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Understanding and assessing the Chinese public administration discipline through data mining on public administration scholars and schools

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the public administration (PA) discipline in China and critically assess its development using a conceptual framework of four typical attributes of an established discipline: specific research objects, internally shared knowledge, institutionalized schools/departments, and scholars with professional identities. Based on data mining of profiles and publications of faculty from top PA institutes at 54 Chinese universities, this study finds that the Chinese PA discipline has a number of specific research objects derived from its five sub-disciplines, and these research objects have a unifying feature of focusing on the governance and management of issues of public nature. However, despite this unifying feature, the discipline has not yet developed a body of internally shared knowledge among the five sub-disciplines. We also find that the discipline has established more institutionalized PA schools/departments in the context of increasing government influence. The hiring network analysis reveals that the community of PA scholars is largely formed on the basis of geographic proximity rather than the same research topics and interests. Comparisons are also made with previous assessments of the PA discipline in the U.S. This study reveals previously unknown distinctive features of the Chinese PA discipline in an objective way.

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Public administration; discipline; China; academic community; hiring network; data mining

1. Introduction

The public administration (PA) disciplines in many Global South countries have been heavily influenced by those in the U.S. and other Western countries. However, the unique features that have emerged in the PA disciplines of these Global South countries remain largely unknown to the international PA community (El-Taliawi, Nair, and Van der Wal 2021; Liu, James, and Man 2022; Peci and Fornazin 2017; Tapscott 2021). In the context of increasingly globalized PA research, there is a strong case for reflecting critically on the development of PA disciplines – not just PA research, but also PA institutes and PA scholars – in Global South countries, and looking into what unique features the PA disciplines have developed and why. But mainstream PA research has not done this

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very well. Existing reflections have predominantly focused on the PA discipline in Western countries (Boyne 1996; Ostrom 1974; Perry 2016; Raadschelders 2010; Rodgers and Rodgers 2000; Vogel and Hattke 2022; Wright 2011; Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). Few lessons have been drawn from Global South countries in Asia, South America, Africa, and elsewhere, and PA disciplines in Global South countries have been largely overlooked.

This study, therefore, focuses on the PA discipline in the largest Global South country, China, and provides a critical assessment of the Chinese PA discipline by answering four research questions based on a conceptual framework of four typical attributes of an established discipline: (1) Does the PA discipline have specific objects of research? What are they? (2) Has the PA discipline developed a body of specialized knowledge that is shared internally within the discipline? (3) Has the PA discipline developed institutional manifestations in the form of academic institutes? What are the characteristics of these institutes? (4) Does the PA discipline have a community of scholars with professional identities? What are the characteristics of the community? Assessing the Chinese PA discipline is extremely relevant and important in today's globalizing PA scholarship, as scholars in many countries are increasingly interested in the Chinese PA discipline due to the size and importance of China in the global population, politics, and economy (Kim et al. 2019; Wu, He, and Sun 2013). An assessment of the Chinese PA discipline using data science methods will reveal previously unknown distinctive features of the PA discipline in an objective way, and more importantly, reflect on how and why the Chinese PA discipline differs from that in the U.S. The findings would not only help to better understand the development and prospects of the Chinese PA discipline and complement the reflections on PA disciplines in the U.S. and other Western countries, but also provide useful lessons for PA scholars concerned with the development of PA disciplines in other Global South countries in Asia, South America, Africa, and elsewhere.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We first review previous assessments and reflections on the PA discipline with a focus on China, followed by an explanation of a conceptual framework for assessing a discipline. Then the method section introduces the data collection procedure and data analysis methods. The fifth section presents the results of analysis and discussions in which contrasts with previous assessments of the PA discipline in the U.S. are made. Finally, we conclude with a brief summary and discuss the limitations.

2. Literature review

The origins of PA can be traced back to the functions of early formal governments; however, its establishment as an independent academic discipline began in the late nineteenth century, marked by Woodrow Wilson's seminal work, *The Study of Administration* (Wilson 1887). The modern study of PA subsequently took shape in specific countries through the establishment of prominent institutions, such as the Royal Institute of PA in the U.K., the New York Bureau of Municipal Research in the U.S., and the local chapters of the Royal Institute of PA in Australia (McDonald et al. 2022). Since these origins, persistent concerns over PA's legitimacy, compounded by boundary ambiguity and the theory-practice gap, have fuelled ongoing scholarly inquiry (Boyne

1996; Hall and McDonald 2023; McDonald et al. 2022; Ostrom 1974; Pollitt 2010; Raadschelders 2010; Rodgers and Rodgers 2000; Vogel and Hattke 2022; Wright 2011; Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). Despite extensive exploration, the PA discipline remains predominantly defined by Anglo-American traditions and often neglects the inclusion of experiences from non-Anglo-American regions (Liu et al. 2025). Scholars have increasingly emphasized the need for systematic assessment and critical reflection on the development of PA across diverse institutional and cultural contexts, with particular focus on the experiences and knowledge contributions of the Global South (Gulrajani and Moloney 2012).

While an increasing number of publications have focused on the assessment and reflection of the PA discipline, two notable limitations consistently emerge in previous studies. The first limitation is that most of these studies focused on PA research in the discipline such as research topics (Raadschelders and Lee 2011), methodologies (Schwartz-Shea 2021; Vogel and Hattke 2022), and theoretical issues (Dubnick 2018), only a few studies examined other components of the PA discipline such as the PA departments/schools and the community of PA scholars (El-Taliawi, Nair, and Van der Wal 2021; Lyu et al. 2022; Ni, Sugimoto, and Robbin 2017; Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). Why have academic departments/schools and the community of PA scholars in the PA discipline been largely ignored in previous research? We attribute this neglect to the lack of a conceptual framework that effectively takes into account the development of teaching and research institutions, as well as scholarly communities. A conceptual framework for assessing a discipline allows scholars to recognize that an established academic discipline has not only a knowledge/research component, but also an organization component such as academic institutes and a community of scholars (Davies, Devlin, and Tight 2010; Krishnan 2009).

The second limitation is that these studies still predominantly reflect on the PA disciplines in the U.S. and other Western countries. For example, Zuo, Qian, and Zhao (2019) conducted a clustering of 46 U.S. public affairs schools based on the similarities of research topics across schools. They also analyzed the gender distribution, productivity, as well as hiring networks of the community of PA scholars in these schools. Studies that examine the PA discipline in other countries, especially in Global South countries, are scarce. This scarcity is largely attributed to the dominance of Anglo-American scholarship in international academic publishing (Liu et al. 2025). The international PA discourse has been significantly shaped by the predominance of PA research from the U.S. and U.K. This has not only constrained scholarly discussions on the development of PA discipline in the Global South but also significantly limited the representation of these regions within the international academic community. Fortunately, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in the development of the PA discipline in Global South countries, especially in China (Holzer and Zhang 2009; Kim et al. 2019; Su, Walker, and Xue 2013; Walker, Brewer, and Choi 2014; Wu, He, and Sun 2013; Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016). These studies introduced the history of Chinese PA discipline (Kim et al. 2019; Liu, James, and Man 2022; Su, Walker, and Xue 2013; Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016; Yang 2019), summarized the development and trends of PA research (Berman and Jing 2008; Chow, Xu, and Wen 2019; Kim et al. 2019; Li and Zhang 2021; Zhang et al. 2018), discussed the challenges on theories (Su, Walker, and Xue 2013), inadequacies of methods (Wu, He, and Sun 2013; Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016), and identity crisis

(Chow, Xu, and Wen 2019; Mingus and Jing 2017; Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016; Yang 2019). Similar to research on the PA discipline in Western countries, studies on the Chinese PA discipline mainly focus on the research component of the PA discipline, with few studies examining the PA institutes and the community of PA scholars. Even in the Chinese literature, most studies focused on the research of PA discipline. For example, an analysis of citation links between the top Chinese PA journal and other five top Chinese journals in political science, economics, sociology, law, and business shows that the Chinese PA discipline borrows heavily from neighbouring fields such as political science and sociology, while political science and sociology do not borrow much from PA (Yan, Zhang, and Ma 2020). This asymmetric knowledge exchange reflects the marginalization of PA within broader social sciences, further exacerbating its disciplinary identity crisis.

