

Decoding Catchphrases in China: Reading Between the Lines Using Word Embeddings

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Why Care About Catchphrases?

Catchphrases (a.k.a. slogans), defined as “terse strings of words” with fixed usage that “gain meaning by repetition and context” [1, 2, 3], are building blocks of official discourses in China. While some catchphrases (e.g. “China Dream”) are well-known, thousands of others are used by Chinese officials on a daily basis to communicate their political allegiance and ideological and policy preferences. Pervasive in propaganda and official language of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), catchphrases are often perceived as uninformative jargons whose meanings elude most regime outsiders. This paper attempts to facilitate our understanding of CCP political communication by deciphering these catchphrases with the help of word embeddings. In sum, this paper:

- Extracts a comprehensive list of catchphrases from top leaders’ speeches and CCP documents (1921-2019).
- Shows how lower-level officials’ usage of catchphrases reflect shifting political alliances.
- Uses word embeddings trained on CCP’s major ideological and policy texts to interpret the meaning of catchphrases.
- Compares word embeddings of the same catchphrase across localities to reveal political and policy coalitions.

Extract Catchphrases

- The main idea: People’s Daily publish articles following a major speech and document to emphasize and interpret important points.
- For each speech/document, find PD articles published within 30 days with highest cosine similarity. Use string matching to find important terms “highlighted” (see illustration above).
- Filter matched strings with three tests:
 - Inclusion test: remove short strings used in longer strings over 70% of time.
 - Redundancy test: eliminate long strings that contain unnecessary words.
 - Informativeness test (using mutual information): true catchphrases with ideological/policy contents are able to distinguish texts from distinct political eras from the rest (e.g. Mao vs. reform era).

Catchphrases Output

- Left: sample speech and People’s Daily article that interpreted the speech. Matched strings are highlighted in red.
- Right: Top 10 catchphrases (ranked by mutual information) characterizing three CCP General Secretaries’ terms.

| Xi Speech: | People’s Daily Commentary: | Hu Jintao | Xi Jinping |
|---|---|---|--|
| 中共中央总书记、国家主席、中央军委主席习近平近日就坚持和发展“枫桥经验”作出重要指示强调，各级党委和政府要充分认识到“枫桥经验”的重大意义，发扬优良作风，适应时代要求，创新群众工作方法，善于运用法治思维和法治方式解决涉及群众切身利益的矛盾和问题，把“枫桥经验”坚持好、发展好，把党的群众路线坚持好、贯彻好。习近平指出，50年前，浙江枫桥干部群众创造了“依靠群众就地化解矛盾”的“枫桥经验”，并根据形势变化不断赋予其新的内涵，成为全国政法战线的一面旗帜。浙江省各级党委和政府高度重视学习推广“枫桥经验”，紧紧扭住做好群众工作这条主线，为经济社会发展提供了重要保障。 | 一个50年前创造的“依靠群众就地化解矛盾”的地方经验，为什么今天依然历久弥新、充满活力？一面全国政法战线的旗帜，为什么要在全国范围推广、弘扬？在纪念“枫桥经验”50周年之际，习近平总书记作出重要指示，充分肯定“枫桥经验”重大意义，为新时期加强和创新群众工作指明了方向，是对全面建成小康社会创造和谐稳定环境的重要部署。...坚持把群众路线与法治方式结合起来，运用法治思维和法治方式预防化解社会矛盾，这是“枫桥经验”所蕴含的创新精神和时代要求；充分发挥党的政治优势，把专门工作与群众路线结合起来，这是“枫桥经验”给我们的重要启示，也是有效预防社会矛盾的重要法宝。 | 实现全面建设小康社会目标 Realize the goal of comprehensively building a moderately prosperous society 紧密团结在以胡锦涛同志为总书记的党中央周围 Unite around the party center with comrade Hu Jintao as the General Secretary 全面建设小康社会构建社会主义和谐社会 Comprehensively building a moderately well-off and harmonious society 以邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想为指导全面贯彻 Thoroughly implement using Deng Xiaoping Theory and Three Represents 马克思列宁主义毛泽东思想邓小平理论和三个代表重要思想 Marxism, Leninism, MaoZD Thought, DengXP Theory and Three Represents 认真落实科学发展观 Implement Scientific Development Outlook 党的十七大精神 Spirit of 17th Party Congress 大规模培训干部 Massively train cadres 第五个五年规划 The fifth Five Year Plan 建设海峡西岸经济区 Build Western Taiwan Straits Economic Zone | 学习贯彻习近平总书记 Study and implement General Secretary Xi Jinping 创新驱动发展战略 Innovation Driven Development Strategy 运用法治思维和法治方式 Use law based thinking and approaches 建设美丽中国 Build Beautiful China 底线思维 Bottom-line thinking 国家卫生和计划生育委员会 National Health and Family Planning Commission 实现中国梦 Realize China Dream 加快发展现代职业教育 Speed up development of modern vocational education 党的十八大以来 Since 18th Party Congress 习近平总书记重要讲话精神 Spirit of Genera Secretary Xi Jinping’s important speeches |

