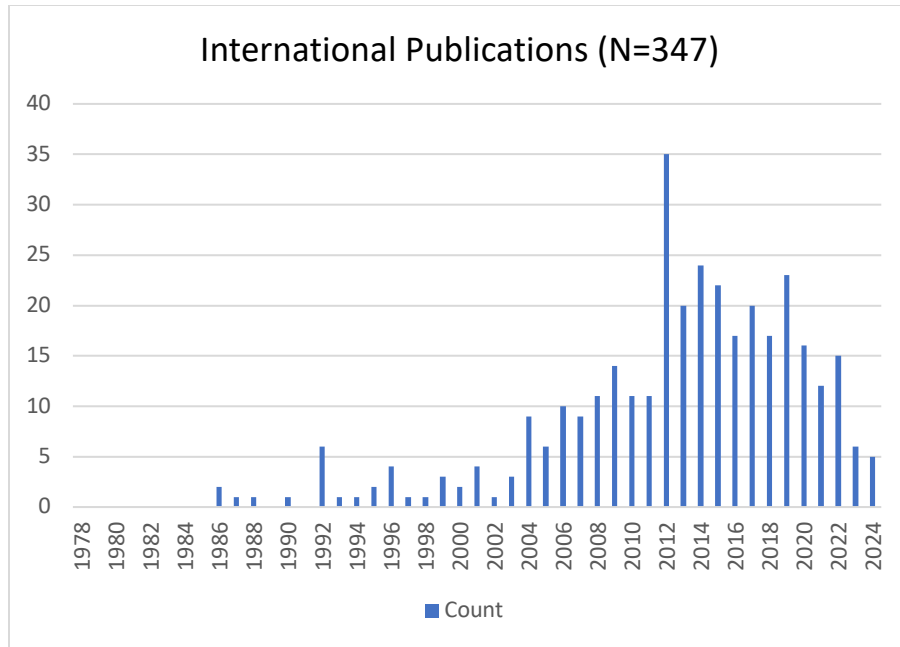


Figure 3 International Publications on Policy Studies in China

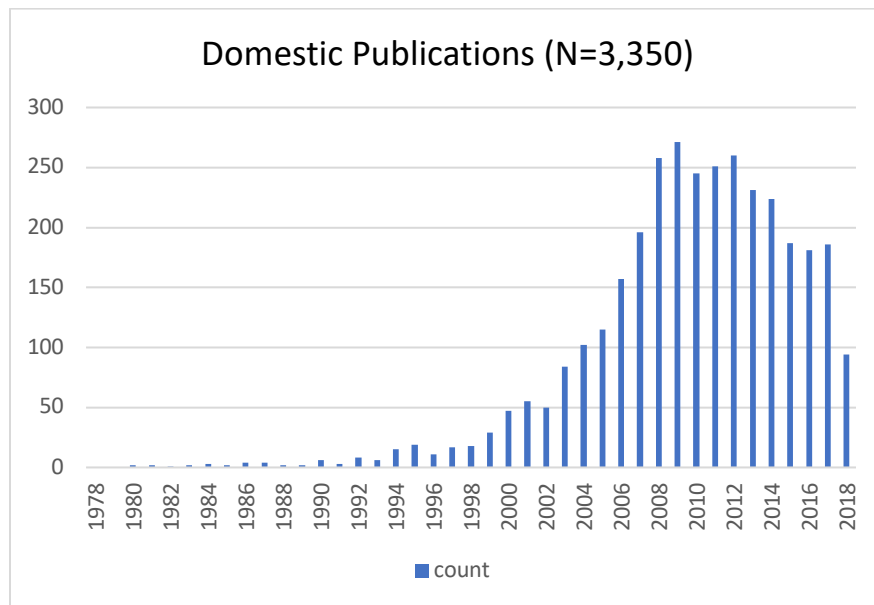
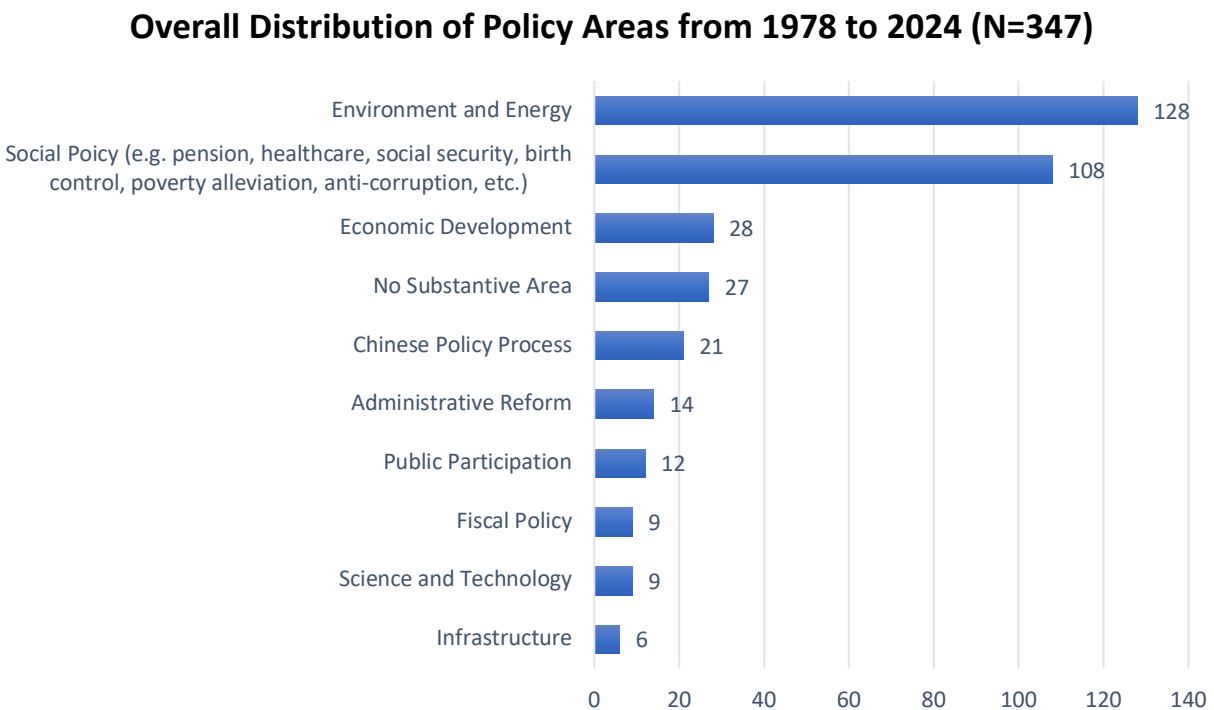


Figure 4 Domestic Publications on Policy Studies in China

Note: Figure 3 is based on the dataset (N=347) we compiled. Figure 4 is adapted from the Huang and Lin (2019) article published in a Chinese journal called *Journal of Xiamen University (Arts & Social Sciences)*. Figure 3 covers the period from 1978 to 2024, while Figure 4 covers the period from 1978 to 2018. In Figure 3, the number of articles as of 2023 might be underestimated as it takes time for those articles to be cited. In Figure 4, the number of articles published in 2018 is underestimated because the data collection was conducted as of July 30, 2018.

