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Institutional Frameworks and Knowledge Production in Higher Education: Comparing Country and Region Studies and Area Studies (2020–2025)

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Abstract

The institutionalization of Country and Region Studies (CRS) as a first-level discipline in China (2022) provides a unique lens for examining how disciplinary frameworks shape knowledge production and, by extension, higher education curricula for global understanding. This study presents a comparative quantitative analysis of Chinese CRS and international Area Studies (AS) knowledge production between 2020 and 2025 using CiteSpace, analyzing publication volume, collaboration networks, keyword clusters, and research hotspots across CNKI (n=431) and Web of Science (n=528) databases. Three key findings emerge. First, institutionalization accelerated publication growth: Chinese CRS output surged after 2022, while international AS maintained steady growth. Second, Chinese CRS scholarship centers on discipline-building discourse—including talent cultivation and curriculum design—whereas international AS is organized around geographically and thematically diverse research objects. Third, Chinese scholars' international publications primarily focus on domestic governance rather than external regions, revealing structural misalignment between the two knowledge systems. These findings suggest that CRS and AS represent distinct institutional frameworks with different implications for curriculum design and global citizenship education. The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to balance national imperatives with intercultural competence development when designing CRS and AS curricula.

Keywords: Disciplinary Institutionalization; Global Curriculum Design; Quantitative Analysis; Academic Disciplinary Systems; International Education Policy; Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

In an era of intensifying globalization, higher education institutions face the critical challenge of preparing students for global citizenship and intercultural competence. Different institutional frameworks for organizing knowledge about world regions—such as Country and Region Studies (CRS) and Area Studies (AS)—embody distinct logics that fundamentally shape this educational mission. Wang (2025) proposed a “glocal citizenship” framework integrating five traditions of international education, while Banks (2008) argued that citizenship education in a global age must develop students’ ability to function across cultural communities. Within this context, the establishment of CRS as a first-level discipline in China in 2022 (J. Liu et al., 2025) presents an important case for understanding how institutional frameworks shape both research output and the educational preparation of students for a globally interconnected world.

In recent years, the Chinese academic community has engaged in intensifying discussions about questions such as “how to understand the essence of CRS as a discipline” and “how to establish its disciplinary framework.” These discussions carry direct implications for curriculum design, talent cultivation, and the knowledge services that universities provide to national strategy and public understanding of world regions. Qian et al. (2024) underscored that CRS is a “multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, intersecting discipline” whose primary task is to cultivate talent for understanding the world beyond China’s borders. Quantitative research, which captures the structural characteristics of knowledge production, offers a unique evidence base for understanding how disciplinary frameworks translate into curricular structures, talent cultivation pathways, and knowledge services for area and country/region studies. Within this context, this study conducts a quantitative comparison of domestic and international research outputs, systematically revealing the developmental trajectory and structural characteristics of CRS and AS knowledge production, with particular attention to their implications for higher education.

The year 2020 is chosen as the starting point for two reasons. First, 2020 marked the formal establishment of the interdisciplinary category in China’s disciplinary system, serving as an important institutional precursor to the institutionalization of CRS. Second, the 2020–2025 time span covers approximately three years of literature data both before and after the discipline’s formal establishment, facilitating an examination of the impact of institutional change on knowledge production from a comparative perspective. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how institutional frameworks influence what and how students learn about world regions in higher education settings.

Specifically, this study addresses the following three research questions: (1) What development trajectories and evolutionary characteristics do domestic and international CRS and AS knowledge production exhibit over the past six years? (2) What consensus and differences exist between Chinese and international scholars in

terms of research domains, thematic focus, and methodological orientations? (3) Within the global knowledge landscape, what are the implications of the structural differences between CRS and AS for higher education curriculum design, talent cultivation, and global citizenship education?

2. Literature Review

As a starting point, it is necessary to clarify several core concepts and research contexts: first, AS as a research field in the international context; second, CRS as an interdisciplinary field in the Chinese context and its talent cultivation practices; and third, the CRS knowledge landscape.

