一带一路
ONE BELT, ONE ROAD
INFOGRAPHICS MAP
▭▭▭ Silk road economic belt
╌╌╌ Maritime silk road initiative

CHINESE ACADEMIA MARCHES WEST: A STRUCTURAL TOPIC MODEL OF CHINA'S KNOWLEDGE-PRODUCTION IN CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

BY ANASTASIA ZHU, BRADLEY JARDINE AND FRANK MARACCHIONE

As the United States began to pivot from the Middle East and Afghanistan to South Asia in 2013, China began debating its own pivot from the Asia Pacific toward the Eurasian heartland (Yun Sun, 2013). This strategy, colloquially known as "Marching West," as popularized by influential scholar Wang Jisi, captured both domestic and international attention (Markey, 2020). Unlike the Asia Pacific, it was argued, where China and the U.S. are engaged in strategic competition, in the West they faced common threats and shared similar interests in curbing terrorism, securing energy supples, stabilizing Afghanistan, and ensuring nonproliferation (Yun Sun, 2013). But there were always clear limitations to this cooperation, as recent events have underlined. In December 2020, the New York Times released a series of secret speeches by President Xi Jinping from 2014 argued that

the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would result in a wave of extremists flooding its restive Xinjiang province (Ramzy, 2020). This marked the beginning of China's "People's War on Terror" and laid the groundwork for the mass incarceration program that emerged in 2017 and shocked the world (Jardine, 2022). The neighboring Central Asian republics were seen as the first line of defense in securing China's western borders.

China's creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; security agreements; economic initiatives; and growing trade relations and normative influence have been well documented (Cooley, 2012; Cooley and Nexon, 2020; Jardine and Lemon, 2020; Petersen and Pantucci, 2022; Markey, 2020;), little has been written about how Chinese scholars have been thinking about Central Asia other than two essays which we explore below. The government in Beijing has paid significant attention to better understanding this critical part of the world. In 2015, the China's government commissioned translations of eight major works of Western scholarship on Central Asia into Mandarin in a bid to improve the quality of China's regional studies research (See Appendix 3).

This article aims to contribute new insights into Chinese scholarship on Central Asia and the changing approach to regional studies in China's academic institutes. The article begins by outlining the Structural Topic Model (STM) employed to analyze a sample of 231 articles on the region published in China between 2008 and 2022. Next, we review Mandarin-language journal articles that have previously attempted to contextualize the state of Central Asian studies and identify gaps that we intend to fill. Finally, we provide an analysis of our data and the main trends we have identified from our Structural Topic Model analysis.

Data Collection and Methods

This section outlines the procedures for data collection and analysis that will be used for this paper on the changing nature of China's regional studies scholarship. We will start by detailing the criteria that we followed to identify the sources of knowledge about Central Asia in Chinese academia. We will also outline our rationale for including or excluding related works of scholarship in the Chinese language within our medium-sample dataset. We will then describe the statistics of our database, which includes a directory of scholars publishing in Mandarin, a list of research centers and other institutions that produce knowledge about the region in the People's Republic of China, as well as a new collection of academic publications (books, articles, and reports). Finally, we will go through the quantitative part of our analysis, where we explain the choice of training a Structural Topic Model (STM) for a thematic analysis of the publications in Mandarin (Roberts et al, 2014). The STM is an unsupervised quantitative document analysis method that allows

us to estimate thematic prevalence and content over a large number of documents. Its key innovation is that it allows us to use covariates, document-level variables (e.g., date of publication, author, source), and estimate their effect on both prevalence and content (Combei, 2019). This work aims to show how innovative methods of unsupervised document analysis can help us shed light on the overall trend of academic production on Central Asia in China without prioritizing established narratives over latent content. The aim of the project is to use the same methodology with the final version of our database and to match our entries with further content and prevalence variables to refine our analysis.

Data Selection and Collection

The main decision to make when starting an analysis of geographically and linguistically located scholarship is to define the boundaries of collection. Namely, when trying to understand the patterns in Central Asian and post-Soviet studies in Chinese academia, we started by defining what we mean by "Chinese." As the purpose of the research is to identify shifting patterns of research interests in the People's Republic of China, the boundaries of the research will coincide with the boundaries of the PRC. The opposite choice would have resulted in a civilizational analysis of all academic output coming from culturally Chinese researchers writing in the Mandarin language, which would have diluted the original purpose of this study.

