

Review

Revisiting Pacific Island Countries Studies within Area Studies: A Decade in Review and Prospects (2016–2026)

Xueting Chi^{1,*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng, Shandong, China

* Correspondence: Xueting Chi, School of Foreign Languages, Liaocheng University, Liaocheng, Shandong, China

Abstract: Pacific Island Countries (PICs) matter as geostrategic players in the Indo-Pacific maritime region for two main reasons: they are key players in global climate governance, and they offer good cases for studying small states in Area Studies. This paper looks at how Chinese-language research on PICs has developed over time. It uses 154 articles from Chinese core journals indexed in CNKI and six overseas SSCI papers, all published between 2016 and 2026. CiteSpace 6.4.1 is used to do a bibliometric analysis of publication trends, productive authors, keyword clusters, and keyword bursts. The study finds three phases of research development: initial accumulation, rapid expansion, and diversified deepening. The research focus has shifted from China–Pacific economic ties to great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific, indigenous Blue Pacific narratives, ocean-climate governance, and disciplinary reflections from a Global South perspective. The current research has several weaknesses: it tends to focus on some countries more than others, relies too much on Western theories, lacks sufficient original fieldwork, and suffers from weak inter-institutional cooperation. This paper reviews ten years of Chinese PIC studies, and evaluates their structural weaknesses against the standards of Area Studies. It offers empirical evidence for building an independent knowledge base for Chinese Area Studies, and helps guide the long-term development of China's Blue Partnership with the PICs.

Keywords: Area Studies; Pacific Island Countries; Bibliometrics; CiteSpace

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

The fourteen independent PICs are small in land size and population. But their huge exclusive economic zones give them real sway over key international shipping lanes and marine life resources. These zones give them a distinctive voice in global climate governance talks. In recent years, as Indo-Pacific strategies have become more important, powers from outside the region - the US, Australia, India, and France - have steadily deepened their strategic ties with the South Pacific. China, for its part, has steadily built up its comprehensive strategic partnership with the PICs. With the *Blue Pacific 2050 Strategy*, the *China-Solomon Islands Security Cooperation Agreement* being put into action, and Global-South cooperation frameworks taking shape, the PICs have moved from the margins of international politics to the center of attention in geopolitical research.

In 2022, China formally made Area Studies an interdisciplinary first-tier discipline (a Level-1 discipline in China's academic discipline catalogue). This filled a gap in China's system of country and regional studies disciplines. It was intended to serve two core goals: to produce context-specific, independent knowledge that fits with China's foreign policy priorities, and to fix long-standing gaps in research on small developing countries. For a long time, Chinese research on Area Studies has mostly focused on regions that get a lot of attention already: Europe, the US, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. The PICs, by contrast, have been largely overlooked in academic research, for three related reasons: access to source materials is difficult, there is a shortage of specialists fluent in local

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languages, and these island countries are small in size. The existing research is scattered and lacks systematic quantitative synthesis. Since 2016, Chinese think tanks that focus on PICs have been publishing a steady flow of articles in core journals. Enough standard academic work has built up over the past ten years to do a full review using bibliometric methods.

On the theory side, existing Chinese reviews of PIC research are mostly qualitative: they look at the content of papers rather than doing quantitative analysis. Not many use quantitative visual analysis like knowledge mapping, and even fewer place this field properly within the larger structure of Area Studies as a discipline. This study takes a different route. Using CiteSpace, it covers the full ten-year period from 2016 to 2026, and includes overseas SSCI-indexed papers so that Chinese and international perspectives can be compared. This fixes some of the main problems with earlier reviews: they often lag behind the latest publications, rely only on qualitative assessment, and don't look at the field through an Area Studies lens.

On the practical side, this paper looks at what the field does well and what it doesn't, suggests directions for future research, and offers academic guidance for training Area Studies scholars, designing research projects, and making evidence-based decisions in foreign policy think tanks. In this way, it helps support the long-term growth of China's Blue Partnership with the PICs.

1.2. Literature Review

Research on the South Pacific outside China has a long history and is now a well-developed academic field, mostly led by scholars from Australia, the US, and France. The main findings are published mainly in SSCI-indexed journals like the *Australian Journal of International Affairs* and the *Leiden Journal of International Law*.

