




# “Current and potential research directions on the law of free trade zones: A bibliometric analysis (2004–2024)”

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# CURRENT AND POTENTIAL RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ON THE LAW OF FREE TRADE ZONES: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS (2004–2024)

## Abstract

This study aims to explore and identify key past research directions and propose future research avenues related to the legal framework of free trade zones (FTZs). The bibliometric data were collected through the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) database systems. After merging the datasets and filtering English-language publications from 2004 to 2024, a total of 103 documents were retained. The research methodology employed in this study includes descriptive statistics and keyword co-occurrence analysis, supported by the VOSViewer software. The findings reveal that China is the leading country in publishing research on the legal aspects of FTZs. Past studies have formed four clusters corresponding to four fundamental research directions. They include (1) Arbitration and dispute resolution in China's free trade areas; (2) The impact of international trade laws and regulations on risk assessment and tax systems in global trade, including FTZs; (3) The role of financial and governance regulations in pilot FTZs; and (4) The legal framework and impact of FTZs in Shanghai and special economic zones on international trade. This study contributes evidence showing that China is a pioneering country in researching, developing, and refining legal policies for free trade zones in order to enhance its impact on the global economy.

## Keywords

free trade zone, commercial zones, special economic zones, law, bibliometric analysis, co-occurrence analysis

## JEL Classification

K10, K20, M10, M20

## INTRODUCTION

In their economic development processes, countries around the world have emphasized the establishment and development of free trade zones (FTZs). These special economic areas created within a nation's territory contribute significant economic and social benefits, fostering sustainable development (ShaoHong et al., 2024). FTZs facilitate the attraction of foreign investment through preferential tax policies, simplified customs procedures, and reduced trade barriers. This not only increases investment capital but also promotes technology transfer, enhances labor productivity, and boosts national competitiveness. Moreover, FTZs stimulate international trade by lowering import and export costs. Businesses within these zones can capitalize on access to inexpensive raw materials and vast consumer markets, driving sustainable development by reducing transaction costs and improving corporate innovation levels (Wang & Kong, 2024).

Additionally, FTZs generate employment opportunities for local workers, improving living standards and reducing unemployment rates. They also serve as regional economic development hubs, promoting

infrastructure and auxiliary services. To maximize the benefits, countries place significant importance on establishing robust legal frameworks and effectively managing these economic zones to ensure long-term sustainable development.

Research on FTZs has been conducted extensively across various countries; however, studies employing bibliometric analysis methods remain relatively scarce. Notable works have only emerged recently, such as those by Alansary and Al-Ansari (2023), Ye et al. (2022), and Lixia and Xu (2023). In particular, the legal framework aspect of FTZs is still an intriguing area of study due to the differences in institutional structures, management, and governance across countries and regions. Therefore, it is essential to conduct additional review studies that evaluate past research and suggest potential future research directions. This will enrich and diversify the theoretical foundations and provide a basis for empirical studies on the legal framework for FTZs in various contexts across different countries.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Akinci and Crittle (2010), the World Bank has classified special economic zones (SEZs), with free trade zones (FTZs) being one of seven types of SEZs. These include: (1) freeports, (2) free trade zones or commercial zones, (3) export processing zones, (4) enterprise zones, (5) single factory export processing zones, (6) hybrid logistics zones, and (7) special economic zones. The fundamental differences between these zones are summarized in Table 1.

Regarding the concept of FTZ, there have been various definitions depending on the perspective of approach (Alansary & Al-Ansari, 2023). Based

on a synthesis of common points, the definition that can be derived is “A free trade zone is a geographical area designated by a country where goods can be imported, stored, produced, and re-exported without being subject to tariffs or other trade barriers, as long as they are not introduced into the domestic market of the country. The main goal of free trade zones is to promote international trade, attract foreign investment, create jobs, and stimulate regional economic development.”

Thus, FTZs are economic areas with distinct characteristics compared to other territorial areas within a country. Alansary and Al-Ansari (2023) suggest that FTZs consist of three main components: the regulatory framework, incentives, and infra-

**Table 1.** Comparison of basic differences between regions and FTZs

Source: Author's summary.

