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Divergence or Convergence? A Global Bibliometric Analysis of CSR Research Trends Between China and the West

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Abstract

In contemporary business practice, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a critical metric for assessing comprehensive corporate value. Leveraging bibliometric data from the CNKI and Web of Science core databases, this study employs CiteSpace 6.2 to conduct a knowledge mapping analysis, systematically tracing the evolutionary trajectory, research hotspots, and future directions of CSR studies between 2015 and 2024. The findings reveal a sustained upward trend in CSR research globally, with a notable acceleration in Chinese scholarship post-2022, publications tripled by 2023, while Western research exhibited gradual growth from 2020 onward. CSR scholarship demonstrates pronounced interdisciplinary diversity, spanning environmental governance, financial performance, corporate governance, and supply chain management. Despite shared thematic foundations, stark divergences exist in regional priorities: Chinese studies emphasize context-specific agendas like "common prosperity" and rural revitalization, whereas Western research prioritizes sustainability frameworks, bibliometric methodologies, and empirical validations. Emerging trends underscore the rising significance of corporate identity construction and the transformative potential of artificial intelligence and big data analytics in CSR practices. To advance the field, we advocate for deeper interdisciplinary integration, theoretical expansion, and strategic adoption of digital technologies to enhance corporate global competitiveness and contribute to sustainable development imperatives.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); knowledge mapping analysis; interdisciplinary research; corporate identity construction; artificial intelligence; big data

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1 INTRODUCTTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into a pivotal concept in contemporary business practice and academic research, reflecting the critical role enterprises play in addressing societal challenges (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Proactive CSR engagement not only enhances corporate credibility but also fosters economic growth, suggesting a virtuous cycle where robust social responsibility performance translates into tangible economic benefits (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Amid escalating stakeholder demands for ethical accountability (Freeman et al., 2020), the scope of CSR has expanded beyond mere legal compliance (Jamali et al., 2017) to encompass broader commitments to sustainability (Elkington, 2018), social equity, and environmental stewardship. This paradigm shift has spurred multidisciplinary investigations into how firms strategically integrate CSR to bolster competitive advantage and societal well-being (Matten & Moon, 2008).

Recent years have witnessed a surge in CSR scholarship, particularly in exploring the interplay between digital transformation and CSR practices (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). This trend is driven by global imperatives such as climate change (Kolk & Pinkse, 2008), rising inequality, and shifting consumer preferences. Concurrently, the ascendancy of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks has intensified scrutiny of corporate sustainability performance (Eccles & Serafeim, 2013). Scholars increasingly examine how CSR alignment with core strategy enhances organizational resilience and societal impact (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). The interdisciplinary nature of CSR research—spanning ethics, sociology, economics, and environmental science—has further enriched holistic understandings of corporate accountability (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

Despite a proliferation of CSR literature, systematic reviews remain fragmented, necessitating rigorous bibliometric synthesis to map knowledge trajectories and emerging frontiers (Fink, 2019). Prior studies highlight the complexity of CSR governance, particularly in platform-based economies, where antecedent factors and moderators require nuanced theoretical and empirical exploration (Wang & Wang, 2018). This gap is especially salient in China, where rapid economic growth and institutional transitions have created a unique laboratory for CSR innovation (Lin, 2021). By analyzing global and regional CSR research trends, this study aims to elucidate the evolution of corporate responsibility and its implications for business strategy and social progress.

2 Theoretical Framework: Foundations and Evolution of CSR Research

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into a multidimensional construct shaped by diverse theoretical perspectives, institutional contexts, and stakeholder demands. This study is anchored in three foundational theoretical frameworks that dominate contemporary CSR scholarship: stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and shared value creation. These lenses provide a robust scaffold for analyzing the divergent trajectories of CSR research between China and the West, while also accommodating emerging paradigms such as ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) integration and digital governance.

2.1 Stakeholder Theory: Balancing Competing Interests

Stakeholder theory posits that corporations must address the interests of diverse stakeholders—including shareholders, employees, communities, and regulators—to achieve long-term sustainability (Freeman et al., 2020). Western CSR research often operationalizes this framework through empirical studies on disclosure practices (Eccles & Serafeim, 2013), supply chain ethics (Tang et al., 2021), and shareholder activism (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). In contrast, Chinese scholarship emphasizes state-stakeholder dynamics, where state-owned enterprises (SOEs) prioritize governmental policy alignment (e.g., “common prosperity”) alongside market performance (Li & Zhang, 2022). This divergence reflects broader institutional differences: while Western firms navigate voluntary CSR adoption under market-driven governance (Carroll & Shabana, 2010), Chinese corporations operate within a state-guided model where CSR is often instrumentalized for socio-political objectives (Chen & Zhang, 2021).