The existing literature falls into three main research areas. The first area looks at great-power involvement and regional geopolitics. Writing from Australia's position as the regional power, Connolly looked at how China's South Pacific diplomacy changed the regional balance of power [1]. Verhille, on the other hand, looked at sixty years of Sino-French interactions in Pacific island territories. He focused on how France governs its overseas territories and on bilateral competition in the region, filling a real gap in research on France-South Pacific relations [2]. Even so, early Western studies had a clear bias toward great powers: they saw Pacific Island Countries (PICs) as just peripheral players in great-power rivalries, and didn't give enough weight to the PICs' own diplomatic choices.

The second area looks at island-state sovereignty, self-determination, and regional legal disputes. From an international law angle, Heathcote looked at the built-in tensions between small island states' fragile sovereignty and their right to self-determination. This laid the groundwork for Western legal research on the South Pacific [3]. But this work relies entirely on Western international law frameworks, and pays little attention to the idea of equal sovereignty that runs through South-South cooperation.

The third area looks at local public opinion and on-the-ground research on island societies. In 2025, Mudaliar's team finished large national social surveys measuring public attitudes toward foreign involvement in Samoa and Vanuatu [4,5]. Using first-hand evidence from surveys and field interviews, the team looked at how local communities actually see the policies of powers from outside the region. This set a major empirical standard for South Pacific research outside China.

Overall, research outside China has solid empirical foundations, but it has clear blind spots in perspective. For a long time, it has used Western great-power competition as its main analytical lens. This tends to serve the regional strategic interests of Australia, the US, and France, and it doesn't offer a truly impartial view from the standpoint of developing countries.

Chinese review articles on PICs only started coming out after 2020, and they can be roughly divided into three groups [6]. The first group is made up of qualitative reviews that focus on one single topic. They look at separate subjects like trade-related aid,

maritime cooperation, and Sino-U.S. geopolitical competition in the South Pacific. Because they're so focused on one narrow topic, they don't give a full picture of the whole research field.

The second group consists of earlier bibliometric reviews, and their datasets mostly end before 2024. As a result, they miss the hot topics that have come up between 2024 and 2026: the second Trump administration's South Pacific strategy, India's strategic moves in the South Pacific, Global-South theories, and thinking about Area Studies as a discipline. So they can't fully show how the field has been changing most recently.

The third group consists of reviews that reflect on the discipline itself. These are among the first studies to place PIC research within the Area Studies framework, but they don't have the empirical backing that bibliometric data can provide. Their qualitative judgments are quite subjective, and they aren't backed up by objective data on things like publication patterns, key scholars, or how research hotspots have shifted over time.

Putting Chinese and international scholarship together, we can see three key gaps in the research. First, no existing review covers the full 2016-2026 period, and none combines quantitative knowledge mapping with reflection on the discipline itself. Second, Chinese reviews rarely include overseas SSCI papers, so they can't really compare Chinese and international perspectives. This means there's not much dialogue between the two academic communities. Third, earlier studies don't measure the field's weaknesses against the standards of Area Studies as China's first-tier discipline, and they don't lay out clear, practical directions for future research.

With this in mind, this paper has three main innovations. On the time side, it extends the coverage to 2026, covering a full ten years of work and including the most recent publications. On the method side, it combines bibliometric visualisation with a comparison of Chinese and overseas literature, pairing objective quantitative data with cross-national academic dialogue. On the discipline side, it uses the developmental priorities of Area Studies as its main analytical framework. From this disciplinary perspective, it pulls together the gaps in existing research and lays out structured directions for future work.

1.3. Data Sources and Research Design

We got the Chinese-language dataset from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), using "Pacific Island Countries" as the search term. We excluded non-research items like calls for papers, conference announcements, and news briefs, and limited the publication years to 2016-2026. We kept only articles from CSSCI-indexed journals and Peking University-recognised core journals. After the initial search, we manually filtered out papers from unrelated fields like marine meteorology, agriculture, literature, and medicine. This left us with 154 valid Chinese-language journal articles. For comparison, we also chose six representative SSCI journal articles by scholars from Australia, the US, and France. These articles cover topics like great-power strategy, local public opinion, international law, and Sino-French relations in the Pacific islands. Together, these two datasets let us compare Chinese and international research approaches.