The present study aims to fill these gaps. Two contributions make this research distinctive from previous research. First, this study proposes a conceptual framework that provides a conceptual basis for assessing how well a discipline has developed and how far the discipline is from achieving an established disciplinary status. This framework offers a holistic approach to evaluating disciplinary development, which helps deepen scholarly understanding of the disciplinary identity of PA. Second, using advanced data science methods, this study provides an objective and informative description of research topics, knowledge connections among sub-disciplines, PA institutes, and the community of scholars, and reveals previously unknown insights into the Chinese PA discipline. By applying computational techniques such as network analysis, text mining, and clustering analysis, this study uncovers hidden patterns in Chinese PA, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of its development trajectory.

3. A conceptual framework for assessing a discipline

What is an academic discipline? A definition of discipline from the Cambridge Dictionary gives a number of different meanings, from training to a field of study to the control of behaviour. Clearly, the definition of an academic discipline encompasses all of the above meanings. According to Armin Krishnan, an established academic discipline generally has the following six characteristics: (1) the discipline has a specific object of research; (2) the discipline has a body of specialized knowledge which is not shared with other disciplines; (3) the discipline has developed theories and concepts that can organize the specialized knowledge; (4) the discipline uses specific terminologies or technical languages adjusted to the research object; (5) the discipline has developed specific research methods to meet research needs; and (6) the discipline must have institutional manifestations in the form of academic schools/departments and professional associations (Krishnan 2009). Geoffrey Squires (1992) has a similar view: a discipline is one with its own distinct theories, methods, and research topics, which is recognized by society and then institutionalized into academic departments and academic positions. Martin Davies and colleagues state that a discipline should have a community of scholars, a tradition and history of research, a particular way of collecting and interpreting data, a clear requirement for what constitutes new knowledge, and a communication network (Davies, Devlin, and Tight 2010).

Obviously, scholars' definitions of an academic discipline are largely similar. An academic discipline is not only a field of research, but also an organization of learning and

the systematic production of new knowledge. In other words, an academic discipline has a research component and an organization component (Figure 1). The research component of an established discipline should have a specific object of research, a body of specialized knowledge that constitutes an "academic territory", well-accepted theories and concepts, and specific research methods. The organizational component of an established discipline should have institutionalized academic schools/departments, specialized degree programmes and curriculums, and a community of professional scholars. The more closely a discipline adheres to the typical attributes of an established discipline as outlined in the conceptual framework, the more likely it is that the discipline will be recognized within the academia and that the discipline will move closer to its established disciplinary status. In the case of the PA discipline, scholars have pointed out that, due to its interdisciplinary nature, it is still too early to say that the PA discipline has developed its own specific, unique and robust theoretical and methodological core (McDonald et al. 2022; Perry 2016; Raadschelders 2011). In addition, the lack of consistent and comprehensive data on specialized degree programmes and curriculums makes it difficult to systematically assess their development across institutions. Therefore, this study does not examine the theories, methods and education programmes in the PA discipline, but focuses on the remaining four attributes, which are elaborated below.

3.1. Specific object of research

A clearly defined object of research is essential to a discipline. Without a clearly defined object of research, a discipline loses its anchor around which a body of specialized knowledge accumulates. In today's increasingly interdisciplinary world, a particular object of research may be studied by several disciplines, and a discipline may study several objects of research. Normally, the objects of research for a discipline must have a unifying feature, otherwise the discipline may not be able to develop a unifying paradigm and

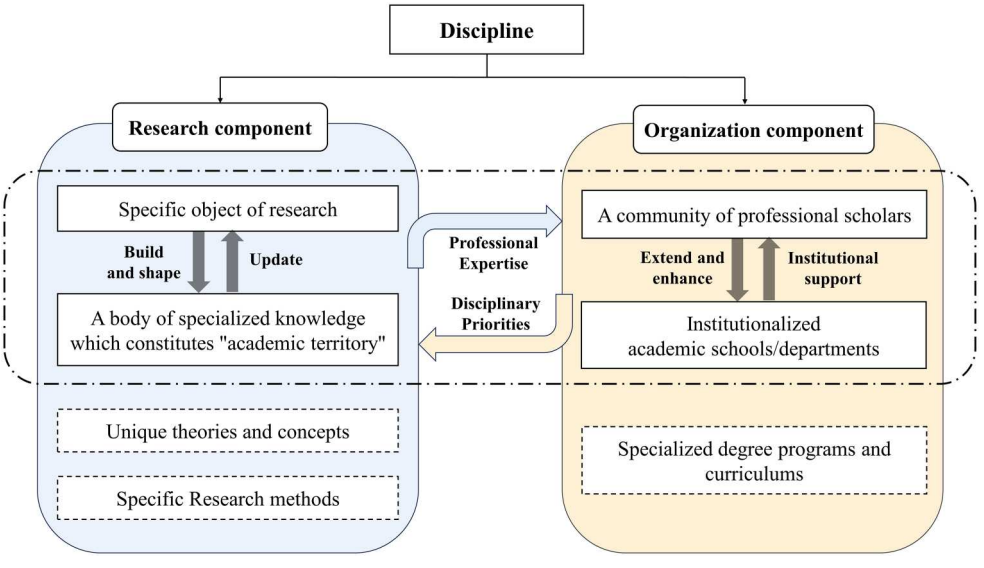

Figure 1. The conceptual framework for assessing a discipline.

therefore runs the risk of being fragmented into many independent sub-disciplines (Krishnan 2009). The object of research builds and shapes the knowledge and academic territory. It not only defines the disciplinary scope but also guides topic selection and methodological development. Changes in research object drive the evolution of the knowledge by introducing new perspectives, theories, and methodologies. The existing body of specialized knowledge refines and updates research objects. The evolution of research object and the cyclical process between research object and knowledge fosters theoretical innovation and keeps the discipline responsive to emerging academic and societal needs.