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2.2 Institutional Theory: Legitimacy and Isomorphism

Institutional theory elucidates how CSR practices are shaped by regulatory, normative, and cognitive pressures (Matten & Moon, 2008). Globally, the rise of ESG reporting standards (e.g., GRI, SASB) reflects coercive isomorphism, compelling firms to adopt standardized sustainability metrics (Eccles et al., 2020). Western literature highlights mimetic isomorphism, where firms replicate industry leaders' CSR strategies to mitigate uncertainty (Porter & Kramer, 2019). Conversely, China's CSR evolution demonstrates normative isomorphism, driven by state mandates (e.g., SASAC's 2008 CSR guidelines) and ideological campaigns like "rural revitalization" (Kong & Zheng, 2022). Notably, the platform economy has introduced hybrid governance models, where digital firms (e.g., Alibaba, Tencent) blend Western ESG frameworks with localized CSR narratives (Lin, 2021).

2.3 Shared Value Creation: Strategic CSR and Competitive Advantage

The shared value paradigm (Porter & Kramer, 2011) redefines CSR as a strategic tool for economic and societal gain. Western research emphasizes innovation-driven CSR, linking sustainability initiatives to financial performance (Dyck et al., 2019) and circular economy transitions (Elkington, 2018). Chinese studies, however, explore political embeddedness, where CSR aligns with national agendas like "targeted poverty alleviation" to secure regulatory legitimacy (Wang & Mai, 2019). This dichotomy underscores a critical theoretical gap: whereas Western frameworks prioritize market-based value creation, Chinese models integrate state-corporate symbiosis, often blurring the boundaries between CSR and industrial policy (Li, 2023).

2.4 Emerging Frontiers: Digital Transformation and ESG Integration

Recent advancements in AI and big data analytics are reshaping CSR governance, enabling real-time impact assessments (Liu et al., 2023) but also introducing risks of algorithmic bias (Buhmann et al., 2020). Concurrently, ESG metrics have emerged as a universal evaluative framework, though their adoption in China remains nascent compared to Western markets (Shi & Wang, 2023). These developments suggest a future research imperative: reconciling technological disruption with ethical accountability while accounting for regional institutional variances.

Despite significant advancements in CSR research, critical gaps remain that limit a holistic understanding of global trends. First, while Western scholarship has achieved theoretical cohesion by integrating stakeholder theory, institutionalism, and shared value frameworks (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Porter & Kramer, 2019), Chinese research remains fragmented, with limited dialogue between political economy analyses of state-corporate relations and emerging global ESG paradigms (Shi & Wang, 2023). Second, methodological disparities persist: international studies employ sophisticated bibliometric and meta-analytic approaches (Zupic & ater, 2015), whereas Chinese research predominantly relies on qualitative case studies (Li & Zhang, 2022), creating an imbalance in evidence synthesis. Third, key actors like platform enterprises—central to China's digital economy—are underexplored regarding their unique CSR challenges, such as algorithmic accountability and gig worker welfare (Lin, 2021), compared to Western tech firms. Finally, while Western research has decisively shifted toward ESG-financial performance linkages (Eccles et al., 2020), Chinese studies lag in empirically validating ESG's impact, hindered by fragmented disclosure standards (Wang et al., 2023). These gaps highlight the need for integrative theoretical frameworks, advanced computational methods, and cross-regional sectoral analyses to advance CSR scholarship.

3 Data and Methodology

To address these gaps, this study investigates three core research questions: (1) How do keyword co-occurrence patterns reflect divergent institutionalization of CSR in China and the West? (2) What explains the 2023 surge in Chinese CSR publications—does it represent scholarly innovation or policy-driven com-

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pliance? (3) Can emerging technologies like AI-driven analytics bridge methodological divides between regional research traditions? By analyzing bibliometric data through comparative and temporal lenses, we elucidate both convergences and persistent divergences in global CSR research.

3.1 Data Sources

This study systematically analyzes CSR-related journal articles from both Chinese and international scholarship. The Chinese dataset was retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, focusing on publications indexed in Peking University Core Journals and CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) journals. Using the search terms " 企业社会责任 " (corporate social responsibility) and " 企业社会责任报告 " (CSR reports) with English synonym expansions, we collected articles published between 2015 and 2024 across all disciplines. After manual screening to exclude conference papers and irrelevant entries, 745 valid articles remained (retrieved September 16, 2024). The finalized dataset was exported in RefWorks format for bibliometric analysis.

