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Регионоведение и современные российские исследования в КНР: парадигма и развитие

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Аннотация. Работы, посвящённые России, являются важным компонентом исследований китайских регионоведов. В статье рассматриваются существующие подходы к изучению России, обобщаются фундаментальные точки зрения и текущие проблемы в рамках исследований Китая в этой области, а также анализируется прогресс, вызовы и потенциальные направления дальнейшего изучения страны. Авторы отмечают, что в исследованиях России доминируют вестернизм и нативизм. Вестернистская парадигма предлагает рассматривать изменения в политике, экономике и дипломатии России через призму развития западной цивилизации, в то время как нативистская парадигма основана на понимании особой исторической траектории страны. Ключевая задача сообщества китайских русистов заключается в том, чтобы выйти за рамки этих парадигм. После окончания холодной войны исследования Китая в области русистики достигли заметного прогресса, включая формирование академического сообщества, разработку программ прикладных исследований, попытки междисциплинарной интеграции и внедрения инновационных парадигм. Дальнейшие задачи включают усиление экономических исследований, расширение анализа на субнациональном уровне, а также более тщательное изучение и отслеживание российского общественного мнения. Ключевые направления развития предполагают диверсификацию тем, поощрение полевых исследований, усиление внимания к количественным методам и, в конечном счёте, создание системы «российских исследований» с китайской спецификой, как с академической, так и дисциплинарной точек зрения.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Россия, российские исследования, русистика, вестернизм, нативизм.

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Area studies and contemporary China's research on Russian affairs: paradigm and development

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Abstract. Research on Russian affairs constitutes a significant component of China's international studies. This article examines existing perspectives in Russian studies, summarizes fundamental viewpoints and prevailing issues within China's current research on Russian affairs, and analyzes the progress, challenges and potential future directions of this research. Globally, the dominant paradigms in Russian studies are Westernism and Nativism. The Westernist paradigm advocates examining changes in Russia's politics, economy and foreign policy through the lens of Western civilizational development, whereas the Nativist paradigm is grounded in an understanding of Russia's distinct historical trajectory. A key challenge for China's Russian studies community lies in transcending these two paradigms. Since the end of the Cold War, China's research on Russia has achieved notable progress, including the formation of a stable academic community, the establishment of application-oriented research agendas and initial attempts at interdisciplinary integration and paradigm innovation. However, future challenges include strengthening economic research, expanding the subnational-level analysis, and enhancing the study and tracking of Russian public opinion. The key future directions for development include promoting the diversification of research topics, encouraging fieldwork, enhancing the focus on quantitative methods, and ultimately aiming to establish a "Russian Studies" framework with Chinese characteristics, both in terms of academic content and disciplinary methods.

Keywords: China, Russia, Russian affairs, Russian studies, Westernism, Nativism.

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Introduction

Area studies has emerged as a new first-level interdisciplinary field in China, and its establishment holds significant importance for the Chinese academic community in addressing real-world international challenges and constructing an international research paradigm with Chinese characteristics. Research on Russian affairs represents both a key focus within area studies and a strategically vital research direction. As China's largest neighbor, Russia's political, diplomatic, and societal developments profoundly impact the PRC's national interests and regional security

environment. Thus, in-depth research on Russia should remain a priority in China's area studies discipline.

Historically, China and Russia share a complex and intertwined relationship. Over four centuries of bilateral relations, Russia has exerted comprehensive and profound influence on Chinese security, development, institutions, culture, and even modes of thinking, consistently occupying a pivotal position in its foreign strategy [Feng Yujun 2021]. Particularly since the early 20th century, the Soviet Union and later Russia have been among the most consequential external forces shaping China's developmental path. The late 20th-century upheavals in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's collapse dramatically altered the PRC's international and regional security landscape. Indeed, at every critical juncture in China's modernization, Russia has served as a decisive external variable influencing the country's political, diplomatic, and security trajectory.

In the 21st century, Russia, a major power sharing over 4,300 km of border with China, is undergoing another transformative phase, accelerated dramatically by the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's transition has entered a new stage of "re-transformation", the outcomes of which will profoundly impact global politics, the world economy, and the international system. As China advances its national rejuvenation, area studies must deepen its examination of contemporary Russian affairs to provide intellectual support for Chinese modernization. Central to this effort is developing Russian studies with Chinese characteristics while clarifying its core research questions and developmental directions.

From a global perspective, current international research on Russian affairs remains dominated by the two paradigms: the Westernist paradigm and the Nativist paradigm [Tsygankov 2014]. They hold vastly different and often fundamentally opposing views on the Russian civilization, its development path and key issues such as its politics, economy, and society. Moreover, they differ significantly in both focal concerns and analytical approaches. The fundamental task of China's research on Russian affairs is, without doubt, to build upon these two paradigms and develop a distinctly Chinese paradigm of "Russia Studies" rooted in the framework of area studies. This paradigm should be capable of explaining contemporary Russian political, economic and social issues – and their implications for China – from a broader perspective. Ultimately, it aims to contribute universally applicable area-based knowledge on Russia to the global international studies community.

This article examines existing perspectives in Russian studies, synthesizes prevailing viewpoints and their limitations, and analyzes the progress, challenges and future pathways for China's Russian studies within the framework of area studies.