3.2. A body of specialized knowledge which constitutes an "academic territory"

From an anthropological perspective, a discipline can be seen as an "academic tribe". Each "academic tribe" has its own specific "academic language" through which the tribe members share information, exchange ideas, build intellectual connections, accumulate a body of common knowledge, and ultimately form a unique academic culture to establish the identity of the tribe. Meanwhile, this specific language becomes a critical tool for demarcating the "academic territory" by distinguishing tribe members from non-members and preventing the "academic territory" from being invaded by outsiders (Becher and Trowler 2001). In short, on the one hand, an established discipline must have a body of specialized knowledge that is shared within the discipline, and therefore each sub-discipline has strong knowledge ties with each other. On the other hand, an established discipline must have a body of knowledge which is not borrowed from other disciplines.

As the literature review shows, the question of whether the Chinese PA discipline has developed a body of knowledge that is not borrowed from other disciplines has already been addressed by a study that analyzed the citation links between the top Chinese PA journal and five other top Chinese journals in political science, economics, sociology, law, and business (Yan, Zhang, and Ma 2020). The results show that the Chinese PA discipline borrows heavily from neighbouring disciplines such as political science and sociology, while neighbouring disciplines do not borrow much from PA. Therefore, this study focuses on whether the knowledge in the Chinese PA discipline is shared internally within the discipline.

3.3. Institutionalized academic schools/departments

From a management perspective, a discipline is a basic management unit for managing the knowledge production and organizing the teaching. Thus, the typical organizational form of a discipline in a higher education institution is the academic school and department for research and teaching. These academic institutes provide a stable environment and an organizational platform for the discipline. Using this platform, a discipline provides teaching services, produces new knowledge, and competes for funding, students, and other resources to sustain itself. Institutionalized academic schools/departments offer structural and financial support to the scholarly community, fostering research, teaching, and professional networks. The scholarly community strengthens these schools/departments through research output, funding acquisition, and curriculum

innovation, thereby enhancing their sustainability. When an academic institute is institutionalized, the academic institute is established as a common and accepted part of the university and acquires a relatively permanent place in the university. A typical example of an institutionalized academic institute is when an academic department is expanded and elevated to a specialized academic school, in which the department no longer has to compete with other departments from other disciplines for resources and funding. Thus, the more institutionalized academic departments and schools are in a discipline, the more likely the discipline is to be self-sustaining.

3.4. A community of scholars with professional identities

From a sociological perspective, disciplines are the result of professionalization and division of labour in academic research (Krishnan 2009). For example, scholars who study politics are considered to be practicing political science professionally, and they are called political scientists. In a sense, a discipline is a unit of the labour market in academic professions (Whitley 2000). In a discipline, scholars train students with a distinct body of professional expertise, skills, and ethics. Meanwhile, scholars in the discipline control students' access to the profession through academic degrees and employment. In this way, a discipline naturally creates a community of professional scholars with a distinct professional habitus (Beck and Young 2005), and the professional identities of scholars in the community are inextricably linked to the discipline and the distinct body of professional expertise, skills, and ethics. The more established a discipline becomes, the more likely it is that the professional identities of scholars will be recognized within and beyond the discipline.

4. Data and methods

4.1. Data

In order to obtain data for assessing the Chinese PA discipline, we start with a list of universities with Public Affairs, Public Policy, and PA schools/departments (hereafter PA institutes) from the fourth China Discipline Evaluation (CDE) result. Then, we collect the information of the faculty in each PA institute, including their titles, gender, highest academic degrees, graduating programmes and universities, and publication records. Data collection took place between January and February 2022.

The dataset includes 54 universities with PA institutes that obtained a discipline rank of B – or above in the fourth CDE (Table S1). The CDE is conducted every 4–5 years by the China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center of the Chinese Ministry of Education. It is one of the most important evaluations in Chinese universities, as the CDE results determine the quota of funding and other resources, as well as the quality of student and staff applications. The most recent evaluation result, also the fifth evaluation result, was completed in July 2022, but it was kept confidential from the public. Interviews with scholars from various Chinese PA institutes indicate that the relative rankings of universities in the PA discipline have remained largely stable between the fourth and fifth rounds of evaluation. As a result, the outcomes of the fourth-round evaluation continue to provide a meaningful reflection of the current

state of the discipline. Therefore, the fourth evaluation result, which was completed in December 2017, was used for selecting the PA institutes. Using an indicator framework, the CDE classifies the top 70% of disciplines in all participating universities into 9 grades: A + for the top 2%, A for 2%–5%, A- for 5%–10%, B+ for 10%–20%, B for 20%–30%, B- for 30%–40%, C+ for 40%–50%, C for 50%–60%, and C- for 60%–70%. For this study, we selected the top 40% of universities with PA institutes, comprising 57 institutions with ratings of B− or higher in the national discipline evaluation. This selection criterion was adopted in recognition of these institutions' leading status in the PA field, and their research outputs are more likely to capture key research trends. Furthermore, higher-ranked universities typically maintain more comprehensive and consistent academic data compared to lower-ranked institutions, thereby ensuring the reliability and robustness of our analysis. Three of these universities, including Harbin Medical University (ranked B), The Second Military Medical University (ranked B), and Dongbei University of Finance and Economics (ranked B), are excluded from the analysis because the websites of the PA institutes in the three universities were not accessible. It should be noted that, at the time of data collection, Beijing Normal University had two PA schools: the School of Social Development and Public Policy and the School of Government. We treat the two institutes as a single university-level unit for ease of analysis.

Information for faculty members in each PA institute is collected from the official website of the corresponding PA institute. In cases where the websites did not provide sufficient information about a faculty member, we further search the faculty member's personal home page, curriculum vitae, and author biography information in published papers. Visiting scholars, adjunct professors, and emeritus professors are excluded from the dataset. We search the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index database (CSSCI) and the Social Sciences Citation Index database (SSCI) to obtain publication records for each faculty member based on author names and affiliations. The dataset comprises a total of 33599 publications, including 30370 Chinese papers and 3229 English papers.

4.2. Methods

4.2.1. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model

To address the first research question, we employ the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model, a widely used topic modelling technique for uncovering latent topics within a corpus of documents (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003). The LDA model can effectively extract latent research themes from unstructured text, which is crucial for accurately and clearly presenting the thematic categories of PA research. Specifically, the LDA model takes the abstracts of publications as input and produces two types of probabilistic distributions. The first type of distributions are multinomial distributions over words that have high probabilities associated with certain topics and can therefore represent the topics. For instance, if a multinomial distribution for a topic consists of the following keywords: "emergency", "risk", "safety", and "contingency plan", it means that these keywords have high probabilities associated with a specific topic, and the topic can be interpreted as emergency management. The second type of distribution is a multinomial distribution over topics that can represent each document. The distribution shows the probabilities that the document belongs to certain topics. More

details on the implementation of the LDA model can be found in the supplementary material (Figure S1).

4.2.2. Discipline bibliographic coupling analysis

This study uses discipline bibliographic coupling analysis to answer the second question. This method is widely used in scientometric studies to map disciplinary boundaries, track intellectual trajectories, and evaluate interdisciplinary interactions (Hou, Yang, and Chen 2018; Jarneving 2007). Discipline bibliographic coupling analysis, as its name suggests, is a bibliographic coupling analysis that quantifies the strength of knowledge connections between (sub)disciplines. By default, bibliographic coupling refers to the relationship between two or more papers that cite the same paper. Scholars have well demonstrated that the higher the degree of bibliographic coupling between two publications, the closer the knowledge connection between them (Zhao and Strotmann 2008). Similarly, if there is a large proportion of common references between the papers in one discipline and the papers in the other discipline, then the two disciplines share a large amount of common knowledge, suggesting that the two disciplines have strong knowledge ties.