For international literature, data were extracted from the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection using the search string: TS=("corporate social responsibility" OR "corporate social responsibility report") with the same temporal coverage (2015–2024). Only articles from SSCI and A&HCI-indexed journals were included, without disciplinary restrictions. Post-retrieval manual filtering yielded 763 relevant publications, exported as plain text files (retrieved September 16, 2024).

3.2 Research Methods

Bibliometrics, rooted in quantitative analysis of scholarly literature, uncovers latent patterns in academic knowledge production (Pritchard, 1969; Liang, 2013). Contemporary bibliometric techniques have evolved from simple citation counting to multidimensional approaches like co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-word analysis, enabling comprehensive research frontier identification (Small, 1973; Wang & Leng, 2010).

Among visualization tools, CiteSpace excels in mapping intellectual structures by analyzing citation networks and keyword dynamics (Chen, 2006). Its algorithmic capabilities—including cluster analysis based on betweenness centrality (Freeman, 1977) and burst detection—reveal domain-specific knowledge foundations and emerging trends (Li & Chen, 2022). Particularly, its time-zone graphs and timeline visualizations elucidate thematic evolution, while clustering algorithms (e.g., log-likelihood ratio) identify core research themes (Fu & Ding, 2019).

To conduct our bibliometric analysis, we implemented a rigorous analytical protocol using CiteSpace 6.2 software. The node type was set to Keywords to effectively map conceptual hotspots within the CSR research domain. We established a temporal framework spanning from 2010 to 2024, with one-year intervals for time slicing to capture the evolutionary trajectory of research themes. To optimize network visualization and interpretation, we applied Pathfinder network scaling combined with merged-network pruning techniques, which enhance structural clarity by eliminating redundant connections while preserving significant pathways. The analysis employed a g-index threshold (k=25) to maintain an optimal balance between comprehensive coverage and analytical focus. For thematic clustering and labeling, we utilized the log-likelihood ratio (LLR) algorithm, which provides statistically robust identification of research clusters. This methodological approach follows established best practices for longitudinal bibliometric research (Zupic & ater, 2015), ensuring both reproducibility of results and effective minimization of noise from peripheral or less significant citations in the network analysis. The protocol was designed to maximize the software's capability to reveal meaningful patterns and trends while maintaining methodological rigor throughout the investigation.

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4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of Annual Publication Volume in Core Journals

The longitudinal analysis of publication volumes in core journals provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) research. Our bibliometric examination reveals distinct developmental trajectories between domestic and international scholarship. During the initial observation period (2015-2018), publication outputs remained relatively balanced across Chinese and international journals. However, a significant divergence emerged in 2019, with international research experiencing accelerated growth that resulted in double the publication volume of Chinese studies by 2020 (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). This period marked the beginning of what might be termed a "global CSR research renaissance".

The Chinese academic community demonstrated a different pattern, with steady but modest growth until 2022, followed by an extraordinary surge in 2023 that saw publication numbers triple compared to the previous year. This dramatic increase, reaching 181 articles in a single year, suggests a fundamental shift in research priorities within Chinese academia. The timing of this surge correlates strongly with several key developments in China's regulatory and corporate landscape (Matten & Moon, 2008).