Key perspectives on Russian studies within the framework of area studies

The origins of the Russian civilization can be traced to the East Slavs of the Eastern European steppes, with the mixed-ethnic Rus' people serving as the common ancestors of modern Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians [Zhao 2022]. From the first East Slavic state of Kievan Rus' on the Dnieper River to the Mongol-conquered Golden Horde, the Grand Duchy of Moscow that emerged after throwing off Mongol rule, Peter the Great's Russian Empire, and eventually the Soviet Union shaped by Marxist ideology in the 20th century, the Russian civilization has developed through distinct phases marked by both the discontinuity and the cultural integration. The discontinuity reflects how Russia's civilizational trajectory has been repeatedly reshaped by external non-Slavic influences, particularly from Europe [Gu 2010: 131]. Two pivotal historical moments exemplify

this: the Christianization of Rus' (988 CE), when Prince Vladimir adopted Eastern Orthodoxy as the state religion of Kievan Rus', and the early 18th-century reforms initiated by Peter the Great, which launched Russia's modernization. These events fundamentally defined Russia's civilizational identity. Moreover, Russia's evolving position in the international system has been inextricably linked to its relations with the West. Its transformation from an Eastern European state to a major European power was cemented by its victory against Napoleon's invasion in 1812. Napoleon's invasion in 1812 positioned Russia as the core force of the European coalition against France, and its triumph significantly elevated its influence in European affairs. The Congress of Vienna and the ensuing Vienna System largely reflected the dominance of conservative powers led by Russia. Tsar Alexander I, bolstered by Russia's victory in the Napoleonic Wars, emerged as a central figure at the Congress [Riasanovsky 1977: 9]. Post-Vienna Russia became deeply enmeshed in European politics. By the mid-19th century, its extensive interventions in revolutionary movements across the continent earned it the moniker the "Gendarme of Europe". Although its defeat in the Crimean War (1853–1856) curtailed its European reach, Russia remained a decisive force in shaping the continent's alliance systems and international relations [Danilevsky 1991: 74–120]. The Great Game between Britain and Russia in the late 19th century not only redefined European geopolitics but also profoundly influenced global dynamics, especially in the evolving dynamics of East Asia [Feng Yujun 2021]. Entering the 20th century, Russia's influence in international relations rose once again with the victory of the October Revolution and the emergence of the Soviet Union. This resurgence was driven, on one hand, by the global ideological appeal of socialism, which the Soviet Union came to embody; on the other hand, it was solidified by the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) against fascist Germany. This triumph elevated the Soviet Union's international standing beyond that of traditional European powers such as France, the United Kingdom and Germany, positioning it alongside the United States as a superpower. This transformation laid the foundation for Russia's current role in the global geopolitical and economic system [Bi 2009: 46]. Thus, Russia's international standing over the past three centuries has been fundamentally tied to its Western engagements. Its modernization began with Peter's Westernizing reforms, and its great-power status emerged through political and military contests with Western powers. This explains why the Westernist paradigm remains indispensable in analyzing Russian affairs.

Fundamentally, the Westernist paradigm examines changes in Russia's politics, economy, and foreign affairs through the lens of Western civilization's development. As scholars like Andrei Tsygankov have observed, Westernists do not merely view Russia from a Western perspective, they fundamentally regard it as culturally, historically and institutionally inferior to Western nations. Westernists maintain that Russia has pursued an unreliable historical trajectory, one that either deviates from proper development models or actively threatens Western interests and values [Tsygankov 2014]. The contemporary Westernist paradigm in analyzing Russian issues primarily encompasses three aspects. First, it adopts a critical perspective toward Russia's historical development path since modern times, viewing it as alienated and backward compared to the Western social civilization, political democracy and economic advancement. Scholars such as the Marquis de Custine in the 1830s and Richard Pipes in the 1970s represent this view. In his seminal work "Russia Under the Old Regime", Richard Pipes defined Russia as a "patrimonial state", characterizing its system as lacking rule of law and individual freedoms while maintaining highly efficient political, economic, and military structures [Pipes 2012]. Second, Westernist perspectives

are not unified internally and have diverged into two distinct forms: liberals and conservatives. Influenced by religious traditions and conservative ideologies, the conservatives place greater emphasis on Russia's historical uniqueness compared to the liberals within the Westernist camp. While conservatives similarly acknowledge that Russia's developmental path and values may pose a threat to Western nations, they believe Russia can reduce the possibility of conflict with the West through gradual reforms. Conservatives also tend to recognize the distinctive value of Russia's civilizational development, arguing that Russia could integrate into the Western-centered "international community" by improving its governance model. Third, the Westernist paradigm's most notable influence on Russia manifests in the "Atlanticism" geopolitical ideology within Russia itself. Atlanticism aims to facilitate Russia's rapid integration into Europe and Western society, both geopolitically and ideologically, to become "a member of the Western community". During the early Yeltsin administration, Atlanticism reached its peak prominence. The prominent Atlanticist Yegor Gaidar published "The State and Evolution" in the early 1990s, arguing that adopting the Western civilization as represented by Europe was the only viable path for Russia's national strength. Gaidar contended that throughout its historical development, Russia had only mechanically adopted Western knowledge and technology without genuinely embracing Western social structures and political thought, forcing it to perpetually play historical catch-up. Only by fully accepting Western political, economic and cultural ideals Russia could "shed its centuries-old layers of peculiarities" and truly become part of the Western society. Contemporary Russian Atlanticists maintain that the post-Cold War model of "democratic politics + market economy", centered around the United States, possesses considerable stability and reliability as the sole viable path for Russia's future development. Russia should therefore persist with this objective and adapt its domestic and foreign policies to facilitate integration into Western political, economic and military frameworks.