Type of regions	Concepts	Basic differences between regions and FTZs
Free Trade Zones (FTZ)	A geographical area established with preferential tariff policies, exemption from import and export duties, and simplified administrative procedures to promote international trade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on trade and logistics.</li> <li>• Tax exemption policies and flexible customs procedures to attract goods across borders.</li> </ul>
Freeports	The area within or near seaports or airports that enjoys preferential policies regarding taxes, exemptions on import duties, and administrative procedures to promote trade and industry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The location is usually concentrated near seaports/airports.</li> <li>• The main objective is to store, package, distribute, and transship goods.</li> <li>• It does not emphasize production or assembly like an FTZ.</li> </ul>
Export Processing Zones	An area focused on the production of export goods, offering tax incentives and minimizing administrative procedures to support manufacturing and export activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on production and export.</li> <li>• Businesses must export the majority or all of their products.</li> <li>• The preferential policies are mainly aimed at production rather than general trade.</li> </ul>
Enterprise Zones	An area supported by the government in terms of taxes, infrastructure, and administrative procedures to promote economic development, create jobs, and encourage investment in underdeveloped regions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The main goal is to develop the domestic economy and create jobs.</li> <li>• It does not focus on international trade or export production like an FTZ.</li> <li>• The incentives are focused on domestic businesses.</li> </ul>

**Table 1 (cont.).** Comparison of basic differences between regions and FTZs

Type of regions	Concepts	Basic differences between regions and FTZs
Single Factory Exporting Processing Zones	A form of export processing zone that does not require specific geographical boundaries, allowing individual factories to benefit from preferential policies if they meet export requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are no fixed geographical boundaries like an FTZ.</li> <li>• Incentives are applied to individual factories rather than the entire area.</li> <li>• Strongly focused on export production but flexible in terms of geographical location.</li> </ul>
Hybrid Logistic Zones	A model that combines logistics activities such as storage, distribution, and production within the same area, providing flexible services for both export and import.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It combines both production and logistics and is not just focused on international trade.</li> <li>• Incentives are aimed at the comprehensive development of supply chains rather than just tariff or administrative procedure exemptions.</li> </ul>
Special Economic Zones	A geographical area established by the government with special economic policies (tax, investment, labor, customs) aimed at promoting investment and economic development, which may include FTZs, export processing zones, or businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger in scale than FTZs and may include various types of areas such as export processing zones, high-tech zones, and logistics zones.</li> <li>• The policies encompass trade, investment, and production.</li> <li>• Often has broader macroeconomic goals.</li> </ul>

structure. In terms of the regulatory framework, FTZs typically have flexible policies regarding taxes, labor, foreign exchange, and legal regulations to encourage investment. The incentives component is reflected in the exemption from tariffs and import duties and policies that create a favorable investment environment. Goods can be imported, processed, produced, or assembled within the area without facing tariffs unless they are introduced into the domestic market. Administrative procedures are simplified, legal support is provided quickly, and foreign investors receive incentives. Regarding infrastructure, FTZs are often heavily invested in infrastructure such as seaports, airports, warehouses, and logistics systems to facilitate trade transactions. Additionally, FTZs not only allow storage but also enable production, assembly, or processing of goods to add value before export.

Based on the theoretical framework, the purpose of this study is to explore major trends from the past and present and identify potential future research directions in the legal framework of FTZs through bibliometric analysis.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

To obtain data for bibliometric analysis, the paper relied on the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases and conducted a search using the keyword filter including the phrases (“\* Free Trade Zone\*” OR “FTZ”) AND “law,” while limiting the search to English-language documents within a 20-year

time frame (2004–2024). The search results on January 20, 2025, showed 81 documents from Scopus and 49 from WoS. Thus, a total of 130 documents were compiled from the two databases for screening duplicates and assessing their relevance to the research topic. The next step in the research process is the screening and evaluation of the data by checking for duplicates between the two datasets when combined. As a result, 27 duplicate publications found in both the SCOPUS and Web of Science (WoS) databases were removed from the official research data. Ultimately, only 103 publications were officially selected for data analysis and discussion of the research findings. The analysis process was carried out using two main techniques. First, descriptive statistics clearly present the number of publications, citations, document types, countries, and journals with the highest frequency of publications. Second, keyword analysis (co-occurrence analysis) using VOSViewer software was performed to identify keyword clusters and analyze past research trends while proposing potential future research directions (Luc, 2022).