It's worth noting that this small sample of overseas literature is just for comparison and illustration - it's not a full dataset for doing bibliometric analysis on its own. For the bibliometric visualisation, we used CiteSpace 6.4.1, a widely used knowledge-mapping tool [7,8]. We set the parameters like this: the time period covered 2016 to 2026, with one-year slices. We used authors and keywords as two types of nodes, to generate the author collaboration network and the keyword co-occurrence network. We used the g-index as the threshold algorithm, and took the top 50 high-frequency and highly-cited nodes for each time slice. The overall analytical framework has four parts: annual publication trends, most productive authors, keyword co-occurrence, and keyword burst detection.

2. Overall Bibliometric Characteristics of Domestic Research on Pacific Island Countries, 2016–2026

2.1. Annual Publication Trend: Three-Stage Evolution

How many papers come out each year, and how they're spread over time, shows how a research field is developing. Figure 1 shows how many Chinese-language core-journal articles on Pacific Island Countries (PICs) came out each year between 2016 and 2026. Looking at how the numbers have fluctuated over this ten-year period, we can divide Chinese core-journal research on PICs into three phases: initial accumulation (2016-2018), rapid expansion (2019-2023), and diversified deepening (2024-2026). Keep in mind that 2026 only includes papers that were out when we collected the data - it's not the full year's output.

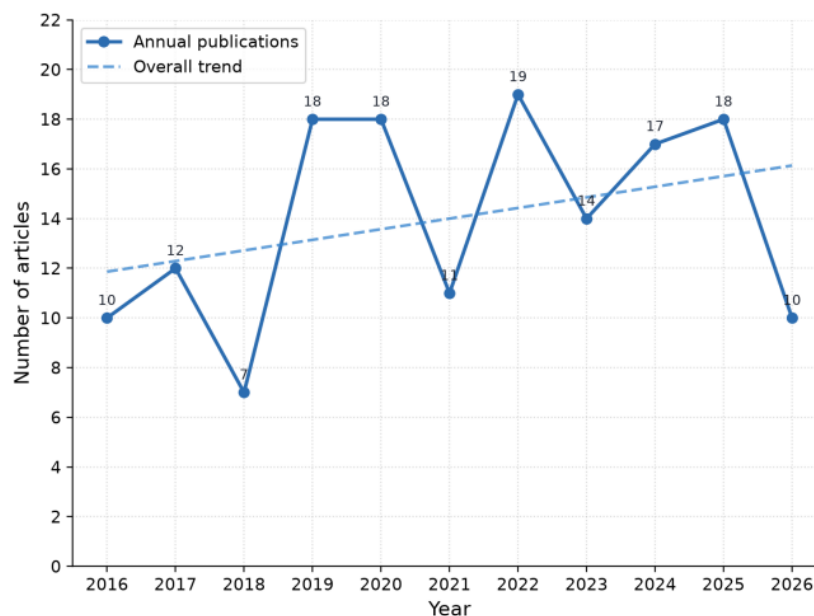


Figure 1. Publication Trends in Chinese Core Journals on Pacific Island Countries, 2016–2026

The first phase (2016-2018) was the field's early stage, with not many papers coming out each year. Chinese think tanks that focused on PICs started to form, and early scholars like Liang Jiarui and Zhang Ying published the first group of core-journal articles. Research topics at this time were mostly about how the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road connects with the PICs. The research community was still small. Most studies looked at broad bilateral cooperation, and there wasn't much in-depth work on individual countries. Even so, this phase mattered because it set up the basic research agenda for the field.

From 2019 to 2023, the number of papers went up steadily, and reached its highest point in the whole ten-year period in 2023. A group of early- and mid-career scholars - including Chen Xiaochen, Liu Jianfeng, and Zhao Shaofeng - produced a lot of work. The main research topics at this time were the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Blue Pacific narrative, U.S.-Australian balancing in the region, and how island states balance great powers in their diplomacy. When China and the Solomon Islands established diplomatic relations in 2021, it set off a boom in research. A lot of papers came out on bilateral security cooperation, infrastructure aid, and geopolitical competition in the region. Researchers also started to bring in perspectives from law, marine economics, and global governance. The research community grew a lot in size.