The second step was to define the geographic scope and disciplinary boundaries at a content level. Firstly, we opted for the inclusive choice of matching Central Asian studies with Russian/post-Soviet studies as we noted that Central Asia is often viewed through a Russo-centric lens and many influential Chinese Russianists often contribute their ideas to the Central Asian studies discipline. This tracks with the pattern in Western scholarship on the region in the early 1990s, and the Russo-centric methodologies used to develop local-level analysis. As for the disciplinary boundaries, we opted for a similarly loose filter by including research in the social sciences and partially humanities, with the exception of works on language, linguistics, and literature. Hence, political, sociological, anthropological, economic, but also historical, and philosophical research and related researchers have been selected as the best suited to provide an overview of China's existing thought on the region from the perspective of policy. The timeframe is limited to research published from the 1990s, when the Central Asian republics became independent, through to the present day.

The researchers and research centers were scraped manually from institutional websites and compiled into an excel document. This first step informed the data collection for academic publications that were sourced from the lists of publications on institutional webpages and

from the bibliography sections of books and articles. Another important source of publications on Central Asian/Eurasian studies was the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), a database containing most research articles written in China. The CNKI was launched by Tsinghua University in 1996 and grew to become one of the main international outlets of Chinese academic works. The publications were manually entered in an excel file paired with the following variables: author, title, type of publication, journal/publisher, year, abstract, source and keywords. While the titles of the publications were entered both in the original Mandarin and in the English translation, the rest of the data was automatically translated into the English language. It is to be noted that automatic translation is considered to be reliable enough for quantitative analyses such as the STM (Lucas et al, 2015), as it maintains the general semantic connections that are at the basis of topic modeling. The present version of the database contains 215 researchers, and 231 publications. It is to be noted that the database is an ongoing project and will be updated and completed with new entries over time.

The Structural Topic Model

We will now move to discuss the rationale for the use of the STM and its practicalities. The Structural Topic Model is a generative model of word counts, a machine-learning method that allows researchers to analyze large amounts of text data (including big data) and discover topics (themes) and their relationship with metadata (time, source, author, language, etc) (Roberts, 2014). The STM has been used for a variety of purposes in the academic literature, from the analysis of Human Rights Reports (Bagozzi and Berliner, 2018), stakeholders' narratives in urban studies (Anzoise et al, 2019), and Tweets by politicians (Combei and Giannetti, 2020). The main measures it estimates are topic prevalence (the probability of a topic/theme to be found in the corpus of documents and in the single documents) and topic content (the probability of words belonging to the topic) and its most relevant innovation is to allow the estimation of the effect of covariates, such as time or source, on both measures (Roberts, 2019). Given that our study focuses on the thematic evolution of Chinese academic output on Central Asia and Russia, the STM offers an important tool to estimate topical change over time, while also taking into account other contextual variables. At the same time, being mostly unsupervised, it partially removes biases arising from manual coding of abstracts (Barusch et al, 2011).

Moving to the practical explanation, we loaded our list of publications on the software R and performed the analysis through RStudio by using the package stm, which contains a series of functions that allowed us to pre-process our texts, select our model, and train it to produce our estimation (Roberts et al, 2014). We pre-processed our text by removing

punctuation, numbers, and stopwords (words that have no influence on meaning, such as 'the,' 'and,' etc.) and converting letters to lowercase (Roberts, 2014; Combei, 2019). Then, the text was processed using the stm package and paired with its covariates (our original variables in the database). In the case of our preliminary analysis, we only used the year of publication as a time variable. After that, we proceeded with the selection of our model. Following the literature, we used spectral estimation and employed the searchk function to select a proper number of topics to estimate. The number of topics and the choice of method of estimation are the only human-made choices in the STM. We chose to use statistical methods to inform our choice. The right amount of topics for our corpus is 14. We then proceeded with the estimation of the topics. After that, we paired each topic with the most relevant documents through the getThoughts function and manually labeled each topic based on the most relevant related documents and words. Finally, we estimated the effect of the variable time. The findings of this process are discussed below.