2.1 Area Studies in the International Context

AS has achieved relatively stable recognition in the international scholarly community, with its modern institutional development often traced to the Cold War period when the United States established an academic infrastructure driven by national security imperatives (Derichs et al., 2020). The international academic community has since moved beyond this traditional narrative, shifting from “knowledge about an area” toward “area-based knowledge”—an approach grounded in regional experience yet capable of engaging in theoretical dialogue (Guyer, 2004). Hall and Tarrow (1998) distinguished three notions: detailed description of a nation without generalization; studies building on context-rich knowledge to develop general propositions; and interdisciplinary teaching or research clustered around specific regions. Szanton (2004) further differentiated “traditional area studies,” which takes regions in their totality as the primary unit of analysis, from “area-based knowledge,” which uses regional knowledge to process transregional phenomena. Despite variations, these definitions highlight two basic characteristics: focusing on specific geographic regions as knowledge objects, and capturing multiple dimensions through interdisciplinary approaches. More recently, the international academic community has increasingly recognized the importance of listening to local scholars’ knowledge production about their own regions, reflecting a growing awareness of the power-knowledge structure dominated by center countries (Basedau & Köllner, 2007).

Methodologically, AS emphasizes interdisciplinary knowledge integration, foreign language competence, and field observation, advocating that researchers understand regional differences within specific social contexts (Basedau & Köllner, 2007). These methodological characteristics have direct implications for curriculum design: Zeweri and Farmer (2023) argued that AS courses should provide ideal pedagogical spaces for enacting a decolonial approach to teaching, challenging Eurocentric assumptions while centering subaltern voices. Zhang and Zhang (2025) further identified that integrating AS into undergraduate international relations education requires reconstructing multilingual competency frameworks and shifting from theory-driven to problem-oriented paradigms. At the same time, because AS is not a

strictly independent discipline, researchers enjoy considerable freedom in topic selection yet face challenges related to concept usage and comparative strategy.

2.2 Country and Region Studies in the Chinese Context

In contrast to AS's longer developmental history, CRS in the institutionalized Chinese sense remains a young discipline. Its emergence stems from China's need to systematically understand the external world and cultivate multi-skilled talents through disciplinary institutionalization (Xie et al., 2022). Chinese CRS emphasizes understanding others from a perspective of equality, requiring researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of target regions and systematically accumulate cross-domain knowledge (J. Liu et al., 2025), thereby serving the dual objectives of supporting national strategy and enhancing international understanding (Luo, 2025). Whereas AS exists more as a research field internationally, China has explicitly positioned CRS as an interdisciplinary field, with law, literature, and history as supporting foundations (Xie et al., 2022). Zhu (2023) identified four key areas in CRS construction: secondary discipline setup, cross-disciplinary talent cultivation, systematic curricula, and disciplinary theory. Chang (2024) developed a Content-Language Integration framework for CRS education, while Wang (K.) and Shen (2025) proposed a four-dimensional competency model. Wang (J.) (2024) and Zhai and Han (2025) articulated a "three-in-one" approach integrating discipline development, talent cultivation, and think tank construction. However, this disciplinary positioning confronts CRS with pressing challenges: the field lacks a universally accepted conceptual system, multidisciplinary integration remains weak, and theoretical progress lags behind case studies. How to balance specific cases with general theory while preserving regional complexity remains a critical issue for CRS (Xie et al., 2022).

2.3 Quantitative Studies of Country and Region Studies

Currently, research outcomes that map the discipline building and research genealogy of Chinese CRS remain relatively limited. Existing studies mostly employ visualization tools, either reviewing the development trajectory of China's CRS (J. Liu et al., 2025), or employing quantitative analyses to provide an overview of the research landscape and predict hotspot directions (Jin & Zhang, 2024; Shen & Liu, 2024). However, such studies often adopt relatively long time spans, making it difficult to capture recent literature covering emerging hotspots. Moreover, their literature sources predominantly emphasize Chinese-language outputs, lacking systematic comparison with international mainstream databases.

In summary, while international AS and Chinese CRS are generated in different institutional and knowledge contexts, they share comparability in research objects and methodological approaches. More importantly, both carry direct implications for higher education: AS has developed diverse pedagogical traditions (Son & Ballard, 2025), while CRS is explicitly tasked with talent cultivation for global understanding (Chang, 2024). Incorporating both into a single analytical framework for comparative

study has sound academic rationale and practical significance for curriculum design in higher education.