In China, the catalog of academic disciplines is formulated and revised periodically by the Academic Degree Commission of the State Council (ADCSC). Universities in China usually have to follow the catalog to develop a discipline. There are three levels of disciplines: discipline categories, first-class disciplines, and second-class disciplines. Second-class disciplines are considered as sub-disciplines of first-class disciplines. According to the discipline catalog promulgated by the Commission in 1997, the PA discipline is a first-class discipline that belongs to the management discipline categories and has five second-class disciplines,[1] including administration management, social security, land resource management, social medicine and health management, and educational economics and management. In order to examine the strength of knowledge connections among the five second-level disciplines, this study conducts a discipline coupling analysis by calculating the Jaccard similarity coefficient between each pair of the five second-level disciplines:

$$J(A, B) = \frac{A \cap B}{A \cup B},$$

where A is the reference set for papers published in one sub-discipline, B is the reference set for papers published in the other sub-discipline. $A \cap B$ refers to the number of references in the intersection of A and B, which is the number of common references between A and B, while $A \cup B$ is the number of references in the union of A and B, which is the number of all distinct references in A and B. The Jaccard similarity coefficient ranges between 0 and 1. A higher Jaccard similarity coefficient indicates a stronger knowledge connection between two sub-disciplines. To reduce computational complexity, we divided the universities into two groups based on institutional rankings – A-level PA institutes and B-level PA institutes – and conducted bibliographic coupling analyses separately for each group. This allows us to examine potential differences in knowledge connections between sub-disciplines across institutions of different academic standings.

To obtain the reference set for a sub-discipline, we first classify all faculty members into different sub-disciplines based on the faculty members' research areas and department affiliations. Then the reference data of the papers published by the faculty members classified in that sub-discipline are determined as the reference set for that sub-discipline.

4.2.3. Hierarchical clustering analysis

To answer the third question, this study provides a statistical summary of how many PA institutes have established a specialized PA school and how many PA institutes have to coexist within a non-specialized school with political science departments, economics departments, humanities departments, etc. In addition, to further explore the characteristics of PA institutes, this study uses hierarchical agglomerative clustering (Ward 1963) to group PA institutes based on their research profiles. Hierarchical agglomerative clustering is particularly suited for this analysis as it does not require prior knowledge of the number of clusters, and it provides a comprehensive tree structure that can visually illustrate the relationships between institutes (Murtagh and Legendre 2014). The research profile for each PA institute is represented by the average topic distributions of all papers published by all faculty members in that PA institute. In other words, the distance between the average topic distributions of two clusters of PA institutes is used to calculate the degree of similarity between the two clusters. If two clusters of PA institutes have similar topic distributions, then the distance between the two clusters is small, and both clusters can be merged into the same group. The grouping process between clusters continues iteratively by calculating the distance between clusters until there is only one cluster that includes all PA institutes. Therefore, how many groups of PA institutes are formed depends on a cutoff threshold in the hierarchical agglomerative clustering analysis. The choice of cutoff threshold is usually determined based on the interpretability and relevance of the resulting clusters. We test different thresholds and finally select 5 clusters that produce the most interpretable and meaningful results.

4.2.4. Social networks analysis

For the fourth question, we summarize the distributions of all faculty members in terms of gender, titles, and graduating programmes. In addition, we investigate whether there are different circles within the community, and if so, whether these circles are formed around the same areas of professional expertise and research interests. Therefore, we employ social network analysis to examine the hiring network among PA institutes. First, we record the current working institutions of faculty members and the institutions from which they received their PhD degrees. Then we construct a 54×54 directed co-occurrence matrix, in which the number refers to the number of PhD graduates from the institution in the source node hired by the other institution in the target node. Finally, we use the Louvain community detection algorithm (Blondel et al. 2008) to analyze the different hiring circles of PA institutes. The Louvain algorithm is widely used for community detection in networks due to its efficiency and ability to identify hierarchical structures (De Meo et al. 2011). We use Gephi version 0.9.3 to visualize the hiring network and to perform the community detection.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Research objects in Chinese PA discipline

Using the LDA model, we identify 12 research topics from the Chinese PA literature (Table 1), including 14.49% social governance, 13.81% local government management, 13.24% land resource management, 10.56% social security, 9.29% emergency

Table 1. Research topics and their keywords in the Chinese PA literature.

Research topic	Top five keywords
Social governance (14.49%)	governance (0.087); society (0.056); organization (0.033); participation (0.021); grid management (0.021)
Local government management (13.81%)	management (0.069); local (0.034); implementation (0.023); institution (0.021); service (0.011)
Land resource management (13.24%)	land (0.071); cultivated land (0.033); ecology (0.027); land use (0.026); farmland (0.026)
Social security (10.56%)	Elder care (0.039); medical care (0.021); service (0.021); protection (0.020); relief (0.020)
Emergency management (9.29%)	risk (0.048); emergency (0.044); safety (0.032); capability (0.028); contingency plan (0.021)
Education management (8.21%)	education (0.056); information (0.050); urban and rural (0.030); teacher (0.022); politics (0.022)
Urban and rural planning (6.94%)	urban (0.054); design (0.031); environment (0.026); space (0.025); resource (0.021)
Intergovernmental relations (6.16%)	power (0.022); government finance (0.021); interaction (0.016); value (0.014); "Tiao-kuai" (0.014)
Digital governance (5.79%)	data (0.057); digital (0.029); transparency (0.026); government department (0.019); microblog (0.012)
Government regulation (5.11%)	government (0.069); policy (0.049); reform (0.034); command (0.034); administration (0.019)
Management of tourism and cultural industries (4.24%)	tourism (0.026); public (0.024); culture (0.024); theory (0.020); industry (0.020)
Public economics (2.16%)	economy (0.068); analysis (0.030); factor (0.022); quality (0.019); significance (0.018)

management, 8.21% education management, 6.94% urban and rural planning, 6.16% intergovernmental relations, 5.79% digital governance, 5.11% government regulation, 4.24% tourism and cultural industry management, and 2.16% public economics. The number in parentheses for each topic is the calculated topic intensity, which represents the proportion of the topic among all topics after standardization. A higher topic intensity indicates that the topic is more significant and receives more attention in the literature.