From 2024 to 2026, the overall number of papers stayed high and steady. The research moved toward more specialised topics and started to think more about theory itself. Scholars moved beyond simple Sino-U.S. geopolitical comparisons, and started to look at new sub-fields: the Global-South perspective, India's strategic moves in the South Pacific, French overseas island governance, local island-based think tanks, and climate-resilience governance. In 2026, more and more papers started to reflect on Area Studies as a discipline and take stock of where the field is at. The focus shifted from quick takes on

short-term policy events toward building theory for the long run and forecasting where the region is heading. Researchers also started to do more empirical work based on fieldwork, which made the research much deeper.

Overall, the year-by-year changes in publication numbers closely track what's happening in geopolitics and in the development of Area Studies as a discipline in China. The upgrade of the China-PIC comprehensive strategic partnership, growing great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific, and Area Studies being named a first-tier discipline in China have all pushed this field to keep growing. The fact that publication numbers haven't dropped at all over this whole period shows that research on this topic has real staying power.

2.2. Distribution of High-productivity Core Author Echelons

Key authors are a good way to see how a research field is developing - their work shows what the field cares about and how good it is. Using the 154 valid articles, we put together a table of the most prolific scholars, showing how many papers each has published, when they published their first one, and what they mainly study (see Table 1). This shows how the field is structured internally.

Table 1. High-productivity Authors of Domestic Pacific Island Countries Research, 2016–2026

Author	Number of Publications	Year of First Publication
Liang Jiarui	25	2016
Chen Xiaochen	16	2019
Lü Guixia	7	2017
Liu Jianfeng	4	2019
Zhao Shaofeng	4	2019
Zhang Ying	4	2016
Wang Shiming	4	2017
Qin Sheng	3	2017
Yu Lei	3	2019
Qu Sheng	3	2017

First, one scholar stands out clearly with a lot more papers than everyone else. Liang Jiarui is at the top with 25 core-journal articles. He's been publishing from 2016 all the way to 2026, and his papers cover a wide range of recent topics. His two 2026 papers look at the second Trump administration's South Pacific strategy and India's strategic moves in the region, respectively. This shows he's been one of the leading Chinese scholars in PIC research [9,10].

Second, a clear group of early- and mid-career core scholars started to emerge in 2019. That's when Chen Xiaochen, Liu Jianfeng, Zhao Shaofeng, and Yu Lei all started publishing a lot of papers at once. Their work covers different areas that fit well together: Chen Xiaochen looks at local narratives and the diplomatic agency of island states [11,12]; Liu Jianfeng focuses on bibliometric analysis and thinking about the discipline itself; Zhao Shaofeng explores colonial history and France-South Pacific relations; and Yu Lei studies the geopolitics of Indo-Pacific alliances [13]. Around this core group, scholars like Lü Guixia, Zhang Ying, and Wang Shiming have been working on their own sub-fields for a long time - China-PIC economic and trade ties, island-state political systems, and the blue economy. Together, they make up a stable research network.

Third, the research collaboration network is still quite fragmented, and most papers are written by just one author. The author collaboration network from CiteSpace shows that scholars aren't connected very much to each other, and very few papers are co-authored. This shows there's a big gap in cross-institutional and interdisciplinary cooperation. Most Chinese research on PICs is concentrated in one university-affiliated PIC research centre [14]. Scholars from other universities and foreign-affairs research

institutes mostly work on their own. There isn't yet a national academic community with solid collaboration mechanisms in place.

2.3. Keyword Clustering: Nine Stable Research Clusters

CiteSpace's keyword-clustering algorithm grouped keywords that share important features to make the keyword-cluster map for Chinese-language research on Pacific Island Countries (PICs) from 2016 to 2026 (see Figure 2). The map shows nine main cluster modules #0 – #8. Their main themes are summarised below.