3. Methodology

3.1 Comparative Data Sources and Search Strategy

This study employs a comparative quantitative research design, using CiteSpace as its primary analytical tool to quantify and compare knowledge structures across two corpora. The data sources are the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection's SSCI sub-database, with the search target restricted to published journal articles. For CNKI, the subject was set to "Country and Region" OR "Country and Region Studies" OR "Country and Region Studies research," with a time range from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2025. This yielded 519 CSSCI-indexed articles. After manually removing non-research items, 431 valid articles were retained.

For the WoS, both the subject and the Web of Science category were limited to "Area Studies," with the document type set to "Article" and the same time range applied. This yielded 528 valid articles—of which 526 were English-language publications and 82 were authored or co-authored by China-based scholars. For network construction, the parameter settings were as follows: time span 2020–2025, time slice 1 year; node thresholds (c, cc, ccv) set to (2, 2, 20), corresponding to citation frequency, co-citation frequency, and co-citation coefficient respectively; the pruning method employed Pathfinder, with the overall network presented using the "Pruning the merged network" approach.

In constructing the Chinese and English literature databases, careful consideration was given to keyword and search criteria settings. The Chinese search employed three keywords—"Country and Region", "Country and Region Studies", and "Country and Region Studies research"—for the following reasons: to cover academic discussion since CRS institutionalization (J. Liu et al., 2025), to capture outputs at the research practice level, and to accommodate the interdisciplinary "Country and Region+" scope. The English search used "Area Studies" as its core keyword. Although the international academic community does not have a disciplinary structure exactly corresponding to China's CRS, with AS research dispersed across different (sub)disciplinary and geographical settings (Busse et al., 2024), "Area Studies" as a formal WoS subject category has developed a relatively stable research tradition, exhibiting substantial alignment with Chinese CRS in terms of research objects, problem awareness, and interdisciplinary approaches (Bates, 1997). Therefore, this study limits the WoS search scope to the "Area Studies" subject category and same-named topic keywords to enhance the comparability and validity of the samples. This parallel data collection design constructs two comparable corpora representing Chinese CRS (CNKI) and international AS (WoS) within their respective higher education contexts, enabling systematic comparison of their knowledge production patterns and educational implications.

3.2 Analytical Framework

In parallel, this study adopts Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory as an analytical framework. Kuhn defined paradigm as the "disciplinary matrix" (Kuhn, 1974) shared by members of a scientific community and proposed a developmental model of "pre-science—normal science—scientific revolution—new normal science" (Zheng & Li, 2004). Although this theory originates from the natural sciences, it possesses considerable explanatory power in the social sciences as well, and is often used to assess whether a discipline has developed a relatively independent and stable research paradigm (Cui & Shi, 2011). This study applies the paradigm concept as an analytical lens while recognizing that CRS's formation was driven by institutional construction rather than paradigm competition, thereby avoiding simple theoretical transplantation. Specifically, this study observes four dimensions across both corpora: (1) whether core research topics are stabilizing; (2) whether shared problem awareness, concepts, and approaches have emerged; (3) whether a sustained academic community has formed; and (4) whether a discernible knowledge evolution path exists. Using CiteSpace's quantitative tools, the study examines highly cited literature, keyword structures, and evolutionary nodes over 2020–2025, assessing the extent to which CRS exhibits stabilizing knowledge structures and community formation under disciplinary institutionalization. The same framework is applied to the international AS dataset, enabling systematic comparison of the two knowledge systems. These comparisons carry direct implications for higher education: the divergent developmental paths of CRS and AS illuminate how regional knowledge is organized, taught, and integrated into curriculum design within different academic traditions.

4. Results: A Comparative Analysis of CRS and AS

This study conducts a comparative analysis of three data groups from CNKI and WoS databases across four dimensions: publication volume, collaboration networks, research themes, and hotspot evolution. In the analysis, outcomes authored by Chinese scholars in domestic publications serve as the primary focus, while publications by Chinese and international authors on international platforms serve as reference points for comparing their similarities and differences in development trends, collaboration patterns, thematic focus, and research priorities.