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

#### 3.1.1. Number of articles and citations

Based on Figure 1 and Table 2, from 2004 to 2024, the two databases, Scopus and WoS, collectively published 132 documents related to FTZ law. Among them, Scopus has 81 documents with a to-

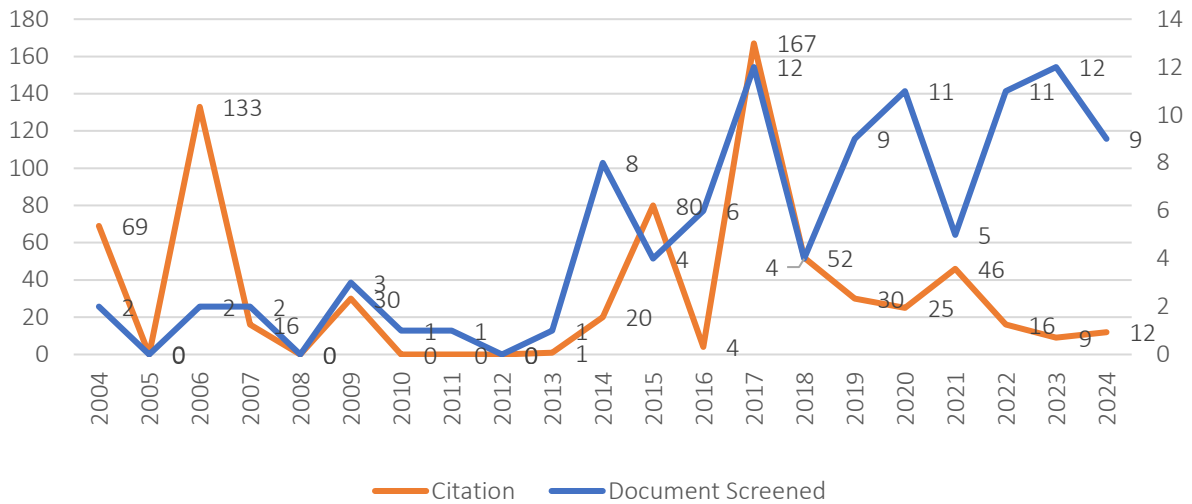


Figure 1. Number of documents and citations

Table 2. Statistical indicators about the number of documents and citations

No.	Some statistical indicators	Scopus	WoS	Combined
1	Number of documents (2004–2024)	81	49	103
2	Number of citations(2004–2024)	640	228	710
3	Highest citation year	2017 193 citation	2017 123 citation	2017 167 citation
4	Year with the highest number of publications	2023 10 document	2017 8 document	2017, 2023 12 document
5	Average citations over period	32	11.4	35.5
6	Average number of citations per document	7.9/document	4.65/document	6.89/document

tal of 640 citations, averaging 7.9 citations per paper, while WoS has 49 documents with 228 citations, averaging 4.65 citations per paper. For the official dataset, consisting of 103 documents, the total citations amount to 710, with an average of 35.5 citations per year and 6.89 citations per paper. Notably, the years 2017 and 2023 had the highest number of publications (12 papers per year). This indicates that, over the 20-year period, the number of publications related to FTZ law is still relatively modest, with uneven growth (Figure 1). This also highlights a gap, suggesting significant potential for future research.