We observe two patterns from the topic modelling results. First, scholars in the Chinese PA discipline have broad and diverse research interests. Their research covers the management of various issue areas, including not only the operations of government administration, but also land resources, education, social security, urban planning, emergency, tourism and cultural industries, and so on. Clearly, there is a significant overlap between most of these topics and the five sub-disciplines specified by the ADCSC, suggesting that the distribution of research topics in the Chinese PA discipline is shaped by the five sub-disciplines specified by the ADCSC. Second, the significant variations in the proportions for the topics reveal a core–periphery structure of research objects in the Chinese PA discipline. More than one-third of the topics, including social governance, local government management, intergovernmental relations, digital governance, and government regulation, focus on government operations and management. In line with previous research (Yang 2019), the result suggests that government operations and management are the core objects of research in the Chinese PA discipline, or more specifically, the research objects of the sub-discipline of administration management. The rest of the topics, including land resource management, social security, education management, and urban and rural planning, focus on the broader public affairs, which are the peripheral objects of research in the discipline. Most of these peripheral objects of research are the objects of research of other four sub-disciplines of the PA

discipline. A comparison with a previous study on the topics of PA research in the U.S. by Zuo, Qian, and Zhao (2019) shows that, although there are some overlapping topical areas, such as public economics and education policy and management, between the PA research in China and the U.S., the Chinese PA scholars pay less attention to the management and policy of health, environment, and energy than their U.S. counterparts. Moreover, there is little discussion in Chinese PA research about political system, public opinion, and criminal justice.

Additionally, we applied the same method to analyze the research topics in the English PA literature by Chinese PA scholars (Table 2). The results are largely consistent with those of Chinese PA publications, with significant overlap in topics such as local governance, educational administration, urban-rural planning, and land use. However, English PA literature by Chinese PA scholars appear to place greater emphasis on issues related to citizens' well-being, climate change, child welfare, migration, and health security.

We also performed two thematic analyses of Chinese PA literature published before 2010 and after 2010, respectively, to analyze the temporal trends of research topics (Tables S2 and S3 in the supplementary material). The results show that the thematic focus has remained consistent between the pre-2010 and post-2010 periods, with sustained emphasis on topics such as governance reform, urban-rural development, and economic growth. In addition, we conducted thematic analyses for A-level PA institutes and B-level PA institutes, and the results remain consistent across different tiers of PA institutes (Tables S6 and S7 in the supplementary material). In summary, the Chinese PA discipline has specific research objects, including the core objects of research, which are government operations and management, and the peripheral objects of research, including land resource management, social security, and other issue areas. Both the core and peripheral research objects in the discipline have a unifying feature, as both focus on the management and governance of issues of public nature. Therefore, ideally, these research objects and their corresponding sub-disciplines should have developed common knowledge and strong knowledge links with each other. However, our analysis below shows a different result.

Table 2. Research topics and their keywords in the English PA Publications.

Research topic	Top five keywords
Public governance and local administration (10.19%)	public (0.0195); government (0.0132); local (0.0127); participation (0.0093); China (0.0083)
Urban governance and housing policy (23.74%)	urban (0.0347); spatial (0.0180); cities (0.0133); housing (0.0120); study (0.0085)
Migrant population management (4.72%)	social (0.0237); workers (0.0198); community (0.0092); leadership (0.0091); migrant (0.0084)
Disciplinary research in China (14.17%)	China (0.0116); development (0.0110); China (0.0083); research (0.0073); paper (0.0072)
Climate governance (9.35%)	climate (0.0101); alpine (0.0091); recovery (0.0081); change (0.0068); grassland (0.0062)
Health governance (6.30%)	health (0.0147); carbon (0.0114); emissions (0.0106); China (0.0097); results (0.0078)
Land use and rural development policies (23.93%)	land (0.0418); use (0.0148); rural (0.0120); ecological (0.0089); China (0.0076)
Child welfare and educational equity (2.96%)	children (0.0101); model (0.0080); child (0.0075); study (0.0068); school (0.0053)
Environmental policy and policy evaluation (4.63%)	study (0.0109); environmental (0.0093); policy (0.0086); effect (0.0078); relationship (0.0075)

5.2. A body of knowledge that is not shared internally within the discipline

As Table 3 shows, the Jaccard similarity coefficients between the five sub-disciplines in A-level PA institutes range from 0.03% (between educational economics and management, and social medicine and health management) to 3.39% (between administration management and social security). This indicates that there are about zero to three common references per 100 references between the five sub-disciplines. For comparison, we calculate the Jaccard similarity coefficient between the discipline of administration management and the discipline of political science using reference data from papers published by scholars specializing in administration management at the School of Public Policy & Management of Tsinghua University and scholars at the Department of Political Science of Tsinghua University, respectively. The calculated Jaccard similarity coefficient between the discipline of administration management and the discipline of political science (8.72%) is much higher than the maximum Jaccard similarity coefficient among the five sub-disciplines. The results show that the knowledge links among the five sub-disciplines in the Chinese PA discipline are extremely weak. In addition, further analysis of the common references between administration management and social security shows that the common references between the two sub-disciplines are mainly published in sociological journals rather than PA journals. This indicates that the knowledge links between the two sub-disciplines are not based on PA but on sociology.

To further examine whether the knowledge connections between sub-disciplines vary across different institutional ranking tiers, we conducted additional bibliographic coupling analysis for faculty publications in B-level PA institutes (Table S4 in the supplementary material). The findings reveal that the results for B-level PA institutes align closely with those for A-level PA institutes (Table 3). In both cases, the highest similarity is observed between administration management and social security, followed by administration management and land resource management. The similarities among other secondary disciplines remain relatively low, indicating that the results are consistent across different institutional ranking tiers.

In summary, there are almost few knowledge links among the five sub-disciplines in the Chinese PA discipline. In this regard, the Chinese PA discipline has not developed a body of specialized knowledge that is shared internally within the discipline. The "academic territory" has not been established in the Chinese PA discipline. Why are there almost no knowledge links among the five sub-disciplines in the Chinese PA discipline? The reasons behind are probably the intervention of administrative power from the government in determining the list of sub-disciplines and the lack of high-quality and widely

Table 3. Jaccard similarity coefficient between sub-disciplines in A-level PA institutes.

Sub-discipline	Administration management	Social security	Land resource management	Social medicine and health management
Social security	3.39%			
Land resource management	2.90%	1.43%		
Social medicine and health management	0.51%	1.84%	0.14%	
Educational economics and management	0.34%	0.52%	0.24%	0.03%

accepted PA theories and methods. On the one hand, the development of the PA discipline in China is deeply influenced by government because what counts as a sub-discipline in the PA discipline is determined by the ADCSC, regardless of any inconsistencies among sub-disciplines. The list of five sub-disciplines in the Chinese PA discipline was determined because in 1997, ADCSC and the Chinese Ministry of Education intended to classify all five sub-disciplines that study "public" issues into one discipline, that is, the PA discipline (Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016). As a result, these five sub-disciplines were then grouped together, thus creating an artificial discipline boundary that seriously deviates from the natural discipline boundary (Yang 2020). On the other hand, since 1997, Chinese PA scholars have struggled to develop high-quality PA theories with strong explanatory power and advanced methods that were widely applicable across all five sub-disciplines (Liu and Li 2013). As a result, scholars in various sub-disciplines often rely on theories and methods from other fields, such as sociology, political science, and geography, to support their research.