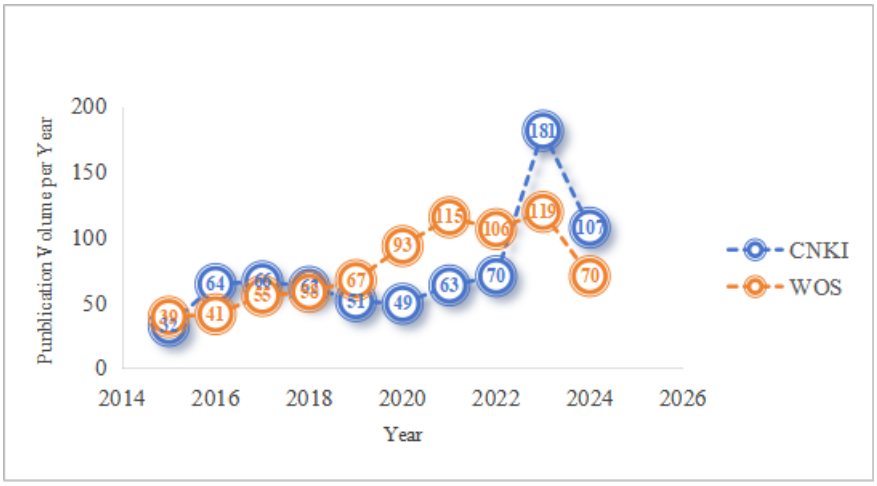


Figure 1: Annual publication volume of core journals at home and abroad

Contextual analysis reveals two primary catalysts for this trend. First, the practice of CSR reporting among Chinese listed enterprises expanded exponentially, growing from a mere 10 reports in 2006 to an impressive 1,422 by 2021, according to Wind Database statistics. This hundred-fold increase reflects a broader transformation in corporate transparency norms. Second, and perhaps more significantly, 2021-2022 witnessed major policy developments including the proposed amendments to China's Company Law incorporating CSR provisions and the integration of CSR requirements into the Listing Rules by both Shanghai and Shenzhen Stock Exchanges (CBNRI, 2023). These regulatory changes appear to have created a "compliance pull" effect, driving both corporate practice and academic inquiry.

4.2 Research Domains and Thematic Analysis

Keywords refer to words or phrases within a text, document, or discourse that encapsulate the central theme or core content of a research paper, representing its fundamental concepts. Consequently, analyzing keywords holds significant importance for comprehending contextual meaning, retrieving information, and conducting data analysis, as they provide a richer interpretation of a topic's centrality (Chen, 2017; Small,

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1999). This study employs CiteSpace software, with the node type (Node Types) set to "Keywords", to extract keywords from both domestic and international corporate social responsibility (CSR) research. Furthermore, the clustering function within the software is utilized to perform keyword co-occurrence analysis on the literature.

The principle of keyword cluster analysis (Cluster Analysis) is based on the frequency of co-occurrence (co-occurrence rate) of two keywords within the same document as an analytical theme. By applying clustering statistical methods, closely related keywords are grouped together to form clusters (Leydesdorff & Welbers, 2011). This approach allows for a detailed visualization of the research themes in CSR studies across different regions. The cluster numbering is inversely correlated with the number of members within a cluster—that is, a smaller cluster number indicates a larger volume of literature included.

4.2.1 Domestic Trend in China

Domestic literature yields 288 network nodes and 218 connecting lines, with a network density of 0.0053. The modularity value (0.8407) exceeds the threshold of 0.3, indicating a highly significant clustering effect (Newman, 2006). Additionally, the average silhouette value (0.9702) surpasses 0.7, confirming the reliability of the clustering results (Rousseeuw, 1987). Using the log-likelihood ratio (LLR) algorithm, eight major clusters are identified. Based on their content, these clusters can be categorized into three primary research domains (see Figure 2).

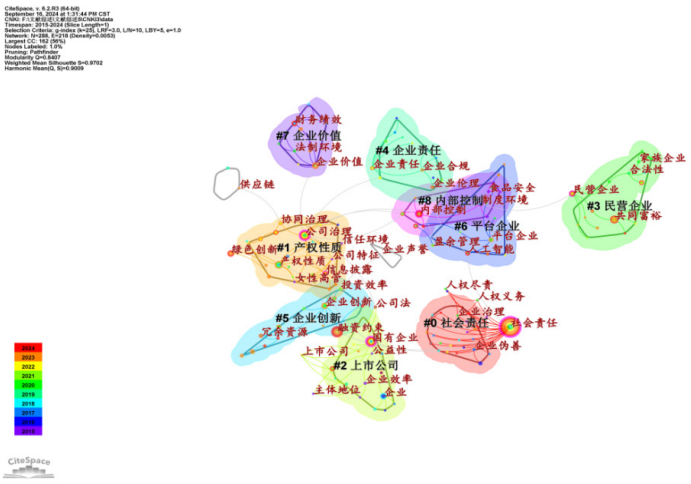


Figure 2: Keyword cluster map of domestic research on CSR

The first research category focuses on the enterprises themselves, particularly studies related to listed companies, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and private firms in fulfilling corporate social responsibility (CSR). This includes clusters #2 "Listed Companies", #3 "Private Enterprises", and #6 "Platform Enterprises", with major keywords such as "family business", "platform enterprise", "state-owned enterprise", "private enterprise", "dominant position", and "common prosperity". Research on the behavioral characteristics of different types of enterprises in CSR implementation has long been a critical pathway in domestic CSR studies. Empirical evidence suggests that firms with varying ownership structures exhibit distinct CSR behaviors. For instance, SOEs prioritize social contributions and governmental obligations alongside economic performance, whereas private enterprises tend to engage in high-profile CSR activities to enhance their public image and gain governmental recognition (2022 China Corporate Social Responsibility Report: The Power of Endogenous Growth, 2022). These findings reveal how firms balance economic objectives and social responsibilities when addressing diverse stakeholder demands.