### 3.1.2. Countries

According to Figure 2, the publication of studies related to FTZ law has garnered attention from authors in various countries around the world. Among them, the leading countries in terms of publications are all developed nations with economies ranked among the top globally. Notably, there is a significant dominance of authors from China compared to other countries. This is particularly surprising because China was not the first country to establish free trade zones, yet China’s FTZs are considered exem-

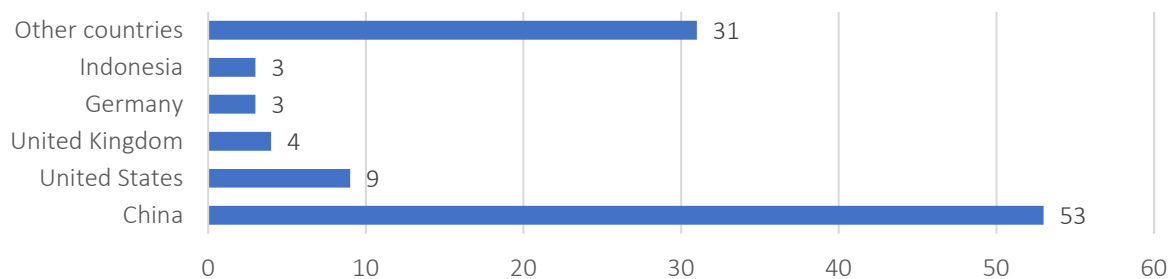


Figure 2. Leading countries in the number of publications related to the topic

plary in integrating FTZs into large-scale economic development strategies. The reforms and policies in China’s FTZs have had a global impact and play a crucial role in shaping the modern FTZ system.

**3.1.3. Type of document and journal published**

Based on Figure 3, it can be easily observed that the majority of publications on the topic are scientific articles (accounting for 64.8%), book chapters (16.7%), and conference papers (6.7%). Among them, the top three fields with the most publications are social sciences, economics,

econometrics and finance, and business, management, and accounting.

Studies related to the topic of FTZ law, with authors from China, account for a dominant proportion (53/103 documents, or 51.4%). Therefore, the journals publishing these studies belong to the fields of economics and social sciences. These are prestigious journals in the field, with the indices presented in Table 3.

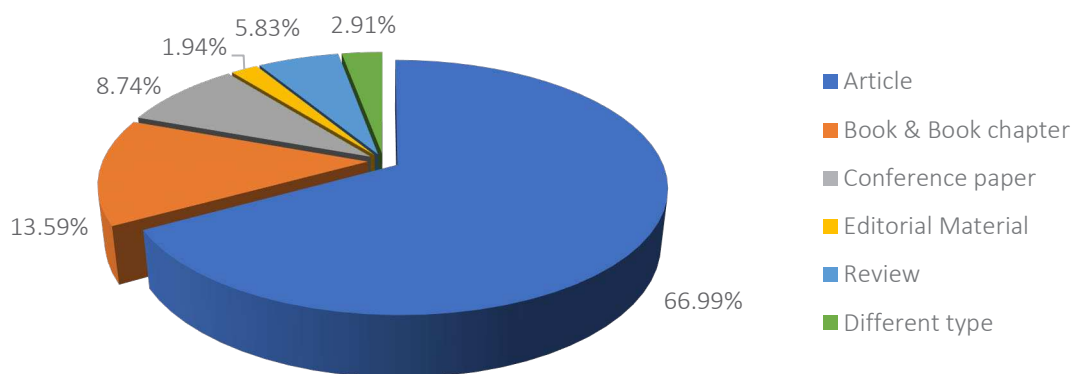
According to Table 4, the prominent studies are mostly conducted by authors with a focus on FTZs in China and some countries that have pilot FTZs.

**Table 3.** The top five journals with the most publications related to the topic

No.	Journal name	Subject	Articles	Journal quartile	H-index
1	Chinese Economy	Economics, Econometrics and Finance	4	Q2, ESCI	21
2	Asia Pacific Law Review	Social Sciences (Law)	2	SSCI, Q3	12
3	Frontiers of Law In China	Social Sciences (Law)	2	Q4, ESCI	8
4	Journal of International Arbitration	Social Sciences (Law)	2	Q2, ESCI	6
5	Journal of World Trade	Economics, Econometrics, and Finance Social Sciences (Law)	2	SSCI, Q2	36