Policy Areas

Regarding the overall distribution of policy areas, the top two are environment and energy, and social policy (see Figure 5). Environmental and energy policies account for approximately 35.4 % of the publications. This is consistent with Chinese policy scholars' growing attention to environmental and energy policies in recent literature (M. Wang, Li, and Wang 2021; Tan et al. 2021). Social policy has the second highest number of publications, as it encompasses multiple subfields, including pensions, healthcare, social security, birth control, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption, and others. The third-highest number of publications focuses on economic development, followed by Chinese policy process¹⁹, administrative reform, and public participation. Fiscal policy, science and technology, and infrastructure account for the fewest publications.



Note: All counts add up to 362 articles because some articles involve two or multiple policy areas.

Figure 5 Overall Distribution of Policy Areas from 1978 to 2024 (N=347)

Policy Process Theories

As for theories of the policy process, we code the 347 articles mainly according to the latest version (the 5th edition) of *Theories of the Policy Process* (Weible 2023), including Punctuated

¹⁹ The Chinese policy process, as a policy area, refers to studies that distinguish policy-making processes and mechanisms in an authoritarian context from those in democratic Western settings.

Equilibrium Theory (PET), Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), Policy Feedback Theory (PFT), Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD), Policy Diffusion and Innovation (PDI), and Ecology of Games (EG). We also include policy entrepreneurship, policy experimentation, and policy networks. While they do not constitute a theory or framework, they can be potentially incorporated into multiple theories of the policy process as important elements or perspectives of policy change (Adam and Kriesi 2007; Mintrom and Norman 2009; Bevir and Richards 2009; Yang and Yi 2023). We also recognize the stages heuristic as an alternative logical framework for organizing policy research (Fagan et al. 2024). We identify policy stages as agenda-setting, adoption (including law-making), implementation, evaluation, and the general policy process or policy change²⁰, adapted from the Stages Model proposed by DeLeon (1999). In our database of 347 articles, 97 articles (28%) do not explicitly include a theory or framework. Among the remaining 250 articles (72%), 101 explicitly reference a policy process theory while 149 apply the stages heuristic. Regarding policy process theories (see Figure 6), the top five are Policy Diffusion and Innovation (PDI), policy experimentation, Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), and policy networks. As for policy stages (see Figure 7), policy evaluation or analysis has the highest number of publications, followed by policy implementation and the general policy process. Agenda-setting and adoption comprise only 14 articles.

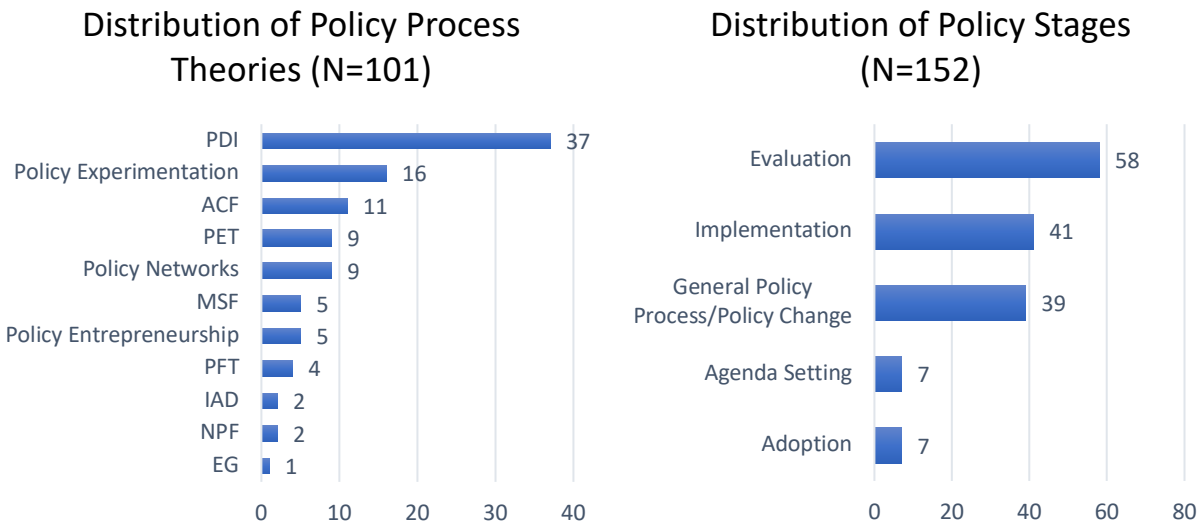


Figure 6 Distribution of Policy Process Theories **Figure 7** Distribution of Policy Stages

Research Methods

²⁰ “General policy process or policy change” refers to the policy research that does not focus on a specific stage but instead uses policy process or policy change as a general term to organize the research.

We identify seven research methods: normative research, descriptive research mainly using words, research with descriptive statistics or graphs, cases or surveys or interviews, literature review, correlational research using statistical models, and causal inference. The results (see Figure 8) show that correlational studies account for the highest number of publications, followed by cases, surveys, or interviews. If categorized into qualitative and quantitative methods (normative research and literature review excluded), the former accounts for approximately 40% of the publications and the latter 60%. There are only two normative studies, accounting for only 0.6%. This is in stark contrast to publications (N=3,097) in Chinese journals from 1978 to 2018, where normative studies account for 92.45%, qualitative research 3.19%, and quantitative research 4.36% (Huang and Lin 2019).