5.3. Institutionalized PA schools

5.3.1. Affiliations of PA institutes and their research profiles

We analyze the affiliations of PA institutes in 54 universities to look into how many universities have a specialized PA school dedicated to the PA discipline and how many universities have affiliated PA departments with departments of other disciplines. The results show that in 2022 there are 19 (about 35.2%) universities with specialized PA schools dedicated to the PA discipline. This shows that the Chinese PA discipline has made significant progress compared to the year 2004, when there were no more than 23.1% of universities with specialized PA schools (Zhou 2004), suggesting that the PA discipline has become more recognized in Chinese universities, and therefore the PA institutes have become more institutionalized and gained more autonomy. This is probably because in the context of increasing government influence, universities tend to establish more specialized PA schools to strengthen their connections with the government through PA programmes such as the Master of PA (MPA) programme, which plays an important role in fundraising and data collection. For the rest of universities with PA institutes, 25.9% of universities affiliate their PA departments with political science departments, 16.7% with business management-related departments, 9.3% with humanities-related departments, 7.4% with law departments, and 5.5% with sociology departments. The composition of the affiliations of PA institutes in 54 universities shows that the nature of the universities has played a crucial role in shaping the affiliations of PA institutes. For example, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics is a university that was founded with a focus on finance and economics. Naturally, the university's PA department had been placed in a school for more than two decades together with departments related to public finance and economics, such as the Department of Public Finance and the Department of Taxation.[2] The reason is probably that these specialized universities deliberately bundled their new PA programmes and existing departments that study public issues into one school in order to obtain authorization for running MPA programmes (Wu, Hou, and Ma 2016).

Undoubtedly, the affiliation of PA institutes has a significant impact on their research profiles, which reflects the influence of neighbouring disciplines such as political science

and management on the PA discipline (Yang 2019). The result of hierarchical clustering analysis in Figure 2 shows that there are five clusters with different research orientations and traditions. The largest cluster consists of Renmin University of China, Tsinghua University, Sun Yat-sen University, etc. These universities are known for their strengths in administrative science. The second largest cluster consists of universities with strengths in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), such as Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Harbin Institute of Technology. Their research pays more attention to highly interdisciplinary topics such as emergency management. Universities focused on finance and economics, such as Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, make up the third largest cluster. PA research at these universities emphasizes public finance and economics. Similarly, universities focused on agricultural and forestry, such as Nanjing Agricultural University, form the fourth cluster. The PA institutes at these universities are known for their research in land resource management. The last cluster consists of universities related to education, such as Beijing Normal University. PA research in these universities pays more attention to education management.

5.3.2. U-shaped relationship between discipline rating and faculty size

Our analysis of faculty size in these PA institutes shows that, on average, each institute has about 39 faculty members, which is higher than the 23 faculty members per PA institute in the U.S. (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). The Gini coefficient for the distribution of faculty size in PA institutes for the Chinese PA discipline is 0.29, which is lower than the Gini coefficient of 0.45 in the U.S. (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). This suggests that China has a more equal distribution of faculty size in PA institutes than the U.S. The top three universities in terms of faculty size are Renmin University of China, Zhejiang University, and Nanjing Agricultural University, respectively. All three universities were rated A or A + in the CDE discipline competition. Obviously, the CDE discipline rating may be associated with faculty size. Using a statistical test for U-shaped relationships (Lind and Mehlum 2010), we confirm that there is a significant U-shaped relationship

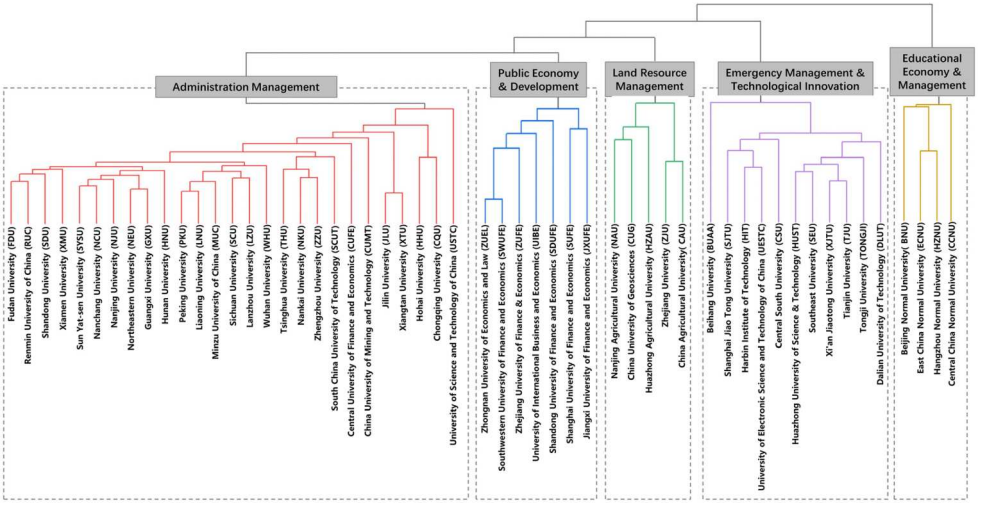

Figure 2. Clustering of PA institutes based on research profiles.

between faculty size and CDE discipline rating. As Figure 3 shows, the correlation between faculty size and CDE discipline rating is negative when the rating falls below B, but becomes positive when the rating rises above B. This suggests that hiring more faculty members may help raise the CDE rating. In fact, faculty size was one of the performance indicators in the fourth CDE framework. Moreover, a large faculty size gives the university administrator more flexibility to select those productive faculty members with high-quality publications to participate in the discipline competition. However, a large faculty size means more demands on funding and office space. In a sense, the CDE in the Chinese PA discipline at this stage is more like a competition of financial input for each PA institute.

5.4. A community of PA scholars who still need to strive to develop their professional identities

5.4.1. Characteristics of Chinese PA scholars

An examination of the distribution of titles among Chinese PA scholars shows that the proportions of assistant professors, associate professors, and professors in the Chinese PA discipline in 2022 are 22%, 41%, and 37%, respectively. Compared with the proportions of assistant professors, associate professors, and professors (21%, 36%, and 43%) calculated using 2007 data (Zhao 2008), the proportion of associate professors has increased over the past 15 years and even exceeded the proportion of full professors. This shows a very different pattern from the U.S. as the corresponding