The Evolution of Central Asian Studies in the Chinese Context

Xiao Bin's "Central Asian Studies in China"(Bin, 2019) provides valuable insight into the growth and trajectory of development of regional studies in China. According to his findings, most of the early scholars who studied the region were previously involved in Soviet studies, the Russian language, and international Communist history. Central Asia had been peripheral or treated as a subfield within Soviet studies, and thus, Chinese academics had lacked an academic understanding of the region itself. Their foreign language was usually Russian; therefore, they heavily relied on Russian sources, and there was a limited exchange of knowledge with scholars from Central Asia. This correlates with the western scholarship at the time, which was also rooted in Sovietology and the methods of that field permeated early research on Central Asia. Xiao's research gathered data from CNKI-published works of Chinese Central Asian Studies from 1992 to 2018, and 5148 papers (4818 of which are journal articles, and 330 of which Masters and Ph.D. dissertations) were selected for their research analysis. Xiao's study recognizes 7 sub-categories of research interests in Central Asian studies and notes that agriculture, energy, and economic cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are the most well-researched areas. Other areas of growing interest for graduate students are the Belt and Road Initiative and broader Central Asian trade relations. Meanwhile, history, language, and cultural studies tend to be pursued by international students from Central Asia, the majority of whom conducted research at Xinjiang Pedagogical University. Other common themes in graduate studies are the "Three Evils," color revolutions, geopolitics, narcotics, and international crime. Xiao Bin notes that most studies rely on traditional methods and use macro-theories rather than cutting-edge micro-level analysis of economic and political

issues. Interestingly, the most widely cited works in Chinese studies on Central Asia are those concerning U.S. foreign policy in the region, whereas studies on local domestic politics tend to be less well circulated. In contrast to western scholarship, terrorism and extremism are the least studied topics in Central Asian regional studies. As scholars such as Alexander Cooley have noted of Western scholarship on the region, research agendas were dominated by security crises and "[the West's] own prevailing security" interests. Xiao notes that studies on the region tend to be policy-oriented and there is a lack of foundational research in the field. In addition, Xiao notes that there is a lack of originality and though there are a large number of research teams conducting research on the region, very few of the researchers have Central Asian expertise, and direct funding for projects on the region is scarce. The main research hubs for the region tend to be in Beijing, Shanghai, Lanzhou, Xi'an, and Urumqi, all of which host major institutes that teach and research Central Asia.

Plot 1 - Number of Chinese Journal Articles in Central Asia Studies

Number of Chinese Journal Articles of Central Asian Studies and Number of PhD and MA Dissertations of Central Asian Studies
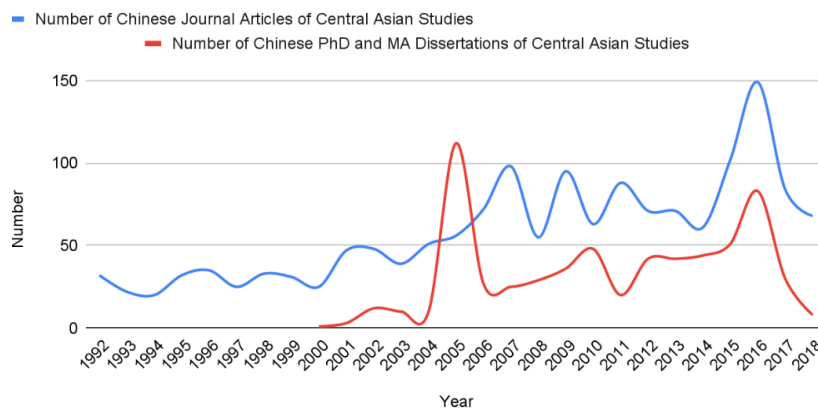

(Source: Xiao, 2019).

He Keyong and Liu Li's "Status Quo of International Central Asian Studies" uses qualitative methods to analyze trends in Central Asian studies among Western academics, and it reflects comparatively with the state of the field in China. This research is based on another project led by He – "Translated Series of Studies on Ethnic Relations and Conflict in Central Asia" – a major project of the National Social Science Fund in 2015; it translated 10 prominent books (Appendix 3) of Central Asian studies from English to Chinese. In their analysis of the Western books exploring ethnic relations and political reforms, the authors conclude that the works analyze Central Asia in the context of contemporary

history and globalization with full consideration of Central Asia's special historical backgrounds and regional characteristics. They suggest that Chinese Central Asianists could benefit from more fieldwork in the region. Ethnographic research offers insights that other research methods cannot provide. Moreover, an important aspect of academic work is to provide consultation for state policy and serve society. There is a great number of Chinese expats and investors who could benefit from better regional expertise, for example. During the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, investors lacked understanding of the region, and the potential for conflict, in particular, resulting in investing in dangerous areas and jeopardizing the safety of the country and related personnel.