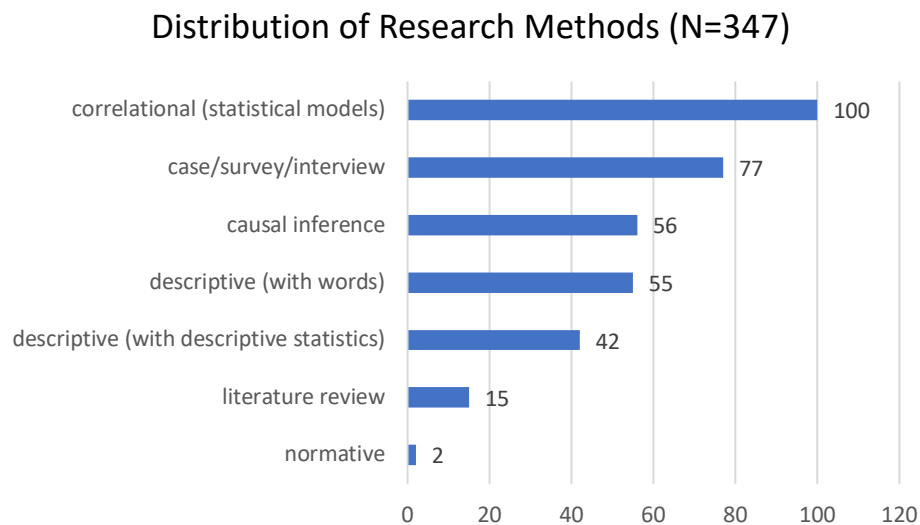


Figure 8 Overall Distribution of Research Methods

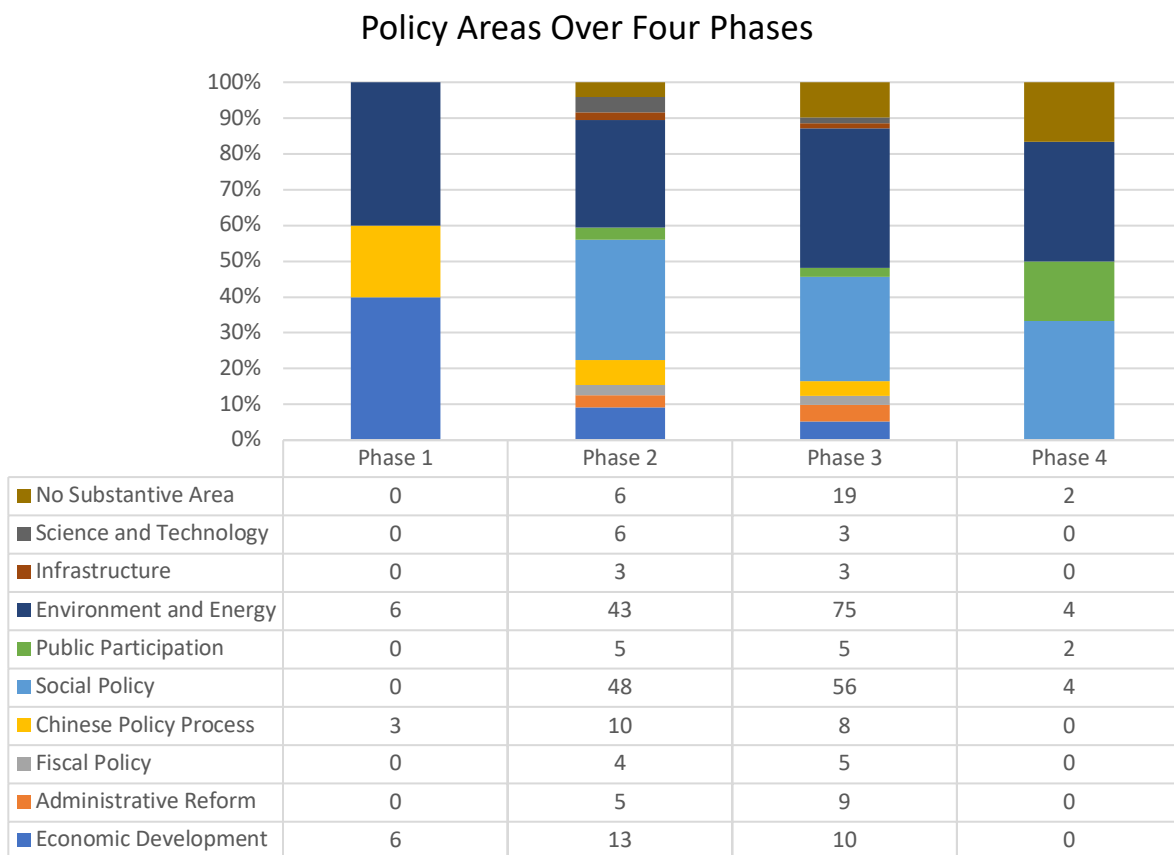
Features of the Four Phases Through the Lens of Top Publications

Our dataset shows some interesting patterns in the four phases of China policy studies, which align with the historical emphasis of the field during each phase. The patterns of these publications also offer deeper insights into the policy areas, theories of the policy process, and research methods in each phase. Below, we present a detailed analysis of the dataset and how it reflects the four-stage evolution of policy studies in China.

The Germination Phase (1978 to mid-1990s)

Under the Reform and Opening Up, national and local economic policies became the main subjects of policy studies (see Figure 9). During this period, local governments were granted considerable autonomy to innovate and implement various policies aimed at boosting economic development – a policy area that received disproportionate attention in both international (see Figure 9) and Chinese publications (Huang and Lin 2019). This led to large-scale policy experimentation, which in turn stimulated policy learning among local governments and

contributed to the national economic transformation. Heilmann (2008) proposed the concept of “policy experimentation under hierarchy” to explain the experimentation-based policy process in China, where the central and local governments interacted to generate policies. Some scholars proposed a model of “fragmented authoritarianism” to elaborate on the interaction between bureaucratic structure and officials in China’s policy-making process (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Lieberthal and Lampton 2018). What is worth noting is that some international scholars explored the legal frameworks of China’s environmental policy (Ross and Silk 1985; Ross 1992; Palmer 1998; Beyer). During this period, China's policy studies paid little attention to specific policy process theories. Rather, they focused on the general policy-making process in China, following a strong political science tradition of institutional analysis (see Figure 10 and Figure 11).



Note: Social policy includes policy areas related to pensions, healthcare, social security, birth control, wealth gaps, anti-corruption, education, and others. Some articles involve more than one policy area.