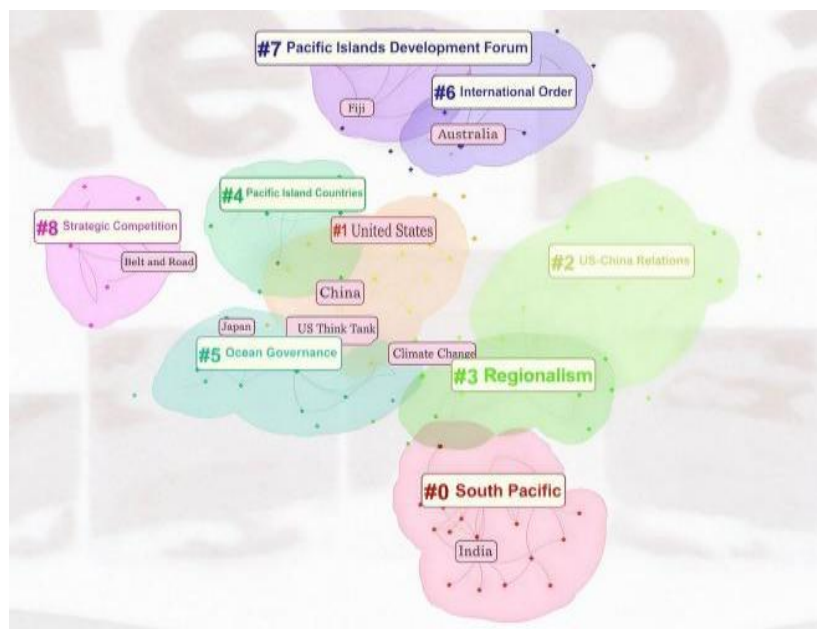


Figure 2. Keyword Clustering Map of Research on Pacific Island Countries in Chinese Core Journals, 2016–2026

Cluster #0, "South Pacific", centres on the high-frequency keyword "India". It covers the whole South Pacific region and India's growing involvement there, showing how scholars fit the PICs into the bigger picture of great-power relations. Cluster #1, "United States", has "China" as its main co-occurring keyword. It looks at where the U.S. has strategic presence in the South Pacific, with a focus on maritime engagement in the Indo-Pacific framework [15]. Cluster #2, "US-China Relations", is the main cluster for great-power competition research. Its related keywords include "strategic competition", "strategic narrative", "securitization", "strategic rivalry", "foreign aid", and "soft balancing". This cluster looks at how the U.S. and China compete, their different strategic stories, their tendency to securitise issues, and how foreign aid is used as a tool [16]. Cluster #3, "Regionalism", looks at regional cooperation mechanisms among the PICs and the independent diplomatic agency of small island states. Cluster #4, "Pacific Island Countries", focuses on bilateral ties between China and the PICs, as well as practical ways to cooperate. Cluster #5, "Ocean Governance", brings together keywords like "climate change", "U.S. think tanks", and "Japan". It looks at how the PICs take part in maritime governance, and how outside actors get involved in regional ocean affairs, with a particular focus on the ten-year history of China-PIC ocean-governance cooperation [17]. Cluster #6, "International Order", is marked by the strong co-occurrence of "Fiji" and "Australia". Using specific island-state case studies, it looks at China-Australia relations against the backdrop of a changing international order. Cluster #7, "Pacific Islands Development Forum", covers sub-regional cooperation mechanisms and the regionalisation processes taking shape among the island nations. Cluster #8, "Strategic Competition", is defined by the keyword "Belt and Road". It looks at how the Belt and Road Initiative is being implemented in the South Pacific, against the backdrop of growing great-power strategic rivalry.

2.4. Temporal Evolution of Burst Keywords: Three-Stage Hotspot Iteration

Keyword burst detection looks at how strong each keyword's burst is, as well as when it starts and ends. It can be combined with time-based analysis to show clearly how a research field changes over time. We took the top five keywords by burst strength from Chinese-language PIC research to make the keyword-burst visualisation for 2016-2026 (see Figure 3). Using CiteSpace's built-in burst-detection tool, we can divide how research priorities have shifted over the decade into three clear phases.

Top 5 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts



Figure 3. Burst Keyword Visualization in Research on Pacific Island Countries in Chinese Core Journals, 2016–2026

The first phase (2016-2020) is when research topics first started to appear. The keyword "South Pacific" (burst strength = 2.88) was the first to burst. This shows that early scholars were trying to treat the South Pacific as one single topic to study. Papers from this period mostly gave broad overviews of the region and laid the basic groundwork.