**Main Trends in China's Scholarship on Central Asia: Quantitative Analysis through the STM**

After describing the state of the art in terms of analysis of China's academic literature on Central Asia, we proceeded by applying the STM on a sample of our dataset, which includes documents published between 2008 and 2022. The reason for this choice is to use a corpus with a normal distribution of documents over time, as visualized in Plot 2.

Plot 2 – Distribution of publications on Central Asia in China per year

Distribution of publications on Central Asia in China per year
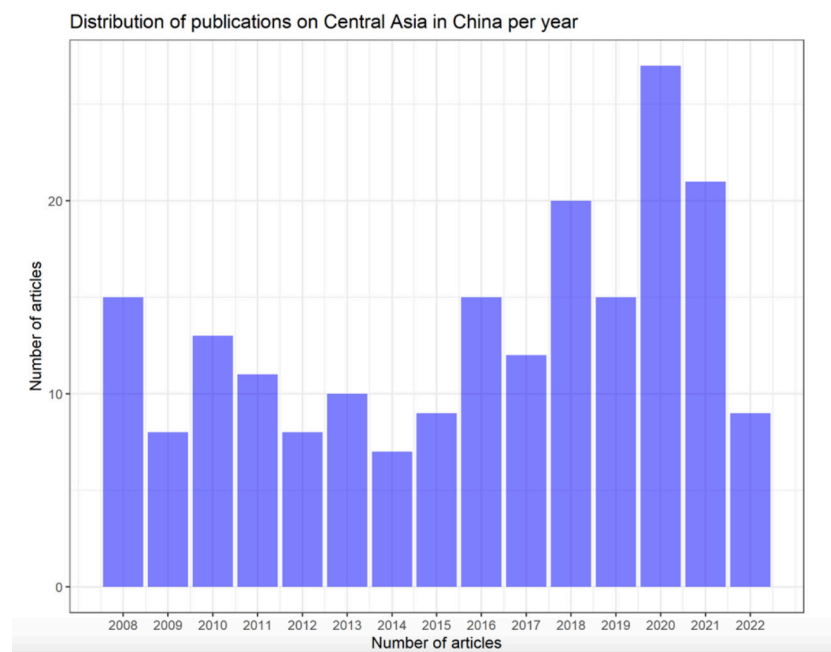
After filtering the dataset, we proceeded to estimate our Structural Topic Model as described in the methodology section. We estimated 14 topics quantitatively that we subsequently grouped in four thematic clusters to facilitate the analysis. Our classification includes clusters on history/culture (topics 1, 4, 7, 10 and 11), economics (topic 2, 5, 7, 13, 14), politics (topics 3, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13) and security (5, 6, 12, 13). It is to be noted that some topics such as topic 7 on the ancient Silk Roads and the Belt and Road Initiative or topic 13 on post-Soviet transition span multiple clusters. Table 1, in the appendix, provides an overview of our topics matched with the unsupervised quantitative estimation of common words and the qualitative labels and descriptions based on an analysis of the most relevant documents per each topic. Plot 3 instead shows the estimation of the change of prevalence over time for each topic. In the next subsections we will describe each cluster in more detail and draw some comparisons between the various topics to identify interesting trends.