Figure 9 Policy Areas Over Four Phases

In Figure 12, we present the research methods used in the 347 publications during each stage. The policy research methods during the germination phase were elementary, primarily consisting of descriptions, reviews, or comments based on personal experience or observations (see Figure

12). The lack of rigorous methods was attributed to three main reasons. First, most policy scholars during this period did not receive sufficient academic training in research methodology. Second, since it was in its nascent stage, policy research paid disproportionate attention to the debates on general topics (e.g., economic development, market reform, administrative efficiency, etc.) rather than specific methods. In addition, the availability and accessibility of data were a considerable challenge during this period (Xue, Peng, and Zhang 2002).

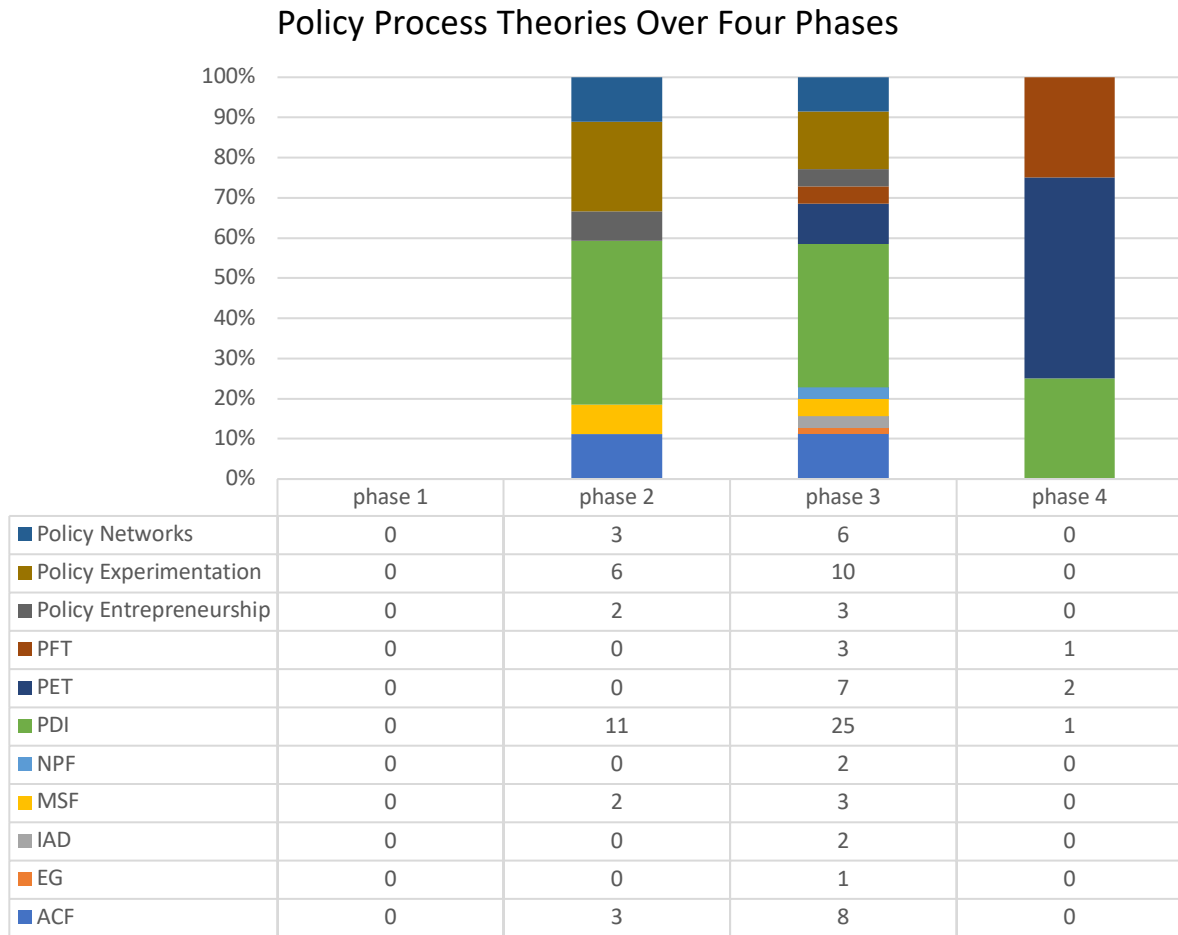


Figure 10 Policy Process Theories Over Four Phases

Policy Stages Over Four Phases

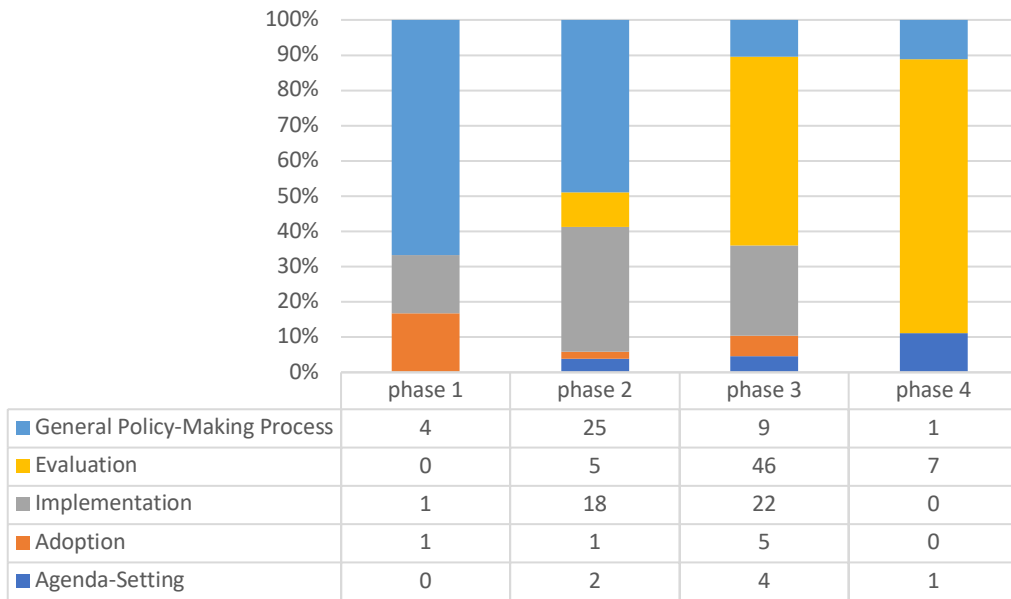


Figure 11 Policy Stages Over Four Phases

Research Methods Over Four Phases

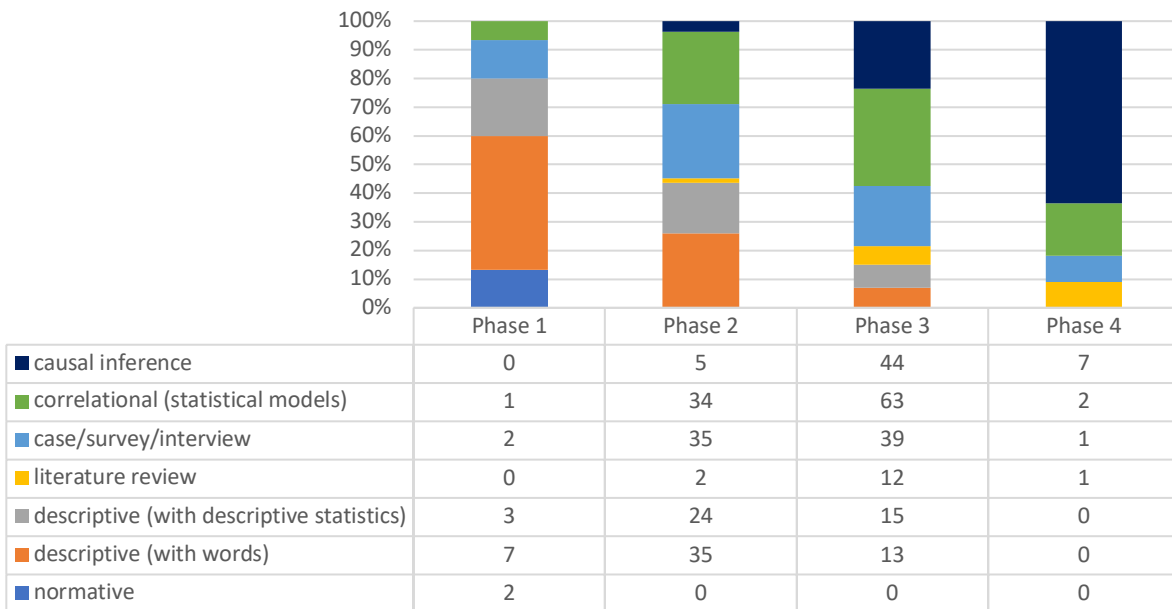


Figure 12 Research Methods Over Four Phases

The Burgeoning Phase (late 1990s to 2012)

As mentioned in the germination phase, policy studies in China, from the very beginning, featured a notable element of internationalization, as they borrowed heavily from Western countries. This trend continued in the burgeoning phase. However, the debate over the internationalization versus localization of policy studies intensified. This is probably due to the double challenges facing Chinese scholars who were simultaneously confronted with positivism emphasizing universal principles and post-positivism acknowledging that knowledge could be socially constructed (Li 2019). Some Chinese scholars called for a balance between internationalization and localization (Yang 2005; Xue and Zhong 2012). This debate coincided with a surge in publications on policy studies in China, both domestically and internationally (see Figures 3 and 4).

As shown in our dataset (see Figure 9), policy areas that scholars focused on during this phase became much more diverse. This was largely driven by the serious societal challenges arising from rapid economic growth, which prompted policy studies in China to shift their attention from economic and administrative efficiency towards a wide range of social policies. As a result, multiple new policy areas emerged, including healthcare, pensions, social security, wealth gaps, state-owned