**Table 4.** Selected studies on the topic of FTZs

Author	Title of document	Citations
Huang (2015)	Challenges and solutions for the China–US BIT negotiations: Insights from the recent development of FTZs in China	10
Liu and Li (2018)	The rule of law experiment in China’s pilot free trade zones: The problems and prospects of introducing Hong Kong law into Guangdong	10
Meng et al. (2015)	Study on evolution and dynamic mechanism of Tianjin Pilot Free Trade Zone	8
Pakdeenurit et al. (2014)	Special Economic Zone: Facts, roles, and opportunities of investment	8
Hu (2017)	A retrospective view on the first three years of China (Shanghai) pilot free trade zone	7
Yu et al. (2022)	Free trade areas as cross-cultural knowledge-sharing platforms: evidence from the Sino-Vietnam case	5
Ye et al. (2022)	A knowledge map study of an application of a Smart land planning free-trade zone and China’s contribution	3



**Figure 3.** Types of publications

### 3.2. Co-occurrence analysis

Using VOSviewer 1.6.20 software, keyword analysis was conducted based on the keywords proposed by the authors of the articles in the dataset of 103 selected papers from Scopus and WoS, with the condition that keywords must appear at least three times. The results showed 612 keywords with 25 relationships meeting the analysis criteria. However, the study continued to review and eliminate six duplicate and irrelevant keywords before including them in the analysis. The output from VOSviewer revealed 19 keywords that met the relationship condition, which were divided into four clusters as shown in Figure 4 and Table 5.

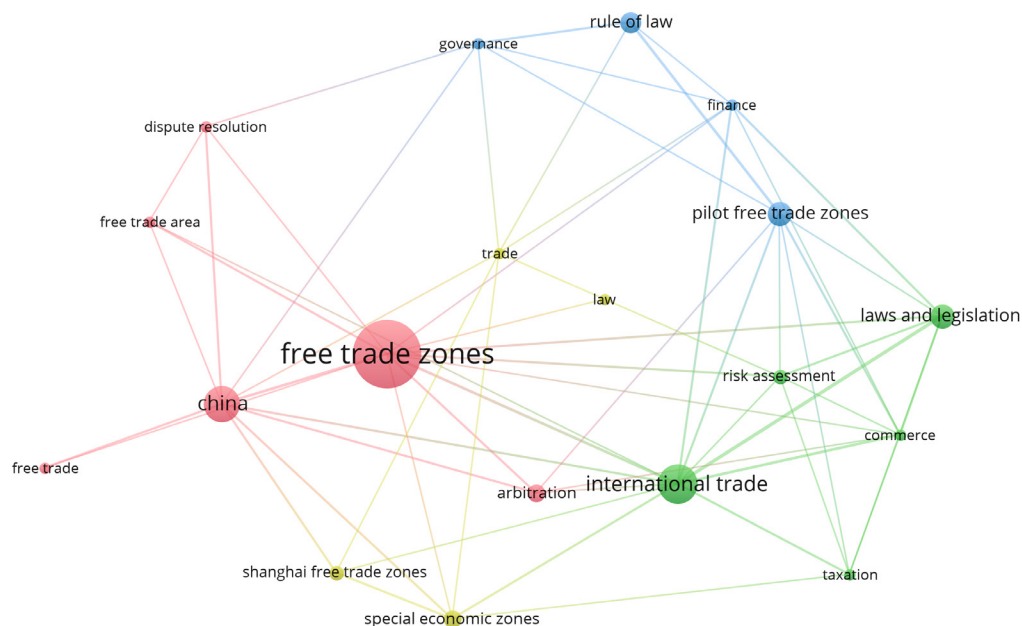
Based on Table 5 and Figures 4 and 5, the keyword analysis results formed four research clusters, each represented by a different color. Cluster 1, in red, consists of six keywords, with the central theme being “Arbitration and dispute resolution in China’s FTZs.” According to Figure 5, this research direction has gained significant attention since 2020. Cluster 2, in green, comprises five keywords, focusing on the theme “The impact of international trade laws and regulations on risk assessment and tax systems in global trade.” This research direction emerged early, starting around 2014. Cluster 3, in blue, consists of four keywords, with the central theme being “The role of financial and governance regulations in pilot FTZs.” Finally,