The second phase (2017-2022) saw research topics expand, with more attention paid to regional actors. "Climate change" (burst strength = 1.38, 2017-2021) and "Australia" (burst strength = 1.68, 2018-2022) burst one after the other, showing that climate governance and Australia's role in the region had become major research topics. At the same time, research moved from broad regional description toward focused, issue-based analysis and looking at sub-regional actors.

The third phase (2022-2026) is marked by a growing focus on great-power geopolitical competition. "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (burst strength = 1.87, 2022-2024) and "United States" (burst strength = 2.85, 2024-2026) then started to burst. The keyword "United States" has the second-highest burst strength (2.85) and started bursting most recently, in 2024. It's still bursting as of 2026. This shows a clear shift toward great-power geopolitical competition. In recent years, U.S. strategic engagement in the South Pacific has become the main research focus.

3. Structural Deficiencies in Domestic Research on Pacific Island Countries from an Area Studies Perspective

Using the bibliometric results and keyword co-occurrence findings, and comparing them with empirical approaches from overseas SSCI papers, this section evaluates Chinese-language PIC research against four core standards for Area Studies. We found four structural weaknesses that are still holding back the high-quality development of this sub-field.

First, there's a big imbalance in which countries get studied, leaving big gaps in empirical research on the smaller island states. A key goal of Area Studies is to do careful, country-specific research that fits each national context. Still, the 154 Chinese-language

articles show a very uneven picture when it comes to which countries get studied. Most of the attention goes to the four bigger PICs that have formal diplomatic ties with China: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. On the other hand, serious core-journal studies of the smaller states like Tuvalu, Nauru, the Marshall Islands, the Cook Islands, and Niue are still few and far between. Some of the tiniest states have almost no dedicated, in-depth work at all. Existing research often generalises across the whole region, treating all fourteen independent PICs as if they're the same. But they're actually quite different when you look at their political systems, economic structures, local cultural traditions, and foreign policy choices. There isn't much long-term, country-specific research on individual island states. By contrast, Australian and U.S. scholars have carried out nationwide field surveys to measure public diplomatic attitudes in Samoa and Vanuatu, and have built detailed empirical analyses based on local first-hand data. Chinese-language research, by comparison, rarely has this kind of locally grounded empirical work. This makes it hard to meet Area Studies' basic need for detailed, country-specific analysis.

Second, Chinese research leans too heavily on Western theories, and has been slow to build its own Area Studies discourse. It still draws a lot on Western international relations and geopolitical theory, which shows a clear path dependence. Studies of great-power competition directly use U.S. Indo-Pacific geopolitical frameworks. Studies of small-island-state development apply the Western "fragile small states" theory without questioning it enough. Original conceptual frameworks based on China's South-South cooperation experience, and adapted to the Pacific's maritime and civilisational characteristics, are still underdeveloped. Chinese scholarly ideas like the "Global South", "Blue Partnership", and "a maritime community with a shared future" have started to gain some attention in recent years. Even so, most studies just use these labels on the surface, instead of building consistent analytical frameworks that fit the South Pacific context. Western academia has long led the way in stories about "island-state vulnerability". Chinese-language research, by contrast, hasn't yet fully engaged with local Pacific perspectives like "island resilience" and the "oceanic community". Overall, progress toward an independent knowledge system for Area Studies has been slow.

Third, original fieldwork overseas is rare, so Chinese-language research doesn't have much in the way of locally sourced primary materials. Fieldwork, on-the-ground interviews, and primary documents in less commonly spoken languages are the basic building blocks of good Area Studies research. Out of the 154 articles we looked at, only one explicitly says the author did fieldwork inside the PICs. The vast majority rely only on English-language news reports, public documents from international organisations, and Western academic literature that's already been written. They rarely use local interviews, civil society survey data, or historical materials written in local languages. This gap creates two linked problems. On one hand, a lot of research only looks at things through a great-power lens: regional dynamics are usually explained through Sino-U.S. geopolitical rivalry, and the real interests and needs of ordinary island residents, local think tanks, and grassroots communities get left out. On the other hand, policy recommendations are usually too general. Few studies design cooperation plans that fit each country's specific social situation, so they don't meet the detailed decision-making needs of diplomatic work and domestic policy think tanks. By comparison, overseas SSCI papers make heavy use of primary evidence from large-scale Pacific public attitude surveys and joint interviews with local universities, which gives them a much stronger empirical base.