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The second research category examines corporate institutions and governance, including institutional environments, corporate governance, and property rights, as represented by clusters #1 “Property Rights” and #8 “Internal Control”. Key terms in this domain include “information disclosure”, “institutional environment”, “trust environment”, “internal control”, and “collaborative governance”. Corporate institutions and governance constitute another crucial factor influencing CSR practices. Studies demonstrate that well-structured governance mechanisms and robust internal control systems enhance CSR performance by improving transparency in disclosures (Li, 2023). These insights underscore the pivotal role of internal governance in driving responsible business conduct.

The third research category investigates CSR and corporate value, analyzing the content, hierarchy, and paradigms of CSR, as reflected in clusters #0 “Social Responsibility”, #4 “Corporate Responsibility”, and #7 “Corporate Value”. Relevant keywords include “corporate hypocrisy”, “legal environment”, and “corporate compliance”. Scholars categorize CSR into three hierarchical dimensions such as legal responsibility (the baseline), ethical responsibility, and philanthropic responsibility (Wang & Mai, 2019). Research on the relationship between CSR and corporate value indicates that responsible business practices not only strengthen brand reputation but also mitigate operational risks and capital costs, thereby fostering long-term value creation (Wang & Mai, 2019).

4.2.2 International Trend

This study similarly employs the log-likelihood ratio (LLR) algorithm to perform keyword clustering analysis on international CSR literature, yielding 291 network nodes and 591 connecting lines, with a network density of 0.014. The modularity value (0.6493) exceeds the threshold of 0.3, indicating a statistically significant clustering structure (Newman, 2006). Furthermore, the average silhouette value (0.834) surpasses 0.7, confirming the high reliability of the clustering results (Rousseeuw, 1987). Based on the visualization output, eight major clusters were identified and subsequently categorized into three primary research domains (see Figure 3).

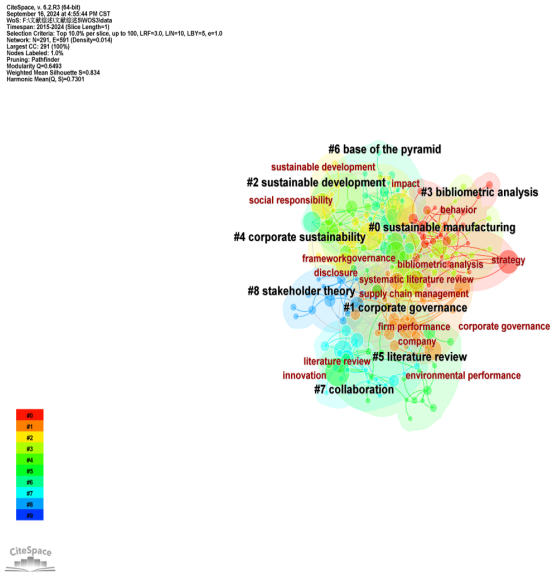


Figure 3: Keyword cluster map of international research on CSR

The first research category centers on corporate governance and foundational theoretical frameworks of CSR, examining intrinsic influencing factors from a governance perspective. This includes clusters #1 “corporate governance”, #6 “base of the pyramid”, and #8 “stakeholder theory”, with prominent keywords such as “corporate governance”, “firm performance”, “framework”, “disclosure”, and “supply chain man-

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agement". International literature from 2016 to 2020 reveals two key trends in corporate governance research: (1) internal governance mechanisms—particularly board governance, shareholder governance, and executive governance—emerged as dominant themes, while (2) external governance mechanisms, including stakeholder engagement and disclosure practices, gained substantial traction (Tang, Wu, & Tang, 2021).

The second research category focuses on sustainability, encompassing clusters #0 "sustainable manufacturing", #2 "sustainable development", #4 "corporate sustainability", and #7 "collaboration". Key terms in this domain include "sustainable development", "impact", "environmental performance", and "innovation". The rapid industrialization of Western societies has precipitated severe environmental crises, fostering widespread recognition of ecological limits and existential risks to humanity. The World Conservation Strategy (1980) by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) notably asserted: "The relationships between natural, social, ecological, and economic systems—as well as resource utilization processes—must be rigorously examined to ensure global sustainable development". The visualization analysis reveals not only a higher quantity of sustainability-related clusters but also their lower cluster numbers, signifying a disproportionately large volume of publications. This underscores the centrality of sustainability in international CSR scholarship.