Plot 3 – Change of Prevalence over Time
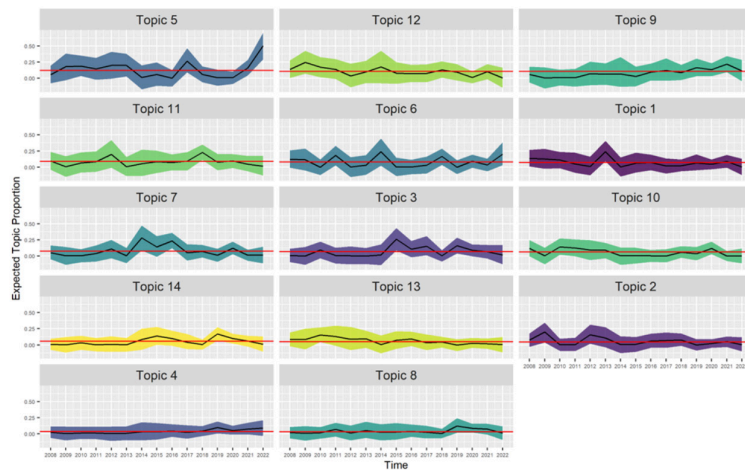
History and Culture

Our first cluster relates to the "soft" themes in our corpus mostly related to humanities and their role in the construction of Central Asian political identity. Historical and archeological research focus on Central Asia and along the ancient silk roads in China has seen an increasing funding in the last decade and previous research posits that this trend might be politically motivated (Storozum and Li, 2020). Given the lack of Chinese involvement in Central Asia in most recent pre-independence history due to the demise of the Chinese empire and various moments of tensions with the Soviet Union until 1989, China's status as a relevant and legitimate player in its Western neighborhood needs to tap into ancient

history. Starting from archaeological research (our topic 4), works such as Liu Yingsheng's "Horses in Ancient East-West Communication" (*gudai dongxifang jiaoliuzhongde mapi,* 2018) or Liu Zixin's (2016) study of tombs in Urumqi, focus on the interrelationship between Chinese and Central Asian cultures since pre-modern times through the example of the importance of horsemanship or the shape and function of tombs.

Topic 10 and 11 instead focus on those historical narratives that see China as a Central Asian nation due to its common history with the region. Topic 11 is related to the role of the Mongolian khanates in Central Asia and contains works such as Liu Yinsheng's (2016) study of the Western expeditions during the rule of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China or Lan Qi and Liu Gang's (2018) volume 4 of the collection (zhongya shi, Central Asian history) dealing with the history of the Mongol dynasty and its Central Asian successor kingdoms. Topic 10 instead focuses on those areas of Central Asia that have been shaped by China's imperial history and become to be considered Chinese Central Asia. Zhang Guangda and Rong Xinjiang's collection of works on the history of the Khotan Kingdom (present Hotan/Hetian in the Chinese Xinjiang province), Bo Bi's (2020) work on the Sogdians in Yanqi or the edited volume by Chen Haiyu and Rong Xinjiang (2018) on "multilingual, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic communities along the Silk Road in the medieval period" all focus on the co-construction of religious, cultural and linguistic histories in these border areas.

Finally, topic 1 and 7 have a more modern take on historical and cultural issues. On one side, topic 1 is centered around narratives of the role of culture and language in ethnic relations and nation building. It contains both localized research on domestic issues in Central Asia and research on Sino-Central Asian cultural relations and China's relations with its Muslim communities. Nation-building and ethnic conflicts are the main topics of the domestic-related literature with works such as Yang Bo and Wang Tianju's (2021) "An Analysis of Language Security in Central Asian Countries" (*zhongya guojia yuyan anquan wenti tanxi*) on the role of language policies in producing stability or Jiang Haijiao's (2019) work on ethnic conflicts in Southern Kyrgyzstan. China-related research on this theme can be exemplified by Liu Yinsheng's (2013) work on Hui language and culture or Si Junqin's (2020) study on Dunggan literature. Topic 7, whose many aspects we will analyze in our related sections, is interesting here as it contains research works that connect historical narratives of the Silk Road to the present Chinese flagship connectivity project, the Belt and Road Initiative. Good examples are Xu Lang's (2022) recent article on the expansion of the use of the term *sichou zhilu* (silk road) or Liu Yingsheng's many works on the connection between historical silk roads the present BRI (2016; 2018). This topic is particularly relevant in the aftermath of the announcement of the Belt and Road initiative in 2013 (see plot 3).