4.1 Annual Publication Volume Analysis

Year	Chinese authors in CNKI	Chinese authors in WoS	International authors in WoS
2020	22	10	54
2021	14	10	69
2022	59	9	73
2023	86	8	74
2024	106	21	77
2025	138	23	96

Table 1. Annual publication output of CRS and AS research (2020–2025)

Source: compiled by the author based on CNKI and WoS databases

Temporal changes in publication volume serve as a direct indicator of disciplinary activity. Between 2020 and 2025, Chinese and international CRS and AS knowledge production exhibited distinct growth trajectories.

CNKI data indicate that domestic publication volume generally experienced three phases: “low-level stability—rapid surge—sustained activity.” From 2020 to 2021, the average annual publication count was approximately 20 articles, still in an early accumulation stage. In 2022, the number jumped to 59—more than three times the previous year’s output. Thereafter, publication volume continued to rise steadily, reaching 138 articles by 2025. The growth inflection point in 2022 closely coincides with the formal establishment of CRS as a first-level discipline, revealing the significant driving effect of institutional supply on academic output.

The publication trend of Chinese authors in WoS shows some consistency with domestic trends, with output remaining low in 2020–2021. However, the substantial increase occurred in 2024, lagging behind the domestic surge by approximately two years. This time lag is related both to the longer publication cycles of international journals and to the accumulation period required for domestic knowledge production to translate into the international academic arena.

In contrast, the publication output of international authors in WoS maintained steady growth throughout 2020–2025, with particularly notable increases in 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. This is attributable to the long-established academic tradition of international AS, while also reflecting the issue-driven effect of recent global geopolitical changes on this field.

From a comparative perspective, the three data groups reveal structural differences in the development pace and driving mechanisms of Chinese and international CRS and AS knowledge production. International research has grown steadily, primarily building on established academic traditions, while domestic research experienced a phased surge driven by disciplinary institutionalization. This pattern of “institution first, research follows” indicates that current knowledge production in Chinese CRS is significantly propelled by institutional construction rather than emerging

organically from accumulated disciplinary knowledge. This distinctive path has direct implications for higher education: CRS curricula are consequently shaped more by top-down policy directives than by bottom-up theoretical consensus, creating both opportunities for rapid program development and challenges in aligning curricula with evolving research.

4.2 Author, Institutional, and Country Collaboration Network Analysis

The structural characteristics of collaboration networks reflect the organizational form and degree of integration of the academic community. The maps generated by CiteSpace show that the three data groups present distinct community development profiles across different dimensions.

The domestic CRS collaboration network (193 nodes, density 0.0175) has preliminarily formed a pattern with universities as the core and research institutes participating collaboratively. Participating institutions cover comprehensive universities, foreign language universities, and academies of social sciences, indicating that CRS has attracted attention from multiple types of institutions within China's higher education and research system. However, the overall network density is low, and most current collaboration remains within institutions, with inter-institutional coordination being relatively limited. This suggests that the domestic academic community for CRS is still in its early formation stage—the organizational foundation has taken preliminary shape, but the degree of collaborative integration still requires further deepening.

The WoS Chinese author collaboration network (85 nodes, density 0.0224) is even sparser. Domestically active publishing institutions have not been synchronously transformed into core participants in international publications, with most institutions having weak international collaboration ties. At the same time, some institutions that are not highly active in domestic publication perform notably well on the international stage, reflecting a divergence in publishing strategies across institutions: some focus primarily on domestic discipline building, while others prioritize international academic dialogue. This differentiation suggests that the overall visibility of Chinese scholars in the international AS community remains limited, and a systematic international academic network has yet to be formed.

The WoS international author collaboration network (153 nodes, density 0.0185) covers a broad geographic distribution of author countries and regions, including North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The United States and the United Kingdom remain traditional academic centers, while Global South countries such as India, South Africa, and Nigeria are emerging as new research frontiers, reflecting the diversification of the international knowledge production landscape in AS. However, research in each country still largely prioritizes its own national interests and policy concerns. How to balance local standpoints with global relevance to build a more inclusive international academic community remains an important challenge for international AS.