The third research category comprises systematic reviews of CSR literature, as evidenced by clusters #3 "bibliometric analysis" and #5 "literature review". This indicates that Western academia has developed a mature, structured body of meta-analytical and bibliometric research on CSR—a phenomenon absent in domestic literature. The lack of comparable systematic reviews in Chinese CSR research suggests a critical gap, warranting future scholarly efforts to consolidate empirical findings through comprehensive meta-studies (Zhao & Weng, 2023).

4.3 Research Hotspots

Following the overview of major CSR research domains in domestic and international literature based on cluster mapping, this study further investigates research hotspots in the CSR field by extracting high-frequency keywords and generating keyword co-occurrence networks (see Figures 4 and 5). In CiteSpace, the node type was set to "Keyword" with a time slicing parameter of 1 year (years per slice = 1), meaning the most frequently occurring keywords were extracted annually. The frequency of keyword appearance reflects its level of academic attention (see Table 1). Since the search terms "企业社会责任" (CSR) and "corporate social responsibility" were used in CNKI and Web of Science respectively, these terms naturally exhibited the highest frequencies but are excluded from discussion.

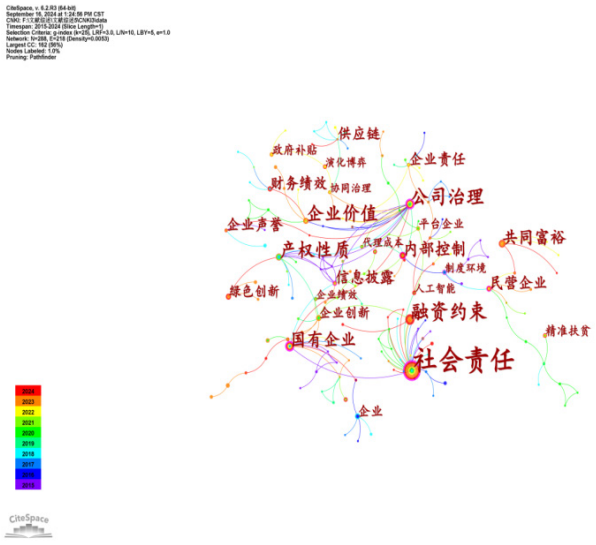


Figure 4: Keyword co-occurrence map of CSR at home

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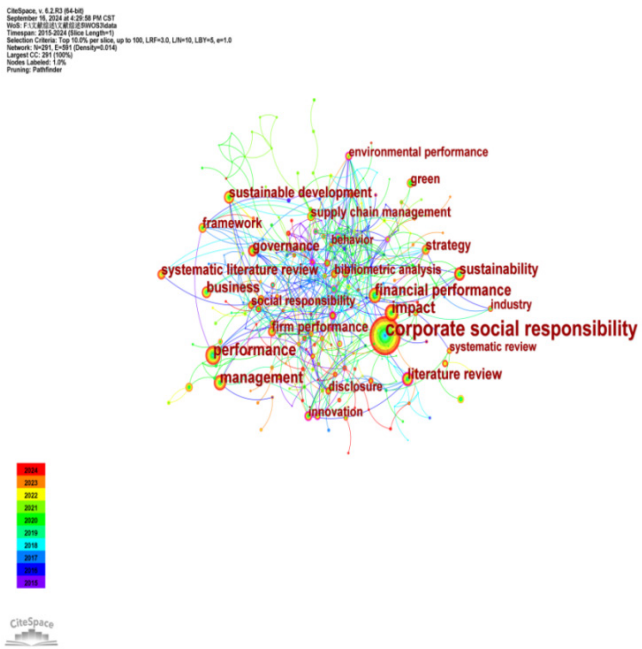


Figure 5: Keyword co-occurrence map of CSR abroad

Figures 4 and 5 reveal that “financing constraints”, “corporate governance”, “firm value”, “property rights”, “internal control”, “state-owned enterprises”, and “common prosperity” dominate domestic CSR literature. In contrast, international research emphasizes “sustainability”, “financial performance”, “sustainable development”, “supply chain management”, and “firm performance”. For comparative analysis, Table1 presents the top 20 high-frequency keywords from both China and abroad. Cross-regional commonalities include shared focus on corporate governance, supply chains, information disclosure, financial performance, and innovation. Distinctively, domestic studies prioritize financing constraints and property rights, while international scholarship exhibits stronger engagement with sustainability and systematic reviews (e.g., bibliometric analyses).