enterprises, NGO, environmental protection, energy transition, and others (see Figure 9). For example, studies show that rapid economic growth does not necessarily reduce poverty, which, instead, is achieved by implementing reasonable redistribution policies, such as equitable personal income tax, at the same time (H. Li 2000; H. Xu and Cui 2009). Policy entrepreneurs, like top-ranking officials, can facilitate the agenda-setting and adoption of policies aiming at reducing urban poverty (Hammond 2013). The social security system in China also experienced a series of extensive reforms to transfer the major responsibility for social security from corporations to the state (Saunders and Shang 2001). Meanwhile, environmental pollution, especially air and water pollution, caused by rapid economic growth, raised public concern (Piao et al. 2010; S. Zheng, Yi, and Li 2015). Research indicates that a perception of clear political commitment to environmental protection can enhance corporate compliance with environmental policies, whereas a perception of policy ambiguity may diminish the intensity of policy implementation, potentially resulting in implementation failures (N. Liu et al. 2018). Campaign-style environmental policies were launched. Research indicates that campaign-style enforcement could effectively improve environmental regulatory compliance in the short term but may lead to diminished effectiveness in the long run (N. N. Liu et al. 2015). Confronted with various social problems that could potentially trigger large-scale conflicts, maintaining social stability was put on the agenda. During this period, provinces in China gradually launched a program to incorporate conflict-sensitive social impact assessment (CSSIA) into the public decision-making process to manage potential social risks and mitigate social conflicts (D. Zhu and Cao 2020). These studies not only introduced multiple substantive policy areas in China to the international academic community, but also engaged in a theoretical and empirical dialogue with international policy research.

During this period, there was a noticeable increase in studies employing well-established Western policy process theories to explain developments in China (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). Tsinghua University and Renmin University of China took the lead in introducing and translating a series of Western textbooks on public policy (Yang 2005; Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016). Regarding the stages heuristic, agenda-setting and public participation in the policy-making process