Economics and Finance

The economic cluster shows the largest change over time as China's focus on Central Asia evolves. Early research in the field of economics focused on analyses of the domestic situation both at a regional or national level. Topic 2 on economic development and finance contains very general analyses of economic aspects of Central Asian states, such as Zhang Ning's (2012) book on Uzbekistan's economic development after independence or Zhang Ning, Li Xue and Li Xinwei's similar analysis on Kyrgyzstan (2013). Moreover, the topic moves to regional analyses such as Zhou Lihua and Zhang Wenzhong's book on financial security and capital flows in Central Asia (2018). These regional attention tends to be more related to economic relations with China. Topic 13 instead focuses on post-Soviet transition and contains books such as the volume edited by Li Shuyun and Cheng Wei (2013) that gives a regional perspective of economic transition after the fall of the USSR. An interesting aspect is that both themes seem to not be particularly relevant in the most recent parts of our timeframe showing a decrease of interest in such analyses, particularly in the post-Soviet transition. The reason might be that the topic has started to age and research is evolving towards a less Soviet-centric point of view.

More recent economic research seems to have evolved with China's involvement in Central Asia and focuses mostly on China's role in the region. While topic 5, our most prevalent topic throughout, relates to the role of rule of law and security in investment in Central Asia, topics 7 and 14 deal with issues that became more relevant in the last decade such as the connectivity projects in the BRI and the theme of energy and sustainability. Topic 5, which is more of a security-related topic, is collocated in this cluster because it contains research produced by China's Ministry of Commerce on the investment environment in Central Asian states (MOFCOM, 2022). Topic 7 on the Silk Roads contains geopolitical analyses on the Silk Road Economic Belt, the terrestrial and Central Asia-focused part of the BRI, which tend to have an important economic significance. See for example Zhao Huasheng's (2014) article "The Focus and Entry point of the Silk Road Economic Belt" (*sichou zhilu jingjidai de guanzhudian ji qierudian*) which describes the focal role of Russia and Central Asia in the project. Finally, a very relevant subject in this cluster is topic 14 on energy and sustainability. The latter shows an enhanced relevance from 2015 and although it contains research on more traditional energy sources, such as Wang Sihai, 2022 on Turkmenistan's oil and gas resources, the topic is mostly about sustainable energy and renewable resources. Xu Hongfeng and Wang Jing (2019) analyze the situation of renewable energy in Kazakhstan and cooperation with China on hydro, wind and photovoltaic power. Pang Guanglian et al. (2019) instead focus on the impact of the international community striving for carbon neutrality on energy policy in Central Asia at a regional level. It will be interesting to see how this last

topic will evolve after research on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent geopolitical/energy crisis will be published in the near future.

Politics and International Relations

In the political cluster, our STM produces a clear division between topics on domestic political science (topics 3 and topic 13) and those related to relations between Central Asia and foreign countries (topic 7, 8, 9 and 12). In the first group we find again topic 13 on the post-Soviet transition, which included analyses on the process of change after the fall of the USSR. Examples are Li Ning's (2016) analysis of the legacy of the Soviet Union in Kazakhstan or Deng Hao's (2011) research on the effects of ethnic issues during the Soviet period in post-independence Kyrgyzstan. Topic 3 is instead a new entry in our analysis and it deals with political systems and institutions in Central Asia, spanning from state-building to legislative analyses. Just to give a few examples, Li Donghai's (2015) contribution explores political systems in Central Asia in terms of their democratic institutions (President and Parliament) and its judicial institutions, while Wang Lingbin and Lei Lin (2019) write about elites, parties and institutions specifically in Kyrgyzstan again focusing on division of power between political, judicial and legislative institutions. It is to be noted that, as pointed out above, the "post-Soviet" topic seems to represent a discussion in the past, while the discussion on political systems is more lively than ever in recent years.

The second group related mostly to Central Asian relations with China, Russia and the United States. A first finding is that analyses of International Relations in Central Asia seem very much focused on the so-called great powers (both intended at a global or regional level), with less attention to other international actors (Turkey, South Korea, India) whose more localized relations in Central Asia are often analyzed in Western literature. Topic 8 includes mostly general IR theory-based analyses of great power relations connected to the region, such as Zhao Huasheng's Sino-Russian-American Relations and the International Order (zhong-e-mei guanxi yu guiji zhixu) or Li Qi's (2016) more constructivist account of Central Asian relations with great powers in geopolitical, geoeconomic and geocultural terms. Topic 7, 9 and 12 respectively cover Central Asia's relations with China, Russia and the United States. Given that we analyzed topic 7 thoroughly on the Belt and Road Initiative and China's role in Eurasia, we will focus on Russia and American roles. Topic 12 contains research on American involvement in Central Asia and Afghanistan, such as Zhao Huasheng's (2009) comment on Obama's policy in Afghanistan that he describes as a prelude of an exit strategy or Pan Guang and Zhang Yifen's (2008) analysis of the so-called US "Greater Central Asia" plan, referring to the American project to include Afghanistan to the Central Asia region and to promote connectivity between Central and South Asia. The American