In opposition to the Westernist paradigm stands another approach to studying Russia – the Nativist paradigm. This perspective originates from an understanding of Russia's unique historical development path. Russia's history represents a process of interaction and integration between multiple civilizations, incorporating not only strong Western influences but also elements from Asian and Islamic cultures. Geographically positioned at the boundary between Eastern and Western civilizations, Russian culture developed as a distinct formation, one based primarily on Slavic traditions while systematically absorbing European, Islamic, Jewish, and East Asian influences. This composite civilization exhibits characteristics of Western rationalism and abstract thought alongside Eastern contemplative traditions and mysticism, while also adopting Western-style market economies and political systems [Gumilev 2007]. This process of absorbing and synthesizing multiple civilizations has endowed Russian culture with the profound complexity and diversity. Consequently, this geopolitical characteristic has made the examination of cross-civilizational exchanges and connections another central focus in Russian intellectual history. Early Russian geopolitical theories emerged largely from studying this unique civilizational identity, including Nikolay Danilevsky's and Konstantin Leontiev's works on Slavophilism, as well as Pyotr Savitsky's and Lev Gumilev's Eurasianism theories. Gumilev and other Eurasianist scholars particularly emphasized the significant impact of Eastern civilizations on Russia's historical development, arguing that Asian influences played a crucial role in forming a unified Russian state [Petrov 2008].

From an overall perspective, research on Russian affairs under the Nativist paradigm mainly encompasses three aspects. First, it emphasizes that the study of Russia must begin with understanding the endogenous development process of Russian civilization, rather than strictly following Westernist analytical approaches. The partial rejection by Russian scholars of the comparative analysis approach is implicit in this view. They argue that understanding Russia should begin internally, rather than by making direct comparisons with the development of other countries. Therefore, Nativist scholars are less critical in their analysis of Russia's institutional changes. Numerous Russian scholars, including Western ones such as Richard Sakwa, believe that the elements of authoritarian politics in Russia's historical tradition have played a role in overcoming party biases, mobilizing resources for long-term development, and achieving compatibility with Western democratic systems. Second, the Nativist paradigm encompasses several ideological factions, including Slavophilism, Populism, and Eurasianism. Among these, the Slavophile school maintains a particularly critical stance toward the Western world while emphasizing Russian (Slavic) ethnic and religious characteristics, advocating the preservation rather than abandonment of Slavic historical traditions. In international relations, deeply influenced by the Eastern Orthodox thought, the Slavophile school calls for uniting Slavic peoples to form alliances protecting Russian and Slavic interests¹. They argue Russia should not strategically align with the West but should instead pursue unique national interests grounded in its history. On the other hand, the Eurasian school emphasizes Russia's unique "Eurasian characteristics" from a geographical standpoint. It strongly critiques idealistic Atlanticism, while simultaneously rejecting radical nationalism and Pan-Slavism². The Eurasian school argues that Russia should carve out a path between the European and Asian civilizations that reflects its own distinct values through the "Eurasian civilization" and the "Eurasian way". Third, the Nativist paradigm offers a strong explanatory framework for understanding Russia's development trajectory in the 21st century. Nativists advocate for the "great power" strategy, which seeks to achieve development while maintaining Russia's strong national authority and asserting its independent geopolitical influence across Eurasia. This viewpoint is frequently echoed in President Putin's speeches, where he emphasizes: "Our country and its institutions have always played an extraordinarily important role in the lives of the state and its people". For Russians, a strong state is not something to be eliminated. On the contrary, they believe that a strong state is necessary to establish and maintain order, and to initiate and drive change. This "great power" strategy represents a return to Russia's traditional developmental path and a fusion of Slavophilism and Eurasianism. Advocates of the great power ideology wield considerable influence within the Putin administration and represent the most mainstream political thought within contemporary Russian political and international relations academia [Ivanov 2001].

In summary, Westernism and Nativism are the two most important perspectives for studying Russian affairs within the scope of area studies on a global scale today. Although there are significant differences between the two in terms of theoretical perspectives, analytical methods, and

¹ Within the context of uniting Slavs, different Slavophile scholars hold varying views on the specific targets and scope of this unity.

² The stance of Neo-Eurasianism toward Neo-Slavism is complex, with different Eurasian scholars holding differing views. On the one hand, Neo-Eurasianism views the entire Eurasian continent as the main stage for its geopolitical strategy, rejecting the notion of confining Russia's geopolitical interests to the Slavic world, and critiques the nationalist views as detrimental to Russia's geopolitical interests. However, many Neo-Eurasian scholars, such as Aleksandr Dugin, are also influenced by Neo-Slavism, resulting in certain nationalist inclinations. Moreover, the critiques of Atlanticism by Neo-Slavism during the 1990s have facilitated the development of Neo-Eurasianist thought.

real-world impact, both paradigms have undeniably contributed to the development of Russian affairs research to varying degrees, each giving rise to distinctive analytical themes. In fact, research on Russian affairs within China's area studies field has been greatly influenced by these two perspectives. It has also incorporated contemporary China's diplomatic, economic, and social needs, forming a uniquely Chinese approach to the study of Russian affairs. The key challenge facing Chinese academia in the future will be how to transcend these two paradigms.

Development of contemporary China's research on Russian affairs from the perspective of area studies

Due to the profound influence of the Soviet Union on contemporary Chinese history and its surrounding environment, research on Russian affairs within the framework of area studies in China is essentially rooted in Soviet studies. Owing to the ideological and geographical proximity once shared between the two countries, China's research on Soviet issues achieved significant success in the past. This laid a solid foundation for the development of Russian affairs research in China after the end of the Cold War. With the emergence and establishment of area studies, contemporary Chinese research on Russian affairs now faces a new round of developmental opportunities. Area studies research is characterized by its cross-regional, interdisciplinary, and spatiotemporal dimensions, which undoubtedly play a crucial role in helping Chinese academia establish a research paradigm on Russian affairs that transcends both Westernism and Nativism.