emerged as the two major themes. A typology of six agenda-setting models was proposed to explain the evolving policy orientations in China, and these changes in policy agendas prompted the transition from dominant economic policies to diverse social policies (S. Wang 2008). To promote scientific and democratic public decision-making, public participation in the policy-making process also drew the attention of both scholars and practitioners. As Chinese society became increasingly pluralistic, social elites and citizens were incorporated into the policy-making process (J. Ma and Lin 2012). Think tanks exerted more influence on the policy-making process. Semi-official think tanks influence policy primarily through their administrative ties to the government, while civilian think tanks exert influence mainly through experts' personal networks with government officials and their expertise in relevant policy fields (X. Zhu 2009). Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also played a role. For example, environmental NGOs engaged in the policy-making process via various forms of policy advocacy (Li, Lo, and Tang 2017). Environmentalist and NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) activists utilized the legislation authorized by the central government to pressure local officials to open participatory channels in the policy-making process (Johnson 2010). Although public participation was restricted by the Chinese government, it did grant citizens a certain degree of participatory rights in policy-making (Duckett and Wang 2013). The interaction between citizens and experts in the policy-making process was also discussed. A consensus between citizens and experts would promote the adoption of a public policy, whereas conflict between them could delay or even terminate a policy proposal (Cao 2019). Regarding theories of the policy process, scholars applied various theories, including Policy Diffusion and Innovation (PDI), Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), policy experimentation, and policy networks, to explain the Chinese policy process (see Figure 10). For example, a study of elder care in China suggests that policy diffusion in China is a political process (rather than a technocratic process) where local officials serve as policy entrepreneurs to adopt successful experimental policies from other places (Shi 2012). Policy isomorphism, the phenomenon that local governments tend to adopt similar or even identical policies, was used to illustrate policy diffusion in national development zones in Jiangsu province (Chien 2008). ACF was employed to analyze the policy change in hydropower projects by identifying two conflicting coalitions that held different policy beliefs and could mobilize different resources (Han, Swedlow, and Unger 2014). Another study shows that state agencies in China, facing forceful popular collective action, might advocate the interests of ordinary people even when such interests may conflict with state policies (X. Chen and Xu 2011). MSF was also employed and adapted to analyze the homelessness policy in China, where policy entrepreneurs (i.e., law scholars in this case) facilitated a policy change by proposing a “politically acceptable” but “technically infeasible” proposal to the central government (X. Zhu 2008). Policy experimentation was identified as one of the major sources of authoritarian resilience (Heilmann 2008; J. C. Teets and Hasmath 2020). One paper also introduced three statistical analysis methods—quadratic assignment procedures, exponential random graph models (ERGMs), and stochastic actor-oriented models—for analyzing policy networks (Robins, Lewis, and Wang 2012). The application of policy network theory was also examined in China’s urban health insurance policy changes (H. Zheng, De Jong, and Koppenjan 2010).

Compared with the germination phase, research methods during the burgeoning phase witnessed a remarkable increase in empirical research, especially case studies, surveys, or interviews,

descriptive statistics, and correlational studies with inferential statistics²¹ (see Figure 12). Recognizing the lag in research methods compared to international policy studies, Chinese scholars began emphasizing the updating and improvement of research methods in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first Chinese textbook on research methods in public affairs, *Introduction to Research Methods in Public Management*²², was published in 2006 (Jiannan Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016). Research methods courses were gradually incorporated into the curriculum of public administration, public policy, and public management. In the summer of 2006, the Center for Social Research at Peking University hosted its inaugural Summer Workshop on Quantitative Research Methods in Social Sciences. The workshop, initiated and led by Yu Xie, a Chinese-American sociologist, aimed to train scholars from various Chinese universities. It should be noted, however, that the research methods were far from mature during this period, although noticeable progress was made in promoting empirical research. The lack of methodological rigor and depth underscored the need for continued methodological advancement to bridge the gap with international standards in policy studies (Powers and Xie 2008).

The Normalization Phase (2013 to 2022)

During the normalization phase, macro policies in China experienced major shifts towards more stringent environmental regulation, more commitment to climate change, political centralization, and corruption crackdown. As a result, environmental and energy policies experienced a noticeable increase in publications. Social policies, particularly those focusing on anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, education, and public health, also maintained significant prominence. In contrast, publications on policies related to economic growth declined (see Figure 9).

Policy studies in China became more normalized and standardized in terms of theories and methods, as elaborated below based on our dataset.

Regarding policy process theories, PDI had the highest number of publications (see Figure 10). Three orientations emerged regarding policy studies in China employing PDI. The first orientation focuses on the effect of hierarchical structure on policy diffusion and innovation. Scholars identified three major types of innovation in the Chinese public sector, namely management, service, and collaborative innovation, and showed that local governments in eastern China were more innovative than their counterparts in central and western China (Jiannan Wu, Ma, and Yang 2013). Empirical research also shows that the multiple mechanisms of horizontal learning, imitation, and vertical top-down coercion could coexist in China (Zhang and Zhu 2019). The effect of China's central-provincial-city hierarchical structure on the diffusion of innovation was also explored by examining the diffusion of pro-business administrative licensing centers, indicating that the combined intervention from both central and

²¹ Please be aware that this is for Chinese scholars' international publications. For their domestic publications, research methods were still mainly descriptive with words and/or graphs, and case studies. Correlational studies with statistical models were still rare for domestic publications during this phase.

²² Wu, Jiannan. *Introduction to Research Methods in Public Management* (in Chinese). Beijing: China Science Publishing & Media, 2006. Please note that Public Management in this context is equivalent to Public Administration in the Western context. It was translated in this way by early Chinese scholars because Public Administration was separated from Political Science and placed under Management by the Ministry of Education in China.

provincial governments might disincentivize innovation adoption by city governments (X. Zhu and Zhang 2019; Zhang and Zhu 2020). The second body of PDI literature explores how local officials can facilitate policy diffusion and/or policy innovation. For example, employing the case of contracting out elder care, one study argues that in authoritarian regimes like China, local officials serve as policy entrepreneurs rather than technocratic ones to adopt successful policy experiments (J. C. Teets 2016). Policymakers with innovative personalities tend to promote local policy innovation even though institutional factors discourage innovation (Lewis, Teets, and Hasmath 2022). Local officials made innovation adoption decisions on an “economic” basis without central authority, whereas they made such decisions on a “political” basis when the central government intervened, driven by concerns about personal political mobility (X. Zhu and Zhang 2016). Geographical career mobility of policy entrepreneurs (i.e., local leaders) can facilitate policy transfer and stimulate regional isomorphism in multiple policy areas (X. Zhu 2018; X. Zhu and Meng 2020). Site visits by local officials to other jurisdictions were also shown to promote inter-city policy learning in policy areas such as public bicycle programs and new energy vehicles’ finance (L. Ma 2017; W. Liu et al. 2024). The third group of articles explores policy diffusion and policy innovation from a network perspective. An Agent Network Diffusion model was proposed to explain how leadership transfer networks could potentially channel performance innovation for energy governance (Yi, Berry, and Chen 2018). Leadership transfer networks through indirect network connections are also shown to promote policy diffusion of local financial subsidiary policies for new energy vehicles (W. Liu and Yi 2023). Connections embedded in the designed networks are also shown to facilitate the emergence of self-organizing networks in inter-local learning (Yi, Liu, and Ma 2024).