Catchphrases and Political Support

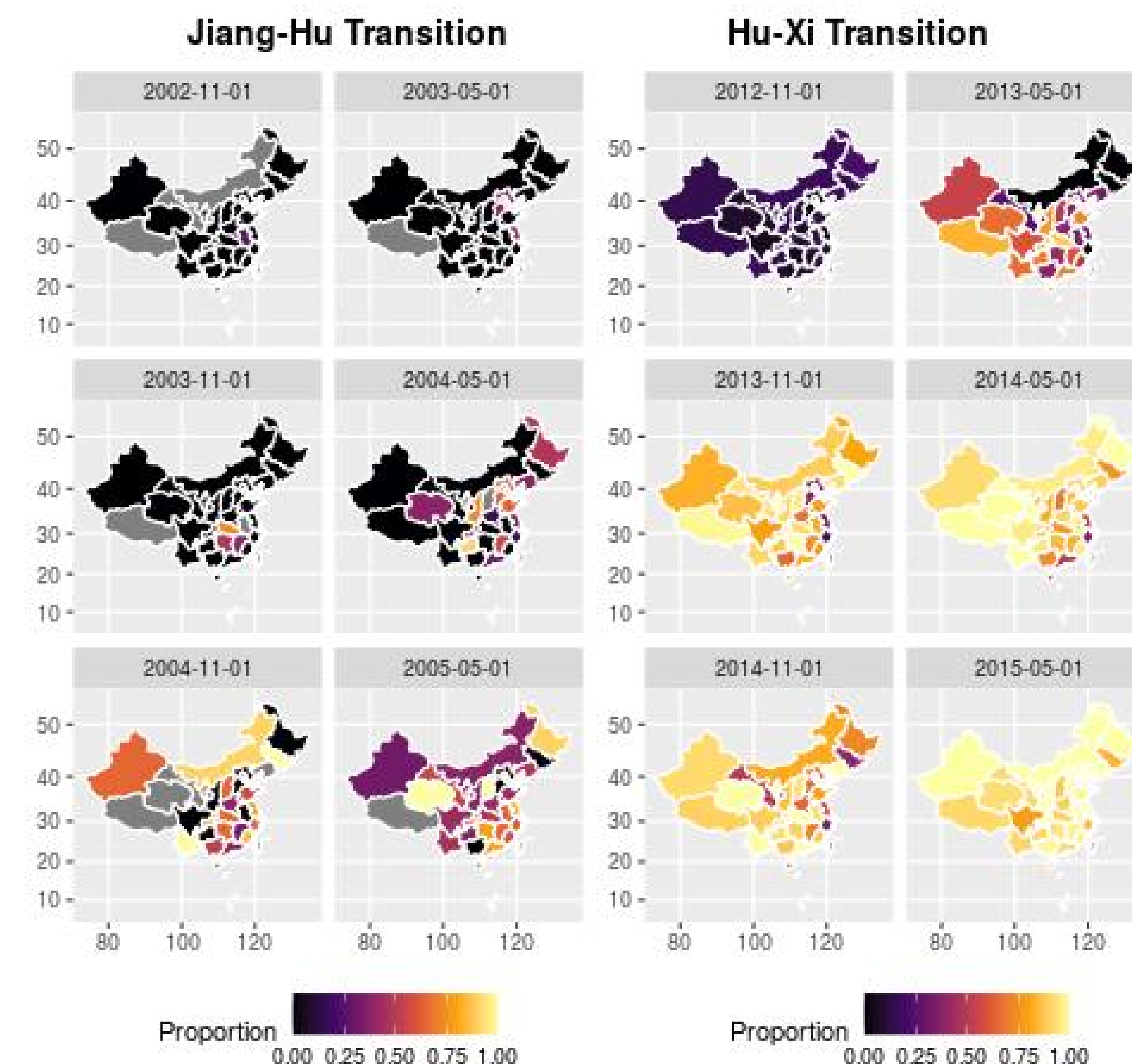


Figure 1: Ratio of appearances of signature catchphrases of incoming leader vs. outgoing leader in provincial newspapers/documents. Signature catchphrases are those most strongly associated with top leaders, often becoming their major legacy.