Overall, the density of all three collaboration networks is relatively low, indicating that both CRS and AS, as cross-cutting fields, have not yet formed a highly integrated community structure either domestically or internationally. Comparatively, the domestic context has preliminarily formed a “university–research institute” coordinated pattern with a somewhat higher degree of organization than the international level. However, the community integration and academic visibility of Chinese scholars in international publications still have considerable room for improvement. On the one hand, this disparity is related to the fact that Chinese CRS is still in the early stages of institutionalization; on the other hand, it also reflects the divergence between CRS in the Chinese context and AS in the international context in terms of conceptual scope and knowledge production orientation, meaning that domestic research outputs have not yet been fully transformed into systematic contributions that align with the international AS discourse. Such limited community integration also constrains curriculum innovation: without strong cross-institutional knowledge exchange, the design of CRS programs risks remaining fragmented, lacking the collaborative input needed to develop coherent, interdisciplinary curricula that reflect both domestic priorities and global disciplinary standards.

4.3 Keyword Cluster and Hotspot Evolution Analysis

Keyword cluster mapping identifies core thematic areas, while timeline analysis reveals hotspot evolution. Next, based on the visualization results, these two analyses are combined to compare the three data groups.

Corpus Source	Major Clusters	Representative Keywords
Domestic CRS Literature	United States, Foreign Language Disciplines, Fieldwork, Talent Cultivation, Discipline Construction, Country and Region, Region	Area Studies, Methodology, Interdisciplinary Studies, Chinese Characteristics
Chinese Authors’ Research in WoS	Development Disparities, Competition, Policy Progress, Holistic Governance, Biopolitics	Politics, Policy, Health, Impact, Challenges
International Authors’ Research in WoS	Comparative Governance, Security, South Africa, European Union, Income, Poverty, Public Health	Climate Change, Gender, Democracy, Africa, Foreign Policy

Table 2. Keyword clusters and representative keywords across the three data groups. Source: compiled by the author based on CNKI and WoS databases

The CNKI keyword clustering reveals four major thematic directions: country-specific research represented by “United States,” covering other countries’ Area Studies systems and comparative knowledge production (Zhao, 2025); disciplinary system construction, encompassing positioning, methodological reflection, and talent cultivation (Zhao & Liu, 2022); methodological exploration through fieldwork and anthropological approaches (Li, 2025); and theoretical reflection on interdisciplinarity and theory building (Wang & Zhai, 2024). Notably, institutionalization-related topics—discipline building, talent cultivation, interdisciplinarity—exhibit high centrality, indicating that current domestic CRS knowledge production remains at the stage of disciplinary justification and institutional pathway exploration. From an educational perspective, these keywords reflect CRS’s ongoing efforts to define its curriculum framework and talent cultivation model.

In contrast, keyword clustering of Chinese scholars in WoS is distinctly focused on development and governance issues, with “politics,” “policy,” and “governance” forming the core. Research objects are primarily China’s domestic governance practices and social issues, covering inequalities in education and urbanization (Duan et al., 2024), policy responses under urban governance (X. Liu et al., 2020), and governance in population growth and aging (Santos & Zhang, 2024; Xu & Zhang, 2024). The thematic gap between domestic CRS discourse and Chinese scholars’ international publications raises a concern for curriculum designers: the CRS curriculum being developed domestically may not yet adequately prepare students for the type of internationally engaged scholarship expected in the global AS community.

The keyword clustering of international authors in WoS comprises three dimensions: macro-level thematic research on global structural issues, including case studies of regional hotspots (Mazzola, 2024) and cross-national comparative analyses (Markowitz & Radnitz, 2021); specific region or actor research focusing on geopolitically significant Global South countries and supranational organizations; and emerging topic research addressing social public resource allocation and urban-rural development imbalances (Fink et al., 2022). Compared to the high proportion of institutionalization topics in Chinese clustering, international research exhibits a more diverse thematic structure driven by specific regional problems rather than disciplinary justification. This thematic diversity implies a broader range of curricular content, potentially offering students exposure to a wider variety of global issues and methodological approaches.