Studies on China’s policy experimentation also continued to draw the attention of scholars. With three cases of local technology zones in China, the authors argue that besides top-down “experimentation under the shadow of hierarchy”, bottom-up local innovations through policy experimentation can be effectively fed back into national policy adjustments and horizontal policy diffusion (Heilmann, Shih, and Hofem 2013). Confronted with intensifying climate change, China adopted a quasi-federalist system, featuring centralized decision-making, supervision, and evaluation, coupled with decentralized implementation, to allow local governments to experiment with diverse policy solutions to reduce carbon dioxide (Yi and Cao 2023). Regional low-carbon pilot schemes combined with a national target were also found to foster local policy experimentation (Zhao, Zhu, and Qi 2016). However, in the later years of this period, policy experimentation notably declined as the central government’s authority increased, discouraging local innovations (J. C. Teets and Hasmath 2020). This would probably reduce the flexibility of China’s multi-level governance structure (J. C. Teets, Hasmath, and Lewis 2017). Some Chinese scholars proposed new frameworks tailored to the Chinese context. For example, one study proposes a framework of Chinese-style experimentalist governance with interactive central-local relations and identifies three new patterns of experimentalist governance in China, illustrated by four pension policies (X. Zhu and Zhao 2021). A second study identifies four distinct mechanisms of experimentation in a multi-level governance structure by analyzing China’s public hospital reform (A. J. He, Fan, and Su 2022). A third study proposes a model of “truncated decision-making process” to offer a new perspective that policy experimentation might fall short in explaining policy design and implementation in China (Xue and Zhao 2020). This model argues that, facing rapid social changes, upper governments in China make decisions quickly in a truncated or compressed manner and then allow further deliberation and adjustment

among lower governments during implementation. However, these frameworks or models tend to be case-specific and offer limited evaluation of their outcomes.

ACF also gained prominence in China's policy studies. An analysis of 81 applications of ACF in China between 2006 and 2017 finds that ACF's core hypotheses, which have been intensively tested in Western contexts, are also confirmed in China's authoritarian context (W. Li and Weible 2021). Meanwhile, some unexpected findings emerged. Even in an authoritarian setting like China, competing coalitions and bottom-up advocacy exist, and policy-oriented learning could happen both within coalitions and across coalitions (W. Li and Weible 2021). ACF was employed or tested in multiple policy areas in China, such as birth control (W. Li and Wong 2020), hydropower projects (Han, Swedlow, and Unger 2014), air pollution (Wong 2016), environmental NGOs (X. Zhan and Tang 2013; 2016; Li, Lo, and Tang 2017), and climate policy (Aamodt and Stensdal 2017). These changes, to a certain degree, might suggest that the Chinese policy process became more open and contentious (W. Li and Weible 2021).

Similar to ACF, PET was also increasingly employed or tested in the Chinese context during this phase in areas such as fiscal management and expenditure (Xiao, Wang, and Liu 2020; Yao, Zhu, and Yu 2021), E-government (Meng and Fan 2022), and rural land policy (Dou and Liu 2020). Two scholars conducted a systematic review of 88 Chinese-language PET journal articles, finding that although these studies confirmed a punctuated equilibrium pattern in Chinese policy changes, they offered limited evidence for more intense punctuations in China, and most of them are qualitative with weak operationalization of core PET concepts (van den Dool and Li 2023). However, there are conflicting findings on whether policy changes in China are more intensely punctuated than in Western democracies. One study shows that policy changes in China's regional governments are more intensely punctuated, likely because authoritarian institutions tend to allocate attention to "known problems", thereby neglecting emerging issues (Chan and Zhao 2016). A second study indicates that national policy agendas in China are also more intensely punctuated (Qin and Huang 2024). In contrast, another study finds that macro policy agendas at the national level are less intensely punctuated due to the absence of party competition and power balance (Yan, Yang, and Yuan 2022).

Policy networks, as a complement to formal bureaucratic structures, were also explored to explain the dynamics of local governance and inter-local collaboration. Three methods for measuring policy networks—hyperlink, media, and partnership networks—were proposed to reduce measurement biases and save time and resources for observing policy networks that are difficult to measure (Yi and Scholz 2016). Policy networks were extensively employed, especially in environmental policy, such as the water governance networks in local China (Huang et al. 2017; 2020; Yi et al. 2019), intergovernmental collaboration networks in atmospheric governance (Suo, Li, and Cao 2023), environmental collaboration agreements in Chinese cities (Yi et al. 2018), and inter-provincial collaboration in multiple policy areas (B. Chen et al. 2019). One study also examines how civil society organizations in China prompt environmental policy changes by creating policy networks among government officials (J. Teets 2018).

MSF and PFT were much less studied in the Chinese context. A few examples include articles employing MSF to analyze the live poultry sales policy (van den Dool 2023) and marine policy

(Wan, Chen, and Sperling 2018), and PFT to analyze the welfare reforms in China (A. J. He, Zhu, and Qian 2024).

All these studies not only expanded the application of major theories of the policy process but also provided more empirical evidence to modify, enrich, and refine these theories.

Research methods during this period became more diversified, with a noticeable increase in correlational studies and causal inference (see Figure 12). More Chinese universities also started organizing various summer workshops on social science research methods with an emphasis on quantitative techniques. The advancement of methods led to more policy analysis studies, covering areas of wind power (T. Tang and Popp 2016), water quality regulations (G. He, Wang, and Zhang 2020), environmental tax (P. He and Zhang 2018), electric vehicles (S. Li et al. 2022), housing markets (Chu et al. 2019), energy regulation (Jianxian Wu, Nie, and Wang 2024), environmental NGOs' monitoring of corporate compliance (Y. Tang et al. 2024), education (H. Wang et al. 2016; Canaan, Mouganie, and Zhang 2024), and social health insurance (Shen et al. 2024).

The normalization and standardization of policy research during this period called for higher-quality policy studies. This is probably why the number of publications during this period decreased slightly but remained relatively stable (see Figure 3 and Figure 4), reflecting a tendency towards quality over quantity.

The Transformation Phase (2023 to present)

As mentioned above in the evolution of the four distinct phases, the transformation phase has just started. Therefore, with a limited number of publications, we refrain from making any concluding remarks for this period. However, the data does reveal some emerging patterns.