**Table 5.** Results of co-occurrence by all keywords

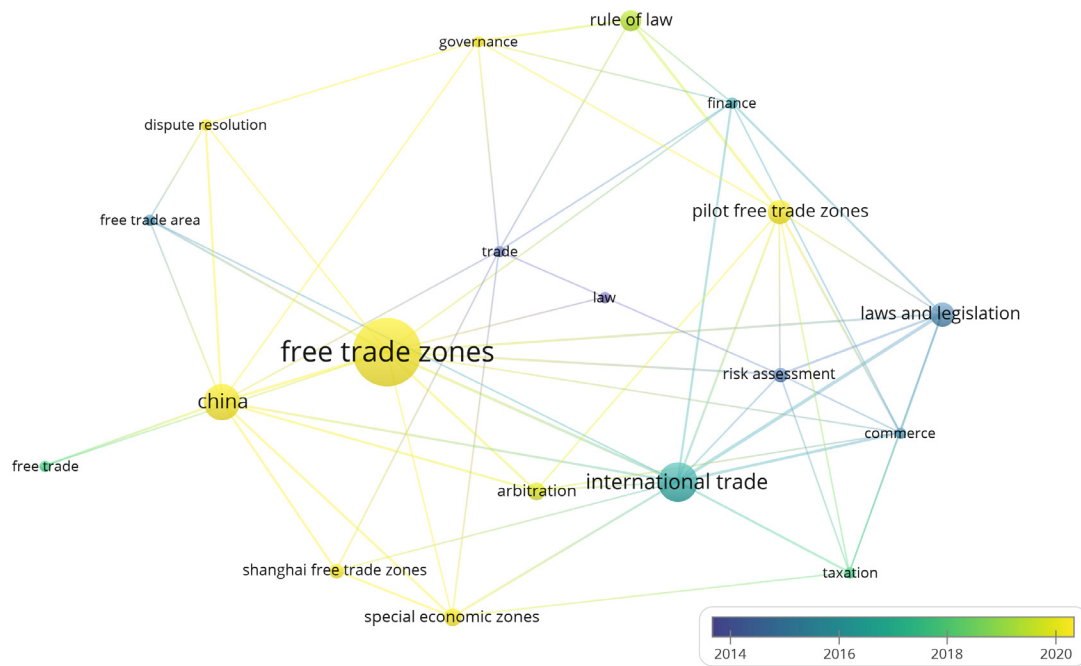
Source: VOSviewer output.

Cluster	Number of keywords	Keywords and frequency of occurrence	Research direction
1 (Red)	6	arbitration (5), China (11), dispute resolution (3), free trade (3), free trade area (3), free trade zones (22)	Arbitration and dispute resolution in China’s free trade areas
2 (Green)	5	commerce (3), international trade (12), laws and legislation (7), risk assessment (4), taxation (3)	The impact of international trade laws and regulations on risk assessment and tax systems in global trade, including FTZs
3 (Blue)	4	finance (3), governance (3), pilot free trade zones (7), rule of law (6)	The role of financial and governance regulations in pilot FTZs
4 (Yellow)	4	law (3), shanghai free trade zones (4), special economic zones (5), trade (3)	The legal framework and impact of FTZs in Shanghai and special economic zones on international trade

Source: VOSviewer output.



**Figure 4.** Network visualization of co-occurrence by all keywords



**Figure 5.** Overlay visualization map of co-occurrence by keywords

Cluster 4, in yellow, is formed by four keywords, with the main theme being “The legal framework and impact of FTZs in Shanghai and Special Economic Zones on international trade.”