topics seems to follow the direction of US policy in the region, meaning that it is relevant until the early 2010s and becomes less interesting in the later years of our timeframe. On the contrary the Russia topic (topic 9) becomes more and more relevant with the passing of time. It is to be said that Central Asian studies in China seem to be even more biased towards the Russian world than the Western discipline is, as many researchers are former Sovietologists or Russian-studies specialists that dedicate part of their research to the region. Hence, the overall relevance of the topic is not surprising. However, the interesting issue here is that the enhanced relevance of analyses of Russian role in Central Asia seem related to China's increasing involvement in the region that sparks discussion on the role of the Eurasian Economic Union (Xu Xiangmei, 2020; Garbuzarova and Li Chuanxun, 2022), or on the impact of China's presence on Russian relations with the region (Qu Wenyi and Zhang Xia, 2021).

Domestic and International Security

The security-related cluster is the smallest one including only four topics (5, 6, 12, 13), three of which were already treated in other groups. Yet, topics 5, 6 and 12 are among the most relevant overall. Topic 5 on investment is included here because of its focus on rule of law, a central issue in discussions on security. Wang Na and Yang Zhaobin (2017) for example analyze the status of rule of law in Kyrgyzstan in different fields (trade, terrorism, criminality, etc). At the same time, our "post-Soviet" topic 13 includes aspects of security coming from the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Li Ning, 2016). Topic 6 and 12 are more international in their focus. The American topic 12 is included here because of its analysis of US policy in Afghanistan, which was a fundamental discussion in Central Asia studies as it includes investigations of possible effects of change in US policy in terms of security in Central Asia, such as Zhao Huasheng's (2011) analysis of American and Russian role in Afghanistan. Another theme here is US and Western role in Chinese Central Asia, like Pan Guang and Zhao Guojun's (2009) article on the World Uyghur Congress and alleged Western support to its cause.

The only new topic here is one of the most relevant in any analysis on Central Asian security and is the only purely security-related topic in our model. Topic 6, "Securities: counterterrorism, the SCO, food and water", contains basically all topics of security related to the Central Asian region. A central issue in this topic is related to food security and agricultural cooperation, which is treated in Wei Feng's (2020) recent book *A Study on Food Issues in Central Asia* (*zhongya diqu liangshi wenti yanjiu / guowai yewu luncong*). The food security theme spans also towards more trade-related discussions on agriculture (Nihemaiti Huojia, 2014; Wei Feng, 2018). Mai Haitiao (2022) introduces another important security topic, water security, which is very relevant for Central Asia, in a discussion

on the effect of urbanization on water reserves in the region. Finally, hard security discussions focus mainly on counter-terrorism. Xinjiang and the threat of the so-called East Turkestan extremist forces to China, for example, are treated by Pan Guang and Zhao Guojun (2008) that connect the organization of East Turkestan forces on the ground with the World Uyghur Congress. Another relevant topic is the fight against the so-called "Three Evils" in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Pan Guang, 2011a; 2011b; Sun Zhuangzhi, 2018). It is interesting to see that the SCO mostly appears in the security-related topic in our model, in contrast with the common view that sees China's interest in the organization as focused on economic issues.

Conclusion

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, China has become a substantial political and economic player in Central Asia. To facilitate its integration with the region, Chinese academia has been expanding regional studies programs and language training for the region. In addition, the choice of academic inquiries has widened dramatically in recent decades with government-funded initiatives to improve the quality of academic analysis. This study has shown that Chinese academia has a very important focus on cultural relations with Central Asia. Interestingly, studies on Russia's role in the region have grown over time, likely due to the interest in exploring Russian organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union's compatibility with Chinese multilateral institutions and broader regional objectives.

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