Fourth, interdisciplinary work is still limited, and there isn't yet a nationally coordinated research community. PIC research is by its nature cross-disciplinary, covering ocean affairs, climate change, politics, economics, culture, and international law. So Area Studies needs collaborative work that brings together history, economics, marine science, environmental studies, and research on less commonly spoken languages. But existing research is quite split by discipline. More than 90% of the papers we looked at come from international relations and international politics. Insights from marine ecology,

island economics, indigenous anthropology, and Oceanian cultural and linguistic studies are rarely cited. Bibliometric data on author output shows that most papers are still single-authored, and cross-institutional or interdisciplinary projects are rare. Chinese PIC research is heavily concentrated in one university-affiliated think tank. There aren't formal, regular exchange platforms that connect diplomatic agencies, marine science research institutes, and provincial social science academies. Without a national research network, the work ends up scattered, research topics overlap, and academic resources get wasted.

4. Future Development Paths of Pacific Island Countries Research Oriented by Area Studies Discipline Construction

Based on the patterns we found in the ten-year bibliometric data, and on the structural limitations we just discussed, this section lays out systematic directions for future research across five areas. These directions line up with the goal of developing Area Studies as China's first-tier discipline, and take into account the long-term geopolitical trends in the South Pacific beyond 2026.

4.1. Balanced Country-Specific Research and Filling Gaps on Micro-States

First, we should set up a tiered country-research framework that divides the PICs into three groups: large island states, medium-sized island states with diplomatic ties to China, and micro-states. We should launch targeted country-specific research projects for under-studied micro-states like Tuvalu and Nauru, with ongoing long-term research. This would help fix the current imbalance, where research mostly focuses on big powers and large island states, and leaves small ones out. Second, we need to build a long-term country-observation database. With support from China-based PIC think tanks, researchers can put together country-level baseline materials covering political systems, industrial structures, foreign policy orientations, climate risks, and civil society conditions. We can then update annual country-development reports to provide standard reference materials for Area Studies teaching and empirical research. Third, we should strengthen research that focuses on the local agency of island states. Using established overseas public-attitude survey approaches as a model, scholars can carry out regular social perception surveys together with local island-state universities. This would let research move beyond the narrow lens of great-power competition, and rebuild regional analysis around the real interests of local island communities and their own maritime narratives.

4.2. Building an Independent Research Voice for PICs, Rooted in Global-South Practice

First, we should do more work to adapt Global-South theory to the South Pacific context. Drawing on China-PIC South-South cooperation, and engaging critically with Western theories of geopolitical competition that leave others out, scholars should develop original analytical concepts: "equal Blue Partnership", "resilient-island sustainable development", and "small-yet-impactful South-South cooperation". These concepts can form the basis of analytical frameworks for small island states that are different from Western models, and reduce our reliance on Western geopolitical theories. Second, we need to explore in depth the theoretical heritage that's already there in Pacific indigenous maritime cultures. Researchers should systematically collect traditional maritime governance norms and community self-governance histories from Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. Bringing these indigenous maritime worldviews into Area Studies analytical frameworks would help challenge the oversimplified Western label of the "fragile small state". Third, we should promote fair, two-way scholarly exchange between Chinese and international academics. By engaging regularly with Australian, French, and U.S. SSCI-indexed South Pacific research, scholars can compare different theoretical approaches and learn from the strengths of overseas field-based empirical work. At the same time, research on China's practical South Pacific cooperation should be shared more widely internationally, so that we can build formal, two-way institutional mechanisms for global academic dialogue.

4.3. Developing Diverse Research Methods and Making Overseas Fieldwork Routine

First, we should set up a dedicated funding mechanism for overseas fieldwork. With special Area Studies grants, stable long-term funding can support scholars doing field interviews, exchanges with local think tanks, and civil society surveys inside the PICs. This would help systematically collect primary sources in local languages and the views of local community stakeholders, and strengthen the empirical base of the research. We should also encourage partnerships with local island-state universities to carry out large-scale Pacific public-attitude surveys and fill the empirical gaps in Chinese-language research. Second, we should push for more multi-method research. This would combine humanities and social science methods - bibliometric knowledge mapping, country-case comparison, field interviews, and big-data text analysis - with quantitative marine economic models and climate risk assessment tools. In short, it links humanities and social science work with marine natural science research. Third, we should speed up training in Oceanian less-commonly-spoken languages and translation work. We should expand the pool of people who can speak indigenous island languages like Fijian, Samoan, and Tongan. We should also systematically translate local policy documents and books written by local scholars. These steps would reduce the information gap caused by relying too much on English-language secondary materials, and make the research more objective and better suited to the local context.