Confronted with domestic conundrums (e.g., stagnant economy, high unemployment rate, low birth rates, and an aging population) and international challenges (e.g., regional wars, trade disputes, climate change, and public health crises), China has constantly shifted its macro agendas. National security has been prioritized over economic growth, leading to a decreased number of publications on economic development (see Figure 9). However, with China's increasing investment in AI and renewable energy, it can be expected that publications on how AI and renewable energy are transforming China's economy will be on the rise. Faced with major policy changes that need scientific evidence, policy studies are paying more attention to policy evaluation (see Figure 11). Regarding theories of the policy process, the application of well-established Western theories seems to be decreasing (see Figure 10). This might be biased due to the limited number of publications in this period. It may also relate to the political and academic call to build an independent and indigenous knowledge system to better serve China. However, it is still highly contested and remains to be seen whether the localization of policy knowledge can foster theoretical innovation and address domestic issues more effectively. As for methodological approaches, the application of causal inference methods is on the rise (see Figure 12), narrowing the methodological gap with the international policy research community.

Patterns are still emerging for this phase. More publications in the coming years are needed to revisit this phase.

Disconnection between Policy Process and Policy Analysis

A persistent disconnection exists between the fields of policy process research and policy analysis. This divide is reflected in their differing theoretical orientations and methodological preferences. While policy process research tends to emphasize theory-driven explanations of how policies are formulated and implemented, policy analysis is more concerned with evaluating policy outcomes using a reliable identification strategy. These discrepancies have led to limited intellectual exchange between the two domains.

Evidence from our dataset further illustrates this separation. Among the 203 articles cited by *PSJ*, only 6.9% (14 articles) are from policy analysis journals. Conversely, of the 101 articles cited by *JPAM*, only 5.9% (6 articles) are from policy process journals. However, even this latter figure likely overstates the actual level of engagement, as many of these policy analysis articles do not apply theoretical frameworks from the policy process literature; instead, they only reference the terms superficially.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we traced the evolution of policy studies in China over the past fifty years, offering both a historical and empirical account of its development. By proposing a time-based and multifaceted framework, we categorized the field's growth into four distinct phases: germination, burgeoning, normalization, and transformation. We examined each phase in relation to its historical context, disciplinary development, policy research, and engagement with the international scholarly community. Using an original dataset of 347 journal articles, we further identified key trends in publication patterns, policy areas, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches that characterize the trajectory of the field. Taken together, our analysis demonstrates that policy studies in China have matured into an increasingly sophisticated and globally connected discipline, while also revealing persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for advancing its theoretical depth, empirical rigor, and international relevance.

We show that the remarkable evolution of policy studies in China over the past half-century was driven by the ever-changing dynamics of both domestic and international environments. Significant progress has been made by scholars and practitioners, both within China and abroad, in terms of disciplinary development, policy research, and international academic exchanges. Policy studies in China have made theoretical contributions by confirming, enriching, or modifying mainstream theories of the policy process, and empirical contributions by documenting substantial empirical evidence from China.

Based on our review, we would also like to identify several challenges and propose potential opportunities to advance Chinese policy studies.

First, one important challenge that China policy studies face is the excessively close connection between policy research and real-world politics. As illustrated in the empirical analysis, policy studies in China have been closely intertwined with the country's broader political and economic dynamics. On the one hand, the strong political influence of policy scholarship in China might make it challenging for policy scholars to conduct independent research, especially in those areas that might be considered politically sensitive (W. Li and Weible 2021). On the other hand, domestic research tends to pursue trending political topics for quicker publication, often at the expense of more fundamental theoretical studies.

The second challenge lies in the tension between internationalization and localization, as well as between theory and practice. Although Chinese policy scholars have made considerable progress in publishing internationally, challenges remain in broadening the scope of research questions and advancing theoretical innovation. Furthermore, the recent call to “construct an independent knowledge system” during the transformation phase has reignited debates over the balance between internationalization and localization. This issue is also closely linked to the broader debates on whether policy research should prioritize the development of universal policy theories or seek policy solutions that are practical and applicable to real-world policy problems. Notably, this is not a challenge unique to Chinese policy research; it echoes the long-standing debate within the global policy studies community over “theories of the policy process” and “theories in the policy process” (Weimer 2008).

The third challenge lies in the gap between policy process theories and policy analysis. Since Harold Lasswell proposed the concept of “policy sciences”, policy research has gradually developed into two distinct camps: theories of the policy process and policy analysis. Scholars working in the former strand often lack the technical tools necessary for conducting applied policy analysis, while those in the latter typically have limited exposure to systematic training in policy process theories. This divide has led to limited academic exchanges between the two camps. Although we did not conduct a comprehensive analysis on this, a cursory review of our database reveals that papers on policy process theories and policy analysis rarely cite each other. While this issue also exists in the international policy community, it appears to be more pronounced in Chinese policy research.

The fourth challenge concerns the limited integration of law into policy studies. The separation of law from public policy largely stems from historical disciplinary boundaries. Yet, it is important to recognize that legislative and judicial institutions often shape and heavily influence public administration and policymaking (Rosenbloom, Kravchuk, and Clerkin 2022). While this issue is not unique to Chinese policy research either, it appears more pronounced in an authoritarian context like China, where the absence of legal authority in the policy adoption process can further weaken law-based enforcement mechanisms (Kostka and Zhang 2018).

Despite these challenges, there are promising opportunities for advancing policy studies in China.

Within the scope of our knowledge, we tentatively propose two potential opportunities that might advance policy studies in China. One opportunity lies in developing universal principles or theories grounded in local contexts. Over the past half-century, China has experienced profound

transformations and implemented a wide range of public policies, providing scholars with a rich array of cases. Beyond applying and testing Western policy process theories in Chinese contexts, Chinese scholars are also expected to develop original theories based on China's contexts that might be applied to the West and the Global South. Achieving this goal would require more comparative policy studies and collaborative research, which could serve as a transitional pathway towards proposing original and broadly applicable theories. This opportunity is especially important in addressing the second and third challenges above.

A second opportunity involves fostering broader and deeper academic exchanges and collaborations through domestic and international research platforms. As this review shows, Chinese scholars have established platforms such as CPSG and CAAPA to connect researchers within China and abroad. Moreover, these platforms have initiated greater interactions with international associations such as APSA, APPAM, ASPA, and leading policy studies journals. By leveraging these platforms, Chinese scholars can facilitate more international exchanges and collaborations – through methodological training, research collaboration, and network building, all of which collectively help strengthen an independent academic community and foster mutual understanding across countries with different political regimes.

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