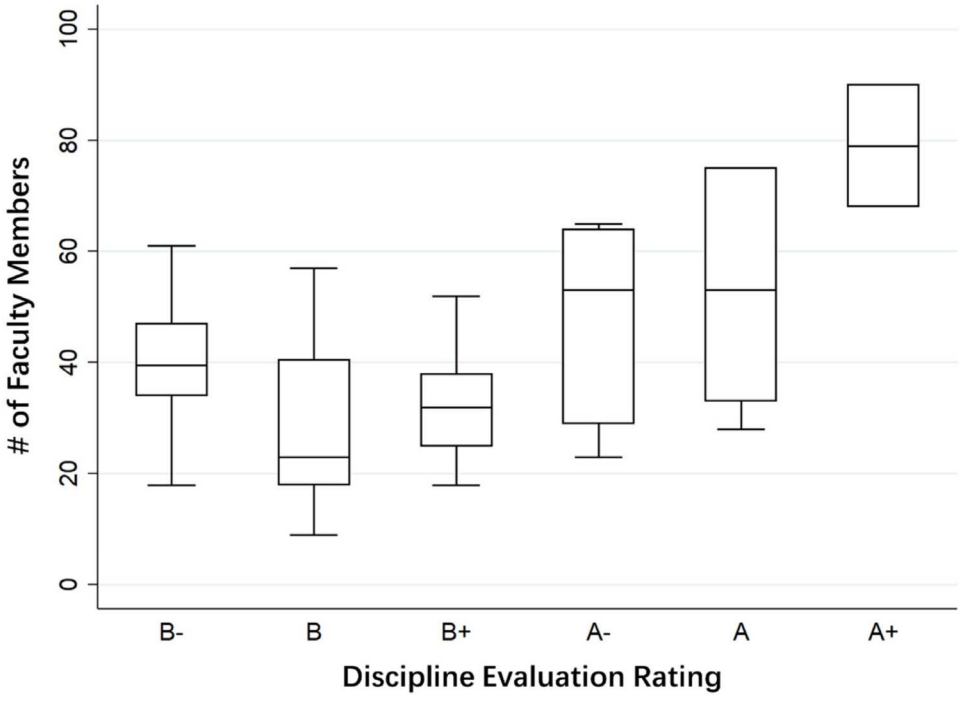

Figure 3. U-shaped Relationship between discipline evaluation ratings and faculty size.

proportions in the U.S. are 23%, 26%, and 51%, respectively (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). In terms of gender distribution, the overall ratio of male to female scholars in the Chinese PA discipline is 1.48, which is lower than the ratio of 1.94 in the U.S. (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). The ratios of male to female scholars for assistant professors, associate professors, and professors in the Chinese PA discipline are 0.92, 1.20, and 2.62, respectively. In contrast, the ratio for assistant professors in the U.S. is 1.13 (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). This indicates that China is more equal than the U.S. in terms of gender distribution of PA scholars. However, the results show that there are more female assistant professors than male assistant professors, but less for senior positions in the Chinese PA discipline. Therefore, China has the same phenomenon of high attrition rate in the promotion of female scholars in their academic careers as the U.S. (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019).

The graduating programmes for Chinese PA scholars are very diverse. These programmes include management, economics, law, political science, sociology, humanities, and even STEM disciplines. Overall, less than one-third (30.6%) of Chinese PA scholars graduated from PA programmes. The proportions of Chinese PA scholars who graduated from programmes in management, economics, law, and political science are 18.8%, 16.6%, 6.2%, and 6.0%, respectively. In addition, we find that the proportion of Chinese PA scholars who graduated from PA programmes increased from 13.0% among full professors, to 31.4% among associate professors, and to 53.7% among assistant professors. These varying proportions reflect the history of the development of the Chinese PA discipline. In the 1980s when China reinstated the PA discipline after three decades of abandonment, all the first-generation Chinese PA scholars graduated from other disciplines such as political science, law, and so on (Liu and Li 2013; Zang and Chan 2020). It was not until 1990 that the first PhD programme in PA discipline was launched in China (Yang 2019). As more and more Chinese students graduated from domestic and overseas PhD programmes in the PA discipline, more PhD graduates from PA programmes became faculty members in PA institutes, and the community of PA scholars was formed. A further analysis comparing scholars' characteristics between A-level PA institutes and B-level PA institutes shows that faculty members in A-level institutions are generally older than those in B-level institutions. B-level institutions exhibit a more even gender ratio compared to A-level institutions. Regarding faculty rank distribution, A-level institutions have a higher proportion of full professors, while B-level institutions have a larger share of associate professors and assistant professors. Indeed, B-level institutions tend to have a younger faculty profile, with a greater proportion of early – and mid-career scholars who have not yet attained the rank of full professor (Table S5 in the supplementary material).

This diversity in scholars' academic backgrounds fosters interdisciplinary collaboration but also contributes to fragmentation in methodological paradigms and epistemology. In the PA discipline, scholars with academic backgrounds in political science, philosophy, and law predominantly employ qualitative research methods, such as grounded theory, case studies, and historical-comparative analysis. In contrast, those trained in economics, management, and geography are more inclined to utilize quantitative techniques, including statistical modelling, experimental design, and geospatial analysis. This qualitative – quantitative divide is widely regarded as a significant manifestation of methodological fragmentation in Chinese PA scholarship. Such fragmentation

may potentially hinder intra-disciplinary dialogue, impede theoretical integration, and undermine the cumulative advancement of knowledge.

5.4.2. Hiring networks

Figure 4 shows the hiring networks among the 54 universities with PA institutes. The results show that Renmin University of China, Peking University, and Wuhan University are the largest suppliers of PhD graduates who became faculty members in most PA institutes. This is not surprising as the three universities have been pioneers in the process of restoring the Chinese PA discipline and are among the most reputable PA institutes in China. In addition, there are several notable strong hiring relationships among the universities in the network. For instance, Hohai University hires Nanjing University graduates heavily. Wuhan University and Huazhong University of Science and Technology

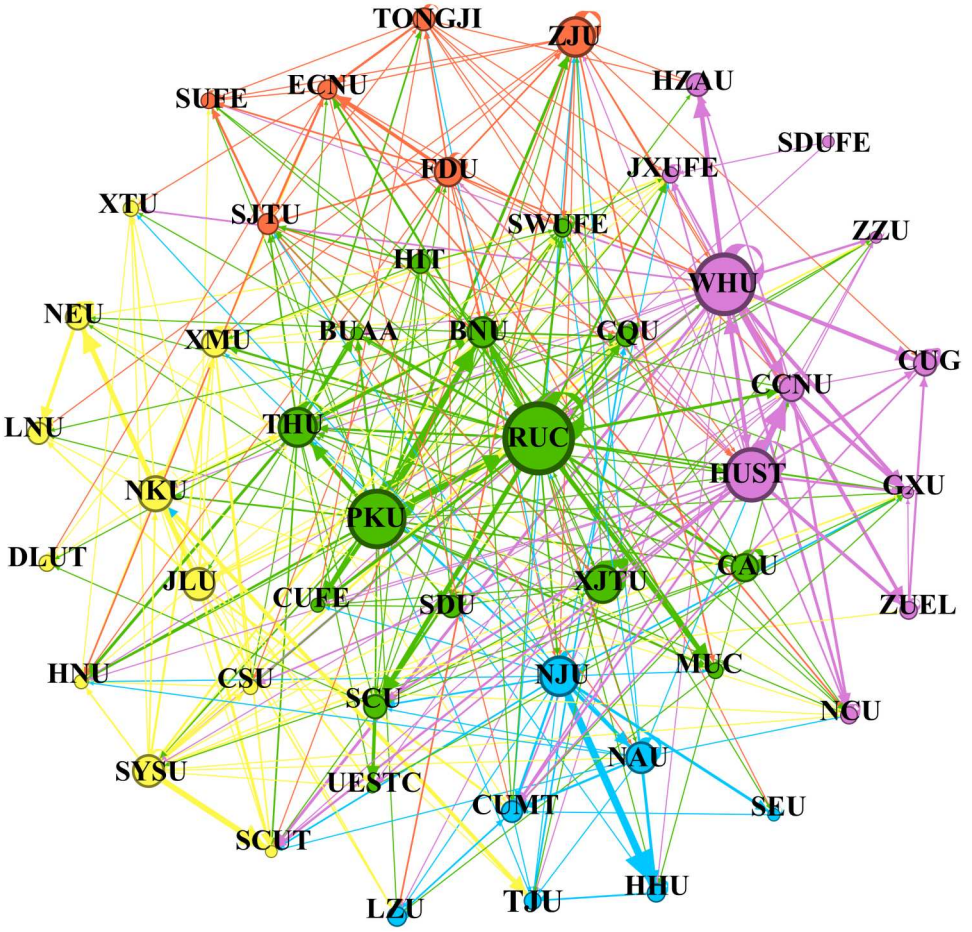

Figure 4. Hiring networks among Chinese PA institutions. Note that the size of a node for a university refers to the number of graduates from that university who are hired by other universities. The width of the directed edge between two universities refers to the number of graduates from the university indicated at the tail of the edge who are hired by the university indicated at the head of the edge. The full names of the universities can be found in Figure 2 and Table S1 in the supplementary material.

have many reciprocal hires. Central China Normal University hires many graduates from Huazhong University of Science and Technology. Beijing Normal University has many graduates from Peking University in its faculty.