References

- [1] Harold Dwight Lasswell and Nathan Leites. *Language of politics: Studies in quantitative semantics*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press [1965, 1965].
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- [3] Gang Qian. *Watchwords: Reading China through its political vocabulary*, 2012.
- [4] Valerio Di Carlo, Federico Bianchi, and Matteo Palmonari. Training temporal word embeddings with a compass. In *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, volume 33, pages 6326–6334, 2019.

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Detecting Policy Coalitions

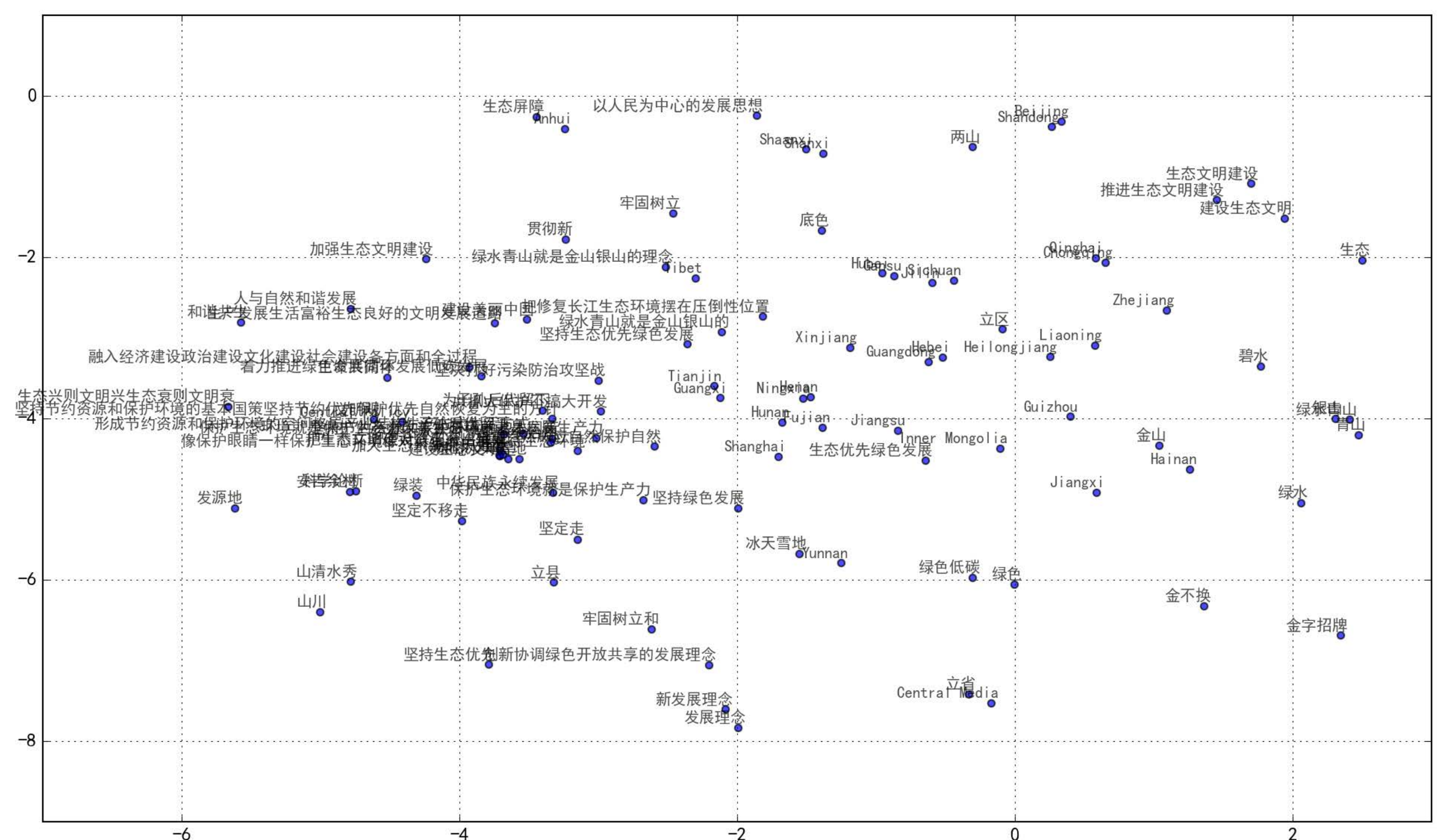


Figure 2: Comparison of word embeddings across provinces [4] for “绿水青山就是金山银山” (clear waters and green mountains bring us prosperity and wealth), a major environmental policy catchphrase under Xi. Word embeddings reflect how provincial officials use the same catchphrase in different contexts, reflecting different preferences and strategies to respond to the centrally handed down policy initiatives (without directly contradicting the party center).