Under the guidance of area studies, current Chinese research on Russian affairs mainly exhibits the following four characteristics.

First, the overall number of academic journal papers on Russian affairs has remained relatively stable. A search of literature on Russia in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) reveals that over the past decade (2013–2023), academic journal articles on Russia have totaled more than 48,000, with more than 5,000 articles published annually from 2014 to 2017. Although the number of publications has been impacted by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 3,000 papers have been published each year (as shown in Figure 1). Among these, articles published in Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals undoubtedly represent the core content of domestic academic research in this field. In recent years, the number of papers in the field of Russian studies has remained stable, with more than 500 papers published annually. This indicates that a relatively stable academic community has been established in the field of Russian affairs, producing steady academic contributions every year. The stability of this academic community is of immense importance to the development of Russian affairs research in China.

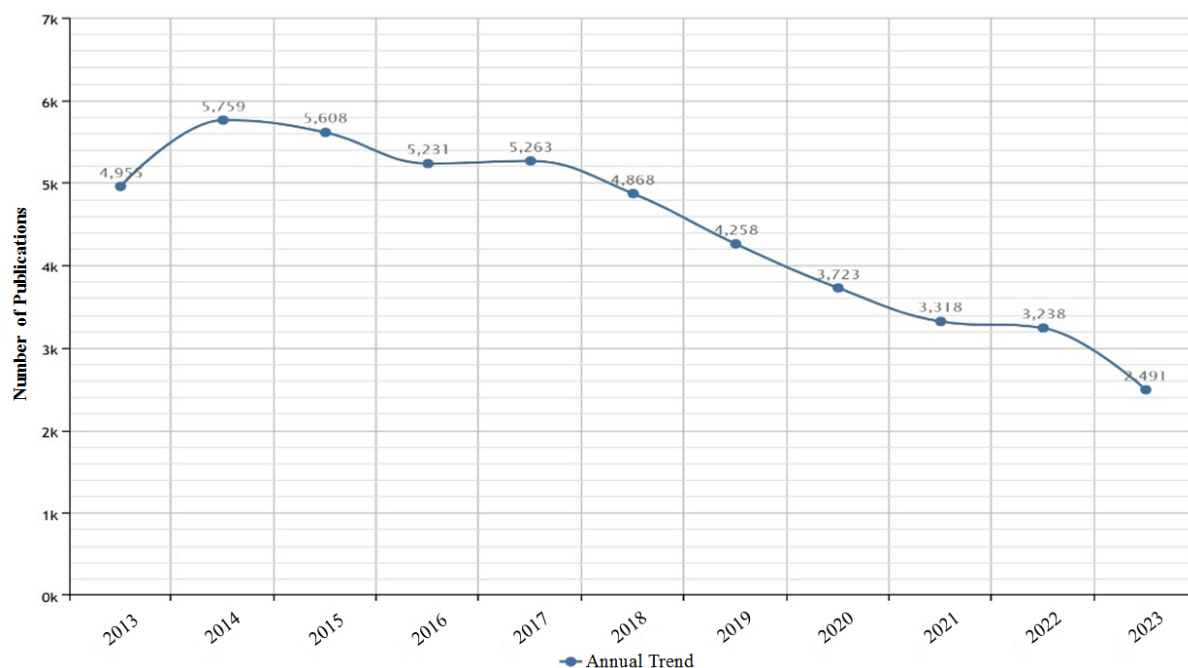


Figure 1. Publication trend on “Russian Studies” in CNKI from 2013 to 2023.

Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

At the same time, the relatively stable and distinctive academic journal construction is also one of the advantages of Russian studies within the field of area studies. Among the articles published in CSSCI academic journals, nearly 70% of the papers on Russian studies are published in four journals with the distinct area studies characteristics: “Russian and East European Studies”, “Russian Studies”, “The Russian Literature and Arts”, and “The Northeast Asia Forum”. The stable academic journal publication channels are an important support for the development of contemporary Chinese research on Russian affairs. In addition, due to the particularity of Soviet and Russian studies, the journals such as “Foreign Social Sciences”, “Foreign Theoretical Trends”, and “Contemporary World and Socialism” also serve as important platforms for publishing research on Russian affairs. As shown in Figure 3, from the perspective of the institutions of authors publishing in CSSCI journals, the development of Russian studies in China also demonstrates a clear regional characteristic. The main contributors to Russian studies in China are universities and research institutions in the northeastern region, Beijing and Shanghai. These regions form the core of the academic community in Russian studies. Universities and research institutions outside of these three regions have relatively low levels of participation in related research.

It is noteworthy that the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022 has had a profound impact on Russia’s development path, marking a significant historical turning point. Although overall statistics show a decline in the number of publications on Russian studies in China after 2022 (likely due to the substantial changes in the conditions and issues facing Russia), academic paper output in CSSCI journals has remained stable, with approximately 600 papers published annually (602 in 2021, 588 in 2022, and 593 in 2023). This indicates that the academic output of China’s research community on Russian affairs remains relatively stable, and the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has not caused significant shifts. Although the content and methods of research have changed, the overall stability of the research subject will undoubtedly contribute to the future development of Russian studies.