Table 1: High-frequency keywords of CSR research at home and abroad (excerpts)

Domestic Journals			International Journals		
Keywords	Frequency	Centrality	Keywords	Frequency	Centrality
Social responsibility	98	0.34	corporate social responsibility	606	0
Financing constraints	29	0.21	performance	154	0.05
Corporate governance	25	0.14	impact	134	0.04
Property rights	20	0.16	management	123	0.04
Firm value	19	0.05	financial performance	113	0.05
State-owned enterprises	16	0.14	sustainability	88	0.04
Common prosperity	14	0	literature review	84	0.1
Private enterprises	13	0.05	business	79	0.01
Internal control	13	0.08	governance	78	0.02
Financial performance	11	0.01	sustainable development	75	0.04
Information disclosure	9	0.12	systematic literature review	68	0
Corporate responsibility	9	0.02	strategy	60	0.08
Corporate reputation	9	0.05	firm performance	59	0.06
Enterprise	8	0.12	framework	59	0.09
Green innovation	8	0.01	supply chain management	54	0.02

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Supply chain	8	0.07	disclosure	48	0.05
Corporate innovation	7	0.21	innovation	47	0.16
Platform enterprises	7	0.03	green	47	0
Evolutionary game	6	0.01	bibliometric analysis	45	0.09
Government subsidies	6	0	social responsibility	45	0.09

Beyond frequency, CiteSpace calculates keyword centrality (betweenness centrality) (Li & Chen, 2022). Centrality measures a node's brokerage potential in the shortest paths of a network, identifying pivotal junctions that bridge disconnected clusters (Freeman, 1979; Brandes, 2001). Nodes with centrality ≥ 0.1 are flagged as critical. Typically, high-frequency, high-centrality keywords signify collective research priorities—i.e., hotspots and frontiers.

In domestic journals, critical nodes like "financing constraints", "corporate governance", "property rights", "state-owned enterprises", and "information disclosure" mark pivotal transitions in CSR research, mirroring the historical trajectory of CSR practices in China. Internationally, "innovation" emerges as a keystone node. Notably, frequency and centrality are correlated but not strictly proportional. For instance, while most high-frequency international keywords exhibit low centrality—suggesting they represent isolated research branches— "literature review" and "innovation" demonstrate both high frequency and centrality (≥ 0.1), positioning them as hubs that interconnect disparate CSR subfields. This implies that systematic reviews and innovation serve as methodological and thematic anchors in global CSR research.

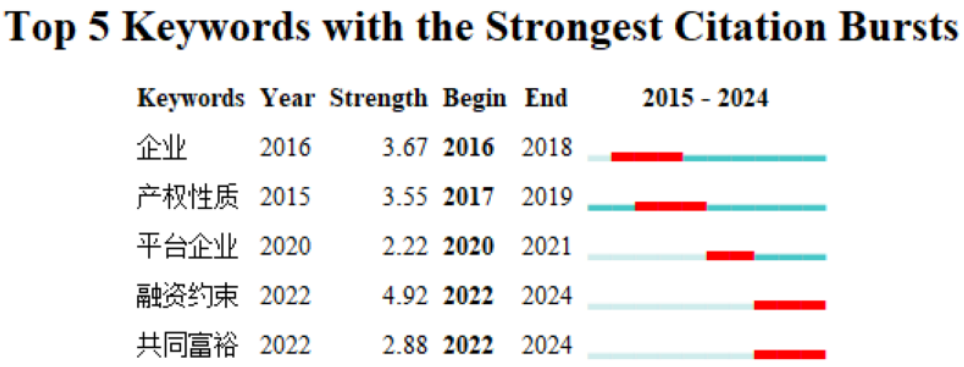


Figure 6: Burst items of domestic research on CSR



Figure 7: Burst items of foreign research on CSR

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4.4 Analysis of Research Trends

The timezone mapping function in CiteSpace visually demonstrates the evolutionary trajectory of hotspot keywords over time, illustrating the inheritance relationships between nodes through connecting lines. Figures 8 and 9 present the timezone views of keyword co-occurrence clusters in domestic and international CSR research, respectively.

A comparative analysis of CSR studies across regions reveals both convergences and divergences. Notably, "corporate reputation" emerges as a shared emphasis in global scholarship, reflecting broad academic consensus (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Firms worldwide leverage CSR initiatives to meet stakeholder expectations and enhance reputational capital—a strategic imperative now entrenched as a global norm (Porter & Kramer, 2019). This universal recognition positions CSR as a critical pathway for reputation-building and competitive advantage, compelling corporations to institutionalize it as a core operational priority.