Distinct trajectories of thematic change between Chinese and international CRS and AS knowledge production emerge across the three data groups.

Domestic CRS experienced an evolution from disciplinary foundation building (2020–2022)—marked by keywords such as “discipline construction,” “interdisciplinary,” and “talent cultivation”—to methodological awareness (2023 onward, centering on

“fieldwork,” “knowledge production,” and “anthropology”), and then to thematic expansion (since 2024, with emerging topics like “Global South,” “artificial intelligence,” and “precision communication”). This thematic shift from discipline-building concerns to methodological and then to diverse real-world topics suggests a parallel broadening of CRS curricula: beyond initial training in disciplinary foundations, students are now increasingly likely to encounter courses that integrate fieldwork methods, area-specific knowledge, and cutting-edge issues, thereby enriching their intellectual horizons and interdisciplinary competencies.

In Chinese scholars’ international publications, policy and political topics constitute a long-term stable focus. In 2021, macro-level topics such as “challenge” and “governance” became prominent. In the past two years, research focus has shifted downward to specific population groups and social issues, as evidenced by keywords such as “children,” “gender,” “health,” and “income.” This thematic diversification from macro-level governance to specific population concerns carries implications for CRS education: curricula should not only train students in policy analysis but also cultivate their capacity to examine concrete social issues across different regional contexts, thereby fostering a more comprehensive understanding of how global challenges manifest at the human scale.

By comparison, international AS has developed a relatively stable research tradition. Since 2020, topics such as “politics,” “policy,” and “climate change” have maintained consistent activity. Regional nodes such as “China” and “South Africa” have been active since 2021 and 2022 respectively, with “Europe” emerging as a new growth point by 2025. Since 2024, research has concentrated on more specific domains such as “rural areas” and “food security,” with strengthened emphasis on assessing policy “impact.” International AS’s combination of stable core themes and evolving topical foci suggests a mature curriculum ecosystem where students receive consistent training in foundational regional knowledge while also being exposed to emerging global challenges, offering a model of curricular stability and adaptability from which newly developing CRS programs might draw.

4.4 Summary of Comparative Findings

Through the quantitative analysis of the four dimensions above, Chinese CRS exhibits both commonalities and significant differences from international AS. The commonality is mainly reflected in the fact that both Chinese and international scholarship consistently focus on key regions beyond their borders, and both demonstrate a trend of moving from macro-level topics toward specific issues. At the same time, the current reality that Chinese CRS is still in the early stage of institutionalization, along with the discussions surrounding disciplinary positioning, talent cultivation, and methodological pathway exploration, constitutes important features that distinguish it from current international AS. From an educational perspective, the divergent thematic structures suggest that CRS and AS curricula may cultivate different types of global competence: CRS emphasizes systematic

understanding of external regions for national strategy, while AS offers more diverse exposure to global governance issues, potentially fostering broader intercultural awareness.

5. Discussion

After presenting the main findings, it is necessary to further examine the underlying causes of the divergence between Chinese CRS and international AS, and to situate these findings within the existing literature and theoretical framework. Unlike prior studies that adopt broader time spans or rely solely on Chinese-language sources, this study constructs a focused comparative framework centered on the 2020–2025 period—a phase defined by CRS institutionalization in China and renewed pedagogical engagement with AS internationally. By integrating both CNKI and WoS data, it enables a bilingual, side-by-side comparison that has rarely been undertaken in domestic scholarship, providing a more grounded basis for the following discussion.

5.1 Institutionalization as a Driver of Knowledge Production for CRS

This study demonstrates that disciplinary institutionalization has been the primary driver of knowledge production in Chinese CRS during the 2020–2025 period. The CNKI data reveal a clear three-phase pattern: low-level stability (2020–2021), rapid surge in 2022 coinciding with the formal establishment of CRS as a first-level discipline, and sustained high-level activity thereafter. By contrast, international AS maintained steady growth throughout the same period. The preponderance of discipline-building keywords in CNKI literature indicates that current CRS knowledge production operates within a framework of institutional justification. This aligns with Zhu (2023), who noted that CRS requires systematic resolution of challenges in curriculum design and talent cultivation. The centrality of these educational keywords suggests that, unlike AS where knowledge production and curriculum development evolved separately over decades, Chinese CRS is simultaneously building its research agenda and pedagogical framework.