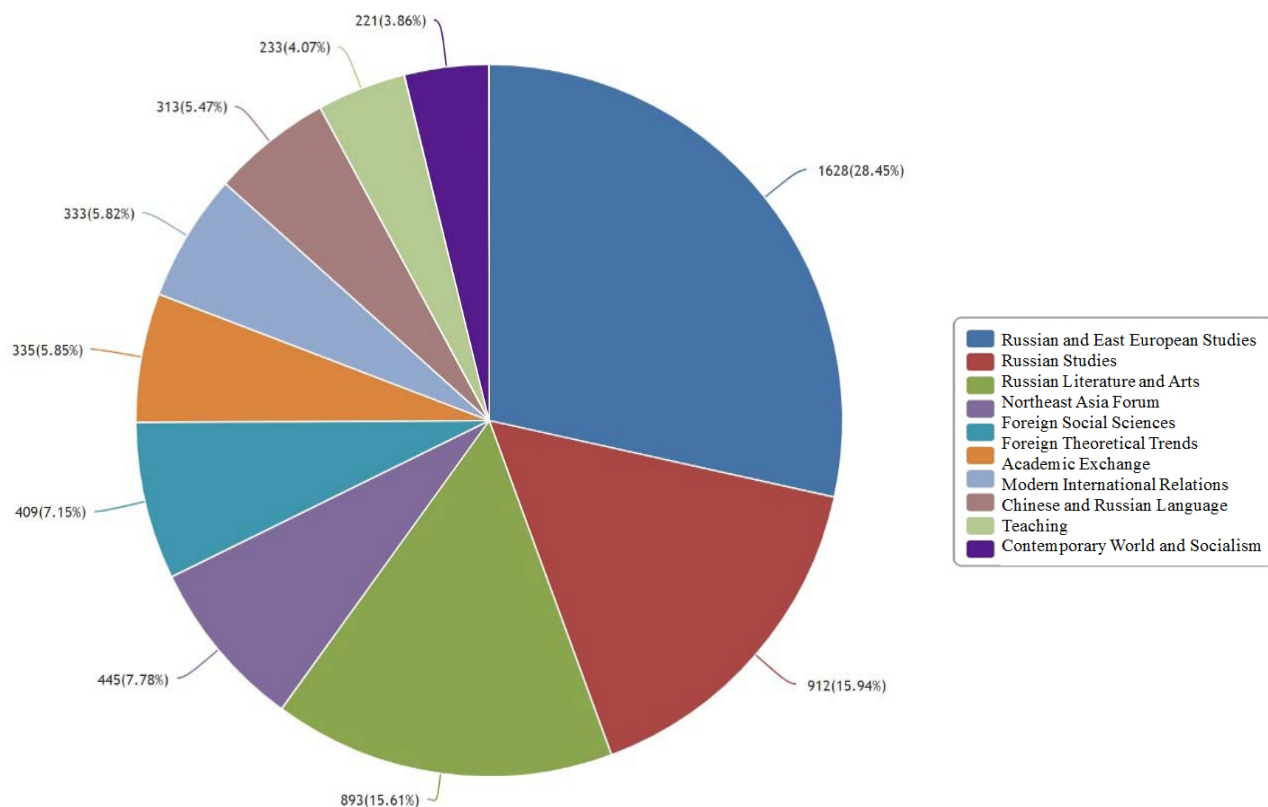


Figure 2. Distribution of CSSCI journal papers with “Russian Affairs Studies” as the main focus.

Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

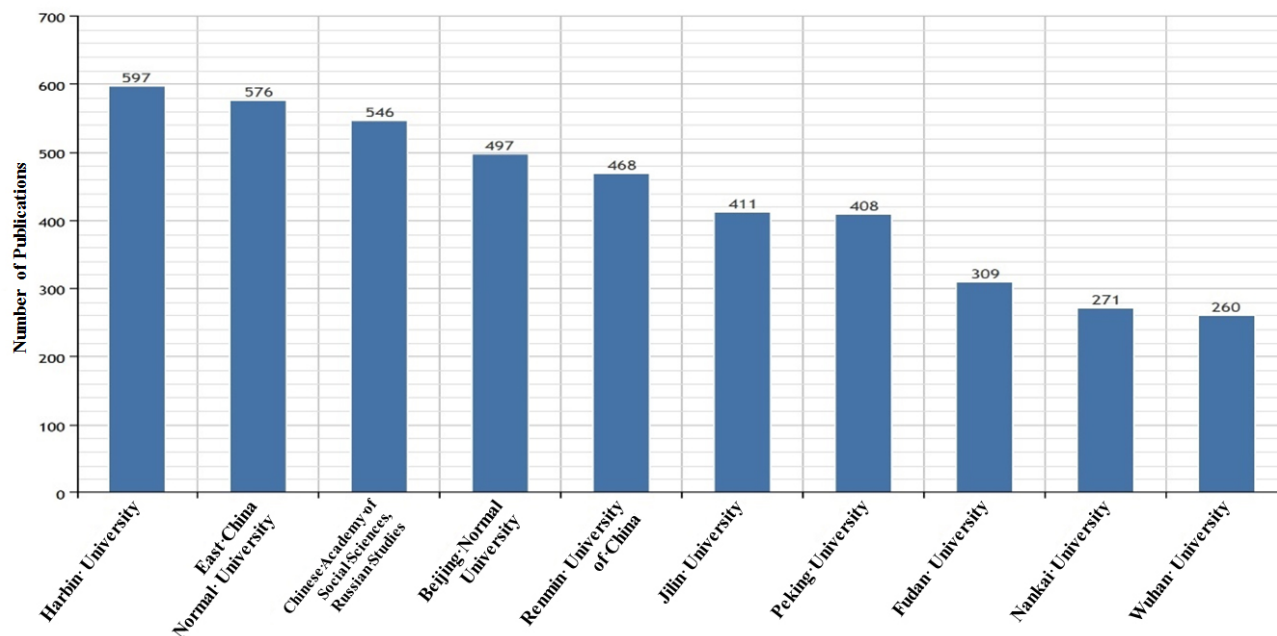


Figure 3. Institutions of authors publishing papers on Russian studies in CSSCI journals.

Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

Second, research on practical issues is the dominant direction of current Russian affairs studies in China's area studies field. A statistical analysis of articles published in three professional journals – "Russian and East European Studies", "Russian Studies Journal", and "Russian Studies" – reveals that out of 432 articles published in these journals, over 420 focus on practical issues. This indicates that contemporary Russian affairs research in China is still highly concerned with real-world problems. The focus on issues such as Russia's domestic political, economic and social realities, as well as their causes and trends, far outweighs the attention given to theoretical issues within Russian studies. On the one hand, this highlights the importance of Russian affairs research in the area studies field. The political, economic and diplomatic changes in Russia are closely linked to China's peaceful development and will undoubtedly have a significant impact on its foreign strategy, especially with the continued advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, the mainstream focus of current Russian affairs research is on these practical issues. On the other hand, this also reveals a noticeable gap in the theoretical and methodological development of Russian studies within China's academic community. Particularly as a significant progress has been made in area studies, the challenge now lies in how to extract valuable experiences and paradigms for the overall development of area studies through research on Russian issues. This is of crucial importance for the future development of Russian affairs research.

Third, interdisciplinary integration is an important characteristic of the development of Russian affairs research in China within the framework of area studies. Interdisciplinarity is a key feature that distinguishes area studies from other traditional humanities and social sciences, and it is also a primary goal of talent cultivation within the discipline. Due to Russia's status as a major power, along with its complex historical development and contemporary issues, the specific topics within China's research on Russian affairs are relatively complex. As shown in Figure 4, from the disciplinary distribution of papers published in CSSCI journals, although political and diplomatic issues remain the mainstream focus of Russian affairs research, the scope of domestic Russian studies has expanded to include nearly all major topics in the humanities and social sciences, including politics, economics, society, history, education, culture, and law, thereby forming a relatively comprehensive interdisciplinary system. This development is partly the result of the academic foundation laid by China's Soviet studies, and partly due to the continued growth of China's Russian studies academic community since the 1990s. The emergence of an interdisciplinary approach is beneficial for the future development of a uniquely Chinese "Russian Studies" within the domestic area studies field, and it has significant positive implications for constructing regional studies that reflect China's characteristics.

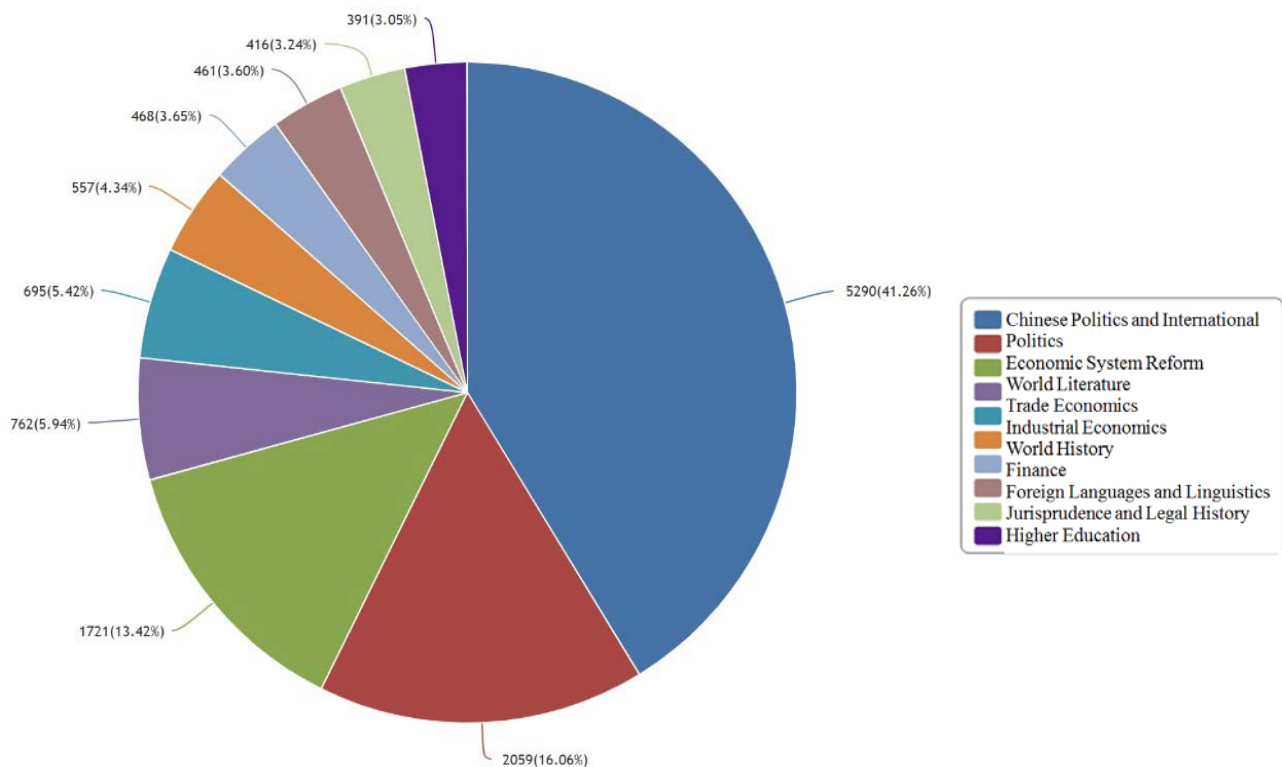


Figure 4. Major disciplines involved in academic papers on Russian studies published in CSSCI journals.

Source: China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI).