4.4.1 Domestic Research Trajectory

The historical evolution of Chinese CSR research shows distinct phases. In 2005, seminal keywords included "property rights", "state-owned enterprises (SOEs)", "corporate reputation", and "food safety", marking the inception of China's CSR discourse. This period coincided with two pivotal developments: (1) the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) formulated the Chinese Corporate Social Responsibility Standard by year-end, and (2) State Grid Corporation issued China's inaugural CSR report, collectively signaling the institutionalization of CSR practices (Chen & Zhang, 2021). By 2020, research pivoted toward "platform enterprises" and "platform economy", driven by frequent CSR incidents in China's digital economy and policy shifts (Zhu & Shang, 2020). Post-18th CPC National Congress, scholarly attention turned to the exemplary role of SOEs in advancing CSR and sustainable development (Kong & Zheng, 2022).

4.4.2 International Research Trajectory

Western CSR scholarship traces its roots to the late 19th century, when industrialization under laissez-faire capitalism precipitated social ills—fraudulent advertising, bribery, substandard products, and pollution—spurring academic scrutiny (Carroll, 1999). Contemporary international studies prioritize "financial performance", "environmental performance", "innovation", and "disclosure", in multidimensional analytical frameworks (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). A 2024 surge in "ESG performance" research underscores its role in enhancing corporate competitiveness (Liu & Wang, 2024). ESG metrics—evaluating environmental, social, and governance commitments—have matured into a robust assessment paradigm abroad (Shi & Wang, 2023), though remain understudied in China.

4.4.3 Divergent Foci

Domestic research exhibits distinctive Chinese characteristics, with themes like "targeted poverty alleviation", "common prosperity", and "rural revitalization" rooted in national socio-economic agendas. Conversely, international scholarship emphasizes systematic CSR syntheses (e.g., bibliometric analyses, meta-reviews), demonstrating theoretical and methodological sophistication (Gao et al., 2023). The ascendancy of ESG evaluation abroad contrasts with its nascent status in Chinese academia, highlighting a critical research gap.

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5 Conclusion

Employing CiteSpace 6.2 for knowledge mapping analysis of CSR literature across domestic and international core journals reveals several critical insights. The comparable publication volume between Chinese and international journals, coupled with the sustained high output since 2022, demonstrates CSR's entrenched position as a pivotal research domain that bridges academic inquiry and corporate practice (Wang et al., 2023). Notably, while global scholarship converges on fundamental areas including environmental impact, financial performance, corporate governance, and supply chain management (Eccles et al., 2020), Chinese research exhibits distinctive contextual depth through its examination of sector-specific applications such as pharmaceutical industry responsibilities. These investigations illuminate how domestic enterprises navigate the complex interplay between profitability and societal obligations, particularly in domains like quality control, pharmaceutical innovation, and sustainable development (Li & Zhang, 2022), thereby manifesting the "Chinese characteristics" of CSR that are deeply interwoven with national strategic priorities.

Building upon current trajectories, Chinese CSR scholarship stands to benefit substantially from several strategic advancements. The imperative for theoretical consolidation through interdisciplinary synthesis emerges clearly, where systematic literature reviews and bibliometric methodologies could transform fragmented findings into coherent conceptual frameworks (Zupic & ater, 2015). Parallel to this theoretical development, the linguistic dimension of CSR communication warrants deeper exploration, particularly regarding how corporations construct identity through discursive strategies. Huawei's strategic deployment of collectivist rhetoric and crisis narratives in annual reports exemplifies how language can shape perceptions of corporate responsibility (Wu & Chen, 2024), suggesting rich potential for cross-sectoral comparative studies.

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence and big data analytics into CSR research presents both opportunities and challenges that demand careful scholarly attention. While these technologies enable sophisticated impact assessments through techniques like sentiment analysis of stakeholder feedback (Liu et al., 2023), they simultaneously introduce ethical complexities such as algorithmic bias in sustainability reporting and the risk of superficial "ethics washing" by technology firms (Buhmann et al., 2020). This dual nature calls for balanced research approaches that harness technological advantages while establishing robust ethical safeguards.

Equally crucial is the linguistic analysis of ESG reporting, where examination of framing devices, modality choices, and intertextual elements can reveal how companies establish credibility in their sustainability narratives (Morioka et al., 2021). The strategic use of active voice and quantifiable metrics, for instance, has been shown to significantly enhance perceptions of corporate accountability (Dyck et al., 2019), offering practical insights for Chinese firms aiming to strengthen their global ESG positioning.

The unique integration of CSR with national development strategies, particularly through state-owned enterprises' initiatives in areas like common prosperity, positions Chinese research to make distinctive contributions to global sustainability discourse. By strategically leveraging advanced analytical tools while maintaining focus on authentic identity construction and ethical transparency, Chinese scholarship can both enhance domestic corporate competitiveness and meaningfully advance international sustainable development objectives.

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