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of research related to FTZs to date has primarily focused on China. This is understandable, as China has developed a large and influential system of FTZs that significantly impact the global economy. The FTZs in China serve as pilot areas for policies on trade liberalization, investment, finance, and administrative simplification, thereby attracting considerable attention from academics and researchers in economics, law, and public policy.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Through descriptive statistical analysis and keyword analysis based on the filtered data from Scopus and WoS with 103 documents from 2004 to 2024, the main research findings indicate that although the topic of FTZ law has received significant attention over the past 20 years, the number of published documents and citations remains quite limited. Among the published documents, studies from Chinese authors focusing on FTZs in China dominate compared to other countries worldwide.

Research on FTZ law has been primarily published in high-ranking international journals in the fields of economics and social sciences (mainly law), along with books and book chapters published by reputable publishers. This is consistent with some studies that have used bibliometric methods through software like VOSViewer or CiteSpace, such as those by Alansary and Al-Ansari (2023), Ye et al. (2022), and Lixia and Xu (2023).

The keyword analysis results have formed four keyword clusters corresponding to four research directions on FTZ law. Based on these research directions, future research should be expanded from various perspectives and approaches.

Firstly, regarding the research direction of “Arbitration and dispute resolution in China’s FTZs,” this has been a focus of many authors because China is a country that has established numerous FTZs to promote trade, investment, and economic reform. FTZs such as Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Hainan are not only economic hubs but also testing grounds for advanced legal mechanisms aimed at resolving disputes, with arbitration being a key tool. Arbitration in these FTZs is designed to meet international standards, ensuring transparency and efficiency

to attract foreign investors. One of the notable innovations is that arbitration centers in these zones are allowed to flexibly apply foreign law or international commercial law if the parties have agreed in advance. This helps resolve complex legal issues in cross-border transactions, facilitating the operation of international businesses in China. This viewpoint is also supported by Tang (2019), Tang (2022), and Huichun (2018).

In addition, arbitration centers in FTZs are also allowed to use languages other than Chinese during the proceedings, such as English. This facilitates foreign parties and reflects China's efforts to integrate with the global trade community. Some major arbitration centers, such as the China International Economic and Trade Arbitration Commission (CIETAC), have opened offices in FTZs to enhance legal support for businesses. However, despite its many advantages, arbitration in FTZs faces some challenges due to China's legal system still being under development, particularly in terms of enforcing foreign arbitration awards (Fu, 2023). Although China is a member of the 1958 New York Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Arbitral Awards, enforcement at the local level can sometimes be slow and dependent on political and economic factors. In summary, arbitration plays a crucial role in resolving disputes in China's FTZs, contributing to the transparency and attractiveness of the investment environment. However, to fully leverage its potential, further reforms and improvements to the legal mechanism are needed to ensure fairness and effectiveness in dispute resolution. This finding aligns with recent studies, such as those by Erie and Prusinowska (2020) and Shengcui and Zhijun (2019).

Secondly, regarding the research direction of "The impact of international trade laws and regulations on risk assessment and tax systems in global trade," this area of study emerged relatively early, even before the establishment of FTZs in many countries. While not yet as detailed and specific as the first research direction, studies in this area are founded on the principle that international trade laws and regulations play a fundamental role in governing cross-border commercial transactions. These laws and regulations not only influence corporate behavior but also shape how risk is assessed and tax systems are designed within the context of global trade.

One of the most significant impacts is the standardization of regulations through international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and free trade agreements (FTAs). These legal frameworks facilitate free trade but also require countries to adjust their tariff systems to comply with international rules. For instance, WTO regulations on anti-dumping duties and subsidies mandate that countries establish trade defense measures transparently and without hindering free trade. Notable studies on this topic include Bhagwati et al. (2014) and Shadikhodjaev (2021).

However, the complexity of international trade agreements also increases legal risks for businesses. Companies often face uncertainties in complying with rules on goods' origins, preferential tax rates, and import-export control regulations (Van den Bossche, 2008). Non-compliance with these regulations can result in legal disputes, fines, or the loss of tax incentives, negatively impacting profits and corporate reputation. These findings align with studies by Kardes et al. (2013) and Puig (2014).