We further examine the community structure of the hiring networks and find that there are five well-separated subcommunities that maintain strong hiring ties within them. The first sub-community includes many universities in North China, such as Peking University and Beijing Normal University. Therefore, we call it the North China community. The second is the Central China community, which mainly consists of universities in Central China, such as Wuhan University and Central China Normal University. The third is the Jiangsu community, which includes universities in Jiangsu province, such as Nanjing University and Hohai University. The fourth is the Shanghai community represented by universities in Shanghai such as Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Fudan University. The last is the Northeast community, which consists of universities in Northeast China, such as Jilin University and Northeastern University.

Obviously, the hiring relationships are to a great extent determined by geographic proximity. With rare exceptions of a few top PA institutes with national influence that are able to transcend geographic constraints, most PA institutes tend to hire their faculty from nearby PA institutes in the same region. These sub-communities of PA institutes do not correspond to the clusters of PA institutes with different research orientations and traditions identified in the hierarchical clustering analysis based on their research profiles shown in Figure 2. In comparison, in the U.S., the sub-communities of PA institutes identified from the hiring networks mirror the topical clusters of PA institutes identified based on their research profiles (Zuo, Qian, and Zhao 2019). In other words, the sub-communities of PA scholars in the U.S. tend to be formed around the same research areas and research interests, whereas the sub-communities of PA scholars in China are likely to be formed based on geographic proximity rather than the same research areas and research interests, which does not contribute to the process of developing a distinct body of professional expertise, and is therefore not helpful in establishing their professional identities. In this regard, the community of scholars in the Chinese PA discipline is not yet well developed.

6. Summary and limitations

This study assesses how the Chinese PA discipline has developed in terms of four typical attributes of an established discipline. This study finds that the Chinese PA discipline performs relatively well in terms of whether the discipline has particular objects of research and whether it has built institutionalized schools/departments. More specifically, the discipline has specific objects of research with a unifying feature that focuses on the management and governance of issues of public nature. The objects of research include not only the core research objects of government operations and management, but also the peripheral objects of research, such as land resource management and social security. The discipline has also gained more autonomy in Chinese universities, leading to the establishment of more institutionalized PA schools. Further analysis of PA institutes shows that there are five clusters with different research orientations, which provides information on which PA institutes are similar or dissimilar to each

other in terms of research profile. We also find that there is a significant U-shaped relationship between faculty size and CDE discipline rating.

However, the Chinese PA discipline does not perform very well in terms of whether the discipline has developed a body of internally shared knowledge and whether it has a community of scholars with professional identities. The discipline bibliographic coupling analysis shows that there are few knowledge links among the five sub-disciplines, suggesting that the Chinese PA discipline has not developed a body of internally shared knowledge. We find that, overall, less than one-third (30.6%) of Chinese PA scholars graduated from PA programmes. Only 13.0% of full professors, 31.4% of associate professors, and 53.7% of assistant professors graduated from PA programmes. In addition, the analysis of hiring networks among PA institutes shows that hiring relationships are largely determined by geographic proximity. As a result, these sub-communities of PA institutes with strong hiring ties do not correspond to the topical clusters of PA institutes identified in the clustering analysis based on their research profiles. This suggests that the sub-communities of scholars in the Chinese PA discipline are likely to be formed based on geographic proximity rather than the same research areas and research interests, as seen in the U.S., which does not contribute to the establishment of professional identities.

This study has the following limitations: (1) We only use the sample of 54 universities with top PA institutes that obtained a discipline rating of B- or above in the fourth CDE. Therefore, the results in this study may not apply to those PA institutes with lower discipline ratings. (2) This study relies on cross-sectional data collected from the official websites of the PA institutes, which do not provide historical records of faculty recruitment. As a result, we are unable to conduct longitudinal analyses to trace changes in hiring patterns over time. This limits our ability to capture the temporal dynamics of academic community formation. Future research is encouraged to incorporate longitudinal data to gain a deeper understanding of the evolution of hiring trends within the discipline. (3) While hiring network analysis offers insights into recruitment patterns, it may not fully capture the formation of academic communities and professional identities. Future research could incorporate co-authorship network analysis, which would better illuminate how academic communities are formed and how professional identities are established through scholarly collaboration. (4) While sub-disciplinary classifications of the reference set based on faculty members' research areas and department affiliations may have some limitations, the potential bias is minimal and does not affect the conclusions of the study.

Despite these limitations, this study offers new insights and contributes to a deeper understanding of the Chinese PA discipline. First, this study introduces a conceptual framework for evaluating the development of the PA discipline. This framework provides a conceptual tool for disciplinary assessment and can be applied to analyze other emerging fields, such as emergency management. Second, this study leverages advanced data science methods to conduct an analysis of the Chinese PA discipline. By identifying key research topics, mapping knowledge connections across sub-disciplines, mining research profiles of PA institutions and hiring patterns within scholarly communities, this study reveals previously unknown insights into the Chinese PA discipline. The findings highlight the importance of fostering greater integration across sub-disciplines within the Chinese PA discipline to address the issue of fragmentation. Furthermore, the

development of academic communities with strong professional identities and shared research interests is crucial for strengthening the discipline's intellectual foundation and its capacity to address governance challenges in China.

Notes

1. In May 2023, ADCSC added another six second-level disciplines to the PA discipline. The six sub-disciplines are public policy, emergency management, social organization management, digital public governance, urban and rural public governance, and global governance. Due to lack of data, this study did not study the additional six sub-disciplines.
2. Shanghai University of Finance and Economics recently merged its PA department with Department of Regional Economics and Urban Management, as well as Department of Agricultural economics and management in 2025.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Jianzheng Liu:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Anle Cheng:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Yifei Xu:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft; **Wenxuan Yu:** Supervision, Validation; **Ning Hu:** Data curation, Formal analysis.

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Data availability statement

This paper analyzes existing, publicly available data. The fourth CDE results can be obtained from https://www.cdgdc.edu.cn/cde/Latest_Results_of_CDE.htm. Information of the faculty in each PA institute are obtained from the respective official websites. The publication records for faculty are obtained from the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index database (CSSCI) and the Social Sciences Citation Index database (SSCI).

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