Fourth, Chinese scholars of Russian affairs attempt to establish academic content in certain areas that goes beyond traditional paradigms such as Westernism and Nativism, aiming to develop a Russian affairs research framework with Chinese characteristics. Professor Feng Yujun points out that China's academic community on Soviet and Russian issues not only needs to continue consolidating and deepening exchanges with Russian scholars but must also strengthen communication with researchers from other countries. Chinese scholars should strive to secure a place in the international Slavic academic community and observe the multifaceted Russia through multiple lenses [Feng Yujun 2021]. Therefore, understanding diverse Russian research paradigms and expanding new perspectives in domestic Russian affairs research has become a key challenge that must be addressed within the framework of area studies in China. In recent years, more scholars have started to introduce and apply new research paradigms and perspectives. For example, from 2011 to 2016, "Russian Studies" published six articles introducing Russian-Eurasian research from countries like the United States, Europe and Japan, recommending research methods that could be adapted domestically. These articles include: "The 'British School' of Russian Studies: Historical Development, Ideological Spectrum, and Contemporary Features" by Feng Shuai, published in the 3rd issue of 2016; "The 'Japanese Paradigm' of Slavic-Eurasian Studies" by Yan Dexue, published in the 1st issue of 2011; "The Soviet Political Studies by the Rand Corporation: Nathan Leites and the 'Politburo Action Guidelines'" by Hao Yakun; "The Core and Extension of Western Soviet Studies" by Yu Bin; "Friends or Foes?—U.S. Russian Political Studies After 1991" by Peter R. Ratliff; "Central Eurasian Studies in Japan: The Close Integration of Russian Studies and Eastern Studies" by Uchiyama Tomohiko and Cheng Yanyang [Yang 2019]. Over the years, institutions

such as the Russian and East European Studies Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Russian Studies Center at East China Normal University have also been continuously promoting the introduction of the latest foreign research achievements on Russian affairs. In 2024, Professor Feng Shaolei published a three-volume work titled “Crisis and Order: Russia’s Foreign Relations in the Context of Global Transformation”, which attempts to explore the drivers of contemporary international processes and Russia’s role within this framework and the context of the global transformation of the international order [Feng Shaolei 2024]. These academic works aim to transcend the constraints of traditional Westernist and Nativist paradigms by constructing Russian affairs research from a global perspective, thereby establishing a beneficial attempt to develop Russian affairs research within area studies with Chinese characteristics.

From the overall development trajectory of contemporary Chinese research on Russian affairs, after the end of the Cold War, China’s relevant research inherited the fine traditions of Soviet studies and formed an academic community for Russian affairs research that is relatively stable in structure and capable of significant academic output. This has profound significance for the future development of China’s area studies, especially in the research of Eurasian issues. At the same time, the consolidation of interdisciplinary characteristics, as well as the efforts by domestic scholars to transcend the traditional Westernist and Nativist paradigms of Russian studies, are opening new avenues for research on Russian affairs in China.

Challenges faced by contemporary China’s research on Russian affairs

The emergence and development of area studies are closely linked to the enhancement of China’s international status and the expansion of national interests. Consequently, the essence of the discipline must align with these developments: it requires the PRC to gain a more accurate, detailed and clear understanding of the external world, while also urging the external world to understand China in a more objective, rational and positive manner. However, under the new conditions and demands, there are still many deficiencies in China’s research on Russian affairs within the framework of area studies. These deficiencies not only pose challenges to the existing domestic research on Russian affairs but also provide opportunities for the future development of related research fields. In general, the main challenges currently facing Chinese research on Russian affairs include the following three aspects.

First, the research on Russia’s economic issues needs to be further strengthened. As one of the world’s major economies and a superpower in the global energy sector, Russia’s economic development and energy transformation issues should remain at the core of Russian affairs research. Especially with China’s continued promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative and the deepening of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia’s economy has become an exceptionally important topic both in the global economy and in regional studies. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has greatly altered Russia’s economic development environment. It has not only resisted the high-intensity Western sanctions but also, with the continuous expansion of the military-industrial production, begun to show certain characteristics of economic structural transformation [Xu Poling 2024]. The emergence of these issues presents new topics and directions for the study of Russian economy, which should be closely monitored when our countries engage in economic cooperation.

According to data from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), research on Russia’s economy in China has shown a clear downward trend in publication volume in CSSCI

journals: from a peak of 33 papers in 2018 to just 10 papers in 2022. Meanwhile, as Russia's economic position changes, both international and Chinese economic journals are facing more practical difficulties in publishing related articles. This undoubtedly hampers China's research on Russia and undermines the expansion of the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era. Therefore, one of the significant challenges for Russian affairs research in China, under the framework of area studies, is how to conduct high-level research on Russia's long-term economic transformation and short-term responses to Western sanctions amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Second, the sub-national level of research in contemporary Russian studies still needs to be expanded. In the past research on Russian affairs, especially in the studies related to politics and diplomacy, Chinese scholars have tended to examine Russia as a unified concept, exploring the changes in its historical development, as well as adjustments in its political structure and state-society relations. However, it is important to note that there is an increasingly evident trend of a "domestic political turn" in contemporary international studies. This trend shares many similarities with the characteristics of area studies: it emphasizes the internal diversity of actors and places a strong focus on how internal differences significantly impact decision-making. From this perspective, Russia's development path and decision-making characteristics are shaped by complex internal interactions and effects, with sub-national elements playing an increasingly prominent role. Research on this issue is undoubtedly an area where China's research on Russian affairs needs to be further strengthened.