Thus, international trade laws and regulations present both opportunities and challenges in risk assessment and tax management within global trade. To maximize benefits, nations and businesses, especially those operating in FTZs, must develop appropriate strategies, including legal compliance and enhancing risk management capabilities.

Thirdly, regarding the research direction on "The role of financial and governance regulations in pilot FTZs," this research area has been extensively explored by scholars in countries with pilot FTZs established to foster economic reform, trade, and investment by testing new policies. In this context, financial and governance regulations play a crucial role, not only by providing a legal framework but also by ensuring the stability and sustainability of activities within FTZs. One of the core functions of financial regulations is to mitigate risks and encourage investment inflows. According to prominent studies in this field, such as Wang et al. (2021) and Li et al. (2023), the establishment of appropriate financial control mechanisms in FTZs – such as cross-border capital flow supervi-

sion, liquidity improvements, and the adoption of international accounting standards – enhances investor confidence. These regulations also support the integration of regional financial systems with international markets, facilitating seamless cross-border transactions.

Effective governance is another indispensable factor. Governance regulations in FTZs typically focus on simplifying administrative procedures, ensuring transparency in licensing processes, and strengthening law enforcement capabilities. Wang et al. (2020) and Huang (2023) highlight that in China's FTZs, authorities have experimented with blockchain-based enterprise management systems to ensure transparency and reduce corruption. These reforms not only improve operational efficiency but also create a more favorable business environment. Thus, financial and governance regulations in FTZs safeguard the interests of stakeholders and act as a catalyst for economic reform and innovation.

Fourthly, regarding the research direction on “The legal framework and impact of the Shanghai Free Trade Zone (SFTZ) and Special Economic Zones on international trade,” this area of study has garnered significant attention as the SFTZ and China's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have become symbols of economic reform and the opening of international markets. Established in 2013, the SFTZ was the first pilot zone in China to test financial, trade, and investment reform policies. The legal framework of the SFTZ includes liberalization measures such as reducing tariff barriers,

simplifying customs procedures, and experimenting with capital flow liberalization in key sectors. Prominent studies in this domain include those by Li et al. (2020) and Xiao (2016a, 2016b).

The SFTZ and SEZs facilitate international trade by reducing transaction costs and shortening transportation times. Special policies, such as the negative list, allow foreign investors to participate in previously restricted sectors, attracting significant foreign direct investment (FDI). SEZs in China, including Shenzhen and Shanghai, have contributed over 20% of the country's total export value, becoming key drivers of global trade. Furthermore, these zones foster innovation in customs and tax management. However, challenges persist, including legal risks arising from inconsistencies in regulations across regions and competitive pressures from other SEZs globally (Zeng, 2021). Thus, the flexible legal frameworks and reform policies implemented in the SFTZ and SEZs not only promote international trade but also serve as models for other countries in designing and managing special economic zones.

This study has limitations, as it relies solely on the Scopus and WoS databases to retrieve publications for data analysis without expanding to other systems such as ResearchGate, Google Scholar, or ORCID. Additionally, the research techniques employed are limited to descriptive statistical analysis and keyword analysis, without incorporating more advanced bibliometric analysis methods. These limitations point to directions for future research.

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## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore previous research and suggest potential future directions concerning the legal aspects of free trade zones. By using bibliometric methods based on 103 selected documents from the Scopus and WoS databases as of January 20, 2025, the study shows that the topic of law on free trade zones is an interesting research area with many gaps to explore. The reason is that the number of publications on this topic over the past 20 years has been limited, and most of the research has been focused on scholars from China and a few other countries. Legal issues related to free trade zones remain quite broad and contentious, with different perspectives, research directions, and approaches, especially in the context of changing trade relations between major global countries, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the new U.S. government. This study has identified several basic research directions from the past and also suggests some potential research avenues for the future, with the hope of contributing to the increase in both the quantity and quality of publications in the future.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Data curation: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Formal analysis: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Funding acquisition: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
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 Methodology: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Project administration: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
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 Software: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Supervision: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Validation: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Visualization: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Writing – original draft: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.  
 Writing – review & editing: Ha Nguyen Son, Thuong Mai Thi.

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