5.2 CRS and AS: Fields of Distinct Natures

A key finding of this study is that Chinese CRS and international AS are not strictly isomorphic knowledge systems. Three interrelated dimensions of misalignment support this observation. The first concerns conceptual scope: whereas CRS is institutionally defined as outward-oriented, AS encompasses broader scholarship. The second is thematic divergence: domestic CRS literature is concentrated on discipline-building discourse, while international AS is organized around specific regional problems. This carries curricular implications: CRS programs—still preoccupied with defining their disciplinary identity—may find their graduates more familiar with disciplinary construction issues than with the context-rich, region-specific inquiry that characterizes the international AS tradition. The third dimension concerns international publication behavior: Chinese scholars' WoS publications

primarily address domestic governance rather than external regions. This tension between outward-oriented disciplinary ambition and inward-oriented scholarly output raises important questions for higher education: How can CRS curricula equip students for international academic dialogue while remaining responsive to national strategic needs?

5.3 Implications for International Academic Dialogue between CRS and AS

Despite the structural differences identified above, this study reveals potential spaces for cross-border academic dialogue. Both fields demonstrate trends toward thematic convergence in areas such as the Global South and governance challenges. This convergence has educational significance: it suggests that CRS curricula should strengthen attention to these shared thematic domains that already bridge Chinese and international scholarly discourse. By incorporating these convergent themes as curricular anchors, CRS programs can create natural entry points for students to engage with international academic debates, moving beyond a narrow focus on disciplinary construction toward substantive, issue-driven learning that resonates across both CRS and AS traditions.

5.4 Implications for Higher Education Curriculum and Global Citizenship Education

The comparative findings carry direct implications for higher education curriculum design. First, the divergence between CRS's institution-driven and AS's problem-driven models suggests that CRS curricula should consciously integrate both logics. Wang's (2025) "glocal citizenship" framework provides a concrete principle for doing so—designing courses that cultivate students' capacity to engage with global issues from a domestic standpoint while also developing contextual understanding of diverse regions, rather than treating domestic and international knowledge as separate tracks. Second, the findings call for pedagogical innovation within CRS programs: Wang (J.) (2024) advocated organizing curricula around interdisciplinary, problem-based modules instead of disciplinary silos, using case-based and inquiry-driven approaches that develop both regional expertise and transferable analytical skills. Taken together, CRS institutionalization offers a strategic opportunity to design curricula that are neither purely domestically oriented nor uncritically global, but intentionally integrative—preparing graduates to navigate between Chinese institutional expectations and international scholarly discourse.

6. Conclusion

This study compares Chinese CRS and international AS knowledge production (2020–2025), framed within how higher education organizes regional knowledge for educational purposes. The findings reveal that CRS and AS are not isomorphic, differing in scope, objectives, and classification logics. These structural differences are reflected in two contrasting models: CRS's institution-driven model orients

knowledge around disciplinary frameworks and strategic talent cultivation, while AS offers a longer tradition of problem-driven, globally engaged approaches. For area and country/region studies education, this study holds significance in three dimensions. First, it provides an empirical foundation for talent cultivation by identifying key competencies that curricula must develop: regional expertise, language proficiency, fieldwork capability, and intercultural awareness. Second, it informs knowledge services: universities and think tanks can use quantitative evidence to align research agendas with societal needs, ensuring scholarship contributes to policy consultation and international academic dialogue. Third, it demonstrates the educational value of quantitative research in measuring the structural characteristics of knowledge production, helping students and scholars situate their work within broader disciplinary landscapes. As CRS continues to develop, curricula should balance domestic priorities with international scholarly dialogue. Despite limitations—including potential retrieval omissions and the absence of micro-level syllabi analysis—future inquiry is warranted to evaluate the impact of CRS and AS curricula on learning outcomes. Ultimately, this study offers an empirical framework highlighting the institution-driven nature of CRS knowledge production, underscoring the utility of quantitative methods for talent cultivation, curriculum design, and knowledge services in area and country/region studies.

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