In terms of sub-national elements, there are two issues that are especially worth attention. The first is research on the central-local relations, which are a critical component of Russia's federal political structure. Therefore, effectively analyzing the current central-local relations within the Russian Federation is undoubtedly one of the most important topics in Russian studies. Particularly, with the emergence of Russia's "Eastward Turn" strategy, the development of the central-local relations and their impact on politics and diplomacy are key issues in Russian affairs research [Xu Bo 2019]. The second issue concerns research on sub-national actors. Due to Russia's historical pattern of a strong state and weak society, state power has long served as the primary point of departure in the study of Russian politics. However, in the 21st century, with the emergence of civil society and a middle class in Russia, many characteristics of the state-society relations are undergoing significant changes [Pang 2020]. Shifts in local political elites and the emergence of new domestic social issues, such as environmental protection, are the results of sub-national actors' influence [Xu, Zhong 2022]. These issues are of great significance for the country's future development, and are also areas that need more attention in future Russian studies.

The third issue is the need for in-depth tracking of Russian public opinion. Public opinion research is a significant topic in political science and sociology, closely linked to the development of electoral studies. As a "barometer" of Russian society, public opinion holds an important place in Western studies on Russia. The leading Russian studies journals, such as "Post-Soviet Affairs" and "Eurasian Studies", regularly publish research on Russian public opinion, covering such topics as the influence of domestic corruption on public political attitudes and the preferences of voters regarding emerging domestic issues [Reisinger et al. 2016]. In the past, Chinese scholars have often focused on elite politics as the core of Russian politics, with research on political elites far surpassing studies on Russian public opinion. However, with the ongoing expansion of globalization, the rise of information technology and the growth of populism, focusing solely on

elite politics no longer provides a comprehensive understanding of Russian politics. In this regard, research on public opinion can undoubtedly provide new and powerful support for a deeper understanding of the Russian society. Moreover, as an important feature of China's area studies, strengthening the tracking of Russian public opinion and gaining a deeper understanding of the views of different regions and social classes toward Sino-Russian relations is an important starting point for conducting in-depth research on Russian public opinion. This will also lay a deeper and more reliable foundation for fostering bilateral people-to-people exchanges in the future.

Future directions for contemporary China's research on Russian affairs

Clearly, Russia-related studies in China have made significant progress since the end of the Cold War and have maintained a vigorous academic vitality. However, in the face of the historical opportunities for the establishment and development of area studies and the new challenges presented by the unprecedented changes in the global landscape, contemporary China's research on Russian affairs can still make further progress in many areas, thus laying the foundation for the creation of the uniquely Chinese "Russia Studies" paradigm and perspective.

Specifically, the following four aspects can be seen as potential future directions for expanding China's research on Russian affairs.

First, promoting the decentralization of research topics to form a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's complexity. According to data from CNKI, nearly half of the published academic articles on Russia are focused on political, diplomatic issues, and Sino-Russian relations. While this research focus contributes to a better understanding of bilateral relations and Russian political processes, it has led to the neglect of other important issues, especially the study of Russia's socio-economic development. Therefore, future research on Russian affairs in China should advocate for decentralizing research areas, with particular emphasis on economic and social structural changes. This would facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's ongoing transformation in the 21st century, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Even within the realm of politics and diplomacy, Chinese scholars should advocate for a greater focus on domestic political issues in Russia, such as central-local relations, political elite transformation, and changes in sub-national actors. This would prevent the over-concentration of research resources in foreign policy and diplomatic topics. Such decentralization of topics would also help in better assessing Russia's future development trajectory.

Second, encouraging domestic scholars to conduct fieldwork on Russian studies. Fieldwork is an important research method in area studies and is widely applied in sociology and political science. Given Russia's vast territory, its significant regional differences and diverse ethnic composition, many political, economic and social phenomena cannot be explained by a unified standard or approach. Therefore, fieldwork plays an irreplaceable role in this context. In the Slavic and Russian studies in the United States, European countries and Japan, fieldwork is considered a very important, even the most critical, research method. However, Chinese scholars have often overlooked this method due to various limitations in the past. Particularly in public opinion studies, conducting detailed fieldwork to better understand Russia will be beneficial to the construction of Sino-Russian strategic partnership.

Third, enhancing the emphasis on quantitative research, especially in the expansion of quantitative studies in Russian political research. From the perspective of global trends in

international research, quantitative analysis has inherent advantages, especially in the context of the rapid development of big data. Although quantitative research is not a cure-all for every issue, it has advantages that qualitative research often cannot match, especially in determining causal relationships and deriving variables. Overall, quantitative research, having undergone continuous development, has formed a collective research type with shared standards and a significant impact on disciplines both domestically and internationally. However, it is still rarely applied in domestic Russian studies. This is partly due to the educational background in Russian studies within China. However, well-conducted quantitative research could undoubtedly provide new insights into understanding Russian issues. Correspondingly, in CSSCI journals focused on Russian studies, quantitative research has been widely applied, covering topics such as central-local elections, public opinion, elite composition, and social governance. Therefore, increasing the emphasis on quantitative research and publishing more papers involving quantitative studies will be one of the key means to expand the international influence of Chinese research on Russian affairs.

Fourth, research on Russian affairs within the framework of area studies in China should still aim to establish content that transcends the Nativist and Westernist paradigms. As mentioned earlier, Nativism and Westernism are the two dominant trends in contemporary Russian studies. Since many Chinese scholars of Russian affairs have academic backgrounds from studying in Russia, Nativism has long dominated. However, with increasing international exchanges, especially with Western academia, the influence of the Westernist paradigm on Chinese scholars has become undeniable. Fundamentally, both paradigms are “imported” from abroad. Therefore, effective combination of qualitative and quantitative research and integration of the beneficial elements of both Nativism and Westernism to establish a distinctive “Russian Studies” content and methodological approach with Chinese characteristics remains the ultimate goal of Russian studies from the perspective of area studies.

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