4.4. Building Interdisciplinary Collaboration Platforms and a National Research Community

We should set up interdisciplinary joint research projects that bring together expertise from international relations, marine science, environmental governance, world history, regional economics, and less commonly spoken foreign language studies. These projects can work on cross-cutting themes like climate governance, the blue economy, and marine spatial planning, breaking down the walls between different disciplines. We should also build a national multi-institutional collaborative network, centered on specialized PIC-research think tanks, and connecting foreign-affairs universities, marine science research institutes, local social science academies, and China-based foreign-related enterprises. We can set up annual academic forums, shared joint databases, and output-sharing platforms to break down institutional barriers and cut down on redundant, low-level research. We should also improve the interdisciplinary talent-training system for Area Studies. Universities can start PIC-focused research tracks within Area Studies programs, and add courses on Oceanian less-commonly-spoken languages, island-based fieldwork, and ocean governance. This would build a stable group of interdisciplinary researchers who have language skills, country-specific knowledge, and cross-disciplinary perspectives, for the long-term development of the field.

4.5. Key Frontier Research Topics as Geopolitics Shifts

As South Pacific geopolitics keeps changing, five frontier research topics should be a priority for future work. First, research on U.S. freedom-of-the-seas strategy in the South Pacific, and how U.S.-Australian Indo-Pacific alliances are changing under the second Trump administration. Second, the strategic positions of different outside powers - India, France, and the EU - in the South Pacific. Third, analysis of island-state maritime rights disputes and multilateral cooperation mechanisms after the BBNJ Agreement on marine biodiversity was adopted.

Fourth, international law questions about migration from island states, and whether island sovereignty can hold up under climate change pressure. Fifth, research on how the seven China-PIC cooperation platforms work over the long term, and on evaluating how well blue-economy demonstration projects are doing. By working on these frontier topics, scholars can keep producing high-quality core-journal papers, and gradually raise the standing of PIC research within Area Studies.

5. Conclusion

This study looks at 154 Chinese-language core-journal articles and six overseas SSCI papers published between 2016 and 2026, using CiteSpace to review a decade of research on the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). The bibliometric results show that Chinese-language core-journal output on PICs increased steadily over the ten years, and went through three phases: initial accumulation, rapid expansion, and diversified deepening. A stable research community has emerged, centered on leading scholars like Liang Jiarui and Chen Xiaochen. Research hotspots have gone through three stages: first, economic-trade cooperation tied to the Maritime Silk Road; then, Indo-Pacific great-power geopolitical competition; and finally, Global-South theory and self-reflection on the discipline itself. These themes have grouped into nine main research clusters.

Compared with what Area Studies needs as China's first-tier discipline, existing Chinese PIC research has four key structural weaknesses: uneven country-case coverage, reliance on Western theories, limited overseas fieldwork, and weak cross-institutional and interdisciplinary collaboration. To meet the two goals of building independent Area Studies knowledge and supporting China's South Pacific diplomatic strategy, future research should focus on five priorities: do balanced, in-depth analysis of under-studied micro-island states; build an independent Area Studies discourse rooted in Global South cooperation; make overseas fieldwork a regular part of research; build a coordinated national interdisciplinary research community; and keep working on frontier topics like ocean-climate governance, the strategies of different extra-regional powers, and diplomacy centered on island-state agency.

The PICs are a good example of a small, specialized sub-field for studying small developing countries within Area Studies. Doing more systematic PIC research has two benefits. First, it provides solid academic support for building the China-PIC Blue Partnership and a maritime community with a shared future. Second, it adds to China's independent Area Studies knowledge base by bringing Chinese analytical perspectives and original research approaches to Global-South small-island-state studies. This, in turn, helps Area Studies as a first-tier discipline develop in a balanced, high-quality way.

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